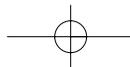
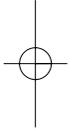




What Is Justification by Faith Alone?



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R&R
P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Page design by Tobias Design

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fesko, J. V., 1970—

What is justification by faith alone? / J. V. Fesko.

p. cm. — (Basics of the reformed faith)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-083-7 (pbk.)

1. Justification (Christian theology) 2. Reformed Church—Doctrines.

I. Title.

BT764.3.F47 2008

234'.7—dc22

2007038778

INTRODUCTION

■ Ever since Martin Luther, the famous sixteenth-century Reformer, nailed his ninety-five theses to the castle door of Wittenberg, the doctrine of justification by faith alone has been one of the great truths of the Reformed faith. During the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformers had five rallying points of belief: Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), Christ alone (*solus Christus*), grace alone (*sola gratia*), faith alone (*sola fide*), and to the glory of God alone (*solī Deo Gloria*). It is particularly three of these slogans that are of great significance for the doctrine of justification. Before we proceed, we should first define what we mean by the phrase the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

All people must at some point in their existence stand in the presence of God and be judged. There are two possible outcomes, either a guilty or not-guilty verdict. Or, in biblical terms, God will either condemn or justify the person who stands before him. In order for God to justify a person, he requires absolute perfect righteousness, that is, obedience to his law. Man, however, is sinful and lies under the curse of God. How can sinful man walk away from God's judgment with anything but a guilty verdict? The answer comes in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, originally written in the seventeenth century and

■ Justification

now one of the catechisms for most conservative Presbyterian denominations, defines justification as: “An act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (Q. 33). Here we see the basics of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

How can a sinner be justified in the sight of God? He can only be justified if another man stands in his place and offers the perfect obedience, or righteousness, that God requires. This is what Jesus has done for the one who looks to him by faith. Jesus lived on behalf of sinners. In other words, throughout his life Jesus was perfectly and completely obedient to the will and law of his heavenly Father. Jesus also suffered the penalty of sin throughout his earthly life, which culminated in his crucifixion on the cross. This means that Jesus both suffered the penalty of the law and offers his perfect obedience to those who look to him by faith. And Jesus was raised from the dead, which signaled that his perfect sacrifice was accepted by the Father, securing the victory over sin and death. The sinner contributes nothing to his justification, to this verdict that God renders. It is for these reasons that the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian and poet, Horatius Bonar, once wrote, “Thy works, not mine, O Christ, speak gladness to this heart; they tell me all is done; they bid my fear depart.” Perhaps now the cries of the Reformation begin to make more sense.

It is by God’s grace alone (*sola gratia*) that he justifies the sinner. God has every right to condemn the sinner but instead shows him mercy and shows him his grace. Justification is through Christ alone (*solus Christus*), as it is the work of Christ—his life, death, and resurrection—that serves as the judicial basis for the believer’s verdict of righteousness. And a sinner is justified by faith alone (*sola fide*). In other words, it is not the obedience or good works of the sinner. Rather, it

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is that the sinner looks exclusively to the person and work of Christ to receive this verdict of righteousness rather than the verdict of condemnation he deserves. These three points are the basics of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and it is these points that we want to examine in the following pages so we come to understand this essential truth of the Reformed faith.

John Calvin, the sixteenth-century second-generation Reformer, explained that “unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.” It was for this reason that Calvin believed that justification was “the main hinge on which religion turns.”¹ It is no wonder that a seventeenth-century Reformed theologian, Johann Heinrich Alsted, one of the delegates to the Synod of Dort (1619), which gave us the “five points of Calvinism,” would later write that the doctrine of justification is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, “the article upon which the church stands or falls.”

To understand this all-important doctrine, we will first survey the opening chapters of the Bible and the creation of Adam to see how God always intended to create and judge his creation. Second, we will see how in a fallen world, God was pointing to the person and work of his Son throughout the Old Testament, proving that a person could never be justified in God’s sight by obedience but only by faith alone in the work of Jesus. Third, we will see how through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ we find the basic building blocks of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Fourth, we will summarize our findings and show how the Reformed churches have historically expressed this doctrine. And fifth, we will answer some commonly asked questions concerning the doctrine.