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# Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today

David Streater

## Introduction

What is the point of considering the question of justification by faith today? Surely, this is a sixteenth-century dispute and can have no possible impact on the twentieth or twenty-first century. To believe that justification is a live issue is to indicate a time-warped mentality. So say the arbiters of modernism. Behind this simplified argument is the fact that over 450 years have passed since Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, setting out for debate the question of indulgences which gave rise to the Reformation and the key doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Very different conditions obtain in the world today and there is a different climate of thought. The Enlightenment, the Oxford Movement, liberalism, Christian Socialism and now post-modernism make the thought world of the sixteenth century almost obsolete. Thomas Cranmer is respected as the founder of Anglicanism but for many he, with his Prayer Book and Articles, is simply an interesting historic figure who can be safely ignored. Hence, the rush away from the doctrines of the Thirty-Nine Articles and the *Book of Common Prayer* in the liturgical revision relating to the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion or Eucharist.

The current position of the Church of England today is well set out in the Appendix to *The Mystery of Salvation*.<sup>1</sup> In this interesting article, (interesting because it clearly sets out the facts although those facts for anyone who wishes to retain the biblical doctrines of the Church of England, make depressing reading) the fact of the change from the objective atonement to the subjective, from Anselm, Luther and Calvin to Abelard and the moral atonement is clearly admitted.

If that stance should be accepted then the doctrine of justification as propounded by Luther, Calvin and Cranmer can no longer be sustained. Christ's sacrifice is an example and not a propitiation or satisfaction. We are no longer in the area of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, or the wonder

<sup>1</sup> *The Mystery of Salvation* Doctrine Commission of the Church of England (CHP 1995)

of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, the God-Man, but we are reduced to the man only, Jesus of Nazareth, the beloved quest of the nineteenth century liberals. There is a price to be paid. The corollary is that justification is also reduced and, at best, is understood as mankind endeavouring to get right with God (works righteousness), or at worst prompts the response: 'Why bother, because if there is any life after death it must be all right in the end' (universalism); the theology of Diana's funeral. The fact of the matter is that if we abandon justification, we have not simply shed the Reformation; we are no longer in historic Christianity as taught by Christ and his apostles but in another religion. This was the problem of the Middle Ages.

How should we respond to this both biblically and theologically? At first sight this would appear to necessitate an examination of all the sources in both the Old and the New Testament. That would be 'a bridge too far' for a paper of this size. We do not need to do this because the critical material lies to hand in the life and teaching of Paul the Apostle.

## The Importance of Paul

The concepts of justification and faith are more closely associated with the Apostle Paul than with any other writer of the New Testament. This is not to imply that the ideas are absent elsewhere, and in the interpretations by Paul of critical passages in the Old Testament both justification and faith appear in their basic ideas. Nevertheless, it is in the epistles of Paul that the doctrine of justification by faith receives its fullest expression, directly or indirectly.

If we examine the documents of the New Testament, we find that Paul 'bestrides that narrow world', and Pauline Christianity is the earliest for which we have documentary evidence. Pauline Christianity pre-dates the documentary evidence of the earlier Palestinian Christianity. A large section of the Christian churches of the first century had heard the gospel only from Paul, or those closely associated with his ministry. An essential part of that gospel was the teaching on justification by faith.

The idea that Paul complicated the original simple gospel cannot be squared with the facts. Paul wrote no theological treatises as such. The Roman epistle is closer to this than any other document but even so it is still essentially pastoral in both its object and content. While the letter to the Galatians which must be seen as foreshadowing much of the Roman epistle does not simply deal with the problem of the ceremonial but the moral law. The authenticity of both these epistles has never been in serious doubt. It can therefore be inferred that when Paul is writing an epistle to a

church, his teaching on justification by faith had formed the foundation of his preaching, even though the doctrine may not be mentioned as such.

## The Development of Doctrine

One of the peculiar problems associated with the Apostle's teaching is how quickly it disappeared from the understanding of the churches. The Galatians had departed from the doctrine shortly after Paul's removal from them through the teaching of false apostles and needed to be restored by him. Although the teaching surfaces in various Church Fathers such as Clement of Rome (c 94) in a letter to the Corinthians, Clement of Alexandria (155-220), Tertullian (170-230) and Augustine (354-430) as well as in the medieval schoolmen Anselm (1033-1109) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1150), nevertheless from an early date the emphasis of the Apostle Paul had largely been lost<sup>2</sup> and it was not until Martin Luther began to preach the doctrine of justification by faith that it became a live issue once more. This was acknowledged by the Council of Trent, which states that 'all the errors of Martin were resolved into that point'.<sup>3</sup> For Calvin also the doctrine acquired a 'dominant significance'. From both Wittenberg and Geneva, through Luther, Tyndale and Calvin, the Church of England received the biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith which was one of the pillars on which Cranmer prepared the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* and which is emphasized in Articles 9-14 of the Thirty-Nine Articles.

How can the loss of Paul's emphatic teaching be explained? There are two interrelated points which help us to understand this. The first is that Christian doctrine was not crystallized immediately. It was over many centuries that the various doctrines came to be in their settled form. The second is that there was much conflict, with heresy within and philosophy without, before the church formalized these great truths. Initially, the New Testament writings had to be collected and the Canon of Scripture determined. From there, the doctrine of the Trinity came to be stated, followed by the Person of Christ and the teaching of Man. The doctrine of the Atonement is associated with Anselm and so we are led historically and logically to Martin Luther and the doctrine of Justification by Faith alone.

The doctrine of justification by faith can never be dealt with apart from both the person and work of Christ. Christ is central to the teaching of Paul. It was the revelation of God's Son to him which caused the revolution in his life. It follows that the teachings, and especially justification by faith

2 Finlayson *Story of Theology* (Tyndale Press 1963) p 42

3 M<sup>r</sup>Ilvaine *Oxford Divinity Compared* (1840) p 1

flow from that same source. It is necessary to set Paul in the context of the first century and to endeavour to understand how he reconstructed his beliefs as a Pharisee and then to trace from his writings what he meant by justification by faith. And this has to be set in a relationship to Jesus Christ, who gives form and meaning to the life of Paul.

## A Man in Christ

By any standard, the Apostle Paul must be regarded as one of the leading figures in the mission of the Christian church in the first century, sharing in the leadership with Peter and John. The epistles written by him form the bulk of the New Testament writings and these throw light on his missionary journeyings, confirming his pastoral labours as he wrote to the Romans that, 'from Jerusalem, and round about as far as Illyricum ... [he had] fully preached the gospel'.<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of these missionary activities, there is a considerable output of pastoral letters, dealing with local problems and specific persons, yet always on the basis of profound theological principles. Vos in his *Biblical Theology* writes:

The preaching and teaching of Paul, as they are reflected in the epistles ... possess more than any other New Testament body of truth a theological character... Undoubtedly, the apostle's mind had by nature a strong systematic bent. Before his conversion he had received a careful training in the school of Gamaliel ... [and] ... during his Christian career he found himself involved in great religious controversies.<sup>5</sup>

The question, which considering his background must have loomed large in the Apostle's mind, was how the revelation of Christ to him related to the previous revelation of God to the Jewish people in the law and the prophets. (The Sermon on the Mount is essentially dealing with this same subject.) As Paul declared that the revelation was given directly to him, it may well be inferred that Christ appeared in a similar way to him as to the disciples on the Emmaus Road, that is personally and visibly, but not necessarily hidden from Paul. The essence of that appearance lies in the words: 'beginning with Moses and the prophets ... he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself'.<sup>6</sup>

In this way Christ is central to the whole revelation of God, and both the

4 Rom 15:19

5 Vos *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1980)

6 Luke 24:27

law and the prophets must be seen in relation to him. In this way the prophets speak of Christ directly, but the law indirectly. The law is not permanent but passing. The law has a splendour because it comes from and reflects the glory of God and Paul illustrates this by referring to the veil which Moses was requested to wear by the elders of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Paul writes to the Corinthians that 'when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted'. And to the Galatians Paul writes that the law, 'is our custodian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith'.<sup>8</sup>

For Paul to have arrived at these conclusions it would have been necessary for him to have studied, not only the messianic prophecies, but the whole redemptive framework of the Old Testament. In this light, the discrepancies in the interpretation of the law by the Pharisees would have become apparent. The Pharisees believed that justification must await the final judgment at the end of the age, and the ground of justification must be conformity to the Torah as interpreted in the rabbinic writings. The framework of the Old Testament was a legal one and God is shown as the covenant-king who rules and judges righteously. He is the lawgiver and is contrasted with the capricious gods of the heathen. Leon Morris comments in his *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* that: 'To the men of the Old Testament, God was a God of law and a very great deal in their religion cannot be understood if this is lost sight of...'<sup>9</sup>

In the Old Testament the idea of justification is usually seen in a legal setting. The Hebrew word 'tsadek' has the meaning of acquittal in the form of a judicial pronouncement. For example, in Exodus 23:7, we read: 'I will not acquit the guilty.' This is more clearly seen in Deuteronomy 25:1, where the idea of acquittal is set in contrast to condemnation (Hebrew 'rasha'), so that we read: 'If there is a dispute between men and they come into court and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty...' A similar use of the concepts of acquittal and condemnation are seen in the New Testament and particularly Paul's epistle to the Romans where verses 5:1 and 8:1 are central to the theme of justification. Paul is able to use the Old Testament concepts by translating 'tsadek' by 'dikaios' and its cognates.

It is on the basis of the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel in Christ that Paul set out as a preacher of the Cross and an eyewitness of the resurrection to both Jew and Gentile. In practice this meant that the starting-point in the proclamation differed between Jewish and gentile audiences. In Athens, among a predominantly pagan and philosophic group, the Apostle outlined the doctrine of God in creation leading on to

7 2 Cor 3:13

8 Gal 3:24

9 Morris *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press 1965) p 253

judgment and resurrection.<sup>10</sup> In the synagogue at Antioch the Apostle dealt firstly with the history of Israel, moving on to the promise and fulfilment of the Messiah who was raised from the dead. He applies the cutting edge of the gospel to the congregation:

Therefore let it be known to you brethren that through this man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins, and by him everyone who believes is justified from all things which you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.<sup>11</sup>

It is this same message which Paul had proclaimed to the gentile Galatian churches. The particular occasion for his writing an epistle to them was their defection to a form of legalism which was being taught by Judaisers, and Paul warns them of their danger by anathematizing the legalist teachers<sup>12</sup> and stating that if they followed this teaching they would be cut off from grace.<sup>13</sup> For the Apostle it was clear that this was another gospel and he appeals to his own personal history and acceptance by the Twelve as a genuine apostle. The reference to the difficulty with Peter who temporized with the Judaising party indicates the strains that existed. Paul's admonition to Peter is in forceful words which indicate that this is not a matter of personal choice and preference but a matter of the utmost importance:

We ourselves who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law shall no one be justified ... for if justification were through the law shall no one be justified ... for if justification were through the law then Christ died to no purpose.<sup>14</sup>

To vindicate his argument Paul appeals firstly to the gift of the Holy Spirit which he says came to them, not as a result of law-keeping, but by faith in Christ.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, Paul cites the example of Abraham who, 'believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness'.<sup>16</sup> To emphasize the point, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy: 'Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.'<sup>17</sup> To desert the liberty which Christ has purchased at Calvary is to Paul

10 Acts 17:31

11 Acts 13:38,39

12 Gal 1:8, 9

13 Gal 5:4

14 Gal 2:15, 16, 21

15 Gal 3:2

16 Gal 3:6

17 Deut 27:26

unthinkable and he is both astonished and angered at the Galatians' defection.

The essence of God's free justification in Christ is that the moral demands of the law have been met through Christ's absolute and willing obedience and the penalties of the broken law have been paid by Christ's willing sacrifice upon Calvary. Christ as the incarnate God-man has paid the debt which mankind owes to God and God has confirmed this by raising him from the dead bodily on the third day. Christ has therefore fulfilled all righteousness and that righteousness is graciously reckoned to those who believe in him.

Nevertheless, Paul gives no occasion to those who recognize their liberty in Christ to pervert that liberty into licentiousness: 'You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love.'<sup>18</sup> The freedom of justification by faith in Christ is to be followed by sanctification through the Spirit. Not to recognize the moral obligation either by reverting to legalism, or turning to licentiousness, was tantamount to having been bewitched.

The life of conflict stands out in a marked contrast to the life and motivation which Paul had led as a Pharisee. There he was single-minded in seeking his own justification by what he would describe as the works of the Law. He was approved by his fellow Pharisees as one who had given himself devotedly to establish his own righteousness. After his meeting with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul is a man with a new life and motivation. He no longer needs to justify himself before God because God has done it for him in Christ's obedience and death. Christ's righteousness is his by faith which is God's gift to him. He is a new man in Christ. A glance at the extensive writings of Luther will reveal the same focus.

## Luther's Discovery

Where and how did Luther make the discovery which started the work of reformation in the Western Church? The fact is that the words 'righteousness', 'wrath' and 'judgment of God', severely frightened Luther and he endeavoured to use the teaching of the Roman Church regarding the seven sacraments to put himself into a right relationship with God. This was all to no avail. Little wonder, for the term justification had become a 'catch-all' to cover all the effects of baptism as taught by the Roman Church, regeneration, quickening, forgiveness and renewal as well

<sup>18</sup> Gal 5:13



as sanctification which was something to be infused into the sinner so that he might become righteous.

Tradition has it that it was on the steps of Scala Santa in Rome, while ascending on his knees, reciting the paternoster for the release of his grandfather's soul from purgatory that he heard a voice from heaven: 'The just shall live by faith.' It is more probable that it was through prayerful, painstaking study of the Scriptures, especially the epistles to the Romans and Galatians that he learned that the righteousness which God demanded, he also supplied to the sinner by faith in Christ and that the attempt to justify oneself was an exercise doomed to failure as he had proved by personal experience.

Luther's background and training had put him in a favourable position to study the subject of justification and to appreciate its profound implications. Roman doctrine had taught justification by human merit. Luther, writing in his Commentary on Galatians (Gal 2:16) has this to say:

Wherefore the wicked and pernicious opinion of the Papists is utterly to be condemned which attribute the merit of grace and remission of sins to work wrought. For they say that a good work before grace, is able to obtain grace of congruence [which they call *meritum de congruo* because it is meet that God should reward such a work]. But when grace is obtained, the work following deserveth everlasting life of due debt and worthiness [which they call *meritum de condigno*].<sup>19</sup>

Luther however does not simply discount the tradition which had grown up, albeit falsely, but supplies a corrective by stating in clear and concise terms what the gospel really is:

Contrary to these vain trifles and doting dreams ... we teach faith and give a true rule of Christianity in this sort: first that a man must be taught by the law to know himself, that so he may learn to say with the prophet: 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ... Thus we by a contrary way do drive men from the merit of congruence and worthiness. Now when a man is humbled by the law, and brought to the knowledge of himself, then followeth true repentance (for true repentance beginneth at the fear and judgment of God), and he seeth himself to be so great a sinner that he can find no means how he may be delivered from his sin by his own strength, endeavour and works. Then he perceiveth well what Paul meaneth when he saith that man is the servant and bond-slave of sin (Rom

<sup>19</sup> *Luther on Galatians* (London: Jas Clarke and Co (first published 1535)) p 129

vii.14); also that God hath shut up all under sin (Rom xi.52; Gal iii.22) and that the whole world is guilty before God (Rom iii.19)... For he being terrified with the law, utterly despaireth of his own strength; he looketh about, and sigheth for the help of a mediator and saviour. Here then cometh in good time the healthful word of the Gospel and saith: 'Son, thy sins are forgiven thee' (Matt ix.2). Believe in Christ Jesus crucified for thy sins, &c. If thou feel thy sins and the burden thereof, look not upon them in thyself, but remember that they are translated and laid upon Christ, whose stripes have made thee whole (Isa.liii.5).<sup>20</sup>

This is Luther preaching the gospel and the result he sets out in this way:

This is the beginning of health and salvation. By this means we are delivered from sin, justified and made inheritors of everlasting life; not for our own works or deserts, but for our faith, whereby we lay hold on Christ... Here is to be noted, that these three things, faith, Christ, acceptance or imputation, must be joined together. Faith taketh hold of Christ and hath him present, and holdeth him inclosed, as the ring doth a precious stone. And whosoever shall be found having this confidence in Christ apprehended in the heart, him will God account for righteous.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Luther's question, 'Where could a sinful man turn for salvation?', needs rephrasing. How shall a man be declared righteous before God? There are two answers to that question. If the question is asked in a moral sense then the answer which Luther gave was incorrect. However, there is another way of asking that question which is in a *legal sense*. Effectively, it is asking a distinct question. The two questions use the same words but start from differing presuppositions. The moral question can be answered by the activity of the person as to whether he is good or bad. The legal question asks only whether the claims of divine justice are satisfied. If so, then the person is declared to be righteous before God. Luther saw that it was the legal question which Paul was asking and answering.

Justification by God is not merely pardon but the pronouncement of a legal righteousness. It is not to make inherently righteous or holy but to declare – not the state – but the standing before God of the believer. The ground of that standing is the righteousness of Christ. Yet what does that

<sup>20</sup> Luther p 136

<sup>21</sup> Luther p 137

mean? It means all that Christ became, and did and suffered to satisfy the demands of divine justice. It began in eternity before the foundation of the world, when fallen humanity was contemplated by God the Father and there was chosen in Christ a huge group whom 'no one can number'. It continued in the Incarnation when he came as the 'second Adam' for his people, as their representative head and substitute. He was obedient to all the law, tempted at every point and yet without sin. His righteousness was perfect. Yet there was still the penalty to be paid for our sin. It was in his suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and upon the Cross of Calvary that Christ paid the penalty in full. He was the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', not by example but by sacrifice, rendering a full substitutionary satisfaction to the violated holiness of God. That this sacrifice was accepted was demonstrated by the Resurrection.

To close let us hear the two voices in the Church of England. The first is the writer of the appendix to *The Mystery of Salvation*. He writes:

The claims of retributive justice equate to the seriousness of the wrongdoing and therefore must be heard ... but retributive justice can never effect reconciliation. Only mercy inspired by love that reaches out to the wrongdoer and absorbs the barrier of hostility ... can reconcile. This is precisely the emphasis of the exemplarist theories of the atonement.<sup>22</sup>

Where is the writer in error? It is in the fact that he fails to understand the nature of the human condition. He also fails to realize that the atonement is the greatest demonstration of the love of God which has ever graced the face of this fallen world. How serious are these errors? Extremely serious for those who wish to see historic Christianity flourish and the whole church revive. Why is that? Let Dr Jim Packer answer for us from his essay on Buchanan's *Justification*:

Justification by faith has been the central theme of the preaching in every movement of revival and religious awakening within Protestantism from the Reformation to the present day ... how far reaching such neglect is, and how much we stand to lose by it. For the doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas; it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace.<sup>23</sup>

While current thinking may change and go through various phases, the heart of mankind does not change and it is at that point that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all those that believe. The one gospel is

<sup>22</sup> *Mystery of Salvation* p 211

<sup>23</sup> Buchanan *Doctrine of Justification* (London: BoTT 1961) p 2

## Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today

that of justification by faith alone in the finished work of Christ and his righteousness, imputed to us.

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