



The importance of justification to the Gospel today

With this article, I am beginning a brief series of articles on the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. These articles are adapted from two public addresses given at a Banner of Truth Conference in May, 1998.¹ Though they have been edited for *The Outlook*, they still retain something of their character as originally delivered. In recent years, there have been a number of joint declarations regarding the doctrine of justification by prominent representatives of the evangelical and Roman Catholic churches. Most recently, on October 31, 1999, the date commonly associated with the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed a consensus declaration on the doctrine, declaring that the historic differences between Protestantism and Catholicism on this subject had been overcome. These developments make it a matter of some urgency, that Reformed believers take a fresh look at the doctrine of justification, lest our heritage in the Reformed faith and adherence to this most basic truth of the gospel be compromised. The following article, the first in this series, only aims to establish the importance of the subject for the church today. It begins with a citation of a passage from Romans which provides a classic statement of the doctrine.

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law. What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 3:19-4:5).

The "main hinge" of the Christian religion

Ordinarily, when a speaker has been assigned a topic — as I've been assigned the subject of the doctrine of justification — he begins by defending the importance or significance of the subject.

From the vantage point of the history of the Reformed churches, this should not be necessary with the doctrine of justification. Calvin, no less than Luther at the time of the Protestant Reformation in

the sixteenth century, was convinced that this doctrine was "*the main hinge of the Christian religion*" (*Institutes*, Book III). If we should become "unhinged" at this point, so to speak, then the whole of the Christian faith is in danger of being lost. The doctrine of justification by *grace alone* on account of *Christ alone* through *faith alone* — to state the doctrine in the most precise way is, as the Lutheran church has historically expressed it, the article of the standing and the falling of the church (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). For this doctrine, unlike any other, crystallizes the great "*sola's*" of the Reformation — *sola gratia* ("by grace alone"), *sola Christo* ("by Christ alone"), and *sola fide* ("by faith alone").

But it is not only the history of the Reformation that reminds us of the importance of this doctrine. Though we are apt to forget this, the doctrine of justification, as John Murray properly emphasizes in his lectures on this subject, answers the most basic of religious questions, namely, where do I stand with God? Even before Adam sinned and plunged the whole human race into sin — in the original state of man's integrity and sinlessness — the most important issue for him and for all men was the issue of their acceptability to God. There is no more pressing concern for any creature than the one expressed in the questions: What does God say respecting me? Does He find me good and acceptable? Or is He against me? Are things right between us? What is my reputation with God?

No doubt, the reality of human sin and rebellion against God has greatly complicated the matter. Now that "*there is none righteous, no, not one,*" the question of the sinner's standing before God has become the more urgent. Since "*all have sinned and fall short of God's glory,*" the issue of the sinner's acceptability to and reputation with God has become most pressing.

For these reasons, the doctrine of justification is a most important doctrine indeed. Not only was it the focus of the great controversy in the church regarding the gospel in the sixteenth century, but it also answers the most basic question of life and of death — where do I stand with God, poor and needy sinner that I am?

"Evangelicals and Catholics together"?

The importance of the doctrine of justification can be seen in terms of the history of the Reformation and in terms of its being the basic religious question. But it can also be seen today in the degree to which the doctrine of justification is becoming the subject of renewed discussion and debate. This renewed discussion has revealed a considerable neglect, and even ignorance of the doctrine among many Protestants and evangelicals. But perhaps more significantly, it has been marked by a series of important declarations, signed in some instances by evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics alike, that claim a new consensus is beginning to emerge on the doctrine.

I can remember several years ago reading Michael Horton's book, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*. As I was reading through the book, I was struck by a story he tells of a speaking engagement to which he was invited at a Christian high school. Horton recounts how he had the opportunity to speak to some 160 students on several different occasions throughout the day. During the course of the day, he queried the students about the doctrine of justification. He asked them to define "*justification*." What caught my attention while reading this account, was Horton's report that not one of those 160 students (and remember, these were students at a Christian, not a public, high school) could give him even a simple definition of the doctrine. Not one! Though this is only an anecdote, it is sufficiently striking to suggest that, among many evangelical Christians, the doctrine of justification is neither appreciated nor dearly understood.

But it is not only this general neglect of the doctrine that is instructive. There have also been over the course of the last twenty or thirty years, several rather high level discussions between representatives of the evangelical church, broadly conceived, and the Roman Catholic Church on the question, "Can we bridge the divisions between us? Can we overcome the divide between Protestant and Catholic? Is it really the case that this is a watershed issue between the 'true church,' which dings to the gospel of Christ, and the 'false church,' which submerges Christ under all manner of religious rites, ceremonies, and meritorious good works?"

For example, already in 1963, at the Helsinki Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (a representative group of world Lutheranism, the first branch, you might say, of the Reformation of the sixteenth century), the conclusion was reached, based upon a series of conferences with Catholic representatives, that there was really no longer any substantial difference between Rome and the Lutheran churches on the doctrine of justification. More recently, in 1985, a joint declaration of Lutheran and Catholic representatives, summarized its findings this way:

"A fundamental consensus on the gospel is necessary to give credibility to our previously agreed statements on baptism, on the Eucharist, and on forms of church authority. We believe that we have reached such a consensus."

More recently yet, in 1997, at the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which is a combination of a number of historic Lutheran denominations, a joint Lutheran and Roman Catholic statement was adopted, declaring that differences on justification by faith no longer need divide their communions. Now someone might respond to these developments by saying, *"Well, that's true of representatives of rather broad, and in many ways latitudinarian, religious bodies of Lutherans and Catholics worldwide."* That is to say, these developments are only occurring within a churchly context where the historic confessions and the teaching of Scripture have long since been abandoned on many important doctrines.

But in our own context in North America, we need to be aware of the fact that two very significant documents have in recent years been endorsed and signed by a number of representatives of both Catholic and evangelical persuasion. The first of these was produced in 1994, and bore the striking title, *"Evangelicals and Catholics Together."* A number of very important and prominent representatives (both of the Catholic church, some bishops, some like Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*; others in the evangelical world, men of great prominence and influence) affirmed together, on the doctrine of justification, that *"we are justified by grace, through faith, because of Christ."*²

What is remarkable about this joint affirmation is not so much that it was signed by evangelical and Catholic representatives, but that it *contains some noteworthy omissions. There are no sola's in this declaration!* So far as I can see, this statement is one that any signatory of the great Council of Trent of the Catholic counter reformation could readily sign. Roman Catholic teaching has always affirmed that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ. However, our justification is not *sola Christo*, "by Christ alone." And because it is not by Christ alone, neither is it *sola gratia*, "by grace alone," nor *sola fide*, "by faith alone."

Due partly to the weaknesses of *"Evangelicals and Catholics Together,"* a number of its signatories were responsible for the preparation of a sequel declaration. This declaration was published in 1997 and bears the title, *"The Gift of Salvation."* Written in order to clarify some of the issues that the first statement raised (and to assuage perhaps the fears and concerns of some that they should have signed that kind of an ambiguous, uncertain statement), the authors of this declaration attempted to offer a better, and in many ways apparently acceptable, statement on the doctrine of justification. This declaration says, regarding justification:

"In justification God, on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends. And by virtue of his declaration it is so. We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone."

This statement, as it stands, is an improvement upon the earlier one. It is a statement which we could probably sign, were it to have been formulated in a different context and were it to acknowledge, in the latter part of the declaration, some troubling areas of continuing disagreement — including whether the righteousness, on account of which we are justified, is an "imputed" righteousness or not!

Now I mention these things to illustrate that we live in a day of great confusion and uncertainty regarding the doctrine of justification. This would not be so serious, were this doctrine not the article on which the church stands or falls, the "main hinge" of the Christian faith. Furthermore,

because we live in a day when tolerance sometimes gets the best of us, some are apt to be swept along out of a desire to agree with others on this doctrine. And so it is all the more important, not only because of the essential and perpetual importance of this doctrine, but because of the way in which it is today the subject of so much uncertainty and confusion, that we give it our most careful attention. Nothing less than a proper understanding of the gospel is at stake.

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² R. C. Sproul has done a fine service to the evangelical and Reformed churches by providing book-length treatments and evaluations of these two statements: *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); and *Getting the Gospel Straight: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). The second of these volumes includes an appendix that gives the complete text of a recent evangelical statement on the gospel, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration." This most recent statement attempts to resolve some of the differences that have emerged among evangelicals over the earlier documents, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," and "The Gift of Salvation."