

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE GOSPEL

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I. "I HOPE I SHARED ENOUGH"

A while back I was visiting with a pastor friend about a short-term mission trip he had taken. Something he said grabbed my attention. This friend is a solid Free Grace proponent. He believes and would surely die for justification by faith alone.

"Steve" was given the chance to speak at a secular orphanage. He was told he shouldn't say anything about Jesus or Christianity. Well, Steve felt burdened to preach the gospel. So he told the boys and girls that God became a baby, that baby grew up and the man, Jesus, lived a sinless life and then He died on the cross for our sins. Three days later He rose bodily from the grave. Jesus died for your sins and for my sins. And now He is alive. With that, Steve ended his message and sat down.

Steve told me that everyone was deeply moved by his message. The power of the cross really came through. But then he told me something remarkable. Steve looked at me and with a wistful look on his face said: "I hope I shared enough so that maybe some of the children were born again that day."

Steve forgot something in his preaching that day. He never mentioned *the promise of the gospel*. He never told the audience what they needed to do and what they would have if they did it.

Steve knew deep down that telling people that Jesus died for our sins and that He rose from the grave on the third day is not enough. He knew people needed more information than that. Steve forgot to tell his audience anything about believing in Jesus or about everlasting life.

I believed Jesus died on the cross for my sins and rose bodily from the dead 14 or more years before I believed in Jesus for eternal life. There are millions of people around the world who do not believe in justification by faith alone, yet who do believe many orthodox truths

about Jesus and the Bible, including the fact that Jesus died for our sins and rose bodily from the dead.

The thesis of this article is this: Justification by faith alone is an essential part of the gospel. Stated another way, if you have not communicated the truth of justification by faith alone, you have not given enough information for a person to be born again.

II. MANY NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS SEE MANY WAYS TO COME TO JESUS

Back in 1998 I had a discussion in front of about 150 students with a renowned seminary professor who teaches New Testament. Our topic was “What Is the Gospel?” In the course of the debate the scholar separated the good news that Jesus died and rose again from the condition of eternal life.

“Daniel” said that there are different types of gospel appeals in the New Testament and that people can come to Christ by believing in Jesus, or by repenting of their sins, or by totally committing themselves to Jesus. There is one gospel, which he understood as Jesus’ death and resurrection; but there are many ways to come to Jesus.

I asked him how he decided which appeal to give when speaking to a given group of people. His answer was that the Holy Spirit guides him and tells him which appeal to present to a given person.

What Daniel was saying is held by many today. He said that the gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is the one and only gospel. But notice that by doing this he is then free to say that there are many ways to come to the One who died and rose again. Justification by faith alone in this view is not an essential doctrine any longer. Some may come to Christ that way, but others may come by turning from their sins or by committing their life.

III. MANY FEEL FAITH-ALONE IS TOO PICKY

A friend of mine used to work as a security guard at a Bible church with well over one thousand people in attendance each Sunday. He told me about a controversy that came up at his church.

The pastor, we’ll call him *Norm*, said from the pulpit that Mother Theresa is now in heaven. A member of the church, I believe she may have been a former Catholic herself, questioned the truth of that statement and the wisdom of saying that in front of a large audience that

surely included people who did not yet believe in justification by faith alone.

Pastor Norm did not clarify his statement from the pulpit the next week or any week soon thereafter. Rather, Norm replied privately to his staff. He emailed the entire staff, including my friend, a report of what the woman had said and then a long explanation of why she was wrong.

In the email Norm said that not only Mother Theresa, but untold numbers of Catholics and Anglicans and others who do not believe in justification by faith alone are born again because they “believe in Jesus” and love Him. The precise content of what they believe about Jesus is not the point.

He went on to say *that God is not so picky that a person has to get his doctrine just right*. As long as a person loves Jesus and believes in Him, that’s enough. Confusion over justification by faith alone is unfortunate, but won’t keep anyone from heaven, because that isn’t what it means to believe in Jesus.

Norm, by the way, is a conservative. He believes in justification by faith alone. He just doesn’t believe that is an essential doctrine that must be believed in order to have eternal life. Of course, this comes out in his preaching. Thus, a person in his congregation who believes in justification by faith plus works will likely understand Norm to be saying that he is born again, for that is what Norm believes.

There are many pastors and many churches like this one today. Many conservative Bible churches teach that it really does not matter whether you add works to faith as the condition of justification. The key is that you at least see faith in Jesus as necessary and that you love Jesus and are committed to serving Him. The precise content of your faith in Jesus is not a life and death matter with most pastors today.

IV. MOST IN CHRISTENDOM BELIEVE IN THE CROSS YET DON’T BELIEVE IN JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

As mentioned above, when many evangelize, they focus on whether the person they are witnessing to believes Jesus died on the cross in their place. They see the cross, rather than justification by faith alone, as the essential truth that separates believers from unbelievers. Yet many who believe in the cross don’t believe in justification by faith alone.

Now I should say that a full understanding of substitutionary atonement almost demands that a person believes in justification by faith

alone. However, few have a full understanding of substitutionary atonement until long after they came to faith in Jesus for eternal life.

The point remains that millions do not understand or do not fully understand substitutionary atonement, yet they genuinely believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and that He bodily rose from the dead.

Believing that Jesus died and rose again is great, but believing that does not mean that a person is regenerate. In other words, a person may believe that Jesus died for his sins and rose again and yet not believe the gospel! I urge that we make the issue of justification by faith alone clear.

Many today, indeed the vast majority, of those who believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose again are not born again. The reason is simple. They have not yet believed that the one who simply believes in Jesus has everlasting life.

Earlier I told you about my Pastor friend, Steve. I spoke at his church a while ago. Steve asked me to speak in the Sunday morning worship service on how to share the gospel clearly. In the course of my message I indicated that object of saving faith was not the cross *per se*, but the promise of Jesus that the one who simply believes in Him has everlasting life. I said that the cross explains how Jesus can fulfill the promise and who it is that makes the promise, but that a person could believe in the cross and not be born again. We must believe Jesus' promise to be regenerate.

Well, my comments set off some fireworks. After I finished Pastor Steve stood up and said something like this:

Thanks, Bob. While I appreciate much of what Bob just said, I feel it is necessary for me to correct something he said. He said that the cross is not the object of saving faith. He was wrong. The cross is the object of the saving faith. First Corinthians 15:3-11 shows that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the gospel. So if we tell people that Jesus died on the cross in our place and rose from the dead, then we have shared the gospel clearly.

That wasn't the end of it. I was there for a multi-day Bible conference. The next day at lunch Steve said that based on his understanding of Gal 1:8-9 that I was proclaiming a false gospel. This led to an interesting discussion over lunch!

The third day, when we were talking, the associate pastor, who had been reflecting on the pastor's charge that I was a heretic based on Galatians, said that the issue in the letter to the Galatians was not the cross,

but justification by faith alone. The associate pastor pointed out that the Judaizers surely preached the death and resurrection of Jesus. What they denied is that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law of Moses. What the associate pastor said is the key to this discussion.

Is the gospel what Paul says in Galatians? If so, we cannot proclaim the gospel clearly without proclaiming justification by faith alone. We don't need to use the word *justification*, but we must preach *the concept* or its equivalent if we wish to preach the gospel of Paul and Jesus. "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47) is justification by faith alone in different words.

As Steve himself illustrated with his comments about his evangelistic preaching at the overseas orphanage, a person can boldly preach that Jesus died and rose again and yet not evangelize clearly enough if he fails to preach justification by faith alone. Isn't that what the Mormons do? The Jehovah's Witnesses? Roman Catholics? Arminian Protestants? Lordship Salvationists?

If the gospel is a car, then justification by faith alone is standard equipment. It is not optional. If you find someone preaching the gospel without mentioning that the sole condition of justification/eternal life is faith in Jesus, then the gospel they are preaching is not the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

V. MANY FIVE-POINT CALVINISTS DO NOT CONSIDER JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE ESSENTIAL

Many five-point Calvinists feel that Arminians, people who do not believe in eternal security or justification by faith alone, are brothers and sisters in Christ as long as their lives back up their profession of faith in Christ. This is a major concern to other five-point Calvinists, some of whom are in the Free Grace camp and others of whom are not.

Calvinist John G. Reisinger wrote: "There is a man in Tennessee who is convinced I am not saved because I speak of 'our Arminian brethren.' He writes long letters warning me of my lost estate. He cannot see that he has placed his particular understanding of truth on the same level as inspiration. The poor man's entire theology is, in his eyes, just as verbally inspired as the Bible itself."¹

¹ See <http://www.soundofgrace.com/jgr/index023.htm>.

Taking the opposite stand, that is, taking the position of the man from Tennessee who confronted Reisinger, Calvinist Pastor Bill Parker says,

“Many so-called Calvinists, who give mental assent to the doctrines of grace, believe that they themselves and others were saved while in Arminianism or some other false gospel. This shows both an ignorance of the true Gospel and a lack of repentance. They judge themselves and others as saved not based on what they believe (doctrine and a life consistent with it) but based on appearance, morality, and reputation. This is Satan’s lie. It always results in speaking peace where there is no peace, and it promotes lost sinners in false refuges of self-righteous religion.”

Many [Calvinists] speak of ‘Arminian brethren,’ implying that even though we differ in doctrine, we believe the same gospel. But what is the Gospel?” (emphasis added).²

Parker went on to say that Arminians promote works salvation since they see faith, repentance, and perseverance as conditions of eternal salvation. Parker sees those things as required, but since regeneration precedes these things, all these things are gifts of God.

Sadly, Pastor Parker didn’t see their problem as their denial of justification by faith alone. Rather, their problem lies in failing to see faith, repentance, and perseverance as gifts of God and works of God.

At a website called “Grace Gems”³ a Calvinist Pastor, Darryl Erkel tells the reader to “recognize that Salvation is Broader than the Calvinist Camp.” His first reason why Calvinists should consider Arminians to be born again is as follows:

All of us, at one time or another, were Arminian in our thinking. A professing Arminian may be just as unregenerate as a professing Calvinist, but one’s adherence to Arminian theology does not necessarily exclude them from the kingdom of God. It is disturbing to hear some Calvinists assign all Arminians to the lowest abyss while conveniently forgetting that they too, at one time, were Arminians. Although the great 18th century evangelist, George Whitefield, had his differences

² See <http://www.rofgrace.com/art20.html>.

³ See www.gracegems.org and click on the sermon by Darryl Erkel entitled, “Practical Wisdom for Calvinists.”

with the staunch Arminian John Wesley, he was able to see the hand of God in Wesley's ministry and count him as a brother in Christ. Thus, we must be patient with our brethren and recognize that both ethical and theological maturity takes time. In fact, there are some truths that, for whatever reason, we may not yet be ready to receive – as Jesus told His own disciples, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12)...

"Far be it from me to imagine that Zion contains none but Calvinistic Christians within her walls, or that there are none saved who do not hold our views" (cited in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966] p.65)... (emphasis his)

This Reformed Pastor does not consider the five points of Calvinism as the gospel. Most JOTGES readers would say a hearty amen to that. However, Erkel implicitly does not consider justification by faith alone to be an essential truth. Arminians believe in justification by faith plus works. They also believe that everlasting life is lost whenever a believer commits a big enough sin.

Later, he gave another reason why we should not consider Arminians as unregenerate:

Most Arminians reject the Doctrines of Grace out of gross ignorance, misunderstanding, or misrepresentation on the part of sincere, but misinformed Calvinist's. Thus, often they are not rejecting genuine Calvinism, but distortions of it. One's *heart* may be right, while one's *head* may be wrong. (emphasis his)

As one can easily see, for Calvinists like this pastor, as long as one's *heart* is right, he is born again, even if he doesn't understand or believe the saving message! Works-salvation thinking is saving as long as one's heart is right.

His final reason is that:

Calvinism is *not* the Gospel. One is not saved by a proper understanding of election, Divine sovereignty, or the extent of the atonement. These issues, no doubt, are important, but they are not the *core* of the Gospel; they *indirectly* relate to the Gospel (as do many other Biblical teachings), but are not the *essence* of it. The puritan, John Bradford, stated: "Let a man go to the grammar school of faith and repentance, before he goes to the university of election and predestination." In the

same way that it is wrong to *detract* from the Gospel message, so it is wrong to *add* to the Gospel message one's particular theology. (emphasis his)

Doctrine, according to many Calvinists, is not part of "the *core* of the gospel." The core is "faith and repentance." Of course, we are not talking here of "head faith," as the preceding point shows, but "heart faith." And notice it is not merely faith, but faith and repentance. Erkel never explains precisely what one must be convinced is true (i.e., believe), since for him, regeneration is a matter of the heart, not head or mind.

A few years ago I met with a leading 5-Point Calvinist who is the head of one of the largest Christian radio ministries in the world. I asked him about Calvinists who speak of Arminians as fellow believers. His response concerned me. Instead of saying that was wrong, he said that was correct. This following is not a quote. This is my recollection of what he said:

Well, Arminians believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead. They are trusting in His death on their behalf. Now while they are in error when they say that one is justified by faith plus works, that doesn't mean that they are not born again. After all, they do believe in Jesus. And if they are persevering in good works, then they are giving evidence that they are regenerate.

Even in Reformed thought, justification by faith alone is not normally considered an essential part of the gospel.

VI. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE IS UNDER ATTACK

The U.S. is involved in a war on terrorism. It is a costly war. The stakes are high. It is not easy to know who the enemies are, for they work covertly.

The Grace movement is involved in a war as well. It too is costly and the stakes are high. And you can't tell who the enemies are simply by looking at them. Those who deny justification by faith alone are loving people, godly people, good parents, and good neighbors. They go to church and sing with gusto and praise God.

The only way to tell who the spiritual terrorists are is to find out what they believe one must do to have eternal life. Spiritual terrorists deny that one must believe in justification by faith alone before he can be born again.

These spiritual terrorists do not deny the cross or the resurrection. In fact, they proclaim these truths. What they deny is that one must believe in faith as the one and only condition of eternal life to be born again.

Justification by faith alone is under attack today. Now by this I mean more than that many who proclaim it define faith in such a way to deny the truth of justification by faith alone. The Trinity Foundation has documented this in *The Current Justification Controversy*⁴ and *A Companion to The Current Justification Controversy*.⁵ I will not repeat that discussion here.

What I am discussing here is more subtle. Justification by faith alone is under attack since many say you don't need to believe it in order to have eternal life! As we've seen above, even some 5-Point Calvinists are saying this.

I know of no Free Grace people who have said this publicly. I know of some who have told me privately that belief in justification by faith alone is not essential. In their view some who believe in justification by faith plus works, and who never believed in justification by faith alone, are born again. I am alarmed by such thinking, especially from within our camp.

If we as the Grace movement fall prey to this way of thinking, the grace movement will die. Of course, God will not allow His gospel to depart completely. But He may well allow fewer and fewer churches and people to proclaim it clearly.

VII. FAITH ALONE IS AN ESSENTIAL IN EVANGELISM (GALATIANS 1:8-9)

As mentioned above, Paul in Galatians was defending his evangelistic gospel, his evangelistic good news. And that good news was justification by faith alone. Galatians 2:15-16, the thesis of the book, make this clear. A person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. That is the good news Paul preached and the legalistic Judaizers opposed.

⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2003).

⁵ John Robbins, *A Guide to The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2003).

So what is the absolutely essential message that must be proclaimed and believed in order for a person to gain eternal life? A person is 1) justified (declared righteous) 2) by faith in 3) Jesus Christ.

The *sine qua non* in evangelism is a propositional statement found in Gal 2:15-16. It has three essential parts. Jesus gave the same three points: “He who believes in Me has everlasting life” (John 6:47). Note the three essentials:

1. Believing
2. in Jesus
3. for everlasting life.

If you don’t mention believing, or the equivalent (like being persuaded), then you haven’t been clear. If you don’t mention the name of Jesus, you have not given enough information. If you don’t speak of the promise of *everlasting* life, or the equivalent (like justification that can never be lost under any circumstances no matter what we do or don’t do in the future), then you have not articulated the saving message.

I’ve found that Free Grace people never fail to mention Jesus’ name. But sometimes Free Grace people fail to mention believing. They will speak of accepting Christ or receiving Christ. Unfortunately, the person to whom they are witnessing normally doesn’t know that accepting or receiving Christ means believing in Him. And even if they do, they often don’t know what they are believing Him for.

I’ve also found that Free Grace people often fail to mention everlasting life. They instead speak of going to heaven when you die. The problem with this is that unless you specifically say that there is nothing you can do to avoid going to hell, that you are secure forever the moment you believe, most listeners think what you are saying is this: “If you believe in Jesus you will go to heaven when you die *as long as you stay faithful to Jesus until that point.*”

If the gospel is a car, then the doctrine of justification by faith alone is not optional equipment. Never fail to tell people that Jesus guarantees eternal life only to those who simply believe in Him. Those who think they must add works do not believe the gospel. They think that if we are right that they are okay, since they just have some extras. We need to show them that if we are right then they are bound for hell since they don’t believe the gospel.

VIII. FIRST CORINTHIANS 15:3-11 DOES NOT TEACH THAT FAITH ALONE IS OPTIONAL

The word *gospel* means *good news*. We sometimes use it, and I am guilty of this myself, to refer to the good news of eternal life for all who simply believe in Jesus. However, the word doesn't have that narrow of a meaning. Any good news is gospel.

Jesus and John the Baptist and the apostles preached the good news of the kingdom. What was that? It was the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand. Jesus the King was here and He was offering the kingdom to that generation of Jews.

The gospel of the kingdom was not the message of what an individual must do to have eternal life. It may or may not have been the two-fold message, repent and believe, of what Israel as a nation had to do for the kingdom to come. But clearly it was the good news that the kingdom was at hand.

The good news in First Corinthians is the good news that Paul preached to the *believers*, not unbelievers, in the church in Corinth. The good news message he preached was Christ crucified. This was a sanctification message that a divided church needed to hear badly.

The apostle John wrote about the cross of Christ similarly in 1 John 3:16-18. Since Jesus laid down His life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. Paul said the same thing in 2 Cor 5:14.

Indeed, is not Gal 2:20 one of the key *sanctification verses* in the New Testament? When Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ, he is talking about how Calvary impacts his life each and every day as a born-again person. When we speak of the death and resurrection of Jesus at communion services, we are not evangelizing anyone. We are using the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection for sanctification.

The example view of the atonement is wrong. The example view of sanctification is correct. The reason we don't find justification by faith alone anywhere in 1 Cor 15:3-11 is because this was *sanctification* good news.

In Galatians the situation is the opposite. There Paul repeatedly speaks of justification by faith apart from works. Only rarely does he even mention the cross, and then it is in sanctification contexts. That is because in Galatians, Paul is defending his evangelism message. Only if a believer remains true to justification by faith alone can he or she walk in the Spirit.

When I hear people point to 1 Cor 15:3-11 and boldly proclaim that is the precise evangelistic message Paul preached, I shutter. How could we get it so wrong? Yes, Paul did tell unbelievers about Jesus' death and resurrection. But *that was not the sum total of his evangelistic message*. Nor is Paul's evangelistic message the point of 1 Cor 15:3-11.

If 1 Cor 15:3-11 is the evangelistic message that we should preach, then Mormons are clear on the gospel. So are Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Arminians, Lordship Salvationists, and just about anyone in Christianity who says that Jesus died for our sins and rose again.

IX. CONCLUSION: CALL PEOPLE TO BELIEVE IN JESUS FOR EVERLASTING LIFE

May we never fail to tell people the saving proposition: Jesus, the One who died and rose again, *guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him*.

There aren't many evangelistic appeals. There is one. There aren't many ways to come to Jesus. There is but one way. Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him. That is information we must never fail to communicate.

When you tell people about Jesus' death and resurrection, don't stop there. Go on to tell them that all who simply believe in Him have everlasting life. He is able to fulfill that promise because of His death and resurrection. But call people to believe the promise. When we believe in Jesus, we believe in His promise of everlasting life to the believer. The true object of saving faith is the faith-alone-in-Christ-alone message

Let's not merely "hope we've shared enough." Jesus, the One who died on the cross in our place and rose bodily from the dead, guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him. Share that message and you have shared enough.