

**FUTURE JUSTIFICATION:  
SOME THEOLOGICAL AND EXEGETICAL PROPOSALS**

**By Rich Lusk**

Before offering my exegetical and theological proposals for a doctrine of “future justification,” I need to offer a few preliminary principles that set the stage for this discussion.<sup>1</sup> First, “future justification,” as will be shown, does not stand on its own. It presupposes and builds upon “initial justification,” even as “initial justification” anticipates and foreshadows “final justification.” In other words, everything in this essay needs to be read in conjunction with my other essay in this volume. The two essays together present something of a unified “Federal Vision” theology of justification (though, even then, there are numerous gaps that need to be filled in).

Second, I want to remind my reader of the word “proposals” in the title of this article. I am not attempting to offer a finished product, but another step along the way in doctrinal development. The doctrine of the final judgment/justification has remained fairly underdeveloped in Protestant thought and pastoral practice. In the Reformed tradition, we have not known exactly what to say about future judgment texts, and so we have not said much at all (as perusal of the standard systematic theologies shows). The result is that we have mitigated, and even muted, an important part of God’s Word. This essay seeks to address that imbalance. As a result, it would be seriously premature to treat this essay as the “last word” on a massive topic. In particular, a number of “prooftexts” cited need more exegetical attention than I can give here. In terms of serious exegetical

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is not responding to any particular chapter in the *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry (CJPM)* volume, but to its recurrent rejection of *any* doctrine of “future justification” (e.g., 205, 209, 294-296, 432, 442). My primary purpose is to set forth a positive case for this doctrine, but I also interact with various *CJPM* authors along the way.

consideration, this paper limits itself to Romans 2:1-16 and James 2:14-26, and even then many, many important details have been omitted.

Third, while my focus in this essay is biblical-theological, not historical-theological, I will cite Reformational precedents at various points along the way. That historical material could be vastly expanded if time and space permitted. Also, while it is beyond my scope to interact with confessional materials, I feel the need to briefly sketch the confessional credentials of the doctrine on the front end so that my proposals can receive a fair hearing in the Reformed community. The Westminster Standards do not speak explicitly of a “future justification,” but they do provide the conceptual framework within which I have developed the doctrine offered here. The Westminster Standards insist on obedience as a necessary condition of eschatological salvation in a variety of ways. Faith must bear “fruit,” which has as its end “eternal life” (WCF 16.2). Forgiveness is only given to the repentant (WCF 15.3). Initial justification is inseparable from sanctification, perseverance, and good works (WCF 10-18). God requires repentance if we are to escape his wrath and curse (WSC 85). Holy obedience is not only evidence of salvation, but the *way* of salvation (WLC 32). Our good works are “accepted” by God in Christ, so that he, “looking upon them in His Son, is pleased to accept and reward” them (WCF 16.6). And so on. All of this, of course, reflects biblical teaching and reminds us that salvation, from beginning to end, in all its legal and transformative elements, is a gift of grace.

More directly related to the theme of this article, the WCF, following Scripture, teaches that all men will be judged at the last day, with the result that each will “receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.” This eschatological,

forensic judgment can only result in two possible outcomes: “For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life...but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments.” In view of this coming judicial examination, we should “shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful” (WCF 33.1-3). While the language of justification is missing here, the conceptual apparatus of justification is certainly present.

The same is true of WSC 38. The “benefits...believers receive from Christ at the resurrection” include being “openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment.” “Judgment” language reminds us this is a forensic event, issuing forth in either justification or condemnation. At that day, God will do more than “openly acknowledge” that believers have *already* received acquittal. He will actually acquit them *in* the day of judgment. While some might want to quibble over the precise term used here, no legitimate argument can be mounted against the notion that “acquittal” is a virtual synonym for “justification.” To be acquitted is to be found “not guilty” in a court of law; the word describes a judicial deliverance in which the one on trial is freed from all charges. This acquittal/justification should be the eschatological expectation of all believers. The prooftexts do not carry authoritative weight, but they are of value in showing us how the Westminster divines read Scripture. In this case, the divines cited Matthew 25:23 (“His lord said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant...”). As will be seen, this is a key prooftext in my doctrinal proposals as well.

Further, it should be remembered that final judgment according to works (with the expectation of acquittal for believers) is axiomatic in the ancient ecumenical creeds. The Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed are all very forthright in asserting

the coming reality of a final judgment by Christ.<sup>2</sup> The Athanasian Creed is the most comprehensive statement: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all people shall rise bodily to give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.”

To deny this truth is to violate the most basic standards of Christian orthodoxy.

Third, my overarching rejection of “merit theology” should be kept in view. I utterly abhor and reject any notion that our works can have merit in God’s sight, before or after conversion. Works do not “earn” anything from God. How could they? After all, the works themselves are the fruit of God’s work in us. Who has given to God in such a way that he is obligated to repay (Rom. 11:35)? With merit out of the picture, we are in a much better position to assess the role of works in our salvation, including eschatological justification. As John Calvin says in his commentary on Romans 2:6 (God “will render to each one according to his deeds”),

as he sanctifies those whom he has previously resolved to glorify, he will also crown their good works, but not on account of any merit: nor can this be proved from this verse; for though it declares what reward good works are to have, it does yet by no means show what they are worth, or what price is due to them. And it is an absurd inference, to deduce merit from reward.

In other words, though Calvin admits that good works *receive* eternal life, one cannot draw the conclusion that such works are the *meritorious cause* of eternal life. Final justification according to works, as articulated here, is *not* a way of sneaking works-righteousness in the back\_door. Rather, it is a way of acknowledging the comprehensive breadth and depth of God’s gracious, redeeming work. Initial and final justifications are both in Christ. When God crowns our works at the last day with the reward of eternal life,

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<sup>2</sup> The only reference to initial justification in the ecumenical creeds is baptismal. In the Nicene Creed, we confess to “acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.”

he is not giving us a merited paycheck, but a promised inheritance, for the sake of his Son.

Fourth, I admit that my aim setting forth these exegetical and theological proposals is as pastoral as anything. It is often said that if we talk about the necessity of works – and especially if we talk about a final judgment/justification according to works – we will undercut the security of salvation and jeopardize the assurance of believers. But this is only because we have framed the doctrine in the wrong way. If we presuppose that God can never be pleased with human works, then a final judgment according to works will always appear as bad news. But if we look at the final judgment *from within* our union with Christ and initial justification, we can see how God can be pleased to declare us righteous according to our good-yet-imperfect works. All parties in the present controversy appear to agree that works will be the inevitable fruit of faith; further, all parties agree that there is some kind of final evaluation at the last day. Why not connect the doctrinal dots? Everything needed for a future justification to doers of the law (cf. Rom. 2:13) is in place.

I contend that it is actually *a great comfort* for believers to know that their works will be accepted in Christ at the last day. We are judged by Christ, who has already stood trial for us and taken condemnation for us on the cross. His blood covers our sins and washes the impurities out of our good-but-imperfect acts of obedience. Jesus judges us as the agent of our Heavenly Father, who looks upon our works in and through the work of his Son. He judges us with tenderness and compassion. He is hard to satisfy, to be sure, but easy to please. N. T. Wright gives a helpful pastoral application of this truth, commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:9:

Many young people in the modern Western world find it, or at least believe it to be, very difficult to please their parents. Whatever we do just doesn't quite reach the high standard expected. Many continue through their whole adult life, even after their parents have died, still trying somehow to please them or at least appease them. Such people find the idea of pleasing God almost laughable. It seems quite impossible that God, being all-knowing and all-wise, could actually be pleased with them. You'd have to be an absolutely superb person on all fronts (they think) to please God. The chances are that God would look down on their best efforts and say, "Well, it's only nine out of ten, I'm afraid; that's not good enough."

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Clearly Paul does not look at the matter like that at all. For Paul, God is pleased when he sees his image being reproduced in his human creatures by the Spirit. The slightest steps they take toward him, the slightest movements of faith and hope, and particularly of love, give God enormous delight. However difficult we may find this to believe, not least because of our own upbringing, it is a truth that Paul repeats quite often. Who we are in Christ, what we do in the Spirit, is pleasing to God; God delights in us, and, like a parent, he is thrilled when we, his children, take even the first small baby-steps towards the full Christian adulthood he has in store for us...

For Paul, if we are genuinely living in and by the Spirit of Jesus, then day by day, often without our even realizing it, we will have done many things that will give God pleasure — the smallest act of forgiveness, a great act of justice or mercy, a wonderful act of creativity enriching God's world. As a result of all these many things God will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." When he says that, of course, we will rightly say, "Our competence, our sufficiency, comes from God." We never escape the wonderful circle of grace, gratitude and glory...

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Although in these days of feeble relativism it is important to stress that God is indeed the judge who cares passionately about good and evil, and that he is a just God who will not allow sin for ever to flourish unchecked, we must remember that the warning of final judgment should not make Christians gloomy or anxious. We are not supposed to drag ourselves through our lives thinking, "Have I made it? Will I be all right?" We have assurance in the gospel that because Jesus died for us and rose again, we are completely forgiven and accepted in him. This assurance is matched by the delight we can and should take in the work of the Spirit. Through the Spirit we are enabled to do many things by God's grace so that, when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ, we will find we have pleased him in countless ways that for now we can only guess at.<sup>3</sup>

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So the ordinary believer should have nothing to fear regarding the final judgment according to works. Unless he is living as an orphan, he should hope to hear the Father's

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<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *Reflecting the Glory* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1998), 45-46.

approval – not because his works are perfect, not because they earn the Father’s approbation, not because his works have merit in and of themselves, but because his works are being evaluated according to a covenantal, familial relationship. If believers are not trained to eagerly anticipate the final judgment in this way, we who are pastors are robbing them of a comfort and security that rightly belongs to them.

The fifth and final preliminary principle is a hermeneutical one. Many of the problems regarding the final judgment according to works crop up because of a law/gospel pattern of reading to Scriptures. I cannot go into a full scale analysis here. But I will point out one key point germane to our discussion. In this law/gospel schema (which is obviously prominent in the *CJPM* book; cf. ch. 12), the law requires perfect obedience and condemns even the smallest infraction. The gospel requires no works, but only a bare faith. It is self-evident, then, that there is no place left for God’s acceptance of our good-but-imperfect works performed as believers. They do not meet the criteria of the “law” and they are irrelevant as far as the “gospel” is concerned. The law/gospel hermeneutic requires that works either be perfect, in which case they merit blessing, or else they are worthless.<sup>4</sup>

A covenantal, eschatological hermeneutic is able to do better justice to Scripture at this point. In this hermeneutic, the “law” in Scripture is *usually* the Mosaic Torah,

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<sup>4</sup> This is precisely why Michael Horton is not able to grasp my argument (following John Calvin) for the *non-meritorious worth* of works done by believers. See *CJPM*, ch. 7 and compare to my essay “Blurring the Federal Vision,” available at <http://www.trinity-pres.net/pastor.php>.

Scott Clark’s utter confusion on this issue is evident on page 244. He writes, “The essence of *the law* (Rom. 2:6) is that God will ‘give to each man according to his works’” (emphasis added). But when Paul concludes his discussion of how God will render to each one according to his works, he declares this to be an aspect of “*my gospel*” (Rom. 2:16). For Paul, contra Clark, the coming judgment is good news for believers. How this is so will become evident when we exegete the passage itself (including the background text of Psalm 62:12, which Paul is quoting in Romans 2:6).

understood as an administration of the covenant of grace.<sup>5</sup> And the “gospel,” while certainly including a free promise of forgiveness and acceptance (initial justification), also promises Spirit-empowered transformation (leading to final justification). The pastoral “cash value” of this way of reading the Bible is seen in the Wright quotation above, and should emerge more fully as we move through the discussion.

### **Initial and Final Justification**

I have already sketched out several main features of the biblical doctrine of justification in my preceding essay in this volume. Now it’s time to project our picture of justification into the future. It is not unreformed to view the NT’s already/not-yet dynamic as cutting across the entirety of salvation, including justification. In other words, while we are already justified (cf. Rom. 3:24, 26; 5:1, 9; 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11; Tit. 3:7; etc.), there is a dimension of justification that remains to be received by the people of God, when we will be found worthy and blameless in his sight (Mt. 12:37; Rom. 2:1-16; 2:26-29; 5:9-10; 8:33-34; 14:10-18; 1 Cor. 1:8; 4:2-4; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; Gal. 2:17; 5:4-5;

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<sup>5</sup> WCF 19.1 says the law, regarded as “a covenant of works” binds Adamic humanity to “personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience.” But the moral content of this law never appears to us in the bare form of a covenant of works. Rather, it comes clothed in the administration of the covenant of grace, as in the Mosaic law (WCF 7.5). To be regarded as a covenant keeper, under the covenants of Abraham, Moses, and Christ, does not require perfect obedience, but rather the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5), that is an evangelical obedience that presupposes forgiveness and the grace of the Spirit. Of course, this is not to flatten out the real redemptive-historical movement and maturation that takes place as one follows along the trajectory of the biblical narrative (cf. WCF 7.6).

To state this truth another way, the “law” is more than merely a set of absolute moral requirements (cf. Ex. 20:1-2). The “law” as given in the Mosaic covenant (that is, the Torah) not only reveals God’s holiness (and thus, serves as a perfect standard of righteousness), it also reveals his grace (and thus, includes typological provision for forgiveness, pointing ahead to the cross of Christ). Of course, both aspects of the law’s revelatory function are celebrated in Psalm 119 – but note that the psalmist is very much at odds with the law/gospel antithesis as a biblical hermeneutic.

Or to put the truth yet another way, believers will not be judged at the last day according to the law understood as a perfect rule of righteousness that condemns even the smallest infraction. They will be judged in Christ by the Father’s gracious application of his moral standards. Thus, what is good in the works of believers will be accepted with praise, while their faults and shortcomings are forgiven. Just as parents can require “perfection” of their children but be pleased with less, so it will be with the Father on the last day. This does not excuse sin or sloth in present; indeed, just the opposite. Knowing that our Father *can* be pleased with us gives us great incentive to seek his pleasure.



Phil. 3:9; Col. 1:22; 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:8, 16; Rev. 20:12-13; 22:12, 14; etc.).<sup>6</sup> There is a final judgment still to come, and judicial pronouncements of approbation and condemnation will be made by the divine Judge on that day. This final day of reckoning is axiomatic in the OT and NT. Inevitably, then, the biblical-theological architecture of justification includes a future verdict, a final imputation (or reckoning; cf. Rom. 2:26; Phil. 4:17; 2 Tim. 4:16) still to come, for God's people. This declaration will be pronounced over the entirety of our lives.<sup>7</sup>

Paul never says that a bare faith will be sufficient at the last day. Instead, he insists that only a faith that works through love will avail for the final, hoped for justification (Gal. 5:5-6). He never says faith substitutes for deeds at the last day. Instead, he says, deeds are necessary as the fruit and evidence of faith, so that we can be established in blamelessness and holiness at the day of reckoning (1 Thess. 3:12-13). The apostle never says that our initial justification cancels out the need for a future, final

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<sup>6</sup> Soteriologically speaking, everything comes in two stages. For a thorough discussion of this already/not yet dynamic, as well as exegesis of several alleged "future justification" texts, see Paul Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), ch. 12-17, especially the summaries on pages 172, 186f, 203, and 212. Rainbow decisively demonstrates that the issue at stake in the final judgment is not one's degree of reward or punishment (though that is included), but ultimate realities (salvation and condemnation). Note that some texts (e.g., Rom. 5, 8) weave the "already" and "not yet" aspects of justification together, without any hint of tension. If we sense an incompatibility, it is because we are not sufficiently attuned to biblical theology.

<sup>7</sup> Some have suggested that we should speak of a "final *vindication*" instead of a "final *justification*" in order to avoid confusion (e.g., Michael Horton in *CJPM*, 222). Perhaps that is so, but I am not yet convinced. The problems with this proposal are twofold. First, vindication and justification are heavily overlapping categories. To be *justified* in a court of law is to be *vindicated* against your accusers. The Bible uses the same family of terms to cover both justification and vindication; they are not sharply distinguishable (as many English Bible translations attest), and they apply in a wide range of contexts, some of which are not as purely "legal" as others (e.g., judgments made in the context of the family rather than a civil court). Second, there are clearly places where justification language and imagery are used to describe the favorable verdict God will pass over his faithful people at the last day (e.g., Rom. 2:13, 8:33; 1 Cor. 4:4-5; Gal. 5:4-5; cf. also the future law court scene of Mt. 25:31-46). Biblically, judgment is inseparable from justification; whenever a judgment is passed, the outcome is either justification or condemnation. Thus, (I would suggest) to deny the legitimacy of a "future justification" is to reject the plain teaching of Scripture. Scripture clearly speaks of two distinct moments of justification, at the time of conversion/baptism and at the last day. Whether we think of this as a single justification unfolding in two phases, or two discrete-but-related justifications, makes little difference as far as I can tell.

judgment. Instead, he says the goal of final salvation remains contingent on conditions which are yet to be fulfilled (Phil. 2:12-13; Col. 1:22-25). He never says that the righteousness of Christ takes the place of our obedience, such that our own personal righteousness is superfluous. Instead, he says we will only be pronounced “worthy” at the last day if we have pleased him with a working faith (2 Thess. 1:3-12, especially verse 11). He never says that works play no role in the culmination of our salvation or our final acquittal. Instead, he explicitly insists that works are the criterion of the final judgment (2 Cor. 5:9-10).

All that to say: In the final installment of our justification, there is a very real sense in which works will be the *decisive* factor. If we take time to bother with the actual words of Scripture, this conclusion is unavoidable. It is so plain, one wonders how it could be missed or suppressed. God requires obedience just as surely as he requires faith. Obedience is not optional, but essential.

At the same time, it is crucial for us to relate initial and final justification to one another in the proper way. We will develop the biblical picture as we go, but note at this point that initial justification by faith alone must, in some sense, serve as *the foundation* for final justification by works. At the very least, we can say initial justification puts us in a state of justification with God, which makes a final justification according to works possible. Exactly what that means will be clarified as we explore Romans 2 and James 2.

### **Justification and Doing the Law: Romans 2:1-16**

Romans 2:1-16 is obviously a key passage in this discussion. Paul says “the doers of the law will be justified” (2:13). Some have argued that Paul must be thinking hypothetically since he elsewhere argues that no one can do good (Rom. 3:10-20) and

works of Torah cannot justify (Rom. 3:28). On that reading, this section is simply preparation for the gospel message to come later in the epistle. While that is certainly an aspect of the text, Paul is actually prophesying of a future, actual event, which will culminate and complete God's saving work. While Paul shows that covenant breaking leads to wrath, he also reveals a way of escape – a way that will be unpacked more fully in the rest of the letter. That way of escape is fidelity to the terms of the new covenant – in Christ and by the Spirit. Note the following points,

First, Paul's indictment against human sin in 1:18-2:11 includes both Jews and Gentiles. He most likely has in view a Jewish unbeliever (non-Christian) in 2:1ff. The "man" who is "inexcusable" is Jewish; Paul is reminding him that just because God will condemn Gentiles (Rom. 1:18ff) does not mean the Jew will be acquitted by the mere fact of his Jewishness. If he breaks the law, he will be judged as a lawbreaker. Whereas 1:18-32 deals with Jew and Gentile together, in 2:1, Paul singles out the Jew who would object to being lumped in with the Gentile under "the wrath of God revealed from heaven" (1:18). Jews are objects of wrath as well, if they are covenant breakers (2:9). They stand in judgment on Gentiles, but are in danger of being judged themselves (2:1, 3).

Second, Paul is speaking in the future tense in 2:13. In other words, this is a reference to final justification, not initial justification. Everywhere else the NT addresses the future judgment, it is shown to be a judgment of works (e.g., Matt. 25:31-46; 2 Cor. 5:10). Even within Romans, this is an important theme (14:10-13). Thus, reading Romans 2:13 as a description of forthcoming reality is not necessarily at odds with those passages that deny *present* justification by works. Present justification by faith alone is not in tension with a future justification to doers of the law (for reasons that will be clearer as we go). If the

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acquittal to (Gentile) law-keepers in 2:13 is actually counter-factual, Paul's entire polemic against arrogant and hypocritical Jewish moralism unravels. The sting of the passage is in its actuality: righteousness Gentiles will rise up and condemn self-assured, presumptuous Jews at the last day. The covenant people must show covenant obedience if they are to inherit the covenant blessings.<sup>8</sup>

Third, keeping/doing the law (in the sense of covenant faithfulness, not sinless perfection) and practicing righteousness (as an ordinary pattern of life) are realities, not merely hypotheticals, as numerous texts attest (e.g., Gen. 6:9; Job 1:1; Luke 1:6; 1 John 3:7; cf. Deut. 30:11-20). Romans 2:1-16 does not require perfection, but rather the seeking of "glory, honor, and immortality," all of which can only be done by faith (2:7; cf. 14:23). The law in view throughout the discussion is the Torah, and the Torah clearly did not require sinless perfection from believers since it was given to sinners and included sacrifices.<sup>9</sup> Thus, why not plug law-keepers, as described elsewhere in

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<sup>8</sup> There is a lot of evidence that Paul is targeting Jewish covenant breaking in the text, though much of it occurs at the level of intertextuality and allusion. For example, in 2:5, Paul mentions "your hardness and your impenitent heart," leading to "wrath," echoing the Deuteronomic description of Israel (Deut. 9:6; 29:19 LXX). The blind self-righteousness of Paul's Jewish interlocutor might be rooted in Deuteronomy 9:4-8. The thrust of the argument is straightforward: in the day of wrath, the covenant will provide no protection to those who have broken it by impenitent unbelief.

Given the "Jew first" language in 2:9, it is possible Paul has in view a 70 A. D. judgment, bringing the end of the old covenant era. I am not yet convinced of a preterist reading of the passage, but even if I were, the theological dimensions of the text would still have application to the final judgment. Most likely, Paul is contemplating the *final* judgment from his pre-70 A. D. vantage point. See Peter Leithart's post "Day of Wrath (Romans 2)" for some thoughts on this interpretive issue: <http://www.leithart.com/archives/000246.php>.

<sup>9</sup> In one way or another, the hypothetical reading requires treating the "law" in Romans 2 as a republication of the Adamic covenant of works. See, e.g., Michael Horton in *CJPM*, 200. But in context, "law" clearly refers to the Mosaic Torah, given uniquely to Israel (cf. Deut. 4:5-8), *after* God redeemed the nation from slavery in Egypt. Jews have this law, while Gentiles do not (Rom. 2:12). Following WCF 7, my reading of Romans 2 treats the law/Torah not as a "works principle" but as an administration of the covenant of grace. As an administration of the covenant of grace, the Torah did not require perfect obedience in order to be regarded as a "covenant keeper" or "doer of the law." The view that "doers of the law" must be sinless can be refuted with one question: Did doing the law (Torah) in the old covenant era include doing the sin offerings?

This view of the law in Romans 2 is strengthened if we keep in mind the Deuteronomic underpinnings of the passage as a whole, culminating with the Deuteronomic promise of a circumcised

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Scripture, into this verse, instead of leaving it an empty set of sinlessly perfect people? Scripture interprets Scripture, after all – and the rest of Scripture most certainly attests that “doers of the law” is not a null set (e.g., Luke 1:6). Why not match the “doing good” of 2:7 with the “Well done!” of Matthew 25:21, 23 and the “good works” of Ephesians 2:8-10? Romans 2:10 says those who “work what is good” will receive “glory, honor, and peace.” Why not link that with John 5:29, where Jesus says those who have “done good” will enter the “resurrection of life”? Or with Galatians 6:7-10, where Paul urges believers to “not grow weary while doing good” so that they may “reap everlasting life”? In other words, there is more than enough non-hypothetical material in the rest of the NT that speaks in the same terms as Romans 2.

*Fourth.* Paul’s precise language in 2:6-7 is crucial to a proper understanding of 2:13 since they obviously have in view the same group of people. Paul says “eternal life” will be the reward of those who “by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality.” “Patience” emerges as a virtual synonym for faith in the rest of the letter (5:3-4; 8:25; 12:12; 15:4-5), and indeed, in the rest of the NT (e.g., James 5:7). Though the exact term is not used, “patient continuance” would also be an apt way to describe Abraham’s faith in 4:16-21. The pair “glory” and “honor” (2:7, 10) trace back to Psalm 8:5. To strive for glory and honor is to strive for the eschatological destiny God originally intended for humanity, and now offers in Christ, the true “Son of Man” (cf. Ps. 8:4). In short, Romans 2:13 is clearly *not* a description of people who are attempting to earn salvation in their own power. If Paul had wanted to describe proto-Pelagianism in this context, he could have done so in a much more straight-forward fashion, without

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heart (Rom. 2:29 and Deut. 30:6). The law in Deuteronomy required obedience because God is an impartial judge (Deut. 10:17), but it did not require sinless perfection as a condition of covenant keeping (Deut. 30:11-20).

dropping so many hints that the “doing” in question is a “doing” that arises from faith. As the text stands, every indication is that the faithful (who will be justified) are being contrasted with the unfaithful (who will perish). Beneath the “doing good” and the “doing of the law” (2:7, 13) lies a posture of faith. How could it be otherwise?

*Fifth,* the justification described in Romans 2 is set over against perishing (2:13).

Thus, final justification at the last day includes a rescue from death and wrath (cf. 5:9). It must be an all inclusive deliverance. Final justification, then, takes the form of bodily resurrection and entrance into glory. When God justifies the doers of the law in that day, his deliverance vindicates them against the claims of death and ushers them into the new creation. In this sense, final justification should be regarded as the completion of what God began in our initial justification. To be found righteous at the last day is to be picked out for salvation and spared from judicial wrath. We were delivered from wrath and death definitively in our first justification, but the delivering verdict does not take fully embodied shape until the last day when we are raised from the grave. At that point, the creation is finally and fully put to rights. In other words, the judgment event in 2:1-16 includes an element of restorative righteousness for God’s people; it is not merely punitive.

*Sixth,* there is no conditional or counterfactual clause in this section. There is no hint that Paul is claiming “*if* anyone could do the law...that person would be justified.”

Paul’s point in Romans 2:1-16 is *not* that God will universally condemn the human race;<sup>10</sup> his point is that God’s judgment will treat Jews and Gentiles with equity (2:6, 10-

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<sup>10</sup> Paul’s case against humanity in 1:18-3:20 obviously applies only to humanity outside of Christ. In the nature of the case, Christians are exempted from the wrath Paul describes.

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16).<sup>11</sup> Divine impartiality was not a point that all Jews were willing to grant in Paul's day (cf. 2:1-2); at least some Jews grounded their hope in some combination of non-moral factors such as election, covenant, and ethnicity; others boasted of moral performance. It is precisely these grounds for confidence that Paul makes his target in the chapter as a whole: in 2:1-11, he subverts the Jews' delusions of moral superiority by exposing their hypocrisy; in 2:12-16, he shows their possession of the Torah by nature does not bring immunity to judgment; in 2:17-24, their national privileges are shown to be worthless apart from obedience; and in 2:25-29, the covenant badge of circumcision is turned against them because of their covenant breaking. Paul's point is that none of these, considered in themselves, can secure eschatological justification. The Torah is a Jewish privilege to be sure (cf. 3:1-8; 9:1-5), but that privilege will only serve to intensify their judgment if they persist in unbelief and disobedience.

Seventh, the condemnation is obviously real, not hypothetical. Romans 2:8, 9, 15 describe an actual state of affairs (condemnation of the wicked). Why not 2:10, 13 as well, especially since Scripture repeatedly stresses that works performed in this life play a decisive role in one's final destiny (e.g., Matt. 25:31-46; Jas. 2:14-26)? Romans 2:6 uses the same verb ("will render") to apply to *both* final condemnation and justification. It simply does not make sense to say that none will be justified in this context, given that the Psalmist himself (whose words are being quoted; cf. Ps. 62:12) expected his final "performance review" to issue forth in salvation (cf. Ps. 62:1-2). That is to say, he expected God to "render" to him justification, "according to his work." The hypothetical

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, Jews should have already known from their own Scriptures that God is an impartial judge (cf. Deut. 10:12-22), not "bribed" by religious heritage or ethnicity in themselves. This impartiality, in Deuteronomy and Romans, shows itself in an even-handed judgment according to works.

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reading actually pits Paul against the Psalmist, instead of allowing Paul to apply the words of the Psalm according to their natural meaning.

*Eighth*, further confirmation that Paul is *not* speaking in hypothetical terms is found in the nature of the contrast he draws in 2:13. Paul does not pit *faith* against *doing*, as two potential ways of justification. Rather he pits mere *hearing of the law* (without doing) against *doing the law* (which implicitly includes faith). If justification by doing is supposed to be hypothetical here, this is a very odd, and even confusing, way to develop the argument. On that reading, Paul ends up describing two false ways of justification (hearing and doing) rather than the false way (hearing) compared to the true way (doing). Again, on this reading, the passage loses its ability to deconstruct Jewish presumption that arises from reliance on mere hearing (and having) the law. In truth, it is obvious that Paul's Jewish interlocutor is deluded about the heinousness of his own sin, which causes the Gentiles to blaspheme God (2:1-3, 17-25). The problem with Paul's Jewish dialogue partner in Romans 2 is *not* that he is trying to earn justification by doing; the problem is that he thinks his bare hearing/possession of the law and circumcision will save him, no matter how he lives. The real issue in 2:1-16 is not legalism but antinomianism (cf. Matt. 3:7-10). The issue is not that the Jews in view keep the law to a certain point, but just don't go far enough. The issue is that they do not keep the law *at all*. They are covenant-breaking apostates. Again, the problem Paul is addressing is not overly scrupulous obedience on the part of Jews, but Jews who live like pagan Gentiles and abuse God's grace, all the while thinking they will be justified anyway because they "hear" Torah regularly. Paul's antidote to such false assurance and carelessness is a reminder that at the last judgment, God will act as an impartial judge and will only justify those who have

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demonstrated the obedience of faith, *whether Jew or Gentile* (cf. 1:5). Thus, as Paul says in 2:3-4, the Jews in view need to consider God's longsuffering goodness to them (basically summing up the whole of Israel's history) and repent (and it is surely significant that *repentance* rather than *faith* comes to the fore in this context!).

Ninth, when Paul speaks of "doers of the law," he is hinting at things to come as the argument of Romans unfolds. In the rest of the letter, he will unpack and transform what it means to do the law. Ultimately, Paul resolves law-keeping into the obedience of faith. Keeping the law, transformed by the arrival of the new covenant, means fulfilling the law's true intentions and eschatological *telos*, by trusting in Christ and living in the Spirit (Rom. 2:26; 3:31; 8:1-4; 10:1-4; 13:8-10).<sup>12</sup> Romans 2:13 no more affirms that human nature can autonomously achieve righteousness in the law apart from God's grace, than Romans 3:28 rules out the good works that must follow from our initial acceptance. Each passage must be read in its own context and according to its own purpose.

Tenth, to further the point just made: The language of Romans 2:15 ("who show the work of the law written on the heart") is linked to Jeremiah 31:33 ("I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts").<sup>13</sup> Paul is speaking of Christians – specifically

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<sup>12</sup> In other words, if we were to interrupt Paul in Romans 2:13 and ask him what he means by "doing the law" he would jump right into his discussion at the beginning of Romans 8. To do the work of the law is to fulfill its righteous requirement by walking according to the Spirit. The fulfillment of the law obviously presupposes faith, a point Paul throws into the discussion in 3:31. Paul is obviously playing around with the meaning of "law" in 2:25-26, where the uncircumcised actually keep the law (2:25-26)! Obviously this cannot be law-keeping in a straightforward "doing what Moses said" fashion. There is an implicit Christianization of the law at work. Note also Paul's ironic phrases, such "the law of faith" (3:27) and "the law of the Spirit of life" (8:2). Moreover, there are texts in Romans 2 that echo later descriptions of Christians in the letter (2:26 and 8:3; 2:29 and 7:6). In an important sense, the interpretation of 2:13 comes down to one question: *Are Christians doers of the law?* Paul would bring in various qualifications, but would certainly answer in the affirmative (cf. Rom. 8:4-9; 1 Cor. 7:19). For Paul, the categories of "believers" and "doers of the law" are identical because true faith is a "doing faith."

<sup>13</sup> Likewise, 2:24-29 alludes to another new covenant prophecy, Ezekiel 36. It is instructive to remember that Ezekiel condemns Jews for sinning in the eyes of the Gentiles (36:22; cf. Rom. 2:24), but he also promises a time when Israel will be reconstituted and renewed, with members drawn from every nation (36:24). Moreover, Ezekiel 36:24 promises that this reconstructed Israel will have the Spirit (cf. Rom. 2:29)

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new covenant Gentile Christians<sup>14</sup> – who fulfill the true meaning of Torah through trusting in Christ and walking in the Spirit. This interpretation is further confirmed by Paul’s redefinition of Jewishness in 2:25-29. These “doers of the law” are new covenant believers;<sup>15</sup> they will hear God’s praise at the last day (Rom. 2:29). They are not circumcised bodily, but they have experienced a circumcision of the heart (cf. Deut. 30:6 and Phil. 3:3). In other words, they have become the true Israel. The ironic fact that Gentiles are fulfilling the law (cf. Rom. 2:27) and entering the kingdom ahead of Jews is, of course, a major NT theme (cf. Rom. 11; cf. Matt. 12:38-42; Luke 13:22-30). Gentiles do not have the Torah “by nature” (that is, by birth and culture; Rom. 2:14, 27);<sup>16</sup> as outsiders to the historic covenants, they are wild branches that must be grafted into the covenant tree. Meanwhile, the natural branches (Jews) are being broken out of the covenant through unbelief and disobedience (Rom. 11:17-25). This is the dynamic Paul is describing in Romans 2 as well, albeit in somewhat different terms than Romans 11. Jews should be teaching Gentiles, but instead are being bested by them (Rom. 2:17-29). Paul’s overall argument is (at least in some measure) aiming to arouse Jewish jealousy and

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and will keep the law (cf. Rom. 2:13). Those who are justified in Romans 2 are the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy, the promised new Israel.

<sup>14</sup> That Paul would include Gentiles in the fulfillment of the new covenant promise is not problematic. Jeremiah’s promise was delivered to the nation when she was in exile, surrounded by pagan neighbors. It is precisely these “neighbors” who come to know the Lord on a massive scale in Jeremiah 31:34. While Jews might not have detected it, the prophetic promise of a new covenant implicitly included a marginalizing of the Jew/Gentile distinction, which Paul now builds into his argument. These Gentile believers participate in the blessings promised to Israel, and thus have the Torah (in a transformed, new covenant way) inscribed on their hearts.

<sup>15</sup> Some have suggested they could be God-fearing Gentiles living in the old covenant era (e.g., Ps. 115:13), especially given that in some sense Jeremiah’s (and Ezekiel’s) “new covenant” went into effect in a preliminary way after the return from exile. The same issue comes up in Romans 4:9-12, where the Gentile believers could be old covenant God-fearers as well. But in both cases, I think it is more likely that new covenant Gentile Christians are in view. There are two decisive factors: first, the reference to the Spirit in 2:29 seems to point to the new covenant in its fully inaugurated sense; and second the fact that the whole Jew/Gentile divide seems to be dissolving in 2:25-29 into one category of “true Jews” (whether Jew or Gentile by nature) who have heart circumcision.

<sup>16</sup> For a defense of this reading of “by nature” in 2:14, see N. T. Wright “The Law in Romans 2” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 131-150.

fidelity by demonstrating that God's intentions for Israel are being realized among Gentiles who have embraced Jesus Christ and entered the promised new covenant. Unbelieving Israel, meanwhile, remains in exile and under wrath, until and unless she embraces Jesus' new way of being Israel. The sharp contrast between Gentile Christians who keep the law (in an eschatologized sense) and Jews who break the law (and thus will perish) is the thrust of the text. There is nothing hypothetical about that.<sup>17</sup>

*Eleventh*, the clinching argument is Paul's OT intertextual echo. Psalm 62 (and probably also Proverbs 24:12) stands in the background of the entire passage. In Romans 2:6, the apostle is alluding to Psalm 62:12, which provides the background for a *gracious* judgment of the believer's works. The psalmist says "Also to You, O Lord, belongs mercy [or steadfast love]; For You render to each one according to his work." Those who

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<sup>17</sup> This larger section of Romans, 1:18-3:20, of course, is aimed at demonstrating that both Jew and Gentile (apart from Christ) are under sin. But that does not suggest that justification by doing the law is a hypothetical perfect standard that Paul invokes only in order to show that no one measures up. Paul has already demonstrated God's response to human sin in 1:18-32. In 2:1-29, he is especially showing Jews are under the power of sin, and thus share in the predicament of the nations, even though they seem to think they are exempt. They thought of themselves as the solution to the curse, but in reality have become part of the problem. They are sick physicians. One way Paul shows them their true condition is by exposing their hypocrisy – they rely on a law they refuse to keep. The sharp edge of his argument contrasts unbelieving Jews to a group of Gentiles who have become their moral (and covenantal) superiors. Their boast of Torah has actually backfired; instead of freeing them from sin, Torah binds them to the rest of Adamic humanity and focuses the curse on them (Rom. 5:20).

Neither does 3:19-20 force a hypothetical reading back onto 2:13. The "law" in view in the two passages is different as the immediate contexts prove. In 2:12-13, the law is the Jewish Torah, the Mosaic covenant which Gentiles by nature do not possess. The law in play in 3:19-20 is actually the whole of Scripture. Note that the immediately preceding catena of quotations in 3:9-18 does not cite Moses at all, but relies on Psalms, Wisdom literature, and the prophets. "Under the law" in 3:19-20 does not have to do with the distinctively Jewish Mosaic covenant (the meaning of "law" in 2:12-13, as well as 5:13, 20); rather, it refers to the word and authority of God in the broadest sense, thus encompassing Gentiles (cf. "Scripture" in Gal. 3:22). The point in 3:19-20 is to summarize the witness of Scripture as a whole to the sinful condition of humanity as a whole. The question, then, is how Israel's unique national privileges fit into the global problem of humanity's sin, in which Israel is just as implicated as every other people group. Further confirmation of this interpretation is found in 2:12, where Paul speaks of those who perish "without the law." See also 5:20-21, where Paul acknowledges the problem of sin (and death) is of wider scope than the reach of the law; in other words, sin is bigger than the law and condemns even those who are not under the law (the Mosaic Torah) if they remain in union with Adam. For more on the meaning of 3:19-20, see the discussion in Richard Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 85ff. All of this stands as a refutation of Michael's Horton's remarkably odd claim in *CJPM* that Gentiles were actually under the Torah (204).

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take the hypothetical view of 2:13 are sawing off the very branch the apostle is sitting on in 2:6. The hypothetical reading severs Paul from his roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. Those Scriptures foretold of a gracious final judgment in which God would vindicate his faithful, obedient people according to their works; Paul has picked up on that theme and brought it into a new covenant context. In the OT background texts (Ps. 62; Prov. 24), those who seek to walk with God (by faith; note Ps. 62:8) have every reason to expect a favorable verdict at the last day; Paul takes hold of that expectation and affirms it. Paul, like the Psalmist, can regard a judgment according to deeds as good news precisely because that judgment is shot through with God's covenant love (Romans 2:16) and God has promised to provide the needed transformation (that is, heart circumcision; Rom. 2:29 and Deut. 30:6). But because the Jews Paul is addressing do not share in the righteousness of the Psalmist, they are deluded to think they will share his glorious destiny. They have rejected God's "mercy" (or "steadfast love") in Christ and so will be judged without mercy. Contrary to their expectations, the coming day will bring them wrath and tribulation, not vindication.

So what do we see here? Paul, with the Judaism of his day, believed in a final judgment according to works. But we also get the sense that this common presupposition is functioning very differently now that Paul has been taught the truth in Christ. For Paul, the judgment will not result in the automatic justification of the Jews that so many of his countrymen were presuming.

For Paul, the expectation of a future judgment has been overhauled and transformed in Christ. If the Jews of Paul's day had drifted into some combination of presumptuous antinomianism and prideful legalism (cf. Rom. 2:1-6), Paul calls them

back to the OT expectation of a coming judgment according to deeds, but now with a new twist: Those who will be regarded as law keepers at the last day will not be mere possessors of the law, but those who have faithfully upheld the law in Christ. If the Judaism of Paul's day was some variety of covenant nomism (with different parties in Judaism putting varying degrees of emphasis on the "covenant" part, or the "nomos" part), Paul *radically re-centers* biblical theology on Christ and the Spirit, within the framework of inaugurated, new covenant eschatology.

Thus, whatever similarities there might have been in formal structure, Paul has filled the covenantal framework with fundamentally different content than his contemporary countrymen.<sup>18</sup> For Paul, faith in Christ, rather than works of Torah, is the way of deliverance. But those who trust Christ are, ironically, fulfilling Torah, because the Torah bears witness to Christ (cf. Rom. 3:21, 31) and faith in Christ inevitably bears Torah-fulfilling fruits (cf. Rom. 8:1-4; 13:8-10). National Israel was supposed to be the solution to the sin of the nations; instead she has become part of the problem. Her only hope is to join Gentile Christians in pledging allegiance to Jesus Christ as her Redeemer and King.

Paul's radical departure from Judaism, then, is found in his Christology, pneumatology, and soteriology. Christologically, Paul and Judaism differ in that Paul believes Jesus to be Israel's promised Messiah. Jesus has single-handedly redeemed Israel from the burden of the Torah's curse (and Adam's curse) through his cross.

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<sup>18</sup> A recurring flaw in the *CJPM* book is the conflation of the "Federal Vision" with covenant nomism (e.g., 19, 22; see also chaps. 3, 7). This is often subtle. For example, Scott Clark says that in covenant nomism, "justification is a matter of obtaining and retaining status as God's covenant people." This implies that in nomism, maintaining covenant status is something earned by works. No one associated with the "Federal Vision" has taught such a monstrosity. We would certainly affirm that there are conditions to be met in order to maintain one's place within the covenant (e.g., Paul's "if" statements in texts like Col. 1:22-25), but these conditions are always met by grace through faith. They are not a matter of "nomism" but of relying on Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Pneumatologically, Paul grounds human ability in the work of the Spirit. Apart from the Spirit, humans are enslaved to sin; in the Spirit, humans are set free to please God (Rom. 8:1-17). Life in the Spirit bridges the apparent chasm between *sola fide* at the beginning of the Christian life, and judgment according to works at the end. As Michael Bird points out, Paul's pessimism about human depravity is only matched by his optimism about the ability of a Spirit-empowered people.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Paul eschatologizes soteriology, including justification. The verdict of the final day is already declared ahead of time in the present in Christ. God justifies believers *right now* in anticipation of the final verdict that is to come. But that does not negate the reality of the final verdict as a distinct event, any more than our being raised with Christ in the present (Eph. 2:5) negates the reality of a still-to-come resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Only a counterfeit gospel of cheap grace would deny the need for Christians to be preparing themselves to meet their Maker and Judge at the last day by striving for obedience and maturation in the present.

#### **How Future Justification Works**

We have started to get a picture of future justification, but we still need to fill in this sketch in various ways. The classic Reformed emphasis on initial justification is fully understandable. Historically, initial justification by faith through grace was the main aspect of the gospel needed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and its recovery was the sparkplug that ignited a long overdue reformation of the church. Theologically, Paul admits that initial justification is a "bigger deal" than final justification. This is the logic of Romans 5:6-11, especially verse 9. If God has already done the much harder thing – giving his Son to die for sinners who are at enmity with him – *how much more* will he save us from the wrath

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<sup>19</sup> Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 173. Some Reformed folk need a reminder the label "totally depraved" is a description of unbelievers, not Christians!

to be poured out at the last day? If God was willing to give his Son for the sake of sinners to reconcile them to himself, surely he will rescue us at the last day now that we are his friends! The hard thing has been done; the easy thing is sure to follow. Initial justification by faith is *the really decisive thing* because it reverses our status from condemned to acquitted; the justification of the last day serves to confirm, concretize, and embody that status. While final justification is undoubtedly the ultimate *goal* of redemption, the major *obstacle* to redemption is tackled at the beginning when God reconciles us to himself. Since that obstacle has been overcome, we have no reason to fear failing to reach the goal.

If initial justification is already settled by faith alone, why is there a final justification according to works?<sup>20</sup> *Because there is more to salvation than bare acceptance.* That acceptance is glorious, but it is only the beginning, not the end. Ultimately salvation is about glorification (or *theopoiesis*, as the church fathers put it).<sup>21</sup> Salvation is not just about getting sins forgiven; it's about growing, maturing, and reaching full godlikeness.<sup>22</sup> The final aim of our union with Christ is that his life might be

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<sup>20</sup> Obviously, many answers could be given to this question. See, e.g., the discussion in Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 254. The final judgment is not simply concerned with parceling out rewards, but with eternal salvation and destruction. It is not my aim to be comprehensive here, but to focus on what is most relevant to the present controversy. My point is very similar to Richard Gaffin's when he writes, "Our sanctification is strategically more ultimate than our justification" (in "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *WTJ* 65 [2003], 179). In other words, present justification is part of a larger soteriological scheme, which has actual, embodied conformity to Christ as its ultimate *telos* (Rom. 8:29-30). Initial justification plays a foundational role in God's "master plan" of salvation, but his soteric intentions towards us are not fulfilled until we have become actually righteous before him. The final judgment stamps us with the character of Christ comprehensively (including bodily). In other words, salvation from wrath and the completion of our transformation is not finally consummated until the last day. This is why final justification is so important: without it, our redemption is not yet a finished product.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin was in agreement with the fathers. Commenting on 2 Peter 1:4, he wrote, "Let us then mark, that the end of the gospel is, to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us."

<sup>22</sup> This is why it is also inadequate to reduce the role of obedience to mere evidence that we are indeed justified. It's not as if God needs proof of our election and faith; these things are matters of his own decree and work. Rather, obedience has value as the very goal, end, and essence of God's work of

wholly reproduced in us, that his death and resurrection would become the pattern of our lives (Rom. 6). The day of judgment is the finish line, the completion of what God started when he began a good work in us by calling us into union with Christ by faith (Phil. 1:6). Those who have run their race in persevering trust will be crowned with resurrection glory at the last day. This is the final “much more” of Romans 5:15, 17, and 20-21 that is added to our initial justification. Final justification ratifies that process of maturation into restored images of God, as he passes a favorable verdict over his faithful, obedient people. Final justification is the public, cosmic declaration at the end of all things, announcing that God is eternally pleased with his children.

To put it another way, final justification is God’s approval of the Spirit’s work *in* us, just as initial justification is his approval of Christ’s work *for* us. If initial justification is rooted in Christ’s work for us on the cross, final justification takes into account Christ’s work in us by his Spirit, which is equally essential to our redemption. The divine Judge will not look at the Spirit’s work in us at the last day and say, “I’m sorry; that’s not good enough.” The Spirit’s work will not be condemned, but accepted and glorified. The Spirit’s work in us has real value before the judgment of the Father and the Son. In Galatians, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit and then concludes, “Against such there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23). *But where there is no law, there cannot be condemnation.* Hence,

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salvation. Salvation aims at the rectification and restoration of human life in its entirety. But restored human life is obedient life.

One might wonder if we are conflating final justification with final salvation. After all, Reformed theology rightly sees justification as a smaller piece within the overall program of salvation. Justification is the judicial aspect of salvation, but does not exhaust the meaning of salvation, which also has experiential aspects. But at the last day, final justification and final salvation, while still distinguishable in certain respects, nearly merge together. Final justification is God’s favorable verdict over us, which ultimately takes the shape of a glorified, bodily resurrection, even as it did for Jesus (1 Tim. 3:16). Of course, this bodily resurrection is the complete restoration and fulfillment of our humanity, and therefore caps off the process of salvation as a whole.

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even the imperfect fruit the Spirit has borne in our lives will meet with divine pleasure and acceptance.

Every Christian needs to continually be reminded of his first justification *and* pointed ahead to his future justification. In other words, every Christian needs to continually hear, “Your sins are forgiven!” as well as “Well done good and faithful servant!” (Matt. 25:21, 23). That “well done,” of course, is really God’s evaluation of the Spirit’s work in us, since the Spirit enables and empowers our obedience. At the last day, when our works are approved and accepted, *God will only be crowing his own gifts* (as Augustine put it). To deny that our works have value before God, so far from magnifying grace, actually belittles the work of the Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

We insist that works do not *earn* final justification. Rather, final justification is God’s gracious, fatherly, judicial approval and praise of the Spirit-wrought works his people have performed. Our works are pleasing only through God’s merciful pardon. Even as God says to us “Well done good and faithful servant,” we will say about ourselves, “We are unprofitable servants” (Luke 17:10). We do not boast in what we have accomplished because it isn’t really our doing anyway. We do not rely on ourselves or our works. Moreover, faith still has a role to play even in a judgment of works. The works themselves, after all, are only the fruit and evidence of faith. But more than that, it is only as we trust God to show us mercy in Christ that our works can find acceptance and favor. At the last day, we still have to trust God to forgive our sinful works in this life, as well as cover over and fill in the imperfections of our good works. In no sense do

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<sup>23</sup> Do not confuse “value” with “merit.” See the complete discussion in my “Blurring the Federal Vision” and John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.17.3.

our works make satisfaction for sin or procure pardon – but, then, there is no need to do those things because they have already been accomplished by the cross.

Thus, final justification is God’s gift every bit as much as initial justification. Final justification is in Christ every bit as much as initial justification. There is even a sense in which future justification is by faith alone, like initial justification, because faith remains the sole instrument of union with Christ, in whom our persons *and works* are accepted. When God recompenses our comparatively paltry works with the gift of eternal life, we will be full of gratitude for all eternity. But note that God only justifies works in the end because he has *already* justified us apart from works at the beginning. The first justification is of sinners in Christ; the second justification is of the righteous in Christ. The first justification secures forgiveness of our sins; the second justification announces approval of our Spirit-empowered obedience. In the first justification, God accepts our persons; in the second justification, God accepts our works. In the first justification, we appear before God empty-handed; in the final justification, we come bearing gifts (Deut. 16:16). In the first justification, the Father judges the Son in our place according to strict justice; in the final justification, Christ judges us as the Father’s agent, according to familial compassion.

#### **Double Justification in Old Testament Typology: Numbers 19**

This double justification pattern got some traction at the time of the Reformation, though anti-Roman polemics probably kept it from becoming the standard form of expression.<sup>24</sup> But, of course, the more critical point is that it is widely attested in

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<sup>24</sup> Contrary to the claims of Michael Horton in *CJPM*, 210, 221 a double justification doctrine, quite distinct from anything found in “covenant nomism” or medieval Catholicism, has precedent within our Reformational heritage. See Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification By Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (New York: T and T Clark, 2002), 33ff. See also Rainbow, *The Way*

Scripture. We cannot do a full overview here. We will limit ourselves to a cursory look at a crucial OT text and its role as a hermeneutical grid for other texts. Double justification is woven deeply into the typology of the OT. Numbers 19 is a particularly clear example. The laws of purification in Numbers 19 required those under Torah to be cleansed from defilement any time they came into contact with death (19:11-22). Ceremonially and symbolically, death “spreads to all men” (cf. Rom. 5:12) under the old covenant. Any time an Israelite touched death in any form, he drew that “death” and uncleanness onto himself. Thus, he needed a “resurrection” and purification to answer to his condition. In the Torah, that resurrection/purification unfolds in two phases over seven days. The unclean person would be cleansed by a sprinkling on the third and seventh days. In other words there are two resurrection (or justification) events, one in the middle of the week, and one at the end of the week.<sup>25</sup>

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*of Salvation*, ch. 20, for Reformed antecedents. As Rainbow shows, Philip Melancthon and George Major openly advocated a view of double justification very similar to what I have offered here. Martin Bucer was forthright in teaching a double justification, first of the ungodly by faith, then of the godly by works. He was very concerned to show that the Reformers were teaching the same doctrine as the church fathers. Bucer also played a vital role in the Regensburg Colloquy (along with John Calvin), which developed a double justification model, as part of an ecumenical effort with some Roman Catholic theologians. Calvin occasionally spoke in terms of a double justification model. In John T. McNeil’s edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*, page 816, footnote 14, the editor makes reference to Calvin’s *Sermons on Various Passages of Genesis*, in which Calvin “speaks of double justification—first a general pardon of those who are called, and thereafter ‘justification even in our works by pure faith.’” In *Institutes* 3.14-18, Calvin beautifully and extensively develops a double acceptance doctrine, showing that God regards the works of his justified people as righteous in the final judgment, all due to his fatherly favor. In his commentary materials on Romans 4:6-8 and Psalm 106:31, Calvin argues that Phinehas received a double justification. His act of obedience was only imputed to him as righteousness because he was (implicitly) justified by faith alone at an earlier point. Calvin says, “In short, faith alone, and not human merit, procures both for persons and for works the character of righteousness.” The Westminster Standards describe the final judgment in judicial terms (WCF 33) and speak of an “open acquittal” at the last day in WSC 38 and WLC 90. Recent and contemporary Reformed proponents of an already/not yet shape to justification include Geerhardus Vos, William Hendriksen, Herman Ridderbos, William Dumbrell, Scott Hafemann, Peter O’Brien, Don Garlington, Richard Gaffin, Sinclair Ferguson, Anthony Lane, Peter Lillback, John Frame, Robert Letham, Simon Gathercole, Mark Seifrid, Michael Bird, Thomas Schreiner, and Paul Rainbow. Of course not all these scholars agree (with me or with each other) on all the details. Nevertheless, Rainbow claims that a “future moment of justification” is now the “common view of most Pauline scholars” (158). My own research confirms that observation – though, admittedly, there is still a great deal of work to be done.

<sup>25</sup> The rite described in Numbers 19 probably stands behind Paul’s cryptic reference to “baptisms for the dead” in 1 Corinthians 15:29, and also his linkage of baptism with death and resurrection in Romans

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Jews would have been quite accustomed to this double-resurrection/cleansing pattern, given how often they would have needed to bury friends or family members. It is easy to see that the third day resurrection/cleansing is apart from works. The unclean person is washed by a clean person. The cleansing is not his own work but that of another. On the seventh day, the unclean person is once again washed by a clean person. But this time, he *also* washes himself (Num. 19:19). In other words, his own “work” is now included. The first cleansing event is apart from work; the second, final cleansing event includes his work.

This is the already/not yet pattern of redemptive history: Jesus is raised in the “middle” of history (the third day). Then, there is a general resurrection at the end of history (the seventh day). But those who were not initially cleansed on the “third day” in Christ’s resurrection will be “cut off” forever (Num. 19:20) at the last day. Thus, the cleansing by Another on the third day makes way for the person’s own work to be acceptable on the seventh day. The third day cleansing makes it possible for a person to grow to maturity in a way that pleases God, so that his work is accepted at the last day and his renewal is complete. Having been purified by Christ, he can acceptably purify himself (cf. Jas. 4:8).

How does the pattern of Numbers 19 play out in this two-stage justification? How does the rest of Scripture fill in our understanding of this model of justification? In initial and final justification, *the ground* of acceptance before God remains the same, namely the death and resurrection of Christ. He is the Cleanser from death and defilement. In both initial and final justification, our union with Christ is *by faith alone* (Rom. 5:1-11;

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6. It also undergirds the NT’s twofold resurrection schema, found in passages such as John 5 and Revelation 20.

8:1-11). Furthermore, Christ is our Advocate in both initial and final justification, interceding on our behalf. But whereas in initial justification, we appear before God's court empty-handed ("nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling"), at the last day, we present to God the works of our hands, to be established forever (Ps. 90:17; cf. Rev. 14:13; 21:24).<sup>26</sup> Through the mediation of Christ, these good-but-imperfect works are made perfect, so that we can appear before the final judgment "blameless in holiness" (1 Thess. 3:13; cf. Col. 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:8) and may be "counted worthy of the kingdom of God" (2 Thess. 1:5). While we do not hope in our own obedience, but in Christ who makes our obedience acceptable, we also know that without obedience, we have no hope (cf. Matt. 5:17-20; 7:13-27; 25:31-46; Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:5-6; Heb 12:14; etc.). God justifies us from sin (Rom. 6:7) so that we bear the fruit of holiness, with the end goal of "righteousness" and "eternal life" (Rom. 6:16, 22), all of which is his free gift (Rom. 6:23). Faith-filled works are related to eternal life as sowing is related to reaping (Gal. 6:7). Thus: Initial justification flows out into progressive growth in sanctification, which flows back into final justification, forming a holistic salvation that rescues us from sin in all its dimensions, legal and experiential.

This twofold resurrection/justification also explains the texts in the Psalms where the psalmist pleads *his own* righteousness before God's law court (e.g., Ps. 7:8).<sup>27</sup> At the

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<sup>26</sup> In this sense, then, we can say that God not only justifies us according to works in the final judgment; he justifies our works themselves. Or, to put it another way: while we are not saved by our works, our works themselves are saved. God effects a comprehensive deliverance, bringing us into the glory, honor, and eternal life we have been seeking. Justification according to works means that our works are not burned up; rather, they are accepted into God's eternal kingdom and woven into the final form of the new creation (1 Cor. 15:20-28). The justice of the last day is restorative justice for the people of God. The final justification will be, to use Peter Leithart's term, a "deliverdict" in the most comprehensive sense.

<sup>27</sup> For a complete study, see the outstanding volume by Gert Kwakkel, *According to My Righteousness: Upright Behavior as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26 and 44* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). Though these psalms may ultimately have a christological referent, Kwakkel shows that at the historical-literary level, the claims of righteousness in the psalter do not have to be understood as sinless

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last day, the upright in heart will be saved – and none other (Ps. 7:10). These psalms are referring to covenant members who have already trusted in the Lord. In other words, they are already initially justified apart from any works on their part (cf. Ps. 7:1). Now, they expect an eschatological confirmation of that already received verdict, when God will manifest their right status and cast down their enemies. The evidence in the court at that last day will be their works of loyalty to the Lord. Because they have already been accepted into a covenant relationship with God, they do not fear the coming judgment; indeed (like Paul; cf. 2 Tim. 4:8), they fully expect to be vindicated. Ultimately, we can say that present justification is a matter of trusting God to forgive our ongoing sin so that we can remain in a right relationship with him; final justification is a matter of trusting God to vindicate and glorify us in the future. We need both.

This also explains the twofold clothing metaphor Scripture uses. In initial justification, God clothes us with Christ (Gal. 3:27). Afterwards, we see the saints clothed with the white robes of their own righteous acts (Rev. 3:4; 19:8). This is not an either/or but a both/and. The robing imagery points to both our new status in Christ and the transformation that flows from it. The fact that the same symbolism can be used both ways show how indivisible these different aspects of our salvation are.

Finally, this same pattern is seen in various historical types of the final judgment. We find that, again and again, the ethically righteous are picked out to be saved from coming wrath. The cases of Noah, Lot, and the demolition of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A. D.

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perfection (which would render the sacrificial system meaningless). Instead, the psalmist is claiming covenant fidelity as an overarching pattern of life. This loyalty to the Lord provides a basis for expecting him to (keep his covenant and) judge in the psalmist's favor in the eschatological assize. The presupposition of these passages is that the psalmist is already a covenant member, and therefore already in a state of initial justification by faith when he pleads for some fuller (final?) vindication against enemies or accusers.

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are especially instructive. These events (the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the end of the old covenant) are rightly taken as pictures anticipating the last day. In each case those who were delivered had God's favor already, but their survival at the coming judgment was not apart from obedience. We are told Noah "found favor" before we are told he "was a just man, perfect in his generations" (Gen. 6:8-9). He had obviously been justified before God for a long time before his obedience culminated in the salvation of his family in the ark (Heb. 11:7; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5). While Lot had his share of struggles, he was certainly among the "righteous" as far as Abraham and Peter were concerned (Gen. 18:16-33; 2 Pet. 2:6-9). His "final" salvation in Genesis 19:1-29 clearly presupposed an earlier standing in God's favor. When Jesus spoke of the judgment to fall on Jerusalem, he made it clear that deliverance presupposed trusting him and living obediently (Matt. 16:24-29). In other words, justification according to works at the "final" judgment of 70 A. D. built upon an earlier justification by faith when the disciples first responded to the call of Jesus, received forgiveness, and began following him.

In sum, Paul Rainbow is exactly right when he says,

For persons to be justified in the full sense, God's present imputation of righteousness to those who are incorporate in Christ by faith must be legitimized in the end by his approbation of an actual righteousness which he brings about in them during the meantime. While faith is the ultimate condition for both events, deeds are proximately conditional in their own right for the culminating event...*Sola fide* is true when it describes how we first enter into a new standing with God, but it oversimplifies the nature of the Christian journey into the coming age, with potentially disastrous effects.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation*, xvi. Despite my reliance on Rainbow at points, there are several problems in his book, including the fact that he vastly underestimates how much Calvin agrees with his thesis. My major complaint is his failure to expound on the role of Christ and faith at the last judgment.

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Of course, Rainbow is just following Calvin, who said that *sola fide* is “false,” unless a “prudent and sound interpretation is given to it,”<sup>29</sup> and also spoke of a “double acceptance of man before God”:

For we dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them...  
[God] takes works into account...[T]hose good works which he has bestowed upon us the Lord calls “ours,” and testifies they not only are acceptable to him but also will have their reward...  
The promises of the gospel...not only make us acceptable to God but also render our works pleasing to him...  
After forgiveness of sins is set forth, the good works that now follow are appraised otherwise than on their own merit...[T]he good works done by believers are accounted righteous, or, what is the same thing, are reckoned as righteousness...  
Therefore, we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God’s sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ’s sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ’s purity, and is not charged to our account. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified.<sup>30</sup>

The twofold justification scheme is one with many analogies in our own experience. When parents welcome a newborn into the home, they do so apart from any works or contribution the child might make. There are no demands. The child’s status is “righteous” in the eyes of his parents. But when the child grows up, mature works are expected, and it is even possible that the child could live in such a way that parents would disinherit/disown him altogether. In a healthy situation, when a child reaches a certain age, the parents will look at their work “in” the child and give their judgment of approval. They will tell their mature son, “Well done! We’re pleased with you! You are worthy of our inheritance!” This is the capstone of the initial welcome they gave to the child before

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<sup>29</sup> See Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 192. Lillback’s work is a masterful and balanced study of the Reformer’s thought, showing that he wrestled with the same biblical issues that this paper studies, arriving at a very complex and nuanced understanding of justification, faith, and union with Christ.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1, 3.15.4, 3.15.3, 3.17.3, 3.17.8, 3.17.10.

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he could do anything that would commend their praise. The inheritance he receives will still be a gracious gift, but he has shown himself to be a fitting recipient of such additional blessing. Obviously this analogy has limitations, but it helps to connect these biblical truths to everyday life.

### **Twofold Justification and the Necessity of Obedience**

Contrary to some of the “Federal Vision” critics, Scripture never says that our deeds will be irrelevant to our standing in the final judgment. The language of the Bible could not be plainer in tying together obedience and final blessedness (Matt. 7:21-23; Heb. 12:14). The end goal of our obedience is “righteousness” (right-standing in God’s law-court) and “everlasting life” (Rom. 6:16, 21-22; cf. WCF 16.2, which confesses the “end,” or goal, of our good works to be “eternal life”). Works are related to final vindication as a means to an end, or a way to a destination (Gal. 6:7-8; cf. WLC 32). Turning the point around, Scripture teaches that inheriting the eschatological kingdom of God is contingent upon avoiding (or repenting of) certain patterns of behavior which constitute apostasy (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21).

The necessity of grace-wrought works is the presupposition of the final judgment. But how should we classify and categorize the role of these works? Are works *instrumental* in final justification? No, at least not in the same sense that faith is instrumental. Works cannot unite us to Christ; that is the special function of faith. But many biblical passages could be easily construed in a way that works are instrumental in a variety of other ways that complement the unique instrumentality of faith. As Gathercole says, reflecting on Matthew 12:37, “It is dangerous to attempt to be more

orthodox than Jesus by insisting that ‘fruit’ [of faith] cannot be described as an instrumental cause of eschatological justification.”<sup>31</sup>

Should we then say that works are (merely) *evidence* in the final court scene? Perhaps. Then we could say God’s vindicating verdict is rendered on the basis of the public evidence. But if we formulate the place of works in terms of evidence, we need to be careful to avoid certain pitfalls. The evidential view can make it seem as though works are tacked onto the real essence of salvation, which is forgiveness/imputed righteousness.

The evidential view can make works appear to be extrinsic to the whole process of salvation. Salvation is one thing; evidence of salvation something else. The evidential view can make it look like trusting and obeying are two separate responses to God’s word, even two different ways of relating to God, rather than distinct-but-integrated aspects of a single response. The evidential view can make obedience look like a second stage in the Christian living, rather than inextricably tied into faith from the outset.<sup>32</sup>

In reality, obedience is the “essential expression of what it means to trust Christ in and of itself.”<sup>33</sup> This is why Paul speaks of the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5). Faith itself is obedience to the gospel announcement, but it also carries within itself the seeds of obedience that are bound to bear fruit. Obedience is not a second step added to faith.

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<sup>31</sup> Gathercole, “The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond: Some Proposals,” in *Justification in Perspective*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 233. But note that Gathercole immediately points out that when Jesus is describing *initial* justification (in Luke 18:13-14), he leaves works out of the picture. It is a justification of the ungodly, received solely by the cry of faith. That is to say, Jesus and Paul are fully compatible in their teaching on present and final justification.

<sup>32</sup> Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation*, 206ff makes a case for going beyond “works as evidence” at the last day. He ends up advocating an “instrumental” view, much like Gathercole, in which works are a “means” unto final salvation. Calvin also describes works as “inferior causes” and “means” of final salvation (*Institutes*, 3.14.21).

<sup>33</sup> Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 188. Hafemann goes on to say, “There is only one thing, not two, that we must do to be saved: trust God with the needs of our lives. This one thing, trust in God’s provision (now supremely manifested in Christ) will show itself, from beginning to end, in our *many* acts of repentance and obedience...” (192).

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Obedience is not a supplement to faith. Obedience is not merely proof of faith. Rather obedience is the reflex of faith to God's imperatives, the same way taking medicine is the reflex of a patient's trust in his doctor. Obedience is just what faith does; it is faith in action. Obedience is what saved, renewed, restored human life looks like.<sup>34</sup>

All that being the case, it might be better to call works a *condition* of final justification. Works do more than demonstrate that we are already saved; growth into mature obedience is the whole point of salvation, after all. As we are rounded out into renewed, Christ-like image bearers, we are being made mature sons, ready to claim our inheritance in God's renewed creation. Thus, obedience is not merely verification of salvation; it is the point of salvation. God's desire has always been to have a mature, obedient humanity at the helm of his creation. At the last day, God will look at his finished work of re-creation in Christ and judge it as "good." Final justification is the declaration that God is pleased with his work in us by his Spirit; he finally has what he was aiming at when he created man in the first place. Good works in the present are signs of God's benevolence to us, showing that we are on the road to eschatological glory, to be received in full in the future.

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<sup>34</sup> We can go one step further and describe obedience as a perichoretic reality. "Perichoresis" is a theological term used to describe the inner "choreography" (or "dance") of God's triune life, as the three persons of the Godhead mutually fill and indwell one another in love, giving, receiving, and returning to one another. As Jesus describes obedience in John 14:20-21, 23-24, we find that (faith-filled) obedience is a means to ever-deepening communion with God. The Father and Son indwell one another; the Son indwells us, and therefore the Father dwells in us as well (14:20). As we give ourselves to the Son in loving obedience, we are loved in turn by the Father, and the Son gives himself to us even more deeply (14:21). As we obey, we prepare our hearts into homes for the Father and Son to take up residence (14:23). Jesus seems to be saying that obedience leads us deeper into the heart of God's triune life, even as it opens the way for the persons of the Godhead to dwell more fully in our hearts. As Father and Son give themselves to us, we give ourselves to them in return, and the bond between us grows and strengthens. In this way, obedience may be thought of as "dancing" with(in) the Trinity; it is the way we come to enjoy and fulfill the communion with the Triune God that we were created to experience. Again, this brings us back to our point above: obedience (flowing out of faith, manifesting love) is not simply tacked on to salvation; rather, is the very shape and goal of our salvation.

The Bible repeatedly describes two ways of life, two paths one can travel: the path of faithful obedience and the path of unfaithful disobedience.<sup>35</sup> The first path ends with the Father declaring his pleasure and granting the crown of life. The other path ends with condemnation and the lake of fire. There is no third way.

Given that the critics of the “Federal Vision” will generally admit that obedience is necessary, it is hard to see why they would so strenuously object to the Bible’s plain teaching regarding a final justification. If there is no final judgment/justification, in which works play a decisive role, *why* are works necessary?

### **The Grace of Judgment Day**

Like Paul, the “Federal Vision” sees a final judgment according to works as good news for believers (cf. Rom. 2:16), whereas (implicitly, at least) the critics see it as bad news.<sup>36</sup> While many aspects of the present controversy may be written off due to misunderstanding, here we seem to have a real, substantive disagreement, one that can only be solved in the old fashioned way – by an appeal to the Law and the Testimony!

How can it be good news to hear that our justification has been inaugurated, but not yet consummated? That our final approbation is contingent on certain conditions which must still be fulfilled in this life? That the criteria for final acquittal includes our performance of good works? What does it mean for already justified believers to *hope* for justification by faith (Gal. 5:5)?

As already noted, the Bible uses very blunt, plain language to express the reality that our deeds in this life bear upon our final destiny (cf. Matt. 5:17-20; 7:21-23; John 5:29; Gal. 6:7-10; etc.). *But this does not have to be taken as bad news.* Indeed, Paul

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<sup>35</sup> See Deuteronomy 27-30; Psalm 1; the book of Proverbs; the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel; the “way” theme in Mark’s gospel; Romans 8:1-17; Galatians 6:7-10; etc.

<sup>36</sup> See the remarks of Hywel Jones in *CJPM*, 295-296.

considers it part of the gospel (Rom. 2:16). The gospel not only delivers us from the penalty of sin, but from the power and presence of sin as well. Jesus died not only to win the acquittal of convicted criminals, but also to secure their rehabilitation through the work of his Spirit. The cross and resurrection not only serve as the ground of our acceptance by God (Rom. 4:25), but also as the dynamic of our renewal and transformation (Rom. 6:1-23). The faith that justifies also works (Jas. 2:14-26) through love (Gal. 5:6). At the last day, those, and only those, who have persevered in faithfulness by grace will hear the Father's praise (1 Cor. 4:5).

We have to distinguish working hard to make ourselves right with God from working hard because we have already been made right with God (1 Cor. 15:10). The works that justify at the last day are the works that flow out of a faith that has already received initial acceptance and the promise of forgiveness. When Paul sets faith over against works, the works he has in view are either [a] works done in an outdated, old covenant mode of life, according to the Torah, apart from Christ and the Spirit, (these works are now obsolete in light of the great redemptive-historical shift that has taken place); or [b] works done pre-conversion, in a vain attempt to merit God's favor in the flesh.<sup>37</sup> But Paul *never* says works are optional for believers; he always insists that works (flowing out of faith) are necessary to receive God's final approbation on the last day.<sup>38</sup>

The problem is that we have shrunk down the gospel. It is all too typical for the gospel to be reduced to the forgiveness of sin and imputation of righteousness. But the

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<sup>37</sup> Too many "Federal Vision" critics have failed to make a distinction between these worthless works, done outside of union with Christ, and the good works of Spirit-indwelt believers. The critics are suspicious that *any* human effort is a sign that one is motivated by merit rather than grace. But there is no generic category of "works" that covers every type of human effort. We have to make distinctions between works that arise out of different modes of living. The works of the flesh are radically different from the works done in the realm of the Spirit, as Romans 8 shows.

<sup>38</sup> See Rainbow's survey of every passage in the Pauline corpus which contrasts faith with works, *The Way of Salvation*, 84ff.

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gospel not only promises free pardon and acceptance through Christ; it also ensures that God transforms us and matures us into Christ's image. This much neglected aspect of the gospel needs to be recovered so that we can eagerly anticipate God's praise on the final day of reckoning the same way Paul did (cf. Rom. 2:10; 1 Cor. 4:2-5; 2 Tim. 4:8).

This does not have anything to do with shifting the *ground* of justification (in the present or in the future) away from Christ. Rather, it is to suggest that Christ does even more for us than perhaps we have thought. God is not going to destroy my life's work because it was stained with sins and flaws. Rather, at the last day, he will establish the work of my hands forever, perfecting, glorifying, and beautifying it (Ps. 90:17).<sup>39</sup> That is part of the gospel hope as well. Christ is not only the ground on which God accepts me; he is the ground on which God accepts my deeds as well.

If the ordinary Christian doubts whether or not his works are "good enough," such that he fears a final judgment according to works, *the problem is that he is not sufficiently believing the gospel*. In Christ, even the most meager, baby steps of obedience delight the Father. Indeed, even our struggles to obey bring him pleasure, though we often falter. Once we know the Father is pleased with our efforts, we can go out into the world and live for him, full of joy and confidence. We can leave behind the old, and strain ahead to the new, knowing that our Father's glorious and gracious approbation awaits us. We are motivated out of gratitude for an already received justification, but love also compels us and presses us ahead towards the goal of pleasing our Father in all that we do so that we can hear his fatherly praise at the last day.

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<sup>39</sup> For a beautiful literary picture of the way the final judgment purifies, perfects, completes, and glorifies our life's work, read J. R. R. Tolkien's story "Leaf By Niggle" in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Harper Collins, 2001). For a more theological account, see Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 2006).

But the critics of the “Federal Vision” balk at these notions. They do not believe even regenerate humans can do anything that pleases the heavenly Father. For example, in *CJPM*, Michael Horton writes, “A final justification based on our works, even works done in faith, would reverse the verdict pronounced in our present justification” (226). This is so, as Horton explains, because the law demands perfect obedience. God simply cannot pass a favorable judgment over the works of his people, even when those works are regarded as gifts of grace and fruit of the Spirit. Of course, the fundamental problem here is that Horton regards believers as still under the law, contra Romans 6:14 and Galatians 5:23.

Likewise, in *CJPM* (411), Dennis Johnson writes,

Some federal vision advocates draw a distinction between God's “strict” justice, which only Christ's perfection can satisfy, and God's “fatherly” assessment, which accepts our less-than-perfect obedience, calling it ‘pleasing’ and “good.” Rich Lusk, for example, asserts...  
In another essay Lusk attempts to soften the daunting prospect of final judgment based on works....

Johnson goes on to say that my view of the final judgment undermines both grace and justice and eliminates love as a motivation for obedience.

But just the opposite is the case. On Johnson's view, no matter how hard the believer tries, his works are always going to be worthless before God. In Johnson's view, living in a state of justification makes absolutely no difference in how God regards our deeds. According to Johnson, a believer should not desire to hear his Father say “Well done!” – and he never will anyway. (Perhaps he would say Matthew 25:21, 23 are hypothetical in the manner that the other *CJPM* authors read Romans 2:13.) We serve a Master who simply cannot be pleased with us. Nothing we ever do

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is praiseworthy. And to seek the Father's approbation is to fall into works-righteousness. The result of this approach, of course, can easily be apathy, listlessness, and even despair, as God's people are robbed of comfort and encouragement that is due to them. Indeed, the doctrine taught in *CJPM* seems demeaning and dehumanizing in its insistence that nothing humans ever do (even in faith) can have value before God.

Compare Horton's and Johnson's view with that of Paul. Yes, Paul knew that his only hope was the free grace of God in Christ. He was motivated not by an attempt to obligate God. But nevertheless, he wrote, "Therefore we make it our aim...to be well pleasing to him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:9-10). By Johnson's standards, Paul was poorly motivated since he took account of God's approbation at the last day.<sup>40</sup> By Horton's standards, all Paul could hope to "receive" before the "judgment seat" is condemnation since he brings works into view. The claim of the "Federal Vision" is that Paul, not Horton or Johnson, got it right.

### **James 2 and Eschatological Justification**

The picture of justification drawn in James 2 may be brought into the discussion at this point. We will find that James 2 and Romans 2 align perfectly. I will not comprehensively exegete this much contested passage, but I do want to point

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<sup>40</sup> On *CJPM*, 411, Johnson seems oblivious to any distinction between seeking to please God by faith and seeking to earn his favor. Virtually everything Johnson says about Luke 7:36ff is fine as far as it goes, and I would agree with it. But the problem is what he leaves out. The parable in Luke 7:41-47 is a beautiful story of how initial justification compels us to love God, but it does not bear upon my point, which is established by appeal to a different set of texts.

In addition, it is not just the "Federal Vision" theologians who argue for a distinction between God's "strict" and "fatherly" justice. The same distinction is found in Calvin. See my essay, "Blurring the 'Federal Vision'" for a complete discussion of Calvin's view.



out that most discussions of the text go astray because they start at the wrong point. Unfortunately, many of our English Bible put a section break between James 2:13 and 2:14. But 2:12-13 provide one of the key premises in the argument that follows (and it turns out to be a premise that Johnson, in the above mentioned discussion, flatly rejects). James says, “So speak and do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” Then, the apostle launches into a discussion of God’s future judgment. But he has already contextualized the meaning of God’s judgment. God judges the merciful with mercy. That is to say, believers (who inevitably show faith by their deeds of mercy; cf. Jas. 1:26-27; 2:1-6, 15-16 and Matt. 25:31-46) will be judged mercifully at the last day.<sup>41</sup> Mercy receives mercy. The law of judgment for believers is the “law of liberty.” Of course, we have seen Paul make the same point by incorporating Psalm 62 into his teaching on final justification in Romans 2.<sup>42</sup>

What do we find in the rest of James 2? And how does it mesh with Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings?

*First*, James clearly has in view works which do not follow from justification, but which precede and lead to the pronouncement of the verdict. This is a justification that is

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<sup>41</sup> Degrees of judgment are also hinted at in James 3:1.

<sup>42</sup> What if we press back further into the early part of James 2? How does James’ statement about the perfectionism of the law in 2:10 comport with the merciful judgment of 2:13? The key is in James’ turn of phrase in 2:12, where he speaks of “the law of liberty,” already referred to back in 1:25. There is no doubt the law in view in 2:10 is absolute in its demands. James speaks of “stumbling at one point” in 2:10; in 3:2, he confirms that we do all in fact “stumble in many things.” So we would all be judged as law-breakers according to the standard of 2:10. But the law of 2:10 is *not* the standard by which believers will be judged. They have come under the “law of liberty.” This law still brings a judgment of deeds (1:25, 2:12), and it appears that it has similar moral content to the law of 2:10, since both laws condemn partiality (2:9). But the law of liberty is distinct in that it brings a judgment of mercy to the merciful. This merciful law is actually an incentive to obedience rather than an excuse for lowering our standards (cf. 2:8, 12). Obviously, this meshes well with what we saw in Romans 2:1-16, as it rests upon Psalm 62:12. The “law of liberty” may also be connected with Paul’s discussion of liberty in Galatians 5 and the law of Christ in 1 Corinthians 9:21 and Galatians 6:2.

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*posterior* to works. In other words, this passage has *nothing* (directly) to do with initial justification, which clearly precedes works. James deals here with eschatological salvation (2:12-14). In the illustrations given (Abraham and Rahab), it is clear that they are already believers well before the justification in view is declared.<sup>43</sup> (This is clearer in the case of Abraham, obviously.) These illustrations foreshadow, model, and typify eschatological justification. James is discussing our final acquittal before the judgment seat of God; he is providing historical paradigms for understanding future justification.<sup>44</sup>

*Second.* salvific realities pervade the text. James is concerned with the same kinds of questions that drive Paul – questions about salvation (2:14), being reckoned righteous (2:23), friendship/reconciliation with God (2:23), the relationship of faith to works, and the connection between works and justification. Like Paul, James is concerned with those who are mere hearers of the law rather than doers (1:22-27). Like Paul, James relies on the example of Abraham, and even uses the same proof-text (Gen. 15:6). James uses a typical Pauline grammatical construction (the preposition “by” followed by a genitive case) to express justification’s instrumentality (2:24; cf. Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:26; etc.). In other words, James 2 breathes the same air as Paul’s theology. There is every reason to

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<sup>43</sup> In other words, the tension between James and Paul is a mirage. The statements of the apostles that appear to conflict are talking about different justification events. The justification and works that Paul opposes to one another in Romans 3:28 are different from the justification and works that James coordinates in James 2:24. Romans 3:28 teaches pre-Christian works cannot attain initial acceptance with God. James 2:24 is about future justification by faith-filled good works. When we recognize this, we see that James easily harmonizes with Paul’s teaching on *future* justification (e.g., Rom. 2:13; Gal. 5:5-6). If we could get away from the unhealthy tendency to force James through the grid of a few select Pauline passages, and let him speak for himself as an inspired apostle, we would be able to deal much more faithfully with the text. We do need to harmonize various texts, but we cannot let that short circuit the work of exegeting each text on its own. We cannot let a handful of Pauline passages muzzle what James has to say.

<sup>44</sup> It is possible that James is laying down the requirements his readers must meet if they are to be justified not at the last day, but at an historical judgment that is much nearer at hand (cf. Jas. 5:1-12; Mt. 16:27-28), perhaps 70 A. D. But even if this is so, such that James 2:14ff is describing historically intermediate judgments, this still serves as a picture and type of the final, eschatological judgment, and that would be the primary application for today’s readers.

suppose that James is using “justification” terminology in a roughly Pauline way (forensic acquittal).

Third. James is dealing with the way to secure ultimate salvation.<sup>45</sup> James has already alluded to the future completion of salvation in 1:12, using language that could easily be construed in a judicial way (“approved”). James says a faith that does not demonstrate itself in works will not profit for salvation in the day of judgment (2:14, 16; cf. 1:26). Indeed, James frames the situation in the harshest of terms: a non-working faith is not only dead (2:17), but demonic (2:18). In other words, faith is not a matter of mere assent (for even demons can assent to propositional truths and shudder). Faith is a whole-souled commitment, an entrusting of one’s life and ways to God. This is why James can insist that saving, justifying faith will show itself in deeds. The way to God’s final approval is the way of faith, as that faith is completed in works (2:22). Faith is as faith does. And only a “doing” faith can yield justification. The whole of the epistle points in this direction.

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Fourth. James states his conclusion three times: final justification is “by works” (2:21, 24, 25). To be sure, the verdict is not given to works apart from faith, as though these works could stand on their own as an independent human contribution to salvation. Rather, James says works and faith combine together to attain final justification (2:24). In

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<sup>45</sup> Contra Jones, *CJPM*, 295, who says (without any substantial proof) that James’ main question is “How can faith be demonstrated?” That is a subsidiary point, to be sure, but Jones’ approach begs the key issues. Jones says that the recurring theme is that “works ‘justify’ faith.” But that is precisely what James *never* says. Yes, works “show” faith, but in the passage, it is *persons* (Abraham, Rahab), not *faith*, that are *justified*. Paying close attention to grammar is critical to sound exegesis, and Jones has failed in that respect. Further, Jones’ view that “to justify” means “to demonstrate righteousness” makes non-sense of James’ formula in 2:22, 24: How could faith “demonstrate” faith? After all, James does not deny faith’s role in justification when he insists that works have a role as well. But in a demonstrative justification, faith would be *entirely* excluded.

However, to Jones’ credit he admits the exegesis of Douglas Moo (which is very similar to what I am offering here) is “open to question.” In other words, Jones has not totally closed the door on giving the passage a more faithful reading.

this way, James maintains the unique role of faith, even though it is not a prominent theme. While he does not use the language of union with Christ, his overall point is one that is found in Paul as well. As radical as James 2:24 sounds, it is actually rather easy to find Pauline equivalents (e.g., Rom. 2:13; Gal. 5:5-6). When Paul denies that works justify, he has in view pre-Christian works (e.g., Rom 3:28). When James says faith alone cannot justify, he has in view an inadequate, workless faith that amounts to mere assent (2:19, 24). When Paul and James speak of works that will justify eschatologically (Rom. 2:13; Jas. 2:24), they have in view the Spirit-driven works of an already accepted believer.

*Fifth*, it is impossible that James is using the verb “to justify” in the sense of “to demonstrate as just.” Besides the well documented linguistic problems with this view,<sup>46</sup> it simply does not fit the sense of the passage,<sup>47</sup> especially the use of Genesis 15:6 in 2:23.<sup>48</sup> In James’ discussion, works are evidential, but they evidence *faith*, not *justification*. James does not say “show me your justification,” but “show me your faith” (cf. 2:18). In James 2, justification *follows from* faith and works. Or to put it differently, only a demonstrated faith will lead to justification (eschatological right-standing). Verse 24 is the clincher: When James says that faith and works justify, he cannot mean that

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<sup>46</sup> See e.g., Norman Shepherd, “The Grace of Justification,” available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/norman\\_shepherd/the\\_grace\\_of\\_justification.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/norman_shepherd/the_grace_of_justification.htm). See also Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation*, 223n. This stands against Jones, *CJPM*, 295. Jones questions whether or not God is the subject of the verb “to justify” throughout James’ discussion. But Genesis 15:6 definitively answers that question. God is the one who does the justifying. Who else could it be? Who else would justify Abraham by faith, even in combination with works? Besides, James identifies God as the Judge elsewhere in the epistle, e.g., 4:11-12.

<sup>47</sup> To be sure, works can be regarded as proof that *initial* justification has taken place. Only the initially justified will do good works; these works flow out of initial justification and verify its reality. So the *theological* point of those who interpret James in this way is entirely valid, even if it is *exegetically* false. My desire here, obviously, is to deal with James’ actual point.

<sup>48</sup> Those who want to argue that James uses justification language in a demonstrative sense, rather than in the Pauline, forensic sense are still left with a contradiction, since then James and Paul are using the same example (Abraham), and even the same proof-text (Gen. 15:6), in radically different ways.

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faith and works demonstrate one's status (or character) as just. Faith, in itself, does not demonstrate anything. Rather, it is the very thing that needs demonstrating, so that one can be (eschatologically) justified.

*Sixth*, some have argued that James is talking about a justification before men, not God. In other words, our good works are not needed as far as God is concerned, but in order to prove our righteous status to other humans, we need to have works. While it is true that works demonstrate our identity in Christ to others (cf. 1 Pet. 2:12), it is not at all clear that that function of works is in view in James 2. The whole context seems to be salvation and acquittal before God. Not only that, but in the two illustrations offered (Abraham, Rahab), a human audience is not in view. Abraham went *alone* with Isaac up the mountain. Obviously Rahab's covert action had to be kept a secret from the other citizens of Jericho. James is apparently answering those who think that a non-working faith (mere assent) can profit towards final *salvation*. The issue at stake is not our witness before men (as important as that is), but our standing before God.

*Seventh*, James' way of relating faith and works seems counter-intuitive at first. In his analogy in verse 26, faith = the body and works = spirit/breath. But upon further reflection, it makes perfect sense. James is saying that a living faith is a *breathing* faith. Faith inhales God's promises (implicit in the examples of Abraham and Rahab), and exhales good works. A faith that does not breathe out good works is suffocated. It is a corpse. It is worthless. A body separated from its breath is dead. Thus, only a vital faith can justify. But because justifying faith is a working faith, good works must always be considered as the works *of faith*, not something added to or tacked on to faith. Thus, in a

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very important sense, a justification by works is still *really* a justification by faith at the deepest level.

*Eighth*, why does James think that Abraham's obedience in Genesis 22 (cited in James 2:21) "fulfilled" the declaration of Abraham's righteousness in Genesis 15 (cited in James 2:23)? Why does James think of God's imputation of righteousness to Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6 as somehow prophetic of Abraham's later obedience, when he offered Isaac? Some have suggested that God imputes believers as righteous in the present in view of who he will make them to be in the future. In other words, justification by faith in the present is really future justification by works announced ahead of time, much like a doctor declaring a sick patient cured as soon as he begins to take medicine, because the medicine is so sure to take effect in due time. This may be what James is saying, but it seems to me more consistent with the overall witness of Scripture to say that the point is a bit different. James is pointing out that the same faith that clung to God's promises in Genesis 15 concerning the seed grew into mature obedience in Genesis 22, so that it could offer the seed back to God. In other words, the kind of faith that justifies in the present is the kind of faith that will produce good works in the future. The good works that flow out of faith actually mature and perfect faith (2:22; cf. 1:4). Faith reaches its *telos*, its goal, in obedient human action, as the life of Abraham demonstrates. God then mercifully declares his approval of that faith-filled obedience (cf. 1:12). The maturity theme runs straight through the epistle and it is not out of place to see it lurking in 2:14-26. The final judgment is God crowning his mature sons with approbation.

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*Ninth*, the example of Rahab is especially instructive in terms of discerning James' overall intentions. In Jewish eyes, she is everything Abraham wasn't: a woman, a Gentile, a flagrant sinner. Obviously, God's judgment is not partial to Israel (cf. Romans 2:1-16). Her inclusion in a passage that focuses on justification by works shows unmistakably that James is not thinking in terms of legalistic demands, but of God's gracious acceptance. He is not thinking in terms of the works of the self-help moralist, who tries to make himself presentable to God. Rather, he is thinking of the believer who

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has cast himself upon the sheer mercy of God ~~→~~ but in the act of doing so, is also transformed by the Spirit of God. Rahab's justification – even when it is according to works – must be a gift. Rahab reminds us that the question “How much obedience is enough to justify?” is seriously misguided. The point is that *any measure* of true faith will demonstrate itself in embodied action. And that is sufficient.

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*Tenth*, if we ask, “How can a perfect, holy God accept our imperfect works? How can flawed obedience justify?” James is ready with an answer. We have already noted that James views the final judgment as a merciful evaluation of believers (2:13) according to the law of liberty (1:25, 2:12). God shows mercy to those who show mercy. Further insight is offered in 2:23, which reflects back on Genesis 15:6. Because Abraham believed God, God called him his friend. So when God judged his actions later on (Gen. 22), God judged him in a friendly way. It was not a judgment of strict justice (since that has been meted out at the cross), but a covenantal judgment. God looked at Abraham's work through the lens of covenant friendship.<sup>49</sup> Forensic justification issues forth into a

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<sup>49</sup> If we fill this out with the rest of Scripture, we can say that God not only exercises a *friendly* judgment towards believers, but also a *fatherly* judgment. We are judged as a father judges his children, which is a comforting thought (cf. Ps. 103:13-14). Calvin put a great deal of emphasis on the fatherhood of God in relation to his judgment of believer's works at the last day. Of course, ultimately, God's judgment is

state of friendship, which provides the context for a future forensic event. Of course, outside of that covenant relationship, there is no mercy mixed into the judgment (Jas. 2:10).

*Eleventh.* James should not be read in such a way that he denies the truth of *sola fide*.

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Grammatically, James identifies two instruments of justification (faith and works), but that is not necessarily the case theologically. While James' (inspired!) formulation rejects *sola fide* on the surface (2:24), there is another sense in which his teaching can be squared with the intentions of *sola fide*. James does not teach that faith and works play identical, or interchangeable, or equal, roles in justification. In fact, his quotation of Genesis 15:6 is a powerful affirmation of the priority of faith. Works and faith cooperate (2:22), but only as works flow out of faith. Works follow faith as a secondary and subordinate condition. So while James says that faith and works justify conjointly (2:24), this does not necessitate blurring their respective functions. In the hands of Reformed theologians, James' dual instrument formula (justification by faith plus works) has resolved into a singular instrument (justification by a working faith). *This is an entirely legitimate move, and one I would endorse.* It is not an improvement on James, but a summary of James. The faith that alone justifies is never alone. Believing and doing are

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merciful, friendly, and fatherly only because we are *in Christ*. Christ has already satisfied God's wrath against our sin, even as Christians. Christ continually intercedes for us, making our flawed works acceptable and ensuring that our sins will be forgiven. The cross, resurrection, and mediation of Christ puts believers on new footing with God, so that our works really can meet with God's good pleasure. Our works are not tacked onto faith in an extrinsic way; rather, as the product of our faith, they are now evaluated by God from within our union with Christ. This was all prefigured in the sacrificial system, where the tribute/grain offerings (representing human labor) were also offered on the heels of sin offerings and ascension/whole burnt offerings (representing Christ's sacrifice). Our works become acceptable to God only after our persons have been accepted. And all of this is enveloped by Christ's work on our behalf. See WCF 16 for a Reformed statement of this truth regarding God's acceptance of our good works through Christ. See also my "Blurring the Federal Vision" for a larger theological discussion, drawing heavily on Calvin.



distinct, but they can never be divorced. Faith and works are integral to one another, but not identical.

Now we are prepared to state the biblical doctrine of justification more fully. Initial justification is by faith alone. But it is by a faith that will prove itself in works. Final justification is by faith and works together. Or, to put it differently, it is by a faith that has proven itself in obedience and borne the fruit of the Spirit. This is the teaching found across the board in the NT. Jesus (Luke 18:14/Matt. 12:37), James (2:23/2:22), and Paul (Rom. 3:28/Rom. 2:13) all provide a synthesis of present justification by faith and future justification to doers. So far from there being tension, there is complete compatibility. This is because salvation is a complete package, which includes initial forgiveness, final vindication, and growth in the obedience of faith in between. God's purpose, beginning in the eternal election of a people, reaching achievement in the death and resurrection of Christ, coming to fruition in the applicatory work of the Spirit, and finally culminating with resurrection and new creation, is all of one piece. In other words, there is no tension between the two poles of justification because, eschatologically and decretally, "believers" and "doers" become the same group. Those who are declared righteous at the start are practically righteous at the end.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Horton wrongly accuses this twofold pattern of justification as being indistinguishable from the Roman Catholic Tridentine view of justification (*CJPM*, 210). But Horton can only make such a claim by radically twisting my arguments out of shape (which he quite adept at doing) and/or misunderstanding the Tridentine view of justification. Which canon from the Council of Trent teaches a doctrine of initial justification anything like I have proposed, in this book? Which canon of Trent proposes a future justification in which the mediation of Christ is foundational to the acceptance of our works (rather than merit), as I have argued? Where does Trent articulate the role of faith as I have done?