

Justification by Christ Alone

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Letters on Theron and Aspasio

{1757}

The doctrine of justification by the works of Christ alone, did indeed lead many to fellowship with the apostles in the same sufferings and joy. But zeal for this doctrine was soon cooled in the minds of many who professed it, by being joined together with another kind of zeal, very different from it. Some eminent teachers of this doctrine, led by such mistakes about the kingdom of God as Jesus timeously checked in his disciples, grew fond of drawing some form of their doctrine over kingdoms and states. And we know, that all zeal for national reformation, if successful, naturally tends to the worldly advantage and honor of the chief promoters thereof; and so to dazzle their eyes with the prospect of something else, than fellowship with Christ in reward of his sufferings. By the time that the famous controversy with Arminius arose, it appears, that many were in readiness to take part with that learned opposer of the truth. And it would seem, there were but few who opposed him on the same footing with Gomarus, {Franciscus Gomarus, 1563 – 1641, Dutch theologian, a strict Calvinist and opponent of the teaching of Jacobus Arminius, which was formally judged at the Synod of Dort in 1619} who was chiefly concerned about the ground of acceptance with God, as he understood it to be affected by that controversy. The greater part of disputants chose to make the controversy turn upon another hinge, contending about grace and freewill, and what influence these had in the conversion of a sinner. It may be maintained by some, that conversion is carried on by grace assisting nature, and by others, that this matter is conducted wholly by irresistible grace; and yet both sides may be equally disaffected to that doctrine, which maintains the work finished by Christ on the cross to be the only requisite to justification. The controversy about grace and freewill, as managed by many on both sides, has as little to do

with the revealed ground of acceptance with God, as the philosophical dispute about liberty and necessity. The consequence of this change in the Arminian controversy, from that way wherein Gomarus held it was a great alteration in the strain of preaching amongst the most zealous Calvinists. For in place of free justification by God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ's blood, much insisted on by the Reformers against the Roman Church, even as it had been before by the Apostles against the Jews and Judaizing Christians, laboring more in setting forth the revealed righteousness to be believed against everything opposed to it, than in any descriptions of the exercise of the mind and heart in believing; they now began to insist much more in their sermons on free electing grace, but especially on the efficacious power of that Grace in the conversion of the elect, working unfeigned faith in them, and turning them to God in a sincere repentance; and then this took the place of the answer of a good conscience toward God by Christ's resurrection, {justified by his resurrection; not as the matter, or cause, of the remission of our sins in the sight of God; but as a full demonstrative evidence, that his life was an adequate ransom; and that "the Lord is well pleased for his righteousness sake;" a manifest declaration, or irrefutable proof that the work was finished, and that the Son by his "one offering had perfected forever them that are sanctified,"} as the spring of Christian religion. This was attended with large descriptions, how a man should find himself under the operation of that free and efficacious grace, calling him effectually, regenerating, and converting him to receive Christ by a true faith, and to repentance unto life; while the things set forth in these descriptions were often not things accompanying salvation. The effect of this strain of doctrine, upon them that hearkened to it, was, their seeking peace with God, and rest to their consciences, by what they might feel in themselves, the motions of their hearts, and the exercises of their souls, in compliance with the call to faith and repentance, under that efficacious operation of grace, which they hoped to find in using those means, whereby they supposed it to be conveyed; or if they could persuade themselves that they had found it, then they looked on themselves as already converted, and in a state of favor with God; comforting themselves against the fears of losing the Divine Favor again, by the inamissibility of grace, or the perseverance of the saints. But, however different this be from the doctrine of the Arminians, concerning electing and converting grace and perseverance; yet it comes to the very same thing with him at last, as to the grand point of the justification of a sinner before God. For whether the

Pharisee in the parable, opposing himself to the Publican, as more fit for acceptance, did thank God in whole, or in part, for what he was in distinction from him and other sinners; yet his confidence in coming before him for acceptance, was in what he found himself to be, and in what he did, by the efficacious operation of God's special grace, working all in him irresistibly. How opposite to this is the Publican's way of coming before God, finding nothing about himself but what makes him the object of Divine Abhorrence, and having no better thing to say of himself, than that he is a sinner, and so a meet object for Divine mercy and grace, justifying freely through the Propitiation for sin, set forth to declare the Divine Justice in justifying the ungodly? He has no other ground of confidence but that, in appearing before God, nor anything else to encourage him to hope for his favor and acceptance with him. And so his address to God is in these words, "God be propitious to me a sinner." Now, he went down to his house justified rather than the other! - Hence it is, that in leading their hearers to faith, they constantly instruct them how to qualify themselves, so as they may be in a condition to advance some claim upon the Deity, and treat with him on some rule of equity; or so as they may find some reason why he should regard them more than others, and, accordingly, grant the favors they desire of him. They maintain, indeed, that men can obtain no benefit from the Deity but in the way of grace; yet, it is evident, that grace obtained in the way they direct is improperly so called, at least it is very different from the apostolic notion of Divine Grace. Paul, when speaking of the Sovereignty of the Divine choice of men to salvation, as proceeding upon grace, in opposition to every notion of desert in those who are chosen, distinguishes that grace in the following manner, "And if by grace, then is it no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace; but if it be of works, then is it no more grace; otherwise work is no work." If this one text were well understood, the whole body of the popular doctrine would fall to the ground at once. Here we see how different the Divine choice is from that of men, who choose what is best and reject what is worst. God in blessing men, or choosing them to blessedness, has no regard to any distinction among them. All the objects of his favor are such as deserved equally to be rejected. According to the Apostle's reasoning, when God blesses any man with grace, he has no regard to any work, requisite, or motion of his will, by which he excels another; for if he had, then the grace thus said to be bestowed would be no more grace, but rather the respect due to worth, or the reward belonging to the work. - "Much more then being now justified by His blood,

we shall be saved from wrath through him." Whatever doctrine then teaches us to think, that our friendly correspondence or acceptance with God is begun by our own good endeavors, seconded by the Divine aid, or even first prompted by the Divine influence, leads us to look for acceptance with God by our own righteousness; for whatever I do, however assisted or prompted, is still my own work; otherwise the most common actions of life could not be called our own, seeing in all these we must still acknowledge our dependence on God, "in whom we live, move, and have our being." Agreeably to what is now said, we may find Philosophers and Pharisees, both ancient and modern, in the height of their self-applause, acknowledging Divine assistance, and ready to agree in using language like this, "God, I thank thee for my excellency above other men." We must begin our religion then as we would end it. Our acceptance with God, first and last, must rest entirely on the work finished by Jesus Christ on the cross; or we must betake ourselves to what many call the religion of nature, and what God warrants us to call the religion of pride, as being no less opposite to the law of nature, than to the Gospel.