

Justification by Faith Alone

by Dr. Roger Nicole

A good deal of discussion has arisen in the last two decades concerning justification. This has taken place particularly in connection with an outlook about Paul's epistles to the Romans and the Galatians known as "the New Perspective."

Three names are prominent in this area: E.P. Sanders, James D.A. Dunn and N.T. Wright. There are nuances in the presentation of these three, but a common assertion is that in the first century A.D., the great mass of the Jews did not believe in a salvation in terms of individual merit on good works and that Paul in Romans and Galatians was not concerned with the basis for salvation, but was addressing the question of whether Gentiles could rightly be admitted as members of the church without practicing the Jewish distinctives of circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and distinction of pure and impure foods. The Christians of Jewish background said they could not, and Paul was concerned to prove that they could.

If this is the substance of Paul's argument, then we are losing many of the basic passages addressed as evidence of justification by faith alone!

- I. The first remark that I want to make is that the fact that the doors of the church must be open to every true believer irrespective of his/her background was made very pointedly in the New Testament by 50 A.D. — that is to say probably before either Galatians and/or Romans were written. This is intimated already in the Old Testament, where the Jewish advantages are articulated, but without shutting the door permanently to the Gentiles (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; Hosea 1:10; 2:23; Romans 15:9-13; etc.).

Jesus also made reference to the Gentiles' participation in ultimate blessing (Matthew 8:11; 28:19; Luke 13:29).

The Book of Acts in chapters 2-15 manifests how God opened the understanding of the church in a progressive way:

- 2:4 *"all were filled with the Holy Spirit"* (This includes the women who were worshipping with them. 1:14)
- 2:4 *"they spoke in other tongues..."* not just Hebrew
- 2:41 3000 souls were added, (including women who could not be circumcised!) Cf. Mt 14:21 by way of contrast.
- 6:1-4 Greek-speaking Jewish Christian women are to receive equality with Hebrew speaking ones.
- 8:12 Samaritan women, although suspect of heresy as Samaritans, were baptized.
- 8:38 A foreigner, acquainted with Judaism but probably not circumcised (eunuch), is baptized.
- 10 Peter receives divine direction to preach to Gentiles, and when they believe and receive their "Pentecost" (10:48), he baptizes them (10:47, 48 cf. 11:17,18)
- 11 The Christian witness reaches many Gentiles in Antioch, and Barnabas (sent from Jerusalem to check this) confirms the propriety

- of their acceptance.
- 13, 14 Paul and Barnabas are sent by God as missionaries and ministers to Jews and Gentiles (13:47 claims Isaiah 49:6).
- 15:135 Challenged about allowing Gentiles not to receive circumcision, Barnabas and Paul go to Jerusalem to request an apostolic decision. It is given in 15:28 as inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- 15:28, 29 The question is closed: Gentile believers were not obliged to submit to Jewish practices.

We do not have an assured date for the writing of the Book of Acts, but since it does not relate the death of Paul, we would assume that it was before A.D. 68. The Jerusalem Council was held probably on A.D. 50 or before.

Under those circumstances, it appears highly unlikely that Paul should concentrate two of his major writings to churches not known as having a large proportion of their members being Jewish Christians, for the purpose of demonstrating that Gentiles could be admitted without a prerequisite of circumcision, Sabbath keeping or dietary discrimination.

If you want to find a place where Paul really discusses this subject, look at Ephesians 2:11-22, where the acceptance of the Gentiles is made crystal clear. Can we imagine that one inspired author who could be so clear and so concise in Ephesians, could also be so murky and inconclusive as to write two major letters in which practically no one for 1,900 years has recognized what he was talking about until the “new perspective” has enlightened us?

- II. The second remark I would offer is that it is true that circumcision language is found more abundantly in Romans (16 times) and Galatians (13 times) than anywhere else in the New Testament. Yet this is not in order to discuss whether or not Gentile Christians should adopt the practice, but rather to manifest that Jewish people (embracing circumcision) and Gentile people (who deem it unnecessary) are actually in need of the salvation by grace through faith, which has been realized in Jesus Christ. (cf. Ephesians 2:1-10). Circumcision is here not presented as needed for salvation, but the word is used to denote one group of people who, in spite of their claims, are not saved by this practice but by the faith to which this practice was intended to bear witness. What is important is not a “circumcision done by the hands of men,” but the “circumcision done by Christ.” (Colossians 2:11). Paul goes so far as representing “those of the circumcision group” (Titus 1:10) as the “talkers and deceivers” who oppose the sound faith.
- III. The promoters of the “New Perspectives” allege that the “works of the flesh” that Paul opposes as instrumental in salvation are not “good works in general” by which some people hope to earn God’s acceptance, but they are the continued observance of the three major Jewish practices of circumcision, Sabbath observance and discriminating diet.

Now it is true that in this discussion Paul fairly frequently names “circumcision.” But it is also notable that he rarely refers to the observance of special days (Romans 14:5; Galatians 4:10; Colossians 2:16), or to what we may eat or drink (Romans 14:3-6, 17;

Colossians 2:16; 1 Timothy 4:2,3), although those matters are presented more at length than circumcision in the Old Testament.

Jesus, in His contestations with the Jewish leaders, by contrast never but once mentioned circumcision (John 7:22,23) and the possible impropriety of food (Matthew 15:17; Mark 7:18-20). He had much discussion about the Sabbath, but never questioned the propriety of the law. He objected to the Pharisees' interpretation; but indeed he was supremely qualified to interpret it (Matthew 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5).

The Biblical evidence for singling these three practices into a pointing to the supreme expression of the Old Testament law is precarious, for the New Testament refers more often to the Decalogue or parts of it, and Paul in Romans 7:7-12 analyzes the implications of one commandment that has nothing to do with those that the "New Perspective" singles out.

- IV. In fact, the truth of justification by faith alone, contrary to what "New Perspective" authors claim, is most clearly and emphatically taught in both epistles to Romans and Galatians, as many of the fathers of the church, and notably St. Augustine, taught. This great truth, that had been obscured, especially in Roman Catholicism, was gloriously recovered in careful exegesis, profound spiritual experience and powerful preaching ministry by the great Reformers of the 16th century and after them, and because of their own obedience to Scripture, by all major Protestant movements in the last five centuries. This was a major point of dissent with Roman Catholic theology, and therefore a point of particularly careful attention to the exegesis of Romans, on which perhaps more commentaries have been produced than on any other book of the Bible!

And indeed, there are many passages of Scripture beside Romans and Galatians that articulate this truth (Isaiah 53; Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 5:24; Acts 2; 3; 3:34; 4 and 20:28; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Ephesians 2:1-10; Philippians 3:4-9; Colossians 2:10-16; Titus 3:4-7; Hebrews 10:1-4; 11-12; 1 Peter 1:7-9; 3:18).

- V. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is directly involved with several other essential elements of the Christian faith.

It is closely tied up with the importance of the work of Christ, who has been the substitute of the believer, bearing his/her guilt and punishment in the full performance of the demands of divine justice. Those who attempt to deny this do not have any moral account for the extreme form of Christ's suffering (Luke 22:42; Mark 15:34).

A Biblical understanding of the gravity of our sinful condition (Romans 3:9,10,20,23) makes it evident that no one can produce good works that would entitle him/her to heaven. So we need a supernatural divine intervention, or we are undone! This is the point of Romans 3:24-26.

It is plain throughout the New Testament that after the coming of Jesus Christ, even a law-observing Jew cannot be saved. Far from teaching that the Gentiles need to conform

to Jewish practices to be pleasing to God, the emphasis of the Epistles is that even those who think they have lives obedient to the law actually need Christ for salvation (Romans 3:9).

Unless the Incarnation were absolutely necessary for salvation in humanity, such a great miracle would be disproportionate to its result, like using atomic power to shave!

- VI. 1. Some object that James 2:14 contradicts the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This is a completely mistaken interpretation of James.

Paul teaches that any one who counts on personal merit as the ground of acceptance with God is wrong. Such a person leans on justification by *dead* works, and that will never do. The real ground of justification is the work of Christ bestowed by grace alone and appropriated by faith (Ephesians 2:8).

James is concerned to discountenance people who imagine that because they claim to have faith, they are now free to disobey God as they would wish to do. This is to abuse the goodness of God as a license for sinning (Romans 6:1). James shows that such an attitude is not compatible with true faith, but is an expression of *dead* faith, just as the bearing of wrong fruit comes from a failure of the whole tree (Matthew 7:15-20; 12:33; Luke 13:6-9).

The problem here is a confusion of justification, which relates to acceptance before God's tribunal, and sanctification, which relates to the gradual extirpation of evil rootage and development of the spiritual renewal into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:17). These are distinct but never separated, even as in the doctrine of the Persons of the Godhead, where separation as well as failure to make distinction is *heresy*.

2. Some say that since faith in Christ is required for justification, this faith must be seen as a human performance that destroys the complete gratuity of God's gift. This is a serious error because we must recognize that even faith itself is a gift of God (Acts 16:14; Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29).

Even so, faith is not the ground of justification but the means of appropriating it. When I wish to water my garden, I can say that the water is what maintains the life of the plants, the hose does nothing in this except to bring the water to the plants. Similarly, faith does not save by itself; it relates to the reception of what Christ has done.

3. Some people are so impressed by the element of forgiveness in justification that they tend to bypass the great blessing of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to His redeemed people by virtue of His headship of His church (Zechariah 3). Forgiveness leaves us untainted but naked. Imputation does clothe believers with the immaculate robe of the righteousness of Christ (cf. Matthew 22:11-13).

In conclusion, let me point once again to the importance of justification by faith alone in our total proclamation and responsible living of Christianity.

The acceptance in the church of Gentile believers who had not submitted to Jewish practices was a problem for the first century, when perhaps a majority of Christians were of Jewish descent. Certainly after the year 100, the proportion was reversed, and the great preponderance of believing Gentiles may have raised some problems as to what Christians should do about Jews (unfortunately, sometimes with very bad, unchristian attitudes!).

To imagine that Romans and Galatians are primarily concerned with the first problem is to cast them into irrelevancy for 1900 years!

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