

THEOLOGY AND LIFE

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE (PART 3 OF 3)

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JUSTIFICATION AND THE FINISHED WORK OF CHRIST

New Perspective scholars have argued that justification is not the gospel and in fact, is not even dealing with matters of soteriology, but matters of ecclesiology. This assertion creates obvious differences in how we are to understand the doctrine of justification.

Lee Gatiss underscores this when he writes:

Luther declared that if the article of justification stands, the church stands but that if it falls, the church falls. Calvin called this doctrine “the main hinge on which religion turns,” while one of his successors at Geneva, Francis Turretin, declared that it is “of the greatest importance... the principal rampart of the Christian religion... This being adulterated or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places.” More recently, Reformed theologian Robert Reymond has written of justification that it is, “the heart and core of the gospel” and that consequently, “great care must be taken in teaching this doctrine lest one wind up declaring ‘another gospel’ which actually is not a gospel at all.”¹

It seems to me that part of the attraction in redefining justification, as it marks those who are members of the Church, is its utility in breaking down the various barriers that separate Christendom. If justification is not about how you are saved, then why should Roman Catholics and Protestants be divided?

As Wright argues that justification should never have been central to the Reformation debates, he concludes it is a doctrine that declares,

...that all who believe in Jesus Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their cultural differences... [and] because what matters is believing in Jesus, detailed agreement on justification itself,

properly conceived, isn't the thing that should determine Eucharistic fellowship.²

...one is justified by faith by believing in Jesus. It follows quite clearly that many people are justified by faith who don't know they are justified by faith. The Galatian Christians were justified by faith, though they didn't realize it and thought they had to be circumcised as well.³

The implication for the advancement of the ecumenical cause is obvious. If the only gospel issue is believing in Jesus, then why are we separated? If justification by faith is about the removal of exclusiveness then why argue about infant baptism, women in ministry or continuing revelation? Wright argues that since justification is the affirmation that we are all one believing community, it therefore makes the barriers of race, class and gender irrelevant to membership or office in the covenant community.⁴

In other words, like Dunn, the new perspective on justification is about the rejection of exclusivism. His implication that all Christians should similarly oppose all exclusivism is unbiblical and goes beyond the Word of God.⁵

Moreover, the argument that our differences on justification are not important or unessential seems to be contradicted by Paul himself who argues that anyone who preaches another view of justification is in effect preaching another gospel. Paul's response (Gal 1:9) is emphatic, "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"

As Robert Smith confirms:

As far as Paul was concerned, the fact that his opponents believed in Jesus was largely irrelevant. Their denial of justification by faith cut them off from Christ and put them outside of Abraham's family and God's family (Gal 5:2-4; 4:21-31). Justification in Paul's estimation is clearly worth fighting about and fighting for (Gal 2:11-14; cf Acts 15:2) precisely because it determines who is and is not 'in the family'.⁶

² N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg. 159.

³ Ibid, pg. 159.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 161.

⁵ For instance, some differences are clearly God's will. The differences between men and women and their different economic roles whilst enjoying ontological equality (Gen. 1-2) would be one of many examples.

Robert S. Smith Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with "The New Perspective on Paul". (RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg 129.

How then can a less than clear understanding of justification by faith be a true basis for unity? Surely, lasting unity is found in our shared confession that we are saved by grace through faith in the work of Jesus Christ. Anything less than this confession is a flimsy basis for ecumenical progress.

In response to the assertions of the New Perspective scholars, Paul teaches that we have no basis of unity outside of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Paul's convictions about the efficacy of Christ's work can be seen in Romans 5:7 – "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" John builds upon this idea in 1 John 1:7, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

PERSONAL ASSURANCE

Closely connected with the issue of justification by faith is the issue of assurance of salvation. The Reformation view of the forensic nature of justification lies as the bedrock of Christian assurance. To be justified is to have peace with God, and our personal assurance of salvation is therefore predicated upon Christ's acceptable, meritorious and atoning work.

Carson laments, that this is in contrast with those who hold to the new perspective and its categories of 'getting in' and staying in'.

... 'getting in' turns on God's grace; 'staying in' turns on the believers obedience.... if accepted without qualification the implications for Christian assurance are stunning. Christian assurance becomes entirely hostage to Christian obedience, and is not established as a constituent element of saving faith itself.⁷

The Reformers saw Christian assurance as an element of saving faith, since they believed that trusting in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and the declaration of righteousness secured our assurance. Indeed, Calvin ground Christian assurance on Christ alone.⁸

Thompson also concurs that:

The Reformers understood personal assurance to be the existential edge of justification by faith. Its reality and intensity are explained by the present in breaking of the eschatological verdict of God on the basis of his intervention in Christ. This is the meaning of Paul's declaration in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". ... Paul boldly

⁷ D Carson, Reflections on Christian Assurance, (WTJ 54 1992) pg 3.

⁸ Ibid, Carson.

proclaims the reality and basis of Christian confidence...[that] we have peace with God, knowing the final verdict of God now, even while we wait for the redemption of our bodies.”⁹

Consequently, the New Perspective presentation of the Pauline doctrine of justification undermines assurance with its reluctance to grapple with the personal and existential aspects of justification. They do this by concentrating largely on the corporate and historical understanding of redemption. In fact, Wright goes so far as to deny, “one is justified or saved first and foremost as an individual.” For Wright, “there is no such thing as an ‘individual’ Christian”¹⁰ This does not sit well with the many references to salvation of individuals. Each Christian should be assured “the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20).”¹¹

Moreover, Wright, Dunn and Sanders all give (in varying degrees) the issue of sanctification or Christian obedience an instrumental role in the final eschatological vindication of God’s people. That is, the New Perspective drives the believer to find comfort and assurance in their own obedience as evidence of the Spirit’s work and as an instrumental part of their ultimate vindication. They take their eyes off the work of Christ and place their hope in the work of their own hands, at least in part, since “staying in” the covenant community is predicated on covenant obedience.

Sanders offers no Christian assurance based on Christ’s finished work when he writes, “It thus appears, that while Christians can revert to the non-Christian state and share the fate of unbelievers, there is no deed that necessarily leads to the condemnation of a believer, although Paul appears to waver with regard to food offered to idols.”¹²

Clearly, the obedience of the Christian is instrumental in whether there will be a favorable eschatological verdict. Consequently, where justification by faith is at the periphery of Christian theology, Christian assurance is pushed to the periphery of Christian experience.¹³ According to the New Perspective, salvation is intrinsically uncertain (if not elusive) whilst it relies upon the instrument of our unpredictable obedience.

In contrast, if salvation is indeed the work of a sovereign God in seeking and saving sinners, then the Christian has in the work of Christ all the assurance they need to be confident on that great day when they shall be revealed as sons and daughters of the living God.

⁹ Mark Thompson Personal Assurance and the New Perspective (RTR, 53:2, 1994) pg. 84.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg. 159

¹¹ Robert S. Smith Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with ‘The New Perspective on Paul’. (RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg. 134.

E.P. Sanders Paul, The Law and the Jewish People (Fortress Press Minneapolis, 1983) pg. 111.

¹³ Mark Thompson Personal Assurance and the New Perspective (RTR, 53:2, 1994) pg. 85.

This orthodox position does not deny that obedience to God manifesting itself in the fruits of good works plays a secondary part in encouraging the believer that the Spirit is working in and through them.¹⁴ However, as the Reformers so clearly saw, it is the finished work of Jesus Christ that is the object of our faith and the foundation of our community, and hope of glory.

¹⁴ 2 Cor 13:10; Jas 2:2