

An Evaluation of the Federal Vision's Doctrine of Justification: A Critique of Peter Leithart and Richard Lusk

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The doctrine of justification by faith alone on the legal ground of Christ's righteousness alone lies at the heart of the gospel and was the material cause of the Protestant Reformation. Though this great doctrine was eclipsed during the Middle Ages, God brought it back to light when the Reformers recovered the sufficiency of Scripture and taught it once again. Because justification by faith alone is central to the gospel, it remains under siege to this day.

A number of influential theologians have sought to modify the biblical Reformed doctrine of justification. Three figures who have perhaps done the most to challenge it within Reformed circles include: N.T. Wright, a leading theologian of the New Perspective on Paul; Daniel P. Fuller, an influential theologian in Calvinistic Baptist circles; and Norman Shepherd, a Presbyterian who was the founding theologian of what came to be called the Federal Vision.¹ In his excellent dissertation titled *Faith, Obedience, and Justification: Current Evangelical Departures from Sola Fide*, Sam Waldron masterfully addressed the errors in justification promoted by Norman Shepherd, Dan Fuller, and Don Garlington.²

In honor of Waldron's formidable work, this chapter will address the errors on justification found in the writings of Peter Leithart and Richard Lusk. While Norman Shepherd was the grandfather of the Federal Vision, Peter Leithart is now the principal theologian of that perspective. Leithart is the President of Theopolis Institute, hosted by Trinity Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where Richard Lusk serves as the lead pastor. This chapter will first describe the doctrine of justification as taught by Peter Leithart and Richard Lusk, and second, it will analyze their teachings in light of Scripture and theology.

Peter Leithart

Leithart defines justification as a "deliverance-verdict" (deliverdict) that simultaneously declares the sinner just, frees him from condemnation, produces inward holiness, and delivers him from sin, death, and Satan. Thus, justification is identical with definitive sanctification; forgiveness and renewal are twin elements of one effective verdict. In making his argument,

¹ Many theologians who once identified with the moniker "Federal Vision" (also called The Auburn Avenue Theology or The Monroe Doctrine) no longer identify with it, though their theology has not changed in substance. They may prefer to be considered catholic Christians or simply biblical Presbyterians. But such ways of identifying them do not sufficiently distinguish their distinctive beliefs from other Christians. Therefore, this chapter will use the term "Federal Vision" to identify their theology, since no other term is available. Others historically associated with the Federal Vision include James Jordan, Steve Wilkins, John Barach, Mark Horne, Steve Schissel and Doug Wilson. Doug Wilson, and those who follow him, are unique among the advocates of the Federal Vision in that he does not believe justification before God can be lost. Wilson no longer wishes to be associated with the term, though his theology has not changed.

² Samuel E. Waldron, *Faith, Obedience, and Justification: Current Evangelical Departures from Sola Fide* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2006).

Leithart departs from the Reformed tradition, claiming that in Scripture, justification is not a strictly forensic category by which God declares his people righteous in his heavenly court, but that it is also a transformative category by which God makes his people inwardly and outwardly just, giving them the grace or virtue of personal justice. Leithart writes:

The Protestant doctrine has been too rigid in separating justification and sanctification, more rigid certainly than Scripture itself (see below). I argue below that, when examined under a military-conflictual metaphor rather than solely under the imagery of “courtroom,” justification and definitive sanctification are not merely simultaneous, nor merely twin effects of the single event of union with Christ (though I believe that is the case). Rather, they are the same act. God’s declaration that we are justified *takes the form of* deliverance from sin, death and Satan. God declares us righteous by delivering us from all our enemies, or, to use the language of 1 Kings 8, God “justifies by giving to the righteous according to his righteousness,” by keeping His covenant promises with those counted righteous.³

Leithart explains that he grounds his understanding of the deliverance-verdict on Christ’s death and resurrection. He writes:

The resurrection [of Christ] is not the result of a prior verdict from the Father; the resurrection is instead the public declaration of the verdict (as it is the public declaration of His sonship, Rom 1:4). By raising Jesus, the Father proclaimed that His son, condemned by Roman and Jew alike, was in fact the Righteous One, and was righteous precisely in His obedience to death on a cross. Obviously, the resurrection did more than change Jesus’ “legal” status. Deliverance from death *was* the verdict.

Jesus’ resurrection is the paradigmatic case of justification. We are justified because we are joined to the One who has been justified by being raised from the dead. Since Jesus’ justification is the pattern of our justification, our justification must likewise involve deliverance from the power of death and from the threat of enemies, including the enemies of sin and Satan. In this sense, justification and definitive sanctification are two ways of describing the same act: God renders a verdict in our favor by cutting off our enemies—our chief enemies being death and sin and Satan—and by delivering us from their power.⁴

In this way, Leithart teaches that Christ’s resurrection, or deliverance from death, is his justification. Since Christ’s justification is the pattern of our justification, our deliverance is also our justification. God’s verdict of justification is announced personally to individuals at their baptism. Leithart writes:

Baptism is the declaration of the verdict, to me personally, with my name attached. In baptism, God promises to forgive me my sins for Jesus’ sake. In baptism, He communicates His verdict to me, just as truly as He communicates it in preaching, but in baptism he more obviously communicates it to me. In baptism, He says that I am included in Christ, and in the verdict that He passed on Jesus. This is what it means for baptism to

³ Peter Leithart, “Judge Me, O God: Biblical Perspectives on Justification” in *The Federal Vision*, eds. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius, 2004), 211–212 (emphasis in the original).

⁴ Leithart, “Judge Me, O God,” 227.

join us to Christ's death and resurrection, since the resurrection is the Father's verdict over the Son through the Spirit (Rom 4:25; 6:1–7).⁵

Thus, Leithart teaches that baptism is the word by which God declares his people to be just and delivered from sin, death and Satan. But what about people who have been baptized and then subsequently deny Christ and fall away? Leithart says:

In baptism, Jesus rescues the baptized. They are members of His body, called to continue trusting and obeying Him. Those who believe the promise given in baptism, who live out their standing as righteous ones, have nothing to fear. Some won't. Some cross these waters and return to the world of Adam. That means that God regards them with favor, counts them as just, for a time. When Paul contemplates how apostasy can happen, he turns to the sovereign authority and inscrutable purposes of the God who shows mercy to whom He will and hardens whom He will (Romans 9–11).⁶

While baptism justifies its recipient, the baptized individual remains justified only if he continues in trusting obedience to the terms of the covenant of grace. Some who were baptized turn away from faith, lose their justification, and go to hell. The elect remain faithfully obedient and continue in justification to the end, while those not chosen for eternal glory will inevitably fall away from faith and justification.

Leithart argues from various passages, including Psalm 7:6–11; 35:22–28; 94:1–7; Isaiah 54:11–17; Jeremiah 51:5–10, which teach that God vindicates, or justifies, people of the old covenant according to their righteousness. The two key New Testament texts he cites include Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 6.

From Romans 6, Leithart argues for the “deliverance-verdict” of justification. He cites Romans 6:7, “For one who has died has been set free [*dikaioō*, or justified] from sin.”⁷ According to Leithart, justification from sin in this context must not refer merely to justification from the guilt of sin but specifically to justification from actual sinfulness. God's justifying word delivers sinners from their actual sinfulness. Romans 6 also teaches that God's justifying word is declared in baptism. Romans 6:3–4 says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Leithart points out that we were buried “by baptism” as a means. Baptism, therefore, is the means by which we die to the pollution of sin and live unto holiness.

1 Corinthians 6 corroborates this same teaching. 1 Corinthians 6:11 says, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” In this verse, we find washing, which is baptism,

⁵ Peter Leithart, “Justification by Faith,” https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/justification-by-faith/, accessed October 24, 2025.

⁶ Peter Leithart, “Does Baptism Justify?” <https://theopolisinstitute.com/does-baptism-justify/>, accessed October 24, 2025.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the English Standard Version.

connected with sanctification and justification. They are tied together. Though Leithart admits this passage is less certain, it does seem, according to him that baptism occurs simultaneously with sanctification and justification.⁸

In summary, Leithart teaches that God's people are justified in their baptism by which they are declared righteous and made intrinsically righteous. The elect will continue in their justification by faithful obedience, while the baptized non-elect will fall away from faith, turn from Christ, lose their justification, and go to hell.

Richard Lusk

Having briefly surveyed the structure of Peter Leithart's doctrine of justification, along with some supporting passages of Scripture, we now turn to Richard Lusk's doctrine of justification, which is similar to that of Peter Leithart. Lusk says justification is grounded in God's righteousness, which is a divine attribute displayed by his faithfulness to the promises and threats of his covenants. He writes:

God's righteousness is clearly a divine attribute revealed in divine action. God's righteousness is his integrity, which manifests itself in history as fidelity to his covenant promises, which in turn manifests itself in the salvation of his people and the destruction of their enemies. God's righteousness is his character, reflected in his actions, vindicating true Israel and condemning the wicked. God's righteousness is his power, exercised on behalf of his people, to rescue them from sin through his Son.⁹

Lusk, therefore, holds that God's righteousness is his integrity in keeping his covenantal promises both to save his people and to destroy their enemies. God declares his people righteous through union with Christ in the covenant of grace.

But what does Lusk believe about imputed righteousness? Imputed righteousness is at the heart of the debate surrounding the Federal Vision. Lusk explains:

Romans 4:6–8 explain the nature of imputed righteousness. To have righteousness imputed means that sins are forgiven—or, to put the same reality another way, it means that God does not count (impute) a man's sin against him. When God refuses to reckon sin (4:8, quoting Ps. 32:2), it means he “covers” our sin (4:7, quoting Ps. 32:1). It means he has cast our sins away (Isa. 38:17), removed them (Ps. 103:12), blotted them out (Isa. 43:25, 44:22), and forgotten them (Isa. 43:25). The non-imputation of sin means God is not pressing charges against us; instead, he is accounting us as in the right. So we have this equation: “righteousness imputed” = “sins forgiven/covered” = “sins not imputed.” Note that it is impossible for imputation language to describe a transfer in verse 8 since a person's own sin is in view. (How could a person's own sin be transferred to him?)¹⁰

⁸ Leithart, “Does Baptism Justify?”

⁹ Richard Lusk, “From Birmingham, With Love: ‘Federal Vision’ Postcards,” http://trinity-pres.net/essays/published_Federal_Vision_Postcards.pdf, accessed October 24, 2025.

¹⁰ Lusk, “From Birmingham, With Love.”

For Lusk, therefore, the imputation of righteousness does not refer to the imputation of Christ's active obedience, but strictly to the forgiveness of sins. In covenantal union with Christ, the believer's sins are forgiven, removed, or blotted out, but God does not legally regard or treat the believer as though he is perfectly obedient to the law of God. Lusk writes, "We share in his legal status because we are in him. He does not transfer righteousness or merits to our accounts; rather, he incorporates us into himself, making his account a joint account. All that he possesses is freely shared with us."¹¹

Lusk also develops a doctrine of future or final justification by obedience to the law of God. He says:

We find the Bible teaching that future justification is according to works. Final justification is to the (faithful) doers of the law (Rom. 2:1ff) and by those good works which make faith complete (Jas. 2:14ff). Justification will not be fully realized until the resurrection. In fact, the main reason justification comes up at all in the Scriptures is because someday we will all stand before God's judgment seat and answer for our deeds done in the body. This makes the question of justification the most practical question of all.¹²

For Lusk, then, justification begins by faith alone, but it is completed, or fully realized, through faithful obedience to God's law. He says, "Thus, initial justification is by faith alone; subsequent justifications include obedience."¹³

Lusk does not believe that faith is the sole means of justification. He says:

[The apostle James] says their persons will not be justified by faith alone, but also by good works of obedience they have done. The use of the preposition "by" is important since it indicates a sort of dual instrumentality in justification. In other words, in some sense, James is speaking of a justification in which faith and works combine together to justify. Future justification is according to one's life pattern. No one dare claim these works to be meritorious, but they are necessary. There is congruence between the life we live and the destiny we will receive.¹⁴

Thus, while justification in union with Christ is initially by faith alone, all subsequent verdicts of justification, culminating on the last day, will include good works of obedience that believers have done by faith. Moreover, final justification by works will be a soft, fatherly judgment, which judges God's people's works graciously, accepting what is imperfect for their justification. Lusk writes:

The law simply did not require perfect obedience. It was not designed for the angels or sinless humans. It was given to a fallen-but-redeemed nation at Sinai, and was perfectly

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Richard Lusk, "Future Justification to the Doers of the Law," <http://hones.org/theologia/rich-lusk/future-justification-to-the-doers-of-the-law>, Accessed October 24, 2025.

¹³ Lusk, "Future Justification to the Doers of the Law."

¹⁴ Ibid.

adapted to their maturity level and ability....

Law keeping in this context is not a matter of scoring 100% on an ethics test. It is not even a matter of scoring 51%. It simply doesn't work that way. Conformity to the law was a matter of relationship, not something mechanical. The law called for a life of faith (Hab. 2:4), a life of full-orbed loyalty to the Lawgiver. If one sinned, one did not automatically become a "law breaker," except in a highly technical sense. After all, the Torah made provision for sin in the sacrificial system. Law keeping included rituals for law-breaking. If one repented by performing the proper offering, one maintained his status as a covenant keeper. Only apostasy itself constituted covenant breaking. All other sins could be dealt with within the confines of the covenant relationship.

... the Bible nowhere says God will apply absolute justice at the last day. So why do we make that assumption? The only places where God enforces strict justice are the cross and hell. For the covenant people, at least, it seems God will use "fatherly justice" in the final judgment, not "absolute justice."¹⁵

Lusk thinks, therefore, that God's covenant is a kind of law that does not require perfect obedience, but only a life of faithfulness and repentance. Lusk goes on to explain the reason faithful good works are necessary in justification. He writes, "The end goal of our obedience is 'righteousness' (right-standing in God's law-court) and 'everlasting life.'"¹⁶

Lusk is very clear that good works do more than merely demonstrate our salvation. They are essential for our salvation. He says:

Works do more than demonstrate that we are already saved; growth into mature obedience is the whole point of salvation, after all. As we are rounded out into renewed Christ-like image bearers, we are being made mature sons, ready to claim our inheritance in God's renewed creation. Thus, obedience is not merely verification of salvation; it is the point of salvation. God's desire has always been to have a mature, obedient humanity at the helm of his creation. At the last day, God will look at his finished work of re-creation in Christ and judge it as "good." Final justification is the declaration that God is pleased with his work in us by his Spirit; he finally has what he was aiming at when he created man in the first place.¹⁷

Lusk is saying that good works are more than evidence of salvation. They are part of salvation and essential to our final justification, which itself consummates our initial justification.

To sum up Lusk's understanding of justification, Christ died to forgive us of our sins, and his resurrection is the pattern of the new life of obedience that God graciously works in us. We are forgiven by Christ's blood and justified by his blood and the new life of obedience within us. Justification is initially by faith alone at which time the believer is forgiven of his sins, but subsequent verdicts of justification take into account the believer's new life of good works.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Richard Lusk, "Future Justification: Some Theological and Exegetical Proposals" in *A Faith that is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (La Grange, CA: Kerygma, 2007), 340.

¹⁷ Lusk, "Future Justification: Some Theological and Exegetical Proposals," 342.

According to Lusk, the preaching of the gospel, baptism, faith, and faithful obedience to God's law are all necessary together in order to be justified for the forgiveness of sins.

Analysis of the Federal Vision

We will now turn to an analysis of the views of Peter Leithart and Richard Lusk. Rather than evaluate them individually, this section will assess various points of doctrine, including the law, imputed righteousness, faith as the sole instrument of justification, and the judgment of the last day. The other problems in the Federal Vision, including its doctrine of a justifying baptism and the possibility of losing justification, are downstream of these more fundamental problems. This section will argue that the Federal Vision has a faulty doctrine of God's holiness, justice, and law, which leads to a faulty doctrine of justification.

Justification and the Law

The foundational issue in the dispute about the Federal Vision relates to the standard of justice, or righteousness, for justification. Virtually all errors on the biblical doctrine of justification are fundamentally errors in connection with the doctrine of God's law. The term "justification" in the Bible is properly a forensic term, having to do with a law-court. It is not a transformational term, *contra* Leithart. Francis Turretin correctly says, "Properly, the verb [to justify] is forensic, put for 'to absolve' anyone in a trial or 'to hold' and to declare 'just;' as opposed to the verb 'to condemn' and 'to accuse' (Ex 23:7; Deut 25:1; Prov 17:15; Lk 18:14; Rom 3–5)." ¹⁸ This is the view of the Reformed orthodox because it is the teaching of the Bible.

In order for any judge to justify anyone in court, he must have a clear standard by which he determines whether the accused is guilty or just. The Bible teaches that God's standard of judgment is his law (Ps 19:7–9), which accords with his holiness. Those who conform to God's law are just. Those who do not conform to his law are unjust or guilty. There is an elegant simplicity in the doctrine of justification when the doctrine of law is understood rightly.

The Federal Vision, on the other hand, seems to have two standards of justice in justification. In initial justification, a strict standard appears to be observed, which requires Christ's blood and forgiveness for even the slightest violation of God's law. This forgiveness of sins against the strict standard continues throughout the Christian's life. In final justification, however, God's justice seems to change. Justice becomes soft and fatherly, and now God judges the entire life of a Christian's obedience, along with all of its sins and imperfections on the basis of an easier fatherly justice. It is impossible to understand soft justice, however, without also having some kind of soft standard or law. Therefore, the Federal Vision teaches some kind of soft law at the final judgment for justification before God. As previously noted, Lusk said, "The law simply did not require perfect obedience." ¹⁹

Complicating the picture, the Federal Vision says that initial and final justification are

¹⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., vol 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: 1994), 633.

¹⁹ Lusk, "Future Justification to the Doers of the Law."

one and the same justification, even while there appear to be two standards of justice within that one justification. But this conflates two things. How can the same justification justly have two standards? God is one, which means his holy justice is one.

The Bible teaches that God's perfect, holy law is the single standard of his justice. His moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, reflects his moral character. Psalm 11:7 declares, "For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds." In addition to his moral law, God also gave covenantal positive laws, laws about worship (ceremonial) and government (judicial law; polity), to accomplish specific purposes for specific people at specific times. God changed these covenantal positive laws after they fulfilled their purpose (Heb 7:12). But the moral law of God does not and cannot change because God cannot change and because it is rooted in God's character and built into the nature of the world. Nevertheless, both God's moral and positive laws always require true or actual (perfect) obedience, never imperfect or partial obedience. Soft or partial obedience is never acceptable to God as judge.

Because of this fact, many passages of Scripture teach that no one, neither a believer nor an unbeliever, can actually obey God's law, and, therefore, no one can be righteous, or justified, by his personal obedience. Consider the following passages.

Job 15:14 says, "What is man, that he can be pure? Or who is born of a woman that *he can be righteous?*" [emphasis added]. This passage shows us that no one can be strictly righteous by his works. The word "can" is a term of ability. No sinner born of a woman has the ability to be righteous. There is, therefore, no justification before God by works.

Psalm 143:2b says, "For no one living is *righteous* before you" [emphasis added]. The words "no one" are a universal negative, including everyone alive at the time the author wrote. That is, no one, neither a believer nor an unbeliever, attains God's perfect standard of righteousness by his works. No one is perfectly obedient to all of God's law and therefore no one is justified in himself by his own obedience. While men may be justified before other men, no one is justified before God, according to his own works.

Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, "Surely there is not a *righteous* man on earth who does good and never sins" [emphasis added]. This text is quite clear. The standard of righteousness here is doing good and never sinning. That is what God's law always requires: obedience without the slightest variation. There is not one person who keeps God's law such that he ascends to God's perfect justice, to personal justification by works.

I have not seen passages like this taken into account in the literature of the Federal Vision. These verses teach that no one obeys all of God's laws. Anyone who breaks even one of God's laws in the slightest is sinning against an infinitely holy God, who is the lawgiver. Therefore, no sinner is or can be righteous before God by his obedience to God's law. Partial obedience, even faithful obedience, is inadequate obedience for justification before God.

Peter Leithart argues from a number of Old Testament passages that old covenant believers were justified in the covenant of grace before God by their imperfect but faithful works of obedience to the law (Psalm 7:6–11; 35:22–28; 94:1–7; Isa 54:11–17; Jer 51:5–10).²⁰ Careful examination of these texts, however, will show that the writers are only claiming their covenantal righteousness, *viz.*, that they committed no crimes in the land and that they did not deserve the

²⁰ Leithart, "Judge Me, O God," 216–225.

condemnation of men. They had outwardly kept the national law of Israel and therefore did not incur judgment on the terms of the old covenant. Psalm 7:8 says, “Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness.” Context shows that David is saying that he has committed no crimes. In Psalm 7:4, David says, “If I have repaid my friend with evil or plundered my enemy without cause, let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it.” David is saying that he is vindicated before men in the sight of God in terms of criminal violations of God’s law in Israel. Psalm 35:11, 24, “Malicious witnesses rise up ... vindicate [justify] me, O LORD, according to your righteousness;” etc. Use of the word “witnesses” shows that national legal proceedings are in view. Isaiah 54:15, 17 says, “Whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you. ... no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication from me, declares the LORD.” Again, God speaks of vindicating or justifying his people before men, when they “stir up strife” (v. 15). God says, “you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment” (v. 17). These passages are speaking of God’s vindication of his people before men, not of their justification in the heavenly court of God.

In sum, these passages cited by Leithart are not teaching that we are justified by a soft obedience in the court of God. Rather, the writers are saying that they do not deserve temporal judgments in the court of man according to the terms of the old covenant because they have kept the national laws of Israel. They are civilly and judicially righteous. They are not criminals. They do not deserve the condemnation of men, even though men are condemning them. They are not bodily transgressors of the law of God (cf. Neh 9:37). God is the Lord of the nation of Israel, her judge, and those who are free from all crimes are just (vindicated, justified) in the old covenant. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, the classical Reformed “two kingdom theology” is of great help here. It teaches that in the spiritual kingdom, we are justified by faith alone before God. But in the temporal and physical kingdom, we are justified/vindicated by works before men.

To further confirm that God’s law requires perfect obedience before God, consider various passages in the New Testament. The Apostle John teaches that sin is *any* transgression of the law of God. “Sin is lawlessness” (1 Jn 3:4). “Through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20; cf. Rom 4:15; 5:13). That is, any violation of God’s law is a sin deserving of eternal punishment, no matter how slight. Galatians 3:10 says, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not *abide by all things* written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” Why are all who rely on works of the law for justification under a curse? The text says that it is because one has to obey all things in the law to avoid the curse. James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” Here again, the standard of God’s law is perfection. To break the law at one point is to break it all. Jesus warns against those who would “relax” his law. In Matthew 5:19 our Lord Jesus warns, “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” If proponents of the Federal Vision are not relaxing God’s law, as they appear to be doing, they need to explain how they are not.

We have seen that the law of God is his standard of justice and that his law is inflexible and requires perfection. Therefore, only those who are perfectly obedient to God’s law can

possibly be justified, or regarded as just in the covenant of grace before the holy God of heaven. For sinners, therefore, justification is impossible. This is the reason the classical Reformed law/gospel theology is so important. The contrast between the law and the gospel is a contrast between two ways to be justified before God. Under the law, we can be justified before God in the court of heaven only if we perfectly obey the law of God ourselves. Of course, that is impossible because of sin. But if we are under the gospel (in union with Christ in the covenant of grace), Jesus obeyed the law of God perfectly in our place as our substitute for our justification before God in the court of heaven. The doctrine of a perfect and inflexible law necessarily leads to the classical Reformed law/gospel theology.

Justification and Imputed Righteousness

The Federal Vision rejects the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Lusk thinks the imputation of righteousness refers only to the forgiveness of sins. He rejects the idea of a legal ledger by which Christ's active obedience is "transferred" to our account. Now, it is correct that the word "transfer," while communicating something true, is imprecise. Reformed theology teaches that God *treats us* as though we justly deserve eternal life for the sake of Christ's obedience alone. Lusk's aversion to the "transfer" of Christ's active obedience to our account raises the question of whether he believes our sins were imputed to Christ's account on the cross. How is the forgiveness of sins possible unless Christ was treated according to our sins on the cross? Furthermore, is Adam's sin imputed to all who descend from him by ordinary generation as Augustine taught in accord with Romans 5:12ff, or is Lusk opposed to all imputations?

If justification before God requires perfect obedience to the law, as I have argued in the section above, then Christ's perfect obedience to the law must be imputed to us in order for us to be justified before God. We must have perfect obedience, or else our holy God may not justly justify us. Most importantly, the nature of God himself is at stake in this debate concerning divine justice. How can God justly justify sinners? He cannot, unless sinners can somehow be regarded as perfectly obedient to the law of God. Romans 3:26 says that God sent Christ "to show *his righteousness* at the present time, so that he might be *just and the justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus" [emphasis added]. This is a vital aspect of what Christ's substitutionary mediation is all about.

Over and against the imputation of Christ's active obedience, Lusk argues that Romans 4 limits the imputation of righteousness to the forgiveness of sins. Romans 4:6–8 says, "Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'" He argues that verses 6–7 show that the "one to whom God counts righteousness" is the one "whose lawless deeds are forgiven." Thus, imputation of righteousness is identical with forgiveness and no more.

Lusk's interpretation, however, seems to ignore the preceding context in which we are justified based on "the righteousness of God" (Rom 3:21–22), which comes through the God-man, Christ (Rom 3:24–25), and which we later learn is the very righteous "obedience" of Christ (Rom 5:18–21). Nested within this larger context, Paul says that not only is Christ's active obedience imputed to us, but our sins are also forgiven (Rom 4:7). Paul's point in Romans 4:6–8,

contrary to Lusk, is that Christ's whole obedience is imputed to us, both atonement for the forgiveness of sins and his life of perfect obedience. Both forgiveness and active obedience are needed for our righteousness, or justification, before God. Romans 4:6–8 does not deny the imputation of Christ's active obedience, which is taught elsewhere in the larger context.

Consider that Romans 5:18–21 positively teaches the imputation of Christ's active obedience:

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so *one act of righteousness* leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the *one man's obedience* the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. [emphasis added]

This passage teaches that everyone in union with Christ is made, or counted, righteous by Christ's perfect obedience. Proponents of the Federal Vision argue that the "one act of righteousness" (Rom 5:18) is merely Christ's death on the cross. But even if it is granted that the cross is primarily in view, it is unfounded to say that the rest of Christ's obedient life is excluded. The Gospel narratives are at great pains to show Christ's active obedience, even while he is dying on the cross. While on the cross, Jesus forgives sinners and refuses to revile them, thus keeping the sixth commandment not to murder (Lk 23:34). He provides for his mother, thus keeping the fifth commandment (Jn 19:26–27). He preaches the gospel to the thief on the cross, thus keeping the ninth commandment (Lk 23:39–43). He refuses to come down from the cross, thus keeping the tenth commandment (Matt 27:40). He commits his spirit into the hands of his Father, thus keeping the first commandment (Lk 23:46). Christ was perfectly and actively obedient to the whole law of God even as he died on the cross. Paul says (Rom 5:19) that "by the one man's *obedience* the many will be made righteous" [emphasis added].

Surely, in verse 19, Paul does not intend to refer only to part of Christ's obedience, his dying on the cross, while omitting the rest of Christ's obedience to the whole law of God. That would be nonsensical and would greatly limit the glory of Christ's obedience for our righteousness. Christ's entire obedience, rather, counts for us in our justification. John Calvin says justification consists in both the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. He wrote, "An acceptance, by which God receives us into his favor, and esteems us as righteous persons; ... it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ."²¹

Other passages of Scripture confirm the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Jesus was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15), showing that active obedience is necessary for justification, or righteousness, before God. The Bible teaches that righteousness is freely given to us as a gift. In Philippians 3:9, Paul's desire is to "be found in him [in Christ], not having a *righteousness* of my own that comes from the law, but that which *comes through* faith in Christ, the *righteousness from God* that depends on faith" [emphasis added]. Notice that the

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* 3.11.2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, under the title *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

righteousness we receive is given to us from God. Jesus *is God the Son*. Romans 5:17 speaks of “the free gift of righteousness.” Romans 10:4 speaks of “the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” precisely because Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 speaks of the great exchange, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” God treated Jesus like a sinner on our behalf while he hung on the cross, and God treats us as if we are perfectly righteous for Christ’s sake if we trust in him.

To be clear, proponents of the Federal Vision agree that Christ was actively obedient. However, they say that while Christ needed his active obedience to fulfill his office as a mediator and to make him a fit sacrifice, his active obedience is not needed in a direct sense for our justification. In reply, while Christ had to be perfectly obedient to be a fit sacrifice, the Bible also teaches that his obedience was part of his office as our mediator. Galatians 4:4–5 says, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, *born under the law, to redeem* those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” [emphasis added]. Thus, Christ’s perfect active obedience under the law, according to his office as a mediator, is part of his work, which redeems those who were under the law. Christ’s active obedience, therefore, is not merely necessary to fit himself for mediation. It is part of his mediation for his people.

The Federal Vision further argues that the imputation of active obedience is not necessary for justification, because if our sins are forgiven, we are under no penalty and are therefore justified because our guilt has been cancelled. The Federal Vision claims that forgiveness is enough for justification. But John Owen provides a helpful argument, explaining why the imputation of Christ’s active obedience is necessary for justification in addition to the forgiveness of sins. Owen writes:

The bare pardon of sin will neither make, declare, nor constitute any man righteous. Neither God nor man judges that someone who has sinned has not sinned. That is what must be done if someone who is pardoned is esteemed to have done all that he should, and to have done nothing that he should not do. If a man is brought to trial for any evil act, legally convicted, and then discharged by sovereign pardon, it is true that in the eye of the law he is freed from the punishment that was due to him. But no one thinks that he is made righteous by that pardon, or that he is esteemed not to have done what he really did and was convicted of. Joab and Abiathar the priest were guilty of the same crime at the same time. Solomon gives an order that Joab be put to death for his crime. But to Abiathar he gives a pardon. Did he thereby make, declare, or constitute him righteous? He expresses the contrary, affirming him to be unrighteous and guilty; he only remitted the punishment of his fault, 1 Kings 2:26.²²

John Owen is saying that while a judge may pardon, or forgive, a criminal, no one imagines that the forgiven criminal is righteous or just, only that he is a criminal pardoned by the judge. Thus, to be righteous, or actually just, before God, we need both the forgiveness of sins *and* the imputation of Christ’s active obedience. That is because the Bible everywhere teaches that God

²² John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith: Through the Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ Explained, Confirmed, and Vindicated* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2006), 295–296.

neither receives us as pardoned criminals nor treats us as pardoned criminals, but as righteous and thus deserving of life. Justification is connected to the right to eternal life throughout the Bible (Rom 5:18; Gal 3:11, 13–14; Titus 3:7). Following John Owen and the Independents, Reformed Baptists, who hold to the Second London Confession, all confess the imputation of Christ’s active obedience in justification. “Those whom God effectually calls, he also freely justifies ... by imputing Christ’s active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness by faith...” (2LCF 11.1). The Epistle to Diognetus (AD 130), puts it this way:

Then he took the burden of our iniquities on himself. He gave his own Son as a ransom for us—the Holy One for transgressors; the Blameless One for the wicked; the Righteous One for the unrighteous; the Unfading One for the Fading; the Immortal One for those that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than his righteousness? By whom else was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, other than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O inconceivable accomplishment! O benefits beyond any expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hidden in a single Righteous One, and that the righteousness of One would justify many transgressors!²³

Justification by Faith Alone

Lusk teaches that good works are a means, together with faith, of our final justification. Leithart teaches that God’s justifying verdict creates holiness and good works in the people of God. Both of these misunderstand the doctrine of justification by faith alone because they both fail to understand that Christ’s active and passive obedience is the whole and sole reason for our justification before God. Consider the biblical arguments Leithart makes for his “deliverance-verdict.”

Leithart argues for a “deliverance-verdict” from Romans 6:7, “For one who has died has been set free [*dikaioō*, or justified] from sin.” Leithart thinks this means that the verdict of justification delivers the believer from actual sinning. But the immediate context makes clear that when Paul speaks of “sin” he is often referring to the guilt of sin. Romans 4:8 says, “the Lord will not *count* sin,” which is clearly referring to guilt. Romans 5:13 also refers to the guilt of sin, when it says “sin is not *counted*.” Since Romans 6:7 speaks of being “justified” (a forensic law-court term) from sin, it stands to reason that Paul is speaking of justification from the guilt of sin rather than actual sin. This fits perfectly with Romans 6:6, which says that “the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” So, Romans 6:6–7 teaches us that Christ frees us from both the guilt and power of sin. This fits nicely with the larger context of Romans 6, which is about union with Christ and the double blessing (*duplex beneficium*) of both justification and sanctification in covenantal union with him. Believers in union with Christ are to “consider” themselves dead to the dominion or rule of *both* the guilt and power of sin (Rom 6:11). Leithart’s account seems to neglect Romans 6’s teaching about freedom from guilt in union with Christ.

²³ Diognetus, 9.

Leithart further argues that God's justifying word is announced in baptism. He cites Romans 6:3–4 which says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Leithart says we were buried "by baptism" as a means by which we are justified and simultaneously die to the pollution of sin and live unto holiness.

Careful attention to the text, however, shows that Paul is making a sharp distinction. He is speaking only to "all of *us who have been* baptized into Christ Jesus." The words "all of us who have been baptized" indicate that Paul is speaking to a subgroup in the church of Rome. They imply that not all in the church of Rome have been baptized into Christ. Does this mean that not everyone in the church of Rome was baptized with water? Certainly not! Rather, it means that while all have been baptized with water, only those who are also baptized into Christ have died to sin and are walking in newness of life. The text speaks of being baptized into *Christ* himself, and baptism into *death*, not merely of baptism into water, which is only the sign or visible word about baptism into Christ. The sign and the thing signified are always united to the believing elect, but not to those who receive the sign wrongly.

Leithart further argues for a "deliverance-verdict" in baptism from 1 Corinthians 6:11 which says, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." He sees a connection between washing (which is baptism), sanctification, and justification which are a package. In reply, it is unnecessary to conclude that Paul is speaking of a package or that baptism is the leading grace in this list. 2 Corinthians 13:14, for example, lists the persons of the Trinity out of order, beginning with the Son, moving to the Father, and then the Spirit. We need to look at clearer texts to interpret texts that are less clear. It seems more likely that in 1 Corinthians 6:11, Paul is listing various graces the Corinthians received in no particular order or relationship. Leithart himself admits that this is a somewhat weak proof text of his doctrine.

Instead of baptism being the means of justification and definitive sanctification, as Leithart teaches, the Bible says we are justified by faith alone. This biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone logically follows from the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Consider the following line of questions. What is required for justification before God? Perfect obedience to God's law. Who can be perfectly obedient to God's law? Because all have sinned, none but Christ can perfectly obey God's law. How then can sinners be just before God? Only by virtue of Christ's perfect obedience to God's law imputed to them. Christ's obedient life and death are the whole and sole ground of their justification before God, and his resurrection proves it.

What then can sinners do for their justification? Sinners can do nothing for justification before God for two reasons. First, nothing a sinner does can meet the standard of perfect obedience to God's law for justification. Second, Christ so perfectly obeyed the law of God and so met the standard of divine justice that nothing else can be justly required of the sinner who is in Christ for his justification before God.

What then must a sinner do to be justified? He must do nothing at all but believe, receiving and resting in Christ and his righteousness for his justification before God. Second London Confession 11.2 says, "Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness,

is the alone instrument of justification.” Faith is the only grace of God fitted to justification before God because only faith looks away from itself and rests wholly in another. Faith is like an empty mouth or an open hand that receives Christ and his righteousness. Faith does not justify because it believes or obeys. It does not justify because it is required for justification, *per se*. Rather, faith justifies only because of its content which is Christ and his righteousness.

The Bible teaches that justification before God is by faith alone. Romans 3:28 says, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” Romans 4:5 firmly declares, “And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” One may either work perfectly for righteousness or trust in Christ for righteousness. But because of sin, there is no way to work for righteousness; so, we are justified by faith only and not by works. These passages teach that we must never work at all in order to be justified before God. The context of Romans never says that the phrase “works of the law” is limited to proud works-righteousness or to the ceremonial law. Rather “works of the law” includes the whole law of God, including the moral law (Rom 2:21–24; 3:10–12). All works of obedience to the law, including works of faithful obedience, are excluded from justification before God.

Galatians 2:16 provides a threefold renunciation of justification by works of the law. It says, “[Y]et we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” The book of Galatians connects the Judaizers’ denial of justification by faith alone to a rejection of the gospel (Gal 1:8–9). The Judaizers added circumcision, food laws, and Torah keeping in general to faith for justification before God. No works of the law of any kind are to be added to Christ for justification. To add any human works to faith in justification is to deny the gospel. Galatians 2:21 says, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness [justification] were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

It is important to understand that faith only justifies as it passively receives and rests in Christ for righteousness before God. That is why the Bible uses so many passive metaphors to describe faith. It speaks of faith receiving (Jn 1:12), looking (Jn 3:14–15), drinking (Jn 4:14), eating (Jn 6:35) resting (Matt 11:28–29), and leaning (Prov 3:5). The eye does not work to obtain the image it sees. Rather, it passively receives an image from without. So faith passively receives Christ and his righteousness. This is Paul’s point in Romans 10:5–10, which says:

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Notice that we must not rise up to heaven or descend into the abyss for our justification. Such would be impossibly difficult things to do. That was what the righteousness based on the law was

like for the unbelieving nation of Israel. Christ is the end of that kind of righteousness. Rather, the righteousness that comes by faith simply looks at and rests upon the Word of God. The Word of the promise of Christ is near us. We do not work to get it. We simply believe in him, and we are justified before God (Rom 10:9). That is how it has been since the fall, even under the old covenant (Rom 4).

Does this biblical teaching about justification by faith alone mean that faith is inactive? It does not. While it is true that faith *as justifying* passively receives and rests in Christ, the same faith *as sanctifying* works through love (Gal 5:6), even in the moment it justifies, and is accompanied by all other inward graces (Gal 5:22–23). Any faith that is not active and does not work is not alive and is not true faith. The doctrine of justification by faith alone insists that we are justified by faith alone but never by a faith that is alone. The Second London Confession 11.2 correctly says, “Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.”

Justification and Judgment Day

The Federal Vision confuses justification before God in the heavenly court with the last day verdict by making them the same verdict. But the judgment on the last day is not the same verdict as justification by faith alone. Rather, the verdict by faith alone is “constitutive.” The verdict of judgment day is better termed a “vindication.” The first verdict makes us righteous and the second verdict demonstrates us to be righteous. These two verdicts have two different standards of evaluation, which means they cannot be the same verdict. To suggest these are the same justification in two parts or modes confuses categories. The standard of the first verdict is perfect justice, perfect obedience to the law of God, which Christ alone provides. The standard of the second verdict is any evidence of true saving faith at all, which only the elect in Christ can have. The standard of the first verdict is attained by Christ’s work for us. The standard of the second verdict is attained by Christ’s work in us.

On the last day, the Bible teaches that believers will be vindicated of the charges of Satan and the world who will claim believers are hypocrites. At the final judgment, God will prove his case before all creation by bringing forth evidence of our good works. Our good works will serve to vindicate Christ’s work in us by demonstrating our faith and thus vindicate our justification before angels and men in the sight of God.

To say that our good works are evidence of our faith and so vindicate us on the last day is not to say that inward holiness is an unnecessary part of our salvation. Justification is the part of our salvation that answers the problem of our guilt and need for right standing with God. Sanctification is the part of our salvation that answers the problem of our inward pollution and need for holiness. Both are absolutely necessary gifts of saving grace. Christ’s work as our mediator effectually secures the blessings of both justification and sanctification, and he graciously gives both blessings in union with him in the covenant of grace, and it is impossible to fall out of this union.

When Christ applies his work to us by the Holy Spirit, we are transformed into his likeness and so become more and more partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). By Christ’s

work in us, we partake of God's communicable attributes, and increasingly, we become true images of God. God reforms our nature so that we become progressively truly human, just as God originally made us to be. Without holiness, we will certainly not see the Lord in the great future beatific vision (Heb 12:14). Godliness has value, not only for this life, but also for the life to come (1 Tim 4:7–8). We must be holy, or sanctified, to enter into heaven (Rom 6:22; 8:13; Gal 6:8). While justification gives legal fitness for heaven, sanctification gives evidence that we are bound for heaven.²⁴ But we must not confuse the two. Even in this life, the more we are conformed to Christ's character in our sanctification, the more we will shine forth, or glorify, the manifold excellency of God's communicable attributes. Inward renewal, therefore, which always results in outward good works, is absolutely and indispensably necessary in those who are being saved as part of our salvation. That said, we do not save ourselves by our holiness and good works. Rather, God saves us through Christ's objective work, and based on his accomplished redemption, the Spirit applies redemption by working life and every grace within us for our good and for his glory. Holiness and good works, however, have no role to play in our justification before God in the court of heaven.

Thus holiness and transformation are necessary to make us ontologically fit for communion with God in this life and in the life to come. In what sense, then, does God judge us according to our works of faith? On the last day, the Bible says God will judge us for our faithful works (2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:12–13). But in the believer, God will not evaluate the inherent worth or justice of our works. That is because all of our good works are, in a strict sense, worthy of God's reproof and curse, not his reward. But God will bring forth our imperfect faithful works as evidence to demonstrate that they are the fruit of saving faith, which unites us to Christ for our justification before God. Consider some of the biblical evidence that supports these claims.

In Matthew 25, our judgment according to works will serve only to prove whether we are sheep or goats (Matt 25:32). Everyone who is present on the last day is already a sheep in Christ or a goat in Adam. The sheep and the goats will be separated before their works are evaluated (Matt 25:33). The good works of the sheep will only prove that God already prepared them for eternal glory from before the foundation of the world (Matt 25:34). The good works of the sheep will not change or uphold their status; rather, their works prove their status as sheep. Works of a sheep do not make a sheep a sheep. They prove that a sheep is a sheep. In John 15:8, Jesus speaks of works as the proof of discipleship: "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so *prove* to be my disciples" [emphasis added]. The *proof* that one is already a disciple of Christ is his good works. Our good works on the last day, therefore, will vindicate, or demonstrate, our already complete justification, because our good works will vindicate our faith, which alone joins us to Christ for our justification before God. On the last day, God will declare that the works are fruits and evidence of faith (Matt 25:46).

James 2 similarly speaks of "showing" and "seeing" our faith by our works. "*Show* me

²⁴ One might say that justification provides legal fitness for heaven, while glorification provides ontological fitness for heaven. The degree of our progressive sanctification in this life will prepare us ontologically for different degrees of reward in heaven (Lk 9:17–10). God will glorify the graces he has given us in sanctification (2 Pet 1:10–11), and we will not all be equalized in our glorified state. Some wonder how Christ could purchase eternal life for all the elect equally, and yet there be different degrees of capacities for reward in heaven. My answer would be that we continue to develop and our capacity for reward will compound through eternity, such that we will all be receiving the same infinite reward when it is viewed in terms of everlasting eternal blessedness.

your faith” (v. 18), “I will *show* you my faith” (v. 18), “Do you want to be *shown*” (v. 20), “You *see* that faith was active along with works” (v. 22). Then James 2:24 says, “You *see* that a person is *justified* by works and not by faith alone” [emphases added]. The Federal Vision strongly insists that the justification of James is the same as the justification of Paul. But context shows otherwise. Justification in James is about demonstrative righteousness not constitutive righteousness. It is all about “showing” and “seeing.” The term “justification” in James 2 is also about showing, or vindicating, a person’s faith before men, not the justification of a person before God. In Paul, our persons are justified before God by faith. In James, our faith is justified before men by our works.

John Owen acknowledges that with careful qualification the judgment of the last day can be called an evangelical, or gospel, justification. At times, Scripture uses the term “justification” to refer to a judgment according to works (Matt 12:37; Jas 2:21; etc). Owen explains:

Suppose a person is freely justified by the grace of God, through faith in the blood of Christ, without respect to any works, obedience, or righteousness of his own. In such a case we freely grant

- (1.) That God indispensably requires his personal obedience, which may be called his evangelical righteousness
- (2.) That God approves of and accepts this performed righteousness in Christ.
- (3.) That by our works of obedience we evidence, prove, and manifest the faith that justifies us in the sight of God and men.
- (4.) That this righteousness is pleadable as an acquittal against any charge from Satan, the world, or our own consciences.
- (5.) That with it we will be declared righteous at the last day, and without it no one will be.

If anyone concludes for these reasons that we have an evangelical justification, or that God’s acceptance of our righteousness can be called by that name, then I will not argue with him.²⁵

The Reformed orthodox, therefore, hold to a final judgment according to works, without which works, no one may enter into eternal glory because a person with no holiness, or works, on judgment day would give evidence that he does not belong to Christ.

Notice the law/gospel distinction at work in the distinction between justification and vindication. Without a clear and accurate understanding of the law and the gospel, one’s doctrine of justification and judgment day will become muddled. In justification, believers are constituted just before God according to the law. In vindication, believers are demonstrated as just before men in the sight of God by the proof of their faith in the gospel. The first verdict is justification before God, properly speaking, according to the law and justice of God. The second verdict is best termed vindication, which proves and demonstrates that we have faith in Christ according to the gospel. John Owen again writes:

The evangelical position is that there is only one justification, and it is completed at once. We will not argue about any other. Those who can find another may say about it what

²⁵ Owen, *Justification*, 180.

they will. Let us, therefore, consider what is offered of this nature. Those of the Roman church ground their whole doctrine of justification on a distinction of a double justification, which they call the first and the second.²⁶

Owen cannot see any more than one justification before God because God's justice is one, and his law is the standard of his justice. After the standard of God's law is met, a person is justified before God. There is no other standard for justice, and therefore, no other standard for justification.

Peter Leithart says the verdict of justification in baptism produces forgiveness and holiness. Richard Lusk adds evangelical good works to faith as a means of justification before God. That is, justification before God in the court of heaven is initially by faith alone, but then subsequently includes good works, which is more than evidence, as a means of justification before God in the court of heaven. We can understand why faith, and not works, can be justly required for justification before God. That is because only faith looks to Christ alone for righteousness. But what is the reason for good works in addition to faith in justification before God? Christ accomplished justification through his life and death. Therefore, to include evangelical good works as a means of any kind (or some kind of secondary instrument) of justification before God would imply that Christ's perfect obedience to the law of God is insufficient as a legal ground of justification before God. It would be derogatory of the work of Christ. It would mean something of our works must be added to his in order to be justified in the court of heaven.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Federal Vision, as taught by men such as Peter Leithart and Richard Lusk, holds that baptism unites believers to Christ and to the visible covenanted people of God, such that they are initially justified by faith alone, and therefore true Christians. In justification, Christ forgives the sins of believers through his death on the cross, but Christ's active obedience is not imputed to them. This means that while a believer's past sins are forgiven, he must remain covenantally faithful to remain in a state of justification. If the justified believer then turns away from Christ and commits apostasy, he will lose his justification and go to hell. If the believer continues in covenant faithfulness, however, God will justify the believer by his faithful obedience in subsequent verdicts, especially in the final verdict of justification on the last day. Believers who persevere in faithfulness and justification to the end prove that they are elect. Believers who turn from faithfulness and lose their justification prove that they are not elect.

By way of response, the central problem with the Federal Vision is that it lacks a clear doctrine of the law of God as the perfect standard of divine justice. When it is understood that perfect obedience to God's law is the standard of divine justice and so of justification before God, most of the problems in the Federal Vision disappear. Sinners can only be justified in the court of heaven on the basis of Christ's obedience and blood. Nothing can possibly be required for the justification of a believing sinner beyond Christ's perfect obedience because Christ has

²⁶ Ibid., 155.

already conformed to the standard as our substitute. Justice is met by what Jesus did alone. Christ receives all the glory and praise for justification. The necessary implication of Christ's perfect satisfaction of divine justice is that the only act of obedience God may justly require of sinners for their justification is faith. The reason that faith is the only grace that can be the means of justification is that it rests upon and receives Christ and his righteousness alone for justification before God, renouncing all other acts of obedience as meeting the standard of justification, including faith itself. Faith justifies us solely because of its content, which is Christ and his perfect obedience and blood. The verdict on judgment day, therefore, is not the same verdict as our justification before God. Rather, the verdict on judgment day, which can be called demonstrative justification, is best termed a vindication of the believer's faith through his works. The reason God judges our works on judgment day is to prove before all of creation in his sight that we belong to him, that we are in Christ, and that we are justified on the ground of his righteousness alone. So, justification in the covenant of grace is about God's perfect justice, and therefore, the justification of a believing sinner is all of grace through faith in Christ, the only Just One. It is all to the glory of Christ, and it is the saint's great consolation, the very ground of his assurance of full and final salvation.