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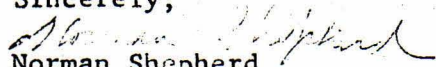
Members of the Board of Trustees
Westminster Theological Seminary
Chestnut Hill
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Dear Brothers:

I am sending to you a translation of two sections (471 and 475) from Vol. IV of Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics. They are found in the chapter dealing with justification. Both the Dutch text, and the Latin citations and technical terms have been translated. The citations and most of the translated technical terms are set off in quotation marks. No effort has been made to include the lengthy and illuminating footnotes.

These sections will, I believe, serve to clarify the historical background for the present discussion of justification and provide the context for an understanding of the work I have been trying to do.

Sincerely,


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Associate Professor
of Systematic Theology

NS:mlk

BAVINCK ON FAITH AND JUSTIFICATION

H. Bavinck, Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, Vol. IV (4th ed.; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1930), pp. 182-186, 198-207.

471. With respect to the doctrine of justification there is no difference between Lutheran and Reformed theology as far as the essence is concerned; however, the doctrine does occupy a different place and does receive a different emphasis in the latter. This manifests itself first of all in that Luther pushed predestination steadily into the background, while Calvin placed it increasingly in the center and viewed justification also from that perspective. "The Lord, when He calls, justifies, and glorifies, does nothing other than to declare his election;" it is the elect who are justified. For that reason, it is entirely correct to say that Calvin never weakens either the objective atonement of Christ or the benefit of justification; but nevertheless, his perspective results in the righteousness of Christ being presented to us much more as a gift bestowed by God than as something which we accept through faith. The objective gift precedes the subjective acceptance. In the second place, Calvin maintains "justification without merits" not only because of the motivation derived from Christ's work of satisfaction and the comfort extended to the faithful, but also no less strongly because of the "glory of God." Calvin feels himself as if in the presence of God and placed before his judgment throne; and looking up at the majesty and holiness of God, he does not dare, with reference to insignificant, sinful man, speak of works, merits, and self-glory any longer. On the contrary, for such a creature, humility and trusting in God's mercy are the only proper thing; to that end are the elect justified, that they should glory in him and not in something else. In the third place, Calvin distinguishes sharply, especially over against Osiander, between justification and sanctification, because the first is a purely forensic act; yet he does not separate them for a moment and continually maintains them in closest connection. Surely Christ cannot be divided any more than light and heat in the sun, though they perform functions distinct from one another. Christ justifies no one whom He does not also at the same time sanctify. Therefore we are not justified "by works," but neither are we justified "without works." Indeed, we do not behold Christ from a distance in order that his righteousness might be imputed to us, "but because we have been clothed with him and have been ingrafted into his body, He deigns to make us one with himself; therefore we glory in the fact that we have communion in righteousness with him." Thus justification in Calvin retained its place and value, yet it did not become the one and only element in the order of redemption. It came to stand between election and the gift of Christ on the one hand, and sanctification and glorification on the other; it was "a kind of transition from eternal predestination to future glory."

But even though Calvin proved his independence as well in the doctrine of justification, he did not resolve the problems which arise with this article of the faith. In particular in this the case with

respect to the relation in which justification stands to election and atonement on the one hand, and to sanctification and glorification on the other. When justification occupies a place between these pairs, then there is always a tendency to connect it more with either the first or the second pair of benefits; and to the degree that this happens, to the same degree the doctrine itself acquires a different meaning. If the purpose is to maintain the objective forensic character of justification, then it is natural to establish a close connection with election and atonement; it then becomes an imputation of the righteousness of Christ, which has taken place long before, in the gospel, in the resurrection of Christ, or even from eternity, and which is only much later accepted by the subject in faith. Such faith is then nothing but a vessel, an instrument, a "merely passive something," so that it becomes difficult to derive from it the new life of sanctification. On the other hand, when one takes into account more the practical rather than speculative interests, it follows as a matter of course that one seeks to establish a close connection between justification and faith. Justification coincides then with the benefit of the forgiveness of sins which is received and enjoyed in faith, and faith becomes a communion with Christ. Faith causes Christ to indwell us through his Spirit; it assures us of the "divine good-will toward us" and pours out new life and new powers into our hearts.

With Calvin we still find both representations united with one another, but they are soon separated in Reformed theology and each developed in a one-sided direction. Under the influence of Socinianism and Remonstrantism, Cartesianism and Amyraldianism, there developed the neonomian representation of the order of redemption which made forgiveness of sins and eternal life dependent on faith and obedience which man had to perform in accordance with the new law of the gospel. Parallel with this development, Pietism and Methodism arose which, with all their differences, also shifted the emphasis to the subject, and which either demanded a long experience or a sudden conversion as a condition for obtaining salvation. As a reaction against this came the development of anti-neonomianism, which had justification precede faith, and antinomianism which reduced justification to God's eternal love and which dissolved sin and atonement into merely inadequate conceptions from which man had to liberate himself through the better insight of faith.

Reformed theologians usually tried to avoid both extremes, and for that purpose soon made use of the distinction between "active" and "passive justification." This distinction is not found in the Reformers; as a rule they speak of justification in a "concrete sense." They do not treat of a justification from eternity, or of justification in the resurrection of Christ, or in the gospel, or before or after faith, but combine everything in a single concept. Consequently they offer support in some of their statements to those who place justification before faith; but they can be presented with no less ground as proponents of the view that justification always takes place by and as a result of faith. But when nomism and antinomianism arose, the obligation was felt to analyse the conception, and the distinction was made between an active and a passive justification in order to avoid both errors. On the one hand nomism, which only recognized the benefit of forgiveness through faith, experience, or the conversion of man was rejected; but on the other

hand, one was on guard against antinomianism and rejected virtually unanimously the doctrine of eternal justification. Consequently, it was generally accepted, that, if there was any ground at all to speak of justification in the decree of God, in the resurrection of Christ, or in the gospel, the active justification took place first in the "internal call" prior to and unto faith; but that the proclamation thereof, the intimation or insinuation in the consciousness, or in other words, the passive justification, occurred only through and by faith. Efforts were made to keep both elements as close together as possible, while accepting only a logical and not a temporal distinction. However, even then, there were those who objected to this distinction inasmuch as the gospel mentions no names and does not say to anyone, personally: Your sins have been forgiven. Therefore it is not proper for any man to take as his starting point the belief that his sins have been forgiven.

From a Reformed viewpoint there would appear to be even less ground for such boldness since the atonement of Christ is particular rather than universal. The preacher of the gospel can assure no one that his sins have been forgiven since he does not know who the elect are; and the man who hears the gospel is neither able nor permitted to believe this, inasmuch as he cannot be aware of his election prior to and without faith. As a result, the conclusion appeared rather obvious that the boldness to know one's sins to have been forgiven and to have assurance of eternal salvation only came about after one has been burdened with a deep sense of guilt, has fled unto Jesus in faith, has surrendered to him and finally, slowly, and through self-examination has become convinced of the reality of his faith as taking refuge in Christ. In other words, man must first believe, that is, he must become active with Christ in order thereafter to be justified by God. But in this manner the ground of justification shifted once again from God to man, from the righteousness of Christ to saving faith; from the gospel to the law. As was the case in Lutheran theology, there was no unanimity in Reformed theology. Soon after the Reformation two schools of thought developed which have existed ever since and which to this day make themselves felt in doctrine and life.

475. If, then, not faith in its quality and activity, but the imputed righteousness of Christ is the ground of our justification, the question arises with all the more emphasis: What is then the place of faith in this benefit? There is no doubt that the Scriptures connect faith most intimately with justification: faith is imputed for righteousness, Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3, Gal. 3:6; the righteous man lives by faith, Hab. 2:4, Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11; the righteousness of God is revealed through faith, Rom. 3:22; and we are justified through faith, Rom. 3:26, 5:1, 10:4, 10, and Gal. 2:16, where it even says: we have believed in Jesus Christ, in order that we should be justified; Gal. 3:6-18, 22-24, compare Acts 10:43, 13:39, Hebr. 10:38, etc. And what is always meant here is saving faith, which has as its object the person of Jesus Christ with his benefits, whether it be as in the days of the Old Testament where He was promised as seed to Abraham, Gal. 3:16, or as in the fullness of time, when He appeared in the flesh, died, and rose again, Rom.

8:34. With this question, as to the place of faith in justification, the other question is therefore immediately and most intimately connected, namely, whether justification takes place in eternity or in time, and if the latter, whether it takes place in the death or resurrection of Christ, in the preaching of the gospel, prior to, or at the same time as, or after faith.

The first position was asserted by the real antinomians, such as Pontiaan van Hattem and his followers. According to them, justification was nothing else than the love of God which is not concerned about the sins of man, which does not require atonement in Christ, and which only needs to be proclaimed in order to enable man to believe. Faith is nothing but a renouncing of the error that God is angry and a realization that God is eternal love. This pantheistic school of thought should be distinguished sharply from the views of the so-called antineonomians who in England, Scotland, and in the Netherlands opposed the change of the gospel into a new law as well as the idea that faith was a co-operating factor in our justification, and who from this perspective sometimes came to confess an eternal justification. In addition to differences in many other doctrines (such as election, the person and work of Jesus Christ), there is this difference between these schools of thought in the doctrine of justification: The first group held eternal justification as being everything and left no place for a justification in time; it was complete in itself, had its total being in eternity needing only to be proclaimed in time. However, the second group saw in eternal justification only the beginning, the principle, and the ground of justification as it occurred in time; they were moved to acknowledge it only by their desire to keep the gospel of grace pure and to protect it against any blending with the law; therefore they only granted the terminology a subordinate place.

Thus presented, this doctrine of eternal justification contains a valuable truth which cannot and may not be denied by anyone who is Reformed. Election is from eternity. The "counsel of redemption" which includes the substitution of the Mediator for his people is from eternity. Everything that happens in time, specifically also the work of redemption, is constantly in Scripture referred back to God's decree from eternity. Justification could not take place in time were it not anchored in eternity. However, that is no reason to recommend speaking of eternal justification or of a justification from eternity. The reason is that Scripture nowhere sets an example for us in this. Reformed theologians were virtually unanimous in their opposition to it, and distinguished between the eternal decree of justification and the execution thereof in time. If one says that justification as "an act immanent in God" must of necessity be eternal, then it should be remembered that taken in that sense everything, including creation, incarnation, atonement, calling, regeneration, is eternal. Whoever would therefore speak of an eternal creation would give cause for great misunderstanding. Besides, the proponents of this view back off themselves, when, out of the fear of antinomianism, they assert strongly that eternal justification is not the only, full, and complete justification, but that it has a tendency and purpose to realise itself outwardly through the providence of God, so that therefore the elect are not in fact, that is, actually, jus-

tified from eternity, but only in his plan and counsel. This amounts really to the usual distinction between the decree and its execution. The counsel of God and all decrees contained therein as a unit are without doubt eternal "immanent acts", but the external works of God, creation, preservation, governing, redemption, justification, etc., are in the nature of the case "transient acts." As works they do not belong to the plan of God's ordering but to the execution of it.

In addition, there is frequent mention of a justification in the death or resurrection of Christ. For this view the Scriptures offer a firmer ground when they witness in 2 Cor. 5:19 that God reconciled the world to himself in Christ, not imputing to them their sin, and in Romans 4:25, that Christ died because of our sins and was raised for our justification. This latter expression can be understood this way, that Christ was raised because we have been justified in and through him, in the same way that He died because we were sinners and He was made sin in our place. But it also permits the view that Christ was raised because, being reconciled through his death, we also had to be justified. Dia with the accusative is then not intended retrospectively but prospectively. This interpretation deserves preference in view of Paul's doctrine of the resurrection of Christ. Christ did not rise because we are justified through his death; but rather, Christ had to rise and has risen because He fully atoned through his suffering and death for our sins; that is, He had completed the task which his Father had given him. Thus for Christ the resurrection was the divine approval of his completed work, the proof that He was the son of God, Rom. 1:4, that our sins are atoned for by him, I Cor. 15:17, and that we shall be raised spiritually and physically in and through him, Rom. 6:7-10, 8:11, I Cor. 15:20-23, 2 Cor. 4:14, Col. 1:18.

Yet there exists according to 2 Cor. 5:19 an intimate connection between the atonement in Christ and the non-imputation of the world's sin which has always been recognized in Reformed theology. Even J. van den Honert, who was a fierce opponent of Comrie, acknowledged freely that the justification of the elect had taken place at the resurrection of Christ, long before they were born, and this by virtue of the legal representation by their sponsor and covenantal head Jesus Christ. From his side, Comrie admitted that the elect are not fully, "actually," and as persons, justified in the resurrection of Christ, but only "virtually." In essence there is no difference. In the same way that the entire human race objectively fell and died in Adam when he transgressed the commandment of God, so also the entire body of Christ's congregation objectively died with him, rose, and was reconciled and justified in his death and resurrection. Therefore the gospel is not: God will be reconciled if you, O man, believe, repent, and fulfill his commandments; but rather, because God was reconciling the world unto himself in Christ, He does not impute their sins to them and He charges the apostles with the ministry and the word of reconciliation. The content of this word is: God has been reconciled; He has forgiven sins; believe this gospel, O man; participate in this reconciliation, renounce your enmity, be reconciled unto God. To this extent justification lies objectively before us in the gospel of Christ as this has been proclaimed since paradise in ever clearer language. Forgiveness of sins does not come into being through

faith and is not obtained through our activities but lies entirely in Christ; it precedes faith and is simply accepted by faith. As it is stated in the Apostles' Creed: I believe in the forgiveness of sins.

In order to maintain this complete righteousness of Christ and the full riches of the gospel, Reformed theologians distinguished in "actual justification" between active and passive justification. Justification was viewed to have taken place in principle in the decree of God, and virtually in the resurrection of Christ; objectively it was viewed as contained in the gospel and only in the last judgment would it receive its full scope and significance; at all those points active justification retained its own important place. The application of salvation through the Holy Spirit is not to be made in any way into an acquisition of salvation because the Holy Spirit takes everything from Christ; yet the application is as essential in her sphere and of equally great importance as the acquisition. Therefore Scripture makes entry into the Kingdom of God dependent on being born again, faith, and repentance. And in this matter acquisition and application relate so closely to one another that the former can neither be conceived of nor exist without the latter, and conversely, the latter cannot be conceived of nor exist without the former. Acquisition leads of necessity to application. Through his suffering and death Christ also obtained the application of all his benefits, including the forgiveness of sins, to his people personally and individually. Christ's purpose as Savior is not only objective atonement, but also the subjective redemption of his people from their sins. This does not come into existence through an objective justification in the decree of God or in the resurrection of Christ, but only comes to pass when man both in his being and consciousness is liberated from sin and is thus regenerated and justified. This is the justification of which Scripture speaks continually and it is of this justification that Comrie acknowledges that it is the "communication and actual participation."

However, under the influence of Remonstrantism and Salmurian theology, and of Pietism and Rationalism, the understanding of this actual justification gradually became that man had to believe and repent first, that thereafter God in heaven, in "the court of heaven," sitting in judgment, acquitted the believer because of his faith in Christ, because of his acts of faith or good works, whereupon He had the verdict announced on earth, in "the court of earth," through his Spirit in the heart of the believers. To avoid this nomism, the distinction between active and passive justification served a purpose. The former took place already in a certain sense in the proclamation of the gospel, in the external calling, but especially in the internal calling when God through his word and Spirit called the sinner efficaciously, convincing him of sin, driving him to Christ and causing him to find forgiveness and life with Him. In the logical sequence this active justification then precedes faith and is, as it were, the efficacious preaching through the Spirit of God that sins have been forgiven, so that man is persuaded in the innermost part of his soul, accepts the word of God in faith, and dares to accept and is able to accept Christ with all his benefits. And when that man first goes out to Christ so to speak ("direct act" of faith) and thereafter returns to himself with a "reflexive act of faith" and acknowledges thankfully as a child, that

his sins have also been forgiven, then the passive justification takes place therein, whereby God acquits man also in his conscience, and man through the Spirit testifies with his own spirit that he is his child and an heir to eternal life.

Against this distinction the objection is made from the nomistic point of view that then the active justification is not a justification by and through faith, as is expressed continually in Scripture, but unto faith, and also that this faith totally changes in character under this representation, since it is then no longer an activity with respect to the person of Christ but only an understanding acceptance of the sentence that the sins have been forgiven. However, these objections are easily countered. One should, namely, take into account, that the distinction mentioned has a logical but no temporal significance. There is here no "priority of order," but a "simultaneity of time." Concretely they coincide and are always coupled with each other. The active justification carries, so to speak, the tendency in itself to communicate itself in faith and to be accepted by faith. What good would a benefit be to us, if it did not come into our possession? What good would acquittal be to a prisoner, if it were not communicated to him and the door of the prison unlocked? And what good would justification in the decree of God, in the resurrection of Christ, in the gospel be to us, if God himself did not make us a participant in the internal call through faith? In addition, as the internal call directly and immediately, without a time lapse, results in regeneration with "habitual faith," so also does this faith include from the very beginning of its existence, according to its character and being, the assurance, that is, the consciousness, that not only to others but to me also forgiveness of sins has been granted. This assurance does not need to be added through a special revelation, as asserted by Rome, if at least it is not forever lacking, but it is inherent in saving faith from the very beginning and develops from it organically. Thus active and passive justification cannot be separated for a moment and are contained in one concept in the Scriptures, in the writings of the Reformers, and in practical instruction.

When now the Scriptures say of this justification in "a concrete sense" that it takes place by and through faith, then it does not intend to say that it is produced and wrought through that faith, since Jesus Christ is all our righteousness and all benefits of the covenant of grace are the fruits of his labor and of his labor alone; they are entirely contained in his person and are not in any need of any addition on our part. The prepositions by and through therefore signify only, that Christ with all his benefits becomes our personal possession only by faith. The terminology, that active justification takes place unto and passive justification by and through faith, may have some value against nomism; but the Scriptural language is entirely adequate, provided it is understood Scripturally. Justification in a "concrete sense" is entirely justification by and through faith because, contained objectively in Christ, it is only accepted, appropriated, and enjoyed personally by means of faith. But that faith which thus accepts Christ with all his benefits, is not a dead, but a living faith; it is not a mere intellectual agreement with the sentence that God has forgiven sins, but it appropriates for itself what is held out and offered in the word by the call, external and internal, so also what it says about our guilt and depravity,

about the person and work of Christ, about the activity of the Holy Spirit. In one word, saving faith directs our eyes and heart from the very beginning away from ourselves and unto God's mercy in Christ.

The logical distinction between active and passive justification offers therefore various advantages which are neither to be despised from the perspective of the confession nor from that of experience. In the first place, it enables us to maintain, over against all nomism, the rich and joyous content of the gospel, that God is gracious and great in mercy, and that He has established a perfect righteousness in Christ in which we can rest both in life and death, and which is in no need whatsoever of supplement or addition on our part. The forgiveness of all our sins is granted to us as an unmerited gift; God himself establishes, voluntarily, out of undeserved mercy, a relation with us, accepts us through Christ into his fellowship, our transgressions notwithstanding, and assures us of his eternal and unchangeable favor. He establishes out of sheer mercy his covenant with us, in order that we should walk thereafter according to the demand of that covenant; religion becomes the foundation of morality. Secondly, it explains the basis on which the believer derives the right and the boldness to appropriate for himself this benefit. From the Romanist viewpoint, objection is raised against "special faith" as understood by the Reformation in that the gospel does not name anyone by name and that therefore anyone who believed "that his sins had been forgiven" could not derive this faith from the gospel but only from himself. And indeed many have in later years, when the confessional power of the Reformation weakened, entered the way of self-examination, in order to be assured of the sincerity of their faith and their salvation. Thus was the focus shifted from the promise of God to the experience of the pious. But if we understand the meaning of active justification properly, the issue appears in a different light for us. It is not we who approach the judgment of God, after self-examination, with the sincerity of our faith, in order to receive there the forgiveness of our sins; God does not sit in judgment by himself in heaven to hear the parties and to pronounce sentence, a representation which is according to Comrie, too anthropomorphic and unworthy of God. But He himself comes to us in the gospel, with the free offer of mercy and gives the right to anyone to accept forgiveness of sins with a believing heart; and this special appropriation is not added from the outside to the universal offer as a foreign element, but is included therein and is only an individual application thereof. "The general promise of the gospel includes the special." So then does the foundation of faith lie outside ourselves in the promise of God; whoever builds thereupon shall not be ashamed.

Thirdly, the distinction mentioned makes it possible for us to conceive of faith at the same time as a receptive organ and as an active power. If justification in every respect comes about after faith, faith becomes a condition, an activity, which must be performed by man beforehand, and it cannot be purely receptive. But if the righteousness, on the ground of which we are justified, lies wholly outside of us in Christ Jesus, then it can obviously only become ours through our childlike acceptance of it. "Remission of sins is the thing promised on account of Christ. Therefore it cannot be accepted except by faith alone, for a

promise cannot be accepted except by faith alone." Faith is therefore not a "material cause" or a "formal cause," it is not even a condition or instrument of justification, for it stands in relation to justification not as, for example, the eye to seeing or the ear to hearing; it is not a condition, upon which, nor an instrument or organ, through which we receive this benefit, but it is the acceptance itself of Christ and all his benefits, as He offers himself to us through word and Spirit, and it includes therefore also the consciousness, that He is my Lord and I am his possession. Faith is therefore not an instrument in the proper sense, of which man makes use in order to accept Christ, but it is a sure knowledge and a solid confidence which the Holy Spirit works in the heart and through which He persuades and assures man that he, notwithstanding all his sins, has part in Christ and in all his benefits.

But if this faith is saving faith, then it cannot be "historical knowledge" or a "bare assent;" it is at bottom a living and active faith, and it does not stand opposed to all work in every respect. It forms a contrast with the works of the law in a double sense, namely therein, that these works can be neither the "material cause" nor the "instrumental cause" of justification. It also stands opposed to the works of faith (infused righteousness, obedience, love) the moment these are to any degree viewed as the ground of justification, as forming as a whole or in part that righteousness on the ground of which God justifies us; for that is Christ and Christ alone; faith itself is not the ground of justification and thus also neither are the good works which come forth from it. But faith does not stand opposed to work, if one were to mean by that, that only a dead, inactive faith can justify us. For the quarrel between Rome and the Reformation did not have to do with whether we are justified by an active or inactive faith, or by a living or a dead faith. But the question was, just as it was for Paul, whether faith with its works, or whether faith apart from its works, justifies us before God and in our consciences. And further, faith does not stand opposed to the works of faith, in so far as these, as the fruit of faith are used by the Holy Spirit as a means to assure the believer of the sincerity of his faith and thus of his salvation. In this sense faith itself is a work, John 6:29, the best work and the principle of all good works. Therefore the Reformed also said that it is indeed "faith alone which justifies, but however, faith which justifies is not alone," and they spoke in addition to the "justification of the sinner" also of a "justification of the righteous." In this sense also Paul and James are not in contradiction to each other. It is indeed not right to say that Paul speaks only of the "justification of the sinner" and James of the "justification of the just." Rather, both deny that the ground of justification lies in the works of the law, and both recognize that faith, living faith, faith that includes and brings forth good works is the means by which the Holy Spirit assures us of our righteousness in Christ. In this there is only this difference, that Paul contends against dead works and James declaims against dead faith. The faith that justifies is the assurance wrought in our hearts by the Holy Spirit of our righteousness in Christ. And therefore, not the more passive, but the more lively and the more powerful it is, so much the more does it justify us. Faith works together with works and is perfected by works, James 2:22.