

The Roles of Faith
in Justification and Sanctification:
A Constructive Criticism of an Element of
Sonship Theology

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According to Neil H. Williams, “The theological foundation for *Sonship* may be summarized by the phrase ‘sanctification by faith.’ The phrase may sound strange to some. We all affirm ‘justification by faith’; however, is it equally valid that we are also sanctified by faith?”² He says yes.

There is a sense in which he is correct: sanctification is a fruit of faith. Yet the phrase *sanctification by faith* is far more commonly associated with pietist, quietist, Wesleyan Holiness, or Keswick thought than with Reformed thought.³ It is therefore not surprising that many people, on

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²Neil H. Williams, *The Theology of Sonship* (Jenkintown, PA: World Harvest Mission, 2002), 7, emphasis original. Williams is theologian and writer with World Harvest Mission, parent organization of the Sonship discipleship course that has become popular in the Presbyterian Church in America and some other Reformed circles lately.

³Williams rightly shows that some Reformed theologians have used the phrase approvingly (*Theology of Sonship*, 8). However, first, while Reformed theologians all agree that faith is essential to sanctification, they are not very likely to use the very phrase *sanctification by faith*. Second, the phrase is very common, in a quite different sense, in non-Reformed traditions. To illustrate: a Google search for the phrase on June 28, 2004, turned up 648 hits. Arbitrarily stopping my tabulation after the first forty yielded only six that were, or probably were, from a Reformed perspective and used the phrase approvingly; the other thirty-four were from Wesleyan, Holiness, Seventh-day Adventist, and other non-Reformed perspectives. A quick perusal of additional items indicates that this heavy tilt toward non-Reformed defenders of sanctification by faith continued through the list. It should be little wonder, then, that confessionally Reformed scholars would doubt the claim that sanctification by faith, *put that way*, has much of a Reformed pedigree. More important, it should be little wonder that Sonship’s use of the phrase engenders considerable confusion, not only since people are far more likely to have encountered it in its non-Reformed senses than in its Reformed sense, but also,

encountering the Sonship program's use of it, naturally associate it with those traditions. The result is an easy misunderstanding of what the Sonship program means by it. That misunderstanding can, however, be cleared up with little difficulty. As Williams points out, his own use of the phrase should not be equated with pietist, quietist ideas ("let go and let God") that encourage believers to "Sit back, enjoy the ride, and let the Spirit blast you from regeneration to glorification."⁴ Rather, the heroes of the faith celebrated in Hebrews 11 "trusted God and believed His Word and promises, and that faith expressed itself in obedience. . . . The life of faith is a life of effort, but it is a certain type of effort . . ." He adds, "Perhaps when some people use the phrase 'sanctification by faith,' they mean a life of no effort. This, however, is not our position. In a life of faith, effort is required, but the kind of effort we exert can be either unbelieving or believing."⁵

Yet there is another hazard in the phrase *sanctification by faith*. Critics who have asserted that Sonship theology confuses sanctification and justification have foreseen it but have not identified it clearly.⁶ Williams has attempted to set aside the misconception that the phrase *sanctification by faith* implies "saying that justification and sanctification are the same thing," explaining that the point instead is that "they come through the same means."⁷ Williams is on to something here, but his argument is not complete enough to close the door to confusion and error. The root of the matter is twofold. First, Sonship advocates have not distinguished between faith as passive/receptive instrument in justification and faith as active/productive instrument in sanctification. Second, neither have Sonship advocates adequately distinguished between justification as the legal declaration of righteousness based on the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, on the one hand, and sanctification as the production of righteous character and conduct in the believer, on the other. For both theoretical and practical reasons, they need to make both distinctions. My purpose in this article is to justify and develop those distinctions and so to help advocates of the Sonship theology and program clarify their views, avoid promoting confusion and error, and make their true insights more helpful to the people of God.⁸

as we shall see, because they are likely to associate with it ideas properly applicable to justification but not to sanctification.

⁴Granted the struggles for holy living that are the common lot of people in these traditions, it is doubtful that Williams's description of this particular view of sanctification by faith is any better than a caricature, but it does serve as a useful foil against which to contrast what he describes as Sonship's view.

⁵Williams, *Theology of Sonship*, 11-12.

⁶E.g., Jay E. Adams, *Biblical Sonship: An Evaluation of the Sonship Discipleship Course* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts, 1999), and Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, "The Sonship Program for Revival: A Summary and Critique," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999):227-46. Both Adams and Van Dixhoorn raise other concerns about Sonship than the confusion over justification and sanctification. It is not the purpose of this article to evaluate those concerns.

⁷Williams, *Theology of Sonship*, 10.

⁸I am indebted to my friend and colleague Dr. R. Fowler White, professor of New Testament and dean of the faculty at Knox Theological Seminary, for his help in wording this paragraph, for helpful suggestions at other points, and for his constructive criticisms of the article as a whole.

The Role of Faith in Justification

Justification by faith is theological shorthand for three phrases, each including the crucial word *alone*: We are justified (1) by grace alone (2) through faith alone (3) in Christ alone—three of the five great *solas* of the Reformation. As we focus on what each of those phrases teaches, it becomes clear that *sanctification by faith* must have a very different sense from *justification by faith*, not only because, obviously, justification differs from sanctification, but also because faith performs different functions in the two.

(1) When we say that we are justified *by grace alone*, we mean that God’s pardoning our sins, accepting us as righteous, and declaring us so (which is what justification is) are grounded on no merit of our own, that any works that would deserve that declaration are utterly alien to us. It is because the righteousness accredited to us is alien—is Christ’s righteousness, not our own—that our justification is undeserved, a matter of God’s grace, not of His justice. In this regard, *by grace alone* has reference specifically to God’s relationship to *us* justified sinners, not to God’s relationship to *Christ* in His mediatorial role as our righteous Advocate (1 John 2:2). With reference to God’s relationship to *Christ*, we are justified not by grace (alone or otherwise) but by justice, for our justification is God’s just judgment on the perfect righteousness of Christ presented to Him on our behalf in fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of redemption. In that covenant, God the Father promised to give to Christ the Son all in whose stead Christ would fulfill the law in life and offer Himself in death as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice. Christ as our substitute both perfectly obeyed all God’s law and perfectly suffered all God’s wrath on sin, thus fulfilling all righteousness.⁹ This is why John could write not that if we confess our sins God is faithful and *gracious* to forgive us our sins but that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and *just* to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Yes, toward us He is gracious in forgiveness; but toward Christ He is *just* to forgive our sins. To affirm that justification is by grace alone would, in reference to Christ’s role in our justification, actually be false. He merited justification for all those for whom He died by His active and passive obedience, so that God’s pardoning all our sins and accepting us as righteous in His sight is, with reference to Christ, not a gracious gift but a merited reward—a reward not to us but to Christ. Nonetheless, with regard to us, justification is entirely a matter of grace—we have done and can do nothing to merit it.

(2) When we say that we are justified by grace alone *through faith alone*, we mean that on our part faith is the sole instrument by which we receive the righteousness of Christ that is the ground of our justification. This follows from our being justified by grace alone. Indeed, we can preserve justification by grace alone only if we preserve justification through faith alone. Here we contrast not ourselves and Christ, as in the first point, but faith and works—that is, the works of obedience to God’s law. The Reformed faith recognizes in the Bible two ways of justification, one under the covenant of works and the other under the covenant of grace. Under the covenant of works, men were to be justified “upon condition of perfect and personal obedience”¹⁰ to God’s law (Leviticus

⁹See Romans 3:25-26: Christ’s satisfaction of God’s justice by both His obedience and His suffering is how God can both be just and justify the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

¹⁰*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.2.

18:5; Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:12). Because of the fall through Adam's sin (Romans 5:12-14), not to speak of our own (Romans 3:9-19), that way of salvation, though theoretically still in force (Romans 2:6-8, 13; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.1-2, 6), is in practice (that is, morally) impossible, "for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20). "[T]he law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good," but we are "of the flesh, sold under sin," and therefore morally incapable of fulfilling the law ourselves (Romans 7:12, 14). Under the covenant of grace, God requires for our justification not works but faith in Jesus Christ. That is, God accounts and accepts us as righteous "not for any thing wrought in [us], or done by [us], but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to [us], as [our] righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto [us], [we] receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith . . ." ¹¹ Therefore "we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28). That is, in justification faith is the *passive instrument* by which we *receive* the gracious gift of Christ's righteousness as the ground on which God declares us righteous. It is not the *active cause* that *produces* our own righteousness as the ground of God's verdict. ¹² This does not commit us to antinomianism—the notion that the Christian is not obligated to obey God's law—for, as a saying common to the Reformed faith puts it, "Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is not alone." While this justifying faith is not barren—that is, it is not fruitless, but bears fruit in good works (James 2:14-26; Galatians 5:6)—it is not the good works faith produces but the faith itself, alone, that is the instrument by which we receive and rest upon Christ and His righteousness for our justification.

(3) When we say that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone *in Christ alone*, we mean not to exclude God the Father and God the Holy Spirit from the work of salvation ¹³ but to focus on Christ's righteousness—both active (fulfilling God's law) and passive (suffering God's wrath)—as the sole ground of our justification. Christ's righteousness alone merits our pardon and acceptance in God's sight. His righteousness becomes ours. Our works do not merit our justification; ¹⁴ the church's works do not merit our justification; ¹⁵ only Christ's righteousness, imputed to us and received by faith alone, ¹⁶ merits our justification. Nothing we do contributes as ground or merit. In justification we and our faith are wholly passive, not active—purely receivers, not causes. This is why we say that the righteousness that is the ground (the meritorious basis) of our justification is alien, not domestic. In justification, only Christ's righteousness, naturally alien to us but imputed to us and received by faith alone, is in view; no domestic righteousness, no

¹¹*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.3; 11.1.

¹²N.B.: *passive* and *active* here are not to be taken in their *grammatical* senses but in their causative senses. They indicate that in justification faith is not the efficient cause of the righteousness that is the ground of justification but the receptive instrument by which the believer receives the righteous of Christ.

¹³The Father elects (John 6:37, 44; Ephesians 1:3-5), and the Spirit effectually calls (Titus 3:5-6; Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

¹⁴Autosoterism—belief that we save ourselves.

¹⁵Sacerdotalism—belief that the work of priests saves us.

¹⁶*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 33.

righteousness characterizing our own persons or deeds, is in sight. That is an important point to remember: In justification, the only righteousness in sight is alien righteousness, not domestic righteousness.

All of that, then, is what Protestants mean when we say that we are justified by faith. The word *alone* is crucial, for it is the dividing line between Protestant and Roman Catholic teaching on justification. Though many Protestants think otherwise, Roman Catholicism does teach that salvation (including justification) is by grace through faith in Christ. But it denies that any of these three elements is properly modified by *alone*. For Roman Catholicism, we are justified by grace *plus* our merit (and the merits of the saints applied to us through indulgence and the sacrament of penance) because God's grace enables us to do the good works that merit our justification; we are justified by faith *plus* our works because it is faith that produces the works that merit our justification; and we are justified by faith in Christ *plus* His church, with her priests, *plus* our own works, because it is He who gives us His church, with her Word and sacraments, to produce in us the faith that yields the works that merit our justification. For Roman Catholicism, we are justified on the grounds not of an alien righteousness (Christ's) imputed to us but of a domestic righteousness (our own) infused into us. All of that Roman Catholic understanding of infused righteousness as meritorious ground for justification is what we deny when we say that we are justified by faith—but we really effectively deny it only when we say that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The Role of Faith in Sanctification

Now, when we say that we are sanctified by faith, do we mean the same things? Are we using *faith* in the same way? Do we mean that we are sanctified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? That is, do we mean that whatever pronouncement anyone made of our holiness would be utterly gratuitous with reference to our own character and conduct, and if grounded on any merit at all would be grounded on the merit solely of Christ's character and conduct? That our own works—what I have called our domestic righteousness—are not taken into account, are not even in sight, in our sanctification? That the faith that sanctifies us does so *alone*, apart from any works? That in our sanctification we and our faith are purely passive receivers, not active causes? That it is an alien holiness that constitutes our sanctification, not our own holiness? Here we must be careful, for in fact Scripture speaks of sanctification in two senses. The first, definitive sanctification, is complete at conversion (Acts 20:32; 26:18; Romans 6:2, 6, 18; 7:4-6; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; Ephesians 5:26; 1 Peter 2:24; 4:1-2). The second, progressive sanctification, grows over time and is completed only upon glorification in heaven (John 17:17; Romans 8:13; 12:2; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:11-16; Philippians 1:9; 3:13-14; Colossians 1:9-10; 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13; 4:3, 7; 5:23; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18). How we answer this question will differ according to which sense we have in mind.

The role of faith in definitive sanctification. Definitive sanctification, though not identical with justification, is contemporaneous with it, marking “a radical contrast between the believer's pre-Christian existence and the life he lives as a Christian. . . . every Christian is definitively sanctified

the moment he trusts in Christ.”¹⁷ Definitive sanctification consists in Christ’s holiness becoming ours because of our union with Him. As Sinclair Ferguson put it,

Jesus Christ himself is our sanctification or holiness (1 Cor 1:30); and it is through union with Christ that sanctification is accomplished in us. . . . Christ *is* our sanctification. In him it has first come to its fulfillment and consummation. . . . Having sanctified his human nature from the moment of conception . . . Jesus lived his life of perfect holiness in our frail flesh Because this has taken place first in Christ our representative, it is possible for it to take place also in us through the Spirit. . . . Sanctification is therefore neither self-induced nor created in us by divine *fiat*. . . . Because of our fellowship (union) with him we come to share his resources. That is why he can “become for us” sanctification¹⁸

Likewise, John Calvin wrote, “First we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us.”¹⁹

Might we then say that we are *definitively sanctified* by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, meaning by each of those just what we mean by saying that we are *justified* by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? No. Definitive sanctification is not a legal declaration but our being transformed from dead in trespasses and sins to alive in Christ, from natural children of wrath to children of God. Paul says that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). That is what definitive sanctification denotes. Paul pictures this in Romans 6 as the believer’s being set free from slavery to sin and made a slave of righteousness. Consequently, a declaration of our definitive sanctification²⁰ is *not* blind with reference to our own character and conduct or grounded solely on Christ’s; our own works—our domestic righteousness—are in sight.²¹ It is *not*—or at least not solely—an alien holiness that constitutes our definitive sanctification.²² Definitive sanctification involves God’s truly transforming the unregenerate sinner—slave of sin, son of disobedience, natural child of wrath—into a regenerate saint set free from sin and made a slave of righteousness. While it is crucial not to make this

¹⁷Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 757.

¹⁸Sinclair Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 47-76, at 48-50.

¹⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1.1.

²⁰Note well that a *declaration of* our definitive sanctification is not the same as the definitive sanctification itself.

²¹Since definitive sanctification is instantaneous, it is proper to note that *works* here denotes not outward actions—for which the convert has had no time yet—but inward conformity of character to the law. It is also important to note that this inward transformation, though it results in a profound contrast between the man in his converted and his unconverted states, does not equal moral perfection, and that it is entirely the effect of God’s re-creative power.

²²It is possible to see our definitive sanctification as both Christ’s own sanctification (alien to us) presented to God in our stead and our transformation, described in the ensuing sentences. In that case our definitive sanctification has both alien and domestic elements. What I am arguing for here is that our definitive sanctification consists not *solely* in an alien holiness/righteousness.

transformation a ground of justification (as Rome does) or to make it the effect of the sinner's action (as Arminianism does) or of the church's action (as Rome does), it is equally crucial to recognize that it is simultaneous with justification and does involve a real change in the constitution of the convert. The body that once was the temple of Satan has, at the moment of conversion, become the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). The man "dead in the trespasses and sins in which [he] once walked" has been "made . . . alive together with Christ" and has become God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:1, 5, 10). The mind—the "old self"—that once was futile, dark, alienated from the life of God, has been put off, and the "new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness," has been put on (Ephesians 4:17-24). The one definitively sanctified has been reborn, that is, regenerated, transformed from unbeliever to believer.

Now, particularly in light of that last sentence, what is the role of faith in *bringing about* our definitive sanctification? Precisely nothing. We do not believe in order to be reborn—or to be definitively sanctified. Instead, faith is a *consequence* of rebirth, which is one aspect of our definitive sanctification. One way in which the sinner is transformed by his definitive sanctification is that he passes from unbelief to belief. Far from saying that we are definitively sanctified by faith, we must say rather that we are made believers by our definitive sanctification.

The role of faith in progressive sanctification. Might we, however, say that we are progressively sanctified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? That is, do we mean that whatever pronouncement anyone made of our (growth in) holiness would be utterly gratuitous with reference to our own character and conduct, and if grounded on any holiness at all would be grounded on the holiness solely of Christ's character and conduct? That our domestic righteousness is not in sight, that in this process faith is purely a passive receiver, not an active cause, and that it is an alien holiness that constitutes our sanctification, not our own? Again, the answer is no. What we mean instead, when we say that we are sanctified by faith, is that, by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit working through the Word (Romans 8:1-4), our faith actively produces the changes of character (including growing faith) and conduct that constitute our progressive sanctification, our growth in holiness. This is implicit in Paul's statement that faith works through love (Galatians 5:6). Williams says as much: "It is important to emphasize this working out of faith, for some may assume that 'sanctification by faith' betrays a pietist or quietist incursion into the Christian life. Faith, however, has an active side that works itself out in love (Gal 5:6) . . ." ²³ Anthony Hoekema put the point more explicitly. He listed four ways in which faith is "a means of sanctification," the first three of which may depict faith in its passive role as receiver, but the last of which cannot. "First, by faith we continue to grasp our union with Christ, which is the heart of sanctification. . . . Second, by faith we accept the fact that in Christ sin no longer has the mastery over us. . . . Third, by faith we grasp the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to overcome sin and live for God."

Finally, *faith is not only a receptive organ but also an operative power.* True faith by its very

²³Williams, *Theology of Sonship*, 12.

nature produces spiritual fruit . . . Gal. 5:6). Faith produces work (1 Thess. 1:3); the goal of God’s command to us is love, “which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5).²⁴

What Charles Hodge wrote of the distinction between regeneration and sanctification aptly expresses the distinction between definitive and progressive sanctification:

In the work of regeneration, the soul is passive. It cannot coöperate in the communication of spiritual life. But in conversion, repentance, faith, and growth in grace, all its powers are called into exercise. As, however, the effects produced transcend the efficiency of our fallen nature, and are due to the agency of the Spirit, sanctification does not cease to be supernatural, or a work of grace, because the soul is active and coöperating in the process.²⁵

Further, the good works that are the fruit of our active faith do not play the same role in sanctification that they do in our justification. Yes, it is by God’s grace that we have the faith that bears fruit in good works, and so in that sense our sanctification, like our justification, is by grace through faith.²⁶ But the good works *we* do by God’s grace by the power of the Spirit through *active* faith in God’s Word constitute our *sanctification*, while the good works *Christ* did on our behalf and that are imputed to us are received by *passive* faith and constitute our *justification*.²⁷ Our good

²⁴Anthony Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, by Melvin E. Dieter, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 61-90, at 65-6 (emphasis added).

²⁵Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1871-1873; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 3.18.1 (3:215).

²⁶“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

²⁷In the causal terminology of Reformed scholasticism, relying on an Aristotelian analysis of different types of causes (inherited through the Medieval scholastics—Can *anything* good come out of Nazareth?!): *Christ’s* works are the material cause (the matter or substance) of our *justification* (the “stuff” of which our justification is made), while *our* works are the material cause (matter or substance) of our *sanctification* (the “stuff” of which our sanctification is made). Note well, for those unpracticed in scholastic causal analysis: a *material cause* is not something that precedes and brings about an effect but is the substance or stuff (matter) of which the effect produced by an efficient cause is composed. To illustrate: a carpenter (efficient cause) produces a chair (effect) as something to sit on (final [end] cause) according to the nature, or form, of a chair (formal cause) out of wood (material cause) using saw, hammer, sandpaper, and other tools (instrumental causes) and following a blueprint (exemplar cause). Good works (both external and internal—conduct and character), then, do not *produce* our sanctification but are the constituents of our sanctification.

works—which are not mere outward conduct but also inward character²⁸—are the *stuff* of our sanctification,²⁹ but they are the *proof* of our justification (James 2:14-26).

To summarize: In justification, faith is a passive instrument that receives Christ’s righteousness as the ground of God’s declaration that we are righteous in His sight. In definitive sanctification, faith is the effect of God’s regenerating work and is one of the changes wrought in us to separate us not only from the unholy world but also from our own unholy past. In progressive sanctification, faith is an active cause that produces our growth in holiness of character and conduct.

Conclusion

The contrasts, both between justification and sanctification and between the different roles of faith in the two, are clear in the Westminster Standards.

First, consider how the *Shorter Catechism* defines justification and sanctification. “Justification,” it says, “is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”³⁰ The *Larger Catechism* clarifies by adding, “not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them.” By contrast, in answering the question, “What is sanctification?” the *Shorter Catechism* says, “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” The *Larger Catechism* again clarifies, this time by adding, “having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces . . . stirred up, increased, and strengthened.”³¹ Justification neither comprises nor is grounded on a renewal of our character or conduct, but definitive sanctification comprises, and progressive sanctification grows out of, just such a renewal. The initial renewal (“having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts”) is definitive sanctification; the ongoing renewal (“and those graces . . . stirred up, increased, and strengthened”) is progressive sanctification. To say “Richard is justified”

²⁸Christ’s exposition of selected commandments in Matthew 5:17-48 clearly emphasizes that the law requires not only outward action but also inward intention. It was the hypocritical Pharisees who thought mere outward conformity adequately kept the law; Christ demanded inward commitment to the law as well, and it was this that was a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees (v. 20)—and indeed a righteousness that no man can have in and of himself but must receive as a gift from God (Romans 1:17; 3:21-22; 9:30-32).

²⁹See note 27.

³⁰*Shorter Catechism*, 33.

³¹*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 33 (cf. Romans 3:24-25; 4:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21; Romans 5:17-19; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9), 35 (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Ephesians 4:23-24; Romans 6:4, 6); *Larger Catechism*, 70, 75. Charles Hodge provided a helpful list of contrasts between justification and (progressive) sanctification when he wrote, “justification differs from sanctification, (1.) In that the former is a transient act, the latter a progressive work. (2.) Justification is a forensic act, God acting as judge, declaring justice satisfied so far as the believing sinner is concerned, whereas sanctification is an effect due to the divine efficiency. (3.) Justification changes, or declares to be changed, the relation of the sinner to the justice of God; sanctification involves a change of character. (4.) The former, therefore, is objective, the latter subjective. (5.) The former is founded on what Christ has done for us; the latter is the effect of what He does in us. (6.) Justification is complete and the same in all, while sanctification is progressive, and is more complete in some than in others.” *Systematic Theology*, 3.18.1 (3:213).

does not mean that he himself is righteous in character or conduct, but that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to him and he is therefore pardoned and accepted as righteous in God's sight. But to say "Richard is sanctified"—whether definitively or progressively—means that he himself has become (to some degree) holy or righteous. Thus, the *Larger Catechism* explicitly distinguishes the two:

Q. 77. Wherein do justification and sanctification differ? A. Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ, in that God in justification imputeth the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification His Spirit infuseth grace, and enableth to the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other, it is subdued: the one doth equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is neither equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.

Second, consider how the Standards distinguish between faith's role in justification and its role in sanctification. Of saving faith, *Confession*, 14.2, says,

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Although, as we shall see momentarily, the Standards elsewhere clearly distinguish the roles of faith in justification and sanctification, the *Confession* here addresses "saving faith" indiscriminately. Legalists collapse sanctifying faith into justifying faith without any distinction and so talk of an "active, living, obedient" faith in relation to justification without mentioning that it is a "resting" faith.³² Quietists collapse justifying faith into sanctifying faith without any distinction and so talk of a "resting" faith in relation to sanctification without mentioning an "active, living, obedient" faith. Both fail to interpret *Confession* 14.2 in light of the *Larger Catechism*:

Q. 72. What is justifying faith? A. Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of

³²This error is one of the defining marks of the neonomianism, or covenant nomism, promoted by Rev. Norman Shepherd in *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000) and by proponents of what has come to be called Auburn Avenue Theology or Federal Vision theology (e.g., John Barach, Peter J. Leithart, Rich Lusk, Steve M. Schlissel, Tom Trouwborst, Steve Wilkins, and Douglas Wilson), on which see E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), a collection of papers by those proponents and critics Christopher A. Hutchinson, George W. Knight III, Richard D. Phillips, Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., Carl D. Robbins, Morton H. Smith, and R. Fowler White.

a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receives and rests upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.

Q. 73. How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God? A. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.

How can faith be described, as in *Confession* 14.2, as both active and resting at the same time? The *Confession* describes *saving* faith, and since both justification and sanctification are elements of salvation, faith's roles in both are properly addressed together in this context.

In short, *justifying faith is resting faith; sanctifying faith is active faith.*³³ One who has the one has the other—that is the point of James 2 and 1 John 3:3-9. This is *not* to say that, after conversion, at which point his faith *was resting*, the Christian's faith no longer rests but becomes solely active. On the contrary, justifying faith continues to rest in Christ and His righteousness throughout life, even as sanctifying faith works throughout life. Consequently the Christian life is one of constant rest, and constant labor. The Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:1-11 concluded his warning against legalism by saying, “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” Thus he rejected self-effort and its legalism as the ground of assurance that God accepted him in Christ. But he also went on immediately to say, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way” (verses 12-15). Thus he asserted believing effort as an important means of progressive sanctification. In counting his own works rubbish in regard to justification, his faith rested; in pressing toward the goal, his faith acted—and he did both simultaneously, throughout his Christian life (cf. Galatians 2:19-21).

If we conflate these two aspects of faith in either direction, we risk becoming either legalists on the one hand or quietists on the other. The former is deadly, equating with the false gospel of Romanism. The latter is debilitating, leading to practical antinomianism and long-term immaturity

³³I am indebted to my friend Rev. Chris Hutchinson for much in these closing paragraphs and for the very wording of this sentence, as well as for his general comments on this article during its development.

in the Christian life. But recognizing and preserving the distinction enables us to rest completely in the saving work of Christ at the same time that we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

Appendix

The following is an excerpt from J. C. Ryle's "Introduction" to his book *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, & Roots*, rev. ed. (1877; reprint edition, Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001):

I now feel it a duty, in sending forth this volume, to offer a few introductory hints to those whose attention is specially directed to the subject of sanctification in the present day. I know that I do so at the risk of seeming presumptuous, and possibly of giving offence. But something must be ventured in the interests of God's truth. I shall therefore put my hints into the form of questions, and I shall request my readers to take them as "Cautions for the Times on the subject of holiness."³⁴

(1) I ask, in the first place, whether it is wise to speak of *faith* as the one thing needful, and the only thing required, as many seem to do nowadays in handling the doctrine of sanctification. Is it wise to proclaim in so bald, naked, and unqualified a way as many do that the holiness of converted people is *by faith only, and not at all by personal exertion*? Is it according to the proportion of God's Word? I doubt it.

That faith in Christ is the root of all holiness; that the first step towards a holy life is to believe on Christ; that until we believe we have not a jot of holiness; that union with Christ by faith is the secret of both beginning to be holy and continuing holy; that the life that we live in the flesh, we must live by the faith of the Son of God; that faith purifies the heart; that faith is the victory which overcomes the world; that by faith the elders obtained a good report—all these are truths which no well-instructed Christian will ever think of denying. But surely the Scriptures teach us that in following holiness the true Christian needs personal exertion and work as well as faith. The very same apostle who says in one place, "The life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God," says in another place, "I fight," "I run," "I keep under my body"; and in other places, "Let us cleanse ourselves," "Let us labour," "Let us lay aside every weight." (Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 9:26, 27; 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 4:11; 12:1.) Moreover, the Scriptures nowhere teach us that faith *sanctifies* us in the same sense and in the same manner that faith *justifies* us! Justifying faith is a grace that "worketh not," but simply trusts, rests, and leans on Christ (Rom. 4:5). Sanctifying faith is a grace of which the very life is action: it "worketh by love," and, like a mainspring, moves the whole inward man (Gal. 5:6). After all, the precise phrase "sanctified by faith" is only found once in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus said to Saul, "I send thee, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me." Yet even there I agree with

³⁴*Cautions for the Times* (1853) was a book of polemical essays, edited by Richard Whately (17883-1863), Archbishop of Dublin, which addressed many of the issues raised by the Tractarians in their *Tracts for the Times*.

Alford that “*by faith*” belongs to the whole sentence, and must not be tied to the word “sanctified.” The true sense is, “that by faith in Me they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them that are sanctified.” (Compare Acts 26:18 with Acts 20:32.)

As to the phrase, “holiness by faith,” I find it nowhere in the New Testament. Without controversy, in the manner of our justification before God, faith in Christ is the one thing needful. All that simply believe are justified. Righteousness is imputed “to him that worketh not but believeth” (Rom. 4:5). It is thoroughly scriptural and right to say, “Faith alone justifies.” But it is not equally scriptural and right to say, “Faith alone sanctifies.” The saying requires very large qualification. Let one fact suffice. We are frequently told that a man is “justified by faith without the deeds of the law” by St. Paul. But not once are we told that we are “sanctified by faith without the deeds of the law.” On the contrary, we are expressly told by St. James that the faith whereby we are *visibly and demonstratively* justified before man is a faith which “if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (Jas. 2:17).³⁵ I may be told, in reply, that no one, of course, means to disparage “works” as an essential part of life. It would be well, however, to make this more plain than many seem to make it in these days.

³⁵“There is a double justification by God: the one *authoritative*, the other *declarative or demonstrative*” (Thomas Goodwin on “Gospel Holiness,” *Works*, vol. VII, p. 181). The first is St. Paul’s scope when he speaks of justification by faith without the deeds of the law. The second is St. James’ scope when he speaks of justification by works.