

## E. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

The biblical gospel includes the use of many terms that are part of God's one plan of salvation, such as "election, regeneration, redemption, atonement, propitiation, substitution, righteousness, reconciliation, grace, adoption," etc. However, it is the expression "justification through faith," that takes on special meaning and emphasis, not simply historically, but rather in the light of man's sinfulness and his arrogant but foolish attempt to attain right standing with the holy God of the Bible by means of his own terms and energy. According to the Bible, man's fundamental problem is a moral issue rather than a matter of lost relationship due to separation. The separation is there, that is man's estrangement from God, but it is a result of moral conflict. So in Isaiah 59:2 we are told that, "your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God." Thus when the problem of iniquity is dealt with, separation will give way to reconciliation. As Job's friend Bildad pondered, "How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who is born of woman? If even the moon has no brightness and the stars are not pure in His sight, how much less man, that maggot, and the son of man, that worm!" (Job 25:4-6).

Thus both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and especially the Apostle Paul, have revealed that man's only hope of right acceptance before this holy God is through faith in the personal, perfect, objective, imputed, and substitutionary righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such faith looks to Christ with great earnestness, after the manner of Isaiah 45:22. "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." Similarly, though with an expansion in detail, John 3:14-15 declares that there is hope only through faith in Christ's completed atonement, and through such faith alone the sinner is pardoned of all his sin and reckoned to be completely covered with that same Christ's perfect righteousness (Rom. 3:24; 4:5; 5:17). Thus the believing sinner is accepted by God solely "for Jesus' sake." Hence when Martin Luther grasped this truth of justification through faith alone, he confessed that, "this straightaway made me feel as though reborn, as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself."<sup>59</sup> Now God had become his gracious friend, whereas concerning his former regard he tells us, "For, however irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience nor could I trust that I had pleased him with my satisfaction. I did not love, nay, rather I hated this just God who punished sinners and if not with 'open blasphemy' certainly with huge murmuring I was angry with God."<sup>60</sup> Yet at the same time, Luther adds that this restlessness of his soul, and this hounding and depressing perspective of God's condemning righteousness, drove him to, "knock importunately at Paul in this place [Romans 1:17], thirsting most ardently to know what Paul meant."<sup>61</sup> Thus it can be concluded that the Reformer's guilty concern regarding the demands of God's righteousness led him to the discovery of the grace of God's free

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<sup>59</sup> Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness Of God*, p. 122.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

pardoning righteousness. Such comprehension, it is maintained, was very much grounded upon Luther's full understanding of the character of God.

1. The loss of Reformation emphasis.

That evangelical Christendom today has lost sight of the biblical truth of the doctrine of justification by faith ought to be obvious to all, that is if this doctrine is comprehended according to Luther<sup>62</sup>, Calvin<sup>63</sup>, Owen<sup>64</sup>, Bunyan<sup>65</sup>, Wesley<sup>66</sup>, Edwards<sup>67</sup>, Spurgeon<sup>68</sup>, Lloyd-Jones<sup>69</sup>, and Packer<sup>70</sup>. Why is this so?

a. Man-centeredness.

The average evangelical church in the United States has fallen from the faith of its more God-centered fathers. Certainly orthodoxy broadly prevails, but true church worship has been transformed into a religious happy hour, an opportunity for feeling good about oneself, a place where ego-massage is available for those who are hurting, a source of satisfying human relationships in an environment of ecstatic, upbeat, cacophonous sound. External philosophies such as existentialism, materialism, rationalism, and hedonism have all played their part in the invasion of this insidious infection. In particular, there has been indulgence in:

(1) Utilitarianism.

While the natural man is at the center of his universe, God is conveniently stationed at his right hand, but not above in holy and sovereign dominion. God is a "blessing provider," a "physical sickness prescription," a

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<sup>62</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, "Lectures on Romans," "Lectures on Galatians."

<sup>63</sup> John Calvin, John T. McNeill, ed., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, XI, 1 - XVIII, 10.

<sup>64</sup> John Owen, William H. Goold ed., *The Works of John Owen*, "The Doctrine of Justification by Faith," V, pp. 1-400.

<sup>65</sup> John Bunyan, George Offor ed., *The Works of John Bunyan*, "Of Justification By An Imputed Righteousness," I, pp. 300-334; "A Defense Of The Doctrine Of Justification By Faith," II, pp. 278-334.

<sup>66</sup> John Wesley, *Fifty-Three Sermons On Several Occasions*, "Salvation By Faith," pp. 7-17, "Justification By Faith," 58-71, "The Righteousness Of Faith," pp. 71-83, "The Scripture Way Of Salvation," pp. 610-622.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Justification by Faith Alone," I, pp. 622-54.

<sup>68</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street and Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Sermons 362, 814, 844, 964, 1280, 1456, 1749, 1917, 2357, 2513.

<sup>69</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, Atonement and Justification*, 3:20-4:25, 250 pp; *Luther and His Message for Today*, 30 pp.

<sup>70</sup> J. I. Packer, article, "Just, Justify, Justification," Everett F. Harrison ed., *Baker's Dictionary Of Theology*, pp. 303-8.

“religious cornucopia,” a “guarantor of entrance into a designer heaven.” God is often regarded as a meal ticket, even as was the Son of God “Jesus answered them and said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled’ (John 6:26). Even if government welfare fails, a final resort is religious welfare, since, after all, is not God love?”

(2) Sensuality.

Today, being a Christian is not so much a matter of “How *are* you?” that is concerning a state of moral being, as “How are you *doing*?” or a state of accomplishment and activity, and especially “How are you *feeling*?, or a state of delicious experience. Religious euphoria, signs and wonders, and phenomena are the hallmark of Christianity in the twenty-first century with truth as an attending handmaiden rather than a master. All of this focuses upon human fulfillment and satisfaction, to which God is a means to an end, not a glorious end in Himself.

(3) Relationalism.

With religious man obsessively focusing on himself as the center of his universe, his chief interest is how he relates to his fellow man, especially in terms of acceptance, approval, self-image, fulfillment, self-aggrandizement, openness, egalitarianism, etc. God is certainly acknowledged, but once again He is more on the sidelines as a supplementary consultant, a back-up when trouble arises. Modern psychology has only fostered this self-focus and its effect has become evident in the dominance of many church “counseling” programs.

b. Neglect of essential Bible truth.

Within evangelical orthodoxy in the United States today, thankfully there has remained a strong formal commitment to the truthfulness and inerrancy of the Bible. However, it is one thing to have the infallible Word of God in one’s hand, and quite another to have the essence of this truth firmly embraced in the soul.

(1) The nature of God.

This whole study has repeatedly maintained that back of all of the multitude of problems that biblical Christianity faces today is a shallow and distorted apprehension of God. The contemporary vision is conditioned by this man-centeredness which has attempted to make God conformable to human expectations and wishes. The end product is not the God of the Bible who man can only hope to know through His initiative

and righteous reconciliation, but rather the god of unconditional acceptance who is moved according to divine, warm fuzzy feelings! This being so, biblical justification has tended to become irrelevant insofar as Paul, the former rabbi, expressed it; his legal perspective must be understood more existentially and sensitively.

(2) The nature of man.

At this other end of the spectrum, with God not appearing quite so transcendently awesome, man does not appear to be quite so sinful, so that the resultant breach does not now appear to be so vast. The nominal acceptance of man's sinfulness in the Christian church has been assailed by the humanism of the day. The result has been weak resistance to this decline in biblical perception that has led to the embrace of a more humanistic mind set clothed in orthodox garments. Consider the dominance in church life of relational theology, counseling and psychology, self-image development, free-will doctrine and autonomy, human rights, sensual stimulation through phenomena and visual media, etc. In multitudes of evangelical churches, the focus is fundamentally upon man; and it is God who is merely the patron of this celebration.

(3) The exact nature of the gospel.

The good news that the Bible declares is clearly stated according to Romans 4:5; it is that God "justifies the ungodly." For hundreds of years this doctrine of sovereign, justifying grace, that remains on offer to repentant sinners, has been declared by a host of faithful preachers who have passionately explained to spiritually starving mankind how a true gospel feast has been set before them. The emphasis has most often been upon the grace of God whereby a sinner becomes reconciled to God, of prior enmity being done away with (Eph. 2:15-16) so that He now becomes Abba, Father. But today a different man-centered emphasis has emerged, and it is well illustrated in the realm of tract literature whereby the gospel is offered, in a formulated manner, on the basis of it being a sort of benefit package. Over forty years ago *Campus Crusade For Christ* introduced *The Four Spiritual Laws* booklet in which it commences, "Law One - God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life." And many variations on this theme have followed. Consider some additional examples that indicate how so many commence with this personal benefit thrust and merely mention in passing the necessity of being reconciled to God, on account of sin, so that the package might be obtained. "A happy and meaningful life begins with God!" "Smile, God loves you!" "God's goal for you is abundant life." "A loving God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to bring men to a new and abundant life." "God loves you and created you to have a personal

relationship with Him." In contrast with so many, at best, half-truths here, for Paul the controlling gospel truth was "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21-22, 25-26; 4:3, 5-6, 9; 5:21); today it has become "the relationship that fulfills."

(4) The relationship between justification and regeneration.

While it may sound like a contradiction in terms, or worse, a regression into error, it is suggested that to focus, concerning the gospel, solely on the glorious truth of justification by faith as is so often the case today in the form of "simple believism," is itself a dangerous and deceitful path to follow. Certainly history offers proof that this statement is true. The rise of German Pietism toward the end of the seventeenth century under Spener and Francke was surely a reaction to a scholastic and creedal Lutheranism that was devoid of warmth of experience, even though belief in justification through faith was coolly upheld.<sup>71</sup> Thus it is true that to somewhat isolate a doctrine, such as justification by faith, is to drain it of its essential life giving properties. For a sinner must not only be right with God in a legal sense, but he must also be alive unto God through the regenerating Holy Spirit. The true child of God must be both justified and awakened in his soul; there cannot be one without the other. And this leads us to the conclusion that such a right understanding of the gospel's address to man has its root in the truth that God must be appreciated as both holy and living. Such a passage as Titus 3:5-7 well illustrates this point. "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." Regeneration in v. 5 and justification in v. 7 are united in v. 6 by means of Jesus Christ as the essential, central fulcrum. But today, while justification through faith has ebbed, regeneration has flowed into these decades in the form of rootless sensuality with the balance being lost.

2. The present controversy.

More recently there have arisen a number of factors that have caused the doctrine of justification by faith to arise in prominence, though not always with the result of hoped for approbation. In both England and the United States, it has been the issue of rapprochement between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism that has stimulated the need to reconsider the essential differences concerning the gospel that divide these historic movements.

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<sup>71</sup> Williston Walker, *A History Of The Christian Church*, pp. 444-9.

In England, the agreed statement in 1987 of the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II), while acknowledging difficulties, yet claimed that an amicable process of frank discussion was on a course of convergence, and that the doctrine of justification by faith ought to be considered on a broader basis with a hoped for synthesis in view. Consequently one Anglican evangelical theologian, renowned for his doctoral expertise in the area of the doctrine of justification by faith, Dr. Alister McGrath, attempted a revisionist approach in this regard. He suggested that as the Reformers declared the doctrine of justification by drawing upon the “experiences, hopes, and fears of their own day and age,” thus by means of the existential process and ethical dimensions the doctrine of justification must today be “liberated [from] the forms of theological expression used in the sixteenth century.”<sup>72</sup> For a detailed rejoinder to this accommodation, refer to Philip Eveson’s, *The Great Exchange*.<sup>73</sup>

In the United States, at the initiative of Charles Colson, with the cooperation of J. I. Packer, Os Guinness, Mark Knoll, Bill Bright, and seven Roman Catholics, there was published in 1994 *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium*. Again, the aim of such interaction was that in spite of obvious disagreements in doctrine and practice, yet consideration of common factors of faith ought to stimulate “brothers and sisters in Christ” to confess a degree of agreement in being “justified by grace through faith because of Christ.” In a 1995 response has come forth the volume *Justification by Faith Alone, Affirming the doctrine by which the church and the individual stands and falls*, with contributions by John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, Joel Beeke, John Gerstner, and John Armstrong.

3. The solution, more than a statement.

It is vigorously maintained that a return to the purity of the gospel as expressed in the doctrine of justification by faith will not come about either by means of redefinition, linguistic flexibility, existential application, or even faithful exposition on key texts. Rather, it will most naturally and inevitably emerge, or better erupt, when the fullness of the doctrine of God is regained in the realms of both Bible truth and evangelical experience. When a man begins to see God as He really is, in all of His glory and holiness and greatness, then he begins to see himself as he really is, that is as a “maggot, . . . [a] worm” (Job 25:6). He will behold the holiness of God and, like Isaiah, bemoan his unholiness (Isa. 6:1-5); he will be overwhelmed with a sense of the life and power of God and bewail his deadness and impotence. This man will then understand that only a great gospel of pure grace can ever bridge such a vast chasm, and that such a bridge will of necessity be a work wholly of God, and certainly not man with his religious formulations and contributions.

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<sup>72</sup> A. E. McGrath, *Justification by Faith, What it means to us today*, pp. 10-17, 92, 113, 117, 142-7.

<sup>73</sup> Philip H. Eveson, *The Great Exchange. Justification by faith alone in the light of recent thought*, 227 pp.

Hence the solution demands more than an agreement that the attributes of God receive greater emphasis. Rather, it is the fullness of God's person that must be sought with singular passion, humble submission, and reverent adoration in lip and life. The biblical setting of the doctrine of justification by faith demands this.

- a. The God of Habakkuk 2:4 who is the God of Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:10-14; Hebrews 10:32-39.

In a small span of three chapters, Habakkuk describes God with such an awesome and full manner that the reader finds it difficult not to tremble with the prophet. "I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us" (Hab. 3:16). Habakkuk's justification by faith is triumphant in the midst of the most depressing of circumstances, and that chiefly because the *object* of his faith is altogether glorious, sovereign and affecting. Consider His:

- (1) Holiness. "But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him." (Hab. 2:20; cf. 1:13).
- (2) Justice. "<sup>3</sup> For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay. <sup>4</sup> Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith." (Hab. 2:3-4; cf. 1:5-11; 2:6-19).
- (3) Salvation. "<sup>12</sup> In indignation You marched through the earth; in anger You trampled the nations. <sup>13</sup> You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for the salvation of Your anointed. You struck the head of the house of the evil to lay him open from thigh to neck. Selah" (Hab. 3:12-13; 2:4; 3:18-19).
- (4) Wrath/mercy. "LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear. O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2).
- (5) Saving power. "<sup>17</sup> Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, <sup>18</sup> yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. <sup>19</sup> The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places. For the choir director, on my stringed instruments" (Hab. 3:17-19; cf. 3:3-15).

- b. The God of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:10-14; Hebrews 10:32-39.

This God is identically the God of Habakkuk, who in the New Covenant revelation likewise manifests holiness (Heb. 7:26), justice (Matt. 21:5; cf. Zech. 9:9), salvation (Matt. 1:21), wrath/mercy (Rom. 3:25-26), saving power (Rom. 1:16), and yet in particular through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- (1) Consider Romans 1:17. "For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.'" Justification through faith alone is in the Son of this only God of Habakkuk. This is the heart of the gospel of the saving, gratis righteousness of God (Rom. 3:24; 5:17), received through faith alone, that meets the demands of God's essential righteousness.
- (2) Consider Galatians 3:10-11. "<sup>10</sup> For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.' <sup>11</sup> Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.'" Justification apart from the works of the law is through faith alone in the Son of this only God of Habakkuk. This is a gospel qualification, namely that attempted conformity to the Law, as a transcript of the demands of God's righteousness, brings a curse, not justification.
- (3) Consider Hebrews 10:38-39. "<sup>37</sup> FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. <sup>38</sup> BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM." Justification in the midst of an afflicting world is through faith alone in the Son of this only God of Habakkuk. This is a gospel application concerning the ongoing, sanctifying role of justification by faith with regard to endurance in the midst of various trials.

And think you, O sinners, that you will be able to stand in the day of judgment, if Christ be not your righteousness! No, that alone is the wedding garment in which you must appear. . . . For whither would you flee, if death should find you naked? Indeed, there is no hiding yourselves from his presence. The pitiful fig-leaves of your own righteousness will not cover your nakedness, when God shall call you to stand before him. Adam found them ineffectual, and so will you.

*George Whitefield*