

## The Reformation Controversy Over Justification

Luther was originally angered by the selling of indulgences as this seemed to imply that salvation could be bought (His nailing of the 95 theses at Wittenberg in 1517). Similarly, he was unsettled by the implication that a person's good deeds could somehow guarantee salvation, that somehow God was *obliged* to save people the more good they did. This is probably what many people still think today. The Jews, especially the Pharisees, certainly believed this. For them, strict observance of the Law made you righteous, a view condemned by Jesus as can be seen in His direct conversation with them (Matthew ch.15, 23);

**'alas for you, Scribes and Pharisees, you pay your tithe of mint, dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the Law, justice, mercy and good faith'**

and in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector praying in the Temple (Luke ch.18).

The misunderstanding between Luther and the Church's teaching centred on the *meanings* of salvation and faith. The Church's position was made absolutely clear at the Council of Trent in 1547 and, in reality, is no different than that of Luther's. By then, however, too much water had passed under the bridge. Political animosities and ambitions meant that questions of theology were no longer paramount, and no reconciliation of Christendom was possible in that climate.



For Luther, salvation meant our *initial* reconciliation with God from sin, our justification (being made righteous in God's eyes). For the Church, salvation was understood in terms of the *whole process* whereby we reach our ultimate end of being with God, and that process necessarily included showing love of our neighbour by doing good works.

For Luther, faith was agreeing to *all* of salvation and that necessarily included hope and charity. This is actually how St. Paul saw it (Romans ch.5), but in his first letter to the Corinthians (ch.15) St. Paul also discusses faith, hope and charity in their role as separate virtues and if faith is understood on its own in this way then it is NOT enough for salvation (neither, by the way, is charity). Faith and charity must work together for justification to occur.

The Church had often been guilty of making this narrow presentation. St Thomas Aquinas, in the 13th century, had defined faith in terms of a decision of the mind, '*Faith is an act of the Intellect agreeing to divine truths under the influence of the Will, moved by God through grace*'. I am sorry about giving a technical definition, but you can better understand how misunderstandings can occur in a climate of such formalism. With respect, this scholastic definition, although strictly correct, is somewhat dry and stale. On its own it fails to make clear the richness and wholeness of the act of faith made by someone *at the time of justification*, a faith that proclaims Jesus as redeemer.

### Salvation a Free Gift of God

I think it is important to end by emphasising that being made righteous is *completely and utterly a free gift of God*. An individual necessarily has to make a decision in faith whether to believe in Jesus' redemptive act, but that decision itself is moved by God's grace. In a real sense, it is not the individual's own decision, because prior to it that person can not do any good without being aided by grace. The question of grace is a very complex one, and shall be examined in another talk.

## Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

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### What is More Important for Our Salvation, Our Faith or Our Deeds?

*Examining what is meant by Justification by Faith*



### Questions for reflection

1. What is meant by Faith?
2. What does St. Paul mean by Justification?
3. Surely faith is not enough, if we don't have charity as well?
4. Was the Reformation essentially caused by a misunderstanding about Justification?

## Justification by Faith?

These three words may not seem very important but they are what caused the split in the Catholic Church at the Reformation, that led to Protestantism. Before examining their importance it is necessary to see how the words faith, justification and righteous were understood in the Bible.



## Faith

In the OT the word used for 'to show faith' is '*aman*' which means to be solid or to be sure of something, that it is true: e.g. the Egyptians would believe that Moses is Yahweh's messenger (Exodus ch.4). The noun from this '*emunah*' is often linked to the Law and Covenant to show faithfulness in God's Covenant promises.

In the NT faith has the same basic meaning but is extended beyond the Law or Covenant to trust and confidence in the *person* of Jesus and His claims. At one level, this faith cures from *disease*, even for non-Jews like the Canaanite woman's daughter:

**'woman you have great faith'** (Matthew ch.15), or the centurion's servant:  
**'in no one in Israel have I found faith like this'** (Matthew ch.8).

At a higher level faith in Jesus *forgives sin*, as happened to the prostitute who washed Jesus' feet:  
**'woman, your faith has saved you'** (Luke ch.7).

At the highest level it is *salvation* through faith in Jesus (Acts ch.2) even for non-Jews (ch.14):  
**'gave an account .. of how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles'**

## Justification?

The NT meaning of Justification is hardly common in today's use of language. Today it means 'give acceptable reasons for a statement or action'. However, it also has another meaning of 'to make or show the justice or righteousness of a person'.

## Righteous

In the OT, a person who is righteous or upright '*sedek*' is one who keeps Yahweh's Law and, therefore, lives according to the standards set by Yahweh to guarantee His blessings.

In the Gospels, the Greek word for righteous '*dikaio*' often has the OT meaning (e.g. said of Zechariah and Elizabeth Luke ch.1) but also goes beyond its association with the Mosaic Law into a new interpretation, that of God's saving justice: Jesus' explanation of the parable of the Sower depicts the righteous as those who accepted Jesus' message (Matthew ch.13). Similarly, Jesus' description of the Last Judgement (Matthew ch.25) emphasises the importance of goodness done in His name.

In some of the Letters, righteous also becomes synonymous with general Christian moral behaviour and freedom from sin (1 Peter ch.2).

However, it is in St Paul's writings that righteous receives its fullest re-interpretation.

## St. Paul's Doctrine of Justification by Faith

St. Paul was a Pharisee (Philippians ch.3), brought up to see observance of the Mosaic Law as the way to become righteous. So, the conversion of non-Jews became a difficulty for Paul, because they obviously could not become righteous in the traditional way. In examining this problem, Paul came to the stupendous conclusion that no-one, Jew or Greek, can become righteous through observance of the Law alone (Romans ch.3). All that knowledge of the Law does is tell us that we are sinful (also ch.3).

Being made righteous is what Paul means by being justified. But even Jesus' death, like the OT law, although necessary for salvation, is not sufficient by itself to justify us before God. The crucial requirement is *faith* in the person of Jesus and His message of salvation:

**'God's saving justice given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe'** (Romans ch.3).

In coming to this conclusion about the importance of faith, Paul uses the argument that Abraham's faith in God (when asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in Genesis ch.15) is what made him righteous in God's eyes and this was *before* the giving of the Mosaic Law *and before* the requirement of circumcision.



Importantly, St. Paul also goes on to argue that Jesus has redefined 'righteous'. It is now deliverance from the power of sin:

**'by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many are made upright'** (Romans ch.5).

St Paul also makes clear that baptism is an integral part of, and outward expression of, our justification (Romans ch.6).

## The Place of Good Works

The Letter of St. James is sometimes held up, incorrectly, as offering an opposite viewpoint to that of St. Paul. St. James was not disagreeing with St. Paul, but he felt that St Paul's argument could be misunderstood and give the impression that *only* faith was needed for salvation. To balance this, he stressed the need for faith to expand into good works as a necessary sign of that faith,

**'show me your faith without deeds, for I will show you my faith through my deeds'** and **'faith without deeds is dead'** (ch.2).

Against St. Paul's example of Abraham's faith, James points out that Abraham's faith was also accompanied by an action (his preparedness to sacrifice Isaac).