

Transcription of remarks made by Dr. R. B. Gaffin, Jr. at the beginning of the debates between A. W. Kuschke and Norman Shepherd. Taken from a tape produced by Westminster Media, 1979.

Basic position is that, the doctrinal position as a whole, as expressed in the Thirty-Four Theses, is, in harmony with the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards.

Two points basically. Very fundamental to the intention and content of the Thirty-Four Theses, as I understand them. My aim is not so much the crucial points controverted. But what is fundamental to understanding the Thirty-Four Theses as a whole. This is not as well understood or appreciated by opponents.

- I. Justification manifests the union between Christ and the Believer.
- II. Justification equals the reckoning and accounting of Christ's righteousness as ours, received by faith.

Restated--Justification is an expression of our union with Christ. Justification is understood as the imputing of Christ's righteousness, received by faith resting in that righteousness alone, for the forgiveness of sins.

Justification, ~~just in that sense~~, roots in our being united to Christ. I hope this point is not controverted. We could compare many Scriptures. As such. Phil. 3:9 where the concern is to gain Christ and be found in Him, not having righteousness of the Law, but having the righteousness of Christ.

What needs to be considered is that this is the position of our Standards. We are committed to this confessionally. The Westminster Larger Catechism is the primary source, along with the Confession and Shorter Catechism.

WLC. 69 "What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ?"

"The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of His mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with Him."

The WLC says Justification manifests our union with Christ.

One important footnote, to focus the notion of union.

When you talk about union with Christ, we can think about it, partially in terms of our Reformed perspectives, in the definitiveness of the Atonement, of the number of God's elect people. We can think of a union that is true in terms of God's eternal design. A union applied to our being represented and contemplated in Christ, in His once and for all work, the Death and Resurrection of Christ.

But then, union in the specific sense of what takes place, or in our actual life history, our experience, when we are united to Christ experientially. And it is important to see that when the WLC 69 is talking about "whatever else manifests their union with Him." It is union specifically in this experiential sense, that is in view.

Cf., WLC.66 "What is that union which the elect have with Christ?"

"The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling."

The union in view is the real, sometimes called the experiential, union, constituted in God's work of effectually calling sinners, in the area of the application of redemption. To put it another way--Justification is a manifestation of our experiential, vital, union; being united to Jesus Christ in that sense.

Compare WSC.30 and 31. They have the same perspective, though expressed in a different question and answer structure.

30 "How does the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?"
 ". . . , by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling."

31 "What is effectual calling?"

". . . is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel."

Look at WSC.29 first, "How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ?"

"We are made partakers . . . , by the effectual application of it to us by His Spirit..

Here we are brought into the realm of ordo salutis, the application of redemption. Question 30 has the same conception again.

You see, Effectual Calling, first of all, constitutes the union between Christ and the believer. Then there is a more full description in Q.31. The final thrust--God does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel. There is the union with Christ again.

Then the WSC asks, and only then, Q.32 "What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?"

"They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them."

Briefly compare this with WCF XI:1 "Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the righteousness and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God"

This focusses the point that Justification is not a matter of infusion, but a matter of free imputation. And it is accenting the imputation of the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto sinners, unto believers. That is the ground of justification.

Look at XI:4, especially note the language at the end--"nevertheless they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them."

The connections may be looser than they are in the Catechisms. But against the background of the Catechisms structure it can be seen. The Confession is not saying something different than the imputation of Christ's righteousness, when it talks in section four of applying Christ unto them, uniting them to Christ.

To try and summarize this point-- I think I understand that we are all agreed; that any statement of the doctrine of Justification, that is going to be faithful to the Scriptures, first of all, and then to our Standards, ought, must highlight Christ's imputed righteousness, as the sole ground of Justification. And it must also highlight faith in its distinctive function. What the Confession calls its "principal acts of accepting, receiving, and resting on Christ alone."

But, while these are vital factors, these are not the only things to be said in formulating a doctrine of Justification. And we must keep in view, in understanding the Scriptures view of Justification, and our Standards doctrine of Justification, the structure that is there. So, we could put it this way--we do not find in our Standards doctrine of Justification, in Q.'s 70-73 in abstraction from Q.69. Nor WSC.33 in abstraction from Q.'s 30-32. Nor do we find XI:1 in abstraction from XI

Union with Christ in its vital, experiential sense is integral to the biblical and confessional understanding of the doctrine of Justification.

II. Justification equals the reckoning and accounting of Christ's righteousness as ours, ~~received by faith~~.

A point which could be more open to being controverted and to misunderstanding. Yet we must focus on it.

Union with Christ is a justifying union only as it is an abiding union.

One misunderstanding--it is certainly the case that we are justified, and justified once and for all, justified irrevocably, at the moment we are first united to Christ. At the moment Christ's righteousness is imputed to us once for all, freely and fully.

But, at the same time, we need to appreciate, that our justification is conditioned on that union being an enduring, abiding, union. A number of Scriptures could be looked at and considered. But one or two in particular.

A. John 15.

The reality of union with Christ is present, massively present, under the figure of the Vine and Branches. But as we look at the passage, particularly vs. 1-10, a central theme is the abiding branches in the Vine. And what is bound up with that abiding: the fruitbearing of the branches as the correlative accompaniment of abiding of branches in the Vine. And that fruitbearing, vs. 10, is a matter of keeping Christ's commandments. Crystallized particularly in vs. 11 in the command to love.

In this context there are a couple of statements that come for our consideration. In vs. 2a, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away," cuts it off out of the Vine. Again in vs. 6 "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."

Now, immediately, we have to emphasize that these statements in 2a and 6 are not teaching that some who are united to Christ will in fact fall away. What Jesus says here has to be controlled by what Jesus says elsewhere, and in other parts of Scripture. Cf., John 6:39; 10:28-29. But, what these statements do, as a matter of fact for us, is to accent how essential, how necessary (perhaps other words could be chosen), abiding, with its fruitbearing, is, to being a branch in the Vine.

What does this have to do with the issue of Justification?

When we keep in mind now all that is involved in the relationship of branches to Vine. When we appreciate that total, the unqualified, the all-embracing dependence of branches on Vine. When we appreciate also, the ultimate stake or issue in being cut off from the Vine--which is burning, destruction. When we appreciate all that is involved in being branches in the Vine. Then we need to appreciate that, to be cut off from Christ (at some point) would be to be cut off from Justification. Or, in a more positive way, We are those who have been justified. We are those who continue in a state of justification (to use the language of the Confession). Only as we abide in Christ, remain in union with Christ.

Compare Calvin on the blessedness of Justification. "We must have this blessedness [i.e., Justification] not just once, but we must hold to it throughout life."

In much of the discussion prior it has been said that the issue is not so much the doctrine of Justification, as it is the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. That matters have been confused by Mr. Shepherd in introducing his concerns under the doctrine of Justification. I think that, as a matter of fact, the issue we are talking

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about are very much within the scope of the doctrine of Perseverance. But what we need to consider, I think, is that, in the language of Scripture, and in our experience (redemption as applied to us), the concerns of Justification and Perseverance interpenetrate. They are not compartmentalized from one another. They are not clearly held apart from one another.

Cf., Heb. 3:14 "For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end."

The writer is addressing believers in Jesus Christ. Those who are united to Jesus Christ. That first part of the statement is, then, a comprehensive declaration, an inclusive statement of what we have in Jesus Christ, in being united to Him. It is certainly not limited to Justification. But Justification can not be excluded from the scope of the declaration--"we have become partakers of Christ." Justification as a manifestation, as a fruit, of that union. So that, if the first part brings into view, all that we have through union with Christ.

But then, the verse goes on with the "if"-clause. And about this, we must say something like this. That all that we are, have, and are as a matter of fact in possession of in Christ, including Justification, is conditioned on our persevering to the end.

Why does the writer do this?, express himself this way? He does not do this to create uncertainty in his readers, nor in us. He knows that that is the case inevitably, that they shall persevere to the end, they who have been made partakers of Christ. His statement is not ~~bringing~~ the salvation of God's people, as presently experienced, under a cloud of uncertainty. Nor is he somehow trying to cast us back on our efforts and striving. As if we must do something, namely persevering to the end, to round out, to supplement, what Christ has done. But the writer is indicating for us here, presenting to his readers, the way in which God sovereignly saves His people. And the way in which He brings them into the full possession of salvation.
 → 4/11/44

Again, all are agreed, including the position of the Thirty-Four Theses, that, particularly in view of Scripture and the history of the Church; And the false ways, errors, that have resulted in the Church. And as that error was clarified particularly at the Reformation, errors that we must not let ourselves now fall into. All of us agree we must maintain and safeguard, again, the imputed righteousness of Christ as the sole ground of Justification. The unique function of faith as that alone by which we receive and rest upon Christ, and are united to Him. What the Confession calls "the alone instrument".

But, what I have been seeking now to draw concern for, attention to, is that within the context of our union, as we are those united to Christ. Faith in its ongoing exercises, faith in what we might call its "fruitful exercises," what Paul calls the "obedience of faith". What we must appreciate, along with all that must be maintained in adequately retaining a doctrine of Justification, is that, faith, in its fruitful expressions, its ongoing exercises, has an inescapable and even integral connection with Justification. "Faith working through love" as Paul puts it. And the issue then before us, and the issue that the Thirty-Four Theses is putting before us, and is wrestling with, is--How are we to express this tie, this integral connection?

Working towards somewhat of a close. I would like to suggest, to try to gain your appreciation for the fact, that our Standards are wrestling with this question. Now I think we can see that in this way.

WLC.77 "Wherein do justification and sanctification differ?"

"Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ, in that God in justification imputes the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification His Spirit infuses grace, and enables to the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other, it is subdued; the one does equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is neither equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection."

This question addresses an issue, what many see as one of the most critical issues before us, in the Thirty-Four Theses. And it certainly is involved here. What I want to call attention to is that on the side then in identifying Justification, we are told that Justification; we are told at the end, that "justification does equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation." The issue of Justification is bound up with freeing all believers, perfectly in this life, from the revenging wrath of God.

Now, keeping that in mind (and your finger in that place), turn to Qu.153 (which compares with WSC 85), "What does God require of us, that we may escape His wrath and curse due to us by reason of the transgression of the law?"

". . . He requires of us repentance towards God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and the diligent use of the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of His mediation." Note what the Catechism connects, what is required to escape the wrath of God, due to us by reason of the transgression of the law. Mentioned here is faith. And then faith in its manifestations: repentance and a diligent use of the means.

The Catechism goes on to expound the outward means: they are the Word, Sacraments, and Prayer. Eventually you come to Q.160(cp. WSC 90), "What is required of those that hear the word preached?"

"It is required. . . that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love ~~weakness~~, and readiness of mind, as the word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives." Or, a diligent use of the outward means includes, among other things, a bringing forth the fruit of God's word in their lives. WSC has "practice it in their lives."

Note what the Catechism is doing here. It uses the language of requirement, that is its language. The language of obligation, of necessity, is used to describe not only faith, but also repentance, and a diligent use of the means of grace. Our new obedience is involved. The language of requirement is used to describe the relation of these things to escaping the wrath and curse of God, which is the issue in Justification. The Catechism does this without calling at all, into question, the imputed righteousness of Christ as the sole ground of our acceptance. Without at all undermining faith as the alone instrument of Justification.

Perhaps the interpretation of the Catechism here, at last, can be challenged, can be called into question. I am open to being corrected, where I have pushed our Standards in a way they do not go. But, I have been struck with this. And I set it before the Committee for your reactions. To sum up then. The two points that I believe we must keep in view throughout the discussion. Something of a touchstone for understanding the overall context of the 34 Theses.

- 1) Justification manifests our union with Christ.
- 2) For union with Christ to be a justifying union it is an abiding uni.