JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, JUDGED ACCORDING TO WORKS: ANOTHER LOOK AT A PAULINE PARADOX

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Nigel Watson articulates in blunt terms the perennial friction between the twin Pauline themes of justification by faith and judgment according to works: “either justification is emptied of its meaning or judgment by works is rendered harmless.” The challenge is how to fully and impartially affirm both Pauline teachings. For understandable (and at times necessary) reasons, the Protestant branch of the church has conscientiously shone its theological spotlight on justification by faith while, in light of perceived Roman imbalances, begrudgingly putting up with the prodigal son of judgment according to deeds. Yet unless Protestantism is prepared to domesticate the judgment motif to the point of signifying little more than “the seriousness of the moral struggle in the Christian life,” we must continue to grapple with this thorny issue—lest we promote either presumptuousness (neglecting the judgment/works motif) or equally dangerous moralism (neglecting the justification/faith motif).

The tension is neither new nor limited to the rarified air of esoteric academia. This essay, moreover, does not proceed under the illusion that the light of consensus can be seen at the end of the scholarly tunnel. Still less does it attempt an exhaustive analysis of this “jungle full of traps and temptations.” It does attempt, however, to create a taxonomy of ways in which scholars reconcile justification by faith and judgment according to works in Paul before suggesting a way forward in light of a few neglected factors in the discussion. In this way we hope to spur on a discussion which “has still a long way to run.”

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I. PROPOSED RECONCILIATIONS

We begin by noting fourteen ways scholars have sought to square Paul’s teaching on justification by faith with that of judgment according to works. The goal is to provide more specificity than normally afforded—the usual breakdown consists of three to five options—while recognizing that the number of scholars examined, no matter how many, will be only slightly greater than the number of distinct attempts to reconcile these two Pauline teachings, since almost no one expresses their own resolution exactly as others do. In what follows, then, we attempt to land somewhere between limiting the taxonomy to three or four (and thereby missing significant nuance among scholars who would be unhappily lumped together) and delineating each individual view with such specificity that it eventually stands alone. Having too many categories is unhelpful to the reader of this essay; too few is unfaithful to the scholars of this taxonomy.

Throughout, we are asking how Pauline statements which refuse to give works a role in justifying sinners (Rom 3:20, 28; 4:1–8; Gal 2:16; 3:2–5; Phil 3:9) cohere theologically with statements which equally clearly ascribe a critical role to obedience in final judgment (Rom 2:13; 14:10–12; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 4:5; 2 Cor 5:10; 11:15; Gal 6:7–8).

1. Irreconcilable
   a. Paul is inconsistent and contradictory (Wrede, Kuula);
   b. Paul’s judgment according to works motif is an unfortunate Jewish retention not adequately jettisoned by the former Pharisee (Weiss, Pfleiderer, Braun);

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2. Reconcilable if Justification is Given Interpretive Authority

c. Justification is by faith, and the concept of one being judged and granted eternal life based upon obedience is hypothetical (Turretin, Ritschl, Lietzmann, Longenecker, Wilckens, Thielman, Waters, Westerholm);

d. The “judgment according to works” motif serves Paul’s rhetorical purposes, unsettling the ethically complacent (Wetter, Joest, Conzelmann, Synofzik, N. Watson, Elliot, van Spanje);


19 Stephen Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 328–29, 387–88; though see 283; idem, “Paul’s Anthropological ‘Pessimism’ in Its Jewish Context,” in Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural En-vironment (ed. John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole; LNTS 335; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2006) 74–76. Be it noted that a general theological understanding of works-based judgment as hypothetical is not equivalent to seeing, more specifically, “the doers of the law” in Rom 2:13 as hypothetical; the first group would be smaller than the second. For a list of those who take Rom 2:13 hypothetically, see Bird, Saving Righteousness 159, n. 13.

20 Gillis P. Wetter, Der Vergebungsgedanke bei Paulus: Eine Studie zur Religion des Apostels (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1912) 75–85. Wetter argues that Paul no longer believes in an actual final judgment; references to God’s wrath and judgment, emerging from Greek concepts, merely denote impersonal forces.


e. Judgment according to works is an event subsequent to a final, works-
free justification, and this judgment is the meting out of relative de-
grees of reward (Filson, Devor, Mattern, Vos, Morris, Ladd, Barnett, Reymond, Stettler); 

3. Reconcilable if Judgment/Obedience is Given Interpretive Authority

f. Justification by faith excludes legalistic/self-righteous obedience from
playing a role in one’s final verdict; it is indeed the “doers of the law”—
albeit imperfectly, and only by divine grace—who will be justified
(Cambier, Snodgrass, Fuller); 

23 Ernst Synofzik, Die Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen bei Paulus: Eine traditionsgeschicht-
elle Untersuchung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977). Synofzik calls Paul’s rhetorical
use of the judgment motif an “Argumentationsmittel” (p. 105) and emphasizes Paul’s use of pre-
existing materials.

24 Watson, “Justified by Faith” 214–21. Watson and Joest emphasize that the relationship be-
tween the two motifs is dialectical and need not be conceptually integrated.

25 Neil Elliot, The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul’s
Dialogue with Judaism (JSNTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 120–27. Elliot nears Bassler
(on whom see below) in seeing divine impartiality as the dominant note but does not follow Bassler
all the way (ibid. 122, n. 2).

26 Teunis E. van Spanje, Inconsistency in Paul? A Critique of the Work of Heikki Räisänen
(WUNT 2/110; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1999) 180–89.

27 Floyd W. Filson, St. Paul’s Conception of Recompense (UNT 21; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs’sche,
1931) 115.

28 Richard Devor, “The Concept of Judgment in the Epistles of Paul” (PhD diss., Drew Univer-
sity, 1959).

29 Lieselotte Mattern, Das Verständnis des Gerichtes bei Paulus (ATANT 47; Zürich: Zwingli,
1966) 177–78.


31 Leon Morris, The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 67; idem,
New Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 64. In his Romans commentary, however,
Morris asserts that the solution is probably either that the works according to which one is judged
are those which issue forth from faith or that justification inevitably brings with it an accompa-
nying transformative power (Romans 148–49).

32 George Eldon Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament (rev. Donald A. Hagner; Grand Rapids:

33 Paul Barnett, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997)
273–77.

34 Robert L. Reymond, A Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith (Nashville: Thomas


36 J.-M. Cambier, “Le jugement de tous les hommes par Dieu seul, selon la vérité dans Rom 2.1–

37 Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace—to the Doers” 86. Akio Ito (“Romans 2: A Deuteronomistic
Reading,” JSNT 18 [1996] 22, n. 7) and Schreiner (“Justification by Works” 138, n. 22) align Glenn
N. Davies with Snodgrass at this point, but this is not quite fair. Davies argues that obedience
is crucial to the life of the people of God in both Old Testament and New, yet in both instances
obedience must be rooted in faith (Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1–4
[JSNTSup 39; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990] 173–75). Davies does not see doing as leading to jus-
tification in the same way Snodgrass does; rather (commenting on Rom 2:13), “The doing of the
g. Justification by faith refers only or mainly to salvation’s inauguration; final, eternity-determining judgment depends upon works produced thereafter (Godet, Wernle, Donfried, Sanders, Garlington, Yinger, Rainbow);

h. Final acquittal is based squarely on works; the δικαίωσις lexeme in Paul (as in “justification by faith”) refers not to a forensic declaration but an ethically qualitative righteousness (Gore, Van Ladingham);

law by these Gentiles witnesses to their justification” (66; emphasis added). Cf. Jewett’s endorsement of Snodgrass in Romans: A Commentary (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 212.

38 Daniel P. Fuller, Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum: The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 105–20. Cf. Scott J. Hafemann, The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), though Hafemann does at points distinguish himself from Fuller (e.g. 244–46).

39 Here and throughout this paper “salvation” refers to the entire soteriological package—not in distinction from, but including, justification.

40 Frederic L. Godet, Commentary on Romans (Kregel Reprint Library Series; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977) 117–18.

41 Paul Wernle, Der Christ und die Sünde bei Paulus (Freiburg: Mohr/Siebeck, 1897) 22, 100–102.


43 E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 515–18; idem, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 105–13. In an appendix to the latter work, however, Sanders treats Romans 2 as a compilation of homiletical material from the diaspora (pp. 123–32).


45 Kent L. Yinger, Paul, Judaism, and Judgment according to Deeds (SNTSMS 105; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 160, 202, 284. Yinger’s framework appropriates Sanders’ covenantal nomism, yet the former’s specific emphasis is that judgment according to works refers not to divine retribution respecting each individual deed but to a judgment rendered on the basis of the consistent pattern of life (e.g. 16, 160, 181, 284).


48 Chris Van Ladingham, Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006); on the meaning of the dik- word group, see 242–332. Christoph
i. Justification by faith, emerging in the context of deconstructing ethnocentric tendencies in young Christian communities, was never intended to exclude moral deeds (more generally conceived) from contributing to final acquittal (Dunn, Wright, F. Watson);

j. In light of the Christ-event, Gentiles can now be justified by faith alone, while Jews continue to be evaluated based on Torah-observance; hence justification by faith applies to Gentiles, judgment according to works to Jews (M. Barth, Gaston, Gager, Wyschogrod);

4. Reconcilable if both Justification and Judgment Emerge from a More Fundamental Reality

k. The key is a robust appropriation of the new covenant reality of the empowering, indwelling Spirit to all those who have been freely justified solely on the basis of Christ’s atoning work (Schreiner, Gathercole, Smith);

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Haufe sees ethnically distinctive works excluded in justification (similar to category [i]), yet deduces from this that justification is not by faith alone: rather, God’s “grace” simply denotes the way God has mercifully placed an earned salvation within reach of humans (Die sittliche Rechtfertigungslehre des Paulus [Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1957]).

49 James D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 365–66, 636–37; idem, New Perspective, 425–27, 466–67. Dunn’s emphasis that justification for Paul generally refers to initial justification (e.g. ibid. 77–78) perhaps ought to place him in (g) above.


51 Francis Watson, Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 209–16. Specifically, Watson argues that justification by faith was a pragmatic means to legitimate the break from Judaism to form a distinctly Christian community.


56 Here more than anywhere there exists considerable overlap; we are dealing not so much with disagreement between categories as diverse emphases.

l. Justification and judgment are both rooted in authentic faith: justifying faith is acting, laboring, loving faith, by which faith-energized actions are all evaluated (Melanchthon, Berkouwer, Ridderbos, Pregent, Seifrid);

m. Justification and judgment are both rooted in the lordship-inaugurating righteousness of God, with its twin realities of status and power (Schlatter, Kertelge, Käsemann, Stuhlmacher);

n. Justification and judgment are both rooted in union with Christ, a union from which fruit organically and inevitably grows (Calvin, Edwards, O'Brien, Gaffin).


65 Adolf Schlatter, The Theology of the Apostles (trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 228–41, 279. Schlatter does, however, frequently laud the soteriological importance of union with Christ, and may fit just as neatly in (n) below (e.g. Theology of the Apostles 219, 229, 245, 248, 312, 320, and esp. 235–36).


68 Peter Stuhlmacher, Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) 68–69. Stuhlmacher earlier suggested that the judgment according to works is a judgment of the flesh remaining in the believer (Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus [FRLANT 87; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965] 51–68, 228–31).

Two crucial clarifications round out this first section. First, this taxonomy seeks to be representative, not exhaustive. Excluded, for example, is the view of Martin Bucer, who, it has been argued, connected justification with judgment by appealing to predestination.73 Jouette Bassler, from another viewpoint, argues that justification by faith and judgment according to works coalesce in that both lead toward the overarching concern of divine impartiality.74 John O'Neill believes Romans 2 must be a later interpolation in light of the way it grates against other statements of Paul's.75 Failing to see how the two themes are compatible, Richard H. Bell concludes that justification by faith refers to believers and judgment according to works to


unbelievers. These and other similarly idiosyncratic proposals have been omitted.

More important is a second clarification. As already evident in comments scattered throughout preceding footnotes, such a taxonomy is necessarily artificial due to overlap between categories and multiple emphases within individual scholars. This cannot be overstated, and is especially true with respect to the final four subcategories mentioned above. Many of the writers cited above ought to be placed in more than one camp. For instance, Wrede not only sees Paul as inconsistent but also believes Paul “never entirely escaped from” his Jewish background; Sanders could be added to the “inconsistent” group; Vos and Francis Watson both at times sound as if they ought to be placed in the “hypothetical” category, and who will dare to say Seifrid neglects the Spirit, or Schreiner faith? Moreover, one frequently finds statements in which several of the above categories are immediately coordinated. The ideal taxonomy, therefore, would not place each scholar in (and only in) a single category, but would present a layered classification in which scholars are placed in multiple categories in varying degrees of emphasis. Such a complex arrangement, unfortunately, would prove unwieldy and perhaps counterproductive, for any gains in nuance would be mitigated by a loss of the big picture. Gaining a more precise picture of each tree, we would lose the layout of the forest. We therefore content ourselves with giving a bird’s-eye view of the woods, acknowledging that some of the individual trees will wish they had received more careful botanical analysis.

II. NEGLECTED FACTORS

With a spectrum of options for reconciling these two Pauline emphases before us, we briefly mention two neglected factors in the discussion—one syntactical (Paul’s use of prepositions) and one exegetical (a reminder of what Paul is not arguing in Rom 2:13). Because the lion’s share of this essay has been devoted to the foregoing taxonomy, what follows is meant to raise, not exhaust, avenues for further exploration. After mentioning these two neglected elements, we provide synthesizing (and again painfully cursory) closing statements on justification, faith, judgment, and obedience in Paul.

76 Richard H. Bell, No One Seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18–3.20 (WUNT 106; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1998) 251–57. Bell calls in Judith M. Gundry Volf (Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990]) for support, yet selectively cites those pages in Gundry Volf that appear to support his own argument (e.g. Paul and Perseverance 205; cited by Bell on p. 256) while ignoring Gundry Volf’s explicit statements to the contrary (e.g. Paul and Perseverance 65).

77 Wrede, Paul 137.

78 So Bird, Saving Righteousness 158; Schreiner, “Justification by Works” 132. See Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People 123–24; but note p. 103.


80 As in Bird, Saving Righteousness 178.
1. Paul’s use of prepositions. Thus far we have referred to justification by faith and judgment according to works. Drawing attention to this pattern, a neglected component of a full-orbed understanding of the relationship between justification and judgment may be due recognition of the prepositions used to connect the two concepts of each pairing. In linking justification to faith and judgment to works, Paul consistently uses διά or εκ when relating faith to justification (Rom 3:22, 25; 5:1; Gal 2:16; cf. Eph 2:8; Col 2:12) and κατά when relating works to judgment (Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 11:15; cf. Rom 2:2; 2 Tim 4:14). Justification is through/by/from faith; judgment is according to works.

This distinction points us toward understanding justification by faith as denoting contingency or instrumentality and judgment according to works as denoting congruence or correspondence. Paul understands salvation to be through (διά) faith, and in accordance with (κατά) a life of obedience and fruit. Faith is a means, works a manner. Justification is contingent upon faith; judgment is congruent with obedience. Philippians 3:9 appears to jar with this pattern, as Paul speaks of a righteousness ἐπί τῆς πίστεως, “on the basis of faith.” While exceptions such as this ought to sober our prepositional observation, we should also note that this phrase comes immediately on the heels of Paul’s desire not to have a righteousness of his own but that which is διὰ πίστεως—moreover, the righteousness that is “on the basis of faith” is nevertheless explicitly designated as εκ θεου. It is appropriate, then, for a minority of scholars to draw attention to the different prepositions used by Paul when synthesizing justification by faith with judgment according to works especially when we observe the clarity-impeding proliferation of imprecise wording concerning the relationship between justification and judgment.

We hasten to issue a warning lest we give inordinate semantic weight to the prepositions used by Paul. For prepositions are, after all, just that:

81 Besides those passages that speak of justification as through (διά) faith, we might also note those employing πίστεως in a simple dative construction (τῆς πίστεως) as a dative of means (Rom 3:28; 11:20; 2 Cor 1:24; possibly Col 1:23). Paul’s seamless transition from εκ to διά in Rom 3:30 may further indicate some degree of semantic fluidity between these two prepositions.


83 See Calvin, Institutes 3.17.6; 3.18.4.


prepositions. We must neither neglect the prepositions nor, in exposing such neglect, ask the prepositions to bear more theological weight than they can legitimately handle. Nevertheless, the general pattern by which Paul prepositionally connects justification with faith and judgment with works may provide one piece of the puzzle in sorting out how Paul squared these two teachings.

2. Romans 2:13: recognizing multiple dimensions of antithesis. A second neglected factor concerns a brief exegetical observation on Rom 2:13. A pause to glance at this text is especially appropriate in that every other Pauline text that seems to contain a tension between justification and judgment could arguably be explained away in that Paul connects judgment, not justification, to obedience. Yet here we find Paul linking obedience with justification itself: “the doers of the law will be justified.”

What to do? Shall we simply absorb this text into the majority of Pauline references to justification? Such textual partiality resists exegetical forthrightness. Shall we shrug off the problem by asserting that “Paul is not concerned with defining his precise doctrine of justification”? Attributing varying levels of theological sagacity to the apostle seems a precarious way forward; and when, in light of the contingency of every Pauline document, is the apostle “concerned with defining his precise doctrine of justification”?

Perhaps some of the Angst over Rom 2:13 can be alleviated by recognizing precisely what is being set in antithesis. The snag is that our Protestant ears have been so deeply trained to understand human action—especially when it emerges in the context of dik-language—to be set in antithesis to faith. Yet the contrast of Rom 2:13 is not human action and faith but human action and mere hearing. It is the poihtai rather than the akratai—not the poihtai rather than the pisteuontes—who are justified. Obedience operates in Paul in multiple directions of antithesis.

Romans 2:13 teaches neither an obedience-grounded justification nor a hypothetical justification (because of v. 16). It is a real justification, but it is a justification linked with doing rather than hearing.

Some overlook this distinction and unnecessarily polarize Rom 2:13 to say something Paul does not, in fact, say. Stott, for example, argues that this

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86 Pointed out by Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism 516. Contra Cosgrove (“Justification in Paul” 663), 1 Cor 4:4–5 does not equate justification with judgment.
verse speaks of a hypothetical justification, “since no human being has ever fully obeyed the law.” Yet Paul nowhere in this verse speaks of “fully obeying” the law. He does not use τελέσω (as in 2:27) or πληρώ (as in 13:8, 10) but ποιήσα,92 a point also overlooked by Turretin,93 Räisänen,94 Stettler,95 Sloan,96 Gathercole,97 Bird,98 Jewett,99 and Clark.100 Stott illegitimately extrapolates out from Paul’s use of ποιήσα to denote full obedience. We therefore endorse the quip of some that acquittal on the last day has to do with “performance, not possession.”101 Regardless of how “performance” may be filled out by these scholars, the point is that they have articulated the proper antithesis. It is obedience rather than race, not obedience rather than grace, that is in view—as Luther himself observed.102

III. TOWARD A SYNTHESIS

Much more could (and should) be said. We have largely ignored, for instance, the question of continuity and discontinuity between Paul and his

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92 Rightly noted by Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace—To the Doers” 75, 82–83. Luther calls “doing the works of the law” and “fulfilling the law” “two very different things” (Commentary on Romans [trans. J. Theodore Mueller; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003] xv).
93 Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology 2:637.
94 Räisänen, Paul and the Law 103.
95 Stettler, “Judgement by Works” 203.
98 Bird, Saving Righteousness 171.
99 Jewett, Romans 212.
100 R. Scott Clark, “Do This and Live: Christ’s Active Obedience as the Ground of Justification,” in Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbytera and Reformed, 2007) 246; see also p. 250.
101 Wright, Romans 440; Gorman, Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 355; Bassler, “Divine Impartiality” 52. See also Schreiner, “Justification by Works” 147; Watson, Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles 205; Garlington, Faith, Obedience, and Perseverance 58.
Jewish background concerning judgment. Also important, as Nigel Watson has pointed out, is due appreciation of the occasional nature of Paul’s letters. Another fruitful line of inquiry, underscored with particular sharpness by Jüngel, is the way in which free justification and judgment may be not only compatible but mutually reinforcing, since an unearned right standing becomes meaningful only in a world the moral fabric of which distributes a justice that corresponds unerringly to desert. Finally, a fruitful perspective on reconciling justification by faith and judgment according to works might be found in transposing the theological tension of divine sovereignty and human responsibility onto the soteriological intersection of justification by faith and judgment according to deeds. Remembering that biblical reality is consistently multi-perspectival—coherent yet incapable of being reduced to simple, stand-alone aphorisms—might we understand justification by faith as viewing salvation from the perspective of divine sovereignty

103 For a list of relevant intertestamental passages, see Barry D. Smith, The Tension between God as Righteous Judge and as Merciful in Early Judaism (New York: University Press of America, 2005) esp. 43–45. Braun noticed that Paul’s statements of judgment are directed toward believers about three times as often as toward unbelievers—an illuminating point, he suggests, in light of the Jewish tendency toward assuming final exoneration due to divine partiality (Gerichtsgedanke und Rechtfertigungslehre 33–58). Cf. Roetzel (Judgement in the Community 179), who explores the relationship between the individual and the community vis-à-vis justification and final judgment, suggesting that corporate dimensions have been neglected and that a recognition of this assuages the perceived tension between justification and judgment (ibid. 8, 59–60, 176–78). On the Jewish background to the “doers of the law,” see Peter J. Tomson, “Die Täter des Gesetzes werden gerechtfertigt werden’ (Röm 2,13): Zu einer adäquaten Perspektive für den Römerbrief,” in Lutherische und Neue Paulusperspektive: Beiträge zu einem Schlüsselproblem der gegenwärtigen Diskussion (ed. Michael Bachmann; WUNT 182; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2005) 200–202.


(though it is real human faith) and judgment according to works from the perspective of human responsibility (though it is God who judges)?

But we must break off and allow others to carry the baton. We close, then, by offering our own brief explication of the inter-relationships of justification, faith, judgment, and obedience as each relates to the tension addressed in this essay.

First, justification is not a two-staged “doppelte Rechtfertigung” but the single eschatological event of a declaration of forensic acquittal and right standing proleptically brought into the present and grasped by grace-fueled faith in Christ’s work. To posit the possibility of a person being justified here and now and yet failing to receive final acquittal is, for Paul, nonsense. We thus remain unconvinced of a consistent NT emphasis on a yet-to-be-determined future justification that consists of anything more than public manifestation. Christians “are already justified—by faith. But they are yet to be justified—by sight.”

Second, our understanding of NT faith must avoid the twin pitfalls of mere mental assent, on one side, and synergism on the other. If faith

107 Such an integration might alleviate the concerns of some that the Protestant doctrine of justification downplays active human participation in obedience (e.g. Paul O’Callaghan, Fides Christi: The Justification Debate [Dublin: Four Courts, 1997] 232–33).

108 The phrase is Stuhlmacher’s, who rejects it (Gottes Gerechtigkeit 229), as does Bell (No One Seeks 256); for those who espouse some kind of “double justification,” see Joachim Jeremias, “Paul and James.” ET 66 (1955) 370; Godet, Romans 118; Rainbow, Way of Salvation 155–74.


110 On justification as most fundamentally concerning the individual, see Stuhlmacher, Biblische Theologie und Evangelium 26.


112 Gaffin, By Faith, Not by Sight 88. So also Owen, Justification by Faith 139, 160; Ziesler, Righteousness in Paul 189–90. Bultmann believes the only reference to future justification in Paul containing a genuine “zeitlichen Sinn” is Rom 5:19 (“DIKAIOSUNH QEOU,” JBL 83 [1964] 15). Dunn’s suggestion (New Perspective, 55–56, 389–90) that the later Pauline texts (e.g. Eph 2:8–10) spoke of an accomplished salvation while the earlier ones (e.g. Rom 5:9–10) spoke of a future or present salvation is simplistic, neglecting both the past-oriented soteriological statements of the “earlier” Paul (e.g. Rom 5:1; 8:24; 1 Cor 6:11) as well as the future-oriented statements of the “later” Paul (e.g. Eph 1:14; 2:7; 2 Tim 2:10; 4:8).

113 A trap into which Jewett appears to fall when he describes faith as “assent to the gospel” (Romans 278; cf. 139).
is strictly cognitive, justification by faith and judgment according to works are kept dangerously distant. Conversely, if faith must be conjoined with obedience for justification, subjectivistic synergism necessarily ensues in which assurance is rendered elusive and Christ’s cross impotent (Gal 2:21). But if the faith that renounces one’s own moral resume is organically bound up with the movement of the will by which one casts oneself on God in Christ for all things (fiducia), justification is protected from all human contribution while faith is protected from unbiblical reductionisms to the merely cerebral.

Third, Paul taught a real judgment that applies to believers and unbelievers alike and is according to, not on the basis of, obedience. Believers will also experience various degrees of reward based on their respective lives of Spirit-ignited, faith-propelled obedience borne out of union with Christ. The clearest support for some kind of eschatological distribution of rewards is 1 Cor 3:10–15. In Rom 2:16 and 1 Cor 4:5, moreover, Paul refers to a judgment of that which has been “hidden” (ta krupta). Judgment, then, appears to be largely the revealing in the next life of what has been hidden in this one. Ultimately, however, believers have nothing to fear on Judgment Day—every shortcoming is covered by Christ’s sacrifice (Rom 8:31–34; cf. Jas 2:13).


115 One might attribute the possibility of such reductionism to the Enlightenment were it not for the presence of such cognitive reductionism in the Bible itself (Jas 2:14–26; esp. v. 19).

116 Contra Wetter, Vergeltungsgedanke bei Paulus 75–85. As Morris appropriately observes, Paul says not “would render” but “will render” in Rom 2:6 (Romans 148).

117 So Stuhlmacher, Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus (FRLANT 87; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 95; Beker, Paul the Apostle 257, 277; Gundry Volf, Paul and Perseverance 65; Schreiner, “Justification by Works” 142–43; contra Luther (see n. 65); Bell, No One Seeks 257–62; Reymond, Systematic Theology 751.


119 Morris suggests that this text may be the one place where both lines of the apparent Pauline contradiction between justification and judgment converge (Biblical Doctrine of Judgement 67). At the same time, we must heed Räisänen’s contextual warning that this passage is “concerned with the ergon of a missionary (Apollos) not with the moral life of believers” (Paul and the Law 185, n. 116). Such a reminder, salutary as it may be, ought not to be seen to render 1 Corinthians 3 irrelevant to everyday believers.


Fourth, obedience is not merely evidential but is rather built into the very fabric of salvation itself. Justification and judgment are linked not so much in cause-and-effect or linear progression as they are organically unified. This organic bond is union with Christ, in which one is not only declared righteous by virtue of Luther’s ‘fröhlicher Wechsel,’ or what Hooker has described as the Pauline ‘interchange,’ but also indwelt by the Spirit. Justification and obedience both sprout from the seed of union with Christ. For this reason “the category of those who are justified by faith is coextensive with those who will be justified on the final day after a whole life of perseverance.” Those who are justified will, for reasons other than any kind of earning, do the law. This is not to say, however, that faith and obedience are synonyms for Paul. The apostle assiduously maintains a principial distinction between believing and doing. But it is also possible, at the other end of the spectrum, to overstate this difference, in hyper-Lutheranizing neglect of such odd conjunctions as “the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26) or “obeying the gospel” (Rom 10:16; cf. 1 Pet 4:17). To exclude moral performance from the ground of justification is not to render such obedience soteriologically irrelevant. Distinction between faith and works must be maintained without sliding into separation. As Clowney writes, “A dead and empty faith cannot justify, but this is not because it lacks works as a supplement. It is because it lacks the living bond of trust from which works must flow.”

The question of whether ἀργα refers to general obedience or to Jewish nomism is immaterial here—in 2 Cor 5:10, e.g., the verb used to describe the action according to which humans will be judged is πράσσω, and in Rom 14:12 Paul simply says we will give an account of ourselves (ἐκαστός ἶμων περὶ ἑαυτοῦ λόγον δώσαι). In neither text does any form of ἄργο- appear.

The latter seems to be put forward by Augustine in “The Spirit and the Letter” (Augustine: Lectures on Romans 50) though Augustine’s comments in On Faith and Works appear to make faith and obedience organically united by virtue of love (pp. 28–29).

See the helpful discussion of this element of Luther’s teaching in Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 45–52, 165–66.


It is at this point that an overly strict adherence to an ordo salutis proves more unhelpful than helpful. From one perspective, one can be united to Christ only if already put right with God. Yet this could obscure the theological truth that union with Christ is the most comprehensive soteriological rubric, from which the other dimensions (justification, sanctification, etc.) emerge. See Schlatter, Theology of the Apostles 234, 251.

Gathercole, “Justification in Paul” 235.

Contra Ito, “Romans 2” 34; Kertelge, Rechtfertigung 225; Furnish, Theology and Ethics 202; Garlington, “Meaning of upakoe pisteos” 208, 224; idem, “Mediation and Justification” 328; Steve M. Schlissel, “A New Way of Seeing?” in The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision (ed. E. Calvin Beisner; Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004) 26. Snodgrass, too, unhelpfully writes that “people are incorporated into [Christ] by believing obedience” (“Justification by Grace—To the Doers” 87).


Edmund P. Clowney, “The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith” in Right with God 49. Calvin (Institutes 3.11.20; 3.16.1) and Schlatter (Theology of the Apostles 235–36) express themselves similarly.
Union with Christ inaugurates not merely external reformation but internal transformation. For one who has been justified, due not only to the justification but also to its necessary concomitants such as regeneration (with attendant new desires) and the presence of the Spirit, an awareness of divine assessment of obedience on the final day can be appropriately motivating without becoming either morally paralyzing (in ethical failure) or legalistically self-absorbing (in ethical success). By virtue of the “not yet,” one will never in this life experience infallible perfection, yet by virtue of the “already,” there has been ignited, even now in this diseased world, an inevitable new direction (2 Cor 5:17). It is according to this new life that judgment is rendered.\footnote{Contra Wernle, Der Christ und die Sünde 90, 105, 126; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Paul and the Stoics (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000) 167–73.}\footnote{I am grateful to Doug Moo and Michael Bird for their comments on an early draft of this paper.}