

Dr. Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of Justification by Faith

Justification by Faith Alone and the "Unio Mystica"

The Third Key: Justification by Faith Alone

The Doctrine upon which the Church Stands or Falls

For Bavinck, the doctrine of justification by faith was one of the key doctrines of the Christian faith as well as a key for understanding salvation.¹ "Regeneration, manifesting itself in the fruits of faith and repentance, opens the way to the Kingdom of God. Whoever is a citizen of this kingdom, presently, comes to share in all the benefits that are the content of that kingdom. They can be summarized in the trio: righteousness, holiness, and blessedness."²

Stated a little differently, "Regeneration, faith, and conversion exist in the covenant of grace in a conditional relationship to its benefits. They are the only way wherein forgiveness of sins and being a child of God, peace and joy, sanctification and glorification can be received and enjoyed by man."³ In the reception of all these benefits and treasures, we must give priority to the doctrine of justification.⁴

¹ Comp. *GD4*:160, "Van al deze weldaden (wedergeboorte, geloof, en bekeering—RG) komt weder aan de rechtvaardigmaking de eerste plaats toe, want daaronder wordt die genadige en tevens rechterlijke daad Gods verstaan, waardoor Hij den mensch van alle schuld en straf der zonde vrijspreekt en hem het recht geeft op het eeuwige leven."

² *ORF*, 439. Comp. *GD4*:160, "Wedergeboorte, geloof en bekeering staan tot de volgende weldaden van het genadeverbond in eene conditioneële verhouding; ze zijn de eenige weg, waarin vergeving der zonde en kindschap Gods, vrede en vreugde, heiligmaking en heerlijkmaking door den mensch ontvangen en genoten kunnen worden. . . . Er kan toch van geen rust der consciëntie, van geen vrede des gemoeds, van geen vreugde en blijdschap der ziel, van geen blijmoedigen zedelijken arbeid, van geen zalig leven en sterven sprake zijn, voordat de schuld der zonde is weggenomen, alle angst voor straf ten eenenmale is uitgeroeid, en de zekerheid van een eeuwig leven in Gods gemeenschap het bewustzijn met haar troost en sterkte vervult."

³ *GD4*, 160.

⁴ *Ibid.*

How is Man Righteous before God?

What is righteousness according to Bavinck? Generally, it “is the justness which a person himself possesses and the just action which he does in relation to others.”⁵ It is precisely in this sense that the Old Testament ascribes justice or righteousness to God. “He is the Rock whose work is perfect, for all His ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He (Deut. 32:4).”⁶ This righteousness of God is ascribed to him on the basis of special revelation.⁷

Moreover, the significance of this righteousness and special revelation has to do with the nature of the covenant of grace, which, in turn, rests upon divine actions in history.⁸

The Righteousness of God

Bavinck contends that the apostle Paul places the notion of the righteousness of God in the foreground in his letters to the Romans and Galatians.⁹ How ought the phrase *dikaiousu,nh qeou/* to be understood? Bavinck states that Paul used it in a very particular sense, in order to convey a specific message. It depicts God’s particular attribute and method of dealing with poor and miserable sinners, who are personally guilty, but in fact have “right” on their side.¹⁰

In the Old Testament, this truth was all but lost. If sinners were to be saved, God would have to reveal his righteousness in a different manner than he had done through the Law.¹¹

⁵ *ORF*, 439.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Comp. Isa. 45:19-21; Zeph. 3:5.*

⁸ *GD4*:162.

⁹ *GD4*:166.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The phrase, “righteousness of God,” encountered in Romans 3:21-26 and 1:17 ought not to cause us to reflect on a notion of the righteousness of man, which somehow exists outside him in Christ, but through him (Christ—RG) it is made man’s by faith and is accounted so by God.¹²

In the very first place, what we need to understand by the term, “righteousness of God,” is the perfection of God, whereby he judges justly and rightly. It is the one who is given the gift of faith in Jesus that God declares acquitted.¹³ Therefore, Bavinck concludes that the phrase cannot mean man’s own righteousness or a righteousness that is infused into him by God.¹⁴ It is a righteousness that is received through the instrument of faith.

What is Faith?

This faith contains several key elements. In the first place, it includes receiving the witness of God found in Scripture. Beginning from there, faith proceeds to the trust of man’s heart upon God’s grace in Christ, a personal relationship to and a personal relationship with Christ. It is no “dead” faith, but a living one that excludes all works righteousness, merit, and boasting. This biblical faith manifests itself powerfully in love.¹⁵

¹² GD4:166-167.

¹³ GD4:167, “Maar in de eerste plaats hebben wij onder dien term te verstaan die eigenschap of liever die handelwijze Gods, waarnaar Hij rechtvaardig oordeelt, in casu dengene, die uit het geloof van Jezus is, vrijspreekt.”

¹⁴ GD4:167.

¹⁵ GD4:168. “Dat geloof sluit wel in het aannemen van het getuigenis Gods, Rom. 4:18v., 10:9, 77 [sic], 1 Cor. 15:17, 1 Thess. 2:13, maar is dan voorts ook vertrouwen des harten op Gods genade in Christus, eene persoonlijke verhouding tot en eene persoonlijke gemeenschap met Christus, Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 6:17, 2 Cor. 13:5, Gal. 2:20; Ef. 3:17; geen dood, maar een levend geloof, dat alle werk, verdienste en roem uitsluit, Rom. 3:28, Rom. 4:4, 11:6, Gal. 2:1, Phil. 3:9, en toch in de liefde zijne kracht bewijst, Gal. 5:6.

There is a “reckoning” or “declaration” by God to lost sinners in justification. It is a righteousness unto life, which brings life and frees the justified sinner from *angst* and fear and produces peace with God. It is a gracious act of the Lord that releases the sinner from servitude and participates in a filial relationship with God.¹⁶

Man's Principle Question

Bavinck agrees that justification is the doctrine upon which the Church stands or falls.¹⁷ It is precisely within the reality of life that this question is asked: Which is the path by which the sinner can be restored to fellowship with God? The form of this question is merely a variant on others, such as, How do I obtain eternal life? Or, to put it another way, How do I receive God's blessings? The alternatives are few. Reality dictates that the blessings of God accrue to the sinner *either* on account of man's merits *or* by God's grace.¹⁸

Bavinck agrees with the Reformers, in their opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, that works righteousness denies true comfort for believers. It also leaves believers in a life-long quandary regarding assurance about their salvation. In addition, works righteousness robs Christ of his perfect and sufficient office of Mediator. Finally, it robs God of his glory. If works justify man, then grace is no longer grace but

¹⁶ *GD4*:168. In *GD4*:172, citing Martin Luther, Bavinck writes, “De kern van het Evangelie is toch daarin gelegen, dat God in Christus een andere gerechtigheid heeft geopenbaard dan welke in de wet van ons werd geëischt; Hij heeft thans in den tijd der genade zonder wet, dat is sine necessitate legis habendae, i.e. sine adiutorio legis et operum ejusdem eene gerechtigheid geopenbaard, non qua Deus justus est, sed qua induit hominem, cum justificat impium, eene justitia, qua Deus justificat nos. . . . Rechvaardigen beteekent in de Schrift justum reputare, accepto ferre, non imputare peccatum, remittere impietatem, justitiam dare per reputationem sine operibus, imputare justitiam.” Bavinck often quotes Luther with approbation when dealing with the doctrine of justification by faith, for, as he says, “In de leer der rechtvaardigmaking is er zakelijk tusschen de Luthersche en de Gereformeerde theologie geen verschil.”

¹⁷ *GD4*:187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

obligation.¹⁹ Therefore, the Reformers unanimously confessed the grace of God as the only *causa impulsiva et efficiens* for the entirety of man's salvation.

Bavinck combines the objective truth of justification with the subjective response of man when he says that the Father justifies, the Son merits all for us, and the Holy Spirit applies it to us. From the subjective side, faith apprehends this justification, the sacraments signify it, and our works in accordance with God's Word declare it.²⁰ The importance of what Bavinck is saying here has to do with the triad of apprehending, signifying, and declaring. These are key elements in Bavinck's understanding of the manner in which man responds to God's grace.

Even though he can assert that justification is a juridical (forensic) act and not an ethical one,²¹ the life of the justified sinner includes ethical behavior. This is so, because every benefit of grace presupposes grace.²² As was seen above, once the sinner "apprehends" God's grace through the instrument of faith, he is to participate in the sacraments and declare God's grace to sinners, by living in accordance with God's Word.

The sinner's faith is never the ground upon which someone is saved. Faith never presents itself as justification itself or even a part of it. What is it that justifies the sinner then? It is the content or object of our faith that is Jesus Christ.²³ Bavinck emphasizes the priority and centrality of Christ in the life of the believer. Faith is neither the principle nor

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *GD4*:188, "De Gereformeerde theologen drukten dit vroeger aldus uit: Pater justificat effective, Filius meritorie, Spiritus Sanctus applicative en, om dit er ineens bij te voegen, fides apprehensive, sacramenta obsignative, opera declarative."

²¹ *GD4*:188, "De rechtvaardiging is daarom ook geene ethische, maar eene juridische (forensische) daad. . ."

²² *GD4*:188-189.

²³ *GD4*:194, "Ten tweede wordt het geloof nooit als grond der rechtvaardiging voorgesteld. . . . Het geloof rechtvaardigt niet door zijn wezen or daad, omdat het zelf gerechtigheid is, maar door zijn *inhoud*, wijl het geloof in Christus, onze gerechtigheid is." Italics—RG.

the source of life. Christ is our life and gives us life. Therefore, it may truthfully be said that whoever believes has life, because he receives it from Christ.²⁴

Imputed Righteousness

Bavinck follows the traditional Reformed method of explaining justification as imputation and declaration. Justification is maintained in its objective, forensic aspect as an *imputatio* of the righteousness of Christ.²⁵ Bavinck defends his position by embarking on a precise scrutiny of the various Hebrew and Greek words used to describe justification.²⁶

A key for Bavinck is the concept of “reckoning” attached to the doctrine of justification by faith.²⁷ A central word in the discussion concerning justification is *logizoesqai*. The word, itself, has several nuances. The essence of the words found in Romans 4:4-6²⁸ is this, however: The words, “faith is reckoned or accounted” as righteousness, are an abbreviation and expression of the saving act of God whereby he reckons the righteousness of Christ that God, himself gives as a gift, through faith. On the ground of that reckoning, God acquits the sinner.²⁹

Bavinck insists that God’s justification of the sinner is no fiction or *imputatio putativa*. When God justifies a sinner he does so based upon the grounds of a righteousness that God, himself, has brought about. Moreover, he brought this

²⁴ GD4:195, Het geloof is eigenlijk niet principe en bron van het leven, want Christus is het leven en geeft het leven. . . . Wie gelooft, die heeft het leven, juist omdat hij het uit Christus ontvangt; en zoo ook, wie gelooft, heeft de *dikaïosu,nh qeou/* welke God in Christus hem schenkt.”

²⁵ GD4:183.

²⁶ GD4:188-191.

²⁷ GD4:194-195.

²⁸ *tw/| de. evrgazome,nw| o` misqo.j ouv logi,zetai kata. ca,rin avlla. kata. ovfei,lhma(tw/| de. mh. evrgazome,nw| pisteu,onti de. evpi. to.n dikaiou,nta to.n avsebh/ logi,zetai h` pi,stij aurtou/ eivj dikaios,nhn\kaqa,per kai. Daui.d le,gei to.n makarismo.n tou/ avnqrw,pou w-| o` qeo.j logi,zetai dikaios,nhn cwri.j e;rgwn..*

²⁹ GD4:195, “De woorden: het geloof wordt toegerekend tot gerechtigheid, zijn eene verkorte uitdrukking daarvoor, dat God zijne in Christus geschonken gerechtigheid in het geloof aan iemand toerekent en op dien grond hem vrijspreekt.”

righteousness about in Christ. By virtue of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, he obtained for the ungodly the right of acquittal.

The righteousness, therefore, whereby the sinner is justified is the righteousness of God, as opposed to man's own righteousness. That does not mean, for Bavinck, that this righteousness is merely an external one. This righteousness stands in *relationship* to the sinner.³⁰

God's justification of sinners "is certainly a gracious, but it is also a juridical deed of God, a *declaration* (emphasis mine) by which He, as Judge, acquits us of guilt and punishment and gives us the right to eternal life."³¹ This declaration also is couched in personal, covenant categories. Bavinck explains it this way:

Besides the fact that Holy Scriptures very plainly speak of the justification as a legal or forensic act, this further fact must be pointed out to the opponents of the doctrine of justification: They have a mistaken notion of what justification is. They say that such an acquittal of man on the basis of a righteousness outside of himself is unworthy of man, and that it leaves him quite unchanged. But this charge comes back upon the heads of those who make it, for if they justify a person on the basis of a righteousness which is in him, they must themselves certainly admit that this righteousness in man here on earth is very frail and imperfect, and must therefore conclude that God justifies a person on the basis of a very inadequate righteousness and thus makes Himself guilty of a false judgment. On the other hand, an acquittal based on the righteousness which is in Christ is a perfectly just one for it was presented perfectly by God Himself in the Son of His love. Moreover, although this justification of the sinner, this acquittal, is based solely on the righteousness which is in Christ, it does in time through faith become operative in the consciousness of man and effects important change there. Even the person who has been accused of a serious crime and is acquitted by an earthly judge is not the same. His whole relationship to the law is changed about. So too the justification of God works on in the consciousness of man and liberates him from all sense of guilt.³²

³⁰ GD4:197-198, "De gerechtigheid, op grond waarvan de goddelooze gerechtvaardigd wordt, is dus inderdaad zijne eigene niet; zij is eene dikaiosunh qeou, staande tegenover de idia dikaiosunh. Maar zij is toch niet in dien zin eene vreemde en buiten hem staande, dat zij niets aangaat en niet in de minste relatie tot hem staat. Integendeel, reeds in het pactum salutis heeft Christus zich in betrekking tot de zijnen gesteld en als middelaar hun plaats ingenomen. In de statte der vernedering is Hij om hunne zonden gestorven, en Hij is opgewekt om hunne rechtvaardigmaking."

³¹ ORF, 457. On page 458, Bavinck adds, "Paul further uses the terms *justifying* and *imputing righteousness* interchangeably (Rom. 4:3, 6 and 11) and also the term *making righteous* (Rom. 5:19). . . . Throughout, therefore, the justifying is regarded as a juridical, a legal, action, a verdict of acquittal pronounced by the heavenly Judge upon the sinner who according to the norm of the law is wicked but who has in faith accepted the righteousness given by God Himself in Christ. Judged by that he is righteous."

³² Ibid., 458-459.

We shall now explore, more in depth, what Bavinck means when he speaks about the centrality of Christ in justification.

The Centrality of Christ in Justification

Bavinck places Christ at the focal point of the doctrine of justification by faith. In this approach there is a peculiar intimacy that has been handed down under the name of the *unio mystica*. This is a key ingredient in Bavinck's theology. Its importance cannot be underestimated.

What Bavinck is concerned to communicate is the intimate union of the believer with Christ. This is a manifestation of the subjective warmth of Bavinck's theology. He is not merely concerned with the communication of truth, but of the truth of the Word of God as it applies to the lives of God's people.

Bavinck's focus in justification, as in other major doctrines, is Christ crucified. This is the gospel.³³ When God justifies a sinner, he does it based upon what God has done in Christ. The central theme of God's actions with regards to the lost sinner is this: God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5; 5:6).³⁴ This justification is based upon the historical deed of Christ on the cross, even though the divine plan of salvation took place in the *pactum salutis*, in eternity, before time.³⁵

³³ *GD4*:192, "Terwijl God dus naar de wet den mensch vanwege zijne zonde veroordeelt en veroordeelen moet, heeft het Hem behaagd zijne gerechtigheid, dat is zijne rechtsprekende, en in dit verband nader nog zijne vrijsprekende gerechtigheid op eene andere wijze te openbaren, n.l. zonder wet en wetswerken, enkel en alleen door het Evangelie. Hij stelde n.l. Christus tot een zoenmiddel of zoenoffer en bleek daardoor, zelf rechtvaardig te zijn, en tevens te kunnen rechtvaardigen of vrijspreken dengene, die uit het geloof van Jezus is, Rom. 3:21-26. *De offerande van Christus verschafte Hem dus den grond voor zijne vrijspraak van zulken, die goddeloos in zichzelf, toch uit het geloof van Jezus zijn.*" Italics—RG.

³⁴ *GD4*:196.

³⁵ *GD4*:197-198.

A covenant of grace and a *unio mystica* existed between Christ and his congregation long before sinners came to faith.³⁶ Temporally, however, justification needs to be understood as a justification of the Head as well as the individual members, of the Mediator and all of his true covenant members.³⁷

“There is no possibility of sharing in the benefits of Christ without being in fellowship with the person of Christ, and the latter invariably brings the benefits with it.”³⁸ It is essential that in order to be able to stand before the judgment of God, to be acquitted of all guilt and punishment for sin, and to share in the glory of God, man must have Christ.³⁹

When Bavinck makes such a statement, it is to be taken in the most inclusive sense possible. That is, it is insufficient to have “something of him.” “We must possess Him in the fullness of His grace and truth, according to His divine and human nature, in His humiliation and exaltation.”⁴⁰ True saving faith directs our hearts away from ourselves and towards God’s grace in Jesus Christ.⁴¹

Bavinck asserts that the believer must possess the total Christ (*totus Christus*). Why is that so important to Bavinck? It has to do with this: “The crucified and glorified Christ is the righteousness which God grants us through grace in the justification.”⁴² This is true

³⁶ *GD4*:198, “Er bestaat een verbond der genade, een *unio mystica* tusschen Christus en zijne gemeente, lang voordat de geloovigen persoonlijk daarin worden opgenomen: anders had Christus ook niet voor hen kunnen voldoen. Er heeft eene toerekening en schenking van Christus en al zijne weldaden van Gods zijde plaats, eer de bijzondere personen komen tot het geloof.”

³⁷ *GD4*:198, “Eene vreemde is dus de gerechtigheid, die de grond der rechtvaardiging is, slechts in zekeren zin. Zij is de gerechtigheid van het hoofd maar daarom ook van al de leden, van den middelaar maar dus ook van al de bondgenooten.”

³⁸ *ORF*, 454-455.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 455.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *GD4*:204-205, “. . .het zaligmakend geloof richt ons oog en ons hart van den beginne af aan van ons zelve af en naar Gods genade in Christus heen.”

⁴² *ORF*, 455.

justification for it rests on God's pronouncement or declaration that we are free of all guilt and punishment.

God's Righteousness and His Law

Bavinck designates three expressions or manifestations of God's righteousness. First, the ". . . righteousness of God came to expression first of all in the laws which He gave the people. For us righteousness consists in the fact that with regards to our being and conduct we correspond to a law."⁴³ This is a key concept not merely for Bavinck, but for all of theology as well: Both in being and conduct man corresponds to a law. In light of Bavinck's theological methodology, this places all "rights" and "laws" as well as their origin, in God. They are good and righteous because "He gave them in harmony with His own being and will."⁴⁴ In this sense, Bavinck is thoroughly "theonomic" in his approach.⁴⁵

Second, "the righteousness of God is manifested further in this, that He maintains these laws in force and requires that His people live according to them."⁴⁶ In a very particular manner God "lays His claim upon His people of Israel, whom in sovereign love He accepted as His own, and who therefore must keep His covenant, obey His voice, and walk in His ways (Ex. 19:5)."⁴⁷

In the third place, God's "righteousness manifests itself in the fact that He judges and will judge all peoples, His own people Israel also, strictly according to justice."⁴⁸ All the biblical statements that emphasize the sovereignty of God "do not by any means serve to

⁴³ Ibid., 439.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 440.

⁴⁵ I'm using the term here in its generic sense of "law of God" and not in the sense of the theological debate regarding Theonomy.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Comp. Isa. 33:22; Job 40:2; Dan. 4:35; Isa. 45:9; Jer. 18:6; Isa. 10:15.

represent God as a tyrant who operates arbitrarily. Rather, they call on man to humble himself and to bow to the majesty of God's thoughts and the incomprehensibility of His ways (Isa. 55:8-9)."⁴⁹

This emphasis on biblical righteousness is also found in Jesus' teachings. Christ spoke of righteousness specifically in connection with the Kingdom of God. He called his disciples to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

What is the nature of this righteousness? It "is a very different righteousness, a much deeper and more intimate righteousness, than the external fulfillment of the law with which the Jews were content."⁵⁰ This particular righteousness about which Jesus speaks "is a spiritual and perfect righteousness, a righteousness like that of the Father (Matt. 5:20, 48)."⁵¹

Jesus is not, however, declaring that fallen man is able, in and of himself, to enter this kingdom. In fact, "no one can enter it unless he is in perfect harmony with the law of God and shares in the perfect righteousness."⁵² How, then, is entrance in the Kingdom of God possible?

Righteousness as "Condition" and "Requirement."

Bavinck explains that this righteousness is both the *condition* and *requirement* of entrance and the *gift* of that kingdom. Moreover, the notions of "righteousness" and "kingdom" are concentrated in Christ. "On the basis of His appointment by the Father and of His own sacrifice He distributed, both before and after His death, all the benefits

⁴⁹ Ibid., 440-441.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 448.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

of the kingdom to His disciples.”⁵³ It is precisely rebirth, faith, and repentance that give access to the kingdom and all its benefits.⁵⁴

The righteousness that God reveals in the gospel has its own peculiar character. “It takes place without the law and yet must harmonize with the law (Rom. 3:21).”⁵⁵ It is a manifestation both of God’s justice and of his grace (Rom. 3:23-24).⁵⁶

Bavinck posits an objective and subjective side to God’s granting of the righteousness of faith. Objectively, it takes place by presenting Christ as a reconciliation in his blood.⁵⁷ Subjectively, it transpires by counting faith in Christ as righteousness (Rom. 4:4-5; Gal. 3:6).⁵⁸ “In short, the righteousness which God reveals in the gospel consists of a granting a righteousness of faith which as such stands in diametrical opposition to the righteousness of the works of the law, to the self-righteousness of man. It is a righteousness from God through faith in Christ (Phil. 3:9).”⁵⁹ The Holy Spirit effects this appropriation.⁶⁰

The emphasis in Scripture regarding justification is that it is the gift of God.⁶¹ “The righteousness which God gives us in Christ and with which alone we can stand in His presence, is, accordingly, in no sense the fruit of our labor, but is in an absolute sense a gift of God, a gift of His grace.”⁶²

⁵³ Ibid., 449.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 451.

⁵⁶ Ibid. pa,ntej ga.r h[marton kai. u`sterou/ntai th/j do,xhj tou/ qeou/ dikaiou,menoi dwrea.n th/| aurtou/ ca,rity dia. th/j avpolutrw,sewj th/j evn Cristw/| Vlh sou/.

⁵⁷ Ibid..

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 451-452.

⁶⁰ *GD4*:183, “de justificatie valt dan saam met de weldaad van de vergeving der zonden, die in het geloof ontvangen en genoten wordt en het geloof wordt eene gemeenschap met Christus, het doet Christus door zijnen Geest in ons wonen, verzekert ons van de divina erga nos benevolentia, en stort een nieuw leven en nieuwe krachten in onze harten uit.”

⁶¹ *ORF*, 452.

⁶² Ibid.

Bavinck summarizes his thinking in this manner:

The gospel is, accordingly, at one and the same time an order of justice and an order of grace. The grace consists of this: that God who could hold us to the terms of the law and condemn us by it, opened up another way of righteousness and life in Christ. And the justice consists of this that God does not lead us into His kingdom without righteousness and sanctification, but instead has a perfect righteousness accomplished in the sacrifice of Christ and in grace gives it to us and counts it to our credit. Christ is a gift of God's love (John 3:16 and Rom. 5:8). And He is at the same time a manifestation of God's righteousness (Rom. 3:25). In the cross on Golgotha righteousness and grace were joined together. Justification is both a judicial and a gracious deed of God.⁶³

Forgiveness and Eternal Life

This declaration gives the believer the right to eternal life, heavenly glory, and eternal fellowship with God. For these reasons, justification is indispensable in and for the Christian life. It is “a juridical deed of God, a declaration by which He, as Judge, acquits us of guilt and punishment and gives us the right to eternal life.”⁶⁴

Hence, justification includes two benefits: “the forgiveness of sins and the right to eternal life.”⁶⁵ Bavinck is keenly aware that in his tradition certain people had abused the concept of free justification. The Heidelberg Catechism makes mention of the possibility that Christians might misunderstand this truth. As it treats the subject of justification by faith, it deals with this possibility.⁶⁶ Bavinck makes it crystal clear that he finds nothing sacrosanct in the words, “once converted, always converted.”

The only way to avoid the pitfalls of that kind of thinking is by exercising constant fellowship with Christ through the means of saving faith.⁶⁷ By saying this, Bavinck takes

⁶³ Ibid., 452-453.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 457.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 461.

⁶⁶ Lord's Day 24, Q/A 64: “Q. *Does this teaching not make people careless and wicked?* A. No. It is impossible that those *grafted into Christ* by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.” Italics—RG.

⁶⁷ *ORF*, 463-464. “It would be easy if we could, with a kind of ‘Once converted, always converted’ attitude, go on in life according to the wishes of our own hearts; and it is true that there are many who continue to live on the basis of a bygone experience, and are content with that. But such is not the Christian life. Neither the righteousness which is in Christ Jesus, nor the faith which the Holy Spirit plants within us is a piece of dead capital. In the long run we become participants in the forgiveness of sin, and the assurance and certainty of this, only by exercising fellowship with Christ Himself, in the exercise of saving faith.”

justification out of the realm of the “static” and places it in the arena of “appropriation.” This appropriation must be in concert with a thankful, grateful heart.

It is only when we come to an understanding of what God has done for us in Christ and the cost of the forgiveness of our sins “that we appreciate what God has done for us.”⁶⁸ Out of this appreciation flows *appropriation*, for “the forgiveness of sins took place at once and perfectly in God, but it is given to us and appropriated by us throughout our lives in the way of faith and repentance.”⁶⁹

It is precisely in this context that Bavinck makes an interesting and germane statement. This “on-going” appropriation finds part of its expression in the Lord’s Supper. It evidences continuing faith and repentance, “for in it we repeatedly remember that Christ allowed His body to be broken and poured out His blood unto the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28).”⁷⁰

Christ’s centrality in justification is also recounted when Bavinck addresses what many today would consider the “practical” side of his theology. (Let me add at this point that virtually all of Bavinck’s theology is “practical,” because of the close connection between Theology and Ethics.) For Bavinck, doctrine was to be lived daily. Characteristically, he devotes a section of the chapter on justification to the topic: What benefit the believer derives from free justification.

The foremost benefit is that it is a great comfort for the Christian. “This forgiveness of his sins, the hope for the future, the certainty concerning eternal salvation, do not

⁶⁸ Ibid., 464.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

depend upon the degree of holiness which he has achieved in life, but are firmly rooted in the grace of God and in the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”⁷¹

Summary

Bavinck emphasizes the centrality of Christ’s Person and Work in the doctrine of justification. This centrality is explained both in terms of the Person of the Savior as well as in the need for man to be in an intimate relationship (*unio mystica*) with the “total” Christ. Justification is a forensic or judicial act by which and in which God declares the sinner righteous based solely upon the Person and Work of the Mediator. Justification places the sinner in a right relationship with God and covers the guilt of the sinner. The loss of the image of God in man, however, entails both guilt and pollution. This means that, by itself, justification is not enough. What is needed is accompanying sanctification. The former is juridical. The latter is moral.

Justification and sanctification cannot be separated. They are distinct within God’s plan of redemption, yet inseparable. We shall now proceed to a description of the relationship between the doctrine of sanctification and the *unio mystica*.

⁷¹ Ibid., 465.