

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



**How Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history**

The Person of Christ It Was a Huge Idea...

It was a huge idea.

It was an idea spawned from hours of boredom, inactivity, and beer. Larry Walters was bored with sitting in his backyard lawn chair and had decided that if he had to take it sifting down, he would just as soon sit somewhere else. So, he turned inward and when he did, he really turned inward. It's not that he engaged in deep metaphysical thought. Larry, a truck driver by trade, was not really a very metaphysical guy. But, he did begin to think about transcending the temporal, mundane affairs associated with life in his own backyard and he decided that whatever plan he came up with, he would take his lawn chair with him.

So he sat, and he pondered and he drank a few...

Then it happened. A plan hatched. It was so singular in its genius that it scared him. It was so profound in its simplicity that he laughed out loud. It came upon him in one brilliant, life-changing flash of genius. Larry would loose the manacles of his own mediocrity. He would break the bonds of his own boundless, boredom. He would ascend where none of his truck driving good buddies had ever dreamed. He was definitely on his way up, fifty, sixty, seventy-five feet tops, and he could take his lawn chair with him.

Larry's plan, UPI later reported, was to inflate 45 weather balloons with helium, tie them to his trusty lawn chair and float slowly upward to the end of a tether line his comrades manned on the ground. Once aloft, he would soak some rays, slam a six pack, eat a few peanut butter sandwiches and finally in one glorious finale, whip out a BB pistol, shoot a few choice balloons, and descend slowly to impart a gentle kiss on good old terra firma. He would be the envy of all his friends, a neighborhood legend, a figure of mythological proportions to his girlfriend. At very least he would get out of his backyard. And he would, after all, have his lawn chair with him.

He was a little ashamed that he had decided to wear a parachute. He was glad his windbreaker helped conceal it. A parachute, after all, hampered the mythological proportions thing; but there was the possibility that things might go differently than he planned. Larry, what is it with people named Larry, had no way of knowing just how differently things would actually go.

Initially, and only initially, everything went well. Larry had thought through many of the provisions that he needed. He had food, beer, a BB gun, old bleach bottles filled with water for ballast, a CB radio, a parachute and a questionable IQ. What was there that could go wrong?

Lift off was slow and gentle. His friends manning the tether line laughed and snorted as the balloon started slowly upward. There was a moment when the chair attached to the balloons lingered gently around sixty feet. Larry wanting to enjoy the full length of the tether line reached down to release one of the bleach bottles filled with water, but because of the way he had tied the bottles, when he pulled the string the whole array of bottles plummeted to the ground, causing the ground crew to scramble for their lives. Nine pounds of water falls pretty fast from 75 feet.

It didn't matter that they let go of the tether because it was fastened to the ground. On the other hand it didn't matter that it was fastened to the ground,

because 45 balloons filled with helium have just about the same lift as an Atlas rocket blasting off from Cape Canaveral. The tether line snapped like it was made out of spider web. Larry, what is it with people named Larry, and his lawn chair where boldly going where no man and lawn chair had gone before.

Larry Walters was at 11,000 feet before he could catch his breath and that was O.K. because at 11,000 feet there really wasn't all that much to breathe anyway. Besides he was just passing through 11,000 feet on his way to a maximum height of 16,000 feet. Let's see $16,000 \div 5,280 = 3.03$ miles. Mmmmm.

Now, 16,000 feet seems adequate to me to get almost anyone's attention, but Larry had other problems. If you've ever visited Los Angeles, you know that there two concerns that face all would be lawn chair pilots. One is a natural problem, rather substantial, called the Pacific Ocean. The problem is of human origin, yet also substantial, and is called the Los Angeles International Airport, LAX for short. Larry, never one to turn down a challenge, decided to tackle both problems simultaneously. So, Larry and his lawn chair, drifted out to sea, directly in the incoming flight path of one of the world's three busiest airports. Now, this is hard to understand, but apparently six pilots spotted Larry drifting back and forth in the path of the runway and not one of them reported it. One can only speculate about why they decided not to call in. I suppose the conversation in and of itself might be adequate reason to ground a commercial pilot. "Uh, tower. Come in tower...uh...tower have you any reports of, uh,...never mind tower."

Finally, the wind began to shift inland and Larry seeing his chance whipped out his BB gun and fired off a few rounds into the balloons above his head. But his hands were so cold that they had grown numb and Larry lost the handle on his weapon and it plunged 12,000 feet into the icy, blue Pacific. Later, officials said it was a good thing Larry dropped his weapon. Had he popped any more balloons, Larry might have come down at a much faster rate of speed. Next, Larry reached for his CB radio, dialed in channel 9, and began broadcasting a Mayday. He was

picked up by the Civil Air Patrol who forwarded his Mayday to the FAA and suddenly Larry was in hip deep.

The LAX tower put a call out to incoming pilots to be on the lookout for a guy in a lawn chair with a bunch of weather balloons tied to it. Finally, a couple of pilots, one from Delta and one from TWA, radioed back that yes there was something floating around in the flight path and yes if the tower thought it was a guy in a lawn chair they would confirm...

Finally Larry started coming down...drifting southward and downward toward Long Beach. The jetliners disappeared. He was warming up. Larry breathed a sigh of relief. He popped a top and began to really enjoy the ride. Looking down he could see people's faces, he could also see slow moving police cars tracking his progress downward. He also saw for the first time, gigantic steel towers and...and...power lines. As he began to try to guess where he was going to come down, he suddenly realized he was sweating. He was about to get really hot.

He hit the power lines just about where he thought he would. The ropes connecting the balloons to the lawn chair wrapped around the power lines and amidst a shower of sparks and exploding balloons Larry found himself suspended a mere five feet above the ground. Larry jumped from his chair and found himself landing in the arms and waiting handcuffs of Lt. Rod Mickelson of the Long Beach police department. A large portion of the City of Long Beach found itself without power for the next four hours.

At first, they weren't sure what to do with him. The FAA wanted to revoke his pilot's license, which was fine with Larry since he didn't have one. Eventually, they released him with a \$1,500 fine, charging him with operating a lighter-than-air aircraft without a license. For a while, Larry enjoyed a measure of notoriety. He did a few talk shows. Sears and Roebuck even contacted him about being a spokesman for their durable lawn chairs. Yet, despite the legendary status, Larry was never quite the same. A few years ago, sadly, Larry committed suicide. But, Larry Walters left a legacy. He has been tagged historically by all that followed

the story affectionately as the “Lawn Chair Dude”. Later, the author of the best-selling, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, immortalized Larry and some of his insightful comments. It seems that right after Larry was released from custody, one reporter rushed up to him and asked him why on earth he did it. Larry, the eternal Stoic, looked up and without so much as a grin said, “Well, you can’t just sit there.”

There are two reasons why I have taken the time to relate that story. First, I love it. It is so zany that any person with a sense of humor would have to love it. Secondly, it’s a wonderful illustration of the church; it provides a valuable lesson for our study of the doctrine of justification. If you would allow me to wax metaphorical for a moment, I would say that the church has been perpetually in the same spot Larry Walters and his chair were right before the tether broke, and that the theological tethers holding here to the ground have always been twofold. The first tether concerns the person of Christ, that is, “Who is Christ?” The second tether concerns the work of Christ, or “What did Christ do?” The church, Christ’s church, has been in a struggle since its inception to stay attached to those two tethers. You, on the one hand “What Christ did” is only important depending on who He is. On the other hand, “Who Christ is” is only important if He has done something that benefits the church. The struggle to flesh out both of those two concepts has been perpetual. Since the days of the apostles, there has been an ever-present threat to the church and its maintenance of Christ’s gospel. You see, if either of those two theological tethers is broken, there is absolutely no telling where the church will head. If the wrong theological proposition is set forth it is impossible to know where it will come down. If the truth is not vigorously maintained, the church which may in fact no longer be the church may simply float away, drifting back and forth in the flight path of worldly philosophy and culture. The inevitable conclusion to such a theological drift would most certainly be an ignominious crash and another opportunity for the world to blaspheme the name of Christ.

Consider for a moment the following quote:

Presenter Delores S. Williams, a "womanist" theology professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, said, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all." Her remark was greeted by applause. "Atonement has to do so much with death," she said. "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." Continuing, she said, "We do not need atonement, we just need to listen to the god within...."

Or how about his quote:

Is it not a slightly odd view of a morally perfect God that the divine nature can be so slighted and offended by what human beings do? ... Anselm's idea is that the penalty must be paid in full; but is this really compatible with belief in the mercy of God?

Secondly, even if one can accept that the sinner must pay such a tremendous penalty, how can it be just for someone else to pay it for me? God places before us the ideal of the Christ life, and forms it within us as we contemplate it. But there is here no substitutionary death, no vicarious justice, no literal death of one person in place of another.²

Keith Ward, A Vision to Pursue: Beyond the Crisis in Christianity (SCM, 1991).

Or this quote:

Fuller Seminary's Russell Spittler writes, "But can it really be true-saint and sinner simultaneously? I wish it were so ... Is this correct: 'I don't need to work at becoming. I'm already declared to be holy. No sweat needed? It looks wrong to me. I hear moral demands in Scripture ... Still, I'm grateful for Luther's phrase and for his descendants ... But simul iustus et peccator? I hope it's true! I simply fear it's not.'"

Russell Spittler, in Christian Spirituality: Five Views on Sanctification, ed. By Donald L. Alexander (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1988), p. 43.

Or this quote:

If our sin is viewed as causing the death of Jesus on the cross, then we ourselves become victims of a "psychological battering" produced by the cross. When I am led to feel that the pain and torment of Jesus' death on the cross is due to my sin, I inflict upon myself spiritual and psychological torment."²⁴

Ray S. Anderson, The Gospel According to Judas (Co. Springs: Helmer and Howard, 1991), p.99.

Or how about his?

As has been already said, there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law...The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption. The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, is a different gospel."²⁰
Finney, Systematic Theology, op cit., pp 320-1.

One recent church growth advocate said:

But people just aren't interested in theology or doctrines like justification and sanctification any more.

But God has always been faithful to maintain a remnant. In that struggle, He has gifted the church with some of the greatest saints in history. There have been dark days, days like the dog days of Elijah. In those darkest of days, it seemed like there were so few who had not bowed their knees to the theology of the world, the flesh, or the devil. It seemed like at times that God's faithful remnant was just barely hanging on to the gospel, clinging to the truth with no more than the tip of their little finger. At other times there were wonderful seasons of revival, in which it seemed like for a few, brief glorious moments the whole world might be converted. But in both instances, God was faithful to maintain the His own gospel.

That's why a historical study of the doctrine of justification is so important. It keeps us coming back to what the Bible teaches and the church has always accepted as its pearl of great price, the doctrine of justification. It is the article by which the church stands or falls.

Listen to Luther:

The article of Justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines...Without this article the world is utter death and darkness...This doctrine alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and

defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.

Luther again writes:

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). "And with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.

Calvin writes:

The theme of justification was therefore more lightly touched upon because it was more to the point to understand first how little devoid of good works is the faith, through which alone we obtain free righteousness by the mercy of God; and what is the nature of the good works of the saints, with which part of this question is concerned. Therefore we must now discuss these matters thoroughly. And we must so discuss them as to bear in mind this is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it. For unless you understand first of all what your position is before God, and what the judgment [is] which he passes upon you, you have no foundation on which your salvation can be laid, or on which piety towards God can be reared.

In our own century, J. Gresham Machen said:

What good does it do to me to tell me that the type of religion presented in the Bible is a very fine type of religion and that the thing for me to do is just to start practicing that type of religion now?...I will tell you, my friend. It does me not one tiniest little bit of good...What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?¹²

But just because this cloud of witnesses testify to the importance of the doctrine of justification, does that mean that the Bible itself places the same priority on the

doctrine. Let me approach the answer to that by citing just two passages of Scripture.

First, LK 24:13:

^{NIV} **Luke 24:13**...Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" ¹⁹ "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." ²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

It's interesting that here Jesus tells the two disciples that the content of Scripture is about Himself and His death and glory. The Bible is about what who Christ is, and what Christ did. It seems to me that in light of that passage we ought to strive to attach a Christological meaning to the text. We ought to look first for those things that Christ identified as the heart of Scripture. It's not that the Bible is not an imminently practical book. It is that is only secondarily so. It is primarily a revelation of God and His saving work in Christ, or at least Christ thought it to be so.

But Paul thought the same.

^{NIV} 1 Corinthians 1:18...For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." ²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the

philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. ²⁶ Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 2:1**...When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

So, we are going to turn it over once again. We are going to examine the multi-faceted gem called justification. Not because we want to ignore the whole counsel of God, but rather because we believe that the doctrine of justification is the primary article in the revelation of God.

In the next few weeks, we are going to look at some historical figures. We are not going to examine them because of our love for history, but rather because the battles they fought and the words they wrote have helped to shape the church's understanding of the principle point of Scripture, that is, that Christ came into the world to save sinners.

We will start off by looking at the church's struggle in understanding who Christ was. In the first couple of lessons, we will look at:

Athanasius Vs. Arius

Council of Nicea
Council of Chalcedon

Then we will turn our attention to the atoning work of Christ, that is, what Christ did and how the church struggles to understand the doctrine of justification.

There we will look at:
Augustine Vs. Pelagius
Anselm Vs. Abelard
Luther Vs. Erasmus
Calvin Vs. Arminianism
Hodge Vs. Finney
Machen Vs. Liberalism

In the course of studying these different men, we will look at four different views of the atonement and how their continuing presence affects the church today.

Ransom to Satan Theory (Christus Victor)
Moral Influence Theory
Governmental Theory
Penal Satisfaction Theory

Lastly, we will look at the biblical preaching and the sacraments and how the adoption of a law-gospel hermeneutic can help us keep the person of Christ and the work of Christ central in study, worship and ongoing sanctification.

My hope, my prayer is that in the next few weeks, we will become like the young oriental boy that accepted an apprenticeship to learn to carve jade. The first day he arrived at his new master's hut, his master gave him a small piece of jade to hold in his hand. His master said, "Hold this jade, squeeze it, rub it. Do not put it down until I say." With that admonition, the boy's teacher went about his chores. Finally at the end of the day, the master asked the boy to give him the stone and sent him home.

The next day the boy looking forward to carving his first piece of jade was disappointed when his mater asked him to do the same thing all over again. His master repeated, "Hold this jade, squeeze it, rub it. Do not put it down until I say."

The boy grew tired of holding the jade and was glad when dark came and he was able to go home, but the next day it was the same thing all over again, even the very same words. "Hold this jade, squeeze it, rub it. Do not put it down until I say."

The same tiring routine went on day after day, until the boy decided he absolutely could take it no more. He made up his mind, he would find another vocation. So, when he saw his master he blurted out. "Today is my last day. I am wasting my time and yours. You have taught me nothing. I have spent all my time squeezing your stupid jade. I cannot endure another day."

He expected his master to explode in rage. But the old man peered into eyes and softly said: "Ah, just so. Well since it is your last day and you have learned nothing perhaps you would humor your master and repeat the same old stupid task one last time."

With that, he reached out his old wrinkled hand and dropped a beautiful lime green stone in the boys hand. The boy instinctively began to rub it and as the old man shuffled off to do his chores, he realized something was wrong. He looked down at the stone and looked up at bowed figure of the old man and suddenly he found himself shouting, "Master, Master!"

The old man turned around and wondered why the old man was smiling a toothless smile. "Yes, my son?", he asked.

Breathless, the young boy stammered, "Master, I do not know what this stone is, but I know what it is not. It is most definitely not jade."

May we become so familiar with the doctrine of justification that we know instinctively when someone gives a lump of coal instead of the most precious gem that ever was.

