

Prof. Finney's View on Justification by Faith

by Charles Finney

Justification is a governmental decree of pardon or amnesty, founded in the disinterested and infinite love of God, and requiring the vicarious sufferings or atonement of Christ, repentance, faith in Christ, sanctification, and perseverance in faith and obedience.

Scripture: Romans 3:24, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "The Role of Christ in Salvation"

Description

Charles Finney presents a detailed examination of justification by faith, emphasizing that it is fundamentally a governmental act of pardon rather than a forensic declaration of innocence. He critiques the traditional view that Christ's obedience is imputed to believers, arguing instead that justification is based on God's infinite love and mercy, requiring repentance, faith, and sanctification as conditions. Finney asserts that the sinner's justification involves a divine decree of pardon, challenging the notion that it can be achieved through mere legalistic means. He highlights the necessity of understanding Christ's role in the justification process, emphasizing that faith should not replace Christ as the foundation of salvation. This sermon serves to clarify misconceptions about justification and the nature of faith in relation to Christ's work.

Transcript

In place of our usual sermon, we have thought it best to lay before our readers some extracts from Prof. Finney's recently published volume, on the point of justification. Our reasons for this are,

- (1.) The intrinsic importance of the subject.
- (2.) To give our readers a specimen of the book that they may the better judge of its value, and the desirableness to themselves of owning it.
- (3.) That the public may see in the light of our standard Theological works, how near the truth are the recent allegations that the Oberlin system puts faith in the place of Christ, and conjoins good feelings along with Christ as the ground, or foundation of the sinner's justification before God.

It may be also not amiss to show that we do not hold the doctrine that Christ's obedience is imputed to us, so as to be reckoned ours, and why we reject it.

Prof. Finney introduces the subject of justification by inquiring in what sense it is a governmental act. To what branch of the functions of government does it appertain?

It may be conceived to pertain to the judicial branch, in which case manifestly justice according to law and testimony must take its firm, undeviating course. Under the legitimate action of this branch of government there can be no mercy. Law knows nothing about pardon.

On the other hand, the legislative or executive branches of government are often vested with the pardoning power.

And here that great question in theology is simply this--Does the sinner's justification involve the idea of pardon, or does it not? Prof. Finney, we hardly need say, holds in the strongest manner that it does. It is nothing else but the pardon of sinners--the pardon of those who have broken the law of God--whom justice dooms to hell--for whom nothing can avail but interposing mercy, moving the great Executive Power of the universe for his pardon.

Right over against this it is observed that Dr. Chalmers and his school of Theologians hold that justification is strictly a judicial and forensic transaction, proceeding upon mere justice. Yet the assumed ground of it is not the sinner's actual, but his imputed innocence--not his own personal and perfect obedience, but the perfect obedience of Christ reckoned in the eye of the law as his, because of his faith in Christ. On this scheme the sinner has rendered perfect obedience by proxy, and hence the most rigid demands of law--supposing it to recognize the proxy--cannot fail to be satisfied. A sinner on this ground might claim his own acquittal. There is no occasion for the exercise of mercy in the transaction. The transfer, or imputation once made, then justice proceeds of course to pronounce the sinner's perfect obedience (imputed) to be most satisfactory.

Widely different from this, Prof. Finney holds that justification "consists in a governmental decree of pardon or amnesty--in arresting and setting aside the execution of the incurred penalty of the law--in pardoning and restoring to favor those who have sinned," and are under sentence of death by the law. He maintains that this view of justification is taught by the whole system of Old Testament symbols and teachings --by the New Testament also; and that in the nature of the case, sinners cannot be justified in any other sense. That "sinners should be forensically pronounced just, is impossible and absurd."

We now quote Prof. Finney's remarks on the Conditions of Justification.

"As has been already said there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but on condition of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law. This is of course denied by those who hold that gospel justification or the justification of penitent sinners, is of the nature of a forensic or judicial justification.-- They hold to the legal maxim that what a man does by another, he does by himself, and therefore the law regards Christ's obedience as ours on the ground that he obeyed for us. To this I reply,

1. The legal maxim just repeated does not apply except in cases where one acts in behalf on another by his own consent, which was not the case with the obedience of Christ; and
2. The doctrine of an imputed righteousness or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption; namely, that Christ owed no obedience to the law in his own person, and that therefore his obedience was altogether a work of supererogation, and might be made a substitute for our own obedience; that it might be set down to our

credit, because he did not need to obey for himself.

I must here remark, that justification respects the moral law; and that it must be intended that Christ owed no obedience to the moral law, and therefore his obedience to this law being wholly a work of supererogation, is set down to our account upon condition of faith in Him. But surely this is an infinite mistake. We have seen that the spirit of the moral law requires good will to God and the universe. Was Christ under no obligation to do this? Nay, was He not rather under infinite obligation to be perfectly benevolent? Was it possible for Him to be more benevolent than the law requires God and all beings to be? Did He not owe entire consecration of heart and life to the highest good of universal being? If not, then benevolence in Him were no virtue, for it would not be a compliance with moral obligation. It was naturally impossible for Him, and is naturally impossible for any being to perform a work of supererogation, that is, to be more benevolent than the moral law requires him to be. This is, and must be as true of God as it is of any other being. Would not Christ have sinned had He not been perfectly benevolent? If He would, it follows that He owed obedience to the law as really as any other being. Indeed a being that owed no obedience to the moral law must be wholly incapable of virtue, for what is virtue but obedience to moral law?

But if Christ owed personal obedience to the moral law, then his obedience could no more than justify Himself. It can never be imputed to us. He was bound for Himself to love God with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and his neighbor as Himself. He did no more than this. He could do no more. It was naturally impossible, then, for Him to obey in our behalf. This doctrine of the imputation of Christ's obedience to the moral law to us, is based upon the absurd assumptions,

(1.) That the moral law is founded in the arbitrary will of God, and

(2.) That of course, Christ, as God, owed no obedience to it; both of which assumptions are absurd. But if these assumptions are given up, what becomes of the doctrine of an imputed righteousness as a condition of a forensic justification? "It vanishes into thin air."

The conditions of justification Prof. Finney arranges as follows.

1. The vicarious sufferings or atonement of Christ.
2. Repentance.
3. Faith in Christ.
4. Sanctification.
5. Perseverance in faith and obedience, or in consecration to God.

[Of these we select at present only a few remarks on Faith; although we should delight to lay before our readers the argument made under the last two heads. Possibly we may at some future time.]

"Faith in Christ is another condition of justification. We have already examined into the nature and necessity of faith. I fear that there has been much of error in the conceptions of many upon this subject. They have talked of justification by faith as if they supposed that by an arbitrary appointment of God, faith was the condition and the only condition of justification. This seems to be the antinomian view. The class of persons alluded to, speak of justification by faith as if it were by faith, and not by Christ through faith that

the penitent sinner is justified; as if faith and not Christ was our justification. They seem to regard faith, not as a natural, but as a mystical condition of justification; as bringing us into a covenant and mystical relation to Christ, in consequence of which his righteousness or personal obedience is imputed to us. We have seen that repentance as well as faith is a condition of justification. We shall see that sanctification and perseverance in obedience to the end of life are also conditions of justification. Faith is often spoken of in scripture as if it were the sole condition of salvation, because, as we have seen, from its very nature it implies repentance and every virtue.

That faith is naturally a necessary condition of justification we have seen. Let the following passages of scripture serve as examples of the manner in which the scriptures speak upon the subject.

Mark 16:15. Jn. 1:12, and 3:16, 36, and 6:28, 29, 40 and 8:24, 44, 47 and 11:25, 26. Acts 10:43 and 16:31. Rom. 4:5 and 10:4. Gal. 2:16. 2 Th. 2:10, 11, 12. Heb. 11:6. I Jn. 2:23 and 5:10, 11, 12, 13.

It is especially to our purpose to quote the remarks made on the foundation or ground of justification. We therefore extract these entire.

Foundation of the justification of penitent believers in Christ. That is, what is the ultimate ground or reason of their justification.

I. "It is not founded in Christ's literally suffering the exact penalty of the law for them, and in this sense literally purchasing their justification and eternal salvation. The Presbyterian Confession of Faith affirms as follows: Chapter on Justification, Section 3.

"Christ by his obedience and death did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf. Yet inasmuch as He was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for any thing in them, their justification is only of free grace, that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners."

What is to be understood here by exact justice and by a real, full satisfaction of his Father's justice? I suppose all orthodox Christians to hold that every sinner and every sin, strictly on the score of justice, deserves eternal death or endless suffering. Did the framers of this Confession hold that Christ bore the literal penalty of the law for all the saints? Or did they hold that by virtue of his nature and relations, his suffering, though indefinitely less in amount than was deserved by the transgressors, was a full equivalent to public justice, or governmentally considered, for the execution of the literal penalty upon the transgressors? If they meant this latter, I see no objection to it. But if they meant the former, namely, that Christ suffered in his own person the full amount strictly due to all the elect, I say,

(1.) That it is naturally impossible.

(2.) That his nature and relation to the government of God was such as to render it wholly unnecessary to the safe forgiveness of sin, that He should suffer precisely the same amount deserved by sinners.

(3.) That is, as their substitute, Christ suffered for them the full amount deserved by them, then justice has no claim upon them, since their debt is fully paid by the surety, and of course the principal is, in justice discharged.

(4.) If He satisfied justice for them in the sense of literally and exactly obeying for them, why should his suffering be imputed to them as a condition of their salvation? Surely they could not need both the imputation of his perfect obedience to them so as to be accounted in law as perfectly righteous, and also the imputation of his sufferings to them, as if He had not obeyed for them. Is God unrighteous? Does He exact of the surety first, the literal and full payment of the debt, and secondly, perfect and full obedience for and in behalf of the sinner? Does He first exact full and perfect obedience, and then the same amount of suffering as if there had been no obedience? And this, too, of his beloved Son?

2. Our own works or obedience to the law or to the gospel, are not the ground or foundation of our justification. That is, neither our faith, nor repentance, nor love, nor life, nor any thing done by us or wrought in us, is the ground of our justification. These are conditions of our justification, but not the ground of it. We are justified upon condition of our faith, but not for our faith; upon condition of our repentance, love, obedience, perseverance, unto the end, but not for these things. These are the conditions, but not the reason, ground, or procuring cause of our justification. We cannot be justified without them, neither are we or can we be justified by them. None of these things must be omitted on pain of eternal damnation. Nor must they be put in the place of Christ upon the same penalty. Faith is so much insisted upon in the gospel as the sine qua non of our justification, that some seem disposed or at least to be in danger of making faith the procuring cause, or of substituting faith in the place of Christ; of making faith instead of Christ the Savior.

3. Neither is the atonement of Christ the foundation of our justification. This too is a condition and means of our justification, but not the foundation of it.

4. Nor is any thing in the mediatorial work of Christ the foundation of our justification. The work and death and resurrection and advocacy of Christ are indispensable conditions, but not the fundamental reason of our justification.

5. Nor is the work of the Holy Spirit in converting and sanctifying the soul the foundation of justification. This is only a condition or means of bringing it about, but is not the fundamental reason.

6. But the disinterested and infinite love of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the true and only foundation of the justification and salvation of sinners. God is love, that is, He is infinitely benevolent. All He does, or says, or suffers, permits or omits, is for one and the same ultimate reason, namely, to promote the highest good of universal being.

7. Christ, the Second Person in the glorious Trinity is represented in Scripture, as taking so prominent a part in this work that the number of offices and relations which He sustains to God and man in it are truly wonderful. For example, He is represented as being:

1. King. 2. Judge. 3. Mediator. 4. Advocate. 5. Redeemer. 6. Surety. 7. Wisdom. 8. Righteousness. 9. Sanctification. 10. Redemption. 11. Prophet. 12. Priest. 13. Passover or Lamb of God. 14. The bread and water of life. 15. True God and eternal Life. 16. Our life. 17. Our all in all. 18. As the repairer of the breach. 19. As dying for our sins. 20. As rising for our justification. 21. As the resurrection and the life. 22. As bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows. 23. As He by whose stripes we were healed. 24. As the head of his people. 25. As the bridegroom or husband of his church. 26. As the shepherd of his flock. 27. As the door by which they enter. 28. As the way to salvation. 29. As our salvation. 30. As the truth. 31. As being made sin for us. 32. That we are made the righteousness of God in Him. 33. That in Him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead. 34. That in Him all fulness dwells. 35. All power in heaven and earth are said to

be given to Him. 36. He is said to be the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. 37. Christ in us the hope of glory. 38. The true vine of which we are branches. 39. Our brother. 40. Wonderful. 41. Counsellor. 42. The mighty God. 43. The everlasting Father. 44. The Prince of peace. 45. The captain of salvation. 46. The captain of the Lord's host.

These are among the official relations of Christ to his people and to the great work of our justification. I shall have frequent occasion to consider Him in some of these relations as we proceed in this course of study. Indeed, the office, relations, and work of Christ, are among the most important topics of Christian theology.

Christ is our justification in the sense that He carries into execution the whole scheme of redemption devised by the adorable Godhead. To Him, the scripture every where directs the eyes of our faith and of our intelligence also. The Holy Spirit is represented not as glorifying Himself, but as speaking of Jesus, as taking of the things of Christ, and showing them to his people, as glorifying Christ Jesus, as being sent by Christ, as being the Spirit of Christ, as being Christ Himself, dwelling in the hearts of his people. But I must forbear at present. This subject of Christ's relations needs illucidation in future lectures.

REMARKS.

The relations of the Old School view of justification to their view of depravity is obvious. They hold, as we have seen, that the constitution in every faculty and part is sinful. Of course, personal, present holiness, in the sense of entire conformity to law, cannot with them be a condition of justification. They must have a justification while yet at least in some degree of sin. This must be brought about by imputed righteousness. The intelligence revolts at a justification in sin. So a scheme is devised to divert the eye of the law and the lawgiver from the sinner to his substitute who has perfectly obeyed the law. But in order to make out the possibility of his obedience being imputed to them, it must be assumed that He owed no obedience for Himself; than which a greater absurdity cannot be conceived. Constitutional depravity or sinfulness being once assumed, physical regeneration, physical sanctification, physical Divine influence, imputed righteousness, and justification while personally in the commission of sin, follow of course. Shame on a theology that is incumbered with such absurdities.

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