

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE'

1. INTRODUCTION

When asked whether the doctrine of justification retained significance for him today, Hans Küng replied:

'Is significance and importance cannot be valued too highly, especially in the Catholic world. As you know, I was particularly pleased that I succeeded in making the entire book On Being A Christian culminate in a contemporary interpretation of what justification is all about in two sections, "What is not Ultimately Important" and, "What is Ultimately Important".'

John Macquarrie, on the other hand, argues that 'the whole notion of justification has been vastly exaggerated in the attention that has been paid to it. It is one element in the Christian experience of reconciliation, but this particular explanatory model of justification, borrowed originally from the law courts, is neither indispensable nor specially illuminating. To be "chosen" or "called" and also justified by Being is to have the assurance that one counts for something in the world.'

In the face of these contradictory assessments, what is the importance of justification for today? The history of the doctrine is particularly relevant to this question.

2. THE REFORMATION POSITION

To Calvin, the doctrine of justification by faith alone was "the hinge on which religion turns" and the foundation not only of salvation but also of Christian godliness and piety. The Homilies agree: "this is the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion". In more technical language, justification and sanctification were necessarily related experiences; sanctification flowed from justification.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to grasp the nature of faith. In Reformation theology, faith is assurance, that is to say, the sure knowledge that God cares for me as my Father because of the work of Christ on my behalf. This full assurance has two sources:

first, the belief in total human depravity and helplessness. We are unable, even as Christians, to control our sinful human natures.

second, the conviction of the total sufficiency of the Saviour's work, the "one full perfect sacrifice, satisfaction and oblation for the sins of the whole world".

Once the helplessness of man and the sufficiency of Christ was fully established, the possibility of full assurance was open because it depended on God alone. If, however, human effort intruded at all into the schema, assurance became impossible, because we can never be certain of the validity of any work of man.

When assurance was based on its true foundation, a revolution in Christian piety occurred. The Catholic Church had surrounded men with an assortment of numinous objects and beings, holywater, holy food, priests, saints, agnels, devils, Mary, Jesus, God. At every point in life reference could be made to one or more of them. At the same time, uncertainty was built-in to the religious system, uncertainty about the attitude of these beings and uncertainty about the value of human works. To this day the Catholic Church repudiates the Protestant doctrine of assurance.

The doctrine of justification by faith swept all this away. As the very heart of their belief, Protestants were taught that God was their almighty Father. A practical monotheism was re-established. All of life was to be referred to the Father. It was useless to relate to lesser spiritual beings who were under his control. All the events of life for weal or woe occurred at his behest and were assuredly for the good of his children. Believers were already in union with Christ, they did not grope towards it through mysticism or good works. The world itself was 'disenchanted', i.e. freed from its mysterious and numinous quality. Objects were no longer blessed. Ritual actons were no longer endowed with special power.

In Catholicism the Christian life was dominated by a quest for certainty. Protestantism began with certainty, and freed its adherents for the outward-looking ethics of gratitude. In Catholicism, the Law of God was hedged about with myriad rules and regulations intended to faciliate obedience and attain some sort of certitude. In Protestantism the believer was encouraged to follow the Law as it was written, neither

adding nor subtracting. His inevitable failures forced him back to the Gospel of grace, and hence to the ground of assurance.

The consequences of this teaching were manifold. Men found religious fulfilment in their secular vocations, for now everything was sacred. The concept of an ordered and Fatherly providence encouraged a new way of looking at the world, conducive to the rise of science. The meaning of the church was radically altered - the BCP, for example, perfectly expressed the doctrine of justification, especially in the Lord's Supper. From the connection between faith and the word arose the concept of the church gathered to hear that word, and to share the sacraments as pledges of God's love. From the same source arose a change in family life, as families became 'little churches'. In pastoral terms only this teaching dealt effectively with guilt by allowing the sinner to admit it fully and then turn to the perfect substitute. It placed true forgiveness at the centre of the spiritual life.

Assurance, then, was the basis of the Christian life, and it truly guarded the sovereign grace of Christ: 'this doctrine advanceth and setteth forth the true glory of Christ, and beateth down the vainglory of man: this whosoever denieth is not to be counted for a true Christian man nor for a setter forth of Christ's glory, but for an adversary of Christ and his Gospel, and for a setter of men's vainglory' (The Homilies).

3. THE POST-REFORMATION DEVELOPMENT

The doctrine of justification was never denied or repudiated amongst Protestants, but it lost its central position.

Amongst the 'Puritans', faith and assurance were separated (e.g. in the Westminster Confession). Once a man had faith he must then press on to full assurance. This division was fatal. (It may well have arisen from the doctrine of limited atonement which prevented the balm of the cross being applied directly to the sinner). Once again the focus of attention turned inwards, and 'godliness' became 'spirituality'. The celebrated Puritan piety was often the product of a perversion of the gospel, strangely parallel to the Catholic doctrine of good works.

It was faith seeking assurance in personal effort rather than in grace. Personal predestination was proved by good works. Obedience stopped being gratitude, and was exercised for reasons of personal satisfaction. The Christian life began to be filled with endless rules, regulations and vows.

The position was the same amongst the 'Anglicans'. The celebrated Jeremy Taylor, whose devotional works retain a strong appeal to this day, was typical of a whole school of thought which insisted that our righteousness be added to that of Christ. In his hands preparation for Holy Communion became an impossible obstacle course. In C.F. Allison's words 'Christianity is, for Jeremy Taylor, an enterprise only for those capable of helping themselves'. Allison also shows how Taylor's work was pastorally cruel since it was calculated to drive men to despair or moralism.

The inevitable result of both tendencies was towards a minimizing doctrine of sin (in an attempt to deal with guilt and despair). It also necessarily involved a compromise concerning the fullness of Christ's atonement. Grace was perverted, and Christ's glory obscured.

4. IS THE DOCTRINE IMPORTANT?

The above argument is intended to show that the doctrine has been of vital importance. But is this still true?

The disagreement between Küng and Macquarrie is illuminating at this point. Although they differ about the place they allot justification, they do agree on a significant matter. For both of them the present value of the doctrine lies in its psychological consequences. Alcoholics Anonymous has discovered the same thing - when a person is prepared to admit total defeat and cast themselves on a 'higher power', release often occurs. Indeed, as Küng has pointed out, there has always been a tendency amongst various Catholic mystics toward the language of justification. This is entirely consistent with Jeremy Taylor whose prayers express the doctrine of grace while in doctrine he stresses merit.

Does this, however, add up to the doctrine of justification by faith? Not if, as is often the case in modern authors, the theme of God's judgment on guilty sinners is denied or muted. It is no accident that Macquarrie speaks of 'untenable theories about the atonement' in this connection. Use of the doctrine of justification is by no means the same as regarding it as the cutting edge of the Gospel of the Kingdom. In short, modern disregard or transformation of the doctrine stems, in part, from the theological loss of many of its surrounding doctrines. False assurance has displaced true assurance.

Medieval Catholicism will not be revived, and to this extent the battles of the 16th century are outmoded. But Puritan spirituality shows how Pelagianism can re-appear in different guises. The consequences of the modern attitude to justification by faith will occur in these areas (and, as the Puritan example shows, they will occur amongst evangelicals):

1. Modern Christianity will show a sustained interest in spirituality probably turning to Eastern religions for help with matters of technique.
2. Godliness will be of less importance and new works will be introduced.
3. Since the Bible is about the gospel, a new hermeneutic will be developed in order to discover new significance for scripture.
4. Christ will become more of a leader and teacher than a Lord and Saviour.
5. Liturgical reform will not reflect the true relationship between God and man.
6. Pastors will be unable to heal the bruised conscience since the disease and the cure are not understood. They will either deliver false assurances or they will turn persons to moralism and false spirituality.

Peter Jensen