

Some Comments on the Justification Issue

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The problem, for me, finally seems to be settling down to manageable dimensions. The question: Does Shepherd's position include a credible testimony to justification by faith alone?

"Alone" is the problematic term. When our discussions first began over a year ago, Norman seemed to call it in question (though even then it was evident that he was not condemning every use of the term in this context). At this point, I'm convinced that he means to affirm all that ~~most traditional~~ ~~Reformed~~ Reformed theology has affirmed in regard to justification by faith alone.

As I understand it, "alone" has two functions. The first is to distinguish faith from all "works of law" understood as attempts to merit salvation. We are justified by faith apart from all such works- by faith alone. On that point, Norman has always been clear.

The second function of "alone" is to distinguish faith from all the other gifts and graces which flow from our union with Christ. Here is where the problem arises. Traditionally, this distinctiveness of faith has been expressed by saying that of all the gifts and graces, faith alone is the "instrument" of justification. Early in our discussion, Norman rejected this formulation by saying that either faith or works could be regarded as instrumental. Today, Norman ~~rejects~~ no longer puts it this way. The problem still exists, however, for today Norman rejects all use of the concept "instrument" in these contexts. Earlier, it seemed that either faith or works could be "instrument"; today, neither faith nor works is "instrument". And since Norman still teaches that justification can be said to be "by" faith or "by" works, taking "by" in something other than an instrumental sense, it would seem that even his most recent formulations put faith and works on the same level- i.e., they ascribe to both essentially the same relation to justification. This would seem to deny the second function of the term "alone" as described above.

~~It is~~ It is evident to me, however, from Norman's responses in discussion, that he does intend to ascribe to faith a unique relation to justification- one not shared by repentance, works or any other "gifts and graces". What is that relation? It is not entirely clear. It is not an "instrumental" relation; nor is it merely a necessary conditionality (for such conditionality is shared among all the gifts and graces). But it is a unique relation of some sort.

Is Norman to be faulted at this point for his inability precisely to formulate the relation? Well, remember that the tradition has its problems here too. Scripture simply uses various prepositions translatable by the English "by". The theological tradition uses the term "instrument"; but as we've seen, this has been with a certain reluctance. What is left? Neither Scripture (as presently understood) nor tradition gives us a more precise alternative.

What is clear is that Norman does hold to a unique relation between faith and justification- and also that he holds to the Biblical reason for this unique relation. Why is it that faith, apart from all other gifts and graces, is "instrumental" to justification in the traditional formulation? Simply because faith ~~is~~ is the act of resting on Christ for justification. "Faith" ~~connotes such trust in its primary definition~~ denotes such trust according to its primary definition ~~rather than~~ ("hope," "love," etc. connote such trust more indirectly). I have never heard any more precise explanation of faith's uniqueness. This is the answer of the tradition, and it is Norman's

Whether what he says will be in context for way. especially relating to work in the last part.

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