

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Timothy 2:18

Misaiming concerning Justification and God’s Purpose

Misaiming: “The Bible teaches that God elected men in eternity in order that in due time they might be justified through faith” (J. I. Packer, “Introductory Essay,” in James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961, pp. 2-3).

Truth: According to the statement above, God’s selection of certain ones in eternity was for the purpose of His justifying them by faith. In this view, justification is God’s goal, and it is supposed that this is what the Bible teaches. Although the truth concerning justification by faith is most precious, the assertion that justification is the goal of God’s selection is erroneous and seriously misrepresents God and His eternal purpose.

Concerning God’s choice, selection, and predestination, Ephesians 1:4 and 5 say, “Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before Him in love, predestinating us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.” Christ was the sphere in which we were chosen by God to be holy, that is, sanctified and separated to God and saturated with God, partaking of the holy nature of God in order to be the same as God, holy even as He is holy. God chose us for this. Furthermore, we were predestinated, marked out beforehand, unto sonship, that is, to be regenerated by Him and thereby receive the life of God to become sons of God for the corporate expression of God. In these verses, which speak of God’s action in eternity for His good pleasure, there is no mention of justification.

Ephesians 1:11 goes on to say that we have been “predestinated according to the purpose of the One who works all things according to the counsel of His will.” Because God has an eternal purpose (3:11) and a will with a good pleasure, He predestinated us unto sonship. He did not predestinate us unto justification by faith, because justification is a necessary procedure, not God’s goal. In Christ God has saved us and called us “according to His own purpose” (2 Tim. 1:9).

Second Thessalonians 2:13 says that God chose us “from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of

the Spirit and belief of the truth.” From the beginning, from eternity past, God chose us unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit. As the New Testament reveals, this sanctification involves the Spirit’s convicting us concerning sin and causing us to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus (John 16:8; 1 Pet. 1:2), the Spirit’s sanctifying us positionally and dispositionally at the time we were saved (Heb. 13:12; 1 Cor. 6:11), and the Spirit’s sanctifying us dispositionally as we grow in Christ with the divine life. Through this threefold sanctification of the Spirit, God’s full and complete salvation is applied to us. Once again, even though justification by faith is indispensable in our being approved by God and qualified to receive eternal life, there is no mention here of justification in relation to God’s choosing of us. Central to our consideration is Romans 8:29 and 30:

Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers; and those whom He predestinated, these He also called; and those whom He called, these He also justified; and those whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Since it is God’s intention to have many sons, who are the many brothers of Christ (Heb. 2:10-12; John 20:17), God predestinated us not simply to be justified by faith but to be conformed to the image of Christ as the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29) so that He might have the first place among His many brothers. For this God predestinated us, for this He chose us and justified us, and for this (in His eternal view) He glorified us. We should note the flow of thought here: predestination, calling, justification, glorification. The goal is a multitude of sons conformed to the image of the firstborn Son and glorified for God’s expression. This was determined by God in eternity for eternity. Then in time God called us and justified us. Without being justified by faith in Christ, we cannot be regenerated to be sons of God with the divine life. Our spirit is life because of the righteousness received in justification. However, justification should not be given an exaggerated importance in God’s eternal economy, and it should not be regarded as the goal of God’s selection and predestination. God’s purpose is to have sons, not to carry out justification; but apart from justification, God cannot have many sons, and Christ cannot have

many brothers. Justification, therefore, is a necessary judicial procedure, but it is not the goal or the purpose for which God selected us in Christ to be holy and predestinated us in Christ unto sonship.

Misaiming concerning the Gospel

Misaiming: “The fullest statement of the gospel that the Bible contains is found in the epistle to the Romans, and Romans minus justification by faith would be like *Hamlet* without the Prince.”

“The church cannot stand without the gospel of justification.”

“Modern Protestantism, by rejecting penal substitution, is guilty of undermining the gospel of justification by faith” (J. I. Packer, “Introductory Essay,” in James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961, pp. 1, 3, 7).

Truth: The first statement makes justification the center of the gospel, just as Prince Hamlet is the center of *Hamlet*. The other statements go so far as to identify the gospel with justification by faith and to define the gospel as justification by faith. Although the truth concerning justification by faith is a foundational element in the gospel of God, it is neither the center of the gospel nor the gospel itself. The Bible does not use the expression *the gospel of justification by faith*. Justification is part of the gospel, but according to the Scriptures something else—actually Someone else—is the gospel.

Let us take as our starting point the claim, essentially accurate, that the “fullest statement of the gospel that the Bible contains is found in the epistle to the Romans.” What is the gospel according to the divine revelation in Romans? We do not need to read far before finding the answer. In 1:1 Paul speaks of “the gospel of God,” and then in verses 3 and 4 he says, “Concerning His Son, who came out of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” The gospel is concerning the Son of God and is centered on Him. Perhaps this is the reason that Paul, in Galatians 1:15 and 16, said that it pleased God to reveal His Son in him that he “might announce Him as the gospel.” Paul announced not a doctrine—not even the necessary doctrine of justification by faith; he announced a living person—Christ the Son of God. Significantly, both in Romans and in Galatians, two Epistles that present the precious truth of justification by faith, Paul relates the gospel not to God’s justification but instead to God’s Son, thereby indicating that no doctrine, however crucial and foundational it may

be, should replace the Son of the living God. Justification is indispensable, but the gospel of God is not focused on justification but on the Son of God, the only begotten Son (John 3:16), who was sent in the likeness of the flesh of sin and concerning sin (Rom. 8:3) and who, in resurrection, was designated the Son of God in humanity as well as in divinity, thus becoming the firstborn Son of God (1:3-4). Now He is both the only begotten Son of God in the Godhead and the firstborn Son of God in God’s economy.

Although justification is not in itself the whole gospel, it is, of course, necessary for the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose (8:28-30) with fallen, sinful human beings. As Ephesians 1:4-5 makes clear, God chose us to be holy and predestinated us unto sonship for His eternal, corporate expression in the divine life. The human beings created by Him for this lofty purpose became fallen and thus were disqualified from enjoying God in Christ as their life and life supply for God’s expression. But praise the Lord for the redemption accomplished by Christ once for all on the cross! When this redemption is applied to us by the Spirit, we are justified by God, our sins are forgiven, and we are regenerated, born of God to be His sons. Apart from justification, none of this would be possible. Hence, justification by faith is a necessary and foundational element of the gospel. Now, having been justified by God, reconciled to Him, and born of Him, we may experience Him and be one with Him in fulfilling His purpose.

Yes, Romans is a revelation of the gospel of God, and this gospel concerns the Son of God. If we resist the temptation to impose traditional theological formulations on the text of Romans and if we allow Paul to speak for himself, we will see that the entire book of Romans, not only the section on justification by faith, is the gospel of God concerning His Son. Furthermore, by the Lord’s mercy we may be enlightened to see that the subject of Romans is the gospel of God and that this gospel is to make sinners sons of God to constitute the Body of Christ, which is expressed as the local church.

The gospel includes justification, but justification is not the gospel. The gospel of God concerns His beloved Son, and the goal of the gospel, as revealed in Romans, is to produce sons of God for the glory of God. For this we were foreknown, predestinated, called, and justified; for this we have been regenerated to become God’s children possessing His life and nature; and for this we are being sanctified, renewed, transformed, and built up as the Body of Christ. This is the gospel of which the Son of God is the center and of which justification is a vital part.

by the Editors