

The doctrine of ‘justification by faith alone’ has been rightly regarded as a foundational tenet of Protestantism. Having been anathematized at the Council of Trent[1], it not only continues to be the archenemy of Romish dogma but has undergone more recent attacks by professing Protestants who have given in to Federal Vision and/or the New Perspective on Paul.

But apart from these more obvious assaults on this key doctrine, it is common for even conservative evangelicals to encounter confusion when struggling to understand how the doctrine of repentance fits within the parameters of *sola fide*. Like many other persistent errors in American evangelicalism, much of this can be blamed on dispensationalism and its entanglement in conservative and fundamentalist churches for more than a century. At the least, many dispensationalists simply fail to understand the three-fold division of the law, despite frequently giving lip-service to it (see my 3-part series on this subject [here](#), [here](#) & [here](#)). At most, some are blatantly antinomian, considering any appeal to repentance a relic of Old Covenant, pharisaical legalism. If “the Law” collective (including the *moral* law which predates the Mosaic Covenant) has been abrogated under the current dispensation (as has been sometimes alleged), quite obviously there is no standard by which one’s actions can be assessed and judged needful of repentance. After all, we are reassured, the church is under the dispensation of grace. Further, we are warned, one dare not pervert grace by adding repentance as a condition for receiving it.

The problem of repentance to which I am referring can be summarized as follows: Justification is by belief alone, yet the NT also teaches the necessity of repentance. The question necessarily arises, what if someone believes the gospel but does not repent? Are they saved? Or, are they somehow “provisionally” saved but retain the potential to fall away (when their repentance is quantified and found wanting at the final Judgment)? This appears to be John Wesley’s view. Gordon Clark quotes from Wesley’s *Doctrinal Summaries* and notes an obvious implication:

“Q.12. Can faith be lost but through disobedience?”

A. It cannot. A believer first inwardly disobeys.... Then his intercourse with God is lost, i.e., and after this [he is] like unto another man.

Q.13. How can such a man recover faith?

A. By repenting and doing the first works.

...Wesley must, if consistent, assert that a man once regenerated can nonetheless fail to arrive in Heaven and on the contrary be eternally lost in Hell.”[2]

Some have attempted to address the faith/repentance dichotomy by simply conflating repentance with belief. Indeed, repentance does refer in large part to a changing of the mind, and may even be the primary meaning in its Scriptural usage. Yet some go farther and argue that repentance and belief are purely synonymous, the terms being a mere redundancy as they are found in the NT. This “solution” ensures that *sola fide* is maintained and the “works” of repentance pose no threat to simple belief in the gospel.

Others have responded by stating that if ‘justification by faith alone’ is correct, then repentance is not necessary for salvation because to demand repentance in addition to faith would be adding something other to the soteriological order. Thus, the doctrine of the “carnal Christian” is born, and those few who actually do repent of their transgressions and turn from the life of the “old man” have thus attained to some higher-order Christianity, not to be expected of the average believer. These answers are hardly satisfactory in light of passages like Luke 13:3.

I have heard good men tackle this issue many times. I can remember having discussions with certain brothers where the issue seemed complicated and paradoxical, some having a zeal to maintain the Protestant doctrine but knowing that repentance was preached by Christ Himself. I personally wondered if using the word “repent” in evangelism would pervert the truth of *sola fide*. It took many years for me to realize that there always was a solution to this alleged faith/repentance dichotomy that both demanded repentance yet did no injustice to the purity of ‘justification by faith alone’. The biblical solution has been largely ignored because of a prior commitment to an inverted *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) in contemporary evangelicalism. This prior commitment to synergism is one that I was not quick to part with.

Ultimately, the whole issue hinges on what human beings allegedly need to “do” in order to be made right before a holy God. Must we simply believe the gospel, or must we believe the gospel and...? Surely something is amiss when an evangelist gives the impression that one might believe the gospel and still be lost because he hasn’t repented. If such a scenario is possible, then justification is obviously *not* by belief alone. And if repentance must precede conversion, how much repentance constitutes a sufficient degree of turning, seeing that sin is not completely abolished from one’s existence at the time of conversion?

Consider the following from Bob Wilkin of the Grace Evangelical Society:

“Either justification is by faith alone or it is not by faith alone. It can’t be by faith alone and not by faith alone. That is logically impossible.”[3]

Wilkin’s logic in this statement is commendable. We wish that every theologian would speak with such precision and directness instead of paradoxical pandering and linguistic lollygagging. Elsewhere, in a paper responding to Thomas Schreiner’s book on justification, Wilkin writes:

“...The expression ‘bare faith’ is synonymous with ‘faith alone.’ How can justification be by faith alone and yet not by bare faith?”[4]

We find in these statements by an opponent of Calvinism a logical consistency concerning *sola fide* reminiscent of a devoted Calvinist by the name of Gordon Clark.[5] Indeed, The Trinity Foundation (created principally for the purpose of keeping Clark’s work in print) has likewise taken issue with Schreiner’s book and included Brandon Adams’ criticism of Piper’s Foreword in a recent *Trinity Review*.

Unfortunately, however, because of Wilkin’s devotion to synergism and allegiance to anti-reformed soteriological presuppositions, he and the society he represents see repentance as essentially optional. The difference between Wilkin’s criticism of Schreiner’s book (and Piper’s waffling) and the criticism of Brandon Adams—though both are in agreement that justification is by faith *alone*—is that Calvinists have no need to maintain a diminished view of repentance (as Wilkin clearly does), nor do they see repentance as optional but regard it as a necessary consequence of having been born-again by the Spirit of God.

Wilkin insists that “God [has] a one-condition only requirement for entrance into His family” Of course, he is speaking of faith as that one condition. He chides Wayne Grudem, John MacArthur and John Piper for being inconsistent on this particular *sola*, because these men speak of the necessity of repentance. To Wilkin, such is incompatible with ‘justification by faith alone’. But in the particular quotes provided by Wilkin (Piper’s Foreword to Schreiner’s book not among them), there is no inconsistency, and I encourage the reader to assess them for himself. In contrast to Wilkin and the Grace Evangelical Society, the

theology of these men demand the recognition of God's regenerating grace as the causative agent of both faith and repentance. In other words, Grudem, MacArthur and Piper are able to speak of the necessity of repentance without violating *sola fide* because they are Calvinists, regarding both repentance and faith as gifts from God and knowing that God does not give one of those gifts to His children while failing to provide the other. Wilkin's folly is in refusing to admit that the "one-condition only requirement" he speaks of is preceded by the regenerating work of God in the heart/mind of the individual. So while faith may be the only "condition" for justification, regeneration is the "condition" which must be met by God Himself prior to faith on the part of man, and that by the will of God alone (John 1:13; James 1:18).

Bob Wilkin's error serves to illustrate why it is that if one adhere to the reformed soteriological order he is not confronted with the alleged dilemma regarding faith and repentance. The reformed "solution" is not new; it has simply been buried under centuries of synergistic strata. The NT text supports the view that there are no such "Christians" who believe the gospel yet refuse to repent. There are no carnal Christians, and there are no "believers" who obtain both justification and glorification yet are free to forego sanctification. We can say this with confidence, and it is not because Calvinists are advocating a sort of sinless-perfection. In commenting on chapter 15 of the Second London Baptist Confession, Sam Waldron notes that

"forsaking of sin is not the achievement of perfect or sinless obedience forever. It is a genuine 'purpose and endeavor' to this end."[6]

Being born-again is the work of God alone, and this divine work (regeneration) precedes faith, contra Rome, Bob Wilkin, Dave Hunt, and synergists in general. If regeneration precedes faith, it also precedes repentance. Both faith and repentance are gifts of God given to His children who have been born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13). Note that only the non-Calvinist who retains any regard for repentance finds himself in the aforementioned uncomfortable dichotomy because he views belief and repentance as actions one takes upon himself to do according to his own volition (not without a little help of the grace of God, of course) *in order that he might be saved*. So the question of what happens to a man who believes but refuses to repent is a legitimate one only for those who hold that faith precedes regeneration. How can such a person solve the problem of holding to Protestantism's 'justification by faith alone' without neglecting the necessity of repentance? Since there is no consistent way to do this, men like Bob Wilkin are diligent to

kick repentance entirely out of the conversion experience. Other synergists, like Wesley, have dealt with this problem by arguing for the necessity of repentance, with the possibility of losing one's salvation, inadvertently treating 'justification by faith alone' not altogether differently from Trent's repudiation of it.

Calvinism affords us the simple solution of regarding the ability to believe, repent, persevere and exhibit any other fruit of the Spirit as necessary consequences of having been regenerated by the Spirit of God. Such gifts are given to all whom God has called, "not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (2 Timothy 1:9). Sam Waldron, in keeping with the Second London Baptist Confession, posits that

"...all believers repent and thus are given repentance by God.... By calling repentance a grace, the Shorter Catechism makes clear that it is a gift of God. It is a plant that grows in the renewed soil of the regenerate heart (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25)".[7]

If someone regards himself as a believer but is blatantly and perpetually unrepentant, we feel no obligation to whisk their dead dry bones up to heaven with the simple caveat that they may miss out on some "heavenly rewards". On the authority of Scripture we can regard such a one as an unbeliever—someone who has not actually been born from above. This is why Waldron can put it so bluntly:

"Is repentance, confession, and renunciation of sin, turning from it with grief and hatred for it, your constant, even daily, experience? If you are a true Christian, it is."[8]

"But", the objection comes, "so-and-so *does* believe; how can we say he is an *unbeliever*?" Here we must note carefully the oft-used and abused text from the Epistle of James. Many people have used passages like 2:14 to assert that faith alone is insufficient for being made right with God. But notice that James says "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" Note that the person *says* he has faith, but his lack of works testify to the contrary. There is no indication in the epistle that works—even repentance—combined with an otherwise "dead faith" would have wrought justification

before God. The sooner we realize this the sooner we will see no tension between Paul and James. But the point for now is that not all who say they believe the gospel actually *do* believe it. They may be able to articulate its propositions. They may hold an orthodox doctrine of God. But it is quite possible that they do not actually believe that Christ died for their sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. This point is deserving of much greater attention, but for now, consider this short excerpt from fellow scripturalist Sean Gerety:

“Note carefully, for Calvin the question is not between those who have faith where one person’s faith is alive and the other’s is dead, as if they both had faith, but rather between the one who believes and the other who does not. The distinction James is drawing is between the person who possesses genuine belief and the hypocrite. Calvin rightly understands in describing faith as alive or dead that James is using a rhetorical device as he ‘disputes against those who made a false pretense as to faith, of which they were wholly destitute.’”[9]

God does not sanctify some of His children and not others. If faith and repentance are gifts of God, then we should rightly expect that God would grant both of these gifts to all of those whom He has graciously regenerated.

It may be helpful to see how Charles Hodge carefully contrasted Jacobus Arminius’ view of repentance within the soteriological order with that of the Reformers:

“...Whether any man does thus repent and believe, or, having believed, perseveres in a holy life, depends on himself and not on God. The purpose of election, therefore, is not a purpose to save, and to that end to give faith and repentance to a definite number of individuals, but a purpose to save those who repent, believe, and persevere in faith until the end.”[10]

Obviously, in such a system, repentance, belief and perseverance must be regarded as separate and distinct conditions which may or may not be met by the individual. It is the reason why the consistent Arminian holds that salvation must be kept by the individual, with actual apostasy of the Christian a real potentiality. Dave Hunt asked essentially, *What Love is This* that neglects to provide the potential for justification to an amorphous mass of

humanity? But we ask, what *justification* is this that either, 1) cannot secure the individual for eternity via the imputed righteousness of Christ unless he perseveres with a certain level of repentance, or, 2) does not lead to sanctification because repentance is only realized by higher-order Christians, and that dependent upon their own volition?

If faith precedes regeneration, as the majority of evangelicalism today maintains, then the question of where repentance fits into soteriology is an unavoidable one. Wilkin simply eliminates it from conversion altogether. It is my contention that all non-Calvinistic solutions are problematic for *sola fide*, another example of one way in which synergists are necessarily *at peace with Rome*. The best they can offer is to say that the unrepentant is *probably* not really saved, but they cannot place repentance within a logically coherent and consistent soteriological construct.

If, on the other hand, regeneration precedes faith the problem of where to place repentance is no problem at all. It, like faith, is a gift of God. Our Heavenly Father graciously sanctifies all whom He has justified. He puts into the heart of His children the desire to keep His moral law, that is, a desire to repent:

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.

For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more” (Hebrews 8:10-12).[11]

[1] Canon IX: “If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.”

[2] Clark, G.H., *What is the Christian Life?*, The Trinity Foundation, Unicoi, TN, 2012, pp. 37-38.

[3] <https://faithalone.org/blog/justification-by-faith-alone-plus-repentance-and-good-works/>

[4] Wilkin, R.N., The role of good works in justification: A review of chapter 16 of Thomas Schreiner's *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification*, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 28(55):18, 2015.

[5] Another free grace advocate even references Clark's *Faith and Saving Faith* for support in his assertion that belief has to do with being "persuaded that a proposition is true" (Biery, R.M., Belief as a cognitive phenomenon, especially in regard to salvation: An expanded discussion, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical* 29(56):58, 2016).

[6] Waldron, S.E., *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession (5th ed. Revised and Corrected)*, EP Books, Welwyn Garden City, UK, 2016, pp. 240-41.

[7] Waldron, ref. 6, p. 233 & 235-37.

[8] Waldron, ref. 6, p. 241.

[9] <https://godshammer.wordpress.com/2016/06/18/faith-alive/>

[10] Hodge, C., Justification by Faith Alone, in Bonar & Hodge, *Not What My Hands Have Done*, Trinity Foundation, Unicoi, TN, 2005, pp. 269-70.

[11] Of course, the Dispensationalists have a way around the implications of this passage having regarded it as a prophecy for a future restoration of ethnic Israel. They do not seem to see that this attaches the New Covenant to ethnic Jews in the last days and not to the church. That is to say, Dispensationalists do not regard the New Covenant as the constitution of the church. Yet, "Every New Testament use of Jeremiah 31:31-34 [including this excerpt from Hebrews 8] relates it to a present fulfillment in the Church. Conversely, there is no justification anywhere in the New Testament for seeing its fulfillment as future and millennial" (Waldron, S.E. and Barcellos, R.C., *A Reformed Baptist Manifesto*, RBAP, Palmdale, CA, 2004, p. 21).

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