TWO JUSTIFICATIONS: WHY THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS EVEN FOR OUR WORKS

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Imagine this scenario.

As you are exhaling in the fellowship hall after a Sunday morning service, a church member approaches you, mentioning that he is rejoicing in divine forgiveness. "Praise God," you respond. But then he explains how much he is enjoying an adulterous affair, even singing the words of Fanny Crosby's hymn as he drives home from his liaisons:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood, To every believer the promise of God; The vilest offender who truly believes, That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.²

Choking on your coffee and biscuit, you look at him with incredulity. "Is that really how Fanny Crosby intended her hymn to be taken?" you ask. "After all, it is titled, 'To God Be the Glory."" "Sure," he responds confidently, quoting the bumper sticker, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." "Besides, Pastor," he continues, "didn't you say that justification is by faith alone, apart from works?"

After insisting that this friend visit your office tomorrow to talk further about his religious freedom, you suggest he read 2 Corinthians 7:1 and James 2:14–26 to consider the relationship of faith and works in the doctrine of justification.

Driving home, the church member's words echo through your head. How can you persuade him that embodied virtue is not superfluous, but essential, to the Christian life? Is there a biblical way to show him how virtuous works are a necessary dimension of justification?

There is. The great Reformers John Calvin and Peter Martyr Vermigli wrestled with this vital question in their day, and their insights can help pastors to communicate this life-changing truth in ours.

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² I am indebted to Professor Tony Lane for this illustration.

1. UNDERSTANDING JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

The Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*, faith alone, revolves around a basic question: Why does God Almighty—the Holy One who abides in unapproachable light—embrace sinful men and women as his children? The Protestant answer begins by recognizing that fallen humanity is unable to secure even the smallest measure of divine merit by performing good works. The perdurance of sin in the life of a believer prevents such achievement, for even the purest and most heroic examples of human virtue remain tainted by the fall and therefore cause one to miss the divine standard.

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said (Matt. 5:20). And even the most scrupulous religionist, who may perhaps feel optimistic looking at the Pharisees' bar, would have to admit defeat after Jesus' next stipulation: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Indeed, the impossibility of attaining divine holiness requires one to embrace Christ, whose perfect righteousness is the sole reason for Christian hope.

The particulars of this Reformation doctrine come into focus when compared with the Roman tradition. By contrast, Trent insisted that one's forgiven status is fully and finally realized in the culmination of a religious process, a faithful life nurtured by grace conveyed through the sacraments in which one grows in holiness.³ In the course of growing, one merits divine favor, and, by doing so, receives the divine embrace. While the initial grace of salvation cannot be merited, faithful people merit for themselves and for others all the graces needed to obtain eternal life.⁴

While the distinction between forensically imputed righteousness (the Protestant view) and actually merited righteousness (the Roman view) may sound like theological hairsplitting, it is crucial for understanding what was at stake in the Reformation, a distinction that is also of great importance to pastoral ministry today. The Reformers consistently distinguished God's work in accepting sinners—the "not guilty" verdict that pronounces sinners to be sons and daughters—from the internal renewal of the Spirit, which actually sanctifies.

It is at this point that the watchword "faith alone" is so important to Reformation Protestants.⁵ From the earliest days of the Reformation, *sola fide* became a way to describe how one receives justifying grace. Like opened hands that receive a gift, faith appropriates the alien righteousness of Christ, an attributed righteousness that is the reason for one's acceptance. Thus, it is not meritorious works but "faith alone" that secures forgiveness.

³ N. P. Tanner, ed. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 Vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 673–74.

⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (Citta del vatticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), para. 2027.

 $^{^5\,}$ By "Reformation Protestants" we are designating Christians in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.

In the words of Paul, "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5, ESV). Tony Lane helpfully summarizes:

Justification refers to my status; sanctification to my state. Justification is about God's attitude to me changing; sanctification is about God changing me. Justification is about how God looks on me; sanctification is about what he does in me. Justification is about Christ dying for my sins on the cross; sanctification is about Christ at work in me by the Holy Spirit changing my life.⁶

It is important to emphasize, however, that while Reformation Protestants assert that we are justified by faith alone, this faith does not remain alone. In Calvin's words, "For we dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them,"⁷ a conviction that echoes down through generations to the present.⁸ In spiritual union with Christ, we undergo the sanctifying work of the Spirit, which produces the peaceable fruit of virtue. Such fruit truly belongs to the Christian. But in what sense does it belong to justification?

Lane explains the logic of Calvin's position, so-called "double justification,"⁹ noting that "God both accepts and rewards the good works of the justified believer, in addition to accepting the believer himself."¹⁰ In other words, as persons are engrafted into Christ, their blemished works are covered by Christ's sinlessness, which causes the imperfections of those works to be expunged. In addition to explaining how genuinely good (but flawed) works may be pleasing to a holy God, the doctrine of double justification enabled Calvin and other Reformers to give an account for the range of biblical data that portrays God as rewarding human works.

II. DOUBLE JUSTIFICATION IN CALVIN AND VERMIGLI

Calvin emphatically denies that human works accrue merit in the sight of God.¹¹ The nonbeliever who tries to earn God's favor by his religious performance does so in vain. It is "not that no works may be done," says

⁸ For example, Jonathan Edwards strikes this note when he writes, "And one great thing he [Jesus] aimed at in redemption, was to deliver them from their idols, and bring them to God" (Jonathan Edwards, "Discourse: Men Naturally are God's Enemies" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2, [1834 reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998], 139).

⁹ Lane, *Justification by Faith*, 17–44.

¹⁰ Lane, Justification by Faith, 33.

¹¹ Calvin asserts, "Our righteousness is not in us but in Christ...we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ" (*Institutes* 3.11.23). About the value of works he writes,

⁶ Lane, Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment. London: Clark, 2002., 18.

⁷ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:798 (3.16.1). Or in the Westminster Confession: "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love." ("Of Justification," in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap. 11.2.

Calvin, "or that what is done may be denied to be good, but that we may not rely upon them, glory in them, or ascribe salvation to them."¹² This is the reality for every person outside of Christ, even for the most kind and altruistic. For the Christian, however, the situation is different. When the Father accepts a believer's works, it results in his smile.

On the face of it, this may sound patently Pelagian. If works are worthless, how can they possibly elicit God's favor when produced by a Christian? It's because God accepts works from a person who is in union with Christ—whose identity is forensically grounded in the victorious Savior and inhabited by the Spirit—for such works reflect God's righteous character. Furthermore, in steadfast love and mercy, God sees the sinful elements of those works—the tainted motives, selfishness, pride, and folly that is inevitably intermingled—as covered by Christ's blood. This is what allows the Father to accept in those works what is genuinely virtuous and pleasing. "Everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ's perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity," writes Calvin.¹³ Once again, this acceptance is not because the believer's works are inherently righteous, but rather because of union with Christ. In other words, it is only because Christians are embraced "in Christ rather than in themselves" that they and their righteous deeds are said to be accepted.¹⁴

Calvin develops this idea, for example, when he considers the Apostle Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Caesarea, about whose conversion Peter states that "anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is accepteable to him" (Acts 10:35). Calvin comments, "Therefore, God accepteth the faithful, because they live godly and justly."¹⁵ Peter's words can be reconciled with other texts of Scripture, Calvin indicates, only in the light of the "double acceptance of man before God."¹⁶ In the first case, God accepts the sinner in Christ by faith alone, and subsequently God receives him as a new creation with regard to his works.

Whenever Calvin makes this point, he remains clear that our acceptance is never merited but is owing entirely to divine grace. He asserts that

¹⁴ Institutes 3:17:5.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles*, in Vol. XVIII of *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 440.

¹⁶ While Calvin uses the language of "double acceptance" at this point in his 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, he unpacks the idea more fully in his earlier versions, for example, in the 1539 and 1543 editions. It also appears in the 1541 French version. These earlier editions generally manifest a more pastoral emphasis and do not possess the same apologetic concerns of the final 1559 version.

[&]quot;The power of justifying, which faith possesses, does not lie in any worth of works, but because it is an instrument whereby we obtain free the righteousness of Christ" (*Institutes* 3.18.8).

¹² Institutes 3.17.1.

¹³ Institutes 3:17:8. In this context Calvin provides a salient definition of justification: "But we define justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ, is reconciled to God by his grace, while, cleansed by Christ's blood, he obtains forgiveness of sins, and clothed with Christ's righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat."

acceptance comes "by reason of our works"¹⁷ because the Father is pleased with deeds that are performed in Christ and approves of them because the Savior's righteousness compensates for their shortcomings. In other words, the Father overlooks whatever defects remain in our works. Again, as Calvin put it: "Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account."¹⁸ Thus, "by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified." This is the essence of Calvin's doctrine of "double justification."¹⁹

It is important to recognize, however, that while Calvin expressed this concept, he did not use justification language to describe internal renewal or the rewarding of human works. Instead, he categorically distinguished the event of justification from the process of sanctification. His terminology for this relationship was "*duplex gratia*" ("double grace").²⁰ Even though Calvin affirmed the idea of "double justification" (that God rewards our virtuous works as he accepts us in Christ), he consistently limits the terminology of justification to the forensic activity of divine acceptance.

Calvin's unwillingness to describe God's approval of human works with the language of justification provides important clarification concerning the inability of one's virtue or works to secure divine favor. That is standard Reformed theology. And it's vitally important, especially from a pastoral point of view when it is essential to clarify *the specific reason* for one's acceptance. At the same time, Calvin's categorical distinction between justification and sanctification may at times let the side down insofar as the *duplex gratia* cannot easily explain how justification involves the Spirit working in the human soul. In other words, Calvin's doctrine of double grace so bifurcates justification and sanctification that his distinction lacks the linguistic flexibility to articulate a thoroughgoing doctrine of double justification, even though the concept is woven into the fabric of his overall doctrine.²¹

²⁰ While always going together as a function of union with Christ, justification and sanctification are properly distinguished in the *duplex gratia*. In Calvin's words, "Now, both repentance and forgiveness of sins—that is, newness of life and free reconciliation—are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith" (Institutes 3:3:1). Cornelius P. Venema, "Calvin's Understanding of the 'Twofold Grace of God' and Contemporary Ecumenical Discussion of the Gospel." *MJT* 18 (2007) 67–105 [70]. Or in Venema's words, the "twofold benefit of our reception of the grace of God in Christ as comprising the 'sum of the gospel." Cf. Lane, *Justification by Faith*, 24, fn. 15.

²¹ A technical distinction to keep in mind: "double justification" (*duplex iustificatio*) is concerned with how God rewards our works despite their imperfections, while "twofold grace" (*duplex iustitia*) refers to the two graces of justification and regeneration.

¹⁷ J. Fraser (tr.), *Calvin's Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles 1–13* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1965) 308–309.

¹⁸ Institutes 3:17:10.

¹⁹ Institutes 3:17:10

There were, however, other Reformers in the opening years of the Reformation who were capable of articulating a full-throated doctrine of double justification.²² One such Reformer was Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562), the Italian Augustinian Prior who converted to Reformed Protestantism when he fled north of the Alps to teach with Bucer at Strasbourg. From there he went to Christ Church, Oxford, before eventually returning to the Continent where he settled in Zurich.²³

Vermigli's doctrine casts an eschatological light upon justification when he explains how God's end-time judgment is currently rendered in the lives of his children in an already/not yet sequence.²⁴ In keeping with Calvin and other Reformed figures, he is careful to insist that the basis of this justification is solely the imputation of Christ's righteousness.²⁵ However, he asserts that justification also has a present and future orientation that is not by faith alone, but must necessarily include virtuous works. For Vermigli, it is not sufficient to simply speak of divine acceptance (in terms of "justification") without also connecting it to the Holy Spirit's work of internal renewal.²⁶ He thus recognizes "two meanings of the phrase 'to justify,' namely, in fact or in judgment or estimation."²⁷ In other words, Vermigli includes both forensic righteousness and actual righteousness in his doctrine of justification. Frank James explains:

²² In addition to Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), there was Martin Bucer (1491–1551) and Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531). Bucer's formulation described a primary justification (*prima iustificatio*) which is concerned with the forgiveness of sins, and secondary justification (*secundaria iustificatio*) which is the result of virtuous works performed in the power of the Holy Spirit. See Brian Lugioyo, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification: Reformation Theology and Early Modern Irenicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2010). For Oecolampadius, see Jeff Fisher "The Doctrine of Justification in the Writings of John Oecolampadius," in *Since We Are Justified by Faith: Justification in the Theologies of the Protestant Reformation*, edited by Michael Parsons (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 44–57.

²³ The definitive account of Vermigli's life was written by his successor at the Schola Tigurina in Zürich: Josiah Simler, "Oration on the Life and Death of the Good Man and Outstanding Theologian, Doctor Peter Martyr Vermigli, Professor of Sacred Letters at the Zurich Academy," in Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Life, Letters, and Sermons*, trans. and ed. John Patrick Donnelly, The Peter Martyr Library, Vol. 5 (Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999), 9–62.

²⁴ Pietro Martire Vermigli, *In epistolam S. Pauli apostoli ad Romanos commentarii...* (Basel: Petrum Perna, 1560), 1263. For the English translation, see Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification: Two Theological Loci*, trans. and ed. Frank A. James, III, The Peter Martyr Library Vol. 8 (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2003), [171]. Hereafter, Vermigli's Justification *Locus* will be listed as *Romanos*, followed in brackets by pages from Frank James's English translation.

²⁵ Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1194 [100].

²⁶ Peter Leithart uses the language of "deliverdict" to convey this notion—a forensic verdict defining one's "status" that simultaneously describes the spiritually liberated "state" of the justified person.

²⁷ Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1182 [88]. The latter of these, justification "in judgment," constitutes the fundamental cause. Immediately after making this statement, Vermigli explains why the renewal of the Spirit and "way of life acquired from good works" ultimately relies upon forensic imputation to accomplish justification, since such works remain "imperfect and incomplete."

To [Vermigli's] mind, "forgiveness" is more than a simple, single, judicial act. Forensic justification is like a pebble dropped in a pond; it creates ripples throughout the lifetime of a sinner. Certainly, it does address decisively the legal matter of guilt derived from Adam. However, even after the judicial acquittal, there remains a moral need for the justified sinner continually to seek forgiveness for subsequent sins...It is this ongoing need for forgiveness, even after justification has been pronounced, that requires a necessary relationship with sanctification.²⁸

The presupposition that undergirds Peter Martyr's doctrine of double justification—one shared by all Reformed theologians—is the profound sinfulness of humanity,²⁹ a belief that Frank James has described as "intensive Augustinianism."³⁰ According to James, "It is [Vermigli's] profound conviction that the Adamic fall rendered all of humanity legally guilty before the divine judge and morally corrupt in their souls, thus bringing alienation and condemnation from God."³¹ With this conviction, Vermigli affirmed that the virtuous life of the justified is a necessary component of justification (albeit not the ground), a life of love that delights the heart of God and finds his reward.³² In the Italian reformer's words: "We have never denied that the works of those now justified are acceptable to God."³³ Although weak and mutilated, these works are buttressed by the perfect righteousness of Christ. This double movement of grace constitutes the basis of future justification.³⁴

111. THE IMPORTANCE OF DOUBLE JUSTIFICATION IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

We must remember that the writings of Calvin and Vermigli were motivated by pastoral concerns. On one hand, they were eager to encourage dejected Christians who were weighed down by guilt and shame—a struggle on which Vermigli reflected from his days as a Catholic priest. For instance, he insists:

²⁸ Frank A. James, III, "The Complex of Justification: Peter Martyr Vermigli Versus Albert Pighius," in *Peter Martyr Vermigli: Humanism, Republicanism, Reformation*, ed. Emidio Campi, Frank A. James, III, and Peter Opitz (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2002), 51.

²⁹ Martyr doesn't hesitate using Augustine's phrase *massa perditionis* to describe this plight. Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1196 [102]: "Omnes nascentes massa perditionis complectitur, a qua labe homines operibus suis emergere posse, et vendicare sibi iustificationem iuxta sacras literas fieri non potest."

³⁰ James, "The Complex of Justification," 52–53.

³¹ James, "The Complex of Justification," 52–53.

³² Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1289 [195], 1321 [227], 1274 [182], 1227–28 [134], 1288 [195].

³³ Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1227–28 [134]. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed., J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vols. 20-21 (London: SCM, 1960), 3:17:5, 10.

³⁴ In a personal letter to Calvin in 1555, Vermigli described this renewal as "Christoformia,"Christ-centered virtue that emerges from one's union with Christ" (McNair, Early Writings, 24).

Certainly no one understands except those who have experienced how difficult it is for a bruised heart, dejected and weary with the burden of sins to find comfort...If we, like the Sophists, commanded a person to have regard for his own works, then he would never find comfort, would always be tormented, always in doubt of his salvation and finally, be swallowed up with desperation.³⁵

At the same time, our Reformers sought to assure Christians that even though our best works are tainted with sinfulness and fall short of God's glory, they matter to God and give him pleasure, and should therefore be pursued with the utmost seriousness.³⁶ They recognized it is possible to so denigrate human works on account of their imperfection that we can pull the rug out from underneath the enterprise of holy living. After all, why strive to cultivate virtue when even our best attempts will be measured and found wanting?

In view of this danger, Calvin and Vermigli both affirm the necessity of good works, without which one's faith is questionable. But they contend for these works in a way that altogether removes human merit from the picture. We can therefore breathe a sigh of relief that God's fatherly grace embraces our works in the same way a Dad cherishes the crayon drawing of his little daughter. To be sure, there's much one can scrutinize, but the child's contribution is received according to the Father's steadfast love. In Calvin's words, we "remarkably cheer and comfort the hearts of believers by our teaching, when we tell them that they please God in their works and are without doubt acceptable to him."³⁷

This idea of God's adoptive love was recently illustrated for me by a friend who has adopted a seven-year-old boy named Emmanuel. Mark explained how he and his wife traveled to Ethiopia to stand before a judge, who declared that a particular child from the orphanage was now their son. With joyful tears, they embraced Emmanuel, but since a few remaining documents were still in need of processing, their son had to remain at the orphanage for a few more days. "Each day," Mark said, "we visited that orphanage to love twenty-four boys, and one son." Emmanuel's environment and life situation appeared to be the same—he remained in the squalor of the orphanage; but the decisive change had in fact occurred. On the basis of the judge's legal pronouncement, everything about his identity and future hope was now different. This would include the pleasure he would now bring to his parents in their new relationship—sometimes because of the child's manifest virtue, and other times despite it.

Likewise, the legal pronouncement of the Father has drawn us from the alienating shadows of sin into the warm light of adoption. No longer

³⁵ Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1208 [114].

³⁶ Calvin writes, "He who is justified will not forget that a reward is laid up for him, but be incited by it as the best stimulus to well-doing" (*Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote*, 6th Session, can. 31).

³⁷ Inst. 3:15:7 [1536/39].

rebels under condemnation, we are now sons and daughters, embraced by divine favor. But the legal declaration is not the end of the story. Just as Mark visited Emmanuel each day and eventually brought him home to live as a family member, God likewise desires relationship with his children. In both cases, the legal verdict is the ground, but it is not the goal of justification. God wants us to flourish in Christ as beloved children, no longer bound by the fetters of sin, developing into maturity as members of his body who are built up in love (Eph 4:15–16).

It is not surprising that Vermigli was particularly drawn to the biblical concept of adoption.³⁸ He recognized that Scripture presents justification in a variety of metaphors and analogies (e.g., being washed and clothed in clean garments,³⁹ the economic transaction of crediting,⁴⁰ horticultural activities such as grafting,⁴¹ and marriage⁴²), but in adoption he found an image that captures both the legal and relational dimensions of justification. Whatever image one may choose, our calling is to reflect carefully upon the way it elucidates the dynamic tension between acceptance and internal renewal by the Spirit.

With the biblical tension in mind, double justification strikes the important balance between confidence and caution before God—the need for us to rest in Christ while also working out our salvation with fear and trembling. On the question of whether it is best to articulate a tension such as Calvin's—his *duplex gratia* of forensic justification and actual sanctification, or whether one chooses to follow Vermigli's formulation of a forensic ground that leads to a broader outworking of actual righteousness, one will want to assess the particular needs of a pastoral situation. Both faithfully represent the tenets of the Reformed tradition, starting with the awakening power of the Holy Spirit, the establishment of one's union with Christ as the locus of salvation, a forensic declaration of forgiveness as the reason for divine acceptance, and divine inhabitation as the empowering impulse of holy living.

Yes, we enjoy freedom in Christ, a perfect redemption about which we should sing with Fanny Crosby. But Scripture is equally clear about the fact that God doesn't want his children to remain "vile offenders." Our Christian freedom can never be an excuse to indulge in vile acts that flout God's law, such as the adultery of our hypothetical church member at the beginning of this article. Instead, it should spur us to grateful acts of love and righteousness, an embodied holiness that lays hold of the purity in which we will one day stand before the Lord. As the conclusion of Crosby's hymn declares:

³⁸ James, Predestination and Justification, xxxvi.

³⁹ Ezek 16:10–14; Zech 3; Matt 22:11–14; Rom 13:12–14; 1 Cor 15:51–54; 2 Cor 5:1–4; Gal 3:26–27; Eph 4:20–24; 6:10; Col 3:9–10, 12.

⁴⁰ Num 21:4-9; John 3:14-15; Rom 4:3-12, 22.

⁴¹ Ps 80:8-10; Isa 5:1-2; 2:21; 15:5; Mark 12:1-12; John 15; Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 6:15-16.

⁴² Ezek 16:1-53; Hos 1:2; 11:1-12; 1 Cor 6:15-17; Eph 5:23-32; Rev 19:7, 9; 21:9.

Great things He has taught us great things He has done And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son But purer and higher and greater will be Our wonder our worship when Jesus we see.