

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION IN THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

The epistle to the Romans is not only the most extended and most systematic exposition of Paul's thoughts, it also holds a price of pride among his writings to the church. In his letter, Paul presents a plan of salvation that stretched from Adam to Abraham, Moses, and Christ. He revealed God's power to save by divine righteousness or justification by faith in Christ. From the inceptions of Christianity to this present age, Paul's theology of justification through grace by faith alone has been the subject of theological debates. It was the disagreement over the understanding of Paul's justification by faith alone that led to the break out of Martin Luther from the Catholic Church. Today, we still have a different understanding of Paul's theology in Christendom. This paper aims to examine and discuss Paul's theology of justification by faith alone. This paper will also show different views on this theological tenet throughout history of the church and its current state in the church.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Generation after generation, the history of the church has been replete with doctrinal debates and struggles. From inception, the church has been plagued with heresies which has generated fierce arguments and schisms. However, no theological tenet has generated more arguments or has been fiercely contested as Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone.¹ Scholars and theologians have described this doctrine of justification by faith as the central cause of the Reformation. R. C. Sproul asserts "It was this doctrine that led to the worst rupture Christendom ever experienced and the fragmentation of the church into thousands of individual denominations"²

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 1

² *Ibid.*, 2

Why did this doctrine lead to so much acrimony and church splinters? Was it a lack of understanding of Paul's theology or was it just a case of theologians engaged in conflict over trivial matters?

HISTORY

The doctrine of justification by faith was not an issue during the first 350 years of Christian development compared to the Christological and Trinitarian debates. In fact, tracing the history of the doctrine of justification by faith before the Reformation in the 16th century is very difficult. However, It should be pointed out that the doctrine is not a modern invention. Seeds were sowed in the early years of Christianity that bore fruit in the 1500s. The history of justification by faith started with the question of how a man can receive salvation, and by what means it is accomplished. Using Acts 2: 38 where, Peter said repent and be baptized for the remission of sin as a reference point, the church viewed baptism as a means by which God forgives sins. This erroneous belief that human work was effectual for the remission of sins started the foundation of a system whereby man can atone for his own sins. Generation after generation continued to build on the foundation of a man being able to atone for his own sins, thereby relegating the atonement of Christ to the background. Instead of looking more deeply into what Christ accomplished on the cross, the concept of merit was introduced to the church. The effect was the distortion of the biblical meaning of justification by faith.³

UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

In Romans 3: 28, Paul maintains that a person is justified by faith and not by the works of the law. He also asserts, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness"⁴ What does it mean to be justified? What part

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 4

⁴ Romans 4:5, KJV.

does a person play in it? Is a person justified by faith alone in Christ ,or does he or she have to earn it with works? Justification is God’s righteous act of declaring a sinner to be innocent of his sins. According to Jonathan Edwards “ a person is justified when he is approved of God as being free from the guilt of sin and its deserved punishment, and as having the righteousness belonging to him that entitles to the reward of life”⁵ Justification is a legal action in that God declares the sinner righteous as though he has satisfied the Law of God. It is completely based on the sacrifice of Christ by His shed blood.⁶ Clearly, justification is a gift of grace that comes through faith.⁷

A sinner is justified when they receive Christ and put their faith in what he did on the cross. Works do not justify one because our deeds, irrespective of how righteous we might deem them are filthy rags before God.⁸ We are, therefore, saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Justification is a divine verdict of God that vindicates a sinner and declares him fully righteous. In justification, God imputes divine righteousness to the sinner and having been justified, “a person is elevated to a realm of full acceptance and divine privilege in Christ”⁹

ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW ON JUSTIFICATION

At the seminal Council of Trent where a response to the Reformation was formulated, the Roman Catholic Church declared “faith is the beginning of justification, the foundation of justification, and the root of justification”¹⁰ However, they believe that a person can have faith and yet not be justified. So, even though the Catholic Church believes that grace and faith are

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Florida, Puritan Publications, 2014), 17.

⁶ Romans 5: 9

⁷ Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:7; Rom. 3:28; 5:1

⁸ Isaiah 64:6

⁹ John MacArthur, “Justification by Faith.” *Grace To You*, May 2020, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A194/justification-by-faith>

¹⁰ R. C. Sproul, *What does the Roman Catholic Church Believe About Justification*, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-roman-catholic-church-believe-about-justification/>

involved in justification, they still affirm that it is accomplished through the sacraments. They believe that justification is not by grace alone and faith alone. They hold the position that works are necessary for a person to be justified. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) ruled “if anyone says that the justice [righteousness] received is not preserved and also not increased before God by good works, but that those works are merely the fruit and signs of justification obtained, but not a cause of increase, let him be anathema”¹¹ A curse of excommunication from the society of the faithful was placed on any one who believes he is saved by grace through faith alone in Jesus.

The Catholics appeal to James 2:24 which states, “Ye see then how by works a man is justified and not by faith only”¹² It should be pointed out that in context, James was speaking of dead faith as opposed to living, saving faith. What James was pointing out was that if you say that you have faith but have no works, the faith you claim to have cannot save you because it is a dead faith.¹³ What this implies is that “mere intellectual acknowledgment of Christ is a dead faith that produces no regeneration and no change in a person’s life”¹⁴ This faith does not justify. The faith that results in justification is real and believing faith in Jesus Christ. Justification means that a sinner is truly saved and regenerate. Real faith manifests good works in the one who is justified by faith alone. It is not the works that save. They are the effect of salvation and not the cause of it.

PROTESTANT REFORMATION VIEW ON JUSTIFICATION

The Protestant view of justification differed from that of the Roman Catholics in several ways. First, the Protestants believe that righteousness was imputed to the believer, not infused.

¹¹ Trent, Session 6, Chapter XIV, *Cannons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 45

¹² James 2:24

¹³ James 2:24, 17.

¹⁴ Matt Slick, “The Roman Catholic View on Justification,” *Christian Apologetics @ Research Ministry*, December 5, 2008, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://carm.org/catholic/roman-catholic-view-justification>

Justification was not someone being made righteous but being declared righteous. This means that God justifies a sinner by seeing him as righteous on account of Christ's righteousness imputed to them. The moment Christ died, He took on our sins while the sinner takes His righteousness. God, therefore, declares a sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's work alone. We appropriate this righteousness by faith alone. Through faith alone, one receives the salvation that has been provided by God in Christ.

To the Protestant Reformers "faith alone does not refer to a mere mental assent to certain propositional truths or Christian doctrines, but an all-encompassing trust in the mercy of God for salvation"¹⁵ Faith, to the Reformers, is a gift of God through which one appropriates Christ's righteousness. The Reformers believe that saving grace does not include good works. This does not mean that the reformers negated the necessity of good works in a Christian's life. They disbelieve that good works did not form the basis of a person's justification before God. Good works follow as an outworking of true faith. The Reformers rejected the idea of synergism and cooperation because such doctrine left room for human boasting.

THE CRUX OF THE MATTER

The difference between imputation and infusion is the core difference between Catholics and Reformer's understanding of the doctrine of justification. While the church and its sacraments have a pivotal role in the Catholic doctrine of Salvation, the Protestant position is that Christ alone is the cause and the mediator of Salvation. To the Reformers, Salvation is through Christ alone. However, to the Catholics, Mary, the church and saints have a mediatory role in Salvation. In December 7, 1990, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* states "God has established Christ as the one mediator and that she herself (the Church) as the universal

¹⁵ Trevin Wax, *Justification: The Defining Doctrine of the Reformation*, October 31, 2007, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/justification-the-defining-doctrine-of-the-reformation/>

Sacrament of Salvation”¹⁶ The Catholics believe that “ the church is the ordinary means of salvation and that she alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation”¹⁷

CRACK IN THE WALL

In recent years, social and political concerns have brought the Protestants and Catholics together as they attempt to unite against the forces of secularism. On October 31, 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JD). The JD claims to have reached a consensus on the “basic truths” of the doctrine of justification. Paragraph 15 states:

In faith ,we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God... together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because on any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our heart while equipping and calling us to good works.¹⁸

Another joint declaration entitled Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) affirms that justification was by grace through faith in Christ. However, despite this attempts at wider cooperation, David Wells notes “the evangelical world, in fact, is now coming apart because its central truths, what once held it all together, no longer have binding power that they once had, and in some cases, are rejected outright with no following outcry”¹⁹ An example is the rejection of the doctrine of justification by faith alone by the New Perspectives on Paul even though the *sola fide* is the foundation upon which the Protestant Church stands or falls. Today, just like the Catholics place the magisterium above

¹⁶ Michael J. Miller, ed., *The Encyclicals of John Paul II* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996) 441

¹⁷ Ibid.,

¹⁸ Walter Altmann, “The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: A Critical Examination.” *Lutheran World Information*, no.8, (2004), 8

¹⁹ David Wells, foreword to *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, eds., Gary L. Johnson & Guy Waters (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 13.

Scripture, some Protestants are placing critical methods above scripture. Guy Waters aptly warns, “The church is facing a threat that strikes at her foundations”²⁰

CURRENT STATE

Today, the doctrine of justification alone which the Reformers meticulously clarified, can barely be recognized by Protestants because it has become very muddled. Doctrinal issues have been deemphasized due to the superficial interests of the seeker church. Doctrinal clarity and biblical purity have been traded for entertainment and motivational speeches. Under the influence of pragmatism, some protestant and evangelical churches are now driven by the desire for church growth and have evidently forgotten the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone has been confused and redefined by the emergence of the New Perspective on Paul and the Emergent church. Not only is the doctrine shrouded in darkness once again, the Christian church is also in real danger of returning to the Dark Ages. Christianity is gradually departing from *sola scriptura* and is embracing Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern subjectivism. This will ultimately lead to a departure from *sola fide*, the doctrine upon which the church stands or fall.

CONCLUSION

Justification of faith is believed to be the article upon which the church stands or falls. The doctrines of Trinity, the creation, the fall, God’s grace, the incarnation, the sacraments, sin, and salvation come together in the cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross, Jesus bore our sins and the judgment that we deserve. In exchange, He imputed to us his righteousness.

²⁰ Guy Waters, “Introduction: What Happened to Sola Fide?” in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, 32

Justification not only frees us from the death penalty, but it also gives us access to and peace with God. And a person is justified by faith alone, not by works. Today many Christians believe that faith alone is a means to an end and that salvation is by our good works. The prosperity gospel and the gospel of inclusion, which accepts people as they are while denying their sinfulness, is prevalent in the churches and the doctrine of justification by faith alone has been relegated to the background. It is about time that the church to the doctrine of justification by faith alone because it is the solid foundation of the bridge that reconciles us with God. Without this key doctrine which the Reformers meticulously clarified and even spilled blood over, Christianity falls.

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