

JOHN PIPER'S DIMINISHED DOCTRINE OF  
JUSTIFICATION AND ASSURANCE

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A Paper

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by  
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## Introduction

John Piper is one of the great voices for Jesus Christ in our generation. His desire for the deeper things of the Christian life, while at the same time having a passion for world missions, is truly contagious. Thousands of young people have been drawn to a greater commitment to Christ and giving their lives to reach the lost as a result of his ministry. So it goes without saying that none of the discussion which follows is intended to impugn Piper's heart for God, or his pursuit of truth. Indeed, this paper is a direct result of the latter.

In his Crossway Lecture at the 2008 ETS Conference in Providence, Rhode Island, Piper began by recalling a conversation he had with Wayne Grudem several years ago. He said Grudem told him he should come to ETS more often because he was surrounded at his church by people who largely agreed with him, and might not challenge him in the way he would be challenged at ETS. People at ETS were more critical, and Piper would be helped to avoid error and refine his thinking.

To his credit, Piper took that advice. In fact, his following words were these: "So here I am, and I am looking for criticism – or at least penetrating questions that will help me avoid error and sharpen my biblical thinking."<sup>1</sup> Sharing Dr. Piper's desire to avoid error, I present these thoughts.

*In November, 2007, John Piper delivered the Crossway Lecture at the ETS Conference in San Diego, entitled "Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ."*<sup>2</sup> His thesis was that some contemporary teaching on the doctrine of justification "diminishes" the grandeur and wonder of the finished work of Christ. In particular, he pointed to the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, what he understands to be the practical outworking of the inner transformation which takes place in justification. In other words, Piper views imputation as "being made righteous" (practically) instead of "being declared righteous" (forensically): The true believer *will* demonstrate in his behavior the righteousness of Christ. Those who do not hold to his view of imputation, he asserts, "diminish the work of Christ" on the cross, inhibit the normal pattern of spiritual growth in the Christian life, and open themselves up to bondage to sin.

At the outset, it is perhaps self-serving, but nevertheless appropriate, to state as clearly as I can my enthusiastic and total agreement with Dr. Piper in his passion for God's holiness, his emphasis on missions, and his pursuit of personal holiness. I say this with conviction and seek to demonstrate it with my life, yet I differ with Piper's view on the doctrine of justification. This is important, as an underlying theme throughout Piper's presentation is that those who do not interpret the doctrine of justification as he does do not share this passion for missions, do not go on to godliness, and do not pursue holiness. For example, the fact that 20

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, "Why God Is Not a Megalomaniac in Demanding to Be Worshiped," ETS lecture, November 20, 2008, Providence, Rhode Island. Text available online in the *Resource Library* at <http://www.desiringgod.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations inserted throughout this paper are taken from John Piper's 2007 Crossway Lecture at the 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 14-16, 2007, in San Diego, CA. Written copy online at [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/2007/2489\\_Justification\\_and\\_the\\_Diminishing\\_Work\\_of\\_Christ/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/2007/2489_Justification_and_the_Diminishing_Work_of_Christ/), or CD copy available from ACTS Conference Products, 11139 South Towne Square Ste. F, St. Louis, MO 63123, online at [www.actsconferenceproducts.com](http://www.actsconferenceproducts.com).

families from his church had committed to foreign missions was used as anecdotal evidence that his theology was the one which produces such results. But similar results could be shown from groups with very different theology.

I wish to make clear, therefore, that I am not explicitly or implicitly suggesting anything about the real spiritual pursuit of Dr. Piper or any others in my comments. The implication in too much of our invective today is, “Follow my theology and you’ll experience spiritual victory, have a passion for the lost, and your church will grow! Disagree with me, and you’ll struggle with sin, you won’t have passion for the lost, and even if your church grows, you’re just tickling people’s ears with what they want to hear, instead of giving them the tough teaching of Scripture.” This straw man is both arbitrary and demonstrably false. Honest Calvinist theologians will admit that many who disagree with their theology share their practical godliness, and honest Arminian theologians will admit that those who disagree with their theology still share their passion for souls.

Similarly, people from all sides of the argument over aspects of the doctrine of justification have a high view of the work of Christ. One who does not share Piper’s viewpoint on the “imputation of Christ’s righteousness” does not automatically have a diminished view of the work of Christ. Neither does it follow that a person who shares Piper’s theology will always magnify the work of Christ, by having a passion for souls and a large mission’s budget!

Indeed, we may all “diminish” the splendor of the work of Christ, regardless of our theology, in many ways. Struggles with sin are not unique to those holding any particular view of justification. Dr. Piper’s own admission of his ongoing struggle with sin is evidence of this fact.<sup>3</sup> People with differing interpretations of biblical teaching on the doctrine of justification are inclined at times to exhibit a lack a passion for the lost, a failure to witness consistently for Jesus Christ, or struggle with bondage to sin. In short, we might say that sin is an “equal opportunity disease” that afflicts all mankind, and affects all Christians, regardless of their doctrine of justification. So at the outset, let us dispense with any notion that this or that theology is either the gateway to spiritual success, or the trap-door to spiritual failure.

Two basic issues do, however, come to the surface as a result of Piper’s presentation. The first may be characterized as the answer to the Philippian jailor’s question, “What must I do to be saved?” It is ironic that what Paul and Silas succinctly stated in response, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved,” an invitation to believe which evidently required no further explanation, and which the jailor received immediately with joy, is the object of intense division, and increasingly complex theological penumbræ in the writings of modern scholarship.<sup>4</sup> It is

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<sup>3</sup> In response to a question about our imperfectness in this life, Piper responded: “I know people, and I would say this about myself, for whom the greatest threat to my perseverance and my ultimate salvation is the slowness of my sanctification. It’s not theoretical questions like ‘Did He rise from the dead?’ or the problem of evil. I’ve got answers. But why I sin against my wife the same at age 62 that I did at age 42 causes me sometimes to doubt my salvation or the power of the Holy Spirit... This question is *not* theoretical.” John Piper, “Why God is Not a Megalomaniac in Demanding to be Worshipped” 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Recording available through ACTS Conference Products, # EV08487 ([www.actsconferenceproducts.com](http://www.actsconferenceproducts.com)).

<sup>4</sup> For a breakdown of various approaches to what is required for justification in contemporary scholarship, see Dane C. Ortlund, “Justified by Faith, Judged according to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox,” *JETS* 52/2 (June 2009), 323-39.

always worth asking whether or not a person's soteriology agrees with or undermines Paul's evangelistic statement.

The second issue is an outgrowth of the first, perhaps more of a 'felt issue,' what Piper referred to in his lecture as "the subjective side of the problem, the more pastoral side – namely, the struggle for assurance." Assurance of salvation is often devalued in theological debate, but it is a crucial and deeply felt issue within the wider Christian community.<sup>5</sup> I suspect that the readiness, and even eagerness, of some theologians to make statements that undermine the doctrine of assurance reflects a too cavalier attitude toward what is intrinsic to evangelical faith. *I agree with Piper that this is important.* How we frame our soteriology impacts the possibility of any real assurance that we are saved, and indirectly affects every aspect of our ongoing Christian walk.

### Piper's Doctrine of Justification

First, a word about the answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?" This question has eternal ramifications. The gift of God is eternal life – that is what is at stake. Because Scripture is so succinct on this issue, it is hard for anyone laying claim to being an "evangelical" to deny that Paul's answer is entirely adequate: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." But it is truly spectacular to see what creative theological minds can construe within this simple statement. For example, there are those who insist that saving faith includes works! Despite explicit biblical statements that justification is not of works (Eph 2:9), that it is received by those who "do not work, but believe" (Rom 4:5), and it is "by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law" (Gal 2:16), they insist on making works part of the equation.

For example, John MacArthur's writings within the "Lordship Salvation" debate often reflect an inclusion of works in the salvation formula. He writes, "Meritorious works have nothing to do with faith. But *faith works* have everything to do with it."<sup>6</sup> This semantic 'slight of hand' impregnates "faith" with anything and everything from an attitude of sorrow, to abject grief over sin, to a life of godliness, to – and this is the logical end – an absolute holiness. The inevitable result of this thinking is justification based on our works. MacArthur makes this clear when he writes,

Salvation isn't the result of an intellectual exercise. It comes from a life lived in obedience and service to Christ. . . The life we live...determines our eternal destiny.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, Paul Rainbow and Richard Gaffin show similar theological dexterity in proposing that there is an "initial justification" which is by faith alone, and a "final justification" which depends on "works of grace."<sup>8</sup> Rainbow clearly states that in his view, "good works will be the ground on which God will approve of believers on the last day."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 279-85.

<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 53. Emphasis his.

<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 93.

<sup>8</sup> Paul A. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2005); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "By Faith, Not By Sight:" *Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Rainbow, *op. cit.*, pp82-84.

Eternal life is gained, according to this view, by faith *and* good works. Karlberg's assessment of Rainbow and Gaffin is succinct:

Whether one is reading *The Way of Salvation* or "*By Faith, Not by Sight*," the message is the same – one that is out of step with Scripture and orthodox Protestant teaching.<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to see how John Piper's comments do not reflect the same perspective. He states that what an unbeliever needs is "the righteousness of someone else" – that is, Christ. But instead of understanding this forensically (judicially), that is, a guilty sinner being "declared righteous" on the basis of Christ's substitutionary atonement, he sees this as a reference to practical living. Piper is clear: Righteousness "means the way one behaves when one behaves in accord with some right standard." In fact, he equates Christ's perfect (practical) obedience in Philippians 2:8 with the righteousness the believer receives in Philippians 3:9.<sup>11</sup> He states: "Christ was found in human form *obedient*; we are found in him *righteous*. Which would naturally mean that in Christ – in union with him – his perfect obedience is counted as ours as gift (sic) from God." Note: It is not the forensic *result* of Christ's perfect obedience – a believing sinner being declared righteous by God on the basis of the Son's finished work – which we receive in justification; rather, "His (Christ's) perfect obedience is counted as ours as [a] gift from God."

If we have been so *made* righteous, if Christ's "perfect obedience" is received as a gift at the moment of faith, then the demonstration of that obedience in our behavior immediately becomes a *sine qua non* of justification. Without that "perfect obedience," how can anyone lay claim to being justified? An *inevitable* outcome of justification, therefore, becomes a *de facto* requirement of it. This view was articulated and defended by John Gerstner, who wrote: "The question is not whether good works are necessary to salvation, but in what way they are necessary. *As the inevitable outworking of saving faith, they are necessary for salvation.*"<sup>12</sup> No matter how we couch it in terms of what God is doing through us, the result is simply this: If we do the works, we are saved. If we fail to do the works, we are not saved. To affirm justification *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus* (by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone) has no real meaning if in the next moment we declare that "perfect obedience" will demonstrate whether or not you are saved. Whatever degree of holiness is viewed as an inevitable result of justification (and no standard can be any higher than Christ's "perfect obedience"), that holy behavior becomes a requirement for justification.

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<sup>10</sup> Mark W. Karlberg, review of Rainbow and Gaffin, *JETS* 50 (2007), 428.

<sup>11</sup> Piper bases this on the shared use of the passive voice of the word "find" in both verses, but the suggestion that this means our behavior as Christians will (or must) mirror the perfect behavior of Christ is at best an example of finding more in the text than the author ever put there himself, and at worst forcing his own theology on the text. The repetition of a word in two contexts does not allow us to equate the two contexts!

<sup>12</sup> John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 210 (emphasis mine). This is not a new view. Arthur Pink, in *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968, p600), quotes John Owens – the prince of Puritan expositors – *with approval*: "...but yet our own diligent endeavor is such an *indispensable means* for that end, as that without it, it will not be brought about...If we are in Christ, God hath given us the lives of our souls, and hath taken upon Himself, in His covenant, the preservation of them. But *yet* we may say, with reference unto the *means* that He hath appointed, when storms and trials arise, *unless we use our diligent endeavors, we cannot be saved*" (italics mine).

That Piper's doctrine of justification includes a requirement of doing good works is borne out in his preaching and writing. Some examples:

"Paul foresees the possibility that some professing believers – in the judgment of charity he calls them brothers, may go to hell... Your works confirm that you are saved."<sup>13</sup>

"Getting to heaven in the New Testament involves the use of means... Your perseverance in faith is a means of attaining heaven; it is necessary... Mutual exhortation is a means by which we...help each other persevere to heaven. It is not automatic..."<sup>14</sup>

"...These are just some of the conditions that the New Testament says we must meet in order to be saved in the fullest and final sense. We must believe in Jesus and receive him and turn from our sin and obey him and humble ourselves like little children and love him more than we love our family, our possessions, or our life. This is what it means to be converted to Christ. This alone is the way of life everlasting."<sup>15</sup>

From an evangelical perspective, considering the historical debate between evangelicals and Rome over the role of good works as a means of justification, we might say that 'the fox is in the henhouse'! We have acceded to the notion that justification is *not* by faith alone, but by faith *and* works. Our theology must return to a place where we can be both intellectually honest and as concise as Paul was when he invited the Philippian jailor to "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

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<sup>13</sup> "We Will All Stand Before the Judgment of God (Romans 14:10-13)"; October 30, 2005. Cited by Brian Fisher, "Calvinism's Resurgence Leaves Many Vulnerable to Bad Doctrine", *Grace In Focus* 21:2 (March/April, 2006). If Piper thinks Paul was being 'charitable' by calling those who he believed were going to hell "brothers", I question his understanding of the Apostle's straightforward presentation of the gospel and passion for the lost!

<sup>14</sup> "Do Not Destroy the Work of God (Romans 14:14-23)"; November 6, 2005. Cited by Brian Fisher, *op. cit.* At times, Piper makes conflicting statements, resulting in confusion as to where he really stands. For example, in "The Justification Debate: A Primer" (*CT*, July 23, 2009; see <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/june/29.34.html>), under the heading "The Gospel", he writes: "The heart of the gospel is the good news that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead. What makes this good news is that Christ's death accomplished a perfect righteousness before God and suffered a perfect condemnation from God, *both of which are counted as ours through faith alone, so that we have eternal life with God in the new heavens and the new earth*" (italics added). This is both biblical and clear. Yet two paragraphs later, under the heading "Future Justification," he writes: "*Present justification* is based on the substitutionary work of Christ alone, enjoyed in union with him through faith alone. *Future justification* is the open confirmation and declaration that in Christ Jesus we are perfectly blameless before God. *This final judgment accords with our works.* That is, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives will be brought forward as the evidence and confirmation of true faith and union with Christ. *Without that validating transformation, there will be no future salvation*" (italics added). How can it be true that "through faith alone...we have eternal life with God in the new heavens and the new earth," but at the same time also be true that at the "final judgment," without the "validating transformation" of our good works, "there will be no future salvation"? Which is it – "through faith alone," or only with the "validating transformation" of "our works"?

<sup>15</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR; Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 69-70. For an excellent response to Piper's view of Galatians 5:6 making good works part of the justification formula (and clarification on other misused biblical texts in reference to faith and works), see Fred Chay and John P. Correia, *The Faith That Saves: The Nature of Faith in the New Testament* (Schoettle Publishing Company, 2008), 90-101, available by request at <http://www.graceline.net/>.

Any inclusion of works into the salvation formula is inimical to the biblical gospel, and could therefore be said to “diminish the work of Christ” (or, to use Paul’s words, to “nullify the grace of God”; Gal 2:21).

### Piper’s Doctrine of Assurance

This discussion leads inexorably to the question of assurance of salvation. Piper identified this issue as a major spiritual problem among his parishioners. He stated in his presentation: “I deal with this as much as anything, probably, in the people that I’m preaching to. Fears, and doubts, doubts not about objective ‘Did He rise from the dead’ – very few people are wrestling with that – but ‘Am I in? Am I saved?’ That’s very common for people to wrestle with.”

Piper’s solution to this epidemic of a lack of assurance of salvation within his congregation is to point to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness – the practical outworking of the righteousness of Christ in our daily lives. He states that “there are deficiencies – defects – in the sinful human soul that were meant to be remedied by the achievement of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Christ did not perform this great work for nothing. There was a need for it. When that achievement is denied, that need languishes without remedy, and the assumption is made that it can be remedied by Christ’s other achievements, like the forgiveness of all our sins.”

This is a startling statement. Piper suggests that a believer who bases his full assurance on the fact that all his sins have been forgiven will “languish” in a lack of assurance, while a person who understands the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to mean that they will exhibit his “perfect righteousness” in their lives will overcome the “deficiency in the human soul” which undermines our assurance. Piper offers no biblical or logical explanation why this would be so. Instead, he simply admonishes us, “Don’t try to be wiser than God.”

Since Piper views this as a major spiritual problem within his church, we may assume that he views lack of assurance of salvation as a bad thing. We concur with this view.<sup>16</sup> But if the aim is that Christians will have assurance, it is difficult to understand how basing it on our progressive works of righteousness will produce such a goal. Indeed, Piper’s own statement would suggest that his theology does *not* lead to a solution for the problem of a lack of assurance of salvation. Among those who listen to his teaching each week, who are in his congregation and most likely to embrace and embody his theology, it is “very common” for them to wrestle with a lack of assurance.

Beyond this, Piper himself evidently also wrestles with a lack of assurance of salvation. In response to a question in last year’s Crossway Lecture at ETS, he said, “...why I sin against my wife the same at age sixty-two that I did at age forty-two causes me sometimes to doubt my salvation.”<sup>17</sup> Unless this was a case of hyperbole, in which Piper overstated his meaning for effect, we cannot but conclude that he himself is, because of his own moral failings,

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<sup>16</sup> Beeke is certainly correct when he writes, “Sadly, the church, for the most part, is scarcely aware that it is crippled by a comparative absence of strong, full assurance.” *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 279.

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 3.

occasionally uncertain of his eternal salvation! While such comments may seem to exhibit a godly humility which reflects well on one's spiritual destiny, many will struggle to find comfort in the notion that a pastor and Christian leader of Piper's status is unsure of his eternal destiny!

The fact is, *dependence on our works for assurance of salvation* ultimately and inevitably undermines any real assurance. Even the best of us falls far short of "Christ's perfect obedience"! Therefore, we are all left with ever-varying levels of eternal *insecurity*. This kind of teaching has spread throughout evangelicalism, resulting in a pandemic of *lack of assurance*.<sup>18</sup> This cannot help but "diminish" the doctrine of assurance, that "by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone" a person is justified, possesses eternal life, and with it assurance of salvation.

### A Biblical-Historical Corrective

Did Jesus accomplish fully the payment for sin once-for-all on the cross? Was it indeed "finished," as He said (John 19:30)? Concerning this, Calvin writes:

Now this word, which Christ employs, well deserves our attention; for it shows that *the whole accomplishment of our salvation, and all the parts of it, are contained in his death*. We have already stated that his resurrection is not separated from his death, but *Christ only intends to keep our faith fixed on himself alone, and not to allow it to turn aside in any direction whatever. The meaning, therefore, is, that every thing which contributes to the salvation of men is to be found in Christ, and ought not to be sought anywhere else*; or – which amounts to the same thing – that the perfection of salvation is contained in him. . . .

If we give our assent to this word which Christ pronounced, *we ought to be satisfied with his death alone for salvation, and we are not at liberty to apply for assistance in any other quarter*; for he who was sent by the Heavenly Father to obtain for us a full acquittal, and to accomplish our redemption, knew well what belonged to his office, and did not fail in what he knew to be demanded of him. *It was chiefly for the purpose of giving peace and tranquility to our consciences that he pronounced this word, It is finished. Let us stop here, therefore, if we do not choose to be deprived of the salvation which he has procured for us. . . .*

...Christ, having once accomplished, by a single oblation, all that was necessary to be done, declares, from the cross, that all *is finished*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 155, writes: "I am frankly astonished at the number of times I have explained to classes of Christian college students about the unmerited love God has for us...and how in the course of my explanation students from strong evangelical churches literally will cry. . . .they point to the *insecurity* they have learned at their home churches. 'If I don't feel like God's child, maybe I'm not.' 'If I can't always act like God's child, perhaps I never was.' My office has witnessed such statements from the children of our evangelical households every semester for years."

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Trans. Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), online at [http://www.biblestudyguide.org/comment/calvin/comm\\_vol34/htm/i.htm](http://www.biblestudyguide.org/comment/calvin/comm_vol34/htm/i.htm) (italics mine). For a detailed discussion of Calvin's understanding of faith, works, and justification, see Sam Waldron, "Does Justifying Faith Include Evangelical Obedience in John Calvin's Theology?", unpublished paper, available online at



Leon Morris agrees:

“Jesus died with the cry of the Victor on His lips. This is not the moan of the defeated, nor the sigh of patient resignation. It is the triumphant recognition that *He has now fully accomplished the work that He came to do.*”<sup>20</sup>

Tenney echoes:

“The use of the perfect tense in ‘It is finished’ (*tetelestai*) signifies full completion of Jesus’ work and the establishment of a basis for faith. *Nothing further needed to be done.*”<sup>21</sup>

And Gaebelein writes:

“But who can tell what this one word ‘It is finished’ means? It is as glorious as it is inexhaustible and unsearchable. Never before and never after was spoken such a marvelous word, which means so much. No Saint is able to measure the depths of this triumphant shout. It means that His great sacrificial work, the sin-bearing, was now finished. *All that needed to be done to satisfy the righteousness of God and to vindicate His holiness was finished*; peace was now made in the blood of His cross; all that God in His eternal counsel had purposed was finished; prophecies and types relating to His matchless atoning work were finished. *Yea, all was finished to reach down to man in his deepest degradation and to save him to the uttermost, so that the lost, the guilty, the hell-deserving sinner becomes, trusting in Him, a child of God and an heir of glory.* All is finished to put on the side of the believer every spiritual blessing which an infinite God is able to bestow.”<sup>22</sup>

To the Galatians the Apostle Paul wrote, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal 2:21). Concerning this Luther forcefully writes:

“*The Antichrist teaches that faith is no good unless it is combined with works*; instead of the grace of Christ and his kingdom, he has established *the doctrine of works* and ceremonies.”<sup>23</sup>

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<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/papers/ets/2004/Waldron2004/Waldron2004.pdf>. Waldron concludes that the tendency for evangelicals to unify faith and obedience in justification is “contrary to the classic view of *sola fide* enunciated by Luther and Calvin.”

<sup>20</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (NICNT)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 815. Italics mine.

<sup>21</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *The Gospel of John, (EBC)*, Frank E. Gaebelein, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:184. Italics mine.

<sup>22</sup> Arno Clement Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John*, (Gospel Publishing House (?), 1919), 371. Italics mine.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*; *The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, Series Editors (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 113. Italics mine.

Undergirding the doctrine of assurance, the Apostle John wrote, “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that *you may know that you have eternal life*” (1 John 5:12-13).

Was this knowledge only provisional, based ultimately not on believing, but on works, so that those “who believe in the name of the Son of God” *cannot really* know they “have eternal life”? Such an assertion turns Scripture on its head! As Marshall affirms,

John was therefore writing not to persuade unbelievers of the truth of the Christian faith but rather *to strengthen Christian believers who might be tempted to doubt the reality of their Christian experience...* Those who believe in the name of Jesus *can be sure of their possession of eternal life.*<sup>24</sup>

Beeke has well said, “If assurance is *assumed*, pastors build congregations that won’t appreciate the depths of Christian experience. If assurance is *compelled*, Calvinism could collapse into neonomianism. If assurance is *ignored*, churches may be reduced to legalistic morality that lacks evangelistic zeal for God. But if assurance is *cultivated*, the faith of believers is brought to rest in a faithful God whose grace is mightier than their proneness to backslide.”<sup>25</sup>

### Conclusion

We should all be grateful to John Piper for tackling difficult issues associated with the doctrine of justification, and laying bare the difficulties both he and members of his church have experienced in the area of assurance of salvation. An objective look at Piper’s view of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, understanding it as “being made righteous” (practically) instead of “being declared righteous” (forensically), leads to the conclusion that it is his own doctrine which is, to use his word, “diminishing” the work of Christ.

It is at best uncertain how Piper’s inclusion of works can do anything but “diminish” historic tenets of the doctrine of justification, and fatally undermine any possibility of true assurance. In our desire to promote holiness, and exalt the finished work of Christ, may we never inadvertently undermine that very work, and “diminish” its completeness and grandeur!

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<sup>24</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 243. Italics mine.

<sup>25</sup> Beeke, 282-3.

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