

PART 3:

The Centrality of Justification by an Imputed Righteousness

The doctrine of justification by Christ's imputed righteousness is not simply one doctrine among others. As Luther constantly declared, it is the basic and chief article of faith with which the church stands or falls and on which its entire doctrine depends. If anything in this article is given up, lost or compromised, warned the Reformer in the *Smalcald Articles*, "all is lost, and the Pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory." Again he said, "We cannot emphatically and often enough sharpen our thinking on this doctrine. We must devote ourselves to it with the greatest theological diligence and seriousness. . . . No other article of faith is so threatened by the danger of false teaching."

It can be seen that Luther did not think that the doctrine of imputed righteousness was only something to be preached to mere Christian beginners or that it could be forgotten as a mastered accomplishment. He not only stressed that this truth cannot be learned too well but that it must occupy the central position in the teaching and thinking of the church.

If we were to judge Protestantism by whether or

not the doctrine of imputed righteousness is at the center of its thrust, we would have to conclude that Protestantism scarcely exists today. Not by any stretch of the imagination is Christ's imputed righteousness central in present-day thinking or witness. Some will make cursory mention of it, and even most who do mention it relegate it to something which is required at the time of Christian initiation. Apparently it is thought that more mature Christians can get past it and go on to higher things.

This present state of affairs in the Protestant movement explains the growing accord between Rome and the neo-evangelicals. No Roman Catholic dogma has ever changed; but with the Reformation doctrine of imputed righteousness removed from the center of the neo-evangelical witness, Rome sees more reason for affinity than for alarm.

It is not hard to demonstrate that Protestant revivalism, following in the tradition of Charles Finney, thinks very poorly of the great Reformation doctrine of justification. The inner experience of being saved or sanctified is overwhelmingly the center of almost

all revivalism. It has become a kind of Protestant *gratia infusa*. Neither can anyone challenge the observation that Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism and Campus Crusade are entirely devoted to a focus on internal experience. It is the old Roman Catholic theology of *gratia infusa* wrapped up in some evangelical trimmings. For Rome it is a happy eventuality. Catholics are even being instructed to learn the evangelical pattern so that they can move in with this stream of religious fervor.

Let us now leave these very obvious deviations from sound Protestantism to examine what we may well expect to be the last fort of the Reformation heritage—the good, conservative or middle-of-the-road evangelical Protestantism. This is where the shoe is going to pinch. Most of us who are interested enough to publish or read this type of material would like to think that we of all people are the sound evangelicals who recognize the difference between medieval and Reformation theology. But let us also submit to the acid test: Is the doctrine of imputed righteousness really at the center of our faith and witness? It is not easy to be self-critical, but it is time that we let that great truth which calls all doctrines into question, call the content of our own message into question.

We will now observe how the best evangelicals can often fail to keep the great doctrine of imputed righteousness from being at the center of their message.

1. Centering on the New Life

In their book on *Protestant Christianity*, John Dillenberger and Claude Welch pinpoint the vital difference between the Reformers (who did believe in the new life of the Spirit) and the sounder Anabaptists (who did believe justification by faith). “For the Anabaptists ... the new life in Christ through the Spirit rather than justification by faith is the center.” —p. 63.

And on this same point, evangelical Protestantism today reflects the Anabaptist rather than the Reformation focus. Says Paul Tillich in *A History of Christian Thought*: “For the kind of Protestantism which has developed in America is not so much an expression of the Reformation, but has more to do with the so-called Evangelical Radicals.”—p. 225. “Luther’s conflict with the evangelical radicals is especially important for American Protestants because the prevailing type of Christianity in America was not produced by the Reformation directly, but by the indirect effect of the Reformation through the movement of evangelical radicalism.”—p. 239.

Most evangelical witness tends to lack a central theology of justification. Its overwhelming focus is on the internal experience of being born again and saved. There is much truth in it. The need for the new birth ought to be taught. But when it is not seen in the setting of the pre-eminence of justification by an imputed righteousness, there is grave danger that people come to think that salvation is based on an internal change within their own hearts. Then the focus is inward instead of outward, on Christian experience instead of Christ’s experience, on a subjective happening instead of a historical reality.

In the popular evangelical message, people are urged to get saved by inviting Christ to come into their hearts. Being saved is then identified with having that internal experience of being born again by the presence of the indwelling Christ.

Aside from the fact that this comes perilously close to the Roman Catholic principle of salvation by the indwelling presence (as ably set forth by Cardinal John Henry Newman¹), it is a far cry from the apostolic message of salvation. The apostles did not begin by proclaiming that their hearers could be saved by having Christ come into their hearts to produce an internal experience. Their focus was not an internal happening but an external happening. Christ lived, died and rose again for the sinner’s justification. The apostles proclaimed an objective, historical reality. Here was Paul’s *kerygma*:

“We declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that He hath raised up Jesus again. . . Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.” Acts 13:32, 33, 38, 39.

Salvation was said to be in something which God had already done outside the sinner in the person of Jesus Christ. As men listened, the Holy Spirit was present to give them faith. Now the hearers were exhorted to accept this salvation by faith. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” Rom. 10:9.

Faith does not bring the person of Christ down out of heaven to come into the believer’s heart,² for “the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on

¹ *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification*.

² Christ is present by His Spirit in the Word of faith (see Rom. 10:8). The person of Christ remains at the right hand of God.

this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above)" (Rom. 10:6). Rather, faith lifts the believer up to heaven and places him "in Christ." Then and then alone is the scripture fulfilled, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." 2 Cor. 5:17.

Rather than the new birth being the result of focusing on the inner change itself, the very opposite is true. We see this illustrated in Jesus' lesson to Nicodemus. After telling the proud ruler about his need of a new birth, Jesus did not lead the convicted sinner to dwell on his internal experience. He directed Nicodemus' eyes to that great external event which guaranteed his salvation. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:14, 15.

2. Centering on the Experience of Sanctification

The Christian experience of sanctification is a most necessary doctrine of the Christian faith. But when it subordinates justification and takes the center of attention, it becomes a return route to medieval piety. This is the greatest single weakness of the holiness-Pentecostal teaching, and a lot of it has rubbed off on the Protestant movement.

Why does the internal work of sanctification tend to swallow up justification by faith? We shall offer two reasons:

a. Arminian theology (which was the soil from which sprang the holiness-Pentecostal movement) greatly weakens the doctrine of justification by faith. It thinks of justification only in terms of forgiveness of past sins by virtue of Christ's death. It fails to see that justification is also the imputation of Christ's life of perfect obedience to the law—an obedience which gives to the believer a full and free title to eternal life (Rom. 4:5-7; 5:10, 18, 19). Consequently, final salvation is thought to depend largely on the active obedience of the believer in his life of sanctification.

b. Sanctification has often been separated from justification. When the renewing power of the Holy Spirit is separated from the doctrine of justification, all that is left is a cold, legal, intellectualized concept. Then there is only a fictitious "justification" which brings neither the Holy Ghost nor His transforming power into the life of the church. People profess salvation while their lives are a positive denial of it.

Then what happens? The preacher looks at the church and thinks, "These people have been 'saved,'

but they certainly need something else to lift them out of their low spiritual [carnal?] state." Along comes a "second blessing" or "renewal" expert who proceeds to say, "What these people need now is to learn the secret of the deeper life. They have been taught justification [?], but now they need to be taught the secret of sanctification."

This program is quite palatable to proud human hearts—especially to responsible people in the church who are supposed to have been "saved" for years. It would be altogether too humbling to admit that what is needed is a true, Bible experience of accepting the gospel, being justified by faith and being truly born



again in consequence of it. It is too hard to confess being among those thieves and robbers who have really tried to climb over the wall rather than to get into the fold by the one true door (John 10:1). So instead of submitting to going back and entering the real door of salvation, men think it much better to get a second blessing, some baptism of power that will correct their carnal condition. Being outside of Christ, they expose themselves to a false spirit and delude themselves that they are filled with the Holy Spirit because they can do fantastic things like speak in an unknown tongue—unknown to God as well as to man.

Certainly justification must be distinguished from sanctification.³ We must not transfer the property of one benefit to the other. But it is just as certain that they can never be separated. Union with Christ by saving faith results in justification as a judicial benefit, but it also results in sanctification as a moral benefit. One blessing cannot be enjoyed without the other. They are as related as light and heat. Where there is light, there will be heat.

Sanctification of the Spirit through a life of active obedience, is not optional. God does not justify the sinner in such a way that obedience to the Ten Com-

³One error is to confuse sanctification with justification. This is the essence of Roman Catholic legalism. The opposite error is to separate sanctification from justification. This is the essence of antinomian Protestantism.

mandments is optional. Submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not optional. Faith that is unto justification means that the whole life turns from disobedience and submits to the sanctifying authority of Heaven's government. It is impossible to be justified and not have the renewing, transforming gift of the Holy Spirit. Justification means that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer and that he stands before God as if he were perfect. God must, therefore, treat him as a righteous man; and He does this by giving the believer the gift and infilling of the Spirit. What is needed, therefore, is not a "second blessing" doctrine to add to justification but a true justification which will bring every blessing in its train.

3. Centering on Predestination

Calvinism has become synonymous with predestinarianism. While Calvin did teach predestination, and a double one at that, it was not the center of his teaching.

"Calvin moved from faith to an elaboration of predestination as a way of showing that God is wholly the author of our faith and that every notion of work or merit must be rejected. . . . Calvin moved from faith to predestination, not predestination to faith. The latter .. was the pattern of most of his successors."-John Dillenberger & Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 34, 35.

As it often happens, people tend to accentuate their controverted doctrines and harden their position in the midst of controversy. As the Reformed doctrine of predestination came under fire, Reformed orthodoxy hardened its position and moved predestination to the center of its theology.

A by-product of centering on predestination has been the reduction of Calvinism into the popular "once-saved-always-saved" theology. In its cruder simplicity, it means that the man who once accepts Christ will never forfeit eternal life even though he goes out and commits the most outrageous sins. This is a far cry from the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Calvin meant that the elect would persevere in a life of consistent piety, and if a man flagrantly failed to persevere, it just proved he was not one of the elect. But the modern mind is seldom disposed to cope with elaborate theology-perhaps very sensibly it wants theology reduced to a simple, pragmatic formula. And when Calvinistic predestination is reduced to that simple formula, it means "once-saved-always-saved."

Aside from the obvious difficulty of doing justice to the fearful warnings against falling away which are

found in the book of Hebrews, this type of evangelicalism cannot help people keep the great doctrine of justification at the center of their attention, Impossible! For if members of the church regard justification as something which was irreversibly accepted by them way back there on the day they were "saved," justification is relegated to a thing of the past.

The great Reformer who said that justification must remain the center, had an insight into the righteousness of faith which enabled him to keep it central. The Protestant movement today needs to rediscover that insight. Luther fully appreciated why St. Paul used the present continuous tense, "Being justified freely by His grace ..." Rom. 3:24. With Paul it was not a matter of merely becoming justified and then going on to other things. (Relegating justification to a mere Christian initiation and attempting to go on to higher things was the great heresy which Paul had to meet in Galatia, Colosse, Corinth and other places.) The believer can only continue in the same way as he began (Col. 2:6; Gal. 3:1-5). He must continue to see himself as a sinner who does not fulfill the law, and he must continue to bring to God a righteousness of that other Man, which alone fulfills the law. While God does not impute His righteousness in degrees, nevertheless the believer must always live in the process of laying hold of it and the posture of receiving it. The Christian cannot take his election for granted (2 Peter 1: 10; 1 Cor. 9:27). Luther declared:

"Therefore, no saint regards and confesses himself to be righteous, but he always asks and waits to be justified, and because of this he is reputed as righteous by God who has regard for the humble (Luke 1:48). In this sense, Christ is the King of the Jews, i.e. of those who confess that they are always beset by sin and who yet seek to be justified and detest their sins. Hence, 'God is wonderful in his saints' (Ps. 68:35), because he regards as righteous those who acknowledge and bewail themselves as sinners, but condemns those who think that they are righteous."-Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (Library of Christian Classics), p. 1 13.

The doctrine of "once-saved-always-saved" and a supreme emphasis on the new-birth experience generally go along together. What happens then is that people tend to look to their "new birth" experience for assurance of eternal security. Instead of finding all their needed security by identifying themselves with the experience of Christ, they try to find their assurance through identifying with their own past experience of being "saved." This is one of the greatest single weaknesses of most evangelical Protestantism today.



4. Centering on the Indwelling Presence of Christ

Perhaps the greatest weakness of neo-evangelism is its overwhelming focus on the indwelling presence of Christ. It is all the more dangerous because the indwelling of Christ through His Spirit is an important New Testament doctrine. But the present-day emphasis is a distortion of New Testament emphasis. It is completely out of proportion. Take a good concordance (especially one which gives the original Greek words) and look up how many times the New Testament speaks on the objective "in Christ" as compared with the subjective "Christ in you," especially in Paul. The focus is overwhelmingly on the objective "in Christ."

In the present-day evangelical teaching, there is so much concentration on Christ dwelling, living, working and obeying inside the heart of the believer, that the whole Christian message is sunk into a sentimental, internal mysticism. It is developing into an evangelical "*gratia infusa*"—in apocalyptic terminology, "an image to the beast" (Rev. 13: 13, 14).

With the risk of appearing too repetitious, we say again that the main New Testament emphasis is not on the Christ on the throne of the heart but on the exalted Christ on the throne at the right hand of God. It is interesting to see what Old Testament scripture is quoted or alluded to most often in the New Testament. It is Psalm 110:1: "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool."

The remedy for this sentimental subjectivism is

to restore the New Testament doctrine of Christ's intercession at the right hand of God to its proper place. Ever since this mighty truth was cast down to the ground by the Babylonish captivity of the church, it is doubtful whether it has been restored to the overwhelming importance it occupied in the apostolic church. When the eye of faith sees the power and efficacy of Christ's intercession of righteousness at the right hand of God, the church will realize that its greatest power is not in an inward experience but in a work going on outside of itself in the throne room of the universe.⁴

Summary

The absence of a central theology on justification by faith and the concentration on internal experience, are swiftly moving the Protestant movement into greater and greater harmony with Rome. Will the popular wave of revivalism succeed in turning the Protestant movement into "an image to the beast"? In view of the prophecy of Revelation 13:13, 14, we ought to give serious thought to where things are headed in the bond of union which is developing between Rome and the neo-evangelicals. The time has surely come for a "new" Reformation which will restore the truth of the intercession of Christ's imputed righteousness to its rightful place.

⁴We recommend Louis Berkof's excellent treatment of The *Intercessory Work of Christ*, *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth Trust), pp. 400-405.