

Justification by faith has had a surprisingly pivotal position in Christian doctrine

Robert L. Schmitt
March 1978



The issue of justification by faith has had a surprisingly pivotal and serious position in Christian doctrine. The seriousness of its meaning was well represented in the whole Reformation crisis and the numerous religious wars and upheavals that ensued. What St. Paul surely intended to be a source of deep faith and a key to establishing an eternal relationship with Christ became instead a misunderstood concept causing the very division in Christ's body that Paul had fought to avoid. Paul Tillich observes this in his book, *The Protestant Era*:

"And yet this doctrine of justification by faith has divided the old unity of Christendom; has torn asunder Europe, and especially Germany; has made innumerable martyrs; has kindled the bloodiest and most terrible wars of the past; and has deeply affected European history and with it the history of humanity. This whole complex of ideas... is now scarcely understandable even to our most intelligent scholars."¹

Almost as if afraid to find out what Christ and Paul meant, man often converts the simplicity of God into confusion.

Implicit in an interpretation of justification of faith is a view of the nature of God and His role in man's life as well as a view of man's responsibility in building the Kingdom of Heaven. For some believers, justification by faith may imply the utter impotence of sinful man and require that they merely maintain belief as they await the apocalypse, watching a dying society with knowing looks and relieved anticipation. For such people God will do what He will do in time in spite of what the Christian does. His best bet is to remain a believer to avoid God's wrath in the end time. For other believers in Christ, justification by faith implies more the need to be workers and foundation-setters for the kingdom. To these Christians God is able to do what He will do in time only to the extent that man helps change himself and the world. These two extreme positions account for much of the problem facing contemporary Christianity.

The Typical Christian Interpretation

Martin Luther set the tone for what came to be a generally accepted view of justification by faith when in 1545 he had a rebirth experience resulting from his perception of the meaning behind Romans 1:17, "the just shall live by faith." What this meant to Luther and what it has meant to most Christians is that man is too impure to save himself by any actions, however moral or ceremonial. Instead, he must receive faith and righteousness as a gift from God (Romans 3:24) and in accepting that gift he becomes justified before God.² Paul Tillich explains the dynamics of this event:

"'Justification' in this sense is the paradox that man, the sinner, is justified; that man the unrighteous is righteous; that man the unholy is holy, namely, in the judgment of God, which is not based on any human achievements but only on the divine, self-surrendering grace."³

The question that is often unanswered in such descriptions of the justification event is actually several in one: at what point does a man truly receive this gift? Tillich mentions justification and righteousness in the same breath, as if to suggest that a man's becoming justified also renders him righteous for the first time in his life and that no amount of good works could precipitate God's blessing. The value of asking this question is to consider seriously one's role as a justified person in the world but not to worry particularly about whether or not one is in God's favor. A large portion of Christian believers, ministers and leaders become so embroiled in their personal justification-salvation drama that they either take it too much for granted and too simplistically, thereby missing the real point of what Christ taught, or else worry themselves into hopelessness and spiritual paralysis. In either case the result is the same. If one prays and reconsiders what Jesus and Paul said about justification and its role in the salvation process, then one must regard it as a catalyst to better Christian living and not a topic of seemingly endless debate and scholastic mystery. If the believer exercises his will to live according to the spirit of Christ and Paul, he will find himself justified and ultimately saved without his ever having to utter those perplexing words either to himself, to others, to Christ, or to God.

What Jesus Meant by Justification

Jesus Christ never worried about the minutiae of interpretations that have so clouded Christianity since Luther. He probably would have laughed in disbelief at all the controversy and furor caused by a single word. For Jesus, justification, if it ever were a concept he truly reflected upon, would have suggested the inner attitude of the individual judged to be justified before God. The emphasis is placed on man as the responsible factor in justification; merely believing in God and Christ's death and resurrection does not have as much value as do the fruits of one's spirit. After all, even Satan believes in God, but surely isn't justified.

Two passages in the Bible are particularly telling of the spirit behind Jesus' understanding of justification. In Luke 18:14, Jesus ends the parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble publican by saying, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other;...he who humbles himself will be exalted." Also, in Matthew 23:7, Jesus said, "by your words you will be justified." This could just as well read, "by your works you will be justified", since he had previously said, "the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (12:33-34). So, for Jesus, a man's standing as justified before God was the result of that man's quality of living and "abundance of heart." This is why Jesus, on the evening of his death, encapsulated all he had ever taught by calling his disciples,

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends... you should go and bear fruit and... your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give to you. This I command you, to love one another." (John 15:12-13, 16-17).

Clearly Jesus wanted each man's humility and love to be elevated to his own level. What too many Christians have done is to subordinate ethical practice and spiritual cultivation to an intellectual plane characterized by myopic self-righteousness similar to the Pharisee mentioned in Luke 18: 11, who considered himself the epitome of justified virtue. But Jesus and Paul caught that if one lives for the sake of others he will capture God's heart and blessing, regardless of the label put on such a state. The book of James helps our understanding in this regard:

"... I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe -- and shudder.... Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:14, 17-19, 21-22, 24-26)

What Paul Meant by Justification by Faith

In light of the Biblical evidence that Jesus equated justification with man's works of love, it would be disappointing to find that Paul held some contrary view. Several passages in his letter to the Romans prove their mutual understanding. In Romans 2:13, Paul states, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified." The astute Bible reader might see a contradiction between this passage and what follows later in 3:20. There Paul says, "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Actually these seemingly opposing comments are perfectly compatible. By "works of the law" in 3:20 Paul probably meant the legalistic, ritualistic practices of his Jewish heritage. Paul knew such "works" often made a man only arrogant and self-righteous, thereby giving him a "knowledge of sin." Such works of the law have no value without the overriding rule of love. He further said, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13:10). Romans 13:10 and 2:13 could be

blended to read, "it is those who love as Christ commanded who will be justified." Paul illuminates the validity of this in Romans 2:14-15.

"When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

This contrast between rote adherence to ritualistic law and the law of love is found also in Galatians. In Galatians 2:16 Paul echoes Romans 3:20 by saying, "by works of the law shall no one be justified." Then he goes on to say in 5:22-23, "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law." And in Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love."

A man is no more justified by faith alone than he is saved by faith alone. Says one Biblical scholar, "Faith for Paul is no mere intellectual ascent to a proposition of monotheism."⁴ Paul exhorts his cohorts in Philippi, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." (2:12-13). And speaking of his own justification-salvation process, Paul confesses that in relation to Jesus' perfection he is yet immature; but he promises, "I press on to make it my own." (Philippians 3; 12).

The proposition that Jesus and St. Paul had a more simple understanding of justification from that reflected by the Reformation controversies and Augustinian interpretations may not come as any surprise to the Christian believer. Hopefully such a realization can lead to a renewed humility among all who profess to be followers of Christ and the willingness to unite as fruit-bearing imitators of Jesus and Paul, above any "morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words." (I Timothy 6:4). The priority that both Christ and Paul placed on works of loving service to mankind suggests the need for Christians today to view God as a Father who needs help in bringing His long-awaited kingdom on earth. Justification among Christians depends upon a willingness to unite as one body, regardless of doctrinal differences. What hope can there be for mankind if people instructed by Jesus and Paul cannot reconcile their divergent opinions? What would happen if instead they would just drop them in the dust and live to manifest the love of God?

"For we are fellow workers for God; you are God's field, God's building. According to the commission of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid the foundation and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it." (I Corinthians 3:9-11).

Footnotes

1. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 196.
2. E. Harris Harbison, *The Age of Reformation*, Cornell University Press, 1955, pp. 49-50.
3. Tillich, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-171.
4. Raymond Brown, ed., *The Jerome Bible Commentary*, J, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968, p. 822.

Bibliography

- Brown, Raymond, ed., *The Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968.
- Harbison, E. Harris, *The Age of Reformation*, Cornell University Press, 1955.
- Tillich, Paul, *The Protestant Era*, University of Chicago Press, 1948.