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Reformation
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**JUSTIFICATION:
MODERN
REFLECTIONS**

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FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

Thinking clearly about justification is often problematic, especially when many Protestants and Catholics are convinced that the argument was settled in the sixteenth century. All who seriously enter into this doctrinal discussion should read Professor Alister E. McGrath's magisterial study, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge, 1986). This work, originally published in two volumes, was revised and brought up-to-date in a single volume issued in 1998. It is the first major study of the history and development of the doctrine of justification since 1870 and is invaluable for serious Christian discussion.

Dr. McGrath provides a detailed assessment of the development of the doctrine during the medieval period, and a careful analysis of the sixteenth-century debates over this important doctrine. One thing you soon discover when you read this work—the church has never spoken with one single voice on justification. Augustine plainly did not understand it the way Luther did. And Luther and Calvin had some disagreement, at least in emphasis. Since the Reformation, Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars have found some amazing common ground when they studied the doctrine with an open Bible. New developments in Pauline studies are being published almost every day. McGrath gives a brief overview in his new edition of his work and handles with great care some important debates. The effect is that he provides for the discerning reader a clearly and carefully outlined overview that sets the modern debate in its wider historical context. I highly commend this volume.



The central issue at stake in the present discussion of justification boils down to this: What kind of faith justifies a believing sinner? I want to argue that the Bible plainly answers this question by telling us that justifying faith is "obedient" faith (cf. Romans 1:5; 16:26). The faith which saves (justifies) is "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). This is not confusing faith and works in the biblical sense. Faith, which is real saving faith, is trusting Christ. It is not agreeing to a set of salvation texts or propositions. Faith, by biblical definition, trusts the promises of God in Jesus Christ and thus banks one's whole eternal future on Jesus alone, thus on nothing one can do. But when one trusts Jesus, the faith given by God himself, yields obedience. This is the only way to make sense of Hebrews 11 and the great roll call of the faithful.

By this means we can also reconcile Paul and James 2:14-26 without great difficulty. (Luther had serious struggles with James, as you may recall.) James is simply saying that "faith alone" does not justify, that is the faith which does not obey is not real faith. It is not active trust and thus goes its own way.



In one sense it is not fully appropriate to speak of a believer being justified by faith *alone* unless you understand that the faith that justifies (and it is God's gift) is *never alone*! This is not a new idea but one soundly rooted in the Reformed tradition itself. Faith and repentance are not "works" nor are they the "ground" of salvation or of justification in any true sense. They are better understood, as Norman Shepherd argued nearly thirty years ago "as covenantal response to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the way (Acts 24:14; 2 Peter 2:2) in which the Lord of the Covenant brings his people into the full possession of eternal life."

Further, when justification is biblically understood it means that those who believe are presently justified and thus live by the Spirit every day of their lives. At the same time they will also be justified (vindicated) on the last day. I understand

the critical and oft misused text of Romans 2:12 (“the doers of the law will be justified”) to refer not to *hypothetical* persons, as though no one could ever be such a person. I understand Romans 2:12 to refer rather to faithful disciples of Jesus who will be justified on the final day. (Read Luke 8:21 and James 1:22-25 in this light and see what is plainly taught here.)

In Romans 4:5 Paul speaks of the justification of God as linked to the justification of the ungodly, to whom faith is reckoned as righteousness. The death and resurrection of Jesus result in “our justification” (Romans 4:25). We are brought home to this by the Spirit’s work of bringing us into union with Christ. John Reumann is correct when he notes that “for Paul, justification is the prime effect of the Christ event, a metaphor of salvation along with ‘participation in Christ’ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This theme must be considered along with the related word fields of ‘grace’ and ‘faith’ as well as, in English, ‘righteousness.’”

The Reformed doctrine of *sola fide* never meant, at least in John Calvin, what it often seems to mean in many modern debates. Justification by faith was never an *abstraction*, a kind of faith not *vitally* related to good works. Galatians 5:6 says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” In *Institutes* III, 11.20, Calvin wrote, “Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies ‘but faith working through love.’ But it does not take its power to justify from that working of love. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads us into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ.”

If there is one argument most often made against defining justifying faith as “living and active” in this way it is expressed in the fear that you will end up with justification by faith *plus* works. What do I say to this charge? I would argue that forgiveness cannot be separated from justifying faith, as if it were something extra or added. If the very essence of justification includes forgiveness, along with a declaration of status, then there are numerous texts that are baffling beyond words. There is no forgiveness *without* repentance. (This is, at the core, the modern “Lordship Debate.”) If this is true then there is no jus-

tification without repentance. Justifying faith—as we see again, *defining* faith is the issue here—is, necessarily, penitent faith. If we do not treat faith in this manner we end up with a sanctification that is quite intentionally separated from justification.

I have asked several proponents of *sola fide*, who disagree with my understanding of the expression, how they define saving faith. I have asked, further, “Is the saving faith which brings justification any different from the same faith which brings sanctification?” Amazingly, I have heard answers that begin to talk about a “nanosecond’s difference” between the faith which brings justification and the faith that brings sanctification. This answer fails to satisfy me in the light of the text of the Bible itself. It sounds much more like a scholastic answer than a biblical one.

Simply put, faith is not a work. Plainly, human “works” (Ephesians 2:9), or “works of the law” (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16), or “deeds which we have done in righteousness” (Titus 3:5) do *not* contribute one iota to our salvation. But “good works” (Ephesians 2:10) are the very works for which true believers were created in vital, living, union with Christ. The same can be said of the works done by the power of the Holy Spirit in the believer (Romans 8:9; Galatians 5:22-26), or the works done that spring from true faith (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

I can affirm several important truths at this point. Faith is not a work, in the sense that it is anything good, meritorious, or just that I can contribute to the saving work of Christ and the Spirit. I do not allow a conscious, or unconscious, synergism to work its way into my understanding of justification. Further, justification is a forensic declaration. Perhaps the best synonym in English is “vindication.” I do not think the primary issue with traditional Roman Catholic theology is “works” in the right sense of the term (e.g., Ephesians 2:10) but rather the nature of faith. Both parties affirm the necessity of faith but Rome wants to bring “merit” into the equation. Faith alone, in my thinking, is a God-wrought work of the Holy Spirit which leads the sinner to trust the promise of God in the gospel (forgiveness) which brings me, as a believer, into right relationship with God, which is the new life given in the

Spirit. I can accept a *historia salutis*, but find an *ordo salutis* very problematic in the light of biblical evidence.

Further, the *ground* of my justification is the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ alone. The *instrumentality* through which I come to Christ is faith, indeed real faith alone. The righteousness of God has been limited, even obscured, in some of our Protestant tradition. If I understand the biblical use of this term it has both a *legal* and a *dynamic* quality about it (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Part of what is going on in this modern discussion is an attempt to understand and develop an inaugurated eschatology. We are vindicated now *and* we will be vindicated in the Last Day. Both are true! By this means biblical theologians wish to see the righteousness of God in the reconciling work of Jesus and the renewing of the Spirit. This causes some to say that this is Roman Catholic theology, thus the accusation that I am teaching infusion.

When the Spirit gives a person faith they are reconciled to God and renewed in the Spirit by the righteousness of God. This is experienced in both the removal of the penalty against us and the power of the Spirit immediately working in us.

One of the ways the "traditional" view handles important texts can be seen in how commentators treat Romans 3:21-26. Most treat "righteousness" here as merely, or only, a legal concept. This causes them to separate the righteousness of God from the ethical power of the cross and thus from God's revealed righteousness. But the ethical power of the cross is not an addition. God is faithful to his promises precisely because he is righteous. God's righteousness includes two aspects of a single reality in the New Testament. Peter Stuhlmacher notes that "Romans 3:23-26 has already shown us how concretely Paul understands justification, and this is confirmed by the parallels between 'to be justified' and 'to be sanctified' in 1 Corinthians 6:11 and Romans 8:30. According to biblical thought, justification is a legal act of the creator God and therefore at the same time an act of new creation, by virtue of which those who are justified participate in the glory and righteousness which exist in God's presence. Hence, the

dogmatic distinction which arose in the history of the church between a justification which is first only reckoned legally (forensic-imputed) and a justification which is creatively at work (effective) is, measured by the examples just named, an *unbiblical abstraction*" [emphasis mine].

Trent taught that justification came about by the righteousness of Christ "infused" into me, thus the righteousness which ultimately saves me is a righteousness that *inheres* within me. Am I now suggesting that this is correct? Absolutely not! Justification comes about solely on the basis of Christ's twofold work for me, namely his forensic *and* effective work of salvation. Understood properly, this is alien to me. It was something done in history that results in my salvation. I do not add one iota to it nor does my effort win it in any sense. What I am saying, and saying rather clearly I hope, is that we must not separate justification and sanctification in the way we have often done. They are bound up in the same gift of faith. They are both the fruit of God's righteousness. They are both given to faith alone. This is precisely why Paul can speak of salvation by grace and speak of sanctification as he does in 1 Corinthians 1:30. This also is why he can put sanctification in front of justification as he does in 1 Corinthians 6:11. There is no confusion between the two so long as we affirm clearly and biblically that the ground of our justification, and our sanctification, is the life, death and resurrection of Christ, not our own faith-obedience, or our own works (in the negative sense as used in Romans 2:2-4).

Paul's insistence that faith is the means by which God saves us does not make faith into a human work that we bring to God that helps him to finish the job. Paul's continual insistence upon faith alone is meant to destroy any notion that we can do anything in ourselves to commend us to God. The ground of my salvation is the life and death of Christ alone. The issue then is this—what does Christ's life and death do for me? Is it merely a declaration or does it also bring a new position that includes a new power? Christ's life and death bring forgiveness, a reality and a declaration grounded in God's righteousness, and new life. He does break the power of

canceled sin by the work of his cross, thus two-stage salvation theology is dealt a powerful death-blow by this understanding. (I am quite convinced that John Wesley, following the traditional Reformation view of forensic declaration alone, came to his views of sanctification because of this division.)

So, does justifying faith include our obedience, properly understood as the fruit of Christ's righteous, powerful, saving work? Of course it does if you are prepared to take Romans 2:3-16, Matthew 12:37; 25:31-46, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:21, and Hebrews 11 at face value. (Read these texts and simply let them say what they are saying with no attempt to force them into a definition that changes their straightforward sense.) You can get a summary of the whole in texts like 2 Thessalonians 1:3-5, Philippians 1:28, Hebrews 6:9-10, 2 Peter 1:10-11 and Revelation 14:12-13. And you can see clear parallels between faith and obedience in Hebrews 3:18-19 and 4:2 and 6. As a friend noted to me a few months ago it is striking that Abraham can be said to be justified by faith at the beginning of his walk with God (Hebrews 11), at the middle of his journey (Romans 4) and at the end of his life (James 2). Justification refers, in other words, to the whole journey. He was continually trusting and thus was justified and would finally be justified by God, or vindicated, in the end.

There runs through much of this debate the idea that I am suggesting "our own acts" constitute an obedience that saves. By this accusation it is said that linking faith and obedience in this way really falls into the trap of saying we contribute something to our salvation. I reject this precisely because "my own acts" (as a believer) do not save me. I am saved by what God works in me by grace alone, which is revealed in the justifying death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the consequent life-giving work of the Spirit, which is grounded in this historical act.

If regeneration brings new life, and new life is given to faith (itself a gift), then we cannot separate the faith which justifies from the faith which sanctifies, at least not in any meaningful way.

So can I affirm *sola fide*? How can I accept this great slo-

gan, given the trajectory of my own thought? I believe the biblical answer is this: *Sola fide* means "only by faith in Jesus Christ" not "faith alone," understood as bare faith, or faith severed from living union with Christ. If you interpret faith alone to mean what is sometimes argued you can make no sense at all of James 2:14-24. This is, I think, is why Luther was so baffled by the Epistle of James itself. And this is why John Calvin got much closer to the proper balance in these matters by stressing union with Christ so prominently as he did in his theology.

Can a genuine discussion about the biblical texts related to the doctrine of justification, and their meaning, take place in our time? I believe those who affirm *sola Scriptura* are necessarily committed to seeking further light from the Bible, not just from the creeds. Luther is not the last word on the matter. We need not fear an earnest and serious effort to plumb the depths of the biblical revelation if we would reform the church.

Sadly, this is not always the case. There are some legitimate discussions being conducted but the atmosphere is too easily poisoned through strong rhetoric and frequent misrepresentation. The term "The New Perspective on Paul" is now kicked around rather freely. I personally think the label has some usefulness. At the same time it can be easily employed as a brand for anyone who begins to search out the biblical texts related to a very important discussion. The tendency has too often been to treat with suspicion anyone who does not embrace a particular doctrinal system rooted in the German Reformation. By the use of this label (for that matter, the use of any label) some can reject what almost anyone has to say as out of hand.



Alister E. McGrath calls this "an important debate [about the meaning of the all important phrase the righteousness of God] that is still under way." He adds that it "has yet to be resolved."

J. Reumann provides a helpful representation of the four main lines of how modern interpretations of "the righteousness of God" are understood. He notes the positions, and their primary advocates, in this way:

- The term is an *objective* genitive, i.e., it refers to "a righteousness which is valid before God" (Luther's view).
- The term is a *subjective* genitive, i.e., it refers to "righteousness as an attribute or quality of God" (Käseman's view).
- The term is a *genitive of authorship*, i.e., it refers to "a righteousness that goes forth from God" (Bultmann's view).
- The term is a *genitive of origin*, i.e., it refers to a "man's righteous status which is the result of God's action of justifying" (Cranfield's view).

McGrath adds that there is a general consensus on one point, which should be emphasized. "*The 'righteousness of God' is not a moral concept*" (italics his). He adds, "There is a disturbing tendency to use Pauline texts to construct a picture of God as some kind of moral rigorist, and thus impose human conceptions of righteousness upon God. If Pauline exegesis has achieved anything, it is to remind us of the need to interpret Pauline phrases within their proper context, rather than impose 'self-evident' interpretations upon them." All I can say is "Amen."

John R. W. Stott, in his popular commentary on Romans, notes that evangelicals do not have to exclusively choose one approach over the other in this debate. We can benefit by seeing the insights another brings to these modern reflections. Some, such as E. P. Sanders, have clearly gone too far. I find Stott's counsel, however, far more circumspect, careful and pastoral than the way some have dealt with these issues over the past few years. My prayer is that an engaging and full-orbed biblical discussion can go forward. I believe the benefit will be an ongoing reformation in our churches.