

*Gospel Truth of Justification: Proclaimed, Defended, Developed*, David J. Engelsma. Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2017, 528 pages. Reviewed by Rev. Martin VanderWal

Thoroughly grounded and rooted is *Gospel Truth of Justification* by David J. Engelsma. Thoroughly grounded and rooted in scripture, the book presents a strong and beautiful garden for every lover of the grace of God to enjoy. This is not a garden of flowers that live and die according to their seasons, but it is a garden of a tree of life that yields all manner of fruit. Deliciously sweet and nutritious are many kinds of fruits in this garden. Fruits abound of confidence, of comfort and assurance, of good works, and of everlasting peace with God. It is a garden to live in. It is a garden to die in.

Because this garden is rooted and grounded in the truth of God's word, it means also that it is surrounded by a wall with its foundations dug deeply into that same ground. The wall is immovable, both dividing and distinguishing. The wall makes clear distinction between the living good within the garden and the evil decay that is without.

And without is plenty of decay and ruin. One might be tempted to call the land outside barren and unfruitful, a desert wasteland. Such a wasteland it is indeed, as there is nothing good or glorifying to God in it. Yet it is a wasteland full of groves of trees, evil trees that bear poisonous fruits. Carefully tending these trees and recommending their fruits are a multitude of theologians with their hordes of enthusiastic followers.

Engelsma's work is also a thorough survey of this dark realm outside the boundary of scripture and the confessions. The reader is brought to see not only how widespread the errors of legalism and works righteousness are, but also their common roots of callous contempt for scripture and the Reformed confessions and an evil yearning for the gates of Rome and its papal throne.

The contrast could not be made more striking. On the one side is truth, light, joy, peace, and all confidence. On the other side is heresy, darkness, loss, and continuing enmity with God, all in the stark absence of the righteousness of God in Christ.

The believing reader, enjoying the fruit of this garden, will appreciate the way the author presents the powerful relationship between scripture and the creeds of the Protestant Reformation on the topic of justification. He shows how thoroughly these creeds are rooted in scripture and that they speak with one voice on the subject of justification by faith alone, based on the righteousness of Christ alone without the works of men in any sense. Whether continental or islandic or whether Reformed or Presbyterian or Lutheran, the doctrine is exactly the same: works are entirely excluded; justification by grace alone is everywhere present.

Just as vigorously as the above is prosecuted, so vigorously is it applied to the present controversy over justification. On the basis of scripture and the confessions, N.T. Wright is shown to be wrong and the doctrines of the federal vision and the conditional covenant are completely demolished. Manifold, carefully selected quotations from the proponents of these heresies constantly ensure that Engelsma is attacking no straw men of his own devising. The book is thus a powerful friend to the gospel, and in the power of that friendship is a bitter, unrelenting foe to its enemies.

The vast importance of this work is highly positive, however. First, *Gospel Truth of Justification* demonstrates the wonderful value of the true doctrine of justification. It alone brings peace with God and the true joy of salvation. It alone provides peace of conscience and heart before the judgment seat of God. The blessed fruit of assurance and the powerful motive of gratitude for a life of true godliness are made to stand alone upon the gift of the righteousness of Christ.

Second, the book develops doctrines related to justification. With this development it has much to contribute to the body of Reformed dogma. Two matters contend for the highest place for this contribution. One is the development of the doctrine of eternal justification and its relationship to predestination. Confusion is taken away by placing justification in the forum of the conscience first according to the emphasis of the gospel itself, and then making subservient to that mode of justification

the work of the cross and God's eternal decree to justify the elect in Christ. This development highlights the point of gracious justification without works: the assurance the believer possesses and enjoys *in his conscience* through faith alone in Christ.

The other contribution is closely related: a thorough and masterful presentation of the truth of Christ's headship in the covenant of grace and its necessary relationship to justification. Positively, this presentation highlights the wonderful unity of scripture and the gospel of scripture. Negatively, it demonstrates the serious damage that is done to scripture and the gospel when the doctrine of the covenant is separated from election and the headship of Christ.

One other point of development should be highlighted. On page 360 the reader is presented with the wonder of the revelation of the triune God in relationship to justification, brought out of a treatment of Acts 20:28: "The price paid by Jesus was the blood—the *life's* blood—of God himself in the human nature of the eternal Son become flesh." With such words, Engelsma shows that the biblical and Reformed doctrine of justification is fraught with infinite love and grace, not as some cold theology of death and blood and only a callous shuffling of legal debts. In the same way he also demonstrates the great blindness toward such wonderful love and mercy exhibited by proud self-righteousness.

*Gospel Truth of Justification* is filled with a wealth of insightful, penetrating statements. What follows are just a few of such statements:

The new perspective [on Paul] is not able to penetrate to the heart of Paul's doctrine of justification: God justifies "the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). (31)

If evangelicals and Roman Catholics do not agree on imputation, they do not agree on justification. To affirm oneness on the doctrine, in spite of this fundamental disagreement, is a lie at best. At worst, it is the evangelical capitulation to the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification as *infusion*. (54)

This confusion [between sanctification with justification] is not harmless. It prevents the publican from going down to his home justified. It is attempted robbery of the people of God of their joy and peace. It detracts from the obedience of Jesus Christ as the complete righteousness of the believing sinner, as though the obedience of the sinner must be added to the obedience of Jesus for the sinner's righteousness with God. (112–13)

Ignorant of the righteousness of God, both as a perfection of God and as the fundamental grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Wright and the men of the new perspective leave themselves and their followers guilty before a just God, devoid of the imputed righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore miserable objects of the damning wrath of God. This misery they experience also, regardless of their theological profundity and pious platitudes. The only deliverance from the consciousness of guilt is the imputation of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. This righteousness they reject. (152)

The theology of the federal vision, which is essentially the ugly Arminian whore beautified in covenantal dress for contemporary seduction of Reformed churches, denies the teaching of Dordt and Westminster that the state of justification cannot be forfeited or lost. (230)

Sin cannot merely be ignored, or winked at, or excused, not only regarding the holy God, but also regarding the experience of the sinner. Despite all their claims to the contrary, this holds true also for the theological liberal, for the professed secular humanist, and for the avowed atheist. They know God; they know God as righteous; they know that his righteousness must

and will be satisfied with respect to their sinfulness and sins. This is the secret terror of their lives. (267)

[Reformed churches and theologians today are afraid of election...] The name of this fear is unbelief. (473)

The federal vision is as ignorant of the law as it is of the gospel. (488)

Another short quote deserves great emphasis: “[The federal vision’s] rejection of merit is of no consequence” (22). Although Wright and the federal visionists constantly exclaim that they stand for grace and reject merit, all their effort and work is exactly against grace and for merit. As *Gospel Truth of Justification* proves by many quotations, all their claims to serve the gospel are hollow and vain. The track of works, merit, and conditionality constantly denies any and all grace.

The great value of the book is its bold, incisive, and decisive character. It consistently follows a straight line between truth and error. That straight line runs clearly out of holy scripture throughout the whole book. It is also cause for sorrow that this delineating character is missing not only from so many works devoted to the same subject, but also from theological conversations of every kind and in the decisions of deliberative assemblies in so many Presbyterian and Reformed churches far and near. This work is therefore a welcome and necessary foray into the controversy over justification, constantly issuing a strong rallying cry for the cause of truth and true righteousness. The book is unapologetic and unafraid. It stands clearly for the gospel, offending and offending deeply only where such offense is necessary.

With its method, *Gospel Truth of Justification* represents the proper way in which the labor of dogmatics ought to be carried out. Even though the book draws deeply from the scriptures as a primary authority and from the creeds and confessions of the Protestant Reformation as a secondary authority, interaction with present trends and controversies is not lacking at all. In fact, throughout the book the light of scripture is made to shine clearly upon the many contemporary issues surrounding the truth of justification. The results, while very disturbing, are not only true, but also necessary to know and understand.

The book raises a question that needs to be asked in our day, a question that has arisen of late and is directed against its polemical character. Is this kind of work necessary? Should dogmatics involve the work not only of showing and demonstrating errors running through Reformed and Presbyterian churches, but also of demolishing such errors and calling out the men who promote them?

The answer is a clear, resounding, and emphatic yes. A friendly no to these kinds of errors is to make of them friends, not enemies. Merely to highlight them fails to show the poisonous deceit in them. The battle must be taken up, and the lines must be clearly drawn. Such was the method of Jesus Christ in his rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. Such was the manner of the apostle Paul in the book of Galatians. The same apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, identified by their names persons who had apostatized from the faith (2 Tim. 2:17), as also did John, the apostle beloved of the Lord (3 John 9–10).

The host of errors described in this book and the vast company of the promoters and adherents of these errors must give every believer pause for thought. How can the very heart of the gospel be so abused and even vilified, such contempt and scorn heaped on it? For what mess of pottage is such a birthright sold? Only the most distressing answer is given: The pride of man and the refuge promised by Rome. Gone is all the righteousness of Christ. Gone with that righteousness is all true peace, all comfort and hope, all true godliness and good works. One cannot but see the mighty hand of God’s judgment in all this.

There are three points of criticism of *Gospel Truth of Justification* of which the reader should be aware. The first is that the book suffers significantly from repetition. Illustrations, distinct points, and comparisons appear time and again in its pages. While each point of repetition has its fitting place in the surrounding context, the flavor is given to the book of a collection of essays, which detracts from the hard-hitting unity of its overall character.

The second is that the reader will run across sentences which are difficult to read and understand. While patient re-reading of these sentences will yield clarity, such sentences interrupt the flow of thought and soften the impact of the points being made. These difficult sentences in no way detract from the overall clarity of the book. In fact, any reader must be impressed with the complete freedom of this book from any ambiguity, ambiguity which so often is the devil's favorite hiding place for smuggling error.

The third is found on page 383, where there is a confusion of names. In the text itself Sinclair Ferguson is identified as teaching and defending the doctrine of conditional salvation, but in the footnote given, Don Garlington is identified as the source used by P. Andrew Sandlin in his book, *A Faith that is Never Alone*. The reader is unable to tell if the error of conditional salvation truly belongs to Ferguson or Garlington.

In summary, *Gospel Truth of Justification* is of inestimable value to the Reformed reader who wishes to grow in knowledge of and appreciation for this precious truth, which is at the heart of the gospel. May this outstanding work serve to keep the faithful church of Jesus Christ within the walls of her garden given by her God, enjoying the blessed fruit of this gospel truth to the glory and praise of her Lord, with never a thought of venturing out into the darkness and ruin outside its walls!