Jesus' Perspective on Sola Fide

Code: A192

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Many who have embraced "the New Perspective on Paul" are also proposing a different slant on the doctrine of justification by faith. When the text of Scripture is interpreted in the new light, they say, Pauline support for the principle of *sola fide*, the doctrine of imputation, and the distinction between law and gospel doesn't seem quite so strong.

We say that's nonsense. We reject the historical and hermeneutical revisionism of the New Perspective, but regardless of how one interprets the apostle Paul, it is quite clear that *Jesus* taught justification by faith alone. To abandon this truth is to abandon biblical soteriology altogether.

No doctrine is more important to evangelical theology than the doctrine of justification by faith alone--the Reformation principle of *sola fide*. Martin Luther rightly said that the church stands or falls on this one doctrine.

History provides plenty of objective evidence to affirm Luther's assessment. Churches and denominations that hold firmly to *sola fide* remain evangelical. Those who have strayed from the Reformation consensus on this point inevitably capitulate to liberalism, revert to sacerdotalism, embrace some form of perfectionism, or veer off into worse forms of apostasy.

The Very Essence Of Christianity

Historic evangelicalism has therefore always treated justification by faith as a central biblical distinctive--if not the single most important doctrine to get right. This is the doctrine that makes authentic Christianity distinct from every other religion. Christianity is the religion of divine accomplishment--with the emphasis always on Christ's finished work. All others are religions of human achievement. They become preoccupied, inevitably, with the sinner's own efforts to be holy. Abandon the doctrine of justification by faith and you cannot honestly claim to be evangelical.

Scripture itself makes *sola fide* the only alternative to a damning system of works-righteousness: "Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned 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 reckoned as

righteousness" (Rom. 4:4-5, emphasis added).

In other words, those who trust Jesus Christ for justification by faith alone receive a perfect righteousness that is reckoned to them. Those who attempt to establish their own righteousness or mix faith with works only receive the terrible wage that is due all who fall short of perfection. So the individual as well as the church stands or falls with the principle of *sola fide*. Israel's apostasy was rooted in their abandonment of justification by faith alone: "For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:3).

Biblical justification must be earnestly defended on two fronts. No-lordship theology (the error we dealt with in the November/December issue of *Pulpit*) twists the doctrine of justification by faith to support the view that obedience to God's moral law is optional. This teaching attempts to reduce the whole of God's saving work to the declarative act of justification. It downplays the spiritual rebirth of regeneration (2 Cor. 5:17); it discounts the moral effects of the believer's new heart (Ezek. 36:26-27); and it makes sanctification hinge on the believer's own efforts. It tends to treat the forensic element of justification--God's act of declaring the believing sinner righteous--as if this were the only essential aspect of salvation. The inevitable effect of this approach is to turn the grace of God into licentiousness (Jude 4). Such a view is called *antinomianism*.

On the other hand, there are many who make justification dependent on a mixture of faith and works. Whereas antinomianism radically *isolates* justification from sanctification, this error *blends* the two aspects of God's saving work. The effect is to make justification *a process* grounded in the believer's own flawed righteousness--rather than *a declarative act* of God grounded in Christ's perfect righteousness.

As soon as justification is fused with sanctification, works of righteousness become an essential part of the process. Faith is thus diluted with works. *Sola fide* is abandoned. This was the error of the Galatian legalists (cf. Gal. 2:16; 5:4). Paul called it "a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6, 9). The same error is found in virtually every false cult. It's the main error of Roman Catholicism. I'm concerned that it may also be the direction many who are enthralled with "the New Perspective on Paul" are traveling. [1]

If doctrine as a whole has been ignored in our day, the doctrine of justification has suffered a particular neglect. Written works on justification are noticeably missing from the corpus of recent evangelical literature. [2] In his introduction to the 1961 reprint of James Buchanan's landmark work, *The Doctrine of Justification*, J. I. Packer made note of this:

It is a fact of ominous significance that Buchanan's classic volume, now a century old, is the most recent full-scale study of justification by faith that English-speaking Protestantism (to look no further) has produced. If we may judge by the size of its literary output, there has never been an age of such

feverish theological activity as the past hundred years; yet amid all its multifarious theological concerns it did not produce a single book of any size on the doctrine of justification. If all we knew of the church during the past century was that it had neglected the subject of justification in this way, we should already be in a position to conclude that this has been a century of religious apostasy and decline. [3]

Having neglected this doctrine for more than a century, evangelicals are ill-equipped to answer those who are saying Martin Luther and the Reformers misunderstood the apostle Paul and therefore got the doctrine of justification wrong.

The evangelical movement is on the verge of abandoning the material principle of the Reformation, and most evangelicals don't even see the threat and would have no answer cogent if they did.

What must we do to be saved? The apostle Paul answered that question for the Philippian jailer in the clearest possible terms: "*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31).

Paul's key doctrinal epistles--especially Romans and Galatians--then expand on that answer, unfolding the doctrine of justification by faith to show how we are justified by faith alone apart from human works of any kind.

At least, that is the historic evangelical interpretation of Paul. But that's the very thing under attack by the New Perspective.

So what if we move beyond the apostle Paul? Is it possible to prove the principle of *sola fide* from the earthly teaching of Christ? It certainly is.

The Gospel According To Jesus

Although Christ made no formal explication of the doctrine of justification (such as Paul did in his epistle to the Romans), justification by faith underlies and permeates all His gospel preaching. While Jesus never gave a discourse on the subject, it is easy to demonstrate from Jesus' evangelistic ministry that He taught *sola fide*.

For example, it was Jesus Himself who stated, "he who hears My word, and believes . . . has passed out of death into life" (Jn. 5:24)--without undergoing any sacrament or ritual, and without any waiting period or purgatory. The thief on the cross is the classic example. On the most meager evidence of his faith, Jesus told him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43). No sacrament or work was required for him to procure salvation.

Furthermore, the many healings Jesus accomplished were physical evidence of His power to forgive sins (Matt. 9:5-6). When He healed, He frequently said, "Your *faith* has made you well" (Matt. 9:22;

Mk. 5:34; 10:52; Lk. 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). All those healings were object lessons on the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

But the one occasion where Jesus actually declared someone "justified" provides the best insight into the doctrine as He taught it:

He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house *justified* rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14, emphasis added).

That parable surely shocked Jesus' listeners! They "trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (v. 9)--the very definition of self-righteousness. Their theological heroes were the Pharisees, who held to the most rigid legalistic standards. They fasted, made a great show of praying and giving alms, and even went further in applying the ceremonial laws than Moses had actually prescribed.

Yet Jesus had stunned multitudes by saying, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20)--followed by, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). Clearly, He set a standard that was humanly impossible, for no one could surpass the rigorous living of the scribes and Pharisees.

Now He further astounds His listeners with a parable that seems to place a detestable tax-gatherer in a better position spiritually than a praying Pharisee.

Jesus' point is clear. He was teaching that justification is by faith alone. All the theology of justification is there. But without delving into abstract theology, Jesus clearly painted the picture for us with a parable.

A Judicial Act of God

This tax-gatherer's justification was an instantaneous reality. There was no process, no time lapse, no fear of purgatory. He "went down to his house justified" (v. 14)--not because of anything he had done, but because of what had been done on his behalf.

Notice that the tax-collector understood his own helplessness. He owed an impossible debt he knew he could not pay. All he could do was repent and plead for mercy. Contrast his prayer with that of the arrogant Pharisee. He did not recite what he had done. He knew that even his best works were sin. He did not offer to do anything for God. He simply pleaded for divine mercy. He was looking for God to do for him what he could not do for himself. That is the very nature of the penitence Jesus called for.

By Faith Alone

Furthermore, this man went away justified without performing any works of penance, without doing any sacrament or ritual, without any meritorious works whatsoever. His justification was complete without *any* of those things, because it was solely on the basis of faith. Everything necessary to atone for his sin and provide forgiveness had already been done on his behalf. He was justified by faith on the spot.

Again, he makes a stark contrast with the smug Pharisee, who was so certain that all his fasting and tithing and other works made him acceptable to God. But while the working Pharisee remained unjustified, the believing tax-gatherer received full justification by faith alone.

An Imputed Righteousness

Remember Jesus' statement from the Sermon on the Mount, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20)? Yet now He states that this tax-gatherer--the most wicked of men--was justified! How did such a sinner obtain a righteousness that exceeded that of the Pharisee? If the standard is divine perfection (v. 48), how could a traitorous tax-collector ever become just in God's eyes?

The only possible answer is that he received a righteousness that was not his own (cf. Phil. 3:9). Righteousness was imputed to him by faith (Rom. 4:9-11).

Whose righteousness was reckoned to him? It could only be the perfect righteousness of a flawless Substitute, who in turn must bear the tax-gatherer's sins and suffer the penalty of God's wrath in his place. And the gospel tells us that is precisely what Jesus did.

The tax-gatherer was justified. God declared him righteous, imputing to him the full and perfect righteousness of Christ, forgiving him of all *unrighteousness*, and delivering him from all condemnation. Forever thereafter he stood before God on the ground of a perfect righteousness that had been reckoned to his account.

That is what justification means. It is the only true gospel. All other points of theology emanate from it. As Packer wrote, "The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas: it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace." [4] t he difference between *sola fide* and every other formula for justification is not theological hair-splitting. A right understanding of justification by faith is the very foundation of the gospel. You cannot go wrong on this point without ultimately corrupting every other doctrine as well.

And that is why every "different gospel" is under the eternal curse of God.

1. I raise this concern because most New Perspectivists deny any legitimate distinction between law and gospel; they often portray justification in stages, with final justification dependent on the believer's own works; and many of them downplay or reject the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. They have focused their revisionist hermeneutic on the very passages where Paul most clearly teaches these doctrines, such as 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Philippians 3:9. To give a more thorough analysis the New Perspective's devastating impact on the doctrine of justification is far beyond the scope of this article. But most critics of New Perspectivism have raised very similar concerns. See, for example, David Linden, The New Perspective of N. T. Wright on the Doctrine of Justification.
2. Two notable exceptions are James White, *The God who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), and R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
3. James I. Packer in James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961 reprint of 1867 original), 2.
4. Packer, in Buchanan, 2.

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