

Smoke And Mirrors

Refuting Fallacious Arguments for Justification by Faith Alone

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This essay is written in response to a series of articles that constitute a book entitled, *Justification By Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by which the Church Stands or Falls*” which is published by Soli Deo Gloria publications. I quote from the second edition which was published in 2003. The importance of this book is reflected by the preeminent pastors and/or scholars chosen to make contributions to it. These are men of prestigious rank within the reformed tradition. It stands to reason that when a person interacts with these men, you are engaging with some of the most reputable representatives of reformed doctrine. This was the reason for my choice. My aim has been to interact with the arguments of these men as they seek to convince the reading and thinking public of the biblical veracity of the “justification by faith alone” teaching. As the title of this essay clearly indicates, despite the reputation of these men, their arguments leave much to be desired. I have tried to fairly represent their arguments, and then present my reasons for why their arguments should fail to convince seekers of biblical truth. However, I strongly encourage any reader of this essay to secure a copy of this book and read it in its entirety with your Bibles open so you can hear them for yourselves.

Mirrors: Standing On One Leg With Joel Beeke

In Dr. Joel Beeke’s chapter in the book *Justification by Faith Alone*, he makes a provocative assertion that “the sinner is justified by Christ’s sacrifice alone, not by his act of feasting upon or believing in that sacrifice by faith.”(p.62) Putting aside his critique of Catholicism that has to do with “feasting,” we will focus on the final clause having to do with “believing in that sacrifice by faith.” Dr. Beeke is saying that “the sinner is justified by Christ’s sacrifice alone, not by.....believing in that sacrifice by faith.” In other words, we are not justified by faith in Christ’s sacrifice but by Christ’s sacrifice alone. This is quite interesting, given that the title of the book the chapter appears in is “Justification by Faith Alone.” It is made even more interesting given the fact that the Scriptures state repeatedly that we are in fact “justified by faith” in Christ. What impels Dr. Beeke to make this statement? What we will see is that Dr. Beeke makes this statement out of dogmatic sentiment rather than on the basis of responsible biblical research. First, we need to take a careful look at how Dr. Beeke explains himself. Second, we will examine the biblical evidence in order to discern if what he writes makes any biblical sense. Third, we will briefly reflect on the implications of his assertion.

Dr. Beeke supports his statement by arguing that when the Scriptures describe us as being justified *by* faith, the writers meant that we are not justified *on the basis or ground* of our faith, but only *by means of* or *by the instrument* of our faith. For Dr. Beeke this is a massive distinction. For him, the basis or ground of our salvation can only be that of Jesus Christ and His finished

work on the cross and can be nothing that we do at all- even believing. For Dr. Beeke, this is an important distinction that puts Jesus Christ and us in our rightful places. He writes, “It is critical to note that in none of these cases, nor anywhere else in Scripture, is faith (or any other grace) represented as constituting some ground of merit for justification. And this is all the more remarkable when one considers that *dia* with the accusative would mean ‘on the ground of’ or ‘on account of.’ Thus, *dia ten pistin* would convey the notion of ‘on the ground of or on account of faith,’ thereby making faith the meritorious reason for the believer’s acceptance with God.”(pp.59,60) We can see from this quote why this distinction is so crucial for Dr. Beeke. For Beeke, to teach that faith is the ground or basis of our justification is the same as to teach that faith is “the meritorious reason for the believer’s acceptance with God.” He teaches that the biblical evidence demonstrates that this cannot be the case. He makes a point about the Greek preposition *dia* as being sufficient to prove his case. Those without a background in the Greek language would have a hard time confirming or refuting his argument here. Most people would accept his reasoning and trust his biblical research. Let me try to explain his argument. Greek prepositions carry different meanings depending upon the object of that preposition. The Greek preposition *dia* can mean, “through”, “by”, or “on account of” among other things, depending on the form of the word that follows as the object of the preposition. Dr. Beeke’s point is that *dia* always means “through” or “by” when connecting justification to faith. For him, this proves his case that we are never described as being justified “on the basis” of our faith. If we were justified “on the basis” of faith, then the Bible would open us up to being justified by our “merit.” He goes on to write, “Yet such is the precision of the Spirit’s oversight of the New Testament scriptures that nowhere does any writer slip into using this prepositional phrase. On every occasion faith is described as the *means* of justification.”(p.60). Before citing the historic confessions he concludes his biblical argument on this point by writing, “Justification by faith alone is never justification on account of faith (propter fidem), but always justification on account of Christ (propter Christum), i.e. on account of the blood- satisfaction of the Lamb of God being graciously imputed to and received by an undeserving sinner (Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). Ultimately, the ground of justification is Christ and His righteousness alone.”(p.60) He goes on to quote the *Belgic Confession of Faith*, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, John Calvin and the Puritan Thomas Goodwin in support of his assertions. As impressive as this array of supporters is, nothing is as impressive as the Apostolic witness. To that we now return.

An argument is only as good as the evidence that supports it. Dr. Beeke recognizes this, and this is why he presents evidence for his view. But how compelling is the biblical evidence that he presents? Let us take a closer look. Dr. Beeke highlights one Greek preposition to prove his case, the preposition *dia*. From his study of the use of this preposition Dr. Beeke concludes that, in his words, “justification by faith alone is *never* justification on account of faith, but *always* on account of Christ, i.e. on account of the blood -satisfaction of the Lamb of God being graciously imputed to and received by an undeserving sinner.” He concludes the point about justification *never* being on account of faith based upon his biblical study of the preposition *dia*. So it follows that his second point about justification *always* being on account of the “blood-satisfaction” of Christ would also come from the same study. After looking up every one of the 520 occurrences of the preposition *dia* in the New Testament, I discovered that Dr. Beeke is correct on his first point. The preposition *dia* is used 19 times to connect our faith to justification,

and it is always to be translated as “by” or “through” faith. However, when I looked up the uses of *dia* to connect God’s saving work on our behalf the results were surprising. The preposition *dia* is used 41 times in total to connect God’s work on our behalf to us. Out of the 41 occurrences, 37 times the biblical writers use *dia* to speak of us being saved “by” or “through” God or Christ or the Spirit or grace. On only 4 occasions to they speak of us being saved “on account of” God’s work, and only one time is Christ’s cross-work written of as the basis of our salvation. Dr. Beeke states that “justification.....is *always* on account of Christ” and not on account of our faith. The evidence does not support Dr. Beeke’s assertion. While it is true we are always described as being justified “by” or “through” faith where the preposition *dia* is concerned, it is also true that almost every time the biblical writers chose to describe us as being saved “by” or “through” the work of God and not “on account of” His work. Dr. Beeke radically misrepresents the facts on his second point, justification is not *always* depicted as being on account of Christ. As a matter of fact, only once is this the case out of 41 possible occurrences. I have no doubt that the Scriptures are the result of the Spirit’s precise oversight as Dr. Beeke says. However, this observation now works against him. If the Holy Spirit desired to make this clear distinction between our justification being “by” faith and “on account of” the work of Christ, wouldn’t the language clearly reflect this desire? The Spirit Himself fails to make Dr. Beeke’s hard and fast distinction in the composition of the Scriptures themselves. Here, at least, Dr. Beeke fails to “keep in step with the Spirit.” What we can conclude is that the biblical writers, when using the preposition *dia*, preferred to describe our salvation as either “by” or “through” faith or “by” or “through” God. In neither case did they prefer to write of our justification as being “on account of” faith or God.

Secondly, Dr. Beeke’s conclusions are further shown to be misguided when we look at the one occasion out of 41 when the preposition *dia* is used to describe our salvation to be “on account of” the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is recorded in Revelation 12:11, “They overcame him *on account of* the blood of the Lamb.” But the second half of this verse is further indication that the Apostle John did not share Dr. Beeke’s radical distinction between what Christ does for us and what we must do in response to Christ. Here is the verse in full:

“They overcame him *on account of* the blood of the Lamb and *on account of* the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as the shrink from death.”(Rev.12:11)

The overcoming, or salvation, of God’s people finds its basis in Christ death *and* in their obedient testimony even to the point of being killed for their faithfulness. At this point we have to recall Dr. Beeke’s assumption concerning what it means for our salvation to be *on the basis of* anything we do, including believing. To be saved on the basis of anything we do for Dr. Beeke represents “some ground of merit for justification.”(p.59) His contention at this point is with the Apostle John who chose to represent our overcoming as finding its ground, at least in part, to our obedient testimony concerning Jesus. The evidence, once again, points to the fact that the Apostles did not hold to Dr. Beeke’s radical distinction.

Furthermore, when we look at other uses of the proposition “by” in the Scriptures we continue to see that Dr. Beeke’s proposed radical distinction of meaning between “by” and “on account of” does not hold up. For instance, time and again Paul opens his letters by writing that

he has been “called *by* the will of God” to be an apostle. Are we to make of this that Paul would not understand his calling to be “on the basis of” the will of God? Of course not. With language we commonly discern an overlap of meaning. Dr. Beeke’s radical distinction of meaning between “by” and “on account of” is not reflected in biblical usage and fails to recognize these overlaps of meaning in language, which biblical usage does support. The Bible can describe us as being saved “through” God’s work in 37 places and “on account of” God’s work in 4 places precisely because there is no radical theological distinction between the two descriptions. This makes good common sense, because it is true also of our everyday use of these terms. I can say, “I cut the bread *by means of* a knife,” or I can say, “*On account of* having a knife, I was able to cut the bread.” The biblical writers can describe us as being saved “through” faith, and Jesus can look at the woman who has just been healed and say, “Daughter, your faith has healed you.”(Mt.5:34) Jesus grounds her healing in her faith just as the biblical writers make unbelief the basis of Jesus’ unwillingness to heal people in certain locales.(Mt.13:58) Are we to understand from this that the woman was not healed “on account of” Jesus because Jesus grounded her healing in her faith? Once again, of course not. Do we need to correct Jesus and instruct him that it was really *on account of* Jesus that she was healed and *through* faith and not *on account of* her faith? I hope we can see how silly this becomes.

What we must conclude from the evidence is that the biblical writers did not share Dr. Beeke’s dogmatic distinctions. If they had, we would reasonably expect the Scriptures themselves to bear this out. Dr. Beeke makes his dogmatic assertions *on the basis of* evidence that serves back his view, but not on all the evidence. Let me illustrate his critical mistake in judgement this way. For decades the FBI has claimed they could identify the precise source of a bullet from testing the lead from the bullet found in a shooting victim. It was believed that this lead was so unique that it would provide the information needed to trace that bullet right to the box that it came from and then lead the FBI to the identity of its purchaser. Hundreds of convictions were made based on this assumption. The evidence *seemed* compelling. The lawyer would announce that the bullet found in the victim was traced to a box of bullets owned by the man who was accused of the crime. What powerful testimony! Years later more research was done. It turned out that these bullets could be traced to these particular boxes of bullets, because they could be traced, in fact, to thousands of boxes of bullets. As it turned out there was nothing particularly unique about the lead in a particular bullet, therefore a bullet could not be conclusively matched to a particular box of bullets. Upon consideration of all the evidence, the significance of connecting a bullet to a particular box of bullets evaporates. Dr. Beeke has subjected his readers to the same fallacy, the fallacy of appeal to selective evidence. D.A. Carson describes this fallacy as “an instance where there has been so selective a use of evidence that other evidence has been illegitimately excluded...As a general rule, the more complex and/or emotional the issue, the greater the tendency to select only part of the evidence, prematurely construct a grid, and so filter the rest of the evidence through the grid that is robbed of any substance.”¹ When Dr. Beeke presents part of the evidence his case *seems* compelling. However, after consideration of all the evidence, the significance of the conclusions he draws from the limited evidence he brings forward disappears. We conclude by asserting with the biblical writers that we are in fact “justified by faith.” This does not at all conflict with believing at the same time

1. DA Carson, Exegetical Fallacies, p.98

that we are justified by the blood of Christ. Nor is there any good biblical reason to not consider our justification to be “on account of” multiple causes, including faith. After all, will a person be saved without faith? No, the scriptures are clear, the unbelieving will be condemned. Jesus has been crucified for the sins of all men, however his death is only effective for those who believe. If I do not believe, then Jesus’ death does me no good. Therefore, it is “on the basis of” faith that I receive the benefits of Christ’s death. This is what the apostle Paul asserts in Philippians 3:9, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God *based on faith*.”² Of course we will not have faith without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, so we could say we are saved *on account of* faith *on account of* the Spirit of God. It is also true that we won’t have the benefit of the Spirit’s enabling grace apart from the predestining will of God, so we could say as well that we are saved *on account of* faith, *on account of* the Spirit, *on account of* the predestining will of God. These are not contradictory statements, each *cause* is necessary in the scheme of redemption. Each element must be upheld as a crucial *cause* of our redemption against unbiblical dogmatic distinctions that would drive a wedge between them. It is true that no one will be saved apart from Christ’s work on the cross, it is also true that no one will be saved apart from faith in that work. It must be acknowledged that Dr. Beeke would agree that no one is saved apart from faith. However, Dr. Beeke has written in unbiblical ways about faith because of what he supposes must be true about justification not being grounded in *anything* we do, including having faith.

It is important at this point to address an assertion that Dr. Beeke makes which is based on his fallacious belief that we are not justified by (on account of) faith but by (on account of) the work of Christ. He goes on to write, “Given the meaning of ‘by faith’ in the original Greek, it is more accurate to speak of faith as an instrument rather than a *condition* of justification and salvation.”(p.62) Once again, Dr. Beeke draws what is for him a crucial distinction. He explains why this is so; “A condition generally denotes a meritorious quality for the sake of which a benefit is conferred.” And later he writes, “If faith were the conditional (i.e. meritorious) ground of justification, salvation by human merit would be introduced, dishonoring divine grace and subverting the gospel by reducing it to simply one more version of justification by works (Galatians 4:21-5:12).” For Dr. Beeke, faith cannot be a condition for justification for the same reason that it cannot be a ground of our justification, because “a condition generally denotes a meritorious quality”.....which “dishonors divine grace and subverts the gospel.”

At this point, it is important to point out that a condition is *explicitly* expressed in a conditional statement.³ A conditional statement is indicated by two clauses introduced by the

2. This is the unusual Greek construction *epi tei pistei*, which only occurs twice in the New Testament and can be translated “by faith”, “through faith”, or “based on faith.” These various possibilities demonstrate the overlap of meaning. “Based on faith” is the translation of choice for the NRS, RSV, ESV, NAU and the NASB.

3. Thom Schreiner has given us an excellent description of “contingent” or conditional statements in his book *The Race Set Before Us* (p.41) He helps us to understand that contingency expressed in conditional statements are also communicated by way of commands and relative clauses. For instance, the relative clause, “Whoever believes in me has eternal life” reflects the same contingency that is expressed in the conditional statement, “If you believe in me, then you have eternal life.” These are two ways of expressing the same thing, the relative clause is what I mean by an *implicitly* conditional statement.

word “if.” The following is a conditional statement; “*If* I go to the football game, (then) I will see a great quarterback.” Going to the game is the condition that has to be met in order to then see a great quarterback. By rejecting a conditional prerequisite in order to receive salvation, Dr. Beeke opens himself up to some very strong biblical objections. Just as faith can easily be understood as a ground for our justification, just as clearly do the writers depict faith as a necessary condition to be met in order to receive God’s benefits, including salvation. The following brief selection of conditional statements make this quite clear: John 11:40, “Did I not tell you that *if* you believed, you would see the glory of God?” Here Jesus teaches that the benefit of seeing God’s glory in healing was conferred upon those who met the condition of faith. Rather than “dishonoring divine grace” as Dr. Beeke supposes, Jesus teaches that faith is a condition to met in order to behold the grace of the glory of God. The apostle Paul wrote, “That *if* you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Here is another conditional statement in which Paul depicts being saved as a reality for those who have met the condition of “believing in the heart.” In other words, “*If* you believe in the heart, *then* you will be saved.” Paul describes the benefit of salvation as being conferred upon those who meet the condition of faith, the very thing that Dr. Beeke says is an impossibility for the gospel. For Paul this is far from an impossibility, rather this is a description of how the gospel is to be savingly received. Paul again writes in 1 Corinthians 15:2, “By this gospel you are saved, *if* you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain.” Here Paul describes the necessity of a persevering faith. To believe “in vain” in the past is to stop believing in the present. Therefore, a persevering faith that endures to the end is a condition to be met in order to receive the benefit of salvation. Once again, for Dr. Beeke this is an impossibility, because for him, a condition to be met “generally denotes a meritorious quality.” For Paul, meeting this condition is an absolute necessity if a person expects to be conferred with the benefits of the gospel. Who should we believe? Nowhere in his chapter does Dr. Beeke explain to us how he can make such strong assertions when passages like these teach the opposite. If a *condition* to be met “dishonors divine grace and subverts the gospel” then it seems very odd that the biblical writers would make so many conditional statements that hold salvation as the benefit to be conferred on meeting conditions.

Smoke: Walking On Air With John MacArthur

John MacArthur spends a lot of ink in his chapter refuting the Roman Catholic view of justification and proclaiming the truthfulness of the Reformed view of “justification by faith alone.” Much of his discussion centers on dogmatic distinctions. The purpose of my writing this article is not to support Catholic views of justification, but to test these contemporary reformed arguments in light of what the Scriptures teach. MacArthur spends much energy arguing the benefits of the reformed view over the perspective of Roman Catholics, but I am left dissatisfied that he has sufficiently established his reformed position as the *biblical* one. This is my main concern. What we believe about justification has to be established by reasonable and accurate interpretations of Scripture. The reason for this dissatisfaction is that MacArthur has made several inaccurate statements that reveal the weakness of his position. The first statement he makes is that “whenever the Bible speaks of believers’ justification, it always speaks of a past-tense event that occurs at the moment of faith.”(p.13) He then quotes two passages that reflect

this. Of course, the Scriptures do speak of justification as a “past-tense event that occurs at the moment of faith,” but the problem here is that the Scriptures don’t *always* speak of justification of the believer in this way as MacArthur says. On several occasions justification is depicted as a future event established by means other than faith as follows:

Matthew 12:36,37, “But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you *will be justified*, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Matthew 6:14,15, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father *will also forgive you*. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father *will not forgive your sins*.”

Matthew 24:12,13, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end *will be saved*.”

Romans 2:13, “For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it those who obey the law who *will be justified*.”

Galatians 5:4,5, “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith *we eagerly await the righteousness* for which we hope.”

There are many other passages that could be cited which indicate a future justification before God. MacArthur’s statement that “justification is *always* spoken of as a past-tense event at the first moment of faith” is patently false and very misleading. While it may be true that MacArthur accurately represents reformed theology, we must have higher expectations when his article is written to persuade us that the reformed view was Jesus’ understanding “long before Luther.” If this was Jesus’ view then he needs to explain to us how Jesus Himself speaks of a future justification based on how we use our mouths and on our willingness to forgive men.

MacArthur makes the statement that Jesus Christ “made no formal explication of the doctrine of justification(such as Paul did in his epistle to the Romans), justification by faith underlay and permeated all His gospel preaching.”(p.15) What does MacArthur mean that Jesus “made no formal explication of the doctrine of justification?” Does he mean that Jesus never explicitly and carefully taught on the subject of how a person is made right before a holy God? If this is what MacArthur means then it is quite easy to show that he is wrong. Jesus taught quite frequently and quite clearly on justification. Many times Jesus taught on how a person is to be accepted by God, and on a couple of occasions he was directly questioned on the subject. The real problem for MacArthur, is that Jesus’ “explications” frequently do not reflect the reformed position that MacArthur advocates. For instance, Jesus is asked directly, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Here is an ideal place for Jesus to respond- “by faith alone.” But instead he responds, “What is written in the law and how do you read it?” The questioner quotes commandments requiring love to God and neighbor and Jesus states, “You have answered correctly, do this and you will live.” There is nothing unclear about this teaching. But then Luke

adds, “But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbor?’” Notice, Jesus gives the answer and then Luke writes, “*But* he wanted to justify himself.” According to MacArthur’s reformed dogmatics, Jesus had just taught him to justify himself by telling him to do the commandments in order to live. Luke’s statement shows this cannot be the case, as he depicts the man wanting to find a way *other than* what Jesus had just said! What becomes clear is that the man’s attempt to “justify himself” was to justify a life that had not in fact been in the habit of doing the commandments. He asked Jesus “who is my neighbor?” in order to hopefully limit the field to those he had been loving as his neighbor. Jesus’ answer by way of parable depicts a Samaritan helping a severely injured stranger. This burst the bounds of the man’s way of life and at the same time reinforces Jesus’ clear teaching on justification. Jesus had said, “Do this and you will live,” he tells the parable and then closes the conversation by saying, “Go and do likewise.” Clearly, by this Jesus meant “Go and do as the Samaritan in this parable.”

MacArthur, recognizing that Jesus taught unclearly on justification by faith alone, claims this is because the reformed doctrine “underlay and permeated all His gospel preaching.” This is a clever maneuver in which he implies that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is never obviously stated because it so permeates all of Jesus preaching. He states, “While Jesus never gave a discourse on the subject, it is easy to demonstrate from Jesus’ evangelistic ministry that he taught *sola fide*.”(p.15) On his first point, I would say MacArthur is right, Jesus never discoursed on justification by faith alone, an odd fact given the importance reformed teachers place on the doctrine. But it is not true that Jesus never discoursed on justification.

Now we turn to MacArthur’s insistence that it is easy to show Jesus’ taught *sola fide* in his evangelistic ministry. How does MacArthur support this? He supports is by citing the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14 as “the one occasion where Jesus actually declared someone ‘justified.’” For MacArthur, this supposed one occasion “provides the best insight into the doctrine as He taught it”(p.16). In this parable Jesus tells the story of Pharisee who commends himself before God in comparison to the tax collector who pleaded for mercy because of his sins. Luke informs us that he “told the parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.”(Lk.18:9) The Pharisee thanked God that he was not a sinner like the tax collector but did many good things. Jesus concludes the parable with his main point, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”(Lk.18:14). MacArthur goes on to interpret this parable to teach “faith alone.” He describes the Pharisees as holding to the most “rigorous living” and even surpassed what Moses prescribed through the ceremonial law. So when Jesus taught that our righteousness needs to surpass that of the Pharisees, “he set a standard that was humanly impossible, for no one could surpass the rigorous living of the scribes and Pharisees.”(p.17) For MacArthur, “Jesus’ point is clear. He was teaching justification by faith alone. All the theology of justification is there.” For MacArthur, since the man knew he was a sinner, he relied on Jesus’ work on the cross and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness by faith alone. The tax collector was forgiven because of the cross and reckoned to be righteous because of Christ’s obedience applied to him.⁴

4. Justification By Faith Alone, pp.18-20 MacArthur’s interpretation of the creedal affirmations of the tax collector in the parable reveals an anachronistic reading in of Jesus’ intended meaning. It is doubtful Jesus intended us to discern,

The first problem with this picture is that the Pharisees were *not* in reality rigorously living according to the law. This was not Jesus' or Paul's evaluation of the Pharisees. Jesus accused the Pharisees of straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel.(Mt.23:24) By this he meant they had a bad habit of making a big noise about the smaller things of the law, like fasting, tithes, and ceremonial washing, and neglected the more important matters of the law like justice, faith, and mercy. They made a big show of their religion, yet in reality were greedy and murderous, loving their unbiblical traditions and ignoring the will of God.(Mt.23:23) Paul makes this clear in the book of Romans where he accuses the teachers of the law of being idolaters and murderers. (Rom.2:17-24) Contrary to MacArthur's representation, these are not men who were meticulous law- keepers, these were men who made themselves out to be law-keepers for the praise of men but in reality were not law- keepers at all, but law- breakers.(Mt.23:32)

The second problem is an even more obvious one. The tax collector went home "justified"and MacArthur insists he was justified by faith alone. According to MacArthur's own interpretation, he was justified by the mercy of God shown at the cross and by the imputation of Christ's active obedience, and not by anything the tax collector was or did, because he was a sinner. But how does Jesus conclude the parable? Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other; *for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.*" He was justified *for* he humbled himself before God, so God exalted him as justified. This is the reason Jesus gives as the main point of the parable. This is recognized even by those who share MacArthur's theological commitments. Darrell Bock in his commentary observes, "Luke 18:9-14 is a simple contrastive parable with one basic message: humility before God is what he finds acceptable. One is not to compare oneself to anyone in hopes of justifying oneself."⁵ To be accepted before God is to be justified, and as Bock puts it, humility and not arrogance is acceptable before God. Bock elaborates, "Humility is exalted in the parable, while pride - especially religious pride - is condemned. The principle enumerated here is eschatological. Hearts will be evaluated and appearances will be reversed at the judgment."(p.1465)

I believe that Darrell Bock is correct in his interpretation. We must press this a little further. God commands us to be humble and we must humble ourselves in obedience to that

from a parable, teachings that had has of yet been revealed to anyone. At this point in Jesus' ministry no one had a clue about Jesus' death on a cross as an atonement for sinners, so it seems highly unlikely that Jesus' intended us to understand the tax collector to understand he was saved by Jesus Christ's cross, let alone an imputation of Christ's righteousness, a 17th Century doctrine. Brownlow North does the same thing in his interpretation of Lazarus and the Rich Man. North supposes that Jesus was teaching that the poor man was contented with God in Christ, and the rich man was contented with luxuries without God. While this makes for powerful sermons, it misses to point of parable. See "A Great Gulf Fixed: Sermons on the Rich Man and Lazarus," Banner of Truth Trust. 1999.

5. Bock even denies that the justification discussed in this parable is of the same type that Paul teaches having to do with "final salvation." (He takes the opposite position of MacArthur who believes it is Jesus' most explicit teaching on justification by faith alone.) It is obvious why Bock must come to this conclusion. If the justification in this parable is according to humility, then it can't be justification according to faith alone. Therefore, for Bock, Luke 18 must teach a different justification, one that has nothing to do with our "final salvation." John Piper reasons in the same way concerning Jesus teaching in Matthew 21 that we will be justified by how we use our mouths. My point here is that Bock understands this passage the same way I do, except I see no good reason to deny that Jesus uses it in the same way Paul does. Paul and Jesus both taught that man is justified by works of faith.

command. James commands the church, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up”(Ja.4:10). Likewise, Peter exhorts the church to “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time”(1 Pet.5:6). Bock recognizes something that MacArthur fails to understand. If God commands humility, then being humble is something we are to do and the way we are to be. The man in the parable was humble, therefore he was obedient to God. As Bock observes, the man was “accepted” based on his humility while the Pharisee was rejected because on his arrogance which is sin. MacArthur teaches that the tax collector was justified by faith alone, and not by righteousness or obedience to God, as he says, “He ‘went down to his house justified’(v.14) - not because of anything he had done, but because of what had been done on his behalf.” By this MacArthur represents this tax collector as having knowledge of Jesus’ death on the cross and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. MacArthur imposes his reformation views on the text, because nowhere is Jesus’ death on the cross even mentioned, nor a supposed imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Given the absence of these teachings, they could hardly have been Jesus’ point! Upon MacArthur’s principle of interpretation we can make any passage say whatever suits our fancy. It is sufficient for us to say that Jesus portrays a sinner who knew the God of Israel to be a merciful God. Further, if being humble is commanded by this merciful God in order to receive His mercy as taught by the Scriptures in James (4:10), and the tax collector was humble, then it follows that he was justified by his obedience in being humble. This is why Darrell Bock must falsely conclude that the justification in this parable is not “final salvation” justification. It is obvious why he must believe this, because, like MacArthur, he holds to justification by faith alone. Recognizing, unlike MacArthur, that the parable is about humility verses spiritual pride, he must conclude that this is not a salvation kind of justification since he recognizes Jesus is not teaching justification by faith alone in this parable, but justification by humility.

In conclusion, MacArthur’s doctrinal commitment to faith alone leads him to miss what is clearly the main point of the parable. Unlike MacArthur, Bock recognizes the main point of the parable is to uphold humility and to reject spiritual pride. Bock’s doctrinal commitment to faith alone leads him to deny that Jesus’ justification is of the “final salvation” type. It is interesting to note that MacArthur teaches that this is the clearest teaching of Jesus Christ on justification by faith alone, and Darrell Bock, a reputable interpreter with the same doctrinal commitments as MacArthur fails to see it! If this is the clearest teaching on the “faith alone,” and those of his own persuasion fail to see it here, what are we to say about the rest of Jesus’ teachings on justification by faith alone?

Furthermore, MacArthur asserts that Jesus’ teaching leads us to a doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. This, of course, has become a technical term which means Jesus’ active life of obedience is applied to us. In other words, even though we are sinners, Christ’s righteous way of being is applied to us, even though it is not our personal way of being. Christ’s righteousness remains alien to us or outside of us but ours by imputation. MacArthur writes, “The only thing that makes any sinner acceptable to God is the imputed merit of the Lord Jesus Christ.”(p.14,15) The only explanation that he gives for how this parable teaches this doctrine is that the tax collector knew himself to be a sinner. However, MacArthur fails to recognize some crucial biblical facts. Humility is pleasing to God, and since God is pleased with

righteousness, it is clear that it was the tax collector's righteousness that pleased him. This was not a righteousness that was external to the tax collector, because he was humble as a way of being. Therefore, he was internally righteous. It is true, the tax collector knew himself to be a sinner, *but it was the response of the tax collector to his own sin which was the righteous response*. The tax collector stood with God as his own accuser. He, with God, decreed himself to be a sinner, which is seen in his cry for mercy from God as a sinner. To plea for mercy is an acknowledgment of your own helplessness. To agree with God against yourself as a sinner is a righteous response to your own sin. It is the righteousness of the tax collector which is offended by his own life. This pleases God! He delights whenever we humbly submit our minds and wills to God's opinion in agreement with Him, including when we agree with him against ourselves. This is reflected in Jeremiah 31:19,20:

“After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.’ ‘Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?’ ...declares the Lord.”

Crucial elements of Jesus' parable are present in Jeremiah. The beating of the breast, the shame, the self-abasement, and then the “delight” of God in response to those things. This demonstrates the highest allegiance to God. This is the phenomenon we see in the Scriptures over and over again. Psalm 32 stands as another prime example as follows:

“Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.”(v.2)

“Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord’ - and you forgave my sin.

Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found.”(v.5)

Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart.”(v.11)

In this Psalm to be a man of integrity is to be righteous, and to admit the truth of your own sin and need for mercy is to be without deceit. This Psalm is not the language of MacArthur's imputation of Christ's righteousness. According to the Psalmist, this is the way of righteous man. Contrary to MacArthur's teaching, the tax collector was not imputed with an external righteousness, rather he exhibited a righteousness of the heart in humility before God.

In conclusion, John MacArthur makes assertions about what he considers to be Jesus' clear teaching on justification by faith alone, that in reality are not supported by the text itself. He admits that Jesus never gave a concerted and explicit teaching in the reformed “faith alone” doctrine, and then presents a parable as the “clearest” teaching on the subject which upon closer examination, is far from advocating MacArthur's view. We are left with the unsettling feeling that MacArthur hopes to persuade the reader less from biblical reasoning and more from arid assertions of his presupposed essential doctrine. Those who love the will of God as revealed by the Scriptures themselves should remain unconvinced.

Mirrors: Standing On Shifting Ground With R.C. Sproul

If a person goes through the effort to read RC Sproul's contribution to this book looking for anything that resembles a biblical argument for justification by faith alone, you will read in vain. At least Joel Beeke and John MacArthur cite texts and make some sort of an attempt to reason from passages of Scripture in order to argue for justification by faith alone. What makes Sproul's chapter particularly frustrating is something he writes at the outset. He writes, "But the vital question is: What does the Bible mean by justification? Our final authority for our understanding of justification rests neither on Roman Catholic pronouncements about it nor on Protestant creedal affirmations about it, but solely on what Scripture pronounces." (p.26) This is well said and I couldn't agree more. However, RC Sproul goes on from here to compare Roman Catholic pronouncements as reflected in the Council of Trent with his interpretation of reformation pronouncements and asserts, upon his own authority, the superiority of the latter. For example, after going through great effort to present the Roman Catholic view of "infused righteousness" RC Sproul states,

This Canon 11 is a shotgun blast. Some of the pellets fired missed *the Reformation position* completely, while other pellets from the scattered shot hit home. *The Reformers* did not exclude infusion of grace. Grace is poured into the soul. The issue was the grounds of our justification. *For the Reformers* the sole grounds are the imputed righteousness of Christ, not the inherent righteousness of the believer or the infused righteousness of Christ...The concept of imputation is crucial both to the Biblical concept of justification and to the Reformation. Indeed imputation is of the heart and essence of forensic justification. There is no forensic justification without imputation. (p.36)

This type of reasoning is typical of Sproul's argumentation. There is much about The Canons of Trent, the Reformed position and Sproul's own opinions. Note the last two sentences are stated conclusions that are not drawn from any reasoned *biblical* basis whatsoever. They are assertions from the authority of Dr. RC Sproul. As eminent as RC Sproul is, a Christian of noble character of the Berean type ought not rest his confidence on the pronouncements of Trent, the Reformers or RC Sproul. What we need to hear from him is how the Scriptures themselves support Sproul's understanding of "forensic justification." If he were to do this, then he would be leading people to be loyal to the solid rock of Christ's teachings. What makes his chapter particularly disturbing is Sproul's claim to be doing just that. He claims it, then does nothing of the kind. He falls into the "Fallacy of Simplistic Appeals to Authority." This fallacy is described by D.A. Carson,

Such appeals can be to distinguished scholars, revered pastors, cherished authors, the majority, or various others. The fallacy lies in thinking that appeals to authority constitute reasons for interpreting texts a certain way; but in fact unless that authorities reasons are given, the only thing that such appeals establish is that the writer is under the influence of the relevant authority!⁶

6. Carson, p.125

Clearly, RC Sproul is under the influence of his understanding of the Reformer's interpretation of the Scriptures. What he needs to show us is how the Reformer's interpretation of the Scriptures make the best sense of God's revealed will contained therein. The closest he comes to this is when he references Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned unto him as righteousness." Sproul teaches us that this passage is biblical evidence for the reformer's view of forensic justification, because Abraham was "reckoned righteous" before the Law was given as Paul says in Romans 3 and 4. Sproul concludes that he had to be reckoned righteous by the imputation of Christ's active obedience (righteousness) because Abraham did not have to obey the Mosaic Law. While it is true that the Mosaic Law had not been given during Abraham's lifetime, it is not at all clear that Abraham did not have to obey commands of God to him, by traveling where God commanded him to go, circumcising his offspring and by sacrificing his only son. This is made clear by Genesis 22:3, "Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws." Also, he doesn't explain to us how Abraham's faith was not the righteousness reckoned to him, when this is what the text seems to be saying. As an aside, the original Reformer Martin Luther himself held that Abraham's faith was his righteousness in contradiction to Sproul and his professed "reformation position." RC Sproul with a wave of the hand expects us to bow to his interpretation by spending half of a page out of a twenty-eight page chapter speaking from the Scriptures. We need more from him if we are to believe what he wants us to believe. We need to stand on the foundation the Word that Sproul talks about, and not on the foundation of human opinion that he actually leads us to.

Smoke: Blinded By the Fireworks of John Gerstner

The focus of John Gerstner's chapter is a discussion on the nature and necessity of faith in the "justification by faith alone" slogan. For sure, a discussion of justifying faith is a worthy subject that deserves some extended discussion and focus. Unfortunately, Gerstner attempts to cover many subjects other than the nature of justifying faith, so we have to search carefully for those portions where he focuses his discussion on the stated topic. What makes this even more difficult is that most of his chapter reads more like emotional rhetoric than a reasoned discourse from the Scriptures. Let me show you what I mean. Gerstner, in the second paragraph proclaims concerning salvation by Christ alone, "This is the heart of the Bible. This is the heart of the gospel. This is the heart of Christianity. This is the heart of the saint. This is the heart of Lord Jesus Christ. Those are the reasons it was the heart of the Reformation.....those who do not even claim this heart of the life of Jesus Christ is to commit spiritual suicide. "(p.106,107) This is fiery rhetoric, but these emotive proclamations do not emerge from any form of reasoned discourse. It is a proclamation of what he already believes, but it is not suited for persuading us from texts to believe that what he says is the "heart of the Bible," which is the purpose of this book. This is one example of many places this occurs in Gerstner's chapter.

For the sake of time, we will focus on those sections where Dr. Gerstner focuses his argument on the subject at hand, "the nature of justifying faith." Gerstner begins by quoting Romans 4:5, "To the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Gerstner concludes many things from this passage, but his focus is to

show that “faith is an act, but not a work.” Gerstner recognizes that to believe or have faith is something we do, so it is an act, but is at the same time not a work. This he gets from Romans 4:5, “to the man who does not work, but trusts...” Here Paul depicts trusting as antithetical to working. Gerstner goes on to describe *how* it is that faith is not a work, when he says, “(faith) is not a work - a work of merit, that is. Faith is workless, worthless.”(p.108) He also states, “So Scripture is teaching us that the faith that saves is not a work. It has no spiritual value in itself. *Strictly speaking, the true Christian church does not teach justification by faith. It teaches justification by Christ.*”(p.110) Here we must assume that John Gerstner is discussing “justifying faith” that is faith in Christ, and not faith as a psychological response to any proposition. In other words, all agree that faith in my doctor’s instructions for the healing of my ailing knee is not “justifying faith.” So when we speak about “faith” we are talking about “faith in Christ.” So for Gerstner “justifying faith” or “faith in Christ” is “workless and worthless” and as he also puts it “has no spiritual value whatsoever.” The reason Gerstner makes such evaluations springs from his expressed desire to keep “justifying faith” from being a “work of merit.” He is rejecting the Roman Catholic teaching that good works make a person “worthy of eternal life” and merit heaven. He reasons that if faith has spiritual value, or virtue, if it is a moral good, then faith becomes a “good work” that enables us to merit eternal life. So for Gerstner, justifying faith must be “workless and worthless” and have “no spiritual value whatsoever.” As I have pointed out, the seminal passage for this teaching is Romans 4:5. We will come back to this passage in a moment, but first I must point out that many passages seem to contradict Gerstner’s de-moralization of justifying faith, as follows:

1 Peter 1:7, “These (trials) have come so that your faith- *of greater worth than gold*, which perishes even though refined by fire- may be proved genuine and *may result in praise, glory and honor* when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

This is certainly an odd way of speaking about something that Gerstner deems to be “worthless” and lacking in any “spiritual value in itself.” How can something that is “worthless” “result in praise glory and honor?” Or how about Jesus’ response to the Centurion’s faith in the gospel of Matthew? After the Centurion exhibited his faith in Jesus’ power and authority it is recorded that Jesus “was astonished (or marveled) and said to those following him, ‘I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such *great faith*’ (Mt.8:10). Are we to understand Jesus to be marveling at something “worthless” and having no “spiritual value?” In connection with this, the writer of Hebrews speaks about the necessity of faith in order to please God,

Hebrews 11:6, “And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Just as we saw with the Centurion, here we see that God is pleased by the response of faith to His promise of reward. Are we to understand God to be pleased with something “worthless” and having “no spiritual value?” We could go on with many more passages but these will suffice to show that John Gerstner’s response to Catholic merit leads him to be out of step with passages of Scripture. Not only is he out of step with Scripture, but he also stands in conflict with teachers in his own Reformation heritage. Martin Luther taught that faith is commendable as the

Christian's righteousness because of how faith honors God.

When, however, God sees that we consider him truthful and by the faith of our hearts pay him the great honor which is due him, *he does us that great honor of considering us truthful and righteous for the sake of our faith....* So Paul says in Romans 4:3 that Abraham's faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness' because by it he gave glory most perfectly to God, and that for the same reason our faith shall be reckoned to us as righteousness if we believe."(Lull, p.603)

Luther does not reinforce Gerstner's teaching that justifying faith is worthless and workless, rather just the opposite. For Luther, justifying faith gives glory to God *by virtue of what it is* in response to God's promise. This is something far removed from Gerstner, yet Luther appears to have good biblical support for his view. Paul in Romans 4 reflects on Abraham's faith by writing,

"Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was *strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.* This is why 'it was reckoned to him as righteousness'"(Rom.4:20-22).

Notice it was faith that gave glory to God, *by being fully persuaded* in God's ability to perform what was promised. We know elsewhere that faith biblically defined is "Being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"(Heb.11:1). So faith *is being fully persuaded*. This is what I mean by saying God is glorified *by what justifying faith is*, a certainty in God's truthfulness regarding His promise. Gerstner, a great fan of Jonathan Edwards, arguably the greatest theologian this nation has ever produced, stands with Luther over and against Gerstner. Edwards goes so far in his treatise "Concerning Faith" to say that "It is evident that saving faith is one of the chief virtues of a saint, one of the greatest virtues prescribed in the moral law of God." He then quotes Matthew 23:23 to support this statement,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done without neglecting the others."

On this point, Edwards, certainly no friend of Catholicism, even sides with a Roman Catholic perspective when it appears to him to be better attested by the Scriptures. He takes issue with a Dr. Goodwin who wrote, "The papists say, wickedly and wretchedly, that love is the form and soul of faith." But Edwards responds to this by asking the question, "But how does the truth of this charge of wickedness appear?" His answer is that biblically speaking, it does not appear at all.

That true faith, in the scripture sense of it, implies not only the exercise of the understanding, but of the heart or disposition is very manifest.....It is evident that trust in Christ implies the disposition or will, the receiving and embracing of the heart. For we do not trust in any person or thing for anything but good, or what is agreeable to us; what we choose, incline to, and desire. (vol.2, p.588-9)

Edwards, and the most important aspect of our discussion, goes on to show this from the scriptures. He cites Hebrews 3:12, which says, "Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." Edwards reasons from this text, that if an unbelieving heart is an evil one, then a believing heart is a good and virtuous heart. Secondly, Edwards points out that faith "*arises from* a principle of love to God." (p.589 sect.75) This is reflected in Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:7, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Here Paul represents faith as deriving from the heart that loves God, or in other words, love produces faith. I want to make it clear that I quote Luther and Edwards not because I hope to ground the reader in their teaching as their foundation. I quote them to show that Gerstner is not reflective of all reformed teachers, and that Luther and Edwards reasoned from texts and came to conclusions that a far different than Gerstner's.

Now we return to the Romans 4:5. This is Gerstner's principle text for his understanding of faith not being a work, therefore not having any spiritual value, therefore not meritorious. However, Jesus does speak of faith as being a "work." In John 6:28 Jesus is asked, "What shall we do to be working the works of God?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this, that you shall believe in the one he has sent." Jesus does not respond with "No works at all, but belief in the one he has sent." Jesus calls belief a "work of God" or in other words, a work that God requires. It is quite consistent for Jesus to call faith a work, since faith is commanded and therefore constitutes "an act," as Gerstner acknowledges, of obedience to God's command. Gerstner distinguishes between "an act" and a "work," but why does he do this? He does this because of Paul's anti-thesis between believing and working in Romans 4:5, "to the man who does not work, but trusts God." However, a look at the context from Romans 2 through Romans 4 reveals that Paul is rejecting "*works of the law*." Paul's argument in this section of Romans was meant to cut the ground out from under Jewish boasters who felt they had a birthright privilege which "works of the law" served to establish. This is why Paul consistently targeted circumcision in his critique. This is how Paul can say, "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Rom.2:7). Paul also wrote, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Cor.7:19). Paul can write against works and for "keeping God's commands," because the works he was referring to were "works of the law." Understanding the context of Romans 4:5 prevents us from the tortured sophistical reasoning of Gerstner who seeks to make difficult distinctions between "an act" that is not a "work" and a "work" that is not a "work of merit."

One final point has to be made. Gerstner repeats an assertion that has become assumed dogma in reformed theology. He makes the point that "The Christian works are *so imperfect* that they could never merit justification" and again he states, "but post-justification works *have sin in them*, and therefore cannot *merit* reward." (pp.120,121) The reason I say these statements are assumed is because Gerstner gives no biblical rationale for them. He merely makes the assertion, and then builds his argument from there. His theological house is build on the foundational assertion that our works are polluted because they have "sin in them." This he must show from the Scriptures. There is no place in the Bible that I am aware of that teaches that good works Christians do "have sin in them" that needs to be forgiven.⁷ The Scriptures everywhere make the

7. A passage which is customarily quoted in support of this teaching is Isaiah's referring to Israel's righteous deeds

distinction between good works and evil works, but not between evil contained in good works, nor good contained in evil works. Gerstner should not assume what must be proven, especially since his teaching of the existence of evil in good works stands as foundational to his argument as to why good works cannot “merit justification.”

In conclusion, by insisting that faith is “workless and worthless” having “no spiritual value” John Gerstner runs into obvious biblical difficulties and into strong disagreement with his own reformed heritage. Gerstner nowhere acknowledges this or makes any attempt to deal with passages that would appear to teach the opposite of what he says. No amount of impassioned and fiery rhetoric ought to satisfy those who want to be grounded on the word of God. Like his colleagues who contributed to this book, at crucial points, he assumes what must be proven. For Gerstner, he assumes that all our good works are tainted with sin, in order to establish a foundation for his assertion that works can not be rewarded with a declaration of righteousness. This seems to run counter to Paul in Romans 2:7, James in James 2:21 and Jesus Himself in Matthew 6:14,15 among others. In each of these passages the reward of eternal life, the declaration of righteousness and forgiveness, find their respective basis in something God requires us to do.

Mirrors: The Logical Illusions of Don Kistler

Dr. Kistler sets the tone for his chapter by stating that there are only two choices to be made in establishing a religious perspective. Either to establish a religion which is based on works or a religion that teaches acceptance by God is by faith *alone*. The first, he tells us, is the teaching of all “counterfeit” religions, however the perspective that he is promoting is the one that truly saves because it is by “faith alone.” Don Kistler’s purpose in this chapter to advocate for the justification by faith alone teaching by focusing on the “alone” portion of this reformation slogan.

Don Kistler begins his argument by focusing on what he puts forward as logical reasons for holding to faith alone. Once again, one hopes for the preeminence of Scripture to be attested to by well-reasoned arguments from biblical testimony. Be that as it may, we will examine what he gives us by means of rational argument in his opening paragraphs. Dr. Kistler, in the following statement, makes a rhetorically powerful statement when he says,

To use the apostle Paul’s words, they ‘put no confidence in the flesh.’ There is nothing about me, there is nothing in me, there is nothing I have ever done, and there is nothing I will ever do, that adds one iota to what Christ has done for me. If I am justified and thereby saved, it is because of what Christ has done *for* me, not even because of what Christ has done *in* me! (p.124)

First, he assumes a particular interpretation of what Paul meant by the statement we “put no confidence in the flesh” in Philippians 3:3. Like his colleagues, he assumes from the Scriptures

being as dirty rags (Isaiah 64). However, the passage itself is best understood to teach that Israel’s law-keeping is undermined by her idolatry. This is confirmed by Isaiah 64:7, “No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you.....” but Isaiah can also say, “You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways.” (64:5)

what must be proven from the Scriptures. He trots out Paul's statement as if his interpretation of what Paul says is the most likely one, that Paul means anything and everything we might do is rubbish before God. This is not at all self-evident in Paul's teaching. The context strongly points to Paul speaking about "confidence in the flesh" being confidence in Jewish heritage, when he says,

"If anyone else thinks he has *reasons to put confidence in the flesh*, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for law righteousness, faultless."(3:4-6)

Paul defines what he means in this passage. The evidence points to a Jewish boasting by which "works of the law" came to signify ethnic superiority. Don Kistler assumes from the outset that Paul is referring to anything we are commanded to do, and this leads to his conclusions. But if he is wrong, which the evidence suggests he is, then his conclusions are called into question. He must establish the cogency of his argument by showing us how Paul is not rejecting Jewish ethnic boasting and is speaking about anything and everything we are commanded to do.

Secondly, Dr. Kistler assumes that anyone who teaches something other than faith alone must by necessity teach that we must *add* to what Christ did for us on the cross by requiring that something must be done in order to be saved. However, Kistler himself would acknowledge that a person has to repent of sins and trust in Jesus Christ in order to be saved. Since these are things Kistler would teach a sinner is required *to do* in order to be saved, is he teaching them to *add* to what Jesus did on the cross by repenting and believing? According to what he states he would have to conclude this very thing about his own perspective in order to be consistent. Of course, to require repentance and faith does not add to what Jesus did on the cross, it is the biblical requirement in order to gain from what Christ accomplished on the cross. It does not follow at all that to require an action in order to gain what has been promised adds to what has been promised. Let me give you an example in order to make this clear. Lets say I purchase a house for my son as a wedding gift. In order to take possession of the house, he needs to go to the courthouse and sign the necessary papers. Is he adding to the gift by signing the deed? Of course not! Signing the deed does not in any way *add* to the house. The signing of the papers is what needs to be done in order to gain the gift. Likewise, faith does not *add* to what Jesus did on the cross. Rather, faith is required in order to gain from the cross. Repentance does not *add* to what Jesus offers, but is required in order to receive what Jesus offers. Jesus himself taught that "we must forgive in order to be forgiven." Is Jesus thereby teaching that we must *add* to what Jesus did on the cross by forgiving others? Again, no, forgiving others is what we must do in order to gain from Jesus' finished work. Dr. Kistler's reasoning is fallacious because he teaches a non-sequitur.⁸ Just because we are taught that we must do things in order to be saved, it does not follow that the doing of these things *adds* to Jesus' finished work on the cross.

Dr. Kistler then closes this paragraph by posing a false dichotomy. He makes the

8. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies, p.119, "This refers to conclusions which 'do not follow' from the evidence and arguments presented."

statement that “if I am justified and thereby saved, it is because of what Christ has done *for* me, not even because of what He has done *in* me!” But why can’t it be that what Christ does *in* me is at the very same time something that Christ does *for* me gratuitously. This seems to be Paul’s meaning in Romans 8:1,2;

“Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, *because* through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”

In the passage Paul grounds our justification, which is the opposite of condemnation, in God’s work *in us* by His Spirit. This is how Paul describes us being rescued from the “body of death.”(Rom.7:24)(see also Titus 3:5,6) There is no reason to understand that what God does *for us* for justification is not what God does *in us* through Christ. Kistler paints himself into a corner when he writes, “What we are declaring is that a person is justified by faith alone, and nothing but faith.”(p.124) However, doesn’t God work faith *in us*? Isn’t faith itself a gift of God given to us by which we apprehend the glory of God through the cross of Christ? Here is Scripture’s witness concerning justifying faith:

Romans 10:9,10, “....if you *believe in your heart*, that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.”

Hebrews 10:22, “.....let us draw near to God with a *sincere heart in full assurance of faith*, having our hearts sprinkled..”

2 Timothy 2:22, “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, *along with those who call on the Lord out a pure heart.*”

Clearly from these passages God does *for us* by working *in us* what enables us to apprehend and receive what Christ has done for us at the cross. Dr.Kistler in his zeal to reject Catholic teaching ends up misrepresenting biblical teaching.

Don Kistler, in pursuing logical cogency for justification by faith alone, continues to fall into logical fallacies. He makes the statement that,

Logically, there are only two options. A person is either justified by faith alone or by works alone; and any effort to combine those two into a third possibility, such as a combination of faith plus works, must of necessity fall into the works category, for it would be a denial of justification by faith alone. And since the faith alone part in that scheme is insufficient, it would be the works that justify. (p.125)

This statement makes no sense whatsoever. He asserts that if you deny faith alone than you have to teach works alone. The reason he gives is that if you teach faith and works than faith is not enough. True, but he provides no reason for someone not to put forward an alternative view that works produced by faith justifies, or works added to faith justifies. Both deny faith alone, but both incorporate the necessity of faith *and* works. Also, on his logic, what is it that prevents him

from saying the reverse, “since works alone is insufficient, it would be the faith that justifies.” Kistler’s incoherent logic could lead to either conclusion, so in an irrational sort of way he could teach that any combination of justification by faith and works reasonably leads to faith alone!

Don Kistler makes the statement that “The Bible teaches that justification is by faith alone” and then spends significant space referring to the solas of the reformation (p.125), the Roman Catholic scholar Hans Kung (p.126), the inclusion of “alone” in Galatians 2:16 by Luther, the Nuremberg German Bible and certain Italian translations(p.126)⁹ and citations of the Church Fathers (p.126). Then he concludes by stating, “But we must admit that in the end it does not much matter what Luther said, or what Origin, Basil, Clement, or Kung has said. In the final analysis it matters only what Scripture says, and what the Scripture means by what it says.”(p.127) True enough, but why spend precious time citing what, as he says, “in the end does not matter.” I get the feeling that the opinions of men matter more to him than he lets on. As the saying goes, “a man is what a man does.”¹⁰ He cites a multiplicity of witnesses other than the Scriptures and then seeks to take the high road of sola Scriptura over and against his own citations! This is a not- so- subtle form of double-speak.

Finally, on page 127, Don Kistler brings forward a passage meant to prove his case. This is a parable told by Jesus and recorded in Luke 17:1-10. Jesus has just taught his disciples on the necessity of forgiving, even seven times in a day. The gist of the teaching is that if a brother repents we are obligated to forgive. The disciples were astonished by this and said to Jesus, “Increase our faith!”(17:5) They understood this to be a mandate too high for them and were asking for Jesus to help them by giving them faith to do it. Jesus responded by describing the power of faith “as small as a mustard seed” and then he tells the parable of the unworthy servant. He tells of a servant who does all that he is bound to do by nature of being a servant, by working in the fields and then preparing his master’s dinner. The master does not thank him for his work, because it was his duty as a servant, and only after all his work is done does he sit down and eat. Jesus concludes the parable with the lesson, “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’”(17:10). Don Kistler draws some surprising conclusions from the parable as follows:

If a person actually did everything that Christ commanded them to do, wouldn’t he be justified in assuming he had just achieved something significant? He would indeed think he earned a reward for being someone who had actually obeyed all of Christ’s commands. But that is not what Christ says at all. He not only does not commend the servant, he reduces the perfect obedience to simply doing what is expected and says that it is nothing special at all! This a real shock, a surprise ending! The Greek word which we translate as “unworthy” or “unprofitable” literally means “useless”....He had only been perfect, and that made him totally useless in God’s sight. (p.129)

Dr. Kistler then goes on to describe what this means for us. He states,

⁹This inclusion is not reflected in any modern translations which have accessed the best and most ancient manuscripts.

¹⁰Forrest Gump

This is significant and has eternal implications for all of us, Our Lord is telling us that if we were in the same relationship to God as this servant to his master; if we met all the commandments to the fullest, if we in all cases actually loved God with all our heart...if you had no debts to ask God to forgive you of; even if you had no offenses for which you needed to repent and be forgiven; even if you worked all your life faithfully for the Father - you would have no right to the fatted calf. You have only done your duty, which is to be perfect! (pp.129-130)

For Kistler this by necessity lead us to “justification by faith alone.” “Christ is driving home the point of salvation by free grace”(p.130). In other words, we receive the fatted calf by free grace, not by right as to perfect obedience.

It is Kistler’s teaching that is shocking First, it is interesting to note that Don Kistler goes well beyond reformed teaching. It has already been asserted in this book that Jesus Christ merited our salvation by his perfect obedience. It has been reasoned that Jesus was the only one who can be justified by works and merit salvation for us because he is the only one who could do it sinlessly. It has been taught by Don Kistler’s fellow teachers that Jesus Christ was rewarded by the Father for his obedience, and was commended and is greatly to be praised by virtue of his perfect obedience. Now Kistler states that through this parable Jesus taught that if we were to do the same thing Jesus did, which would be perfect and sinless obedience, we would “*only* be perfect and that would make us totally useless in his sight.” Incredible! What his colleagues argue from in order to proclaim Christ’s right to life with the Father as an eternal reward for Him and for us, becomes for Dr. Kistler what makes us “unworthy” and “totally useless” in his sight.

Also, when we look at other passages having to do with faithful servants, Jesus can depict a very different reaction from the master toward the servant. For instance, in the parable of the talents the master commends the servant for his faithfulness, “Well done good and faithful servant, come share in your master’s happiness!” What are we to make of this? Jesus does not depict the master as saying “Well done worthless servant.” In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus at the judgment will commend people for their faithfulness in feeding and visiting and caring for needy brethren. Jesus does not say, “I needed clothes and you useless servants clothed me, I was sick and you worthless servants looked after me.” In fact the biblical writers exhort us frequently to be “worthy” of our calling by means of our behavior (Eph.4:1;Col.1:10;Phil.2:27;1 Th.2:12). Jesus teaches us, “Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”(Mt.10:38). We could go on, but these will suffice to raise important questions concerning Don Kistler’s understanding of what Jesus meant by this parable.

Taking a closer look at the parable, Jesus’ meaning is more focused than Don Kistler recognizes. Parables, as is well known, were used by Jesus to make singularly pungent points. We are wise to not try to draw too much from them. These other passages about “worthy” servants who please God are important clues that Don Kistler has done just that. When we look at the context, we understand that Jesus was addressing the astonished apostles who found Jesus’

teaching about the need for repeatedly forgiving the repentant to be incredible. Jesus then tells a parable in order to illustrate the fact that forgiveness for a disciple of Jesus Christ was mandatory. This was their duty. Their obedience in forgiveness was not above and beyond what it meant to belong to Jesus Christ. This obedience would not lead to “special privileges” over and above what belongs to a servant of God. This was the point of Jesus’ teaching. If they were not willing to forgive, then they would be rejected by the Father as unfaithful servants, “for if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”(Mt.6:14). And for those who persevere in forgiving sins, they will receive the commendation of “well done good and faithful servant.” There is no contradiction here, they will have done their duty which is necessary in order to be received.

The tragic irony of Don Kistler’s teaching is that he inadvertently leads us to believe what Jesus was rejecting. For Dr. Kistler and his colleagues, Jesus merits our justification by faith alone and any subsequent obedience in forgiveness *merit* for us additional rewards in heaven (see Gerstner pp.120,121) This is the above- and- beyond the call of duty commendation that Jesus is rejecting in this parable! For Jesus, forgiveness is a basic requirement of what it means to be a servant of God. This was His point. They would deny that the forgiveness Jesus teaches as mandatory is actually mandatory in order to enter the kingdom, because, as at least Don Kistler wants us to believe, even perfect obedience of the Jesus- type would not enable us to enter the kingdom of God.

Dr. Kistler repeatedly falls into logical incoherence when attempting to present a rational argument for justification by faith alone. When he cites Scripture he gets so carried away by his great zeal to refute works- righteousness that he draws conclusions that are not only in conflict with the witness of Scripture, but also with aspects of his own reformed heritage. Once again, anyone with his ear to the tracks, being informed by the testimony of the Word of God should not fall in with Dr. Kistler’s conclusions, for he has not presented a contextually sensitive or reasonable argument in defense of justification by faith alone.