

Romans 4:1-3 teaches all of the five Reformation *solas* or alones or onlys. Justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*). It is not by works: “For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God” (2). Justification is only by faith: “Abraham *believed* God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (3).

Justification is through grace alone (*sola gratia*), since it is not by works in any shape or form (2).

Justification by faith alone and through grace alone is taught in Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*): “For what saith the *scripture* [not fallen man or the wicked world or the false church or even the true church]? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (3). Here we have New Testament Scripture quoting Old Testament Scripture (Gen. 15:6). Clearly, Old Testament justification and New Testament justification are the same, though the latter part of God’s Word reveals this truth more fully.

Justification by faith alone through grace alone according to Scripture alone is to the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*). When Romans 4:2 says, “For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God,” it presupposes that the sinner’s justification is designed to bring glory not to man but to the blessed Trinity.

Justification by faith alone through grace alone according to Scripture alone and to the glory of God alone is in Christ alone (*solus Christus*). Justification is not by Abraham’s (or any man’s) works (2) and so it must be on the basis of someone else’s righteousness. The threefold promise to Abraham embraced the blessing, the seed and the land, all of which are only in Christ: blessing (Gal. 3:13-14), seed (16, 29) and land (Rom. 4:13; Eph. 1:10). That our justification is in Christ alone is clearly taught in chapters 3, 5 and 10 of Romans, as well as many other places (e.g., Jer. 23:5-6; I Cor. 1:30; 6:11; II Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9; II Pet. 1:1).

“What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?” (Rom. 4:1). The issue here is not merely what the Bible says about Abraham but also what he *personally* found, discovered, learned, experienced or came to know. Abraham grasped that if he “were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God” (2). The patriarch understood that he had nothing in which he could boast. He had been an idolater in Ur (Josh. 24:2), and knew that all his works were sinful and could never withstand God’s intense and holy scrutiny.

Positively, Abraham found and discovered, by God’s grace, that justification is by faith alone: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). He knew that he was righteous before God with a perfect imputed righteousness that would stand at the final judgment: the righteousness of God in the coming Messiah. No wonder Abraham rejoiced to see Christ’s day and was glad (John 8:56)!

Have *you* found what Abraham found: Christ’s righteousness reckoned to your account by believing the gospel? Let us continually learn the riches and depths of this truth in all its glory and comfort!

Rev. Stewart

The Well-Meant Offer and Organic Unity (2)

1) Another question of a reader is in response to the charge we make against the gracious and well-meant offer, that it teaches that God changes from loving all men to casting them into hell—surely a revelation of divine hatred. But God is immutable, that is, He does not and cannot change. Yet the reader claims that He does change.

“Was there not a moment in eternity when God did not create? Followed by a moment when He was creating all things and then followed by another moment when He stopped or was no longer creating? Isn’t that God changing? God can do whatever He wants, wishes, desires, etc., to do. Therefore, He can choose to ‘love’ an individual for a time, for whatever reason or purpose He deems proper, and then choose to ‘hate’ that same individual, as He pleases.”

The reader has made some serious mistakes in his question. One error is that he speaks of time in God’s counsel: “a moment in eternity.” The fact is that time itself is a creation of God (II Tim. 1:9). God is eternal and He determined that time would be made at the creation of the earth. It is a denial of God’s attribute of eternity to say time is in His decree (or in Him) and it would also mean that God changes, a denial of His immutability.

The second problem with the question is its insistence that God can do what He pleases (irrespective of His Being or nature). This sounds very much like the arguments of the Roman Catholic scholastics who discussed questions such as these: “Since God is omnipotent, can He create two mountains without a valley between or a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it? Since God is omnipotent, can He sin?” The answer to all these frivolous questions is: God can and does only that which is in harmony with His own divine Being or nature, and so also with truth or the law of non-contradiction.

The answer to the reader’s question itself is clear: “I am the LORD; I change not” (Mal. 3:6; cf. Num. 23:19; Heb. 1:10-12). That means exactly what it says. God’s counsel, therefore, is as eternal as He is. History is God working out His eternal counsel, part of which is the creature we call “time.”

The relation between eternity and time is a profound mystery. I have often pondered it and even discussed it with one of my colleagues. But we know that God’s ways are inscrutable and we are mere specks of dust with only a little understanding of His mighty works.

2) The more we come into contact with the gospel, the greater is our knowledge of the way of salvation and the greater is the divine requirement of us. In this sense, the saying of our Saviour in Luke 12:47 holds true: “And that servant, which knew his lord’s

will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.” This statement is applied especially to those who labour in the vineyard of the Lord, yet the principle is of far broader extent.

The men of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba will rise up in judgment against the generation of the Jews of Jesus’ day, and condemn them (Matt. 12:41-42), for they, though less privileged, gave more honour to the Word of the Lord. Sodom, Tyre and Sidon will find it more tolerable in the day of judgment than the cities of Galilee where Jesus laboured most (11:20-24), for they never heard the New Testament gospel, which the Jews received in richer measure. Does not this greater responsibility find its explanation in the fact that the preaching of the gospel is, indeed, a wonderful thing?

Generally speaking, the questioner is stating a clear and true principle of one’s relation to the gospel: the closer one stands to the pure preaching of the gospel, the greater is his responsibility. Luke 12:47, referred to by the questioner, clearly states this.

It is well that the implication of this is impressed upon us. We in Reformed and Presbyterian churches have a long and noble tradition to hold, brought to us by the gospel. But what has happened in America and Europe? These same churches have become unfaithful for the most part. Many have fallen away into materialism and worldliness. Many, rejecting the gospel, have joined sects or have abandoned Scripture altogether. Many have corrupted the truth with the heresy of Arminianism. The true church is a hut “in a garden of cucumbers,” a “besieged city,” a “very small remnant” (Isa. 1:8, 9). Think of the judgment that shall come on those who have departed into apostasy in comparison with heathen in the Orient who worship idols of silver and stone. The awful responsibility that is implied in the question makes one get on his knees and beg for mercy.

However, it is not at all the case that Luke 12:47 speaks of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. There is nothing in the passage referring to God’s blessing upon, or love for, absolutely all who hear the preaching. There is only a warning that their judgment is greater because in unbelief they reject the fuller revelation of the gospel.

When we consider the Scriptures’ teaching, we learn something very different from the Arminian theory. The preaching of the gospel to many who reject it is indeed good. It is like the rain and sunshine that come upon the fields of all farmers. That is not common grace: that is common rain and sunshine. But is not every gift of God good? Does he ever give bad gifts? He sends terrible judgments upon the wicked, but His gifts are wonderful and always good.

If what God does for anyone in giving him his daily bread is good, is the coronavirus bad? Does God suddenly decide to give bad things to man when He usually gives good gifts? What constitutes good gifts? And what constitutes bad gifts? What we like is good? What we dislike is a bad gift? Is good and bad determined by how we feel about what God sends into our life?

I do not understand this type of reasoning. The fact is that God’s gifts in themselves are good. God never gives bad gifts. But is rain grace? Ought the farmer consider the drought that destroyed his crops a bad gift from God? There are a lot of people who,

when faced with this dilemma, say, “No, the devil sends bad things; God sends only good things.” When four preachers from four different denominations were quizzed on TV about the terrorists’ destruction of the World Trade Center (11 September, 2001), they were asked by the host, “Did God send this disaster? Or even have anything to do with it?” None would answer in the affirmative. The host was so incensed that, though not a Christian himself, he walked away.

Though all God’s gifts are good, those who use them to sin suffer greater punishment for misusing them. If the prodigal son in Luke 15 was one who misused his portion of the inheritance in riotous living, does that make the father’s gift to him bad? It was good, was it not, regardless of how the wayward son used it? Scripture teaches that all things are good for His people, even calamities (Rom. 8:28), but all things are curses upon the wicked. Read Psalm 73 and Proverbs 3:33.

But we are talking about the preaching of the gospel. Scripture looks at this from God’s side. In Isaiah 55:8-11, we are told that God’s Word never returns to Him void. He does not bring the gospel to all men in grace and then find that men foiled His plans. The gospel is like the rain that God sends. It surely makes the crops grow but it also makes the thorns grow. That is, it is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16) to the elect but it is also the means He uses to harden sinners who reject the gospel. This same figure is found in Hebrews 6:7-8 in connection with the unpardonable sin.

I appeal, finally, to II Corinthians 2:14-17. Paul recognizes that there are many who have heard his ministry but rejected the command that comes to them to believe in Christ. But, he says, in any case, faithful preachers are pleasing to God whether the gospel is believed or rejected, for the gospel always accomplishes His purpose. In some, it continues to bring life, over and over, until it finally brings everlasting life in heaven; but for others, who are spiritually dead, it works death that becomes worse and worse until it ends in hell. But, says Paul, God always makes the preaching of the gospel triumph, for it always accomplishes the purpose He intends.

No wonder the apostle says, “who is sufficient for these things?” (16). It is a difficult thing for a minister of the gospel to see the Word of God rejected, especially in his own congregation but also on the mission field. But, Paul goes on to say, “Because of our pain in seeing the gospel rejected, we do not make the gospel more palatable by corrupting it with preaching so that the minister says to the sinner, ‘God loves you and wants to save you’” (cf. 17).

God’s sovereign purpose is always accomplished, not because men reject His love but because He is sovereign in all He does. Let us bow in humility before a sovereign God who does all His good pleasure and worship Him as God alone!

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