

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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Did John Calvin Teach a Doctrine of Secondary Justification? Refuting Steven Wedgworth on Secondary Justification

By Daniel H. Chew

Editor's Note: The following article first appeared in a much briefer form at the author's blog, Daniel's Place – puritanreformed.blogspot.com, February 16, 2020. It has been expanded by the author, an M.Div graduate of Westminster Seminary California. It has slightly been edited for The Review.

Introduction

In the modern Reformed world, there have been raging controversies over issues like the Law-Gospel distinction, and charges of neo-nomism versus antinomianism as it relates to the Federal Vision, Norman Shepherd, John Piper, and the disgraced pastor Tullian Tchividjian.¹ Most worrying is the push for some

version of a “judgment by works” by theologians such as Mark Jones,² who has likewise defended John Piper from the charge of works-righteousness.³ According to Jones, all that Piper has striven to do was to defend the necessity of works for salvation, which he asserted was taught by Reformed theologians and the Reformed faith.⁴ Works lead us to the “possession of life” not the “right to life,” and therefore for Jones there is nothing wrong in asserting that works are necessary for salvation, when understood according to the manner he has prescribed.⁵

The focus on works is understandable in the Christian's desire for holiness and for honoring the Law of God, and for some it shows that we “need to better understand the Word of God to our own holiness of heart and life before the Lord.”⁶ As Christians, we must affirm

¹ On the Norman Shepherd issue, see Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*, P & R, 2000; Mark W. Karlberg, *Federalism and the Westminster Tradition: Reformed Orthodoxy at the Crossroads*, Wipf and Stock, 2006. On the Federal Vision, see Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis*, P & R, 2006; Jeong Koo Jeon, *Calvin and the Federal Vision: Calvin's Covenant Theology in Light of Contemporary Discussion*, Wipf and Stock, 2009; R. Scott Clark, editor, *Covenant, Justification and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, P & R, 2000; Sean Gerety and John W. Robbins, *Not Reformed at All: Medievalism in “Reformed” Churches*, Trinity Foundation, 2004. On the controversy over the Law-Gospel distinction, see for example Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko and David VanDrunen, editors, *The Law is Not of Faith: Essays of Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, P & R, 2009; Andrew M. Elam, *Merit and Moses: A Critique of the Klinean Doctrine of Republication*, Wipf and Stock, 2014. On concerns over antinomianism, see Kevin Deyoung, *The Hole in our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Holiness*, Crossway, 2014. Concerning John

Piper, see John Piper, *Future Grace*, Multnomah, 2005; John W. Robbins, “Pied Piper,” *The Trinity Review*, June, July 2002; Timothy F. Kauffman and Tim Shaughnessy, “John Piper on Final Justification By Works,” *The Trinity Review*, November, December 2017; and Carlos E. Montijo, “When Protestants Err on the Side of Rome: John Piper, “Final Salvation,” and the Decline and Fall of *Sola Fide* at the Last Day,” *The Trinity Review*, July-September 2018.

² Mark Jones, “Judgment According to Works – Reformed Style,” *The Calvinist International*, November 6, 2017, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2017/11/06/judgment-according-to-works-reformed-style/>.

³ Mark Jones, “In Defense of Piper,” *Reformation 21*, September 24, 2015, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/in-defense-of-piper.php>.

⁴ See note 3 above.

⁵ See note 3 above.

⁶ Shane Anderson, “Mark Jones on Justification, Good Works, and Sanctification (Updated 2019) – A Compendium of Online Posts,” *The Daily Genevan*, October 19, 2017,

that the Law of God is important for the Christian life and Christians ought to strive for holiness “without which no one will see the Lord” (*Hebrews 12:14b*). Yet stating the necessity of holiness for the Christian life is not the same as saying that holiness and good works are necessary for salvation. Logically, holding that good works is a *necessary consequence* of salvation is not the same as believing that good works is a *necessary condition* for salvation. Jones’ weakness here is one of logic, as he has proven over and over again that the Reformed tradition teaches the necessary consequence of good works in the Christian life, and showed that Christians are to do good works as part of the “means and ways to salvation,”⁷ but all of that does not logically imply that good works are a necessary condition for salvation.

While Jones stews in his logical incoherence, fellow Presbyterian Church in America pastor Steven Wedgworth has moved forward with his own formulation of the doctrine of justification. According to Wedgworth, the Reformed tradition, from no less a person than John Calvin, has taught the notion of a “subordinate order of justification.”⁸ While Jones had insisted that there is only one justification,⁹ Wedgworth astonishingly asserts a “double justification.” What exactly does Wedgworth mean by this, and how does he square it with the Reformed faith?

Wedgworth’s Idea of “Double Justification”

In the article putting forward his controversial position, Wedgworth asserts that John Calvin did in fact teach justification by faith alone, but *alongside that* he taught a secondary or “different kind of justification,” which “remains a forensic and declarative act,” that takes account of the “transformative work of regeneration,” and “render(s) a sort of judgment on the spiritual fruit of sanctification.”¹⁰ This secondary justification is “built atop” and “dependent on” the initial justification, and thus it can be said that there is a sense in which

justification is by works, as long as one holds to that justification as a “secondary justification.”

Wedgworth’s definition of “double justification” therefore reflects an initial justification by faith alone, following which there is a subordinate justification that judges the fruit of that initial justification. Since for Wedgworth, this subordinate justification is dependent on the initial justification and at the same time cannot *undo* that initial justification, this “secondary justification” to him does not detract from the doctrine of justification by faith alone. In this manner, Wedgworth squared his view with the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone, since he can say that secondary justification can never undo initial justification, so once a man is justified by grace, works does not in any way save him.

In response to Wedgworth’s article, it must be asked whether his position is theological coherent and historically grounded. The response here will be twofold, the first dealing with Wedgworth’s theology and the second with his historical sources. First, is Wedgworth’s position theologically sound? Second, did he accurately represent the teachings of John Calvin on the matter of justification?

The Roman Catholic View of Justification

Before assessing Wedgworth’s position theologically, it would be helpful to look at the Roman Catholic view of justification to better understand what the Reformed tradition in its formulation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone had rejected.

The authoritative Roman Catholic view of justification is found in the Decrees of the Council of Trent. At Trent, the Roman Church states the following concerning justification and works:

Of this Justification the causes are these: ...the efficient cause is a merciful God who washes and sanctifies gratuitously, signing, and anointing with the [H]oly Spirit of promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance; but the meritorious cause is his most beloved only-begotten, our Lord Jesus Christ...the instrumental cause is the sacrament of baptism...the alone formal cause is the justice of God, not that whereby he himself is just, but that whereby he maketh us just, that, to wit, with which we, being endowed by him, are renewed in the spirit of our mind.... (Chapter VII, Decree on Justification, Sixth Session of the Council of Trent)¹¹

accessed March 14, 2020, www.thedailygenevan.com/blog/2017/2/17/mark-jones-on-justification-and-sanctification.

⁷ Mark Jones, “The ‘Means and Way’ to Salvation,” *The Calvinist International*, October 17, 2017, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2017/10/17/means-way-salvation/>.

⁸ Steven Wedgworth, “John Calvin’s Subordinate Order of Justification,” *The Calvinist International*, November 2, 2017, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2017/11/02/john-calvin-subordinate-order-justification/>.

⁹ Mark Jones, “One Justification or Two Justifications,” *Reformation 21*, October 8, 2015, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/one-or-two-justifications.php>.

¹⁰ See note 8 above.

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes: The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations*, Volume 2, Harper Brothers, 1890, 96. Logos library.

And whereas the Apostle saith, that man is justified by faith and freely, those words are to be understood in that sense which the perpetual consent of the [Roman] Catholic Church hath held and expressed; to wit, that we are therefore said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation, and the root of all Justification; without which it is impossible to please God, and to come unto the fellowship of His sons: but we are therefore said to be justified freely, because that none of those things which precede justification – whether faith or works – merit the grace itself of justification. For, if it be a grace, it is not now by works, otherwise, as the same Apostle says, grace is no more grace. (Chapter VIII, Decree on Justification, Sixth Session of the Council of Trent)¹²

As it can be seen, in Tridentine Roman Catholicism, justification is “free,” and faith and works do not merit the grace itself of justification, since the efficient cause of justification is the God who is merciful, and who washed and *gratuitously* sanctify sinners through the Holy Spirit. In popular Evangelical rhetoric, it is normally assumed that Roman Catholicism teaches justification by faith and works, or even justification by works.¹³ However, while Roman Catholicism ends up being about salvation by faith and works, it is not technically true that it teaches justification by faith and works. Here, it must be noted that Trent does not place works in any of the four Aristotelian causes of justification. Rather, as Trent states in Chapter 7, works is seen as the outworking of the “initial justification,” as a perfecting of baptism so as to “unite man perfectly with Christ.”¹⁴ Thus, in orthodox Roman Catholic theology, works are treated as the outworking of faith in the process of justification (works as faithfulness), and therefore works become essential for one’s status before God, albeit in a round-about way.

The Reformers, when they promoted the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone, had insisted that the faith that justifies is one that is seen without works. It is not a “faith formed by love” that justifies. That was precisely why Trent was not satisfied with the Reformed position that works are the fruits of justification (even though such a position would not lead to antinomianism), but anathematizes it as follows:

CANON XXIV. — If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof: let him be anathema.¹⁵

For Rome, justification is a process that begins (“initial justification”) at baptism, and works itself out as the person lives faithfully in grace (“faithfulness”) with good works through the Roman sacerdotal system, and the person finally becomes fully justified and sanctified after finishing well in receiving the sacrament of extreme unction and then completing final purification in purgatory. If justification under the Roman system were to be conceived as stages, there would be an initial stage at baptism, and as many stages as is required to go from there to the final justification event on the Last Day.

Assessing Wedgeworth’s Position Theologically

When examined alongside the Roman Catholic view, Wedgeworth’s position of a subordinate order of justification sounds similar to Rome’s view of justification, if the process were to be conceived in terms of stages of justification. Since in Tridentine Roman Catholicism works are not in any way causative of justification, it is unclear how Wedgeworth’s view of initial and secondary justification is not functionally similar to Federal Vision and Roman Catholic soteriologies. Just because “secondary justification” is built upon and dependent on the initial justification does not solve anything, for after all Roman Catholics believe that too. It must be remembered that the grace of God to man in the Roman system is indeed gratuitous!

As mentioned, the only difference it seems is that where Wedgeworth proposes two stages, two *acts*, of justification, Roman Catholicism believes in a *process* of justification. But is this difference substantial and not merely one of semantics? Wedgeworth asserts that the secondary justification of a person is unable to undo his initial justification, but what does this actually mean in the Christian life?

Take a man named Saul for instance. In living his Christian life, he is initially justified but does not do good works; so will he be saved? Wedgeworth seems to imply a negative answer to this scenario, since Saul without works will not have secondary justification. But he continues to possess the “initial justification” which cannot be undone, does he not? So, is it possible for Saul to have an initial justification, which truly makes him just in the sight of God, yet he is nonetheless not saved?

¹² Schaff, 97.

¹³ But see Canon I “On Justification,” where Trent anathematizes Pelagianism, and Canon II “On Justification,” where Trent anathematizes Semi-Pelagianism.

¹⁴ Schaff, 96.

¹⁵ Schaff, 115.

If that is how Saul's situation is understood to be, it is unclear how Wedgeworth's theory of initial and secondary justification is substantially different from Rome's view of initial justification in baptism which needs to be perfected through good works.

Wedgeworth could of course bite the other end of the bullet, and assert that the person with initial justification is saved regardless of works, and that the secondary justification just points out the necessity of a person to seek holiness. But since the word "justify" is literally "to make just," from the Latin *iustificare*, in what sense can we call this view of secondary justification "justification" if it does not actually "make [the person] just"? And as pointed out earlier with Jones, asserting the necessity of holiness does not necessarily imply that good works is a necessary *condition* for salvation. Logical coherence it seems is a commodity in short supply here.

Therefore, whatever the intent of those like Wedgeworth who promote this view of "secondary justification" is, it seems clear that this "secondary justification" practically smuggles works into the act of justification by a more sophisticated route as compared to Roman Catholicism, a move which coincides with the redefinition of "faith" to "faithfulness" in Federal Vision discourse.¹⁶ At best, Wedgeworth is totally confused and mired in logical dissonance. At worst, Wedgeworth is in danger of proclaiming another gospel altogether, undermining the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone.

John Calvin's View of Justification

In an attempt to show the supposed Reformed pedigree of his teaching, Wedgeworth puts forward John Calvin as someone who taught this idea of secondary justification. However, when the passages cited by him are perused, it can be clearly seen that Wedgeworth has

¹⁶ See especially *The Joint Federal Vision Statement* in its section on Justification by Faith Alone, which states:

*We deny that the faith which is the sole instrument of justification can be understood as anything other than the only kind of faith which God gives, which is to say, a living, active, and personally loyal faith. Justifying faith encompasses the elements of assent, knowledge, and living trust in accordance with the age and maturity of the believer. ["Justification by Faith Alone," in "A Joint Federal Vision Profession," *Federal Vision* (blog), January 22, 2007, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://federal-vision.com/ecclesiology/joint-federal-vision-statement/>.]*

Faith must be "living," "active," and "personally loyal" in order to justify, and thus faith is faithfulness in the Federal Vision system.

misinterpreted Calvin. Consider one such passage cited in his article:

But a more difficult question still remains, How that one action could be imputed to Phinehas for righteousness? Paul proves that men are justified by faith alone, because it is written, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness," Romans 4:3.

In Genesis 15:6, Moses employs the same word. If the same thing may be said respecting works, the reasoning of Paul will be not only feeble, but frivolous. First of all, let us examine, whether or not Phinehas was justified on account of this deed alone. Verily the law, though it could justify, by no means promises salvation to any one work, but makes justification to consist in the perfect observance of all the commandments. It remains, therefore, that we affirm, that the work of Phinehas was imputed to him for righteousness, in the same way as God imputes the works of the faithful to them for righteousness, not in consequence of any intrinsic merit which they possess, but of his own free and unmerited grace. And as it thus appears, that the perfect observance of the law alone (which is done nowhere) constitutes righteousness, all men must prostrate themselves with confusion of face before God's judgment-seat. Besides, were our works strictly examined, they would be found to be mingled with much imperfection. We have, therefore, no other source than to flee for refuge to the free unmerited mercy of God. And not only do we receive righteousness by grace through faith, but as the moon borrows her light from the sun, so does the same faith *render our works righteous*, because our corruptions being mortified, they are reckoned to us for righteousness. In short, faith alone, and not human merit, procures both for persons and for works the character of righteousness. I now return to Paul. And it is not from a single expression, that he argues that we are justified freely, and by faith only, but he assumes higher principles, to which I lately referred, that all men are destitute of righteousness, until God reconcile them to himself by the blood of Christ; and that faith is the means by which pardon and reconciliation are obtained, because justification by works is nowhere to be obtained. Hence he very properly concludes, that we are justified by faith alone. But righteousness by works is as it were subordinate (as they say) to the righteousness just mentioned, while works possess no value in themselves, excepting, and as far as, out of pure

benevolence, God imputes them to us for righteousness.¹⁷

As can be clearly seen, especially in the emphasized phrase, Calvin teaches that God justifies the unclean *works* of believers. In this and other passages, this “secondary justification” is God declaring that the works of believers are acceptable to him, or as cited and emphasized by Wedgeworth, “their works are esteemed righteous by the same gratuitous liberality (Comment. on Ezekiel 18:17).”¹⁸

To make it even clearer, note that the *object* of this “justification” is the believers’ works, not believers themselves. It is the *works* which are justified, not believers who get micro-doses of justification every time they do a good work. This view of God justifying our works is not novel, and is in fact taught by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in the chapter on good works:

Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him, not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprouable in God’s sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections. (16.6)¹⁹

Wedgeworth’s argument that Calvin taught a doctrine of secondary justification is therefore a misinterpretation of what Calvin actually taught. Calvin did not teach a secondary justification of *persons*, and to claim that he did so is to misinterpret and misunderstand Calvin and his thought.

Brief Excursus: Romans 4:5, 6 and Justification

Before concluding, look briefly at what the Scriptures say concerning justification. Look at *Romans*, 4:5, 6: it is written that God justifies the ungodly (ἀσεβῆ), something which God does apart from works (χωρὶς ἔργων). The key point to note here is that for Paul,

justification is always something God does as an act, and works play no part in the equation.²⁰

Appealing to *James* 2:21 is the desperate tactic of those who want to find works in justification, and one does not have to go too in-depth into the text to know that the appeal to James is invalid. First of all, if James really taught justification by works, it would be in direct contradiction to Paul, an interpretation which is not an option for Christians who believe in the unity of Scripture. Second, the naked appeal to James leads to a place that almost no one actually wants to go, because to claim justification by works is Pelagianism. Rather, the appeal to James is normally used to force a synthesis of justification by faith and works in some manner, but that is an option precluded by the text, which provides no such synthesis except through the Hegelian dialectic, an interpretive method foreign to Scripture which thus must be rejected. Therefore, it is better to go with interpreting *James* according to its genre not as a doctrinal treatise, but as a letter on practice and encouragement; not didactic but parenetic.²¹

The relevance of this for Wedgeworth’s proposal is evident. If works play no part whatsoever in the Biblical view of justification, then “secondary justification,” however it is phrased, is contrary to the Biblical view of justification, and thus must be rejected by those who claim the Bible as their sole authority for the faith.

Conclusion

Theologically, Biblically, and historically, Wedgeworth’s proposal of a double justification is contrary to Scripture and to basic principles of reading comprehension. Instead of Wedgeworth’s proposal, the orthodox Reformed position denies any kind of two (or more) -stage justification or process of justification. The scandal of the Reformation was not because Roman Catholicism believed in works meriting justification (a typical Evangelical caricature), but that the Reformers taught that justification requires no work of any kind at all. That is the essence of the Gospel message of justification by faith *alone* that scandalized the Pope and the entire structure of Medieval Catholicism. Why is it that charges of antinomianism were leveled against the Reformers? Were 16th century Roman Catholic

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* – Volume 4, translated by James Anderson, Christian Classics Ethereal Library), accessed March 15, 2020, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom11/calcom11.xv.vi.html>. Cited in Wedgeworth. Wedgeworth’s emphases removed; author’s emphasis added.

¹⁸ See note 8 above.

¹⁹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, in *Christian Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Westminster Seminary California), Android App, accessed March 15, 2020.

²⁰ See James R. White, *The God Who Justifies*, Bethany House, 2001 for a simple introduction to the doctrine of justification. See also Horatius Bonar and Charles Hodge, *Not What My Hands Have Done*, Trinity Foundation, 2005, which combines Bonar’s *The Everlasting Righteousness* and Hodge’s *Justification By Faith Alone*.

²¹ White, 329, 346, 347. On genre, see D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd edition, Zondervan, [1992] 2005, 629, 630.

theologians so dense that they did not know (if it were true) that Protestants have a place for good works in justification (beyond evidence), and therefore the dispute is one of semantics rather than substance? Was Canon XXIV “On Justification” a Roman strawman of the Reformers rather than what the Reformers have always taught?

Instead of this novel teaching of Wedgeworth, let us meditate on Scripture, and upon this very excellent quote from the orthodox Reformed Scholastic Francis Turretin:

VIII. Although our justification will be fully declared on the last day (our good works also being brought forward as the sign and proof of its truth, Mt. 25:34-40), still falsely would anyone maintain from this a twofold gospel justification—one from faith in this life (which is the first); the other (and second) from works on the day of judgment (as some hold, agreeing too much with Romanists on this point). The sentence to be pronounced by the supreme Judge will not be so much a new justification, as the solemn and public declaration of a sentence once passed and its execution by the assignment of the life promised with respect to an innocent person from the preceding justification. Thus it is nothing else than an adjudicatory sentence of the possession of the kingdom of heaven from the right given before through justification. And if works are then brought forward, they are not adduced as the foundation of a new justification to be obtained then, but as signs, marks and effects of our true faith and of our justification solely by it. (2.16.X.VIII)²²

Good works are the “signs, marks and effects of our true faith” but are not the conditions for salvation. Much less are they necessary for “secondary justification,” however construed, a doctrine which John Calvin did not teach.

Lastly, knowing the centrality of the Gospel and the importance of justification, it is very dangerous that such teaching on “secondary justification” is deemed acceptable in Reformed circles; for once we lose the Gospel, we lose the faith. It is my sincere hope that all of us, including Wedgeworth, would come to reject this teaching as misleading at best, and heretical at worst, and altogether unhelpful to help us understand the true Biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone.

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²² Francis Turretin, *Institute of Elenctic Theology*, George Musgrave Giger, translator, James T. Dennison Jr., editor, P&R, 1994, 2:687.