

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: THE REINSTATEMENT OF THE DOCTRINE TO-DAY

THE title of this paper virtually makes two assumptions, first that the doctrine of justification by faith ought to be reinstated because it is worthy, and second that it needs to be reinstated because it is neglected, and does not hold the place that it should either in our praise to God or in our preaching to men. A proper sense of its full glory and wonder is weak, if not lacking, among many Christians. What is worse, there is no consciousness that truth of inestimable value is lying unappreciated; we are not aware that we are losing much by our failure to dwell upon it. Indeed, to many who occasionally try to think about it, it seems rather unreal, theoretical and abstract; it has even been disparagingly described as a legal fiction, a method of reasoning by which it is pretended that something is true which is not true. So thinkers and preachers pursue it no further; and it is certainly not preached from our pulpits as it ought to be.

Not only so, many Christians who personally rejoice before God in the blessings of justification by faith cannot worthily declare to others what they themselves enjoy. So the truth is not preached and taught as it ought to be even by them, because its theology is inadequately understood; and this unsatisfactory situation is made worse because able thinkers, with no evangelical experience of its truth, often misunderstand it themselves and then misrepresent it to others in their teaching.

Also, the ancient historic Creeds, which in our day many tend to regard as an adequate theological basis for Christian reunion, make no explicit mention of justification by faith, while the great Reformation Confessions, which do recognize the importance, and expound the truth of this doctrine, tend to be obscured and forgotten.

Is it not time, therefore, to ask whether Luther was wrong when he asserted that justification by faith is the article by which the Church stands or falls? Or was the discernment of the late Dr. H. R. Mackintosh at fault when he wrote, "The doctrine of justification by faith . . . has a way of turning up again with new majesty and power in every period of revival" ?<sup>1</sup>

Or was Paul a fool when he chose to suffer the loss of all things that he might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of his own, which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God upon faith?<sup>1</sup> Or ought we to wake up to our own error, our own lack of discernment, our own folly in choosing? Ought we to choose afresh and to set ourselves to reinstate the truth which is after all the indispensable secret of personal salvation, of spiritual revival, and of the very existence of the true Church of God?

If we are thus to move towards worthy reinstatement we need first of all to realize that the very phrase "justification by faith" tends to limit or misdirect us by its incompleteness. It would be theologically wiser, and in practice more profitable, always to state explicitly by whom and in relation to whom the believer is justified, in whom his faith rests, and who is thus justified when he does believe. In other words, we ought to speak not merely of "justification by faith", but rather of "the justification of the sinner by God and in God's sight by faith in Christ, crucified and exalted". This would then make plain that "justification by faith" is no mere legal fiction or subjective fancy, no mere formal dogma or illusory experience, but an action of God wrought in the sphere of our personal and individual relation to Him.

In his book on *F. D. Maurice and the Conflicts of Modern Theology*, Professor A. M. Ramsey summarizes Maurice's exposure of the weakness of the Protestant by saying, "The Protestant, because he treats his principle of justification by faith as a shibboleth, slips from faith in Christ the justifier into belief in an experience of being justified, and great is the fall."<sup>2</sup> However unfair this may be as a generalization, let us acknowledge its measure of truth, let us heed its implied warning, and let us fix our faith, and urge others to place theirs, not in a dogma nor in an experience of justification, but in the living God who justifies us freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Similarly, in the second place, if the doctrine of justification by faith is to be properly appreciated and thus worthily reinstated, it ought not to be considered in isolation, but rather

<sup>1</sup> See Phil. iii. 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. (Camb. Univ. Press, 1951), p. 29.

<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (Nisbet, 1938), p. 5.

viewed from varied standpoints in explicit relation to every essential feature of the Gospel. For instance, the apostle Paul has indicated that the meaning of "to be justified" needs to be interpreted in the divine and eternal context of being fore-known, fore-ordained and called by God on the one hand, and being glorified by Him on the other.<sup>1</sup> Let us then survey more in detail and one by one these complementary considerations which are indispensable to the full and worthy understanding of justification by faith.

#### I. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN HOLINESS AND GRACE

We need with fresh acknowledgment and full awareness to be recalled to the recognition that God is sovereign in the universe, the First and Final Cause of all things; and particularly we need to be recalled to the conscious confession that the only righteousness which ultimately matters is to be accepted as right in God's sight and to be acting in harmony with His will. In contrast to the godless or secular thought so widely and so subtly prevalent, we need deliberately to return to theocentric thinking, in which from first to last God is the supreme pole or rather Person of universal reference. Sin can, for instance, only be seen in its true character and full horror, if it is seen not just as transgression of some impersonal law but rather as rebellion against God and His appointed ways.

What matters supremely is not just that right is right and wrong is wrong, but that God is God, and that He loves righteousness and hates iniquity. Things sinful are the inevitable objects of His wrath. In relation to the sinner the God of holiness is a consuming fire. Yet in His sovereign freedom to do His own pleasure this same God delights to show mercy to the unworthy and the undeserving, and to devise means by which the estranged should be reconciled and the banished reinstated. Nor are these two complementary activities of holiness and grace satisfactorily held together in outworked harmony anywhere else except in the propitiation of Christ's sacrifice, and in the consequent Gospel which offers to the sinful God's own way of being Himself just, and yet at the same time the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Rom. viii. 28-30.

<sup>2</sup> See Rom. iii. 21-28.

#### II. THE PRIMARY AND FINAL AUTHORITY OF THE WORD OF GOD

Nothing has perhaps undermined more our hold on and appreciation of the truth of justification by faith than modern criticism of the Bible; for it has subtly deprived most of us of any adequate awareness of the supreme sanction belonging to the God-given word. We need to realize afresh and with compelling force that what settles things in the universe is God's will as it is declared by His word. Once God speaks, then, either it is, or it shall be, as He says. Of this there can be no final gainsaying, for every word will be vindicated by corresponding fulfilment. Therefore, than this there can be nothing more certain and secure. So our Lord Himself said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."<sup>1</sup>

Nothing, therefore, can be more important and more decisive for the individual man, and most of all for the convicted sinner, than to be declared righteous by God Himself. For if God says that in His sight I am righteous, then I am righteous. I may boldly ask, as did Paul, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that shall condemn?"<sup>2</sup> I now have no possible accuser or gainsayer to fear in earth, heaven, or hell. Nor is this word of God an empty declaration or legal fiction, pretending that something is which is not. For His word is the decisive and creative word. What He declares is thereby constituted essential truth and infallible or incontrovertible fact.

For instance, if it is proper in this British Realm to regard a verdict of the High Court or an Act of Parliament to which the Royal Assent has been given as decisive, as indeed a word that can henceforth be acted on or proved operative, how much more is the solemnly declared word of the living God decisive in heaven itself. If the former borough of Cambridge, recently declared a city by Royal Charter, is now rightly able publicly to call itself a city, how much more may I who still know myself to be a sinner say with Luther—a sinner, yes,—but "*simul iustus et peccator*". For by the double sanction of God's word and covenant I have incontestable right to confess that as a believer in Christ and His redeeming work I am justified with God. Is not this something to wonder at and to glory in—the gracious pleasure and the royal writ of the Divine King, who

<sup>1</sup> Mark xiii. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. viii. 33, 34.

has given me the standing of being righteous in His sight? For if God calls me "righteous", who can call me otherwise? Is not this a boldness and a glorying which we need to see reinstated in our worship and our witness?

To this one may add that in the day in which we now live the fact that justification by faith is a revealed and Scriptural doctrine, is in some quarters not only an original but also an up-to-date advantage. For, in the book previously quoted, Professor A. M. Ramsey has written of our times, "The climate of thought has so changed that theologians commonly see it as their function not to demonstrate the validity of the Christian faith by the methods of contemporary secular thought so much as to study the Biblical revelation in its own categories and to draw from it some light to guide our steps in a dark world where diabolical forces are seeking whom they may devour."<sup>1</sup>

### III. MAN'S GUILTY, HELPLESS AND HOPELESS STATE AS A SINNER

In comparatively recent times just as many have, on the one hand, lost faith in the supreme authority of God's Word, so they have, on the other hand, become blind to the extreme gravity of their own sinfulness. There has been, as we all know, a period of humanistic optimism, a belief in natural evolution and inevitable progress. No wonder the relevance and the glory of the evangelical doctrine of the justification by God of the ungodly and the sinner ceased to be fully appreciated. In the last forty years, however, such hopes of human progress have been not only violently shaken but almost completely shattered. There is in consequence a new readiness to recognize the essential truth of the Christian insight concerning the inherent sinfulness and frustrating impotence of human nature. This new sense of depravity and proneness to despair provide just the field for the reinstatement of this doctrine of the salvation by God of the sinful and unworthy, this doctrine of a complete change in life's fundamental relations not only to things and people but above all to God Himself; a change offered, not as a reward of merit or as a prize to be won by good works, but as a free initial gift of divine grace to all who, confessing their need and unworthiness, cast themselves on the justifying mercy of God and the propitiating work of the God-given Saviour.

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 111.

In contrast to the Englishman's inveterate Pelagianism, his persistent belief that God helps those who help themselves, there are fresh need and opportunity to make men aware, and to proclaim, that God helps those who cannot help themselves, and who do not deserve to be helped either; and that our Lord Himself taught that it was the publican who acknowledged with shame his sinfulness and counted on God's provision of propitiation, who went home justified with God rather than the Pharisee, who could honestly enough protest, by comparison, how much he had done of righteousness or had not done of sin. This message of the free justification of the sinful is the distinctive glory of the Christian Gospel. Also, as our Lord made equally plain, there are in the end only these two alternatives—either condemnation or justification, either to exalt ourselves and be divinely humbled or to humble ourselves and be divinely exalted.<sup>1</sup> Such is the message which ought afresh to be clearly sounded forth.

### IV. THE SUBSTITUTIONARY AND PENAL DEATH OF CHRIST

It is no mere chance coincidence that at the time of the Reformation a penal and substitutionary doctrine of the atoning work of Christ and the full wonder and significance of the doctrine of justification by faith were appreciated and emphasized together. For the two doctrines are interdependent and complementary. The second rests upon the first as an indispensable and divinely-ordained foundation. It was the Christ, who was first delivered up for our offences, who was then raised again for our justification.<sup>2</sup> He had first to be lifted up on the tree to bear the sinner's condemnation as one cursed of God, before He was lifted up to the throne in vindication to secure the sinner's acceptance in God's presence; and both happened to Him as our substitute or proxy or federal head. Again to quote significant New Testament words, "Him who knew no sin God made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."<sup>3</sup>

Justification, therefore, is no empty pretence, no mere legal fiction, because, although given to the sinner freely and apart from works, it does depend upon an objective work of propitiation wrought by Christ on the sinner's behalf and indeed in the

<sup>1</sup> See Luke xviii. 9-14.

<sup>2</sup> See Rom. iv. 25.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. v. 21.

sinner's stead. For Scripture does not teach that human sin can simply be pardoned. An objective work of redemption and remission is needed to set the sinner free from his burden and his guilt, and to give him a new standing of freedom and acceptance before God. This is exactly what is now ours because of what Christ has done for us. We cannot, therefore, reinstate the preaching of justification by faith without reinstating the preaching of a substitutionary and penal doctrine of Christ's atoning work. So it is of no small significance that, in spite of violent antagonism to the very idea on the part of many, there is a fresh readiness in more than one quarter to recognize that a substitutionary and penal doctrine of the atonement may, after all, be what Scripture teaches.<sup>1</sup>

#### V. THE TRUE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION AND EXALTATION TO THE THRONE

The doctrine of justification by faith, the certain fact of the sinner's full acceptance as righteous in God's presence only through faith in Christ, is not realized and preached as it ought to be by many, because they know no corresponding certainty that Christ's atoning work is finished, and that He Himself as our High Priest is already fully accepted by God and enthroned at His right hand. They suppose rather that Christ is still making atonement by eternally presenting Himself to the Father as the Lamb that was slain. If, therefore, the Christ Himself in heaven is still only working towards our ultimate justification, justification can only be viewed and preached as a goal towards which believers are moving rather than as a God-given relation to God in which by grace they already and unalterably stand.

Such views, that the Christ in heaven and His Church on earth, by the continual offering to God of His sacrifice, are making propitiation for sin, and thus winning ultimate justification, sound devout and humble, and are obviously attractive to the religiously minded, but they are not scriptural. Indeed, they involve a fundamental and God-dishonouring denial of

<sup>1</sup> See J. P. Hickinbotham, "The Atonement in St. Mark's Gospel", *The Churchman*, April-June, 1944; F. W. Camfield, "The Idea of Substitution in the Doctrine of the Atonement," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Dec. 1948; A. M. Hunter, *The Work and Words of Jesus* (S.C.M. Press, 1950), pp. 91-100; Leon Morris, "The use of *ἰλάσκεσθαι*, etc., in Biblical Greek," *Expository Times*, May, 1951.

the eternal sufficiency of Christ's one sacrifice, finished once for all; and they completely deprive believers of the proper evangelical assurance of present and permanent peace with God. What we need to reinstate, therefore, is the preaching to believers of the glorious gospel truth that at the very throne of God Himself none can deny our access or condemn us as sinners. For there on the throne we have God Himself in Christ as our justifier. He who died for us and was raised from the dead is now at God's right hand for this very purpose to intervene on our behalf as our Advocate, to pronounce us righteous in God's sight, and thus to secure the acceptance and full salvation of all who come unto God by Him.<sup>1</sup> So in Christ we have already and eternally an inviolable status as holy and without blemish in God's sight.<sup>2</sup>

#### VI. THE FULL WEALTH OF THE CONSEQUENT BENEFITS; AND THE FULL WEIGHT OF THE ACCOMPANYING OBLIGATIONS

Neglect of the full significance and consequent implications of the doctrine of justification by faith has caused very many true believers in Christ to be completely unaware of the wealth of their Christian inheritance and of the weight of their Christian obligations. As a result, instead of possessing the possessions which are already theirs in title, instead of seeking to cease from sin and to perfect holiness by regarding themselves dead to sin and alive unto God, many seek some "second blessing", as though they still needed God to do something more for them before holy living and full salvation can be theirs. Whereas, actually, once we are "in Christ" all things are ours; and so not only our reconciliation to God but also our sanctification and our glorification are assured.

To quote the New Testament way of putting it: "whom He

<sup>1</sup> See 1 John ii. 1, 2; Rom. viii. 31-34; Heb. vii. 25.

<sup>2</sup> On Col. i. 22, "to present you holy and without blemish," Professor C. H. Dodd has written, "It is probably wrong to take the words 'to present you holy' as referring to the ultimate issue of the divine purpose in the final moral perfection of Christ's people. It is 'justification by faith' of which Paul is speaking. It is not that the Colossians have attained to, or are to attain in some remote future, a moral perfection which will secure their acceptance at the Last Judgment. It is that here and now by grace of God who 'justifieth the ungodly' they stand before Him as His consecrated people to whom He 'imputes' no fault" (*The Abingdon Bible Commentary* [Epworth Press, 1929], pp. 1255 f.).

justified, them He also glorified.”<sup>1</sup> “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, once we are reconciled to God through the death of God’s Son much more can we be sure that we shall be continually kept safe by the power of His resurrection life, and finally saved through Him from God’s wrath against sinners, and conformed in resurrection glory to the image of God’s Son.<sup>3</sup>

The consequent obligation resting upon us is, therefore, so to live as those who are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem and can no longer be earthly-minded, as those who have the present available power of God’s indwelling Spirit for holy living, and as those who have the sure future prospect of full redemption, when we shall at Christ’s coming be clothed upon with a new spiritual body, fashioned after the likeness of our exalted Lord’s own glorious body.

Such are the heritage and the high calling of the justified. The doctrines of justification, sanctification and glorification (or “the redemption of the body”<sup>4</sup>) belong thus together. And in this connection it is the worthy exposition of the relevant scriptural promises and exhortations to the justified, which particularly needs in our day widespread reinstatement in the ministry of the Word to Christian congregations.

#### VII. THE PROPER SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TWO SACRAMENTS OF THE GOSPEL

Christian Baptism is the divinely appointed seal of our justification by faith. As an ordinance administered once for all it corresponds to the once-for-all character of the redeeming work of God in Christ. Just as the finished work of Christ is sufficient to procure the full salvation of all who are in Him, so baptism is not only administered once never to be repeated, but also it assures the recipient not only of initiation into Christ but also of every blessing of the justified life, including the final redemption of the body; as a sacrament it is thus eschatological as well as evangelical.

<sup>1</sup> Rom. viii. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. v. 1, 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Rom. v. 9, 10; viii. 29.

<sup>4</sup> See Rom. viii. 23; 1 Cor. i. 30; Eph. iv. 30.

Adequate awareness of this comprehensive significance of the baptismal seal as pledging the sinner’s full salvation from beginning to end is lacking in most Christian congregations. This is due, on the one hand, to the unworthy practice of infant baptism, to the failure frequently in the presence of the congregation both to baptize and to preach about baptism, and to the prevalence of mistaken views about baptismal regeneration. It is also due, on the other hand, to over-emphasis on the necessity of the candidate’s personal confession of faith to the neglect of other and even more important truths about Christian baptism.

We all seem to have lost sight of the primary witness of baptism to God’s justifying act, and still more to the full witness of baptism as pledging a complete salvation. For, on the one hand, Christian baptism is not just an initiation or beginning only; still less is it simply a provisional admission into the visible Church or local congregation. It is rather the visible seal of that incorporation into Christ which makes every blessing ours. All the promises of God which concern the sinner’s full salvation, and not just the initial ones are therein visibly signed and sealed. At the same time, on the other hand, while emphasis on the necessity of faith on the part of the candidate is important and indeed indispensable, such emphasis is overdone if a person’s baptism is regarded more as the occasion of his public confession of faith than as the visible seal given to the candidate in God’s Name of God’s one all-sufficient justifying act whose full benefit is thereby assured to the believer. We greatly need, therefore, first in our understanding and then in our exposition of the significance of Christian Baptism, to reinstate the doctrine of justification by faith.

Similarly, in contrast to the widespread and grossly misleading use of the Holy Communion service as a Godward plea or sacrifice of the altar, we need more fully to realize and rejoice in its divine sanction as a manward pledge or gift of the Lord from His table to His people. Far from any further pleading or spreading before God of our Lord’s sacrifice being necessary, these symbols given under His hand to His disciples are visible seals of the conveyance to His believing people of the innumerable benefits of His passion as an already and once-for-all finished work. Further, their repeated administration assures believers that the one sacrifice that has secured their initial

cleansing and peace with God is sufficient both to make theirs fresh cleansing from sins of daily living, and to assure them of final preservation unto life everlasting of body as well as soul. In other words, the service challenges us to appreciate, and by faith either to appropriate or to anticipate, the full consequences and endless eternal blessings of being justified by faith. Also, many who devoutly use the service, desiring to find it a means of grace, need to be saved from the prevalent temptation to trust in the supposed virtue of partaking of the consecrated elements, and taught to fix their faith and hope on the justifying Lord, who by these visible tokens seals the conveyance to His people of the benefits of His finished work. If, therefore, the significance of the Lord's Supper is to be properly appreciated, and its administration properly enjoyed, we need fresh and frequent preaching in its fulness of the doctrine of justification by faith.

#### VIII. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ONLY

The distinctive character and the sole-sufficiency of the faith which justifies continually need afresh to be both recognized and expounded. This can only be adequately done when attention is directed not towards faith but towards the person and work of Christ. The faith of the individual must be seen as having no value in itself, but as discovering value wholly and solely through movement towards and committal to Christ. It must be seen as simply a means of finding all one's hope outside oneself in the person and work of another; and not as in any sense an originating cause or objective ground of justification. For true faith is active only in the man who is wholly occupied with Christ; its practice means that every blessing is received from another. For this reason faith is exclusive and intolerant of company; it is only truly present when any and every contribution towards his salvation on the part of the believer himself or on the part of the Church is absolutely and unequivocally shut out. Justification must be seen and received as a blessing dependent wholly and exclusively on Christ alone, on what He is and on what He has done—a blessing enjoyed simply through being joined directly to Him, through finding one's all in Him, through drawing one's all from Him, without the interposition of any other mediator or mediating channel whatever. The one sufficient cause and the distinctive character of the salvation consequently enjoyed can only be properly

expressed if it is made abundantly plain that it is justification by faith only. Religious man is so incessantly prone to introduce some contribution of his own works or of the Church's ceremonies and sacraments that this truth of justification by faith only unquestionably needs continual reiteration among those by whom it is appreciated, and frequent reinstatement among the many by whom it has all too often been lost.

#### IX. TRUE EVANGELICAL ASSURANCE

When hope is thus wholly and exclusively fixed outside oneself and outside one's fellow-men on another, and that other Jesus, the Son of God, the once crucified and now exalted Saviour, the believer finds a solid and unshakable ground of full and abiding assurance. He knows that his sins are forgiven and forgotten by God. He knows that by His grace all is and all will be well. Possession of such assurance is an intended heritage, and should be a distinctive mark of all who embrace the Christian Gospel.

Yet it is just this assurance which in our day so many lack, and not least those who profess and call themselves Christians. What is more, for lack of it many are disturbed and sometimes tormented by inner misgiving. They resort for relief either to the psycho-analyst and his psychotherapy or to confession to, and absolution by, the priest. The widespread prevalence of both these practices provides objective evidence that men are still hungry for, and in many cases far from enjoying, inner assurance. It is ours to declare that such full assurance of peace with God, of sufficient grace to face the uncertainties of this life, and of sure hope in the life beyond, is only to be possessed, and is meant fully to be enjoyed, by those who are justified by faith. For none can give the heart of sinful man true peace except the justifying Saviour. This is exclusively His prerogative; and this glory He will not give to another. Is it not time, therefore, that over against the well-meaning but ultimately insufficient ministries of the psychologist and the priest those who know the truth of the Gospel of saving grace should set the renewed preaching of justification by faith?

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