

**Faith Alone – The Doctrine of Justification:
What the Reformers Taught ... and Why it Still Matters**

Thomas Schreiner

Zondervan, 2015

288 pages

Fred Zaspel

Hi! This is Fred Zaspel with Books at a Glance. Today we're talking to Dr. Tom Schreiner about his new book, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification—What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters*. Dr. Schreiner is a friend of us here at Books at a Glance. He serves on our Board of Reference. He is Professor of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. This is his newest book. I've just read through it. I thought it was fabulous. It is marked by his usual careful exegetical precision and doctrinal clarity, and it is a very important doctrine. Again, the title, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification—What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters*. He's here to talk to us about it today. Tom, good to have you with us.

Tom Schreiner

Fred, it is good to be with you today.

Fred Zaspel

All right, first off, this book is first in a brief series of volumes that is scheduled to be published over the next year or so. Tell us about that.

Schreiner

Yes. Matthew Barrett is the general editor, and the books are on the Five Solas. The intention of the series was to publish five books on the five solas, and to have them published roughly around the time of about 2017, the 500th anniversary posting of the 95 Theses. So Matthew Barrett is doing *Scripture Alone*, Carl Trueman is doing *Grace Alone*, Stephen Wellum *Christ Alone*, and David VanDrunen *For the Glory of God Alone*. I believe David's book is the next one due to be out, and Matthew's shortly thereafter. I've already read Matthew's on a PDF so it is coming out soon as well. So the first three books will be out very soon.

Fred Zaspel

So will all five of them be out before 2017?

Schreiner

I don't know that. I don't know where Steve and Carl are in terms of their volumes. We are having a theology conference on this September 24th and 25th with all five speakers at Southern Seminary, so in a couple weeks we'll all be gathered together and we're giving presentations based on the book.

Fred Zaspel

And we can find information on that at sbts.edu, I imagine?

Schreiner

Right, right.

Fred Zaspel

All right. Okay, talk to us about your book, first of all in just broad strokes. How do you approach your subject? What can readers expect to find?

Schreiner

I would describe my book as a tour of the subject. So I don't only look at Scripture—that's a big part of the book, of course. We want to establish that justification by faith alone is based on the Scriptures. But I also look at history, so we conduct some tour stops along the way, ports of call so to speak. So I look at the early fathers, and I try to argue there that the early fathers are compatible, mainly, I think, with the notion that justification is by faith alone. I have chapters on Calvin and Luther and Edwards and Owen, and I consider Richard Baxter since Baxter and Owen had different understandings of imputation.

Fred Zaspel

Wesley?

Schreiner

Wesley, yes, I have a little section on Wesley. Wesley is very hard to understand on this issue because he goes back and forth so much on where does he stand on the matter. As you know, Wesley's writings are very occasional, so it is difficult sometimes to discern where he is coming from. I think he finally landed in his very last sermon, I think he landed positively on the issue, but it is quite disputed. Actually, people dispute Edwards as well. There is a good cadre of scholars who think that Edwards wasn't consistent. But I argue in terms of what Edwards wrote, that I think that he was consistent at the end of the day, even if we wouldn't all agree with exactly how he formulated it. Edwards was quite creative, and I think sometimes his creativity was a problem. But I think he was simply trying to express the Reformed understanding of justification in new ways, which was quite typical of him—to try to formulate it in fresh and creative ways, to speak to the issues of his time. And Edwards, more than Wesley—Edwards is very strong that we're justified by faith alone and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. So if he was inconsistent, he wasn't consciously inconsistent. We can at least say that. He believed he was defending the standard Protestant doctrine on it. It was when he came to discuss justification by works that some think that he strayed a bit. Then in the book I also consider more recent contributions or controversies. I look at ECT, the evangelicals and Catholics together, the Lutheran and Catholic joint declaration on justification. I consider Frank Beckwith's conversion back to Roman Catholicism. Then I consider some of the

pastoral ramifications as well. Biblically, I should have said, I look at the new perspective, N.T. Wright and others who are advocating the new perspective.

Fred Zaspel

Well, I thought it was a great approach to start with the history and then frame out the discussion that way. The bulk of your book is more exegetical, looking at the biblical material, and then at the end giving some contemporary applications to some of those issues. I thought it was a great approach. I think it is very helpful.

Okay, let's look at some of the biblical material. What is justification? Give us an understanding of that biblically. Perhaps also you can set that in contrast to some competing views and misunderstanding. What is justification?

Schreiner

I would say that justification is the declaration that we stand in the right before God. That right standing before God, in the traditional Protestant understanding—which I uphold in this book, is based on the imputation of Christ's righteousness. I think the classic formulation of that is in John Owen's book *Justification: By Faith Alone*, where Owen considers this issue after one hundred years' debate between Protestants and Catholics. He also considers a Socinian view. So you have a very mature position when we read Owen. Now today, of course, we have people such as N.T. Wright. Wright's view is hard to parse out in some ways, because Wright would agree that justification is forensic. He's very clear on that. However, he rejects the notion that there is an imputation of Christ's righteousness. Furthermore, he would say that justification is fundamentally about covenant membership, or God's covenant faithfulness, so that justification, according to Wright, is more of an ecclesiological doctrine, a church doctrine, instead of a soteriological doctrine. Of course I agree with him that justification is forensic, but I think he wrongly rejects the notion that there is no imputation of righteousness, and I think that he is fundamentally wrong when he says that justification focuses on ecclesiology rather than soteriology. I think that's backwards. I think that justification has to do with being right before God, and I try to show in the book that justification language is used with other soteriological language like salvation. So the notion that it is fundamentally ecclesiological, I think is mistaken. I would agree with Wright that it has ecclesiological implications, but he turns that around, and he says that it is fundamentally about ecclesiology and it has soteriological implications, and I think that's just backwards.

Fred Zaspel

Right. Well, flesh that out a bit then. Explain for us why this doctrine of justification by faith alone with the imputation of Christ's righteousness is so essential to the Gospel. Why is it so important for believers to understand and embrace? We've been told by Calvin that this is the "hinge of true religion," and we've heard that this is the "article of a rising and falling church." What is it that makes this doctrine so essential and so important?

Schreiner

Personally and pastorally, there is no more important issue than this. How are we justified? How do we stand in the right before a holy God, a holy God who demands perfection? I think we have to begin there because some deny this today, actually—that God demands perfect obedience. But if we start there—and I think the Scriptures are quite clear on this—Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden for one sin. God did not say to them, “Let’s see if you can do better from here out and it will be fine.” One sin disqualifies us from God’s presence. This is something that Protestants have always taught, and I think the early fathers as well.

So, how can we stand before the Holy One of Israel—on what basis? The Scriptures are clear. We can point to Paul in particular, but I think the other authors agree as well, that we cannot be justified by our works. We can’t be justified by our works because God demands perfect, flawless obedience, and all fall short. So in one sense it is really quite simple, isn’t it? God demands absolute perfection. If we have sinned before him, and we all have, we’re faced with eternal judgment.

So how can anyone be right before Him? The answer of the Gospel—this is why it is so important—is that the Creator God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect life, who was sinless, and He went to the cross and He bore the penalty that we deserve, so that we receive forgiveness of sins when we trust in Him. Also, we receive—when we trust in Him—his righteousness. His righteousness is imputed to us. His righteousness is credited to us. Since even after we’re saved, even after we’re forgiven, we continue to be sinners. We continue to fall short in many ways.

One of the stories I tell, which I know you know very well, Fred, is when the famous Presbyterian New Testament scholar, J. Gresham Machen, who founded Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—when he was dying in the 1930s and he was in his fifties. Machen had done so much for the cause of the Gospel, but as he is dying, clearly what came to his mind were his many sins. God had transformed him in remarkable ways, but he still fell short in many ways, and as he is dying, he says, “Thank God for the act of obedience of Christ. No hope without it.” And the act of obedience of Christ is another way of speaking of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

Machen was a great theologian, but personally he was expressing that truth in the most poignant of moments that his only hope of standing before a holy God was what Christ had done for him, and not his own righteousness, which can’t stand before a holy God, but only the righteousness of Jesus Christ. So this isn’t [only] a very important theological issue, but it is really the most important question of life for every one of us. How do we stand before a holy God? Therefore, the reformers were adamant on this question. Luther, Calvin, and of course many others, and it has been the mark of Protestants over against Roman Catholics ever since.

Fred Zaspel

This is humanity’s greatest question. This is the question, really, that ties into the storyline of the Bible, like you mentioned, from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden onwards. This is the issue that has to be addressed, and the biggest one we can face.

All right, what is the role of faith in justification?

Schreiner

The title of the book, and what the reformers argued, is that justification is by faith alone. As we read the New Testament, the New Testament teaches us that justification does not come by the works of the law, or by works, or by what we do or accomplish or perform. Justification is by faith.

Now quite interestingly, nowhere does it say explicitly in the New Testament that justification is by faith alone, which is one of the Five Solas. I would argue, as Luther did, in Romans 3:28, that when Paul says that justification is by faith and not of the law, it is a right deduction to conclude from that that justification is by faith alone. [inaudible] Joseph Fitzmyer is a famous Roman Catholic New Testament scholar. He is not a Protestant, but he does say in his commentary on Romans 3:28 that Luther got it right there.

Fred Zaspel

Interesting. Interesting.

Schreiner

Also he says that justification is by faith alone. Since works of the law and works were excluded from justification, then justification is by faith alone, by trusting—and this connects us to what we just talked about—so, what is our trust in? We have a controversy in evangelicalism—do we say that faith is our righteousness, or is it the case that faith justifies us because it unites us with Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness? I would say the latter. Our faith justifies us because it unites us with Jesus Christ, in whom we find forgiveness of sins, and the righteousness of God is given to us (2 Corinthians 5:21). In one sense, I think it is almost simple if I explain it this way. Why is it that faith justifies us? It can't be, I would say, to speak dogmatically, it can't be because it is our faith. What justifies us is clearly the object of our faith. It is not our faith itself that justifies us. It is who our faith is placed in that justifies us, which is Jesus Christ.

Fred Zaspel

Actually, I was going to follow up on that. I was going to ask another question in that regard too. With regard to Paul's language, like in Romans 4, where he says "faith is counted as righteousness," the way it is translated in, for instance, the ESV. Faith is counted as righteousness. That's often puzzling to people because it sounds like he's saying that faith is our righteousness. Is "as" the best translation there? What's going on?

Schreiner

I don't have any objection to "faith is counted as righteousness." I think that's a fine translation. We have the same issue in Galatians 3. So here we have to think profoundly about that text. Yes, one option out there is that it actually says faith *is* our righteousness. But when we consider Romans 4 and Galatians 3, is that the substance of the argument? I would maintain that we have to recall that both in Galatians 2, he has just argued that we have been crucified with Christ, death and life have come in Jesus Christ, and in Romans,

right before Romans 4, we have Romans 3: 21-26, where Paul makes it very plain that our faith is placed in Jesus Christ, who is our redemption, and who absorbed the wrath of God on our behalf. Hence, when he says faith is our righteousness, I think Paul has in mind given the context, it is faith in the one who has atoned for our sins. So there is the danger of isolating [Galatians] 3 and Romans 4 from the flow of thought in both those letters, and I think that is what happens there. I can understand why the mistake is made, but biblical scholars and theologians—we always need to be reading what is said in light of the whole argument. Therefore, I think it is clear that the faith that saves us is the faith in God, not faith itself.

Fred Zaspel

Yes, faith cannot be both the righteousness that we need and the means of obtaining it.

Schreiner

Exactly, exactly. Very well put.

Fred Zaspel

Well, maybe this is too technical, maybe this is not an important question. But at the risk of getting too technical, maybe we can talk prepositions just a little bit. The New Testament writers employ several different expressions to convey the idea that we are justified by faith, we're justified by faith, through faith, out of faith, on the basis of faith. There are even expressions like the righteousness of faith. Is there any particular significance to any of those expressions, and are there any important distinctions to be made?

Schreiner

I would argue that the distinctions are not finally important. Not everyone would agree with that. But my understanding of prepositions is influenced by Moisés Silva. And Silva argues that prepositions in and of themselves, in some sense, are marker words. They're connection words. And hence, I think what Paul does, and other New Testament writers, but particularly Paul—I think Paul uses these prepositions rather loosely. So if we can speak in Greek, I think he used “*ek*” and “*dia*.”

One of the key examples of this is in Romans 3:30, he switches prepositions. The Gentiles are justified—I forget which one is which, but *ek pisteos*, and the Jews *dia pisteos*. I don't think there's any significance in that. Almost all commentators agree it is a matter of stylistic variety.

Then, in Philippians 3:9, he says “*epi*”—upon faith. So I would argue that we ought not to press the preposition. Another huge debate is in the genitive constructions *pistis Iesou Christou*, which I understand to be faith in Jesus Christ. So I think what we have in the New Testament is we just have a variety of ways of describing and depicting righteousness by faith. We remember, therefore, that Paul is not writing systematic treatises. It is very theological and well thought through, but in terms of using the prepositions, he opts for variety. The differences between the prepositions in my opinion ought not to be pressed. They're just different ways of just saying the same thing.

Fred Zaspel

Excellent. All right, another question that keeps popping up today. How are justification and sanctification related? How can we summarize that?

Schreiner

I think I would say, of course, there is no justification without sanctification. I would say that justification is the basis of sanctification—so that they need to be distinguished. 1 Corinthians 1:30: Jesus Christ is our righteousness and our sanctification. I should say, actually thinking of 1 Corinthians 1:30, I think in some contexts, actually like 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 1 Corinthians 6:11, sanctification and justification are just two different metaphors of describing what it means to be right before God. If we're talking about positional sanctification or definitive sanctification, when Paul uses sanctification that way, it is simply a way of saying we're in the realm of the holy, whereas justification is a law court forensic metaphor, and that is a way of saying we're declared to be in the right before the judge.

But when we're talking about progressive sanctification, that's a different entity, I think. Justification, unlike sanctification, doesn't progress. With progressive sanctification, we grow in holiness. There's progress in our life. We can go up and back, but hopefully we grow in a spiral, that we're growing to be more like Christ. But our justification is perfect from the beginning, because it is in Christ. Our progressive sanctification isn't perfect, and we won't be perfectly sanctified until Jesus returns, until the final day.

So they ought to be distinguished in that way. Our right standing with God is not based on our progressive sanctification. Our right standing with God is based on our justification, because our justification is based on the perfect righteousness of Christ that is given to us.

Fred Zaspel

Very good. One last question. Any other books in the works that we can keep an eye out for?

Schreiner

Well, I'm in the beginning stages of revising *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament). So that's good. It came out in 1998, the Baker Commentary on Romans, and so there has been seventeen or eighteen years of literature. I've changed my mind on a few things as well, so I am very excited to be working on Romans, and there's a lot of literature out there. It is amazing how much has been written in the last seventeen, eighteen years since I worked on it. So I'm working on that slowly. Lord willing, I will get that done in the next two or three years. And then, I haven't even begun it, but I have a contract to write *1 Corinthians* in the Tyndale series, so a smaller commentary. I feel like I can never replace Leon Morris. How can you ever replace Leon Morris? Leon Morris is one of my heroes. But Lord willing, I'll get to that one as well.

Fred Zaspel

Great. Well, it is great to have you with us. Again, the title of Tom's new book, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters* by Tom Schreiner. Tom, it is good to have you with us. Thanks so much.

Schreiner

It has been great to be with you, Fred.

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