

Foundations

Dr. Marvin J. Effa

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Foundations, Part 1, Justification Apart from Works.

We live in a time of unprecedented information. Not all of it is good. The parable of the wheat and the tares indicates it is God's will that truth and error exist side by side until the end of the age (Matthew 13:24-30). I have attended a wide variety of schools and have held and taught various doctrinal systems. What follows is my current understanding of some important biblical systems or foundations.

1. **The Ungodly Believes and It Is Accounted to Him as Righteousness.** Justification before God happens when a person believes in Jesus. Jesus is the God/Man Who died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Faith, or believing, is a thinking process whereby someone becomes convinced of something or accepts something as true. It is not a work. In John 6:28-29 the Jews wish to know what work God requires and Jesus tells them to believe in the One Who sent Him. It is an unusual context, for normally faith is contrasted to works. One is justified before God by faith, not by works; John 6 is helpful, because faith is something a person does: they choose to believe. The ungodly person believes in Jesus and his faith is reckoned to him as righteousness (Romans 4:5). As far as justification before God is concerned, the requirement is faith alone in Christ alone. We bring nothing to this judicial ruling but faith.

The whole world seems to get this wrong. Rather than receiving a gift from God apart from works, everyone wants to arrange some sort of transaction between the person and God. We are told:

- "Give your heart" to Jesus
- "Give your life" to Jesus
- "Change your ways"
- "Repent"
- "Depend, rely,"
- "Put your confidence/trust" in Jesus¹
- "Surrender your heart/life/bank account" to Jesus
- "Submit yourself" to God
- "Visit the widows and orphans."

The focus in all of these statements is upon the person and not on Jesus. The person gives something to God and God gives something back in return. It is a quid pro quo.

Someone is declared righteous when he or she believes in Jesus. They are not made righteous, as many teach; they are declared righteous. Righteousness is reckoned or imputed or accounted to the person. Believing in Jesus allows the righteous Heavenly

¹ Both the Greek and the Hebrew have different words for "believe" and "trust." "Trust" is a privilege for believers and is not used in soteriological contexts. In English, "trust" may be used a synonym for "believe," but "trust" usually includes some aspect of human responsibility that is absent in "faith."

Father to take the work of His Son Jesus and apply that work to the account of the ungodly person. In one moment, an ungodly person believes in Jesus, and in the next moment God sees that person as righteous as His only begotten Son.

What motivates a person to believe does not seem to be a priority in Scripture. Abraham believed, being childless and afraid of Babylonian kings. Some believed because of health issues; others believed because of the coming kingdom. Jesus said a lot about hell—more than about heaven. Some sought forgiveness of sins. Some friends in Africa believed out of fear of the witchdoctor. Every person comes to the personal exchange of believing in Jesus with a different path. Perhaps our worship of God throughout eternity will reflect the diversity of how He alone has met the needs of Adam's fallen race.

The goal is to help others understand good news: **No works are necessary to receive imputed righteousness; it is freely given when someone believes in Jesus.**

Foundations, Part 2, The Just will Live by Faith.

2. **The just will live by faith.** When it comes to the life of the believer, the history of Christianity has largely doomed the church to a system of works. Believers are taught that incrementally—over time—they become better people who are tempted less, and consequently sin less. The believer becomes increasingly righteous as he or she practices the “means of sanctification” or the “spiritual disciplines” of the various religious groups. There are protocols for each temptation, that, when followed, remove the temptation from the believer. These protocols or works that a believer does are typically not called “works,” but fasting (a common spiritual discipline) is a lot of work. Those advocating these systems do not wish to use the term “works,” and this hesitancy leads to a kind of mysticism. It is a work, but it is not a work.

Martin Luther never intended to break with the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). He expressed concerns about abuses regarding justification, but his system, like the RCC's system, required a demonstration of good works to accompany faith. His systems had no carnal believers, and therefore had no assurance of salvation. Sinning believers is the reality of both life and Scripture, but not most theological systems. First John 1:8 makes this clear (my translation) “If we should have said, ‘We are not having sin,’ we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Continued godly behavior was Luther's foundation for assurance. Justification by faith in his system was not by faith alone, and the life of the believer must consist of certain good works as defined by the RCC.

Little has changed in systems of sanctification. Today if one asks believers how to live the Christian life, invariably the response is one of works: go to church, read your Bible, pray, give, sing, witness, evangelize, memorize the Bible, and don't forget to fast.

But these so called “spiritual disciplines” appear to be a far cry from the “just shall live by faith.” This concept is the theme of the New Testament, the majority of which is written to believers who have already been justified. Having been declared righteous or just, they are now to live by faith. This view of the life of the believer is repeated in each

of the three primary doctrinal books of the New Testament. Romans explains “just” or “justification.” Hebrews explains “faith,” and Galatians focuses on “live.” Let’s look at each of the terms used in this phrase.

1. The just. Romans presents justification as a judicial ruling whereby the ungodly person believes, and righteousness is imputed or reckoned to him or her.
2. Faith. Hebrews spends a significant amount of time defining and demonstrating the centrality of faith. “Faith” is accepting something as true. Hebrews 11:3 is a helpful reference to understand “faith.” “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God.” The only way someone can “know” (“know” is a better translation than “understand”) about creation is through revelation from God. Since He revealed how He created everything, we believe that report, or accept it as true.
3. Live. Galatians castigates the readers for abandoning the grace of the gospel. In order to “live” in life with God, some false teachers had convinced them that it was necessary to keep the Mosaic Law. Out of fear, Peter went along with their doctrines. Paul publicly corrected Peter for his sinful error. Paul lives by faith in the Son of God (Galatians 2:20). Unlike Peter, who returned to works of the Law, Paul does not set aside the grace of God by following a works-based system. Paul actually expands this line of thought by including all systems of works and not just the Mosaic system. Faith was not enough, these teachers said: works were required to “live” for God (Galatians 2:19). If righteousness could come to a person through works, it would not have been necessary for Jesus to die (Galatians 2:21). No unaided human can please God. Romans 8:8 states that “those in the flesh cannot please God.” This should not be understood to mean “controlled by the flesh,” but rather means those who are only flesh and blood, that is, without the Spirit. We need the indwelling Spirit, whom every believer has (Romans 8:9). The Holy Spirit comes to the believer by faith (Galatians 3:2), not works. When Christ came, the Law ended (Galatians 3:19). The believer today lives unto God by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. True liberty and freedom are only found in God’s grace and never in rules, regulations, or protocols.

“The just will live by faith” is not a new concept. Habakkuk 2:4 provides the quote for the New Testament. The New Testament looks at this concept through several similar statements:

- Jesus said “abide in Me (John 15:4)
- John said “walk in the light” (1 John 1:7)

Paul used several ideas to convey living by faith in addition to quoting Habakkuk:

- “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16)
- “walk in the steps of faith” (Romans 4:12)
- “live in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25)
- “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), and
- “walk in Him” (Colossians 2:6).

Righteousness never comes to the believer through works; it comes through faith. Just as a person brings nothing to justification but faith, so the believer brings nothing to living by faith—but faith. Colossians 2:6 makes this clear: “as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.” It is through faith, not works, that the believer experiences the

richness of God's grace. King David was a believer, a Jew, a prophet, the king of Israel, and man after God's own heart. What sort of spiritual disciplines or means of sanctification solve the problems of adultery and manslaughter? He needed imputed righteousness after his sin, and it came to him by faith, not works (Romans 4:6-9).

The believer, living by faith, is not made a better person. At any time, he or she may act like they are not "in Christ," but "in Adam." The believer does not become a better person in this life—even if he or she walks in the light for many years; an honest evaluation by the believer must agree with the Apostle Paul that there is no human merit, goodness, or righteousness in the believer. Everything good is external from the believer and "comes down from the Father of lights with Whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" —God gets the credit; not the believer (Romans 7, 8:11, James 1:17).

The "justified believer" lives in the realm of the Spirit by faith, not the practice of disciplines or some so-called means of sanctification. ("Sanctify" by the way, is always in the Aorist and Perfect tenses, except for 2 references to a millennial "setting apart" and a secular reference regarding the temple. One cannot prove the popular doctrine of progressive sanctification from the biblical use of the term.) Living by faith allows the believer to abide in Christ, walk by the Spirit, walk in the light, be filled by the Spirit, and fellowship with the Father and His Son. The power here is the Holy Spirit and not a human being, whose Adamic self is being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Speaking of "transformation," we are told that we are being transformed by degrees into Christ's image as we appropriate the various means of sanctification, better called "various works." Romans 12:1-2 argues for the changing of our minds from the world's system of thinking into a biblical way of thinking. God's Spirit helps believers become better thinkers. We are told to "put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:23-24). Again, this is a changing or renewing of the believer's mind to the end that the believer does not grieve the Lord's Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). 2 Corinthians 3:18 is routinely used to provide the foundation for progressive sanctification: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." The context here is Israelis without glory who were fearful of Moses, whose face shone. Unlike them, we bask in the glory of the indwelling Spirit who is preparing us for the future glorification (Romans 8:30). The progression is believing Israelis who were fearful of God's glory, to church-age believers who have the indwelling Spirit, to glorified believers in the age to come. The passage should not be understood as a system of sanctification.

But what about good works?! There should be no questions as to God's desire for believers to do good works. In fact, He has put together a list of works for each of us: "for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Having received God's grace, believers should make a break with the former way of living, conduct themselves in a godly manner, eagerly look for Christ's returning, and be zealous to do good works (Titus 2:10-14). As believers live by faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit,

they follow the Lord's leadership to do the work that He desires. Our love for the Lord should be our primary motive.

Foundations, Part 3, The Motive of Love.

3. **Motivation: The Labor of Love.** Does it matter why a believer lives by faith? It appears that it does. Religious ceremonies (such as circumcision) are irrelevant and actually have no benefit whatsoever (Galatians 5:6). What does matter is that the faith of the believer is "energized by love." The term translated by the author as "energized" is used in James 5:16 to describe an "effective, fervent prayer." "Love" is the effective, fervent element that makes the believer's faith experientially come alive.

The primary motive for living by faith should be the believer's love for Jesus. When Peter lost his way, Jesus desired to re-establish the relationship: "Peter, do you love Me?" (John 21:15-17). Hebrews makes it very clear that God could never forget the believer's "labor of love" (Heb. 6). Loving the Lord our God with all our hearts is a theme of both Old and New Testaments (Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37). Our love for Christ is also something that He rewards. 1 Corinthians 2:9 indicates we cannot begin to imagine the future blessings God has for those who love Him and, in this life, everything works together for good to those who love God (Romans 8:28).

But are there other motives for living by faith? Fear of discipline from the Lord appears to be one motive. Hebrews is filled with warning passages for believers to continue in the life of faith.

Rewards also play a role in encouraging a life of faith. Everlasting life is both a gift by faith alone in Christ alone, and it is also a reward for living by faith. An easy place to see this distinction is in Romans 6:22-23. In verse 22 Paul explains that the believer should become a slave of God, and that produces fruit unto holiness and eventually everlasting life. In this verse everlasting life is a reward for being a slave to God, but in the next verse he reminds us that everlasting life is a gift found in Jesus. Like Abraham, who inherited the world, walking by faith will be rewarded. In this life the reward is the richest life possible, and in the age to come our roles are determined by this life's relationship to Jesus.

Foundations, Part 4, The Believer's Reward in the Coming Kingdom and the Eternal Age.

4. **Foundations, Part 4, The Believer's Reward in the Coming Kingdom and the Eternal Age.** A normal hermeneutic of literature should be the starting point of this central aspect of Scripture. The Old Testament prophets spoke extensively about the coming kingdom. Ezekiel gives the last 8 chapters of his book to the physical dimensions of the temple and its surrounding areas. The Gospels detail the offer of this kingdom to the Jews, but the Jewish leaders rejected the King and prohibited His apostles from speaking His name after His resurrection. During our current time of biblical history, God

is bringing Gentiles to Himself through the gospel of grace as proclaimed through the church. At some point in the future the fullness of the Gentiles will arrive (Romans 11:25), and God will return His attention to the complete conversion of all Israel. By the end of the Tribulation all the remaining Jews will have believed in Jesus, and then comes the prophetic Millennial Kingdom.

The message of the coming kingdom was a central part of Paul's message. Acts 28 makes it clear that he spent two years imprisoned preaching the kingdom of God, and he also taught things about Jesus (Acts 28:30-31). The book of Acts begins with a normal understanding of the prophetic kingdom ("will you restore the kingdom at this time?" Acts 1:6), and it ends with a normal understanding of the prophetic kingdom.

Poor hermeneutics and antisemitism contribute to the majority positions today: amillennialism and "already-not-yet." Amillennialism denies the possibility of a future for Israel, and the "already-not-yet" position spiritualizes the text. Neither position can be defended with a normal hermeneutic.

The world to which Hebrews says believers are headed is a future world where humans will have complete rule over everything (Hebrews 2:5-10, quoting Psalm 8). In that kingdom, where Christ is king of the whole earth (Zechariah 14:9) and David is resurrected and ruling over his people (Ezekiel 37:25), believers will be rewarded for their labors of love for their Savior (Hebrews 6:10).

Conclusion.

Having been justified by faith alone in Christ alone, apart from works, the believer, who has now been declared everlastingly righteous through the work of Christ, lives by faith in the risen Son of God, who continues to give him imputed righteousness through faith and not works. Enabled by the Holy Spirit, the believer is no longer simply flesh and blood, but is indwelt by the same Person who created the heavens and the earth and raised Jesus from the dead. Out of a heart of love for the Father (who sent His Son Jesus) and enabled by the Holy Spirit, the believer should be eager to find and do the works God prepared for this particular believer before the world began. This very same Jesus, who loved and gave Himself for the sins of the world, will return as the triumphant king of the whole earth, where He will reign for a thousand years. After this earthly reign He will be the exalted center of the new heavens and earth. The process of walking by faith now, as believers await His return, is the first fruits of a millennial and then an eternal experience of joyful worship and service of our Heavenly Father.