

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH DID PAUL GET IT RIGHT?

by Peter Hastie

This is an interview with Rev Philip Eveson, Principal of London Theological Seminary UK, author of "The Great Exchange – Justification by Faith Alone in the Light of Recent Thought" published in 1996. It was originally published in the [Australian Presbyterian Magazine](#).

Is the doctrine of justification by faith a doctrine with important spiritual implications or is it a debate about purely academic matters? There might be some people who would like to treat it as an academic issue, but it's hardly in that category. It's a very important issue with enormous implications for Christian living.

Why is that? Because the doctrine of justification by faith lies at the heart of a person's relationship to God. It tells us how sinful people are made right with God. Essentially, it says that God declares the ungodly righteous, not by their good works, but solely through their reliance on Jesus Christ. Actually, that's why the doctrine was such a great relief to Martin Luther. When he discovered it in Paul's writings, he said, "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."

What difference did it make to Luther? A huge one. He had grown up with the idea that to be right with God he needed to fulfill the requirements of the church. Specifically, he had to participate in its rites such as baptism and the sacrament of penance. He could also pray, do the works of merit and buy indulgences. These were meant to help him escape from the punishment of purgatory. But through his study of the Bible he began to see that forgiveness and a right status with God were not the result of putting one's trust in penances and rites. Rather, his justification with God came about through God's gracious position of righteousness for him through Jesus Christ.

Why do Catholics find the doctrine of justification by faith so hard to accept? Interestingly, some of their leading scholars today like Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer and Hans Kung have agreed with the Reformers that Paul used the term "justification" to mean, "to declare righteous". But Catholics are reluctant to let go of their views on the sacraments and other teachings like indulgences and purgatory. I suspect that Catholics feel there is too much at stake if they acknowledge the biblical teaching. The doctrine of justification by faith challenges some of their most fundamental traditions and practices. That's why they find it so hard to recognize the legal or forensic meaning of justification, which means to "declare righteous". It challenges their traditional understanding of the word that they interpret to mean "to make righteous". Obviously, if they accepted the biblical meaning, they would have to make huge changes to church practice.

What did the Reformers understand Paul to be teaching on justification? Both Luther and Calvin saw that Paul's doctrine of justification had been distorted by the Catholic Church. Augustine understood the verb "dikao" to mean "to make righteous" rather than "to declare righteous". So the idea developed that when God justifies the sinner, he actually makes him righteous. On the contrary, Paul taught that when God justifies us, He declares us righteous even though we still remain sinners. The Catholic teaching confused justification (the act of declaring someone righteous) with sanctification (the process of actually making them righteous).

The Reformers saw the true meaning of justification in Paul. It became clear to them that justification was a forensic or legal declaration made by God concerning sinners who believe in Jesus. Luther taught that God is seen to be righteous not only when He condemns the guilty, but also when He justifies the ungodly, that is, accounts people righteous. Calvin taught that when Paul used the term "justification", he meant that God accepts sinners into His favor as righteous men. Calvin saw that justification involved two aspects: first, it consisted in the pardon of the sinner's guilt. Second, it meant that Christ's own righteousness was imputed or credited to the sinner.

So you can see that the Reformers made a clear distinction between justification on the one hand and regeneration and sanctification on the other. The medieval church had confused these concepts and taught that justification included all of them.

The Reformers, on the other hand, showed that while regeneration and renewal are intimately linked with justification, these sanctifying actions must never be confused with justification. They insisted that it is guilty sinners whom God pardons and declares righteous when they put their faith in Christ.

What is the nature of the saving faith? This is a vital issue. Since the Bible teaches that we are justified by faith alone, and that faith is the instrument through which we receive salvation, it's essential that we understand the nature of saving faith. The Reformers understood this, which is why they gave careful attention to the definition of faith. They defined it as including a number of basic elements: content/information (notitia); intellectual assent (assensus) and personal trust (fiducia).

The Roman Catholic Church taught that true faith consisted only in information and giving one's assent to it. The Reformers' view, which was based on the New Testament, went one step further than the Catholic position. They said that the Catholic definition was inadequate. It omitted the idea of trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So the Reformers made it very clear that true faith is not merely the faith of assent to the facts of the Gospel. Nor is it a willingness to accept what the church believes. It involves a personal reliance on the Lord Jesus Christ. The Roman Church, on the other hand, isn't too worried about whether the individual understands the gospel - a nodding acceptance will do.

I think I should also add that faith is not the ground of our justification. The reason why

we are justified is that Christ has fulfilled all righteousness and has died an atoning death for our sins. We are declared righteous solely on the basis of Christ's death, whereby all our sins are imputed to Christ. He fully satisfied God's justice in the deed. God also credits the "alien righteousness" of Christ to us. Faith is simply the hand that takes hold of the gift. Faith is not a work that earns merit.

How does the Pauline view of saving faith differ from some of the ideas of faith that are popular in modern evangelicalism? I suppose that one of the most noticeable tendencies in modern evangelicalism is to ignore the content of the Christian faith. This sometimes happens in mass evangelism, but it can also happen in other settings too. People are called upon to "decide for Jesus. But little is said about the person or work of Christ in the Gospel presentation. What these preachers forget is that saving faith must be based on content. Jesus is more than just a vague being to whom you commit your life. The Bible teaches that it matters profoundly what we believe. We are not justified by sincerity alone. We might be sincerely wrong. So knowing about the person and work of Christ is crucial if we are to exercise the sort of self-despairing faith that Luther says we need.

Again, I'm concerned when I hear evangelicals talking about faith as though it simply means agreement to doctrine. Faith certainly included believing in God. But the demons do that too, as James reminds us (James 2:19). It's one thing to believe in God; it's another thing to believe Him so that we trust Him with our lives. It's the idea of self-despairing faith in Christ that evangelicals must affirm.

Paul talks about the obedience of faith in Romans 1:5 and "faith expressing itself in love in Galatians 5:6. What is the relationship of works to faith? Of course, there is a sense in which the Gospel calls us to obedience. We are meant to repent and believe in Christ. But the Bible never sees this as a meritorious act. In this sense, good works play no part in our justification. However, the apostle Paul does teach that works are important in the life of the believer. They are not meritorious, but they are the fruit and signs of justification. The believer cannot earn salvation by works nor can he gain final acceptance on the day of judgment. But works follow on as the fruit of a believer's faith.

Luther puts it like this: "Faith does not require our doing; it requires that we believe the promise of God and accept something from Him. Therefore faith always justifies and makes alive; and yet it does not remain alone, that is idle. It does not remain idle or without love".

Calvin agrees. He says that, "We are justified through faith alone; but the faith that justifies is never alone".

Can Christians find assurance? Yes, they can. The Bible calls us to make our salvation a matter of certainty (2Peter 1:10). The primary way to find assurance is to look to Christ. If we are distressed by our spiritual state, then we must consider Him. He alone is the object of faith. He is the Savior. It is Christ who brings us to God. We must

continually look to Him. I think I should also add that Christian assurance is not confidence in oneself and one's own abilities. It comes from relying entirely on the grace of God in Christ.

What is it important to persevere in faith? I think Luther put it well when he said that although we are justified by grace, we always remain sinners. However much I grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, I must always remain conscious that I am a sinner who needs to trust in Christ as my Savior. That is how I must come to Christ, and it's also how I must respond to Him on my deathbed. I never cease to trust in Christ no matter how much I grow in my knowledge of Him. So perseverance in faith is vital.

What spiritual effect will the doctrine of justification by faith have in the believer's life? I think the main effect will be one of tremendous joy. It's a wonderful thing to wake up each day and realize that although I'm an unworthy sinner, nevertheless, I am accepted in Christ. Further, I don't have to work for my acceptance. Life is not about keeping God happy by performance. It gives me enormous joy to know that the most important person in the universe accepts me as I am because of the merits of Jesus Christ credited to me.

Again, it's an amazing relief to know that God has dealt with all my sins and faults. He's taken my guilt away. I am accepted in Christ. I know that if I was to die tonight, I would go to be with my Lord in heaven.

Further, now that I know that I'm saved through trusting Christ, I don't have to be terrified of the threat of purgatory. I don't have any worries about whether people will pray for me after I die, or whether they'll light candles for me. Nor do I have to worry about whether my friends and relatives will pay to have masses offered for me after my death. Justification through faith deals with these and many other fears.

What will happen if the church loses the doctrine of justification by faith? The first thing that will happen is that the Church will no longer have a Gospel to declare. There will be no good news.

Second, believers will lose their sense of assurance. We will wonder if we have ever done enough to please God. "Are we good enough?" we will ask. On the other hand, if we believe this doctrine, it will have a significant impact on our lives. First, we will have peace with God. This means that we will be able to approach God as a friend. Second, it also means that we will have a totally different attitude to sin. When I think of all that God has done for me in Christ, I should hate sin with all my heart. When I reflect on what it cost the Son of God - damnation upon the cross, punishment in body, mind and spirit - I should loathe sin with every part of my being. When I know that I have been justified by grace through faith, I should delight in obeying the One who loved me and gave Himself for me.

What is happening on the broader church front with respect to the doctrine of justification that causes you such alarm? I am alarmed at the way Evangelicals are

co-operating with Roman Catholics in evangelistic projects where the aim is to present the Gospel to people. If we cannot agree on the way in which a person is made right with God, how can we have an authoritative Gospel to preach? I cannot see how we can meaningfully join with Catholics in such an important enterprise when we are not agreed on the most fundamental matters. Of course, that doesn't mean that we cannot join with Catholics, or even Muslims for that matter, on other issues like abortion. There are some social issues where Catholics and Protestants can speak with a united voice. But we cannot compromise the Gospel. While we have much in common with Roman Catholics, and we thank God for it, we cannot concede what lies at the heart of the Gospel - the doctrine of justification by faith. If we are going to preach the truth to an ungodly world, we must not compromise it in the first place.

People often fail to remember that the Reformers could have very easily joined up with Rome in the sixteenth century to fight Islam. But they didn't. They wouldn't compromise the Gospel Luther refused to enter any alliance where the doctrine of justification by faith was compromised. And we ought to be glad that he made his stand. Otherwise, the truth might have been lost to us.

Should Evangelicals be trying to find more common cause with Roman Catholics today? I think it is good that Evangelicals and Catholics already agree on many things. For instance, we share a common Bible story line, we are opposed to pluralism and we think of salvation in reasonably similar ways. But all this was true for Luther and Calvin too at the time of the Reformation. They agreed with Catholics on the doctrines of the Trinity and the person and work of Christ in an age where many people were questioning these things. However, they refused to compromise what they believed was the essence of the Gospel - the doctrine of how a person is made right with God. At this point, I think they were right. And I believe that the safest course is to follow them.

Why is it that other people like James Packer and Charles Colson are urging religious co-operation with Roman Catholics? I think they believe that a united Christian front against secularism will yield more results in the modern age than our own individual efforts. They think there is room for co-operation with Catholics who have a high view of the Bible, God and Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, they haven't come up with a helpful solution as to how to get around the problem of Rome's denial of the Pauline doctrine of justification. That issue won't go away.

I think I should also point out that Protestants in countries such as Spain and Portugal, where Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, are amazed at Packer's stance. They find it incredible. They see only too clearly the spiritual and cultural impact of denying justification by faith. These people experience the religious superstition, idolatry and darkness that inevitably follow where justification by faith is denied.

Some New Testament scholars today have charged that Luther misunderstood the Gospel and sent the Church down a false trail on justification. Are they right? You are obviously referring to scholars who belong to the "New Perspectives on Paul" group. This term owes its origins to James Dunn, who was referring to a landmark book

by the scholar, E. P. Sanders, called 'Paul and Rabbinic Judaism'. In his book, Sanders claimed that Luther misunderstood first-century Judaism as a legalistic religion based on the idea of earning merit with God through keeping the Law.

Sanders criticized Luther's understanding of Paul. He claimed that Luther failed to realize that Paul was trying to counteract a fiercely nationalistic religion which sought to confine God's grace to those who had the covenant signs of the Jewish faith. According to Sanders, first-century Jews did not really believe that salvation was by works. Consequently, Luther's doctrine of justification is based on a misunderstanding of the spiritual problem that was troubling the Jews. Tom Wright, a leading evangelical scholar, is now promoting this new perspective on Paul that challenges the Reformers' understanding of justification by faith.

But not everyone agrees with this new perspective. For instance, Don Carson has shown that there are elements of merit theology in first-century Judaism. And the evidence for this works-based salvation can be found in Ephesians and the Pastoral Letters, as well as in Roman's and Galatians. Personally, I think Wright is wrong in his assessment of Luther. Luther did understand the problems of first-century Judaism, and he rightly identified Paul's doctrine of justification by faith as the solution.

Alistair McGrath has bought into this issue as well. He has suggested that the Reformation teaching on justification by faith needs modification today. Does it?

No, I don't think it does. McGrath seems to be agreeing with Tom Wright in his desire to reassess the doctrine of justification by faith. He agrees that there is a biblical concept of justification, but he sees no developed doctrine of justification by faith in Paul. He thinks the Reformation doctrine of justification is too narrow; it is not elastic enough. He wants to expand the concept of justification to include regeneration and sanctification in line with Augustine. He thinks the Council of Trent's definition of justification is "brilliant". Further, he has said that he believes that we should move away from the forensic language of the sixteenth century because it is not sufficiently attuned to the modern world. Frankly, I can't understand his position. Courtroom imagery is very much a part of life in today's world. Lots of movies are based around courtrooms, trials and judges' verdicts. I cannot see that the legal imagery in the concept of justification is irrelevant to a modern audience. We all understand it.

Why is McGrath going in this direction? One can only guess. I know he is interested in ecumenism and the bringing of churches together. Perhaps he would like to see Protestants and Catholics in one church. But it must not be at the expense of justification by faith.

Why do Roman Catholics assert that justification is not a forensic/legal declaration but is rather an infusion of grace? Because they have based their doctrine on a mistranslation of the Greek verb "dikaio". Sadly, Augustine, who played a key role in developing the Catholic doctrine, did not know Greek. I think it's tragic that the Catholic doctrine is founded on such a basic error. That's why it's important to understand biblical words. Scholars are not playing games when they are trying to

establish the meaning of terms. The line between truth and error can be a very fine line at times. Sometimes it can turn on a single word as in this case.

What doctrines do Roman Catholics still hold that deny the doctrine of justification by faith? They still believe that some Christians, like Mary, have done so many good works that they have earned excess merit with God. All these works are stored in the "treasury of merit" and can be given to other believers. This doctrine is still taught in their recent Catechism.

The Church also teaches that Christians can obtain indulgences for sin. And the teaching about purgatory is still in force. It's [all in the latest edition of the Catechism](#).¹

Are you sure about indulgences?

Yes, I am. Recently Rome has been offering plenary indulgences to faithful Catholics to mark the new millennium. You can get full remission of sin and escape purgatory if you go to Rome on pilgrimage or to other recognized Catholic pilgrim sites. You can also obtain a plenary indulgence at the moment by giving up smoking. The whole system is rather farcical in the way it treats sin.

¹ This link is an addition to the original article. While the information at this link is helpful, Third Millennium is not responsible for the other content on this site.