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Perspective

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Perspective is a monthly journal with articles and book reviews. It is part of the “equipping” ministry of Mount Vernon Baptist Church, where we exist to KNOW, EQUIP, and SEND one another for the worship and glory of God.

SERMON SCHEDULE

April 6

Dream Weaver

Song of Songs 1:1–2:17

April 13

Answering to an Omnipotent God

Job 40:1–5

Associate Pastor: Bryan Pillsbury

April 20

The Easter Sermon

Luke 24:1–12

April 27

Let’s Get Married

Song of Songs 6:4–8:15

For a full list of past sermons,
visit www.mvbchurch.org.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTICLE

Salvation by Faith Alone and Pastoral Confidence 1

An article discussion the doctrine of salvation by faith alone.

by Aaron Menikoff

BOOK REVIEW

Spurgeon: A New Biography by Arnold Dallimore 6

A book review on the life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

reviewed by Brad Thayer

Knowing & Being Known 8

Newest Members

FIGHTER VERSE

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 5:13–14 (ESV)

Salvation by Faith Alone and Pastoral Confidence

Aaron Menikoff

This article was first given as an address to Atlanta area pastors at the Feed My Sheep Conference held at MVBC on March 10, 2014. Although the article focuses on pastoral confidence, it has implications for all Christians. If we are honest, we all struggle with confidence in some way. God's answer to our struggles is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. As you read, I pray your understanding of this precious truth will deepen and your confidence in God will grow.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I had lunch with a man, about my age, who had been attending Mount Vernon for a number of months. I will never forget how the conversation went. He told me that he had made a million dollars before the age of thirty. In his short life he had great, visible success. But as he sat under the preaching here, he didn't walk away feeling good about himself. In fact, he walked away feeling like he wasn't good enough. Like the rich young ruler he came into contact with a holy God, and he wasn't sure he was up to snuff. For the first time in his life, he was asking the right question. Not, "How much money can I make?" but "Am I worthy?"

This young businessman needed to understand that none of us is worthy. We all fall short of the glory of God. He needed to know, more than anything else, that we are justified by faith alone.

There is, in my humble opinion, no biblical doctrine that is sweeter, no truth that provides me more comfort, no teaching that is more central to my ministry than the doctrine of justification by faith alone. It is, as Martin Luther put it, "the article of the standing or falling of the church." It gets to the heart of the problem facing every human being: How can a miserable sinner stand in the presence of a holy God?

In this article, I have two goals. First, I want to define the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Second, I want to apply the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Defining Justification by Faith Alone

To be justified means to be freed from the guilt of sin, counted holy in the sight of God, and all this through faith in the work of Christ, and not on the basis of any inherent goodness in us.

The Westminster Larger Catechism answers the question, "What is justification?" this way:

Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

These definitions are rooted in a number of biblical passages: Romans 1:16–17; Romans 3:21–5:21; Ephesians 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:30–31; and Galatians 5:6, to name just a few. However, if we want one paragraph that screams justification by faith alone, it's Romans 3:21–26:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forth as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Many insist that this is the most important paragraph ever written. It rises like a phoenix out of the ashes of Romans 3:20: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight." In the next six verses Paul argues it is not by "works" that we are declared righteous, but through faith in Jesus Christ alone. We stand under God's judgment, his wrath. We deserve his condemnation. We

naturally think we can get out from under his verdict of death and judgment by virtue of our good heart or clean living. Paul knew no hope could be found in the law. He tried to trust in his good deeds for redemption, and yet he discovered he could not lead himself out of the punishment he so richly deserved.

For nearly twenty years I have been walking non-Christians and young Christians through a simple study based on the gospel of Mark called *Christianity Explained*. The fourth lesson is my favorite because it is so clarifying. I begin by asking the famous D. James Kennedy question, “If you were to stand before God tonight, and he were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ how would you respond?” I have stopped being amazed how many people don’t know the biblical answer. There is only one right answer: We deserve hell, but because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the doors of heaven have been opened.

We are surrounded by people convinced that God will welcome them because they aren’t as bad as their neighbor, but they have no sense of God’s righteousness, the just judgment that we deserve, and our need for propitiation, that is, our need for God’s wrath to be removed from us. They live with minds fixated on their visible problems, unaware of the fact that their biggest problem is invisible—at least for now. Their biggest problem is that they are standing under God’s wrath.

Let me unpack the definition of justification by faith alone.

First, to be justified means to be freed from the guilt of sin.

The criminal has been cleared. The Judge has pardoned all his sins (Romans 4:7). And, since his guilt has been fully removed, God’s wrath has been propitiated, taken away, or assuaged.

A few months ago, a PCUSA hymnal committee rejected inclusion of the popular Getty hymn, “In Christ Alone.” The song proclaims, “Till on that cross as Jesus died/The wrath of God was satisfied.” They didn’t like the thought that God’s wrath needs to be satisfied. But that is exactly what Romans 3:21–26 and other passages teach. To be justified is to be freed from the guilt of sin, and this is possible only if God’s wrath is propitiated—removed from sinners like us so that we can be freed from the guilt of sin. But that’s not all.

Second, to be justified means to be counted holy in the sight of God.

All the benefits that that the sinless Son of God deserves, now belong to the Christian. Jonathan Edwards put it this way, “A believer’s justification implies...an admittance to a title to that glory which is the reward of righteousness.” Every Christian has received a “title to glory.” This title is Christ’s reward, but it has been given to us. The inheritance that Jesus deserved because of his divine sonship, is an inheritance that we receive.

In Hebrews in 9:15 we read that those who are called “receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed.” This eternal inheritance is what Edwards’s called the “title to glory.” It is the title that Jesus deserves for living a spotless life and dying a gruesome death—it is a title that only he deserves. It is his reward, but it is a reward given to true believers.

How could the believer get Christ’s “title to glory,” Christ’s inheritance? Part of being justified is having the righteousness of Christ imputed or ascribed to the believer. This is the meaning of Romans 5:19: “For by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” God imputes or credits to us the sinlessness of Christ’s whole life—his obedience to the law as he lived and his obedience to the Lord as he died. In that sense, his “obedience” is his living the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have died. Because of the imputation of Christ’s obedience, the believer is counted holy in God’s sight.

So then, justification has two sides to it: first, being freed from guilt and, second, being counted holy.

We still need to ask, “How does this happen?” The answer is “by,” or even better, “through” faith.

It is *through* faith that we are united to Christ such that his righteousness is credited to our account. All of Christ’s work on our behalf is, according to Paul in Romans 3:25, “to be received by faith.”

At this point we have to be careful. It’s not our faith that saves us. When we say we are justified by faith alone we are not saying that our faith is the reason we are saved. God didn’t look down at us, see a spark of goodness manifested by our faith. He didn’t see a speck of integrity and choose, in response, to reward us with eternal life.

This is what a lot of people think. Let me illustrate. J.R.R. Tolkien’s story, *The Lord of the Rings*, centers on a ring with the power to corrupt. It is constantly wooing people to take it and use its power for evil. Some

characters give in, others don't. So for example, the good wizard Gandalf, when given the opportunity to have the ring, won't even touch it. He resists temptation. Then there is king Aragorn. When Frodo offers him the ring, Aragorn refuses, folding Frodo's fingers around the ring to keep it away. Then there is the elf Galadriel. She could have taken it too, but she also resists. But then there's Gollum. From the moment he sets eyes on the ring, he wants it, and he will kill to have it back.

Whom do you relate to in this cast of characters? Gandalf, Aragorn, Galadriel? Whatever your answer, I know the truth—we are all Gollum. Left to ourselves, we would grab that ring in a second. And it is important you know that when you consider justification by faith alone. *Faith is not the strength to resist the ring but the admission that without God's help you will steal it. Faith is not the firm exercise of your goodness but the humble confession of your need.*

The ground or reason for our salvation is the work of Christ. It is God who justifies, not our faith! It is God who saves, not our faith! It is God who sanctifies! Not our faith.

All this to say that faith is not a work. I'm prone to stumble at this point. In some ways faith "seems" like a work, something I do.

So, how is it that faith is not a work? We need the answer settled in our minds.

Jonathan Edwards gave the best illustration I have read for this idea in an essay on justification. He wanted his readers to understand that salvation is not a reward for faith. He points us to marriage: Suppose a man offers himself to a woman in marriage. This offer of marriage is not a reward for the woman's decision to accept his hand. By offering himself to the woman, he is not rewarding her for receiving him. And by receiving him, she is not being rewarded by him. No. It is *by* receiving him that the woman is united to the man. And so it is with faith—our receiving of Christ. Union with Christ is not a reward for our faith; our faith is simply the instrument, the tool that God uses to unite us to his Son, Jesus Christ.¹

J. Gresham Machen in his book, *What is Faith?*, answered the question this way:

Faith means not doing something but receiving something; it means not the earning of a reward but

the acceptance of a gift. A man can never be said to obtain a thing for himself if he obtains it by faith; indeed to say that he obtains it by faith is only another way of saying that he does not obtain it for himself but permits another to obtain it for him. Faith, in other words, is not active but passive; and to say that we are saved by faith is to say that we do not save ourselves but are saved only by the one in whom our faith is reposed; the faith of man presupposes the sovereign grace of God.²

Faith is an empty hand ready to receive the sovereign grace of God. The moment you consider faith a work-that-you-do, instead of simply the instrument God uses to unite you to Christ, is the moment you take credit for your salvation and, in so doing, rob God of his glory.

That leads us to the end of our definition. To be justified means to be freed from the guilt of sin, counted holy in the sight of God, and all this through faith in the work of Christ, *and not on the basis of any inherent goodness in us*. We are all Gollum. There is nothing in us to warrant God's favor, nothing we have done to deserve God's attention, nothing we have done to be able to say, "I am worthy." The fact of the matter is we are not worthy. But justification by faith alone teaches us that we can have the worthiness of another—Jesus Christ. We can enjoy the benefits of eternal life because of his obedience: his perfect life and atoning death.

Applying Justification by Faith Alone

How do you begin to apply a truth like this? It is like answering the question, "Why is light or water important?" It simply changes everything. I want to walk through eight application points. I am listing several because some may resonate with you more than others. I have made each one personal to me because I have wrestled with everything I am about to say. Here is the question: how does the doctrine of justification by faith alone affect my ministry as a Christian and as a pastor?

1. *It frees me to love others.*

Justification is a change in status. The believer is *declared* righteous. The moment that declaration is made and the Spirit enters your heart, you are now in the process of being sanctified. You are now, for the first time in your life, free to truly love other people. You no longer have to

¹ Jonathan Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1 (Banner, 1974), 640.

² J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Banner, 1937), 195.

love them for what they can give you—you can love them for who they are.

In pastoral ministry it is tempting to value the people in your church for the tasks they can accomplish—the task may be filling a seat, watching kids, or teaching adults. You are tempted to love them on the basis of the work they can do for you.

But if you have been justified by faith alone, you know what it is like to be loved, not on the basis of anything you have done, but on the basis of what Christ did. This is why Paul wrote in Galatians 5:6: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” The faith through which we are justified leads to a genuine, long-lasting love for others.

2. It pushes me to holiness.

It won't do to separate faith and repentance. True saving faith assumes genuine repentance. If you have truly been justified by faith alone you will pursue holiness.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking holiness will naturally happen if you just think long enough about justification. Read the New Testament carefully and notice how often Paul charges Christians who have been justified to pursue sanctification (e.g., 1 Timothy 6:11). A proper understanding of justification pushes us to preach the need for sanctification.

3. It furnishes me with peace.

I know that I am not to be anxious because God clothes the flowers. I can rest in the fact that God will take care of me. But there is more. I have peace not only because God will take care of me but because God *did* take care of me.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). Peace with God does not come simply from knowing that God is sovereign, but from knowing that a sovereign God took care of our biggest problem—our sin.

By all means, rest in the future. God will take care of you. But remember that this good future is rooted in the historical reality that God took you out of the kingdom of darkness and planted you in the kingdom of his beloved Son. Justification by faith alone reminds me that God took care of me. Dwelling on this truth furnishes me with peace.

4. It frames my preaching.

There is a preaching out there today that leads one to believe that he is okay *if or because* he gives faithfully, attends regularly, takes his son camping, dates his wife, and keeps his eyes pure. All this is hugely important, but preaching that only shines a spotlight on what you must do is dangerous.

A few years ago, I heard a sermon that in many ways was faithful to the text. The theme of the message was mercy, and it was all about the importance of being merciful. But not once did the preacher draw my attention to the mercy of Christ. Not once did he explain that we were all unmerciful and deserving of judgment but, praise be to God, who shows boundless mercy to all, he has provided a way of escape for the unmerciful! There was enough gospel to damn in that message, but not enough to save.

That is why I say justification by faith alone frames my preaching. I don't want my preaching to leave people confident in their ability. I want to leave them confident in Christ's sufficiency. To proclaim Christ is to preach justification by faith alone.

5. It points me outside myself.

Many of us tend toward introspection—naval gazing is the more unflattering term for this phenomenon. We spend a great deal of time thinking about how we are doing, how we are thought of by others, how we are failing, how we are succeeding, and so forth.

A certain amount of introspection is really important. I am thinking about passages like 2 Corinthians 13:5: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.” To examine yourself you have to look at your life, the spiritual fruit you are or are not producing, your motives, and your track record. That is good and valuable.

But it can be overdone, can't it? If you spend the majority of your time looking inward, your spiritual vision will inevitably get blurry. When Martin Luther was a young man, he looked so hard at himself, and saw his sin so clearly, that he became convinced he could never be righteous in God's sight. He could confess every day, but he knew his heart so well that his sin kept him up at night. Finally, after the study of passages like Romans 1:17 and 3:21-26, Luther came to see that he needed to look outside himself, to what he called an “alien righteousness”—a righteousness foreign to himself. He finally took his eyes off of himself and put them on the cross.

That is where our eyes need to be: off of ourselves and on our Savior.

6. *It promotes humility.*

Atlanta has a fair number of startup companies. Imagine a great, cutting-edge company is being formed. Some investors are looking to build a team. They send out some invites and somehow one crosses your desk and you go the meeting. The capitalist goes around the room. He wants to know what you bring to the table.

“So, John, what do you have to offer?”

“Well, I’m an expert coder and I sold my first program at age 14. I’m currently dually enrolled at GA Tech and Emory.”

Next, he turns to Sarah. “Sarah, what about you?”

“My father made his fortune in peanuts. I’ve got about 2.5 million dollars to invest. If you think this company could produce a good return, I’d like to get in on the ground floor.”

“That’s great. Okay, Aaron, your turn?”

“Ummm, well . . . I’ve got nothing, actually. I really shouldn’t be here. I’m broke and I don’t know a USB from a GPS.”

John and Sally had something to bring to the table of that company. We have nothing to bring to the table of our salvation—nothing but our sin. That reality calls for a good bit of humility for all of us, but especially those of us who are pastors.

I get nervous when I see pastors drawing attention to themselves; putting their names on signs outside their buildings or tooling to get on the bestseller list. I also get nervous when I see pastors pride as humility—“Look at me, I’m so humble.”

I want us to be ambitious for the gospel, doing everything and anything we can to serve our churches and our communities. But at the end of the day, justification by faith alone should teach us to live lives marked by evident humility.

7. *It drives me to worship.*

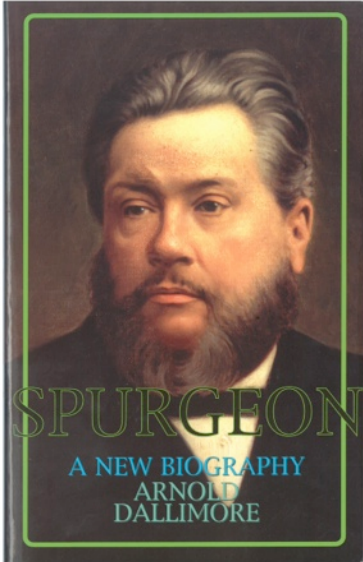
In Revelation chapter 5, the apostle John is given a vision of God, seated on his throne with a scroll in his right hand. In verse 5 we are told that there was “no one in

heaven or on earth or under the earth” able to open the scroll or look into it. Why? Because no one had the inherent righteousness. We were all Gollum, our righteousness is not our own, it is extra nos—outside of us.

But then, John sees the One who is worthy. And everyone cries out: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And the elders fell down before this Lamb and they worshipped.

Conclusion

Justification by faith alone is possible because the Lamb alone is just. He is holy, righteous, and worthy. The more I think about this doctrine, the more I am drawn to Christ who is righteous and, in the greatest mystery of all, made it possible for me to be counted righteous, too.



Book Review

Spurgeon: A New Biography

By Arnold Dallimore
Reviewed by Brad Thayer

IMAGINE YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE for the spiritual care and direction of a church with approximately 6,000 members. Add to it the oversight of a pastor's college, an orphanage, a housing

complex for widows, a monthly magazine, and a Bible and tract distribution society. As time permits, you are an author and regularly speak across the country. Lastly, you have managerial oversight of a church's building, schedule, and resources that is open seven days a week from 7:00 am – 11:00 pm hosting numerous ministries and meetings. Oh! Take into consideration that you and your spouse are of ill health and bed-ridden a quarter of the time.

Needless to say, this is a calling to an entire enterprise of Christian ministry. Furthermore, an individual does not set out to acquire this calling, but it is placed upon them by God and comes upon only a few uniquely gifted individuals once a century. Such was the calling placed upon the 19th century British Baptist pastor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834 – 1892). And Arnold Dallimore has provided a summary of it in his very accessible and enjoyable book *Spurgeon: A New Biography*.

If you wanted to read just one book for a good understanding of Spurgeon's life and ministry, it is this one. The late Arnold Dallimore achieved his goal of providing a well-rounded biography that included a less sensationalized look at well-known parts of Spurgeon's life and ministry and a more comprehensive look at inadequately detailed areas of it. Dallimore covered a breadth of time – Spurgeon's birth to his church's subsequent history after his death – and a breadth of topics – Spurgeon's conversion, preaching skills, ministry enterprise, controversies, character, and much more.

Dallimore divided the book into four parts, each covering a different period of Spurgeon's life. With approximately

240 pages broken up into twenty-one chapters, this is a perfect fit for a late night or vacation read.

Here are a couple of the highlights from my reading of a man and ministry that's impact is felt today.

First, Spurgeon had an unswerving commitment to serve and honor the Lord. Only days after his conversion, he wrote and signed a covenant between himself and the Lord saying:

O great and unsearchable God, who knowest my heart, and triest all my ways; with a humble dependence upon the support of Thy Holy Spirit, I yield myself up to Thee; as Thine own reasonable sacrifice, I return to Thee Thine own. I would be forever, unreservedly, perpetually Thine; whilst I am on earth, I would serve Thee; and may I enjoy Thee and praise Thee for ever! Amen. (23)

It was this commitment, for example, that made him willing to sacrifice relationships for doctrinal fidelity. It was tested early in his life at home. Shortly after being converted, he became convinced that a biblical baptism was the immersion of the believer, a.k.a., believer's baptism. There was one problem. He came from a family of Congregationalists (grandfather and father were Congregational pastors), which baptized infants. Spurgeon himself had been baptized as an infant by his grandfather. Thus, it was no small thing in the Spurgeon family to seek believer's baptism thinking your infant baptism was invalid. So before being baptized at a nearby Baptist church, he asked his parents for permission. They granted it, "but it was not fullhearted." As his mother said, "Ah, Charles, I often prayed the Lord to make you a Christian, but I never asked that you might become a Baptist" (26).

Another more substantive example is the Down-Grade controversy (203-214). Spurgeon spoke out militantly against pastors and churches that were promoting a "new theology" (from Higher Criticism) that, among other things, denied the Bible's inspiration and miracles. Such teaching spread among fellow pastors in the Baptist

Union. (A Union would be called an association or network today.) Spurgeon spoke and wrote against it, trying to convince them of the danger of their false teaching. He urged the Union to adopt a statement of faith that would uphold truth and deny falsehood. In the end, he was not successful and broke fellowship from the Union, a fellowship of close friends and fellow pastors.

Many were supportive but many weren't. One was a friend and a "man who had been probably the largest financial supporter of the orphanage, the Almshouses [housing for widows], and the [pastor's] College." He wrote Spurgeon "expressing his strong opposition and stating that his giving was finished" (208).

Spurgeon took on an inconceivable calling and paid incalculable costs because of his unwavering commitment to serve and honor the Lord.

Second, Spurgeon was uniquely gifted at preaching with a passion for the lost. This is undoubtedly what Spurgeon is most known for. It's why he became a pastor at the age of 17 (34). It's why he once preached to a single gathering of 23,654 people indoors (94). It's why dozens of young preachers came to him for instruction, which precipitated forming the preacher's College.

It was not just his oratory skills that made him such an affective preacher, which interestingly he later made some intentional changes to his preaching style to a "more conversational style of utterance" so that people might not be so "conscious of him...He prayed that as he preached he might be hidden behind the cross and longed that sinners should not be concerned with him but should look upon the Savior" 163-164). Spurgeon also had "intellectual abilities of a very rare order." This meant that he had a wealth of knowledge about the Bible, theology, hymns, history, and so much more regularly at his disposal (63-64).

Yet, it was not these rare gifts that stood out as most memorable to others. It was his earnest love for souls, "an earnestness that almost defies description" (76-84). Dallimore put it well: "Together with his love for the Lord, Spurgeon's preaching manifested a great love for the souls of mankind. Christians were fed, and needy saints were comforted under his ministry, but above all sinners were pleaded with to come to Christ" (79-80).

If you want to increase your zeal, faith, and boldness in service to the Lord, I encourage you to read *Spurgeon: A New Biography*.

Knowing & Being Known

NEWEST MEMBERS



Jake Chandler
Marietta, GA



Ben & Lauren Hirsh
Camille
Atlanta, GA



Amy Mahoney
Alpharetta, GA

These members were voted into church membership during the Church in Conference on March 30, 2014. Please get to know and love them.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. - John 13:35



