

“What Does Justification Really Mean?”

Galatians 2:11 - 3:5 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹² for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³ And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" ¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷ But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. ^{3:1} You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! ² The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? ⁴ Did you experience so much for nothing?-- if it really was for nothing. ⁵ Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

Justification by faith is one of the cornerstone doctrines of the Christian faith, but I also think that it is among the most misunderstood of Christian teachings. I don't want to give you a history lesson as to how it was rediscovered by Martin Luther in the 1500's as he discovered the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ and how it has since been muggled. That's what Bible Study on Wednesday's is for. The mugging shows itself with the way people have equated being justified by faith with being saved by faith. We are saved by grace not by faith as Paul writes in Ephesians, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (2:4-9). We are saved by grace, by the Father's love in sending his Son to die for us that we might live in him and he in us by the presence of the Holy Spirit. By saved we mean set free from the dominion that sin and death have over us and given new life, indeed eternal life.

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Because of this gracious gift of new and eternal life given to us in Christ through the Holy Spirit we now can live for God in faith meaning we are in his presence now and try to live according to his will as we will after we have been raised from the dead to live in the kingdom of God when creation is renewed and the knowing of God abounds. Faith is not primarily believing something about Jesus Christ. Faith is living in Jesus Christ because he lives in us and living according to the day that is coming not the one we left behind. Belief about Jesus comes in after the fact. Faith is given to us from the Father by the presence of the Holy Spirit as a gift because of the faith and faithfulness of Jesus Christ. To be saved is to share now and eternally in the faith and faithfulness of Jesus Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father.

N.T. Wright explains justification¹ in this way and he's done more to unmuddle me on its meaning than anyone else. Justification is a word that comes to us from the courtroom. A person is said to be justified because the judge has declared that person to be in the right. It does not mean forgiveness. It is a verdict that presupposes forgiveness. It is not righteousness either. Righteousness is the status before the court that results from that declaration. Justification is not the means whereby it becomes possible to declare someone to be in the right. It is the declaration itself. It is not how someone becomes a Christian, but simply the declaration that someone is a Christian. In the Bible, the judge is God and the verdict will be rendered on the Day of Judgment. But because of the gift of the Holy Spirit who brings Christ to live in us now, God's verdict is brought forward into the present. We share in Jesus' life and faith and the result is that we have faith. To be justified is to be declared by God to be one of his covenant people now in the present and to live in this right relationship by faith. God declares us to be in the right and therefore to be one of his people because of the faith and faithfulness of Jesus Christ. This declaration is extended to us now by the presence of the Holy Spirit the result of which is our faith in Jesus Christ and faithfulness to him.

Justification presupposes two things, the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus death on the cross has dealt with our sin. He has paid our penalty. He has mended our broken relationship with God and reconciled us to him and one another because he loves us. With respect to the Holy Spirit, Wright says, “Justification takes place on the basis of faith because true Christian faith—belief that Jesus is Lord and the God raised him from the dead—is the evidence of the work of the Spirit, and hence the evidence that the believer is already within the covenant... Faith is not an achievement which earns salvation, but the evidence of saving grace already at work. Only the renewed heart can believe in the resurrection: only the penitent heart can submit to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Because of the work of the Son and the Spirit, God rightly declares that Christian believers are members of the covenant family. The basis of justification is the grace of God freely given to undeserving sinners.” Wright

¹ This and the next paragraphs are various quotes from N.T. Wright, “Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism”, in *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, Ed. Gavin Reid, London: Collins, 1980, 13ff., from http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Justification_Biblical_Basis.pdf.

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sums up saying that justification “is God’s declaration in the present that the person who believes in the risen Lord Jesus Christ is a member of the covenant family, whose sins have been dealt with on the cross and who is therefore assured of eternal life.’

Now, I’m not trying to put you to sleep with a bunch theological mumbo-jumbo. I just don’t know how else to straighten out how this doctrine has been muddled over the past few centuries. What I am saying here is that we do not get ourselves saved by convincing ourselves that things about Jesus Christ are true. Those who make people make decisions for Christ by telling them you had better believe this if you want to go to heaven are a product of the mugging of the doctrine. Though I will say that I don’t believe God would damn a person for choosing to believe the gospel and living accordingly for sooner or later the Holy Spirit will break in on that person. In fact, if a person can say they believe it, I would say he already has. On the other side of the coin, I am saying that we have been saved by the work of Christ freely and it is the work of the Holy Spirit to give us the faith to believe it and live accordingly.

One last thought, when Paul in his letters brings up the topic of justification by faith it is always in the context of correcting those who wish to redefine what is the mark of a member of the covenant family of God. Paul’s point here in Galatians is that we are justified—God has declared us to be in the right, awarded to us the status of righteous, and included us among his people—because of the faith of faithfulness of Jesus Christ extended to us in the Holy Spirit and evidenced in us as faith in Jesus. There is nothing anyone can do to earn that. It is a free gift of God. Because justification involves who is and who ain’t a member of the covenant family of God, it’s practical application has to do with fellowship and hospitality in churches. Paul blasted Peter because he separated himself off from Gentile brothers and sisters when his Jewish brothers and sisters came around. Paul said Peter stood condemned because his actions were not in accordance with the truth of the Gospel. This indicates that we are saved, justified, filled with the life of Christ by the Spirit and made to be of the covenant people of God so that we can be a community the proclaims who God is by the way love each other and extend hospitality to all peoples. Whenever we regard one another in any way other than love we make Jesus’ death to be in vain and we prove ourselves sinners. Whenever we place spoken or unspoken requirements upon our brothers and sisters in Christ before we will keep company with them or stigmatize them we make Christ’s death to be in vain. As Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). We are one in Christ Jesus, amen.