

GOSPEL TRUTH
OF JUSTIFICATION

GOSPEL TRUTH OF JUSTIFICATION

PROCLAIMED

DEFENDED

DEVELOPED

DAVID J. ENGELSMA



REFORMED
FREE PUBLISHING
ASSOCIATION
Jenison, Michigan

© 2017 Reformed Free Publishing Association

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reprinted in any form without permission from the publisher, except in the case of a brief quotation used in connection with a critical article or review

All scripture quotations by the author are taken from the Authorized (King James) Version

Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive

Jenison, MI 49428

www.rfpa.org

mail@rfpa.org

616-457-5970

Book cover by Christopher Tobias / www.tobiasdesign.com

Interior design and typesetting by Katherine Lloyd / www.theDESKonline.com

ISBN 978-1-944555-18-4

Ebook ISBN 978-1-944555-19-1

LCCN 2017936250

To the work of Jesus Christ through Martin Luther—
humblest of the children of God,
mightiest of the men of God,
and greatest of the reformers (heroes all)

The truth of the Gospel is this, that our righteousness comes by faith alone, without the works of the Law. The falsification or corruption of the Gospel is this, that we are justified by faith but not without the works of the Law...If the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost.—Martin Luther¹

Christian freedom...consists of [this]...that the consciences of believers, in seeking assurance of their justification before God, should rise above and advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness. For since...the law leaves no one righteous, either it excludes us from all hope of justification or we ought to be freed from it, and in such a way, indeed, that no account is taken of works. For he who thinks that in order to obtain righteousness he ought to bring some trifle of works is incapable of determining their measure and limit but makes himself debtor to the whole law. Removing, then, mention of law, and laying aside all consideration of works, we should, when justification is being discussed, embrace God's mercy alone, turn our attention from ourselves, and look only to Christ. For there the question is not how we may become righteous but how, being unrighteous and unworthy, we may be reckoned righteous. If consciences wish to attain any certainty in this matter, they ought to give no place to the law.—John Calvin²

1 Martin Luther, commentary on Galatians 2:4–5, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1963), 88.

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.19.2, 1:834.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	xiii
Chapter One	
DOCTRINAL BACKGROUND: ROMAN CATHOLIC AND ARMINIAN HERESIES	1
<i>Controversy with Rome</i>	1
<i>Controversy with Arminianism</i>	6
Chapter Two	
DOCTRINAL BACKGROUND: FEDERAL VISION HERESY	13
<i>Criticism of the Creeds</i>	16
<i>Distinctive Heresy</i>	22
Chapter Three	
DOCTRINAL BACKGROUND: THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL	26
<i>New Perspective on the Reformation Gospel</i>	27
<i>The Wrongs of Wright</i>	34
<i>Back to Rome</i>	42
Chapter Four	
DOCTRINAL (AND ECCLESIASTICAL) BACKGROUND: EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS TOGETHER	45
<i>One in the Faith</i>	47
<i>One Regarding Justification</i>	51
<i>Ecumenical Evil</i>	58
Chapter Five	
THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS ON JUSTIFICATION: AN INTRODUCTION	65
<i>Bound to the Confessions</i>	67
<i>Unity and Peace</i>	70

Chapter Six

**THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS ON JUSTIFICATION:
THE STATEMENT** 77

Belgic Confession 77

Thirty-Nine Articles 80

Heidelberg Catechism 80

Westminster Confession of Faith 85

Canons of Dordt 87

Chapter Seven

**THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS ON JUSTIFICATION:
AN OVERVIEW** 91

Imputation, Not Infusion 93

Faith, Not Works 95

Means, Not Condition 100

Chapter Eight

JUSTIFICATION AS IMPUTATION 108

Legal Act 109

Obedience of Christ 117

Chapter Nine

“BY” AND “OUT OF” FAITH 124

Justification “by” Faith 127

Justification “out of” Faith 139

Chapter Ten

**THE FAITH “OF JESUS”: AN OBJECTION
CONSIDERED** 143

Faith as Faithfulness 148

Justification as Church Membership 154

The Cross as ?? 155

The New Perspective as Ecumenicity 168

Chapter Eleven

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH ONLY 172

The “Big Lie” 177

Source of the Big Lie 195

Chapter Twelve

ASSURANCE OF JUSTIFICATION 210
A Doctrine of Doubt 211
Justification as Assurance 215

Chapter Thirteen

JUSTIFIED, WHEN? 224
Repeated Justification 234
Eternal Justification 242

Chapter Fourteen

THE GROUND OF JUSTIFICATION 261
Confessed by the Reformed Faith 265
Undermined by Arminianism 268
Covenantal Heresy 276

Chapter Fifteen

THE CHARGE OF LEGAL FICTION 279
Righteous in Reality 281
Substitutionary Death 287

Chapter Sixteen

THE COUNSEL OF THE COVENANT 294
Covenantal Headship 297
Covenantal Headship Opposed 308
Covenantal Ground of Justification 313

Chapter Seventeen

GRACIOUS JUSTIFICATION 322
At Stake Is the Gospel 323
Away with That Impious and Profane Word “Merit” 329
Away with the Impious Notion of Adamic Merit 338

Chapter Eighteen

THE MERITORIOUS WORK OF CHRIST 342
Rejection of the Merit of Christ’s “Active Obedience” 344
Merit of Christ in the Creeds 352
Merit of Christ in Scripture 359
Possibility and Necessity of Jesus’ Meriting 363

Chapter Nineteen

THE MERIT OF CHRIST'S ACTIVE OBEDIENCE 367
Testimony of the Creeds 369
Testimony of Scripture 373
Federal Vision "Maturing" 375
Notice of Rejection of the Merit of "Active Obedience" 380

Chapter Twenty

THE REWARD OF GRACE 386
Nature of the Reward 389
Non-Meritorious 392
Merit Exposed by Romans 7 399
Other Aspects of the Reward 405

Chapter Twenty-One

PAUL AND JAMES 409
Rome's Harmony of Paul and James 411
The Reformed Harmony of Paul and James 417
Relationship of Justification and Sanctification 428

Chapter Twenty-Two

JUSTIFICATION AND ELECTION 455
Election and Justification in the Creeds and Scripture 456
Justification and Election Experienced 459
The Federal Vision on Justification and Election 464
Oh, That "Dangerous" Doctrine of Election 469

Chapter Twenty-Three

JUSTIFICATION IN THE FINAL JUDGMENT 475
Final Justification 476
Final Justification for the Federal Vision 480
According to Works 491
The Same Verdict, One More Time 497

BIBLIOGRAPHY 499

CREEDAL INDEX 505

SCRIPTURAL INDEX 507

PREFACE

Such is the importance of the truth of justification both for the gospel and for the salvation of the chosen people of God that a defense of it is always in order, if not necessary.

Justification is God's pardon of the guilty sinner—the forgiveness of sins—delivering the sinner from eternal damnation. It is also the gift to the sinner of a righteousness that makes the sinner worthy of eternal life and glory.

Paul indicates the importance of the truth of justification for the gospel in Galatians 1:6: “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel.” Loss of the truth of justification, or more precisely, corruption of the truth of justification (for this is the evil of the Galatians to which the apostle is referring), results in “another gospel” than God's gospel of grace. The one who preaches the other gospel, by corrupting the truth of justification, is accursed of God: “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (1:9).

David expresses the importance of the truth of justification for the salvation of the sinner in Psalm 32:1: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered,” that is, blessed is he who is justified. Forgiveness, or justification, is the fundamental blessing of salvation. Without it no one is blessed, whether spiritually or materially. For the man or woman who is not justified, there is only divine curse. With justification one receives all the blessings of salvation, as well as the blessing of God in all the circumstances of earthly life. For the justified man or woman, there is no curse.

The apostle quotes Psalm 32:1 in Romans 4, where he is teaching justification as the imputation of righteousness by faith, apart from works. “Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered” (Rom. 4:6–7).

As its centrality in the epistle to the Romans shows, justification with its ground in the atoning death of Jesus Christ is the heart of the church’s proclamation of the gospel of grace. Justification is also the Christian’s peace in life and death (5:1) and the wellspring of his life of holiness (12:1).

There are several reasons that a thorough treatment and an uncompromising defense of justification by faith alone ought to be published in 2017.

One reason is that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is so fundamental to the gospel of grace that an exposition and defense of this truth are in order always. The true church of Christ in the world simply cannot keep silent about this doctrine. To keep silent about justification by faith alone would be to silence the gospel. The true church certainly cannot allow the false churches and the heretics to corrupt this gospel truth without sounding the alarm and defending the faith.

A second reason is that the present day sees the most serious assault on the gospel of justification probably since the time of the Reformation. The enemy is within. It appears, launches its attack, and is protected and defended within the Reformed and Presbyterian churches that have a reputation for orthodoxy, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America among others. The name of the enemy is federal vision. Adding to the gravity of the assault is that these churches are the main players in the ecumenical movement called North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) that is popular with any number of conservative denominations, including the Protestant Reformed Churches. Churches that tolerate,

refuse to condemn, and even approve the federal vision and its heretical proponents at their broadest assemblies are not conservative but churches that take on the mark of the false church.

This book exposes the federal vision for the gospel-denying heresy that it is. It is the contemporary form of the false doctrine condemned in Romans, especially chapters 3–5, and in the epistle to the Galatians. It is the doctrine of justification by works.

A third reason why this book is timely is that 2017 marks the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation of the church of Jesus Christ. In 1517 the reformer Martin Luther affixed the ninety-five theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, the act by which Jesus Christ began his reformation of his church. Essential to this Reformation was the gospel truth of justification by faith alone. This book on justification is intended by the Reformed Free Publishing Association to celebrate that glorious work of Christ.

But the purpose both of the Reformed Free Publishing Association and of the author is more than a celebration of the beginning of the Reformation. It is the purpose of both to maintain, defend, and promote the Reformation in the perilous times for the church at present. This too we have learned from Luther. At one stage in the progress of the Reformation, Luther addressed the German nation, whose ear he had. God has given you the gospel, he proclaimed, with special reference to the truth of justification by faith alone. Hold on to it, he continued, for if you corrupt it, or allow it to be taken from you, God himself will take it away from you, and you [the German people] will never have it back again.

Germany has not heeded the warning of its great prophet and teacher. Germany has let the gospel go. It is now a spiritual and theological wasteland of unbelief and liberalism. Upon the German churches lies the awful judgment of God.

The same apostasy is today far advanced in the United States. Most churches proclaim the false gospel, that is no gospel,

of righteousness and salvation by the works and will of the sinner (see Rom. 9:16). Today the churches with the most exalted reputation for Reformation orthodoxy are helpless, apparently, before the onslaught of the federal vision.

At such a time as this, a work that echoes Luther's "here I stand" with specific regard to the fundamental doctrine of the Reformation is not only appropriate, but necessary. Clearly, unequivocally, creedally, biblically, the gospel truth of justification by faith alone, without works—any works, all works! Only the alien, perfect work of the Son of God in our flesh, Jesus the justifying Christ of God! Received by faith *alone!*

Protestantism, Protestantism in North America, Protestantism worldwide, especially Reformed and Presbyterian Protestantism, again *hear* this gospel, *believe* it, *confess* it, and *defend* it!

—DAVID J. ENGELSMA
2017, the five hundredth anniversary
of the Reformation of the church

DOCTRINAL BACKGROUND: ROMAN CATHOLIC AND ARMINIAN HERESIES

Controversy with Rome

The sixteenth-century Reformation of the church was Christ's deliverance of his church from the heresy of justification, and therefore salvation, by the works of the sinner himself. The apostate church of that day taught that guilty sinners are justified partly by Jesus Christ through faith and partly by their own good works. Their own good works are the decisive factor in justification.

That church rigorously applied its false doctrine of salvation by works to the lives of the people. In the sacrament of penance, the people paid the price of the "temporal punishment" of their sins by their own deeds of "satisfaction," that is, satisfaction of the justice of God. The church taught the people to expect dreadful suffering after death in a place called purgatory. This suffering would be the people's further payment of the "temporal" debt of their sins.

In addition, the lively ecclesiastical traffic in indulgences bound the doctrine of justification by works upon the people. By all kinds of deeds, including the purchase of indulgences with money, the people could work their way out of purgatory into heaven by their own payment for sin.

The institute that thus manifested the mark of the false church—denial of the gospel of salvation by grace—also oppressively bound its works doctrine on the people by denying that any of them could be assured of everlasting justification and therefore of salvation, a terror far worse than the fear of the fires of purgatory. A justification that is dependent on the sinner’s own works is necessarily highly uncertain.

This apostate church, which hardened herself against Christ at the Reformation, is the Roman Catholic Church. Rome made her heretical doctrine of justification creedal in the Canons and Dogmatic Decrees of the Council of Trent (1563).

The Roman Catholic Church has not changed her doctrine of justification. She has not repented of and retracted the doctrine of justification that occasioned the Reformation. She has not withdrawn the anathemas she pronounced at Trent on the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. Indeed, Rome has reaffirmed her heretical doctrine of justification in the dogmatical decrees of Vatican II (1962–65), including the sacrament of penance, purgatory, and indulgences.

We know Rome’s teaching about justification from the condemnation of it in the Reformed confessions, particularly the Heidelberg Catechism, questions and answers 57–64; the Belgic Confession, articles 22–24; and the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapters 11 and 16. We know the Roman doctrine of justification also from Rome’s official statements, especially the Canons and Dogmatic Decrees of Trent, Sixth Session, Decree on Justification.

The doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church concerning justification is that the guilty sinner becomes righteous in the judgment of God partly by his own good works. Rome is quick to add, especially in controversy with Protestant defenders of justification by faith alone, that the sinner performs these works only with the help of grace. The good works that justify are those that proceed from true faith in Christ. With appeal

to Galatians 5:6, “faith which worketh by love,” Rome contends that justification is by faith and by the deeds of love that faith performs. But the sinner is righteous in the divine act of justification by his own deeds.

The righteousness of a sinner before God therefore is partly the work of Christ for him, especially the atoning death of the cross, and partly the sinner’s own good works. A sinner earns, or merits, and *must* earn forgiveness and eternal life by his efforts (with the help of grace, Rome is quick to add, especially in controversy). In Roman Catholic doctrine, the good works of the sinner are a cause of God’s act of justification.

Two additional features of Rome’s doctrine of justification are noteworthy as basic to the teaching. First, Rome teaches that justification is a renewing, sanctifying work of God within the sinner, and not a strictly legal declaration by God the judge upon the sinner. According to Rome, in justification God *makes* the sinner righteous, rather than *declaring* the sinner righteous. God *infuses* righteousness into the sinner, rather than *imputing*, or *reckoning*, righteousness to him.

This doctrine of justification makes room for the sinner’s good works to play a role—a *decisive* role—in the matter of his justification. When God judges the sinner (and for Rome too there is in justification this element of judging), he takes into account what the sinner himself has done and what the sinner himself actually is (with the help of grace, Rome is quick to add, especially in controversy). In justification, according to Trent, God “maketh us just” by renewing us, so that “we are not only reputed, but are truly called, and are just, receiving justice within us.” The righteousness of justification is “inherent” in those who are justified.¹

1 Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Decree on Justification 7, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 2:95–96.

The second feature of Rome's doctrine of justification that is basic to its heresy is Rome's teaching that the sinner has a "free will," that is, the natural, spiritual ability to choose God and the good when these are offered to him. Although fallen men and women are sinful and unable to save themselves, they do retain a free will. It is the proper exercise of free will that gives the sinner's good works their merit and that distinguishes those whom God justifies from those whom God condemns. If a sinner merits in the matter of justification, he must have something of his own that he contributes to his righteousness. That which he contributes is the proper exercise of his free will. In the first chapter of its confession concerning justification, Trent declared that "free-will," although "attenuated...in its powers" in all men because of Adam's sin, "was by no means extinguished in them."² Later, Trent cursed those who deny that "man's free-will...co-operates towards disposing and preparing itself for obtaining the grace of Justification."³

The Protestant churches, Reformed and Lutheran, condemned Rome's doctrine of justification as heresy, as the radical and total corruption of the gospel, so that her doctrine of justification marks Rome as a false church. In their condemnation of Rome's doctrine of justification, the reformers, Calvin as well as Luther, and the Protestant churches, Reformed as well as Lutheran, judged the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification as essentially the false doctrine of justification by the works of the law that Paul exposes and condemns in Romans 3–5 and in the book of Galatians.

The evidence that nothing other and nothing less than this was the Reformation's condemnation of Rome's doctrine of

2 Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Decree on Justification 1, in *ibid.*, 2:89.

3 Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session, [Canons] on Justification 4, in *ibid.*, 2:111.

justification is again the Protestant creeds. These creeds condemn the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification with the language that Paul used against the teachers of justification by works in Romans and Galatians. They raise against the Roman Catholic doctrine the passages of scripture that Paul wrote against those teaching righteousness by works in his day. In support of the Protestant doctrine of justification, which the Roman Catholic Church curses, they appeal to the texts in Romans and Galatians that affirm justification by faith.

Having exposed the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification as the teaching that “something more is required besides him [Christ],” the Belgic Confession declares, as the Protestant doctrine of justification: “Therefore we justly say with Paul, *that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works.*”⁴

In article 23 of the Belgic Confession (“Our Justification Consists in the Forgiveness of Sin and the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness”), the Reformed church confesses that “our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied.” Therefore, the Reformed church rejects as presumption the Roman Catholic doctrine that the people of God are to trust “in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours.” In support of this Reformed belief concerning justification, *and in condemnation of the Roman Catholic doctrine*, the creed appeals to Psalm 32:1–2; Romans 4:6–8; and Romans 3:24: “As David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same Apostle saith, *that we are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ.*”⁵

4 Belgic Confession 22, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:408. The heading of the article is “Of Our Justification through Faith in Jesus Christ.” The emphasis is that of the confession.

5 Belgic Confession 23, in *ibid.*, 3:409. The emphasis is that of the confession.

The Protestant and Reformed doctrine of justification is biblical. The doctrine of Rome is the false doctrine condemned in Romans and Galatians.

Controversy with Arminianism

Within a mere fifty years or so after the death of Martin Luther and only thirty years after the death of John Calvin (and after the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism and of the Belgic Confession), a heretical doctrine of justification caused schism in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and eventually in the Reformed churches in all of Europe. The ministers and professors of these churches who taught the heresy are known as Arminians after the leading theologian of their faction, James Arminius. They are also called Remonstrants because of a remonstrance, or protest, they lodged against the orthodox doctrine of the Reformed churches.

The error of the Arminians concerning justification is often overlooked because of the emphasis on the struggle over five other cardinal truths of the Christian faith. These truths are predestination, the atonement, the spiritual condition of fallen mankind, regenerating grace, and the preservation of saints—the well-known five points of Calvinism. Nevertheless, Arminian theology included a distinct, erroneous doctrine of justification.

Regardless that the Arminian doctrine of justification is often ignored by both defenders and opponents of Arminianism, and regardless that justification is not listed among the main points that were (and still are) at issue between the Arminian heresy and Reformed orthodoxy, the Arminian doctrine of justification was (and still is) a crucially important aspect of the Arminian perversion of the gospel of grace. John L. Girardeau was right when he stated:

In nothing, except in its assertion of the supremacy of the sinner's will in the matter of practical salvation, and its consequent rejection of the sovereignty of God's

electing grace, is the Arminian theology more conspicuously defective than in its denial of the great principle, that God requires in the sinner, in order to justification, the possession of a real, substantive, perfect righteousness of works [the righteousness of the works of Christ in the stead of and imputed to the elect believer].⁶

That Arminianism included a false doctrine of justification and what this false teaching was are evident from the condemnation of the Arminian heresy by the orthodox Reformed churches in the Canons of the Synod of Dordt (1618–19). Even though this creed of the Reformed churches does not devote a separate head, or chapter, to a defense of justification in opposition to Arminianism’s false teaching regarding justification, it does explicitly refer to and describe the Arminian doctrine of justification.

The main reference to the Arminian doctrine of justification occurs in the rejection of errors section of the second head of the Canons. In the context of a rejection of the Arminian teaching that the death of Christ “acquire[d] for the Father the mere right to establish with man such a covenant as He might please, whether of grace or of works” (the necessary implication of Arminianism’s doctrine of universal atonement), the Canons condemn those, that is, the Arminians,

who teach that the new covenant of grace, which God the Father, through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man, does not herein consist that we by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the

6 John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism: Compared as to Election, Reprobation, Justification and Related Doctrines* (1890; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1984), 553.

perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.⁷

The crucial phrase in determining the Arminian doctrine of justification is “regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy.”

The Canons analyze the Arminian doctrine of justification similarly in the rejection of errors section of the first head of doctrine. Refuting the Arminian teaching of conditional election, the Canons note that in Arminian thinking election consists in this, that God chose not certain persons rather than others, but “the act of faith, which from its very nature is undeserving, as well as its incomplete obedience, as a condition of salvation, *and that He would graciously consider this in itself as a complete obedience and count it worthy of the reward of eternal life.*” This understanding of faith, charge the Canons, is “injurious” to the “truth of gracious justification.”⁸

As the Canons accurately describe their doctrine of justification, the Arminians taught (and teach) that the sinner’s act of believing is itself his righteousness with God and therefore his worthiness to obtain eternal life. Obviously, a sinner’s faith is not, in actuality, the equivalent of perfect obedience to the law, much less the payment of the debt of sin to an offended God. But, said the Arminian theologians, God graciously waives the requirement of perfect obedience to the law and likewise graciously is willing to esteem the activity of believing as the sinner’s righteousness.

Appealing to Genesis 15:6, “And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness,” the Arminians rejected the Reformed explanation that Abraham’s

7 Canons of Dordt 2, error 4, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 164–65. Schaff does not include the rejection of errors section of the Canons in English translation.

8 Canons of Dordt 1, error 3, in *ibid.*, 160; emphasis added.

faith was counted, or reckoned, to him for righteousness *inasmuch as the object of Abraham's faith was Christ crucified, so that the righteousness reckoned to Abraham was, in fact, the obedience of Christ in his stead, which faith always looks to, embraces, trusts in, and receives*. Rather, the Arminians explained the text, which Paul quotes as fundamental to the doctrine of justification he sets forth in Romans 4, as teaching that Abraham's activity of believing itself, *as an activity*, was counted to him by God for his righteousness.

Although James Arminius was exceedingly crafty in disguising his real opinion regarding justification, as also regarding all his departures from the great doctrines of grace recovered at the Reformation, he made his aberrant doctrine of justification known clearly enough. Defending himself against the charge that he taught that "faith is not the instrument of Justification," Arminius appealed to Genesis 15:6. He explained: "Faith, not as it is *an instrument*, but as it is *an act*, is imputed for righteousness." Confusing the issue, but not at all retracting what he had just asserted, Arminius added, "although such imputation be made on account of Him whom it apprehends."⁹

Arminius was more candid in explaining his doctrine of justification to his theological friend Uitenbogard than he was in defending it to his theological foes. Regarding the biblical phrase "faith is imputed for righteousness," Arminius wrote Uitenbogard: "If I understand it at all, I think this is the meaning of the phrase, *God accounts faith for righteousness*: And thus justification is ascribed to faith, not because it accepts, but because it is accepted." The great heretic went on to express his disagreement with the orthodox explanation of Genesis 15:6, that faith is counted for righteousness inasmuch as the object of faith is

9 James Arminius, "Apology against Thirty-One Theological Articles," in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 2:49–51.

Christ: “For, *not the object which he apprehends by faith*, but *his believing*, is said to be imputed to him for righteousness.”¹⁰

According to the Arminian doctrine of justification, not only is faith a human work by which a sinner distinguishes himself as worthy of God’s justifying verdict and by which he earns this verdict, but faith, that is, the sinner’s act of believing, is also itself the sinner’s righteousness with God. In justification God does not reckon the obedience of Christ to the account of the guilty sinner by means of the sinner’s faith. But God reckons the act of believing as the sinner’s righteousness.

In the language of Romans and Galatians, Arminianism teaches justification by work. The work is faith. Arminianism teaches justification *on account of* faith (something scripture does not teach), rather than the biblical justification *by (means of)* faith.

Yet works of obedience to the law are not excluded from the Arminian doctrine of justification. As the Canons remark, the Arminian doctrine of justification is that God “regards faith itself *and the obedience of faith*” as the sinner’s righteousness. The “obedience of faith” is the good works that faith performs.

Therefore, justification for Arminianism is by works, *with a vengeance*. Arminianism’s doctrine is worse than Rome’s. Rome at least makes the obedience of Christ part of the sinner’s righteousness in justification, indeed the greater part (in theory, if not in practice). For Arminianism, the sinner’s righteousness is *all* his own works: his faith as a human work and his obedience to the law. Christ is not the sinner’s righteousness whatsoever. Christ merely made it possible for the sinner to justify himself by believing and obeying.

As the Canons point out in their rejection of the error, the Arminian doctrine of justification is closely related to Arminianism’s teachings regarding Christ’s death and regarding the new covenant. First, denying the substitutionary efficacy of the cross by its theory of universal, ineffectual atonement, Arminianism

¹⁰ Ibid., 2:50.

taught (and teaches) that Christ's death merely obtained for God the right to offer all humans salvation on the condition that they believe. Faith, then, for Arminianism is not the instrument (earned for the elect sinner by the cross and bestowed on him by the Spirit) by which the sinner receives the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ by imputation. Faith is the work of the sinner's fulfilling the prescribed condition and thus becoming the sinner's righteousness with God.

Second, the Arminian heresy of justification on the basis of faith and good works is an aspect of Arminianism's erroneous doctrine of the covenant. The Canons' description and condemnation of Arminianism's doctrine of justification, in Canons 2, errors 2, 4, are part of the Canons' repudiation of the Arminian doctrine of a conditional covenant. Arminianism denied that the death of Christ "confirmed the new covenant" for and with "all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to him by the Father." It denied that this confirmation of the covenant included Christ's purchase for the elect of both salvation and the faith by which they receive salvation.¹¹

Rather, Arminian theology taught that Christ's death earned for God the right to establish the covenant with all humans, conditioned upon their faith and obedience. In such a conception of a conditional covenant, justification is necessarily also conditional, that is, dependent upon the work of the sinner, whether faith or good works or both.

Basic to the Arminian doctrine of justification, as it is also basic to the Roman Catholic doctrine, is the notion of the free will of the sinner. By their free will, sinners are able to distinguish themselves as worthy of justification and to contribute something of their own in the matter of justification.

Necessarily involved in this doctrine of justification is the admission that the grace of justification can be lost. A

11 Canons of Dordt 2.8, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:587.

righteousness consisting of the sinner's works is highly uncertain, indeed fickle. An act of justification dependent on the sinner is precarious to the very last breath of the sinner.

The Synod of Dordt—that grandest and most important assembly of the ecumenical church for the Christian faith from the time of Nicea/Constantinople and Chalcedon to the present day—condemned the Arminian doctrine of justification with all its related teachings, particularly those concerning the death of Christ and the covenant, as heresy. In fact, in the context of its condemnation of the Arminian doctrine of justification the Canons damn Arminianism, root and branch, the Arminianism of John Wesley as much as that of James Arminius, as the “bring[ing] again out of hell the Pelagian error.”¹²

That the Canons judge the Arminian teaching as essentially the false doctrine concerning justification that the apostle condemns in Romans and Galatians is proved by the biblical passages adduced by the Canons against the Arminian teaching. In the critically important article concerning the Arminian doctrine of justification, the Canons quote against it Romans 3:24–25: “[The Arminian doctrine of justification] contradict[s] the Scriptures: *Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood* (Rom. 3:24–25).” In a further, searing indictment, the creed adds, “And these [Arminians] proclaim, as did the wicked Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church.”¹³

12 Canons of Dordt 2, error 3, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 165.

13 Canons of Dordt 2, error 4, in *ibid.*

DOCTRINAL BACKGROUND: FEDERAL VISION HERESY

In a development that almost defies belief, this “new and strange justification of man before God” now appears in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches. These include the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, the United Reformed Churches, and the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches. The heresy that Romans 3–5 exposes as destructive of the gospel of grace and that the apostle calls “another gospel” in Galatians 1:6 now works at subverting the gospel from within the conservative churches. In the case of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, it has already accomplished this subversion by official decisions of presbyteries and general assembly protecting and approving the heresy.¹ The

1 In proof of these assertions, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2003); A. Donald MacLeod, “A Painful Parting, 1977–1983: Justifying Justification,” in *W. Stanford Reid: An Evangelical Calvinist in the Academy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 257–79; Paul M. Elliott, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2005); W. Robert Godfrey, “Westminster Seminary, the Doctrine of Justification, and the Reformed Confessions,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries*, ed. David Van Druenen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 127–48; and Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006). Waters, himself a member of the Presbyterian Church in America, writes: “Recognized proponents of the F[ederal] V[ision] are

leading theologians of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches are bold and noisy champions of the doctrine of justification by faith and works.

Prominent, influential advocates or defenders of justification by faith and works in these churches include Norman Shepherd; Richard B. Gaffin Jr.; Steve Wilkins; Peter J. Leithart; John Barach; Douglas Wilson; and Steve Schlissel. Shepherd, formerly a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and a longtime professor at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, is now a minister in the Christian Reformed Church. Schlissel is an independent.

The heresy concerning justification gains entrance into the conservative Reformed churches as a fundamental tenet of the theological movement that calls itself the federal vision.²

By affirming that James 2 is “talking about justification by faith in the [same] forensic, soteric sense that Paul talks about it in Romans and Galatians,” Shepherd, in an important respect the father and leading theologian of the federal vision, confesses justification by faith and works in the sense condemned as Roman

cross-denominational (within the Presbyterian Church in America, the United Reformed Churches, the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches, as well as independent churches)” (1). Oddly, Waters omits the Orthodox Presbyterian Church from his list. With the seminary in Philadelphia with which it is closely associated, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has been the fountainhead of the federal vision heresy of justification by works in the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America, as the other books mentioned above make plain.

- 2 For the federal vision’s teaching regarding justification by the men of the movement themselves, see Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000); E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004); and Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds., *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004). Contributing writers in the last volume include Steve Wilkins, John Barach, Rich Lusk, Peter J. Leithart, Steve Schlissel, and Douglas Wilson.

Catholic heresy by the Reformation and the Reformed creeds.³ If justification in James 2 has the same forensic sense that it has in Romans 3 and 4, James 2:24 teaches forensic justification by faith *and works*, as Rome has always contended against the Reformation's doctrine of (forensic) justification by faith alone, altogether apart from any work of the sinner. The text reads: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."

Shepherd adopts the Roman Catholic interpretation of James 2:21: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" "Abraham was considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar."⁴ Deliberately, Shepherd does not explain the text as teaching that Abraham was *shown* to be righteous by his work of offering Isaac, as is the explanation by the Reformation. But God "considered" Abraham to be righteous because of what he did, in a forensic sense of *considered*. This is the standard Roman Catholic explanation of James 2:21 and the full, naked, Roman Catholic doctrine of justification by faith and works.

By rejecting Luther's understanding of Romans 3:28 ("Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law") as teaching justification by faith *alone*, Shepherd embraces Rome's doctrine of justification by faith and works. Justification by faith *and works* is the only alternative to justification by faith *alone*.

Luther inserted "alone" into his translation of Romans 3:28 to make it read "For we hold that one is justified by faith *alone* apart from works of the law." This is the origin of the dogmatic formula, justification by faith alone. However, his insertion actually distorts Paul's meaning.⁵

3 Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Faith Alone," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 80.

4 Shepherd, *Call of Grace*, 16.

5 Shepherd, "Justification by Faith Alone," 87.

Criticism of Luther’s understanding of the key text in the Reformation’s controversy with Rome over justification is, of course, criticism of Calvin as well. Calvin too explained Romans 3:28 as teaching justification by faith *alone*. The “shift” by which the Roman Catholic theologians attempt to exclude “this adjective” (“alone” in the phrase “justified by faith *alone*”), Calvin judged “false” and “obviously ridiculous.” Calvin asked rhetorically, “Does not he who takes everything from works firmly enough ascribe everything to faith alone? What, I pray, do these expressions mean: ‘His righteousness has been manifested apart from the law’ [Rom. 3:21...]; and, ‘Man is freely justified’ [Rom. 3:24...]; and, ‘Apart from the works of the law’ [Rom. 3:28]?”⁶ The last biblical reference is specifically to Romans 3:28. By understanding the text as teaching justification by faith *alone*, Calvin too, according to Shepherd and the federal vision, was guilty of “distorting” Paul’s meaning.

Criticism of the Creeds

Not Luther, not Calvin, not the Reformation, but the Roman Catholic Church got Paul’s meaning right (according to Shepherd), and Paul’s meaning is justification by faith *and by works of obedience to the moral law*—justification by faith *and works*. Indeed, Shepherd’s criticism of Luther’s (and Calvin’s) interpretation of Romans 3:28 falls as well on the Reformed confessions. Largely on the basis of the understanding of Romans 3:28 that Shepherd criticizes as a distortion of Paul’s meaning, the Reformed confessions teach justification by faith *alone*. The Heidelberg Catechism is representative of all the Reformation creeds.

Why sayest thou that thou art righteous *only* by faith?

Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith; but because only the satisfaction,

6 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.19, 1:749.