

BOOK REVIEW

of

Horatius Bonar and Charles Hodge,
Not What My Hands Have Done,
The Trinity Foundation, 2005.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone through Christ alone is, said Martin Luther, the doctrine that the Church either stands or falls by. Nothing could be more basic to the Christian faith. Yet, the sinful pride of man does not like some aspects of the doctrine, and probably all of us wrestle with properly understanding it. What are we to do? Since we know that we are to conform our thinking to what God has revealed, it should not surprise us that it may take a little effort to get our thinking changed when our sinful nature and the surrounding society would have us think otherwise. So, we turn to the source where proper instruction is given. To the Bible. However, Horatius Bonar and Charles Hodge have already done that, and we will likely benefit, and perhaps greatly, if we make use of the studies that they have done on the subject.

Horatius Bonar (1808–1889) of Edinburgh, Scotland was a Presbyterian pastor and is a well-known author of several books and of some 137 hymns. Charles Hodge (1797–1878) was a faculty member of Princeton Theological Seminary from 1822 to 1878, was the Principal of the Seminary from 1851 to 1878, and is a well-known author. *Not What My Hands Have Done* is a combination of *The Everlasting Righteousness* by Bonar, originally published in 1874, and *Justification by Faith Alone* by Hodge. Actually, Hodge never published a book by the title of *Justification by Faith Alone*, but the Trinity Foundation did in 1995. *Justification by Faith Alone* is itself a combination of the chapter on justification from Hodge's *The Way of Life: A Handbook of Christian Belief and Practice* (1841) and the chapter on justification excerpted from the third volume of his famous *Systematic Theology* (1872-1873). The title of the current book, *Not What My Hands Have Done*, is taken from the opening line of one of Bonar's hymns: Not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul. Bonar later in that same hymn provides the answer: No other work, save thine, no other blood will do. The combination of Bonar and Hodge in one book on justification is a good one, not only because they both write clearly and are good Bible teachers, but because their two approaches provide a good complimentary balance. Hodge is the analytical, cerebral, systematic theologian, and Bonar is the compassionate pastor. Hodge wants to make sure we understand the logic of it all, what it really means, what its implications are, and most of all that it is what the Bible teaches. Bonar is more concerned that we see it is the answer to our deepest needs, that we can rest assured that Christ's work on our behalf is complete, that it does not depend on our frail faith waxing and waning from one day to the next but only on Christ's finished work, upon His death and resurrection.

Bonar's *The Everlasting Righteousness* has ten chapters: God's Answer to Man's Question, God's Recognition of Substitution, The Completeness of the Substitution, The Declaration of the Completeness, Righteousness for the Unrighteous, The Righteousness of God Reckoned to Us, Not Faith But Christ, What the Resurrection of the Substitute Has Done, The Pardon and the Peace Made Sure, and The Holy Life of the Justified. Hodge's *Justification by Faith Alone* has thirteen chapters: The Meaning of Justification, Christ's Satisfaction of the Law, The Righteousness of Christ, Confessional Statements of the Doctrine, Justification Is a Forensic Act, Works Not the Ground of Justification, The Righteousness of Christ the Ground of Justification, Imputation of Righteousness, Proof of the Doctrine, The Consequences of the Imputation of Righteousness, Relation of Faith to Justification, Objections to the Protestant Doctrine of Justification, and Departures from the Protestant Doctrine.

One of the most significant objections to justification by the work of Christ alone, which even the Apostle Paul was confronted with, is that it makes light of good works and leads to unholy living. Bonar responds in his last chapter "No, truly. He (the Apostle Paul) is laying the foundation of good works. He is removing the great obstacle to a holy life, namely, the bondage of an unforgiven state. He is speaking, by the power of the Holy Ghost, the words of truth and soberness. . . . To say to a groping, troubled spirit, You must first believe before you can work, is no more to encourage ungodliness or laxity of walk than to say to an imprisoned soldier, You must first get out of your dungeon before you can fight; or to a swimmer, You must throw off that millstone before you can attempt to swim; or to a racer, You must get quit of these fetters before you can run the race." Hodge adds in his chapter ten that "The sins which are pardoned in justification include all sins – past, present, and future. . . . The righteousness of Christ is a perpetual donation. It is a robe which hides, or as the Bible expresses it, covers from the eye of justice the sins of the believer."

Robert Reymond, Professor of Systematic Theology at Knox Theological Seminary, and author of the well-received *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson, 1998, wrote the forward to Hodge's *Justification by Faith Alone*. In the forward he cautions the reader against those who merely say that justification is by faith, omitting the word alone. He writes that "never in the debate between Rome and the first Protestant Reformers did anyone on either side deny that sinners must be justified by faith. The whole controversy in the sixteenth century in this doctrinal area turned on whether sinners were justified by faith *alone* (*sola fide*) or by faith and good works which earned merit before God. The Protestant Reformers, following Paul's teaching on justification in *Romans* and *Galatians*, affirmed the former and denied the latter". This is one we have to get right! If we have this one wrong, nothing else much matters! This book, *Not What My Hands Have Done*, is a great help towards getting it right.