

Editorial: Justification By Faith Alone

Michael Kimmitt

"The just shall live by faith"

(Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38);

quoted from Habakkuk 2:4:

"the just shall live by his faith."

Introduction

The Christian world view is conveniently summarised for us in the *Nicene Creed*:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

To their credit this creed is regularly recited in Anglican Churches. It is met with occasionally in Reformed ones but never in Presbyterian or the various Evangelical and Independent Churches which make up the British scene. This is a pity. We need to see the overall perspective—God the Creator, the Triune God

working our salvation, and the coming of the Kingdom.

We may become experts on issues such as baptism or Psalm singing or the details of the latest church split but behave in ungodly ways such as crossing the street to avoid greeting a Christian brother, or splitting a church on some minutiae, etc. But our Lord would remind us: *"But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment."* We need the weekly jolt of being reminded that after death there will be a resurrection and a judgment of the deeds done in the body.

And if we have any sense of the awfulness of our depravity and guilt we need the credal reminder that Christ "for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven," as it is written, *"And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins"* (Matt. 1:21).

Justification

How then is our salvation effected? The Reformation recovered the Church from the Stygian darkness of the Papacy, and under Luther the doctrine of justification by faith was recovered: *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*—the article of faith that decides whether the church is standing or falling. And it is, of course, the great purpose of Paul's Epistle to the Romans to expound and apply that doctrine "for us men and our salvation."

And if we ask the question "from what do we need to be saved?" the answer is from the wrath of God, as it is written, *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness"* (Rom. 1:18).

How then are we Justified?

By faith alone. James Buchanan explains,

The exclusive instrumentality, and peculiar prerogative, which is ascribed to faith, in connection with our justification, when it is said that we are justified "by faith only," is sufficiently explained and established by proving, *first*, that the only ground of our acceptance with God is the finished work, or vicarious righteousness, of Christ; and *secondly*, that the only grace by which we rely or rest on that ground, as it is revealed in Scripture, is faith, considered as a cordial belief of the truth concerning Christ, and a confiding trust in Him for our personal salvation.¹

Objections

As might be anticipated, the Roman Church objected to the biblical doctrine, confounded it with sanctification, and anathematised Protestants for their position. This situation remains. We recognize that some Protestants tipped over into Antinomianism, and others went in the opposite direction into legalism. But the most striking thing is the clear union amongst Protestants across Europe and subsequently in America and around the world on the biblical position from the time of the Reformation until the present day.

It is not unexpected that both Liberals and Anglo-Catholics in the 19th century called the position into question. What has been unexpected is that in the United States from about 1980 in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian quarters a body of men has arisen calling into question the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and demanding that “works” be seen as part of justification. In the UK the leading proponent of the new thinking appears to be N. T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham.

The refutation of these positions require a better theologian than this writer, and we commend to our readers the valiant efforts of John Robbins of the Trinity Foundation and others.² What we wish to do was first to alert our readers to this attack on the Reformed faith (see above); second to set out the confessional position; and third to offer some concluding remarks.

Confessional Position

We could use either the *Three Forms of Unity* or the *Westminster Standards* but I am going to use the *Thirty Nine Articles*:

XI. Of the Justification of Man

We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings: Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort, as more largely is expressed in the Homily of Justification.

XII. Of Good Works

Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith and follow

¹James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1984), p. 384.

²See www.trinityfoundation.org and *The Banner of Truth*, issues 479-80, August-September 2003.

after Justification, cannot put away our sin and endure the severity of God's Judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be a evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

Comments

As we understand it the heretical party, like all its predecessors, seeks to include works in our justification using such texts as these:

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only (James 2:24).

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me (Matt. 25:34-40).

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works (Rev. 20:12).

But there is surely here a basic misunderstanding. Our salvation involves at least election, calling, illumination, regeneration, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (I Cor. 1:30). In short, while we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone but is necessarily accompanied by all the other aspects mentioned. So we read: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which

no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). The answer then to the question raised about works is that they are simply the lively expression of our faith, but they do not constitute part of our righteousness in justification. Grasping that will enable us to navigate our way between the Scylla of Antinomianism and the Charybdis of legalism and make a safe harbour.

Practical Implications

We all are totally depraved! No church-going, fasting, reading Scripture and good books, praying, living an outwardly moral life, good works, etc., can save us! Only the righteousness of God our Saviour can deliver us from hell. The views we have been trying to confute have the smell of the pit about them. If they are true then we are lost. And if we embrace them we are in peril! They are not theological niceties to be argued about! Only the righteousness of Christ can save our bodies and souls. Nothing we can do can contribute to our salvation; we need the imputation of Christ to do that.

And then we may thankfully sing with the psalmist:

Praise God, my soul! With all my heart
Let me exalt his holy name.
Forget not all his benefits;
His praise, my soul, in song proclaim.

The LORD forgives you all your sins,
And heals your sickness and distress;
Your life He rescues from the grave,
And crowns you in his tenderness.

(Psalm 103:1-4)