

## Justification versus Self-justification

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“To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.” Galatians 2:5

My purpose is to clarify the social dynamics of grace-justification as opposed to the social dynamics of self-justification, so that we can enlarge our understanding of what it means to be faithful to the gospel.

This matters because, as Luther taught us, justification by faith alone is not just one doctrine among others; it is “the article by which the church stands or falls.” Luther also taught us that justification by faith alone is hard to accept and hard to hold onto. In his commentary on Galatians, he wrote, “This doctrine cannot be beaten into our ears too much. Yes, though we learn it and understand it well, yet there is no one who takes hold of it perfectly or believes it with all his heart, so frail a thing is our flesh and disobedient to the Spirit.” What I am saying today, on the basis of Galatians, is that the gospel, and justification in particular, calls for more than doctrinal subscription; it also calls for cultural incarnation. I am not saying it is easy to follow through at both levels. It is impossible without Christ himself, as I will assert in my conclusion. But I am saying we would be unfaithful to settle for doctrinal correctness without also establishing a culture of grace in our churches and denominations and movements. In other words, if justification by faith alone is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls, what does it *look like* to stand rather than fall? Is it possible to fall, while we think we are standing? The book of Galatians shows it is possible. A believer or a church can trumpet the doctrine of grace-justification while, at the same time, be crippled with the dysfunctions of self-justification. In Galatians, Paul is pressing the gospel forward at both levels – the doctrine and the culture. He could not be satisfied if the Galatians’ only response to his letter would be to reassert justification by faith alone as a doctrine; it is clear from this letter that he also expects them to establish a culture consistent with that doctrine. That, in Paul’s view, is faithfulness to Christ.

I begin today with three assumptions.

*One, the classical Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, apart from all our works, is the truth.* The Thirty-Nine Articles put it briefly and clearly:

We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort.

This articulation of the doctrine reminds us of the objectivity, the exteriority, the out-there-ness, the Someone-Else-ness of our justification, as John Bunyan also reminds us in his *Grace Abounding*:

One day as I was passing in the field, and that too with some dashes on my conscience, fearing lest all was still not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, *Your righteousness is in heaven*. And I thought as well that I saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand. There, I say, is my righteousness, so that wherever I was or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, [John Bunyan] lacks my righteousness, for that righteousness is right before Him. I also saw that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, the same yesterday and today and forever. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I went home rejoicing for the grace and love of God. Here I lived for some time, sweetly at peace with God through Christ. Oh, I thought, Christ! Christ! There was nothing but Christ before my eyes.

*Two, self-justification is the deepest impulse in the fallen human heart*. We might sincerely agree with the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. But deep in our hearts, it isn't that simple, is it? Gerhard Forde helps us see ourselves:

The problem lies in the fact that the Old Being will not and cannot hear gospel no matter what one says. The Old Being will only use whatever is said as part of the protection, solidification in the *causa sui* project [the self-justifications we build], and translate it into or see it as a ratification of the legal system. That is, the Old Being will turn *whatever* one says into law.

We deeply desire to save ourselves. At the same time, our sin includes a hidden filter blocking out clarity about our sin. Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes our lack of self-awareness:

You will never make yourself feel that you are a sinner, because there is a mechanism in you as a result of sin that will always be defending you against every accusation. We are all on very good terms with ourselves, and we can always put up a good case for ourselves. Even if we try to make ourselves feel that we are sinners, we will never do it. There is only one way to know that we are sinners, and that is to have some dim, glimmering conception of God.

Our mentality of blind self-justification makes Paul's letter to the Galatians endlessly relevant to us believers. We don't get rid of Galatianism by embracing grace-justification. But, by embracing grace-justification, we do gain a remedy for our compulsive self-justifications. The Puritan William Fenner taught us to see justification by faith alone as a constant resource:

As we sin daily, so he justifies daily, and we must daily go to him for it. Justification is an ever-running fountain, and therefore we cannot look to have all the water at once.

Justification by our own righteousness is not a Galatian problem only or a Catholic problem only; it is a human problem universally. It is a *Christian* problem. You and I are always, at best, an inch away from its dark powers. Indeed, it is possible to preach and defend the doctrine of grace-justification, but do it out of motives of self-justification, and with its bitter fruit. This kind of disconnect is when bad things start happening in Protestant churches that sincerely love the Lord.

*Three, gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture.* The gospel does more than renew us personally within. The doctrines of grace also create a culture of grace, called a healthy church, where the gospel is articulated at the level of doctrine and incarnated at the level of culture and vibe and ethos and feel and relationships and community. But getting a church there and keeping a church there is not easy. Without the doctrine, the culture is unsustainable. Without the culture, the doctrine appears pointless and powerless. An example of how badly we can split doctrine and culture is the Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18. You know how Luke introduces it: "Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous *and viewed others with contempt.*" The Pharisee was going to the temple, the place of substitutionary atonement. Why? He believed in it. But his heart was more devious than his belief. His self-justifying heart spilled over in an attitude of contempt toward the tax collector. Self-justification creates an outlook of aloofness and superiority and negative scrutiny and "Gotcha!" Though we hold the doctrine of grace-justification, our deeper thoughts and feelings can slip into functional self-justification, and it shows. Trusting in ourselves that we are righteous and viewing others with contempt always go together. When we see the negative dynamics of dismissive contempt, there is a reason. And the reason is a gospel deficit in the heart, however sincere the gospel profession in the head. We look at our doctrinal statements and our mental beliefs, and they seem to line up. But a tip-off that the gospel does not have as deep a hold on us as we would wish is whenever, like this Pharisee, we start looking for a scapegoat, someone to judge, someone to whom we can transfer our anxiety. Whenever we *need* someone else to be wrong, to preserve our own okayness, we are in self-justification mode, we aren't really trusting in the perfect Scapegoat God provided at the cross. And it creates a culture of ugliness. But justification by faith alone creates a culture of acceptance and warmth and beauty and safety: "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). The more clearly that doctrine is taught, and the more beautifully that culture is developed, the more powerfully a church will bear prophetic witness to Jesus as the mighty Friend of sinners. He will be honored, and people will come.

Those are my three assumptions as we begin. Let's go now to Paul's letter to the Galatians to see how he guides us away from self-justification and toward grace-justification. We will consider just three brief passages.

*First, in Galatians 1:10, Paul says, “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”* Why does Paul say that? Because he has just heaped anathemas on anyone who teaches a false gospel. Apparently, some had accused Paul of being a cowardly people-pleaser because of his message of grace. Now he counters that accusation: “My anathemas in verses 8-9 – is that what a compromiser would say?”

But what is the gospel doctrine embedded in verse 10, and how is Paul himself demonstrating its gospel culture? “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” The doctrine implicit here is the ultimacy of Christ, the all-sufficiency of Christ, which is entailed in justification by faith alone. We know from Philippians 3 that Paul linked in his mind the surpassing worth of knowing Christ with the righteousness that comes only through faith in Christ. Why trust in Christ alone for our righteousness, unless he occupies the place of ultimacy over all things? But he does. In fact, Paul is not saying in Philippians 3 that his former successes are now neutral to him. He is saying they are distasteful, compared with Christ. Paul’s view of the supremacy of Christ is so high as to be simple, uncluttered. Christ is the only one whose judgment finally matters. We believe that too. We believe that our personal validation, the only justification for our existence, comes not from ourselves or other sinners but only from Christ. His approval alone is enough for us forever. That gospel conviction creates a culture of boldness and independence and nobility of mind, such as we see in Paul.

Paul cared intensely about people. He cared sincerely about their opinions and their feelings, and he wanted to please them. He says in 1 Corinthians 10:33, “I try to please everyone in everything I do.” What a sweetheart this man was! He never stopped thinking about how he could win people’s hearts for Christ. He was widely adaptable, because he respected people and their various ways of seeing things. And here is how he reconciled his desire to please people, on the one hand, with his deeper desire to please God, on the other. When Paul faced a choice between pleasing himself and pleasing others, he pleased others. When he faced a choice between pleasing others and pleasing God, he pleased God. In fact, he is so clear about this that he states his position as a stark either/or: “If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” He will not depart from Christ for anyone. His justification is in Christ alone, and to Christ alone he therefore gives himself in complete surrender, whatever price he might pay socially in terms of human disapproval. He wants to please people, for the sake of Christ; but he wants to please Christ himself more, so he is willing to be unpopular, even controversial. He is willing to be misunderstood and misjudged. He doesn’t relish it. But neither is he threatened by it. And by his example, he is calling the Galatians and us to follow him into manly independence.

The first indicator of gospel doctrine getting traction as gospel culture is the magnificence of total surrender to Christ alone, even when people judge us otherwise. The ultimacy of Christ does not position us to go with the crowd, not even the Christian crowd, as if we needed human approval to stand on our own two feet. Do we need appropriate accountability? Yes. But for every rogue pastor who won’t listen to anyone,

how many just go along to get along? John Calvin reminded us that, at the deepest level, our business is with God (*Institutes*, 1.17.2). Without that clarity, we fall rapidly into a culture of cowardice and conformity. When we do that, we are not serving Christ: “If I were still trying to please man, *I would not be a servant of Christ.*”

In Luke 16:14-15 we see how self-justification-through-human-approval can mask an even deeper sin: “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed Jesus. And he said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination to God.’” How different can things seem to us from how they are to God! He can see what man might cover over – in the case of the Pharisees, love of money. As long as they retained human approval, guaranteeing a steady monthly paycheck, they were satisfied. They even ridiculed Jesus when his teaching encroached on their status quo. They *needed* something to be wrong with Jesus, to deflect attention from the greed lying quietly undisturbed in their hearts. And it seemed to work. They did look good to others and they did secure their positions. But God called their high approval ratings an abomination – the lowest of the low.

In his address on justification by faith alone, J. Gresham Machen called this doctrine

an answer to the greatest personal question ever asked by a human soul – the question, “How shall I be right with God? How do I stand in God’s sight? With what favor does he look upon me?” There are those, I admit, who never raise that question; there are those who are concerned with the question of their standing before men but never with the question of their standing before God; there are those who are interested in what “people say” but not in the question of what God says. Such men, however, are not those who move the world; they are apt to go with the current; they are apt to do as others do; they are not the heroes who change the destinies of the race. The beginning of true nobility comes when a man ceases to be interested in the judgment of men and becomes interested in the judgment of God.

It is so freeing to stop needing human approval; it is so freeing to get up and follow Christ, though inevitably some will find fault. It is so freeing not to be bound by how things look in the eyes of man and to be deeply bound to Jesus. If he is our only justification, then he is all the reason we need to live. The doctrine of justification creates a culture of manly, noble thinking for ourselves as servants of Christ. Only men like that can change the course of history.

*Secondly, in Galatians 2:11-14, Paul writes: “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. The rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to*

*Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"*

This passage exploded in my life during my first decade of ministry in the 1970s. One of my early sermons was on this passage. I entitled it “The Politics of Legalism,” and I still like that title. This passage alerted me early on to the danger of absolutizing and enforcing any tradition. Peter did that, and Paul called him out for it. There was nothing wrong with holiness in traditional Jewish dress. But there was something wrong with elevating and perpetuating that tradition, because Christ fulfills the rituals of the Mosaic law. When Peter distanced himself from the unkosher Gentile believers, he was, in effect, throwing redemptive history into reverse gear and ignoring the triumph of Jesus. What was he saying by his behavior? He was saying that Gentile believers *had* to adapt to Jewish culture for them to be good enough for Christ – and for Peter! What an insult to the finished work of Christ on the cross. How demeaning to those Gentile believers. What an abuse of the holy book of Leviticus. What an arrogant exaltation of Peter and his tradition. What a violation of justification by faith alone. What a pathetic church culture.

And Peter knew better. God had taught Peter, through the vision of the sheet coming down with the unclean animals for Peter’s lunch, that “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15). What was driving Peter here in Antioch was not ignorance, nor a deeper insight into the gospel, but fear, fear of church politics, fear of being disinvited to preach at future conferences in Jerusalem: “He drew back and separated himself, *fearing the circumcision party.*” When Peter denied Jesus back in the gospels, he was panicking for his physical self-preservation. Here in Antioch he is denying Jesus again, this time panicking for his social self-preservation. Driven by that primitive fear, Peter falsified the gospel – not at the level of doctrine but at the level of culture. He was forcing (ἀναγκάζω, verse 14) these Gentile believers to conform to Jewish customs, in order to be acceptable to God and full members of his church. Paul twice calls it hypocrisy (verse 13). Fear of human disapproval feeds hypocrisy and posturing and positioning and wanting to be perceived in a certain way and wanting to be identified with certain people or on a certain bandwagon. What is this fear, but the empty drivenness of self-justification? It is a powerful force among Christians. Peter’s fear and hypocrisy were so contagious that even Barnabas was swept away. Paul alone had the courage to stand up and oppose Peter openly. We can be glad he did, because the gospel was at stake – the gospel for Europe and eventually America. If Paul had caved too, the spread of the gospel would have stalled, because the gospel would have been accessible only to those few people who could embrace Judaism in addition to Jesus.

Earlier in chapter 2, Paul writes how, at another moment of decision, he took a bold stand, “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Galatians 2:5). Both there in verse 5 and here in verse 14, what Paul insists on is not the gospel as a bare theological datum but “the truth of the gospel,” that is, the right understanding of the gospel. What does that tell us? It tells us that gospel faithfulness is more than *saying*, “Justification by faith alone is the truth.” We must follow through on the implications, or we unsay what we say. But we might not even notice, if all we do is look at the doctrine

and tell ourselves, “That’s what I believe.” So did Peter. Paul says in verse 16, “We [you and I, Peter] have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith.” Peter never changed his doctrine. What he did do was deconstruct the culture entailed in his doctrine. Paul shows, in verses 15-21, that Peter’s *behavior* betrayed his own doctrine. Peter was rebuilding the culture of self-justification he had torn down (verse 18). Peter was nullifying the grace of God and desecrating the cross of Christ (verse 21). And Peter was an apostle. In fact, everyone involved in this sorry episode was a Christian believer. As I said before, self-justification is a Christian problem. Here in Antioch it was even an *apostolic* problem. Let’s never think we are above the teaching of Galatians. Preserving the truth of the gospel in our generation is no simple matter.

This passage pushes us to search ourselves with deeper questions. We must ask more than, Do we subscribe to the doctrine of justification by faith alone? We must also ask, Are we keeping in step with the truth of that doctrine? Do we even see gospel faithfulness with that magnitude? Paul included *applying* the gospel within his concept of faithfulness to the gospel. He demanded that Peter and the others follow their own doctrinal vector by their practice: “I saw that *their conduct* was not in step with the truth of the gospel . . .” The gospel is more than a place to stand; it is also a path to follow, without caving to political pressure, but boldly pressing the gospel forward, because it is in the face of resistance that the all-sufficiency of Christ becomes clearer.

John Stott calls Paul’s confrontation of Peter “without doubt one of the most tense and dramatic episodes in the New Testament.” We can benefit from power encounters – not personal rivalries! – so that the gospel continues to change us. It was when Paul’s apostolic boldness refused to satisfy an inappropriate demand that that demand could then reconsider its own intensity and see the all-sufficient Christ with greater clarity, humility and joy, and get back in step with how gracious he really is.

What then is the doctrine embedded in Galatians 2:11-14, and what kind of culture does that doctrine create? The doctrine is that everyone who simply trusts Jesus for their justification is clean before God, whatever their background. They do not need to add to the merit of Christ another layer of acceptability to man. If God declares us kosher through Christ alone, who can demand more? The culture created by that doctrine is one of openness, freedom, candor and fearlessness. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy” (Matthew 11:30). But self-justification creates a culture of oppression – though people passionately committed to Protestant doctrine can generate it, as in fact Peter did.

What stands out in my mind about Galatians 2:11-14 is that Paul considers gospel culture just as sacred as gospel doctrine. He fought for that culture, because the doctrine of grace-justification cannot be preserved in its integrity if surrounded by a culture of self-justification.

*Thirdly, in Galatians 4:17, Paul writes of the false teachers, “They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.” And then in 5:15 he warns the Galatians themselves, “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”* There is no gospel

here. These are the negative dynamics unleashed into a church by the mentality of self-justification. What kind of dark church culture emerges?

First, selfish ambition. Galatians 4:17 exposes the manipulative power of exclusion: “They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.” “They make much of you” could also be translated “They are zealous for you, they are eager to win you over, they take such an interest in you, they seem to care about you so deeply.” The false teachers appeared loving and concerned. But they had an ulterior motive. It was like chapter two in *Tom Sawyer*. Tom got the other boys to whitewash the fence for him by the manipulative power of exclusion. Mark Twain wrote: “In order to make a man or boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain.” But full inclusion in the church of Christ is easy to attain. All we need is Christ, and he gives himself away entirely on terms of grace, received with the empty hands of faith.

To accomplish their hidden purpose, the false teachers had to get Paul out of the way. So they encouraged a sense of grievance against Paul, as if he were an enemy (verse 16). If the false teachers could blur the people’s hyper-focus on Christ – and Paul was a barrier to that end – they could shape the religious culture of those churches. They could take control. So they redefined acceptability within Galatian Christianity on their own terms. The people, in their weakness and insecurity, were falling for it, conforming to a culture of exclusion. Without a return to the gospel, the false teachers would have those churches to themselves, their own religious sandbox to play in, their ambition successful, their reign unchallenged. John Calvin comments:

This stratagem is common to all the ministers of Satan, of alienating the people from their pastor, to draw them [the people] to themselves [the false teachers] and having, so to say, disposed of the rival, to take his place.

Paul is so disturbed by what the Galatians themselves cannot see that, when he takes pen in hand at the end of the letter, he adds this: “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised . . . They desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh” (Galatians 6:12-13). In other words, the false teachers wanted to use the Galatians as scalps hung on their belt, to enhance their own importance. It was self-justification by numbers of conversions – not conversions to Christ for his glory, but to their group for their own self-validation. Their behavior was the opposite of what Paul required of himself back in chapter 1, when he refused to compromise the gospel for the sake of human approval. He was a servant of Christ. The false teachers were promoters of Self.

Secondly, savage destruction: “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” How does an animal bite and devour its victims? By its mouth. Even so, the Galatians were in danger, from their sins of the tongue, of destroying their worship, their fellowship and their witness. With the false teaching disturbing them, tongues were busy, even unrestrained. The Galatian churches were unstable to begin with, because the reassuring finality of “It is finished” had been



eroded away by the acids of self-justification. Insecurity, anxiety, fear and anger had entered in. How could it be otherwise? Self-justification *cannot* create anything but an unsatisfiable demandingness, for Christ is not its satisfying provision. No matter how well a person has been raised to be courteous, self-justification must generate finger-pointing and accusing and slandering and dividing. Whatever the outcome, *no one wins*.

When in any church savagery erupts, the problem is not personal, a lack of niceness. The problem is theological, a lack of gospel. But where Jesus reigns by his gospel, love reigns as “a mutual protection and kindness” (Calvin). Paul was a man of courage, forthrightness and apolitical independence. He was also a man of love, humility and warmth: “You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13-14). Strong principles and humane relationships, together simultaneously, mark a church as faithful to the gospel.

*What then does it mean for a church to stand, rather than fall, by the gospel of justification by faith alone?* It means that a church teaches the doctrine of grace-justification, while it also builds – and, inevitably, protects – a culture of grace-justification. In that kind of church, no one is forced to prove himself, no one is personally humiliated or undermined or cornered or pressured to conform to a human demand. *Everyone is free to seek the Lord and grow in grace, in harmony with others around.* If confrontation is ever required, it is only “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Galatians 2:5). That cannot be a personal smackdown; it may only be the defense and confirmation of the gospel in both doctrine and culture. For some churches, this larger understanding of gospel faithfulness might require repentance and reformation. We might not be as gospel-centered as we thought.

Nothing is easier for a Protestant church than to enshrine the doctrines of Christ within a culture of Ego, and we effectively de-gospel the gospel. We naturally divide what the gospel unites. The gospel unites manliness with tenderness, and all other biblical polarities, as we see strikingly in Paul and perfectly in Jesus. How then, with our selfishly ambitious and cruelly destructive hearts, can we bear faithful witness to the gospel today? Is it even possible? Yes, but only if we walk by the Spirit moment by moment: “But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). That is not mechanical or formulaic. It is costly at a deeply personal level. But there is no other way. It means more than theological alertness. It means real-time dependence on God. It means putting ourselves – not others – under the judgment of his Word. It means being forgiven constantly, making endless mid-course corrections, and following Christ with daily crucifixions of our pride.

In the flesh, all we can do is create doctrinally correct cultures of ugliness. But in the Spirit, and only in the Spirit, we can become, imperfectly but visibly, living proof of the truth and beauty of Jesus. This is the gospel faithfulness our generation must see.