

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: WHAT IT MEANS

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Our understanding of justification by faith is fundamental to our proclamation and understanding of the gospel so in this article I want to indicate what the preaching of the doctrine of justification is concerned to impart to others. This doctrine then will be discussed here in

terms of its importance, its nature and its ground.

### A. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

I want now to highlight the crucial importance of justification in the gospel scheme of salvation in three ways:

1. First of all, we can establish the importance of this doctrine by looking at its achievements in the history of the church.

We can begin the survey where the doctrine actually emerged in its clearest formulation. This doctrine has consistently and correctly been regarded as one of the two basic, controlling principles of Reformation theology. The authority of Scripture was the formal principle of that theology, describing its method and providing its sole touch-stone of truth; and justification by faith was its material principle, determining its substance and directing its dynamic.

It was not, of course, a new doctrine discovered for the first time by the Reformers - Martin Luther and John Calvin. We have to recognise that Christians right down through the ages discerned this principle, and in fact acted on it. The fact of acceptance with God on the merits of Christ, and by grace alone, was never really absent from the faith of Christ's church. There are many instances in which it finds expression down through the years, not so much, perhaps, as an articulated article of the faith, but certainly as a testimony of Christian experience. Now, that is to say just this: that no sinner can know Christ savingly apart from justification, and justification was known in the heart of every believer even if it was not clearly formulated in his mind. While this fact must be remembered, yet it nevertheless

remains true that it was the doctrine of justification by faith that was most clearly to mark the cleavage between the Reformation era and the ages that went before it. There at the Reformation it found clarification, clear formulation, and very significant vocal articulation. It was the centre of the preaching of men like Melancthon, Luther, Calvin, and those who under God were entrusted with the revival that lies at the heart of the Reformation.

Now, that the Reformation itself was in essence a rediscovery of the gospel way of salvation, and that the doctrine of justification by faith was one of the two major catalysts in that rediscovery, is proof for us of how closely it lies to the very heart of the gospel. So close to the heart of the gospel that I want to say this: where the truths of justification are held and proclaimed, there a door of hope is set before sinners; where these truths are neither known nor preached, then the way of salvation has been shut up, and the lost sinner can have no hope. It is because of this - and this is absolutely fundamental to our understanding of what the gospel is - G.C. Berkouwer of the Free University of Amsterdam is right (and I don't always think Berkouwer is right!) when he says: "The confession of divine justification touches man's life at its heart, at the point of his relationship to God. It defines the preaching of the church, the existence and progress of the life of faith, the root of human security, and man's perspective for the future." All these things are involved in the proclamation of justification by faith. Professor Finlayson tells us that these truths mentioned by Berkouwer really underlie the spiritual impulse of the Reformation and show us that the Reformation was in fact far more radical spiritually than we tend to think. He points out its historical importance when he says, "It made faith," (not just the Reformation, but the doctrine of justification) "alone the sole contact between the sinner and the Saviour. It turned theology into religion; it proved to be the substitution of one religion for another of a totally different kind, of a divine religion for a human, of the supernatural grace of God for the blind and hopeless efforts of men." This is true. The emergence and the formulation of this doctrine lay behind the Reformation, and it was nothing less than the substitution of one religion for another: the religion of God's grace over against a religion that was couched in the blind and hopeless efforts of men. And if there was one thing that was not said about or by the Pope on his visit to Britain in 1982, it was this: the doctrine of justification by faith was not mentioned.

Now, one of the men I have found most helpful on the doctrine of justification by faith is Dr James Buchanan, a theologian of the Free Church of Scotland in the last century (and it's a comment on evangelical understanding that his book is the last major treatise that we have amongst evangelicals on justification by faith). He pinpoints the importance of the doctrine to our own position like this: "The revival of the gospel doctrine of justification was the chief means of effecting the reformation of religion in Europe in the sixteenth century." And we should never forget that if the Reformation had not taken place, the history of the Western world would be very different today from what it is. It is untrue to say that the Reformation doesn't matter - it matters a great deal. Professor John Murray confirms this opinion when he says, "It may be safe to say that the greatest event for Christendom in the last fifteen hundred years was the Protestant Reformation." He continues, "What was the spark that lit the flame of evangelical passion? It was, by the grace of God, the discovery on the part of Luther stricken with a sense of his estrangement from God, and feeling in his inmost soul the stings of His wrath and the remorse of a terrified conscience, of the true and only way whereby a man can be just with God. To him, the truth of justification by free grace, through faith, lifted him from the depths of the forebodings of hell to ecstasy of peace with God and the hope of glory." ('Collected Writings' Vol.2 p.203). "The doctrine of justification was the radical principle out of which grew the reformation from Popery," says R.L.Dabney; "it was by adopting this doctrine that the Reformers were led out of darkness into light." Let us never forget this and how vitally important, historically, the doctrine of justification by faith is.

2. Secondly let me stress the importance of justification to the gospel scheme of salvation by referring to the spiritual effects which this doctrine has produced in the lives of God's people. The first and basic question in spiritual things is that of a man's relationship to God. All other questions of a religious nature take second place to that one. All religion - not merely the Christian faith - ultimately poses the query, "How can a man be just with God? How can he be right with the Holy One?" And religions pose a whole series of varied answers to that question. But when we come to the Bible the question assumes a far more serious and aggravated aspect than merely, "How can a man be just with God?" The question now is, "How can a sinful man be just with a holy God?" The gospel, which centres on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, supplies the only valid

answer to that question. For this reason: in the final analysis sin is always against God; and the one who is against God can never be right with God. If we are against God then God is against us; it cannot be otherwise. God cannot fail to take account of that which is the contradiction of Himself. His holy perfection requires the recoil of righteous indignation to all sin and that recoil finds its expression in wrath. "The wrath of God," says the apostle, "is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness," and let us as ministers remember that in our own lives. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." That is our actual situation; that is not theory, but fact. Because this is so, the gravity and complexity of the question is, "How can a sinful man be right with a holy God?"

Man today really fails to face up to this reality. He is living in a cushioned vacuum of his own philosophical creation and his understanding of reality is untrue. To efface not only God, but in addition the God of justice and of wrath who is angry with the wicked every day, is to distort reality, and to hide behind that which is untrue. This is one reason why the ground doctrine of justification by faith alone does not raise large 'Hosannas', either in our own hearts or in the hearts of the people to whom we preach. We fail to reckon with two vital things: with sin, and with the wrath of God. This is the reason why the gospel of grace will really be a mere sound in the world and church of our own day, for man has little sense of the reality of God and of the reality of His judgment; he has little understanding of the majesty of God and of His holiness, while sin is considered nothing more than man's misfortune out of which he is growing. If it's not his misfortune, it's merely a maladjustment to his environment, and proper education will sort it out. If we face reality in biblical terms we have to reckon with the fact that justification deals with lost sinners. "The justification of a sinner," says W.G.T. Shedd (and I would commend him to your reading), "is different from that of a righteous person. The former is unmerited, the latter is merited. The former is without good works, the latter is because of good works. The former is pardon of sin, and accepting one as righteous when he is not so; the latter is pronouncing one righteous because he is so. The former is complex, the latter is simple." That is how he makes the distinction between the justification of a sinner and the justification of one who is not a sinner. "Holy angels," for example, he says, "are justified before the bar of God on the ground of their own righteousness; they have not

sinned."

Now we can go on to this: the plain fact stands before us that sin has involved man in guilt while guilt, in turn, involves divine condemnation. To state the matter in this way points out for us the necessity of a complete reversal in our legal standing before God. That is where justification begins; it is where it must begin. Because of sin, and the condemnation that sin's guilt involves, man's standing with God is wrong. The real question that justification confronts is, "How can that standing be put right?" Our salvation must involve not merely a change in our inward attitude to God, but before that a change in God's judicial relationship to us. How can that standing and that judicial relationship ever be changed? Justification is the answer; and justification is the act of God's free grace. Paul says, in Romans 8:33, "It is God that justifies, who is he that condemns?" So vital and fundamental, then, is justification, that its importance to salvation cannot be highlighted too strongly. Wherever men have come to an understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone, they have come to a wonderful, spiritual emancipation. Wherever it is lost or obscured, men enter in various degrees into spiritual bondage. The spiritual achievements of justification by faith tell us that it lies at the very heart of the gospel.

3. Thirdly, we'll now turn from the historical achievements of the doctrine and its spiritual effects to its theological implications. It is vitally important here to recognise the relationship that justification bears to all other doctrines involved in an evangelical and biblical scheme of theology. The biblical doctrine bears, for example, not merely on the application of redemption to sinners, but it bears even more strongly on the nature of the redemption which is to be applied to sinners. In other words, it ties in not merely with the application of redemption but with the accomplishment of redemption. Or, to put it differently, it ties in with what kind of salvation a sinner can find when he finds salvation in Christ.

Now, we know that the justification of a sinner is inextricably bound up with his regeneration, with his union to Christ, with his faith, his repentance and his conversion. That is, it stands in intimate relation to all the doctrines involved in the application of redemption. But that is not all. We must remember that it also stands intimately related to the person and work of Christ, and especially to the atonement. Was Christ's death a work that lay the basis upon which

sinners could be accounted righteous before a holy God? Did He bear the guilt of sin? Did He safeguard the divine rectitude in the pardon and remission of sin? All these, and many other vital questions of theology, will not only affect, but they will in turn be affected by, our understanding of the doctrine of justification. Now this is very clearly spelled out for us by a theologian whom I admire very much, namely, R.L.Dabney. He writes: "When we consider how many of the fundamental points of theology are connected with justification, we can hardly assign it too important a place. Our view of this doctrine must determine or be determined by our view of Christ's satisfaction. And this again carries along with it the whole doctrine concerning the natures and person of Christ. And if the proper deity of Him be denied, that of the Holy Ghost will very certainly follow along with it, so that the very doctrine of the Trinity itself is destroyed by extreme views concerning justification. Again, 'It is God that justifies'; how evident then that our views of justification will involve those of God's law and of His own moral attributes. The doctrine of original sin is also brought in question when we assert the impossibility of a man so keeping the law of God as to justify himself." I'm quoting Dabney to show the range of doctrines that will be affected by what we believe concerning the doctrine of justification by faith. Perhaps you never knew it was as important as that - but it is. Arianism, Socinianism, and Unitarianism can all be traced back in their origins to a departure from the simple doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone. Justification by faith, the more you study it, becomes a key in the whole archway of evangelical doctrine. So vital is it that where it is lost or obscured, perverted or misunderstood, the entire provision of God's redemptive accomplishment for the salvation of sinners is, in the same measure, lost or obscured or perverted or misunderstood. The importance of justification was not being misrepresented in the least when Luther declared it to be the article of a standing or a fallen church. You can determine the health or otherwise of the doctrine of any church when you know its doctrine of justification by faith.

## B. THE NATURE OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Now I want to go on, in the second place, to look with you at the nature of justification by faith. I am assuming that you are already well acquainted with this doctrine, so all I want to do is to clarify briefly the nature of justification by faith. How do you define it? I have looked at many books on this doctrine, and the best definition

I have found is in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and by faith alone." Could you better that?

1. Now let's look quickly at this definition. First of all, justification is an act of God. That might not seem very important - but it is. It is an act of God, and not a work of God; and the act is of a legal, judicial or forensic nature, and the terminology of Scripture about justification can only be understood in a forensic sense. Because it is a forensic act it has to do with our legal standing before God. It is not a work within the person being justified, but it is a declaration about the person being justified. Regeneration, to take one example of what God does in the application of redemption, is a work of God in us; but justification is purely and solely a judgment of God concerning us. The difference is crucial to a correct understanding of what justification is.

The distinction is similar to the difference between the action of a surgeon and the act of a judge. The one, when he removes some diseased part of the body, does something in us; the other doesn't do that, but he gives a verdict concerning our legal status, our relationship to law and our standing in the eyes of law. The declaration is either concerning our innocence or concerning our guilt - either of these two things and nothing else. Now, that declaration has nothing to do with making us inwardly good or inwardly bad. It is not a work that can make us either holy or evil; it is a declaration not about our inward condition, but about our actual legal standing.

Justification, therefore, means that the sinner is declared as being free from guilt and, in the sight of God, as sustaining a relation which meets all the requirements of His holy law and His inflexible justice. This difference is critical because many make the mistake of confusing justification with sanctification, and this is done in a variety of ways and by a broad spectrum of religious opinion, ranging from the Romanist with its doctrine of infused grace on the one hand, to the Perfectionists with their doctrine of complete holiness, on the other. There is always a confusion of two things which differ: justification and sanctification.

Now, in essence, this type of teaching which confuses these things simply puts the work of the Holy Spirit into the place which should

be occupied by the work of Christ alone. This kind of teaching looks to the work of the Holy Spirit within the sinner as the basis of justification, rather than to Christ's work for the sinner as that basis. James Buchanan writes: "There is perhaps, no more subtle or plausible error on the subject of justification than that which makes it rest on the indwelling presence and the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in the heart."

It's worth noting how damaging this kind of thought can be to biblical teaching, and how destructive of spiritual peace in personal experience. For if we are justified solely on account of what Christ did and suffered for us, we can rest upon a completely finished work, a righteousness already accepted by God. But if we are justified in the least measure at all by a work of the Holy Spirit within us, we are called to rest on a work that is still taking place, which is subject to resistance from our own depraved hearts, and which, in the case of the unrenewed sinner, is not even begun until that sinner is safely past the point of regeneration. Any such scheme of justification strongly detracts not merely from the freeness of grace, but from the fulness of the atoning work of Christ. We must be careful, therefore, to distinguish between justification and sanctification; they are closely related, but distinctive.

It is in fact just at this very point that many evangelicals today lamentably fail to preach a full, clear, biblical message. They do this in a variety of ways and often, I like to believe, without realising it. They put forward faith or repentance, or prayer or even 'coming to Christ' as the basis for becoming right with God. Do you do that when you preach? I have to ask myself, do I? In fact, none of these things is the basis on which a sinner can come to God or become right with God. All of these things are only involved in us being made right with God; but it is true that any doctrine that over-stresses the activity of the sinner, or even the work of God within the sinner, as the basis for justification, has failed to grapple with the very nature of the justification it is seeking to proclaim. Justification is no more a work of God than it is the work of us men. They have never understood it as being not a work but an act of God in which He makes a declaration about the sinner's standing before the law.

2. The second thing to note from this definition is this: that the act is one of God's free grace. It couldn't be anything else. This

is what marks the gospel method of justification as being absolutely unique. Justification has to deal with a sinner under condemnation. That is the only sentence which can really belong to him before justice and law; and condemnation is, of course, the exact opposite of justification. The nub of the matter is that because He is dealing with sinners God is required, as the apostle says, "to justify the ungodly." The amazing thing about the gospel is that God can remain God and do that. He can be just and the justifier of the ungodly. This is precisely the truth which the gospel method of justification is concerned to proclaim. God's declaration proceeds upon His legal regard to what His free grace has already done, and what it has already achieved for the sinner in the finished work of Christ. God acts upon the basis of a provision which He has himself provided, and which adequately meets all the exigencies of the matter in hand; a provision which is there because of His gracious love, and for no other reason at all. It is there because, in the words of the apostle, "God spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all." It is there because "God so loved the world ..." What a gospel! It's rooted in the free grace of God. It's an act of God's free grace.

3. And the third point is this: "In that act," the Catechism says, "He pardons all our sins." This is a vital and important but not the only, part of justification. The pardon of sin consists in the removal of sin's guilt; and that involves the absolving of the sinner from the obligation to punishment which was his just due because of his breach of God's holy law. He is absolved from it. This element of justification regards particularly, though not exclusively, the passive obedience of Christ, i.e., His suffering and death on the cross in the place of His people. The pardon granted here applies to sin because of the cross. Now listen: it applies to all sins: "Wherein he pardons all our sins." Sins in our ignorance, sins in our enlightenment, sins past and sins present, and sins future; "wherein he pardons all our sins." It involves the removal of all the guilt of God's people, and it brings them out from under every penalty. Any chastisement that the believer knows in relation to his sin is not, and never is, the chastisement of a judge. It is the chastisement of his Father God upon the child whom He has adopted into His family. Note in passing that Scripture always brings the pardon of sin into the most intimate relation to its punishment in the person of Christ. In the gospel the death of the cross brought about the situation where mercy and justice rejoiced together; where both were conspicuously displayed - "When we were enemies," says the apostle Paul (not, "When

we were friends"), "we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. And he goes on to say, "If we were enemies when we were reconciled by his death, much more we shall be saved by his life." In other words, if God grounds our justification as enemies and sinners in His death, He'll carry our sanctification on upon the basis of His life.

Now, although pardon is an important element in justification, it's not the only element. "It is a mistake," writes Dabney, "not only of Romanists but of nearly every school of Arminian thought to teach varying shades of the idea that justification is merely exemption from penalty."

4. There is something even more wonderful than pardon, for He also accepts us as righteous in His sight. It is positive as well as negative. Now this is a vital element in justification: acceptance with God in Christ. We are accepted "in the Beloved". Justification must not only deliver from the penalty incurred by guilt and disobedience, it must also provide a sinner with an equivalent of personal obedience. Whereas a holy being owes only obedience to God's perfect law, a sinful creature owes both penalty and obedience. When the sinner is justified, his justification must provide not merely for his deliverance from hell, but for his entry into heaven and justification comprises not only pardon but entitlement to heaven. Heaven is only for the righteous, and it is ours because God pardons our sin and also accepts us as righteous in His sight. Because of His divine substitute who suffered "unto death" for the sinner, the believer obtains not only release from punishment that his sin entails but he also obtains a reward which he does not merit because his substitute obeyed for him. It is not only the passive obedience of Christ in His death which is important but also the active obedience of Christ in His whole life, where He wrought out a righteousness for His people. He obeyed God not only for himself but also for us. I'm not happy with the division between the active and passive obedience of Christ for it has its weaknesses, yet it helps, too, in clarifying the true aspects of Christ's work for us.

#### C. THE GROUND OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

On what basis does God do all this in His act of justification? Well, the Catechism goes on to say: "Only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us." Why does God accept? How can He do it? Because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. Now, we shouldn't be afraid

to use the word 'imputation'. Listening to preachers when I'm on holiday from the North of Scotland to the South of England, I seldom hear this word used in a pulpit, nor do I even hear the truth of it being preached. When did you last preach on imputation and counter-imputation to your people? Would they know what you were talking about? If not, they're not well taught.

To impute sin, or indeed to impute righteousness, in its scriptural usage is a perfectly straightforward, unambiguous concept. Charles Hodge writes, "There is no necessity to go into a prolonged study of the Hebrew or Greek original to understand what imputation means. It means simply," he says, "to set to one's account, to lay to one's charge or to one's credit; to credit as the ground of judicial process." In many scriptures like Isaiah 53, Galatians 3, Hebrews 9, 1 Peter 2, our sins are said to have been "laid on" Christ because the guilt was so charged to His account that they became His, and could be justly punished in Him. "He bore our sins," says Peter, "in his own body on the tree." Now in a similar way Paul teaches us that Christ's perfect righteousness is laid to our account (2 Corinthians 5:21): "God has made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." There is imputation, and there is counter-imputation. Let me put it like this: imputation and counter-imputation, when they are clearly understood, just mean this, that as Christ stood over into the shoes of the believer in relation to sin, so the believer stands over in the very place of Christ in relation to righteousness. Let's remember, too, as Dabney points out, that "imputation is not a transfer of moral character but of legal relation." The imputation of our sin to Christ never made Him a sinner. Not at all. Do you see any theological distinction in my saying that Christ was made sin, and Christ became a sinner? I wouldn't let you into a pulpit to preach if you could not see this distinction! Imputation is no transference of moral character. Christ was still the eternal God when your sins and mine were imputed to Him, and He was still the holy, sinless and perfect God. But it was a transference of legal relationship; as the sinless and obedient one, He was standing in the room of sinners. It is because of His sinlessness that He can be made sin in the sense that He was regarded as the sinner in the eyes of God imposing penalty and punishment.

It is important to realise that this means that Christ, in His person and work, is the real basis and ground of our justification. We tend to think, perhaps, that something we ourselves can do will really help

to make God much more considerate of us, it will help Him to pardon and forgive us, or help us to become Christians. That is to go away from free grace to man's work and endeavour. God cannot justify on the sinful endeavour of a sinful creature. God can justify only on the basis of the ground which He himself, in His mighty grace, has laid: the finished work of Christ.

There is the other danger that we look to faith as the ground of justification. Now, faith is not the ground upon which God justifies. It is true that He will not justify until faith is there; it is the sinner who believes that God justifies. God is just and He justifies the ungodly, but only the ungodly who believe in Jesus; yet it is not because of, or on the ground of, his believing that God justifies. Professor John Murray declares: "While no one is justified apart from faith, faith is not the ground upon which God justifies ... He justifies by, through, or in, faith. But He never uses the expression that God justifies on account of faith." That is worth noting. Sometimes I think that what became the war-cry of the Reformation has led to a misapprehension and a misunderstanding about the ground on which God justifies. "Justified by faith alone," is true yet it carries an inherent danger in it, because it makes people think of the faith of the believer as the ground of justification rather than the finished work of Christ. That shows how theological slogans or popular slogans can often, although correct in themselves, be theologically misleading; and it's one which we should be careful of. We are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

Now, on the other hand, we must not minimize the role of faith in justification and salvation. Justification does not occur irrespective of any activity on our part. The Bible makes it clear that while God justifies the ungodly, it is always the ungodly who believe that He justifies. John Murray writes: "Justification is on the event of faith, and not faith on the event of justification."

Finally, remember that justification is not an end in itself. Men are justified in order that they may be sanctified. That's the biblical order: they are not sanctified in order that they may be justified. Remember this when you feel plagued with your inward corruption and sin. But remember, too, that redemption is not fully achieved with justification. In justification, however, the foundation has been laid upon which the whole edifice of redemption will yet stand complete. "For," says the apostle, "whom he justified, them he also glorified."

That's how closely justification and heaven are linked together. While, therefore, we are justified by faith, that faith includes all that will carry us home to the place which Christ is preparing for us.

Once we understand the fulness, freeness and utter graciousness of God's act in justifying sinners on the ground of Christ's perfect, finished work, and have ourselves been touched by the amazing love that's couched at the very heart of this doctrine, then I believe the foundation has been laid for the powerful, passionate, preaching of a doctrine that nestles at the very heart of the gospel of God's saving grace. This is not cold doctrine but something that should set our hearts afire and make us persuade men by all means to rest on no other foundation.

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## THE BIBLICAL LANGUAGES:

### THEIR USE AND ABUSE IN THE MINISTRY: Part Two

Rev Philip H. Eveson MA MTh (London)

In the previous issue we sought to break through some of the barriers erected in the minds of students and pastors against the acquisition and use of the biblical languages. At the same time, it was emphasised that the prime need in the understanding and ministry of God's Word was for the Holy Spirit's illumination and power. Languages do not make a preacher but they are very useful aids in the minister's own personal study and preparation for preaching.

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We now put forward the following arguments from the Bible, Church history, the lives of preachers of the past, as well as practical considerations to stimulate and motivate preachers to take up and use the Greek and/or Hebrew Bible.

#### THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments we believe to be