Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Scripture, Tradition, and Rome, Part 4
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John MacArthur

Long Before Luther: Jesus and the Doctrine of Justification

No doctrine is more important to evangelical theology than the doctrine of justification by faith alone--the Reformation principle of *sola fide*.Martin Luther called it the article that determines whether the church is standing or falling.

History provides plenty of objective evidence to affirm Luther's assessment.Churches and denominations that hold firmly to *sola fide* remain evangelical.Those willing to yield at this point inevitably capitulate to liberalism, revert to sacerdotalism, or embrace even worse forms of apostasy.Historic evangelicalism has therefore always treated justification by faith as a central biblical distinctive--if not the single most important doctrine to get right.It would not be far from the truth to define evangelicals as those who believe in justification by faith alone.

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). 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).

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*.

Biblical justification must be earnestly defended on two fronts.Many today misuse the doctrine 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).Paul called it "a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6, 9). The same error is found in virtually every false cult.It is also the whole basis of the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification.

Evangelicalism is currently being assaulted with both errors.The "lordship salvation" controversy reveals the potency of modern antinomianism. Meanwhile on the other front, a push is underway for ecumenical union with Roman Catholicism.This would require evangelicals to soften their stance on *sola fide* and grant the stamp of legitimacy to a Galatian-style doctrine of justification that mingles faith and works.These trends are especially alarming because they emanate from within the evangelical movement itself.

And outside evangelicalism, justification by faith alone is being vigorously attacked.A new generation of Roman Catholic apologists have taken up arms against *sola fide*.According to them, Scripture does not teach the doctrine--it is an invention of Luther and the Reformers.

I recently listened to a taped presentation by a Catholic priest who was making these claims. He suggested that Jesus virtually ignored the doctrine of justification in His own teaching and evangelism.This man, who frequently debates Protestant theologians, said he has challenged them all to demonstrate where Jesus taught that anyone could be justified by faith alone.So far, he said, he has not found anyone willing to take him up on his dare.

Unfortunately, today's evangelicals are poorly equipped to meet such a challenge.Many see theology as less important than the great moral issues of our day, such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and similar concerns.Thrown together with Roman Catholics in the political arena, many moral activists view it as counterproductive to debate theology.They prefer to let the doctrinal differences between Rome and the Reformers fade into obscurity.At the very least they are willing to treat all doctrinal differences as secondary matters.This mindset is behind the document titled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," which calls evangelicals to embrace all Catholics as true brothers and sisters in Christ.

Meanwhile, ignorance and theological naivete have left many evangelicals unable to defend what Scripture teaches.Ours is an age of pragmatism, obsessed with what works and less concerned with

what is true.Too few are able or willing to defend evangelical truths against contradictory views. It is easier--and it seems so much more polite--simply not to argue.Therefore attacks on crucial evangelical doctrines often go unanswered.The next generation will reap the poisonous fruit of this trend.

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. In his introduction to the 1961 reprint of James Buchanan's landmark work on 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.

No doctrine is more important to defend than the biblical teaching that believers are justified by faith alone. *Sola fide* is one truth that we must keep clearly in sight if we are to steer a safe course between the twin evils of antinomianism on one side and works-righteousness on the other.The apostle Paul counted it so important that he issued a solemn curse of eternal damnation against anyone who would corrupt the gospel at this point (Gal. 1:9).No wonder so many in the Reformation gave their lives in defense of this doctrine.

In fact, justification was the doctrine that sparked the Reformation. Catholic theology had neglected the subject for centuries. Rome was unprepared to answer the early Reformers' doctrinal challenge.So the Church's initial response was to deflect the debate to the issue of moral and ecclesiastical reforms.Martin Luther was frustrated by Rome's unwillingness to address doctrine--especially justification by faith.He even stated that he would gladly yield to the pope on ecclesiastical matters if the pope would embrace the true gospel. Luther understood that all the moral and ecclesiastical offenses tolerated by the Church were ultimately a result of the eclipse of justification.The doctrine of justification by faith alone would have automatically ended the sale of indulgences and other abuses of ecclesiastical power.

So when the Reformers' preaching about justification by faith began to awaken the masses to the truth of Scripture, it was inevitable that the Roman Catholic Church would respond.

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