

THE BLUE BANNER

Volume 8, Issue 3

For Christ's Crown & Covenant

March 1999

Justification by Faith: What is Justification?

by Richard Bacon

[The following is an edited transcript of a sermon Pastor Bacon preached on December 14, 1997. It is part of a series on Justification. See page 11.]

In the previous sermon, we began looking in Isaiah 53:11 at the doctrine of justification. We saw that it is necessary to relate the doctrine of justification to Christ. The meritorious ground of our justification is in the obedience and death of Christ, and the divine testimony regarding our justification is in his resurrection. We also saw how the blood of Christ and the death of Christ are both parts standing for the whole of both the active and passive obedience of Christ; in his obeying the Law for us and in his accepting the punishment due to us for our sins upon himself.

We continue on with our study of the doctrine of justification by looking at that portion of Isaiah 53:11 that states "by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many." The word "justify" comes from the *hiphil* of the Hebrew verb "TZADEQ" or "TZADOQ." The idea of justification not only in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament as well, is that of *declaring someone righteous*. The question is *how does God make someone righteous?*

In subsequent weeks we will be defining the term "justification" in Scripture. We will see that normally God *does not make* someone righteous by causing him to do righteous things, but *constitutes* him righteous by imputing Christ's own righteousness to him. We will be looking at such phrases as "the righteousness of God," "the righteousness of Christ," and "the righteousness at the end of time." We will discover that justification is a *courtroom sentence*. An antonym is a word that means very nearly the opposite. The antonym for justification is not *to be sinful*. The antonym for justification is *to be condemned*. Since "justify" and "condemn" are used as antonyms in Scripture, then justification must be a courtroom or a forensic term. If "condemned" is one

courtroom sentence, then "justified" must be the other one. But, if "to condemn" does not mean to make someone a sinner, then "to justify" must not mean to make him intrinsically righteous. Just as to condemn someone is *to declare him guilty*, so also to justify someone in Scripture is *to declare him righteous*. Justification in Scripture means that we are *declared* to be righteous, *not that we are righteous*. We have to wait until death to be actually righteous. Westminster Shorter Catechism #37 teaches us "the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness." WSC #38 goes on to explain that at the resurrection at the last day, when our bodies are raised up in glory and reunited with our souls, we "shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted...and made perfectly blessed..."

We are going to look at a sort of "history of justification." Justification begins in eternity past and it continues in eternity future. Biblically, "eternity" simply means "outside time." Therefore when we talk about eternity past and eternity future, we have to use our imaginations a bit. What we usually intend by eternity past is "before I was born" and by eternity future is "after I die." That will be our working definition. Technically, Biblically speaking, eternity simply means outside time or divorced from time. Time is a part of creation as we are part of creation; therefore time impacts upon us as creatures. We know that certain things happened yesterday and that other things will not happen until tomorrow. However God, as Creator and not part of creation, is not aware of a succession of moments as we are. God is not trapped in a succession of days. For God there is just a constant now. God is always in his present, even though that, again, is speaking in temporal terms and temporal terms do not properly relate to God.

We are going to look at how justification begins in eternity past and moves into eternity future in six steps.

I. Justification is bound to God's eternal decree

We will begin our study with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter 11, Article 4, "God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect; and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth in due time actually apply Christ unto them." Notice that God decreed to justify the elect — all the elect, not just part of them. Does this section refer to "from all eternity?" Does it refer to the time that Christ died and rose again? Or does it refer to the time when the elect finally believe? The *Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter 11, Article 4 speaks to all three.

In the counsel of eternity, before the foundation of the world, God eternally ordained Christ as mediator, and in eternally ordaining Christ as mediator, he ordained that certain people would be given to Christ. God the Father decreed that he would justify those people, and no others. He decreed he would justify *all* those for whom Christ died. God knew the elect from all eternity. There was never a time when God did not know the elect. *God never saw the elect in any way other than in Christ.* That is what you should understand in the phrase "from all eternity." God never regarded us any other way. God never saw the elect in any way but in Christ. If God decreed from all eternity to justify the elect, then justification is bound to God's eternal decree. That is all that we mean, and that is everything we mean, by the term "eternal justification."

Sometimes people reject the doctrine of eternal justification as though the doctrine indicates that people do not have to believe in order to be justified. That is not a valid comparison. By eternal justification all we mean is that justification is bound to God's eternal decree. We are not saying that someone is justified *subjectively* before he believes. Romans 8:29-30, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Many times we view these verses as taking place in time but these are all tied together — "whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate... moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called..." We know that at the time Paul wrote this passage not everyone who would be called had already been called. Then why did he use the past tense? He used the past tense because these graces are linked from all eternity.

That linkage between God's eternal decree and the justification of the elect is the point in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 11, Article 4. The point is that God *did* decree from all eternity to justify all the elect.

Notice that "whom he called, them he also justified [past tense] and whom he justified, them he also glorified [past tense]." This entire passage is bound to the decree of God, even though for many of us our subjective justification would not take place for centuries after Paul wrote it. There are some who have not been subjectively justified as yet. They still are among God's elect, and even though, in time, their justification has not yet happened Paul used the past tense because their justification is bound to God's eternal decree.

The passage in Romans is an obvious one, but now I want to deal with a somewhat subtler argument. In Numbers 23 we read the story of Balaam trying to curse Israel. God told Balaam that he was not allowed to curse Israel. He commanded him to bless Israel. Verse 21 explains why, "He [God] hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them." What does the passage mean by stating that God "has not beheld iniquity in Jacob?" Does that mean that there were no sinners in the assembly of Israel on that day? Of course not. It means that God was seeing them in Christ! He was seeing them justified. God does not see any perverseness in his elect. He does not see perverseness in his elect because he sees his elect justified.

Justification is so bound to God's eternal decree that we can characterize it as "eternal justification." I realize that this is a controversial doctrine. We do not hold that anyone who believes other than this is not Reformed. But, if we would be consistent with the Reformed faith, then we have to maintain that justification is so bound to the eternal decree of God that God *eternally* "has never seen iniquity in Israel." In reality we are sinners. In the desert Israel consisted of sinners. Why could God not behold their iniquity? It was not because there was not any to see; it was because it had all been canceled on Christ's account. But this was before Christ ever died.

The Bible speaks of *an objective justification* as well as a *subjective justification*. When God looks at his people *objectively*, he sees Christ. Objectively he sees the righteousness of Christ, not our sin. But that does not mean that *subjectively* each one of us is justified until such time as we believe. To give you an idea of what this idea signifies, we need to read Romans 4:25, "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." If Christ was "raised again for our justification," when does our justification take place? Did our justification take place at his resurrection? Does our justification take place when we believe? There is an *objective* sense in which God sees nothing but Christ when he looks at his elect people though they have yet to believe. But there is also a *subjective* sense in which we receive that justification at such time as we believe.

Let's consider the example of a surety standing for a debt. When was the debt paid? Was the debt paid when the surety first agreed to stand for it or was the debt paid when the debt was actually paid, or was the debt paid when the debtor received the information that the debt was paid for him? There is a sense in which each of those times is correct. As soon as the surety agrees to pay the debt, the debt is no longer hanging over the original debtor. Then, when the debt actually comes due and the surety pays the debt, there is the sense in which *that* is the time at which the debt is paid. And finally, when the original debtor comes in to pay his own debt and finds that it has already been paid for him, subjectively it is *then* that the person is notified that the debt has been paid for him. So, in different aspects, in different senses, all three times are correct. During the Reformation the doctrine of predestination, the doctrine of election and the doctrine of justification were closely bound together. There cannot be one without the others. This is why the Reformers could not accept an Arminian gospel as being a valid gospel. We have to see justification as referring to *the eternal decree* of God, or we do not see Christ as surety.

II. Justification takes place in time

A. Justification is grounded in the death of Christ

We first discussed that justification is based or founded upon the counsel of eternal election, but historically justification is grounded in the death of Christ. What then is the basis of our justification? The doctrine of the atonement must logically precede the doctrine of justification. For the most part, Isaiah 53 has been about the doctrine of the atonement. There are some very important correlations here that I want you to make. Secondly we find that justification is grounded upon the atonement — upon the death of Jesus Christ. Look at Colossians 2:14, “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.” What was the handwriting of ordinances that was against us? The handwriting of ordinances — an indictment — had been drawn out against us because we were guilty of breaking God's law. Christ blotted out “the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.” He took the indictment against us by the law and nailed it to the cross. The indictment of our law breaking ended up not on us but *on Christ*. Historically — in time — on the cross *at the atonement* Christ was atoning for us. He propitiated. Romans 3:25, “[Jesus] whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation.” Christ took away the indictment; it was nailed to the cross.

For some of us the doctrine of eternal salvation is still new. The idea of election and of God's counsels in eternity — God sovereignly decreeing from before the

foundation of the world who would and who would not be saved — is still a new idea for some of us. That was the first point we had to deal with. However, the second point is also important. That point is that justification — our having a right standing with God — is based upon the atonement. It is based upon Christ having paid the penalty for us. Ephesians 2:15-16, “Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.” Some people maintain that these verses mean that God just abolished the law at the cross. But this is the same idea that we see in Colossians 2:14. At the cross Christ removed the indictment that was against us for having broken God's commandment. This is a forensic judgment and can be illustrated by our court system.

First there is a grand jury that draws an indictment, or “a writing.” The writing is a syllogism along these lines:

a. This action is against the law

b. Mr. Smith committed this action on such and such day on such and such place.

Therefore Mr. Smith must appear before the magistrate on such and such a day for trial.

That is an indictment. An indictment states that there *is* a law and that Mr. Smith has *broken* that law on a certain date and that this can be proven. God's law is much the same way. Man's law follows in the train of God's law in this regard. God's law declared in Genesis 2:17, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.” But man did eat and therefore he must appear before God to give an answer. In Genesis chapter three we see all the elements of a judgment taking place. We see these elements also here in Ephesians 2:15. A law has been broken. Because that law has been broken, the relationship between the judge and the accused has been severed. Christ, by his cross, has taken away the enmity between the judge and the accused. Once again we see that reconciliation, — that justification — that *right standing with God* — is based upon the cross.

We said that the cross is a synecdoche for Christ's death, his atonement, his accepting the penalty due to us for our sins. I want to make this point very clear to you because it is at this very central point that most error in the Christian church begins, whether it is Evangelical error or whether it is Roman Catholic error. Most error in the churches today begins at justification. We are going to hammer this home and hammer this home and hammer this home because you have to understand it. It is critical and it is foundational. Colossians 1:20-22, “And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto

himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouable in his sight.” Christ has reconciled you “*in the body of his flesh through death.*” Has Christ reconciled you in “the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouable” in your *manner of life*? Does your life become perfect? No! Christ has reconciled you in “the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouable *in his sight.*” Westminster Shorter Catechism #33 asks, “What is justification?” The answer is, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous *in his sight.*” God sees us as justified in his sight. This verse teaches that we are holy and unblameable and unreprouable in his sight. As God looks upon us, he sees the absolute righteousness of Christ. He does not see any relative righteousness of our own. He does not even see our reformed life. He sees a holy, unblameable, unreprouable life. That holy and unblameable and unreprouable life is found only in Christ. *Only in Christ!* It is in the body *of his flesh* through death that we obtain that. It is through his atonement that we obtain reconciliation. It is through his atonement that we obtain *right standing with God.* We do not just receive pardon. We receive *acceptability in his sight.* We are “holy and unblameable and unreprouable in his sight.”

True justification is altogether different from “I’m trying to do better.” True justification is not centered in our faith. God does not see our faith and decide that it is good enough to save us. Rather *God imputes to us that active and passive righteousness of Christ.* That is the true source of our justification. Our justification is bound up in his cross. Our justification is not only bound to God’s eternal decree, our justification is not only bound to eternal election, our justification is bound to Christ’s cross. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” When God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, at that very point he did not impute their trespasses unto them. Up to now, then, we have justification tied to the eternal decree and we have justification tied to the cross.

B. Justification is tied to Christ’s resurrection

Justification is also tied to Christ’s resurrection, historically. In Romans 4:25, “Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” We should understand this to be “on account of.” Christ was

delivered *on account of* our offenses. It was because we were offenders that he was delivered, and he was raised again on account of our justification — that we might be justified. The resurrection indicates that God accepted Christ as a satisfaction. It is a vindication of Christ’s death. None of the Old Testament sacrifices came back to life. It is only by the acceptance of God of that full, complete, lasting sacrifice of Christ, demonstrated and sealed in the resurrection, that we know that we have justification. That is why Paul wrote “raised again for our justification.” Our justification is tied to Christ’s resurrection. In Ephesians 2:4-5, we see that same power and that same grace. “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ.” God raising Christ from the dead manifests the same power and grace that he exercises toward us in regenerating us. That same bringing to life — that quickening — of Christ, is that same bringing to life of us when we are regenerated. Christ was raised from the dead *physically* and we are raised from the dead *spiritually* by that same grace.

C. Justification is declared in the gospel

Third, justification is declared in the gospel. Understand this! The gospel is not “invite Jesus into your heart.” To declare the gospel we must declare repentance for the remission of sins. What is remission of sins? What is justification? Luke 24:46-47, “[He] said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” Christ tied repentance and remission of sins to the atonement. What is it that the Church is to preach? Based upon the atonement of Christ, the Church is to preach justification and remission of sins. Acts 13:38, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man [Christ] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins.” That is justification!

D. The righteousness of justification is received by us by faith alone

Justification is grounded and has its origin in the eternal decree. It has its historical basis in the righteousness of the active and passive obedience of Christ. In his resurrection, God declares that he is satisfied with the atonement. Justification is declared among the nations in the gospel. Examining these aspect of justification brings us to understand that justification is from “eternity past” to “eternity future.” Here is the key thing for us. Subjectively, we receive the righteousness of justification *by faith alone.* Faith is not another ground of justification. The only ground, the only basis for justification is in the death of Christ. Rather, our faith must always be seen *as the means by which*

the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. God does not see our faith and because of our faith, makes us righteous. That is not it. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us and received by us by faith alone. Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Romans 4:3, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." Verse 5-6 "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works."

III. Justification at the righteous judgment of God at the last day

Finally, we are justified at the righteous judgment of God at the last day. Romans 8:23, "And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." Matthew 25:23, "His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." Matthew 10:41, "He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward." Westminster Shorter Catechism #38, "What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?" The answer is, "At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be *openly acknowledged and acquitted* in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity." Acquittal is a forensic term a courtroom term. It means to be justified or to be declared righteous. At the last day, we shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted. Therefore, is justification — this acknowledgement, this acquittal — from eternity past? Is it in history? Or is it to eternity future? In fact, justification does have its origin in eternity past and this same eternal justification has an eternal future orientation as well. We will forever be acquitted. We cannot lose that justification because it is an eternal justification; it has its origin in eternity past and an acquittal that extends on into eternity future.

Implications

The first implication is that if we are justified not only from eternity past but until eternity future, then there is a *complete* forgiveness of sins. God has forgiven every sin. Colossians 1:22 declares us to be "holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight." Ephesians 1:7, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." I do not mean to discourage any of you from

looking into as much of God's Word as he gives you the grace to understand, but let us always remember that we have to start with the forgiveness of sins. If we do not have a right standing with God, anything else that we study is rather beside the point.

The second implication is that of adoption. This is amazing! Not only have our sins been forgiven, we have been made children! It is one thing to have a servant who does not do what you tell him to. You may say, "I will forgive you. I will hire you back." But God has gone beyond that. Not only has he forgiven our sins; he has made us sons. He has adopted us. Adoption is tied together with the atonement and with justification in Galatians 4:4-6, "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father." Notice the order in this passage. We did not cry "Father" first, and then he adopted us. He adopted us first, and *then* we cried "Abba, Father." First he adopted us, because of Christ's atonement. And because of Christ's atonement — because of Christ's reconciliation, because of Christ's redemption — we have received the adoption of sons. And because we have received the adoption of sons, God has sent his Spirit into our hearts, by which we cry "Abba, Father."

The third implication is that we have an *eternal* righteousness that *cannot* be lost. And I would refer you again to Colossians 1:22, being "holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight." Also John 6:44, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." And verse 37, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." We have an eternal justification. Because justification means imputed righteousness, we have an eternal righteousness, one that has its origin in God's decree from all eternity to see us in Christ. On that last day, we will be openly acquitted to the full enjoying of God forever — we have an eternal justification. Because of that eternal justification, we can have an assurance of God's love. Not because of the extent of *our* reformation — not because of how good we are or might become — but *solely, only, purely, merely, simply* because *Christ is righteous*. Because, as God said, "this is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Only as we are found in him does God see us also as holy, unblameable, even *unreprouvable* in his sight. ♣

The Use of the Communion Table in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

by James Begg

(Continued from the February 1999 issue)

Section Five

Answers to the Arguments in favor of the late Innovation.

Though the innovation introduced into some churches, of excluding the communicants from the Communion Table, and distributing the elements to the communicants sitting in pews, is in direct opposition to the laws and practice of the Established Church of Scotland, and in opposition to the publicly declared doctrine of the Church, "that the table posture is most conformable to the word of God, the example of Christ and the Apostles, and to the nature of that heavenly feast;" yet several arguments are urged in favor of the innovation, by those who have introduced it, or who patronize it. Some of these arguments may be considered and answered.

First. It is argued, that the practice introduced by the innovation, is nearest the pattern of Christ and the Apostles, at the first institution of the ordinance of the Supper, where they all, *as a family, sat at one board.*

Answer. The sacrament of our Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ immediately after the celebration of the Jewish Passover. But the ordinance of the Passover was appointed by God to be celebrated in a family capacity (Exod. 12:3-4). If the family were too small, two families were to unite in eating the paschal lamb. It was in this family capacity that Christ and his Apostles then celebrated the Passover, in the evening, according to the Divine institution. Our Savior certainly ought to be imitated in his actions, relating to all the parts of gospel worship, but not in those actions which had a plain reference to Jewish worship, and which were not imitated afterwards by his inspired Apostles. But the practice of the Apostles in after times, shows plainly, that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not designed to be celebrated in a family capacity, as the Jewish Passover had been, but in the assembled congregations of the faithful. This is evident from the conduct of the Apostle Paul, who, in his journey towards Jerusalem, came to Troas, and there, with many Christians collected on the occasion, in the public assembly, celebrated this ordinance (Acts 20:7). When the same Apostle corrects the abuses which prevailed in the church at Corinth respecting this ordinance, the language he employs evidently indicates, that it was to be celebrated in the Christian assembly. Hence he speaks of the Corinthians "coming together in the church" (1 Cor. 2:18) and "coming together into one place" (verse 20); and

in verse 22, he says, "Have ye not houses to eat and drink in?" or "despise ye the church of God?" etc. These statements of the inspired Apostle, show that the ordinance was to be observed, not in a family capacity, but in the Christians assembly; and his reference to the Communion Table (1 Cor. 10:21) shows, that the table posture was to be observed, as had been done by Christ and the Apostles, at the first institution of the ordinance. If the Communion Table can be conveniently had sufficiently large, it may certainly be desirable, that all the communicants should be at one board or service; but where this cannot be done, a succession of companies coming to the table, appears to be the only way of preserving the table posture in large congregations. But there is neither in Scripture precept nor example, the smallest countenance given to the late corrupt innovation, of making all the communicants turn their backs on one another.

Second. It is argued that the innovation is but small, and of little importance, as it only regards circumstantial, on which little stress need be laid.

Answer. If the innovation is esteemed so small, why make it? It must show a great spirit of novelty when people are so very keen to innovate in a matter that they esteem of so little importance. But every innovation is of importance, that affects the form of our Established worship. The religious feelings and habits of the Christian people, are all connected with those forms of worship, to which, from their earliest years, they have been used. Innovations, therefore, tend to perplex the minds of the worshippers, to disturb their devotions, and to break the peace of the church. This innovation is by no means so trivial and unimportant as is thus supposed, for the Church of Scotland has already in a very solemn manner declared, that this Independent practice is contrary "to the example left us by Christ and the Apostles, and inconsistent with the nature of that heavenly feast;" and this should have great weight, with all the ministers of the Church of Scotland. But though it were a small innovation, which is not granted, small innovations soon prepare the way for greater. There are no bounds to innovations when once they are admitted; and they will very soon deface and destroy the purity and beautiful uniformity of our Established worship. The admission of innovations, as every one may judge advisable, is launching into the boundless ocean, without chart or compass to direct our course; and there is very great danger of ultimately making shipwreck of our Established faith, and Presbyterian form of worship.

Thirdly. It is argued that a Communion Table in the usual form occupies a considerable space in the area of the Church, whereas this new form is more convenient, and yields a greater revenue from letting the pews.

Answer. This a groveling and mercenary idea; and it certainly cannot be endured, that our Established Presbyterian form of worship should be bartered away for worldly gain. Those who for a few shillings would exclude the Communion Table from our Churches; for a few shillings more would part with our Established form of worship altogether. Such an argument does not deserve to be listened to. We must buy the truth at any worldly price, but sell it at no price.

Fourth. It is argued that the plan of communicating in pews is convenient, as any number of pews can be employed, which tends much to shorten the service; which, with a table, sometimes extends to a great length.

Answer. It is granted that every proper arrangement should be made to prevent this solemn service from becoming a mere bodily exercise, by extending it to an unreasonable and fatiguing length; and in large congregations the Communion Table should be large and lengthened in proportion. But whilst this is granted, there can be no good reason for laying aside the Communion Table, and the table posture, and thus to follow a divisive course, in opposition to the Scripture pattern, and the Established form of the Church of Scotland. This is no good reason for abandoning our Presbyterian form of worship, and adopting the unnatural and corrupt form of the Independents, in the holy communion, all turning their backs on one another. It may also be remarked, that there may be some danger of this service being too much shortened, so as to be injurious to the religious habits and feelings of pious people, whose edification ought to be chiefly considered in dispensing this ordinance. There are some professors of religion who very soon grow weary of devotional exercises. The prophet Malachi speaks of some people in his days, who said respecting Divine worship, "Behold, what a wea and who manifested much profane disregard to the service of God, "offering the blind and the lame for sacrifice," to whom the table of "the Lord was contemptible." Are there not many people still among ourselves of the same character? And is there not great danger in studying to please the taste and feelings of such people in the manner of dispensing Divine ordinances? Nothing can be more hurtful to religion, than an endeavor to accommodate its services to the taste and habits of profane, skeptical, or ungodly men; or to the humors and feelings of worldly and nominal professors. This has, in every age of the Church, been a fruitful source of many heresies and errors, both in doctrine and worship. In every case we should adhere to the law and the testimony, and the enactment of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland against innovations, 1707, "That nothing is to be admitted in the worship of God but what is prescribed in the Holy Scriptures."

Fifth. It is argued that when our Lord miraculously fed the multitude with a few loaves and fishes, they were made to sit down in ranks of fifties and hundreds, and that this bears the most striking resemblance to the Communion service, with which we are furnished in the whole inspired volume.

Answer. There is no intimation in the whole inspired volume, that this was intended as a pattern for the manner in which we should celebrate the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. In the first institution of this ordinance, our Lord hath left us a pattern of the form and manner in which we should commemorate his dying love, and to that pattern he hath added a precept, "This do in remembrance of me," which precept should be considered enjoining, not only the performance of the duty, but also the external manner of performing that holy action, at least so far as was afterwards followed by the inspired Apostles, whose practice is the best comment on our Lord's example and precept. But the pattern which Christ and his Apostles have left, exhibits them *encompassing or surrounding the first Communion Table*, with every external token of mutual love, and communion with Christ, and one another, and directly opposite to the attitude assumed by those who follow the late innovation. To neglect this example and command of our Lord, and search for, and grasp at, other parts of his conduct, which were never intended as a pattern in this particular service, to justify us in so doing, is to pervert the precepts and example of our Lord. It shows, in a striking manner, the power of that spirit of novelty and self-will which leads us to gratify our own humor, convenience, or fancy, instead of making conscience of religious duty, and submitting to the authority of God in his word. *Sixth.* It is argued, that on my scheme there should never be more than twelve persons present at the communion, and that all these should be *men, nay, apostles*, and they should meet in a large upper room, and they should be reclining on a sofa, of an oval form, open at one end, with some kind of table, and all this at the hour of supper.

Answer. There certainly should be a table, and the usual table posture of the country should be observed by the communicants, who approach to, and surround the Communion Table. There certainly was a table at the first institution, and the usual table posture of the land of Judea at the Passover feast, was, no doubt, observed by our Lord and his Apostles, who surrounded the table. But the after practice of the Apostles, under the influence of the Spirit of inspiration, shows plainly, that several circumstances here referred to, as connected with the Jewish Passover, were peculiar to the first institution of the ordinance, and not intended by our Lord to be continued in his Church under the Gospel. There is no evidence that the Apostles, in dispensing our Lord's Supper afterwards, limited the number of communicants to twelve, or any other definite number, or that it was exclusively dispensed to *men*, and *apostles*, or that it was celebrated only at the hour of supper.

On the contrary, the example at Troas (Acts 20) exhibits the reverse of all this. There the ordinance of the Lord's Supper was dispensed in the assembly of Christians, collected from different places, without any distinction of sex, or official situation, or character, not at the hour of supper, but in open day, although the evening sermon was continued to a late hour. The practice of the inspired Apostles, who received the Holy Spirit to lead them into all truth, is the best exposition of the circumstances connected with the original institution, some of which were peculiar to the Passover; and we should be followers of them, as they were of Christ. But the express mention of, and reference to, a Communion Table or Lord's Table (1Cor. 10:21) is an evidence of the practice which they followed, and that the table posture was designed to be continued in the Christian Church.

Seventh. It is argued, that the word table is sometimes used in a figurative sense, to signify the food by which it is covered.

Answer. This is admitted; but there could be no figurative use of the word, unless it had also a literal meaning. There was literally a table used by our Lord and the Apostles at the first institution, the very table they had used at the Passover supper, and the after-mentioning of the Lord's table, and allusion to it by the Apostle, even though the word may be used in a figurative sense, has a reference to the literal meaning, and shows the practice which obtained, and was approved by the inspired Apostle.

Eighth. It is argued, that the minds of devout worshippers should be principally employed about the one thing needful, the commemoration of the Redeemer's death, and the pleasing anticipation of an eternal feast, and that attending to the form of the table, is like paying tithes of mint, anise, and cumin, and neglecting the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.

Answer. This argument takes it for granted, that those who follow this innovation of communicating in pews are more attentive to the one thing needful, than those who communicate at the Communion Table, which requires to be proved; and which, I apprehend, will be very difficult, if not impossible, to prove. It is true that the spiritual exercises of the heart are to be chiefly attended to in every part of religious worship. But external scriptural forms of worship are themselves parts of divine worship, and subservient to the promoting of the religious feelings and exercises of the heart; and to undervalue, despise, or neglect these scriptural forms, and teach men so, is to act in opposition to the authority of our Lord, who declares, that whosoever shall break one of the least commandments, and teach men so, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. The weightier matters of the law should certainly be attended to, but the smaller matters must not be neglected. The words of our Lord to this purpose should not be forgotten: "These things ought you to have done, and not leave the other undone." Much is said about the comfort of communicating in pews. If bodily comfort is meant, I cannot perceive how more comfort can be enjoyed

sitting in a pew, than sitting at the Communion Table. If spiritual comfort is intended, I apprehend that this is to be most readily enjoyed in this holy service, when we are following the example and precepts of Christ. Now, it is not pretended that sitting in pews at the communion is more conform to the example and precepts of Christ, than sitting at the Communion Table.

Ninth. It is argued, "the word innovation has little tendency to create alarm in a mind accustomed to deliberate reflection;" and that ministers may do in this matter as suits the conveniency of their church.

Answer. Every innovation on the form of our Established worship, has or ought to have, a tendency to excite alarm in all those who regard it with proper esteem. The many laws of the Church of Scotland against innovations in the form of our Established worship, and the very solemn obligations laid on all preachers of the Gospel, and ministers of the Church of Scotland, to conform to the worship presently authorized and practiced in our National Church, and to preserve its purity and uniformity, show, in a very striking manner, the anxious care of our Church to guard against these innovations, for which some persons feel no alarm. If every minister is allowed to act as he judges most convenient in his own church, or as may be suitable to what he considers his own enlarged and liberal principles, the beautiful uniformity of our Established worship will very soon be destroyed. Such extensive discretionary power, and latitude of conduct, is utterly inconsistent with any legally established form of worship. The late innovation exhibits, in a high degree, the fatal effects of these liberal views, as they are called. In the city of Glasgow, when the sacrament is dispensed, in some churches the communicants all sit at, or about the Communion Table as the law directs; in some churches the communicants sit in pews, according to the late innovation; in some churches there is a mixed mode of administration; part of the communicants receive the elements at the Communion Table, and part of them receive them sitting in pews. In those congregations, also, who communicate in the pews, part of them do so in the pews in which they usually sit through the year, having occupied them during them during the time of the sermon preceding; and part of them have not that indulgence, but go to pews in which they do not usually sit, but to which they are only admitted to communicate. Any stranger passing through the city of Glasgow, and looking into these churches on a communion Sabbath, would never suppose that they were all belonging to the same Established Church, who all observed their own particular form of worship. These things may be called liberal, and the effect of enlarged views; but they are contrary to all order and decency. It belongs to the very nature of a religious establishment, that there be uniformity in doctrine and worship; and the laws of the Church of Scotland are well calculated to preserve, and transmit to posterity, our Established form of worship, in all its purity and uniformity.

Tenth. It is argued, that the subject of dispute is scarcely worthy of discussion in Church judicatories.

Answer. This may be the opinion of some; but the Church of Scotland has been of a very different opinion. The commissioners from the Church of Scotland, to the Assembly at Westminster, had to discuss that matter for three full months, in that Assembly; and the matter was afterwards discussed in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in the year 1645, and then finally decided, and set at rest, *by a solemn and unanimous decision of the General Assembly.* No part of our Established worship has been more the subject of deliberate discussion, than that respecting the Communion Table, and the mode of dispensing the sacrament of our Lord's Supper. It was the object of our fathers, that the form of dispensing that ordinance should be reduced as nearly as possible to the Scripture pattern. I can then see no good object the innovators can have in view, in reviving an old heresy in worship, already condemned by the Church of Scotland, and rejected as inconsistent with the nature of that heavenly feast, and not conform to the example of Christ and his Apostles. It shows a great spirit of self-will, and self-sufficiency, in any minister, to introduce innovations contrary to the form of worship presently authorized and practiced in our Church. It is a violation of all good order, and their own solemn vows. If any part of our Established worship, in their opinion, needs to be corrected, let them bring the matter before the judicatories of the Church, when the subject will be deliberated on, and determined according to the lawful form and order; but it cannot be endured that any individual, or a few individuals, should break the peace of the Church, by following divisive courses, in opposition to the established laws.

Much is said by those who favor the innovation about the disorder, bustle, and confusion of many people pressing forward at one time, to obtain seats at the Communion Table, where only a small portion can be accommodated; and this has been much exaggerated, and considered a good reason for the innovation. But the same disorder and confusion must take place, if a much greater number of people press forward to a pew than can be accommodated; and therefore this argument makes nothing, either for or against the innovation. It is a good reason for making proper arrangements, that there be easy access to, and egress from, the Communion Table, and that it be extended in proportion to the number of communicants, that the service be not protracted to a fatiguing and unnecessary length; but it is no reason for laying aside the Communion Table, and adopting the very indecent, unnatural, and unscriptural mode of making the communicants sit in pews, and turn their backs on one another.

It is very easy to ascertain the number that can be accommodated at the Communion Table at one time, and such directions given, and arrangements made, that no

more people come from their seats at one time, than can be accommodated.

It is in a peculiar manner of duty of Presbyteries to attend to this matter. No church can be built in Scotland, but under the authority and with the approbation of the Presbytery of the bounds. Before it be proceeded in, they should have the plan of the church laid before them, and be satisfied that it be sufficient for accommodating the parishioners, and have everything requisite for performing every part of the public worship of God, according to the laws of the Church, and the laws of the land; and particularly that *there be a Communion Table*, and that it be large in proportion to the number of the parishioners, and that there be convenient and easy access to it, and egress from it. The system of Communion pews is not recognized by the laws and practice of the Church of Scotland; but it is provided that every kirk be provided with a Communion Table, in the First Book of Discipline, agreed on by the General Assembly, 1560. A Communion Table is also provided for by the twenty-second Parliament of James VI, chap. vi. in the year 1617; and Presbyteries are empowered and directed by that Act, to see the law carried into effect. Presbyteries should also exercise the power vested in them by the laws of the church, and of the land, in guarding against all innovations in the public worship of God within their bounds, in checking every tendency to follow divisive courses, and in preserving entire, and transmitting to posterity, the purity and uniformity of worship as presently authorized and practiced in our Established Church, and as enjoined by the General Assembly, Feb. 3, 1645 – “Take special notice of the observation or neglect of the directory for worship, in every congregation within their bounds, and make known the same to the Provincial, or General Assembly, as there shall be cause.”

Eleventh. It is argued that there is no particular form of the Communion Table prescribed, and therefore pews may be used, in which the communicants sit in parallel rows; with their faces to the minister.

Answer. The constant authorized practice of the Church fixes the form of the Communion Table, and every person in Scotland knows that sitting in pews is not our table posture at a feast; and far less the authorized posture to which Christians in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland have been accustomed in celebrating this feast of Divine love. It is not so much to turn their faces to the minister, and attend to him, that Christians go to a Communion Table, as to enjoy communion with their Lord, and with one another, and their external posture there, should exhibit some token of that spiritual communion, which turning their backs on one another does not exhibit. Besides, the authorized practice of the Church is the law in this case; for all ministers are taken bound, in the most solemn manner, “to maintain and defend the doctrine and worship of the Established Church of Scotland as presently *authorized and practiced*, and contained in the fifteenth Act of the General

Assembly, 1707, and to follow no divisive courses from said doctrine and worship.” Those, therefore, who designedly follow innovations in either doctrine or worship, violate their ordination vows.

Conclusion

I have now endeavored to show that this innovation is in opposition to the example of Christ and the Apostles, at the first institution of our Lord’s Supper after the Passover, where there was such a table as they *encompassed, and observed the countenances of each other*, -- in opposition to the practice of the inspired Apostles of our Lord, in the apostolic age; -- in opposition to the nature and design of this ordinance, which is a feast of love, where Christians meet at the table of their Lord in holy communion with him, and fellowship with their Christian brethren; and being in opposition to all these is a corrupt innovation. I have endeavored to show that it is in opposition to the practice of the earliest and purest ages of the Christian Church; that the altar, or Communion Table, was a part of the furniture of every Church; that there was only one table or altar in each Church; and that the Communion Table was so placed that it could be *encompassed or surrounded by the communicants*. I have endeavored to show the danger of innovation, from a review of the corrupt innovations, which, in former ages were gradually introduced, and progressively spread respecting the Lord’s Supper and the Communion Table, which should be a warning to us in these giddy and unstable times. I have endeavored to show that it is in opposition to the laws and practice of the Church of Scotland, from the time of the Reformation; -- in opposition to the Book of Common Order, or Order of Geneva, enacted by the Assembly, 1562 and 1564, which continued to be our Directory of worship, with little interruption, until 1645, when our present Directory was adopted; -- that it is in opposition to our present Directory, taken in connection with the explanations of the Directory in the enactments, sanctioning and establishing it; -- in opposition to the authorized practice of the Church, as founded on the laws; which practice the General Assembly, February 13, 1645, has declared, in opposition to the opinions maintained in the Assembly at Westminster, “to be most agreeable and suitable to the word of God, the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the nature of that heavenly feast and table;” in opposition to the many laws of the Church against innovations, and the solemn engagements of ministers, to observe, in their practice, the worship presently authorized and practiced, and to follow no divisive courses.

I have also endeavored to answer the arguments urged by those who favor the innovation; and it may be proper to look again at these arguments. They are not taken from the scriptural design and nature of the ordinance, nor from the practice of the first and purest ages of the Christian Church, nor from the laws and authorized practice of the Church of Scotland. No: these I have endeavored to show are all against the innovation. The arguments of those who

support the innovation are from conveniency, comfort, worldly gain, shortening the Communion service; that the innovation is what they are pleased to call small and trivial, not worthy of discussion; and that all should be left to act according to their own discretion. Such are their reasonings and arguments; which appear to me to be wholly unworthy of a subject so sacred and important. So long as men are actuated by such views in religious matters, and seek their own conveniency and ease, and to gratify their own humor and fancy, instead of seeking to conform themselves to the institutions of the Gospel, and to please God in the way of submission to his authority, their religious services must be considered as will-worship, and service not required of God. “When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring me no more vain oblations.” How important the direction of the Apostle! “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy, and vain deceit; after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

Our pure and Apostolic form of worship, is the fruit of much toil, patience, and fortitude, of our fathers. They struggled hard for our religious privileges, which are transmitted to us sealed with the blood of martyrs, patriots, and heroes. If we shall wantonly or carelessly innovate upon them, and lose them, we will show little regard to their memory, which ought to be dear to us. We will show little gratitude to God, who protected them by his providence, blessed their exertions, and crowned their pious labors with success; and who has thus distinguished us among the nations by institutions so pure, and conducive, under his blessing, to our spiritual instruction and comfort. All innovations are pretended improvements, but there is a strong tendency in the best religious institutions, as administered by fallible and depraved men to progressive corruption. We should therefore be on our guard. Our fathers have been at great pains to guard against innovations. They left nothing in our religious worship loose, to be changed at discretion. They knew how giddy and fickle men are, now unsatisfied with present things, how desirous to be thought wiser than their fathers, and how fond of change. Hence the many laws of our Church against innovations. Whilst we admire their wisdom, piety, fortitude, and patient investigation and decision, let us now do our duty in holding fast what we have received, and follow these Elders who have obtained a good report through faith.

This matter has already been frequently and solemnly decided. It was decided in the Westminster Assembly, and in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1645. It is decided in all the Acts of the Church against innovations. It is decided in the constant authorized practice of the Church: it is decided by every Probationer at obtaining license to preach the Gospel: and it is decided by every Minister, in voluntarily coming under his ordination engagements. We ought, therefore, to act as honest men before God and the world. It is dangerous, after vows, to make inquiry. I conclude, with stating my approbation of

the sentiments of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1560:

“That the table of the Lord is then most rightly ministered, when it approachth most near to Christ’s own action. But plain it is, that at supper Christ Jesus sat with his disciples, and therefore do we judge that sitting at a table is most convenient to that holy action;” and in their letter to the Westminster Assembly, dated Feb. 13, 1645, “We have thought necessary to declare, and make known, that the clause in the Directory for the administration of the Lord’s Supper, which appointeth the table to be so placed, that the communicants may orderly sit about it, or at it, is not to be interpreted, as if, in the judgment of this Kirk, it were indifferent for any of the communicants not to come to, and receive at the table: in which particulars we still conceive, and believe, the order and practice of our own Kirk to be most agreeable and suitable to the word of God, the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the nature of that heavenly feast and table. Nevertheless, in other particulars we have resolved, and do agree, and we do willingly part with such practices and customs of our own, as may be parted with safely, and without the violation of any of Christ’s ordinances, or trespassing against Scripture rules.”

Finis.♣

[This completes the tract by James Begg on the use of a table in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. It is available in one complete tract from Blue Banner. Write for details.]

The Blue Banner

A Publication of First Presbyterian Church Rowlett

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE	
1	<i>Justification by Faith: What is Justification?</i> By Richard Bacon.
6	<i>The Use of the Communion Table in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.</i> Part 5. By James Begg
11	Justification by Faith tract and tape series, Catechism Cards, Special Blue Banner Subscription Offer Sing Through the Psalms in 1999, FPCR Sermon Subscription Service.
12	About FPCR, Blue Banner Subscriptions, and Order Form

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The Blue Banner is published by The First Presbyterian Church of Rowlett, Texas (RPC) and is supported by gifts. The cost of an annual subscription is \$15.00 per year. If you are able, please consider giving a gift of \$30.00 to support your subscription and one other. All material in this issue Copyright © 1999 by *The Blue Banner*, a ministry of First Presbyterian Church Rowlett, unless otherwise noted. FPCR Session: Pastor Richard Bacon. Ruling Elders: David Seekamp, Carl Betsch, Thomas Allie. *The Blue Banner* Editor: Christopher Coldwell.

How to Contact us: Email: pastor@fpcr.org
WEB: <http://www.fpcr.org> Church Mail: P O Box 141084, Dallas, TX. 75214. Phone: 972-475-9164 or 972-475-2184. Fax: 972-475-5317

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