

Some Reasons for Dissenting from the Majority Report of 21 April 1978  
on the Subject of JUSTIFICATION Submitted by the Faculty to the Board  
of Westminster Theological Seminary. By Philip E. Hughes

A situation in which I find myself in disagreement with a statement of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, of all places, on, of all themes, the theme of Justification I would have considered unimaginable. That such a situation has now arisen is extremely disconcerting to me personally. The observations that follow are offered in a spirit of Christian charity and good faith, and with the hope that God will graciously bring us in unanimity to a right understanding of the vital biblical doctrine of justification.

There are, to begin with, two assertions in the Faculty Report to which I wish to draw attention, both because I find them disturbing and unacceptable, and also because they seem to me to crystallize the issue confronting us: (1) "Faith is never faith-in-isolation" (p. 2). and (2) "Hebrews 12:14 speaks of 'the holiness without which no one will see the Lord,' which surely involves standing justified before the Lord" (p. 4).

In this discussion it is essential to remember that it is the doctrine of justification that is at issue. No one, I imagine, wishes to deny that the faith which is the principle of justification is also the principle of the life of faith, that is, of sanctification, that the root of faith produces the fruit of good works which are pleasing to God. But the attempt is being made to connect these good works with faith in such a way that, though defined as non-meritorious, they are regarded as necessary to our future (or final or eschatological) justification: no good works, no heaven! This has the effect of calling in question the perfection and the once-for-all character of the initial--and, I would insist, the only--justification of the sinner who puts his trust in Christ and to whom the perfect right-

eousness of Christ is fully and indefectibly imputed. The righteousness of Christ which is reckoned to him is the sole ground of his acceptability before God.

On page 3 of the Report endorsement is given to the concept of justification as a process in three stages: initial ("this initial entry into God's favor"), continuing ("the continued enjoyment of God's favor"), and consummating ("the consummation of God's favor at the Judgment"). This implies that the sinner's justification is in some real sense dependent on what he does, on the nature of his works, following his "initial" justification; and this too has the effect of placing a question-mark over the adequacy of this so-called "initial" justification: the outcome hangs in suspense until it is seen whether subsequently the quality of his life is such as to gain the divine approbation. Only on this basis does it become possible to conceive of justification as continuing and ultimate.

Accordingly, the Report goes on to speak approvingly of "the 'necessity' of holiness, of good works, for salvation, of the impossibility of justification without sanctification " (p. 3). Here sanctification, defined as good works, is added to justification as requisite for salvation: no good works of sanctification, no salvation! This, I submit, is a serious confusion of the distinctive roles of justification and sanctification. It is the adding of works to faith as necessary for salvation. Biblical support for this position is claimed from Hebrews 12:14 which speaks of "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord", and this, the Report affirms, "surely involves standing justified before the Lord" (p. 4). But our holiness,

our good works performed as Christians, can never be even partially a basis for our standing justified before the Lord. As verse 10 of the same chapter shows, the purpose of our discipline as Christians is that we may share his holiness; for it is only by virtue of our Redeemer's holiness that we can ever hope to stand justified before the Lord. How can it be otherwise when the demand for holiness is absolute (I Peter 1:15f.)? The holiness imputed to the believer at justification is absolute because it is Christ's holiness; and the holiness imparted to the believer at glorification is absolute because then at last, seeing the Saviour as he is, we shall be fully conformed to his likeness (I John 3:2). But in between justification and glorification we are to "strive for . . . the holiness without which no one will see the Lord": that is to say, we are to be in earnest about advancing in Christ-likeness, being progressively conformed to the holiness that is his (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18). Hebrews 12:14, in short, is speaking about sanctification, not justification.

The Report advises, however, that not to follow the line it endorses may indicate that one is "inhibited" because one has "isolated faith from good works and encouraged people to think of good works as somehow intrinsically in competition with the unique role of faith" (p. 4). The answer to this is that where justification is concerned (and this is the essential qualification) I do indeed isolate faith from good works and I do indeed regard good works as intrinsically in competition with the unique role of faith. I deprecate the extension of justification into the sphere of sanctification, for it is precisely this procedure that leads to the notion that the good works of the Christian have a necessary part to play in his justification.

This means, of course, that I dissent strongly from the earlier assertion that "faith is never faith-in-isolation" (p. 2 of the Report). On the contrary, I maintain that in justification faith is precisely faith-in-isolation. This is the whole point of the biblical and Reformed emphasis on faith alone where our justification is concerned; for justification by faith alone (sola fide) means justification by faith in isolation, and particularly in isolation from works. This does not mean, however, that I have any intention of denying the close inter-relationship between faith and works that follows and flows from the believer's justification and should be the hallmark of his life as a Christian, that is, of his sanctification.

Reference is also made in the Faculty Report (p. 3) to the debate that has revolved around the interpretation of the expression "the works of the law" in Romans 3 and Galatians 3. In these passages Paul declares that "no human being will be justified in God's sight by works of the law" (Romans 3:20), and inquires rhetorically: "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:2). The point is, as all are agreed, that no sinner can be justified by the works of the law (works-righteousness, self-righteousness), but only by faith in Christ, since all are law-breakers and therefore are condemned, not justified, by the law, as the contexts show. Yet in the case of the Galatian Christians Paul is rebuking them because they are imagining that they can supplement their justification by faith, or improve it, by adding to it works of the law as a further basis of justification. Hence the questions: "Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3).

I am much concerned because it seems to me that the Faculty Report is in effect maintaining a position similar to that which Paul deplored in the Galatian church. I believe that the Apostle's reaction to this Report would have been: "Having begun with faith, are you now ending with works?"

In the discussions leading up to the Report it has been contended that the "works of the law" are, within the context of Romans 3 and Galatians 3, something quite different from the works of the Christian --that the former are the works of the unbeliever futilely trying to justify himself by works-righteousness, whereas the latter are, by contrast, works that are pleasing and acceptable to God. This understanding is, in general, not a matter of disagreement. But there is more to be said, because the problem with the Galatians was that of a reversion, to some degree, to the works of the law as though they were necessary to justification as an adjunct to faith: they were, in fact, turning away from the uniqueness of faith, its aloneness and complete separation from works, in the scheme of our justification before God.

Turning to the Epistle to the Romans, one of the numerous texts that have been adduced in support of the contention that there is a "'necessity' of holiness, of good works, for salvation" (p. 4 of the Report again) is Romans 2:7, where Paul says: "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life". I wish to object that this text is not speaking of the works of the Christian, indeed, that it has nothing to do with justification by faith, or with faith that works and is active. The theme of the immediate context is that of justification by works. Thus in the verse preceding the one quoted Paul asserts

that God "will render to every man according to his works" (v. 6): and in the verses that follow he explains that "there will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, . . . but glory and honour and peace for every one who does good" (vv. 9, 10). That this is a universal principle is shown by the repeated declaration, "the Jew first and also the Greek".

But this passage must not be separated from the total argument of which it is an important element, for Paul moves on to demonstrate the universality of human sinfulness, insisting that there is absolutely no one at all who does good, and therefore that all without exception are in need of divine grace and of the justification which comes by faith apart from works. "All men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin", he affirms, and in doing so confirms the teaching of Psalms 14 and 53: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:9-12). There is absolutely "no distinction: since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And this rules out the possibility of any one in any degree being justified by good works: "no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law" (Romans 3:20). In this way it is shown that, because all have sinned and not even a single one does good, the declaration of Romans 2:12, that "all who have sinned without the law (i.e. Gentiles) will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law (i.e. Jews) will be judged by the law", involves the totality of mankind without exception.

Yet the next verse plainly indicates that the law is a principle of justification to the person who keeps it: "it is not the hearers

of the law who are righteous before God", Paul states, "but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2:13). The law is essentially a way of life, not an instrument of death. It is precisely God's standard of righteousness, and therefore of justification. Hence the affirmations of the Old Testament that it is by the doing of the law that a man shall live (Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 20:11, 13). And hence, also, because of the universality of man's law-breaking, the combination with the law of the whole levitical system of sacrifice and offering for sin.

The same emphasis is evident in the New Testament. In Luke 10: 25ff., for example, our Lord, in response to the lawyer's question, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?", said: "What is written in the law?", and then, in response to the lawyer's summary of the decalogue, added: "Do this, and you will live!". Likewise, in Matthew 19:16f., on a similar occasion, he tells his interrogator: "If you would enter life, keep the commandments!" So again, in Galatians 3, Paul explains that "the law does not rest on faith, for 'He who does them shall live by them'" (Gal. 3:12, quoting Lev. 18:5). This is a principle, moreover, to which the Apostle draws attention in the Epistle to the Romans. "Moses writes", he says, "that the man who practises the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it" (Rom. 10:5). Because, however, of his sinfulness, he found that "the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me" (Rom. 7:10). But the fault is not in the law; it is in the sinner who is a law-breaker, whereas the law, precisely because it is God's law and his standard of holiness, justness, goodness, and spirituality, is holy, just, good, and spiritual (Rom. 7:12, 14), and

it is glorious (2 Cor. 3:7ff.). To keep God's law, then, is to be just before God.

Because they are law-breakers, sinners can never be justified by the law; they can only be condemned by it. A different principle of justification is needed if the sinner is to live before God. Yet the law is not set aside. On the contrary, it is perfectly fulfilled on the sinner's behalf by the incarnate Son, and his perfect fulfilling of the law was the essential preliminary to his atoning sacrifice on the cross; for it is solely on the basis of his faultless keeping of the law that the incarnate Son lives before God and that he qualified himself, as our fellow man, to suffer the death of the cross, the penalty of our law-breaking, as our substitute. Accordingly, Paul tells the Christians in Rome: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19), and the very heart of the Gospel is that "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for our sake, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Consequently, the Gospel principle for sinners is that they may live and be just before God only by faith-union with Christ, with whom alone as the sole law-keeper, God is well pleased (Mt. 3:17; 17:5; Is. 42:1; Jn. 17:4; Eph. 1:6f.; 2 Pet. 1:17). "We hold", Paul declares, "that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom. 3:28); and again, in the Galatian Epistle, Paul insists that "a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). As the sole "doer of the law" the incarnate Son alone is just before God, and in him alone is the sinner's justification (I Cor. 1:30).



I wish to maintain, finally, that the evangelical doctrine that "a man is not justified by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" applies not only to works done prior to regeneration but also to works done after regeneration. My argument is based on the biblical teaching that the good works of the Christian believer are still works of the law. The promise of the new covenant includes the assurance: "I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts" (Jer. 31:33); and: "I will put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them" (Ezek. 11:19f.). This promise is fulfilled in and through him who is the Mediator of the new covenant, Jesus Christ (Heb. 8:6ff.; 2 Cor. 3:3). For the believer, then, the law is still operative; not, however, as the way to justification, but as the way to sanctification; not as an external ordinance condemning him as a law-breaker (for he is justified through faith in Jesus Christ), but written within his heart, so that he now delights in God's law and by the grace of the Holy Spirit is enabled to perform it. His life becomes a life of "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6); for love is the sum of the law, which requires us to love God and to love our neighbour (Mt. 22:36-40; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8), and love therefore is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8-10). The law no longer operates from without by the compulsion of command but from within by the impulse of love; and this is how it should have been from the beginning, when man was created in the image of his Maker to enjoy the harmony of will and fellowship with his sovereign Lord.

It follows that the good works of the believer are the same as the good works enjoined by the law. But they are the good works of his sanctification, not of his justification. To speak of a necessity of these good works for our salvation, to relate them to "standing justified before the Lord", is to transpose them from the sphere of sanctification to the sphere of justification; and this, in the degree to which it is done, is to assign to them that very justifying status as works of the law which Paul has repudiated. It is to revert to that position which those who have assented to the Report professed to reject. It is to make the believer's salvation dependent in a real sense on his good works: hence the postulation of the notion of continuing justification and the notion of eschatological justification. Justification becomes some sort of process, fused with sanctification, instead of a divine once-for-all fiat.

This is confusion! And confusion, though certainly not intended, since it affects the true heart of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, that can only be expected to lead to the gravest consequences. It does not suffice to qualify the works of the believer as non-meritorious. Our justification is by faith apart from works; for, I repeat, the only works that contribute to, or are in any way necessary for, a person's justification are the works of the incarnate Son, who alone has kept the law, who therefore alone lives before God, and the perfect righteousness of whose works is imputed to the believing sinner. Our justification is complete and final in Christ, and must be so as it is his perfect holiness that is imputed to us. It is the root from which the fruit of Christian sanctification springs as the holiness of Christ is increasingly manifested in our lives. But

sanctification is progressive precisely because, even though the believer by the grace of God now wills to do the will of God, his life is not here free from sin and self; hence John's admonition to Christian believers, that "if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves", but that if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us and the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from all sin (I Jn. 1:7-9). Let us not, then, speak of a necessity of any works other than those of Christ for our justification. And let us look forward joyfully to our glorification, when, meeting our Master face to face and seeing him as he is, we shall at last be fully conformed to the perfection of his likeness (I Jn. 3:2f.). Then at last, and only then, at our glorification, will our sanctification be complete because it will be for ever commensurate with the perfection of our justification.

Having begun with faith, let us not end with works!

I have written this dissent with a sense of my own deficiencies of expression and understanding as I have sought to contribute to the discussion of this great and central truth of our justification as sinners before Almighty God, and for these deficiencies I ask forgiveness.

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