

Discipleship and the Doctrine of Justification: How to Train Ourselves and Others without Becoming Legalistic

The history of disciple-making has its own pendulum swings. Is the Gospel about grace and is discipleship about works? Theologically this is obviously not the case – but practically sometimes it might seem so. The rediscovered emphasis on the spiritual disciplines is meant to help us transcend “easy believism” and “cheap grace”. But it may also overcorrect the mistake and replace atonement with “at-one-ment”, “what did Jesus do” with “what would Jesus do”, “sin management” with “spiritual transformation”, to name some of the more memorable formulations of a contrast. In this session we will have a practical look at how to live with these apparent contrasts as we “trust and obey.”

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I. Looking at the Bible

A. The Exodus theme in the Old Testament

1. The first exodus – Exodus 5 through Joshua 1 (short version: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13)

2. The second exodus – Ezra & Nehemiah (prophetic version: Isaiah 40)
Cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, Zondervan 2010, p.139f

B. The Exodus theme in the New Testament

1. The gospels

- Matthew 2:15: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” (cf. Hosea 11,1)
- Mark 1:3: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” (cf. Isaiah 40:3)

2. The epistles

- Romans 1-5 and Romans 6-8
- Galatians 1-4 and Galatians 5-6
- Ephesians 1-3 and Ephesians 4-6

II. Following the pattern

A. Justification

1. The classic position:

- Robert Traill (1642-1716), *Justification Vindicated*, Banner of Truth 2002 [1692], p.33:
“He is a wise and happy man that anchors his soul on that rock at which he can ride out the storm of death. [...] [A certain Catholic once] said to a Protestant: ‘Our religion is best to live in, and yours best to die in.’”

- John (“Rabbi”) Duncan (1796-1870), in John M. Brentnall, *Just a Talker: Sayings of John (“Rabbi”) Duncan*, Banner of Truth 1997, p.xlvi:
“Let us seek to have well-grounded marks of saintship, but when push comes to shove, nothing but imputed righteousness will stand the day. It was there we began, and it is there we must end, with God a sin-forgiving God through the obedience unto the death of His only-begotten Son. And being shut up and driven back to that, will not hinder holiness, but promote it.”
And p.85:
“The gospel is not a mere remedial system. Christ came into the world that we might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly [John 10:10]”

2. A “gospel of sin management”?

- Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Harper 1997, p. 40f:
“History has brought us to the point where the Christian message is thought to be *essentially* concerned *only* with how to deal with sin: with wrongdoing or wrong-being and its effects. Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is now presented as the heart of the Christian message, or it is included only marginally. That is where we find ourselves today.
Once we understand the disconnection between the current message and ordinary life, the failures noted at least make a certain sense. They should be expected. When we examine the broad spectrum of Christian proclamation and practice, we see that the only thing made essential on the right wing of theology is forgiveness of the individual’s sins. On the left it is the removal of social or structural evils. The current gospel then becomes a ‘gospel of sin management.’ Transformation of life and character is *no*

part of the redemptive message. Moment-to-moment human reality in its depths is not the arena of faith and eternal living.”

3. At-one-ment rather than atonement?

- Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return*, Crossroad 2004, p.38
“We made the Jesus symbol [Rohr is speaking of the cross] into a mechanical and distant substitutionary atonement theory instead of a very personal and intense at-one-ment process, the very stages of love's unfolding. Jesus became a cosmic problem solver, God became a petty autocrat unable to naturally love what he created, and Christian practice became a polite and fearful standoff instead of a cosmic love affair. We missed out on the positive and redemptive meaning of our own suffering. It was something Jesus did for us (substitutionary), but not something that revealed and invited us into the same pattern.”

B. Sanctification

1. The christocentric character of sanctification

- Cf. J. I. Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, Christian Focus 2012, p.42, on the treatise “The Life of God in the Soul of Man” by Henry Scougal (1650-1678):
One could wish, however, that his [Scougal's] exposition had been more explicitly and emphatically Christ-centered. Like so many seventeenth-century writers, he lets himself assume that his readers know all about Jesus [...]
 - Had Scougal elaborated on the Christian's union with Christ, which the New Testament sees as regeneration by the Holy Spirit;
 - had he explained incorporation into the Saviour's risen life, whereby Jesus's motivating passion to know and love and serve and please and honour and glorify the Father is implanted in sinners so that it is henceforth their own deepest desire too;
 - had he thus shown, in black and white, that imitating Jesus's aims and attitudes in serving God and mankind is for the born-again the most natural, indeed the only natural, way of living, while for the unregenerate it is hard to the point of impossible;his little treatise would have been immeasurably stronger.

- From the catechism of Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrugge (1803-1875):

Question 136: What was the law given for?

Answer: In order to convict us of the power of our sin.

Q. 137: But didn't God give the law so that we might obey it?

A.: Certainly.

Q. 139: So man is able to obey the law?

A.: Not at all [...]

Q. 140: So why does God require something of man, if he cannot do it?

A.: God wants man to render obedience to the law out of the fullness of Christ [i.e. the principle of the vine and the branches of John 15].

2. The way of sanctification

- Rudolf Alexander Schroeder (1878-1962), from his poem "Fuelle/Fullness":

I heard that voice that I could understand,

My hand was gripped and held by a hand,

And the voice said: "Do not fear!

Our path is narrow, follow my course,

Where I place my feet, there you place yours.

Do not look down, do not look back

Hold on to me, your eyes on my track.

Trust me, my son, I am near

You're dizzy? Lean on me, and I'll see you through,

I am carrying my cross, and I am carrying you."

3. The in-built limits of sanctification, or: Justification and discipleship

- Cf. Martin Luther's famous letter from the Wartburg to Philipp Melancthon of 1 August 1521 (LW 48,281) which has been heatedly discussed by Catholics and Protestants for centuries:
“If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly [*pecca fortiter*], but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness, but, as Peter says, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells [2 Peter 3:13]. It is enough that by the riches of God's glory we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day. Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly – you too are a mighty sinner.”

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM 2001, p.12
“But to whom can such words be addressed, except to those who from the bottom of their hearts make a daily renunciation of sin and of every barrier which hinders them from following Christ, but who nevertheless are troubled by their daily faithlessness and sin? Who can hear these words without endangering his faith but he who hears their consolation as a renewed summons to follow Christ? Interpreted in this way, these words of Luther become a testimony to the costliness of grace, the only genuine kind of grace there is.”