

Perspective Digest

Volume 16
Issue 3 *Summer*

Article 2

2011

Justification by Faith

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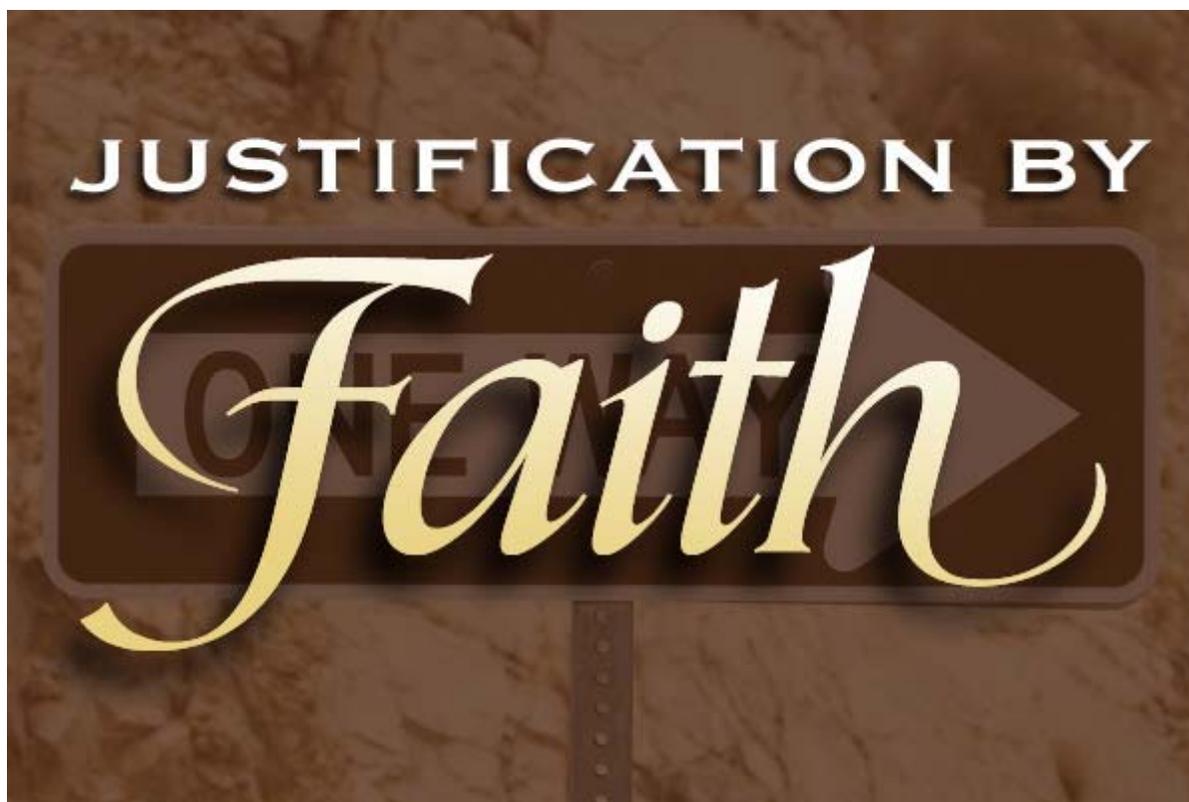


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Recommended Citation

Van Bemmemen, Peter M. (2011) "Justification by Faith," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol16/iss3/2>

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***Adventist belief continues to affirm this great truth
proclaimed by the Protestant Reformers.***

By Peter M. Van Bemmelen

Seventh-day Adventists believe that they have been called to proclaim the everlasting gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people, in the context of the messages of the three angels in Revelation 14:6-12. These messages are God's final appeal to the human race before the second coming of Jesus Christ (vss. 14:14-20).

The expression "everlasting gospel," which occurs only in this passage in the New Testament, has important implications. First of all, it implies that the gospel was in the purpose of God from eternity. This eternal divine purpose is rooted in God's everlasting love as stated in Jeremiah 31:3 and John 3:16.

Second, it implies that there is only one gospel by which fallen human beings can be saved, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, as Paul often refers to it (Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 9:12). In other words, from the days of Adam and Eve until the end of the world, there has been and there ever will be only one gospel, one way of salvation.

In the words of the apostle, "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9).¹ Speaking of salvation through Jesus Christ before the religious rulers of Israel, Peter was very emphatic: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Adventists have always perceived themselves as heirs of the great truths recovered and proclaimed by the Protestant Reformers. As stated in the concluding report of another bilateral dialogue: "Adventists have a high appreciation for the Reformation. They see themselves as heirs of Luther and other Reformers, especially in their adherence to the great principles of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solo Christo*."² This places Adventists in harmony with the traditional evangelical understanding of justification by faith and also with the tradition of the early Christian writers, for, according to Thomas Oden, "The major Reformers' appeals to *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* are found abundantly in the patristic interpreters of scripture."³

The Foundational Teaching of Justification by Faith in the Old Testament

The unity of Scripture does not mean uniformity. To expect very explicit theological statements in the Old Testament such as are found in the Pauline writings shows a lack of appreciation of the diversity in God's revelations to and dealings with His inspired

messengers. Yet Paul himself appeals to the Old Testament to show the unity between his teaching on justification by faith or righteousness by faith with that of Moses and the prophets: "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (Rom. 3:21). It is therefore essential to study what the Old Testament teaches about righteousness and justification.

The Old Testament proclaims the righteousness of God in all His dealings with Israel. In the majestic song, which Moses by divine command taught the Israelites to sing, Moses proclaims the name of the Lord in these words: "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he" (Deut. 32:4). Yahweh's righteousness is manifested, according to the covenant blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28, in acts of judgment (2 Chron. 12:1-6) and in acts of salvation. The latter are at times referred to as the *tsidqot Yahweh*, which can be translated as the righteousness or the righteous acts of the Lord (Judg. 5:11). It is important to realize that in the Old Testament, the righteousness of God is often equivalent to the salvation of God as can be observed in Hebrew parallelism (Isa. 51:6, 8).

When it comes to human righteousness, the Old Testament presents an apparent paradox. There are persistent and emphatic statements that nobody is righteous, that all have sinned. David pleaded with God, "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you" (Ps. 143:2). Solomon acknowledged in his prayer at the dedication of the temple, "There is no one who does not sin" (2 Chron. 6:36). He repeats the same thought in Ecclesiastes 7:20: "Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins."

Three times Moses told the Israelites not to think that the Lord was giving them the land of Canaan because of their

righteousness; to the contrary he asserted, “‘you are a stiff-necked people’” (Deut. 9:6). The paradox is that the same writers and the entire Old Testament make a distinction between two classes of human beings: “the righteous” and “the wicked” or similar contrasting distinctions. This raises the crucial question: “How can any human beings be called righteous in the face of the assertion that no one is righteous and that all have sinned?” The significance of this question is intensified when people are designated as righteous or blameless or “friend of God” or “highly esteemed,” such as Noah, Job, Abraham, and Daniel (Gen. 7:1; Job 1:1; Isa. 41:8; Dan. 9:23), yet described as having committed sin or confessing sin. It is evident that their righteousness is not identical with sinlessness. How, then, can they be called righteous or blameless? Edmund Clowney highlights how important this question is: “How can a man be just with God? The whole history of the Old Testament hinges on God’s answer to that question.”⁴

The clear-cut answer is that Yahweh, the covenant God, justifies all who believe in Him, who trust His promises, who acknowledge their sin, who cast themselves on the mercy of God and turn away from their unrighteousness. We read that Abram “believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Job, of whom the Lord testified that he was “‘blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil’” (Job 1:8), was asked by the same Lord, “‘Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?’” (40:8). Before the holy and righteous God, Job recognized his sinfulness and replied, “‘My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes’” (42:5, 6).

David, the anointed of the Lord, when convicted of his sin against God through adultery and murder, confessed his sin and found forgiveness (2 Sam. 12:13). According to Psalms 32 and

51, he was justified before God and could sing, "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" (Ps. 32:11). This is justification by faith through grace alone. The righteousness of the righteous in the Old Testament is a gift from the righteous Lord. This is why David, throughout the Psalms, exalts the righteousness of God. Paul stated the truth when he asserted that the Law and the Prophets testify that "apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known" (Rom. 3:21).

Edmund Clowney shows that the Hebrew verb *hasdiq* "always means 'to declare to be in the right,' and therefore to acquit or vindicate." With an appeal to Deuteronomy 25:1, where the judges of Israel are commanded to "justify the righteous and condemn the wicked," he states that it "is clear that 'condemn' must mean 'to *declare to be* wicked,' not 'to *make* wicked' [italics his], and that 'justify' must mean 'to declare to be righteous,' and not 'to make righteous.' This meaning is consistent in the Old Testament."⁵

The Lord admonishes judges to give just verdicts because God is the supreme Judge, who testifies of Himself: "I will not acquit [or justify] the guilty" (Ex. 23:7). Though God is speaking here in the context of earthly courts of justice, it becomes apparent when we progress through the Scriptures that this statement has a deep significance concerning salvation. It is necessary to stress that "to justify" is a legal term, declaring that someone is not guilty; this basic meaning of justification as a judicial verdict is retained even when it takes on a broader meaning in God's progressive revelation and in theological reflection on that revelation.

Justification by Faith in Christ Alone

Seventh-day Adventists firmly and wholeheartedly believe that salvation is purely a gift from God in Jesus Christ. Sinful as

we are, we can add nothing to the perfect righteousness of Christ, which He wrought out in His incarnation by His perfect obedience to the law of God and by His death on the cross for our sins. In the words of one of the Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists:

“In Christ’s life of perfect obedience to God’s will, His suffering, death, and resurrection, God provided the only means of atonement for human sin, so that those who by faith accept this atonement may have eternal life, and the whole creation may better understand the infinite and holy love of the Creator. This perfect atonement vindicates the righteousness of God’s law and the graciousness of His character; for it both condemns our sin and provides for our forgiveness.”⁶

Salvation through Christ alone is central to the Adventist understanding and experience of salvation. Although throughout our history it did not always receive due emphasis, this central belief can be traced throughout that period with increasing accentuation and articulation in books, tracts, and periodicals flowing by the millions from Adventist publishing houses worldwide. The same is true for Adventist evangelism in a myriad of forms from small study groups in private homes to high-tech evangelism by means of satellite and the World Wide Web.

In the writings of Ellen White Christ is consistently presented as the only hope and the only way of salvation for sinful human beings. She wrote in 1891, “Of all professed Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world.”⁷ She herself did just that as her writings bear witness.

Concerning justification by faith, she was very explicit. Notice her strong emphasis: “There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works.

Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.⁸

“The blood of Christ was shed to atone for sin and to cleanse the sinner; and we must take hold of the merits of Christ's blood, and believe that we have life through his name. Let not the fallacies of Satan deceive you; you are justified by faith alone,”⁹

It is not surprising that Ellen G. White held in high regard Paul's Epistle to the Romans. “With great clearness and power the apostle presented the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ.”¹⁰ She commented on the fact that Paul could but dimly foresee the far-reaching influence his words would have. “Through all the ages the great truth of justification by faith has stood as a mighty beacon to guide repentant sinners into the way of life.”¹¹ She mentioned Martin Luther's experience and then concluded that for “the epistle to the church at Rome, every Christian has reason to thank God.”¹² The importance of the Epistle to the Romans and other epistles of Paul for Adventist understanding of the gospel is manifested in scholarly publications as well as general biblical and devotional reading materials.

As stated earlier, Adventists believe that there is only one way of salvation, and that way is faith in Christ and His righteousness. This central belief can be and has been expressed in different words, just as the Scriptures are not monotonous but present the truth of the everlasting gospel in diverse ways. Though Adventist scholars may differ over emphasis on certain aspects of the gospel, just as differences can be found among scholars of other denominations, there is significant unity concerning the doctrine of justification through grace alone by faith alone. In the words of Adventist theologian Hans LaRondelle:

“Basic to Adventism is the gospel principle that human salvation is not through the law or by human works but solely through the saving grace of God. . . . Adventist belief accepts

Christ as man's substitute and example, in this irreversible order. Faith in Christ as our substitute before God provides our justification as God's act of *declaring* the repentant believer righteous. Justification is seen as the opposite of condemnation (see Rom. 5:16; 8:1, 33, 34). The basis for the believers' justification is not their law observance, but Christ's sinless obedience (verses 18, 19)."¹³

Undoubtedly, justification is primarily a judicial declaration by God that the sinner who believes in Christ is righteous. It is the opposite of condemnation. But the faith by which we are justified is not merely a mental assent to a certain doctrine. It is a living faith that takes hold of Christ and His atoning sacrifice. Luther distinguished between "acquired faith" and "true faith." He wrote: "Acquired faith has as the end or use of Christ's passion mere speculation. True faith has as the end and use of Christ's passion life and salvation. . . . True faith with arms outstretched joyfully embraces the Son of God given for it and says, 'He is my beloved, and I am His.'"¹⁴

In a similar vein, Ellen G. White wrote that there "are thousands who believe in the gospel and in Jesus Christ as the world's Redeemer, but they are not saved by that faith. This is only an assent of their judgment to that which is a fact."¹⁵ She calls this a general faith and contrasts it with a faith that lays hold upon Christ as one's sin-pardoning Savior, a faith that leads to repentance, "a faith that accomplishes its work for the receiver, a faith in the atoning sacrifice, a faith that works by love and purifies the soul."¹⁶ She further clarified this faith with these words: "The moment true faith in the merits of the costly atoning sacrifice is exercised, claiming Christ as a personal Saviour, that moment the sinner is justified before God, because he is pardoned."¹⁷

Challenges to Adventist Interpretation of Justification by Faith

Seventh-day Adventists have not escaped accusations that they do not really hold the biblical teaching of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Anthony Hoekema in his book *The Four Major Cults*, expresses as his conviction that Adventists, "though they claim to teach salvation by grace alone,"¹⁸ are in reality guilty of a kind of mixed legalism. He bases this on the Adventist doctrine of the investigative judgment and on Adventist teaching on the need to keep the seventh day as the Sabbath, the proper Lord's Day (especially in the eschatological setting of Revelation 13:11-17). For these and a number of other reasons, he classifies Seventh-day Adventism as a cult. Similar criticisms have been raised by others, not the least by some former Adventists.

Not everyone agrees with Hoekema's assessment. In his work *The Kingdom of the Cults*, evangelical scholar Walter Martin showed some serious inconsistencies in Hoekema's reasoning. Although Martin himself did not agree with certain Adventist beliefs, he accepted as genuine their emphatic affirmation "that salvation comes only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ's sacrifice upon the cross."¹⁹

It is true that Adventists believe that the law of the Ten Commandments, including the seventh-day Sabbath, is still binding upon the human race. But this does not mean that they believe in any sense that sinners can be justified by obedience to God's commandments. As stated before, they emphatically reject the idea that sinners are justified through their obedience to God's law. In this respect, Adventist belief agrees with the position of the Protestant Reformers as stated, for instance, in the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which says in Chapter 12, entitled, "Of the Law of God":

“We teach that this law [the Law of God] was not given to men that they might be justified by keeping it, but that rather from what it teaches we may know [our] weakness, sin and condemnation, and, despairing of our strength, might be converted to Christ in faith. For the apostle openly declares: ‘The law brings wrath,’ and, ‘Through the law comes knowledge of sin’ (Rom. 4: 15; 3: 20), and, ‘If a law had been given which could justify or make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture [that is, the law] has concluded all under sin, that the promise which was of the faith of Jesus might be given to those who believe. . . . Therefore, the law was our schoolmaster unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith’ (Gal. 3: 21 ff.).”²⁰

The same article, however, begins by affirming “that the will of God is explained for us in the law of God, what he wills or does not will us to do, what is good and just, or what is evil and unjust. Therefore, we confess that the law is good and holy.”²¹ Adventists, accepting such affirmation as congruent with the teaching of Scripture, believe that the new covenant promise of the Lord, as given through Jeremiah and repeated in Hebrews 8: 10, (“‘I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people’”) is to be fulfilled in the life of all who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and High Priest.

Though Paul emphatically maintains “that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (Rom. 3: 28), which is true for Jews and Gentiles; in the same context he affirms that through this faith we do not nullify the law, “Rather, we uphold the law” (vs. 31). Elsewhere, he states the same truth in different words, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (1 Cor. 7: 19). This obedience results from the faith and love of Christ, implanted by the Holy Spirit, “for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor

uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6).

Jesus, in the final words to His disciples before His crucifixion, spoke several times about this obedience born of love: "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15); "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love" (15:9, 10); "You are my friends if you do what I command" (vs. 14). Adventists believe that it is this obedience of love to which Paul refers when he writes that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

Though Adventists believe that Christians are called to "the obedience that comes from faith" (1:5) and that we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10), they strenuously reject any suggestion that such obedience and good works are in some sense meritorious. The Council of Trent taught in its Decree on Justification that justification increases "through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works"²²; it also taught the merit of good works as the fruits of justification. Its canons on justification pronounced this condemnation that anyone who said "that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema."

Another anathema condemned anyone saying "that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified."²³ In other words, justification is increased by obedience and good works, the good works not just being the gifts of God's grace but also the merits of the justified Christian. This belief was

reconfirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published with the papal blessing of John Paul II. The *Catechism* also reconfirmed the Council of Trent's position that "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man."²⁴ This view of justification was and still is emphatically rejected by consistent Protestants, including Seventh-day Adventists.

That the issue is as relevant in the 21st century as in the 16th century is evident from the fact that Francis Beckwith, who was for a short time president of the Evangelical Theological Society, in May 2007 resigned his position and his membership in the Society, after in April rejoining the Roman Catholic Church (the church in which he grew up). According to *Christianity Today*, Beckwith changed his views on justification because he "found the Protestant view, which assumes that sanctification follows justification, inadequate."²⁵ Beckwith became convinced that the Roman Catholic view on justification "has more explanatory power to account for both the biblical texts on justification [and] the church's historical understanding of salvation prior to the Reformation, all the way back to the ancient church of the first few centuries."²⁶

This highlights the paramount importance and centrality of the doctrine of justification for all who accept the *sola Scriptura* principle. According to the *Christianity Today* editorial, the Reformers "rightly taught that only Jesus' merit counted before God and that only through faith could this merit be ours."²⁷ Adventists wholeheartedly concur.

From the preceding discussion, it should be clear that Seventh-day Adventists believe that keeping the Ten Commandments, including observing the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week, is seen as part of the obedience of faith. It is the fruit of justification, never the root. Christ refers to Himself as Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), obviously not to abolish the

Sabbath, but that all who are justified by faith would follow their Lord in keeping the Sabbath as a memorial of creation as well as a seal of their redemption from the slavery of sin through Christ (Ex. 20:8-11; 31:12-17). There is not a trace of legalism in such Sabbath observance.

If our justification is through grace alone by faith alone, does the obedience of faith have anything to do with our salvation? Or to phrase the question differently: Do our thoughts, words, and actions play a role in determining our eternal destiny? These are crucial questions closely related to the issue of the final judgment.

Scripture has much to say about that judgment, not least in the teachings of our Lord as recorded in the Gospels. Said Jesus: "I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted [RSV/NKJV: "justified"], and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:36, 37). Here our Lord talks about justification and condemnation (the judicial declarations of innocence and guilt) in the context of the day of judgment. Obviously, there is an eschatological aspect to justification. Adventists believe on the basis of Scripture that the day of judgment is a very comprehensive concept, and much Adventist literature has been published on the subject. Suffice it to say here that they hold that the judgment is to be distinguished in an investigative and an executive judgment. It is their belief in an investigative judgment that has led to the accusation that they do not really believe in the Reformation principles of *sola fide*, *sola gratia*.

In Romans 8:1, Paul tells us that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Earlier, he had affirmed that "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). All of this is a present reality. Elsewhere it is written, "God's solid

foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his'" (2 Tim. 2:19).

It is sometimes argued that such texts show that for those who are in Christ, there is no need to be judged and that the concept of an investigative judgment is unbiblical and takes away the assurance of salvation for believers. This kind of reasoning, however, totally ignores the very clear teaching of Scripture that all will be judged. The Apostle Paul is very emphatic about this fact. "We will all stand before God's judgment seat. . . . Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:10, 12); "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).

Other passages of Scripture can be added. Solomon wrote toward the end of his checkered life: "Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Eccl. 12:13, 14). The Apostle Peter informs us that judgment will begin with the family of God. All who in some way have professed faith in God and Christ will be judged before "those who do not obey the gospel of God" (1Peter 4:17). Do these assertions take away the assurance of our justification?

The clear-cut answer to that question is: "Not if we remain in Christ!" In the parable of the vine and the branches, Jesus stressed the crucial importance of remaining in Him. "'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing'" (John 15:5). He adds that if anyone who does not remain in Him will be like a withered branch that is thrown into the fire and burned (vs. 6).

The final judgment will bring to light who remained in Christ and who did not. It will be manifested in whether our faith in

Christ bore fruit in the obedience of faith or whether it was a sterile faith (James 2: 17, 26). It will bring to light in the presence of the entire universe who kept the faith of Christ and who lost hold of the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Paul's assurance of eternal life is rooted in the fact that he had "kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7), his faith in Christ as his Savior and Lord, the righteous Judge from whom he would receive the crown of righteousness. LaRondelle stresses the relation between the present justification of believers and their justification in the final judgment:

"Paul based our certainty of future salvation on the reality of our present salvation, the certainty of our future justification on the reality of our present justification: 'Since we have now been justified by his blood, *how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!*' (Rom. 5:9, italics added; see also verse 17). In other words, when Jesus justifies us, we have full assurance that He will justify us in the final judgment if we remain in him."²⁸

In a different way, P. T. O'Brien, contributor to the book *Right With God*, also stresses the relation between justification by faith and judgment according to works. He makes it clear, however, that "The ground of justification lies not in works, nor in faith, but 'in the revelation of God's grace in Christ embraced by faith.' Works are indispensable for they demonstrate the presence of true faith and are evidence of one's being united with Christ in his death and resurrection."²⁹ Adventists agree and believe that the judgment, whether the investigative judgment or the executive judgment, is good news for all who, like Paul, by God's grace have kept the faith in Christ.

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