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*Another Reply to
Counted Righteous in Christ*



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[T]he attempt, at the Reformation and elsewhere, to make righteousness/justification the center and norm of the NT and of all theology because it was the center of the center in Romans and Paul has been resisted even in connection with Pauline Theology . . . , because of scientific (descriptive) reasons as well as confessional ones.

JOHN REUMAN
(*RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT*, 106)

Few disagreements . . . are as divisive and generate as much heat as the conflict that concerns the nature of faith's relationship to obedience and good works. The familiar motto *sola fide* ("by faith alone") was central to the Protestant Reformation of the church. This was the source of the famous disputation between the reformer Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus, the Roman Catholic. Since the Reformation, Protestants have continued to debate the meaning of "by faith alone." Each generation debates this Protestant motto, usually with some acrimony, because few issues concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ are as crucial as the question concerning the relationship of faith and obedience. Some sever obedience from faith and insist that one can be a Christian and yet have no deeds that accompany one's faith. In fact, they say, a Christian can abandon faith itself and never return but still be saved. This, of course, alarms many who contend that the gospel binds faith and obedience together. Yet it is no small task to explain how the gospel binds them together.

THOMAS R. SCHREINER AND ARDEL B. CANEDAY
(*THE RACE SET BEFORE US*, 88)

John Piper, in his *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), talks of the need for a "detailed defense . . . on the historic Protestant view of the relationship between faith and obedience . . ." (44, note 2). As a pastor of a large church as well as a theologian, he senses a need for "trembling souls and imperfect saints" (51) to understand clearly the relationship between justifying faith and obedience. Piper sounds as if he might write more about this in the months ahead.

But this current book already has quite a bit to say on this subject. "Our only hope of . . . growing in likeness to Jesus is that we already have a right standing with God by faith alone" (49). This "right standing," consisting of the imputed righteousness of Christ, provides believers with the power to achieve practical righteousness (50). Through union with Christ believers are connected with the Holy Spirit, whose power "severs the root of sin's compelling promises by cherishing Christ above all other treasures and pleasures" (122, note 4). But this sanctifying faith coming from union with Christ must not be confused with the antecedent justifying faith that established that union.

PIPER AND JOHN CALVIN

Distinguishing between justifying and sanctifying faith was also essential for Calvin. "[Justifying faith] properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it. For in God faith seeks a life not found in commandments or declaration of penalties [in the law] . . . [but] only in [the unconditional] promise of mercy [found in the gospel]." "When we say, [however], that faith must rest on a freely given promise, we do not deny that believers embrace and grasp the Word of God in every respect [including the law]" (*Institutes* 3:2:29). "[In sanctification] it is the function of the law . . . to arouse Christians to a zeal for holiness. . . . But where consciences are worried . . . with what assurance they will stand [before God], there we are not to reckon what the law requires, but Christ alone, who surpasses all perfection of the law (3:19:2).

For Calvin the faith suited for the law and sanctification was so different from the faith suited for justification that Calvin viewed the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5), to be urged from all peoples on earth, to refer only to the justifying faith urged by the gospel, the only "firm testimony of God's [unconditional] benevolence" (3:2:29).

Distinguishing between justifying and sanctifying faith is also vital for Piper, but not because of how the gospel contrasts with the law. The "works not" of Romans 4:5 certainly exclude the works in which people boast (Ephesians 2:9). But they also exclude the "good works that are caused by faith" (89, note 36), because for Piper it is vital to understand such works, referred to in many biblical passages (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 1:3; Galatians 5:6), as flowing only from the union with Christ accomplished in justification.

Piper thus maintains the reformation emphasis on keeping obedience separate from justification. And as a biblicalist he thinks the relation between justification and obedience "must be answered exegetically from biblical texts, not historical precedent" (35). The "biography" on Piper's web site declares, "Through Dr. [Daniel] Fuller, [a 'live' teacher], he discovered the writings of Jonathan Edwards, his most influential 'dead'

teacher."¹ Edwards is important because he modeled the disposition of the "more noble Bereans" (Acts 17:11) in seeking out what the canonical scriptures were trying to say, even if that meant differing with a revered tradition at some point.²

JUSTIFICATION AND OBEDIENCE IN EDWARDS

In his famous sermon on "Justification by Faith Alone" (1735),³ however, Edwards viewed the "works of faith" not as separate from justifying faith but essential to it as persevering faith. Not merely "a dormant principle of the heart," this persevering faith manifested itself "in its active expressions" (106). Each of these acts of faith "is but an expression of the soul's being united to Christ" (107). Consequently, "All evangelical works are . . . of that faith [alone] that works by love [Galatians 5:6]" (107). And an "after act" of persevering faith ". . . is only a new, effective act of receiving Christ, an adherence to the glorious Savior" (107). "Scripture militates against our imagining that it is our own goodness, virtue, or excellency that instates us in God's acceptance and favor [in any such act of faith]." (102).

Edwards understood justifying faith as "receiving Christ" and thus having "a joint interest with him in his eternal benefits" (103). Such faith must then persevere, despite lapses, since this interest regarding future blessings urges us, "in whatever we do, whether in word or deed, to do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (107). Edwards construed Jesus' words, "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love" (John 15:10) as meaning that one having an interest in Christ's benefits would maintain a congruity with that interest by obeying him. Consequently, justifying faith will result in behavior and actions urged by such a hope.

Edwards saw no substantive difference between the first act of faith in laying hold on Christ for justification and the many "after acts" of persevering faith (106). A subsequent act of faith could function as a first act of faith and vice versa. Genesis 12:1-4 records how Abraham's initial faith in God's promise at age 75 led him to leave his homeland and house to live in tents as a sojourner in a foreign land (Genesis 12:1-4; Hebrews 11:8-

10). But after a few years of this without Sarah's bearing him an heir, Abraham's disappointment with God's promise led him to appoint his chief servant as his heir (Genesis 15:1-3). Then God repeated his initial promise to Abraham and told him his posterity would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham again believed Sarah would bear him a son, and God credited this faith for righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

Significantly, the New Testament cites this "after act" of Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6 at around age 83 for two later "after acts": one at age 99, when Abraham believed that Sarah had indeed conceived in her old age (Genesis 17:17; Romans 4:22), and another at about age 110 when Abraham believes God and obeys his command to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:12; James 2:23). Edwards also cited Noah's years spent in building an ark as an instance of an extended "course of after acts" of persevering faith by which he became "an heir of the righteousness which is by faith" (Hebrews 11:7).⁴

PIPER AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

So Edwards, unlike Piper, viewed the works of faith as an integral part of the persevering faith essential for justification. And Edwards followed sound exegesis in construing the "works" excluded in Romans 4:5 as only those just talked about in verse 4, namely, the kind that earn a recompense from a client. Such works call attention to a care provider's virtue and skill in meeting a client's need, and are totally opposite from the "evangelical works of that faith that works by love" (107). So "boasting is excluded" (Romans 3:27) from Noah's protracted works of faith continuing over the many years it took to build an ark. All this effort was simply a needy client's obedience of faith, and opposite from the care-provider works excluded from faith in Romans 4:5. The client works of Abraham and Noah gave all glory to care-provider God for his loving and marvelous works.

Piper makes frequent references to passages in Romans 4:5-11 in his *Counted Righteous in Christ*, but never cites verse 12, "Abraham is also the father of those who also walk in the steps of that faith which our father Abraham had [before he

was circumcised]." Likewise, Piper's August 29, 1999 sermon on Romans 4:9-12 (see his web site) concerns itself only with believers' baptism and says nothing about the "steps of [Abraham's persevering] faith," so essential to one's being a true heir of Abraham.

Unlike Calvin, Piper affirms a continuum between justifying and sanctifying faith. The Bethlehem Institute creed says (10:2), "The moral effects of persevering faith may be rightly described as the effects of justifying faith." But the roles of justifying and of sanctifying faith differ so as to give them distinctive qualities. Justifying faith is "the occasion of God's forgiving . . . and reckoning as righteous," while sanctifying faith is the "channel through which God's power . . . flows to the soul . . . and changes it into the likeness of Christ" (10:1).

In his current book Piper emphasizes that "faith (as root) remains distinct from works of faith (as fruit), although never inseparable." He cites the Westminster Confession (11:2) as a support for this. "Faith, then receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and [so] is no dead faith, but 'works by love' [Galatians 5:6]" (51, note 16). It seems that justifying faith needs a modification in its quality to then function as sanctifying faith that obeys God's commands. But is not such talk dangerous? For it is arguable from Galatians 3:2-3, that initial justifying faith is fully qualified to carry one on to maturity, and that the Galatian heresy consists precisely in modifying justifying faith in some way or supplementing it with helpers, so that sanctification can function.

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Notes

1. www.desiringgod.org/who_is_dgm/about_piper/piper_bio.html (03.13.03)
2. Piper held a conference on Jonathan Edwards in his church, October 10-12, 2003.
3. "Justificaton by Faith Alone," in *The Works of President Edwards*, 4 volumes, Worcester edition (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1858), 4:64-132.
4. "The Perseverance of the Saints," in *The Works of President Edwards*, 3:507-532, page 517.