

The Protestant Reformation

by Richie Temple
Cary, North Carolina

On October 31, 1517 an Augustinian Monk named Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in the city of Wittenburg in present day Germany. The central idea behind these "propositions for debate" was the biblical doctrine of justification by faith over against the Roman Catholic religious system of his day. Luther had some months earlier "re-discovered" this truth for himself while teaching a course as Professor of Biblical Theology at the University of Wittenburg. This re-discovery and the ramifications of the Protestant Reformation that followed radically changed the world of that day and continue to be felt today any time a man, woman or child picks up a Bible in his own native language and begins to read for him or herself the liberating truths of the gospel message.

As F. F. Bruce states in the Introduction of his commentary on the Book of Romans in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, the story of Luther's realization of this truth is best told in his own words:

I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the righteousness of God", because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous ... Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on new meaning, and whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven' (p.57).

The Protestant Reformation that was sparked by this initial insight by Luther set off an explosion in biblical studies, translations and understanding that has continued, with various ebbs and flows, down to our own time. Thousands upon thousands of men and women of that day risked their lives or their livelihoods to break the monolithic hold that the Roman Catholicism of that day held over the minds of an entire continent of people. The results of this

struggle were not neat and orderly - as is always the case in such struggles - nor were they without gross mistakes in judgment or action by the leaders of the various reforming movements. But it is undeniable by any honest assessment of the historical situation that in the fight for truth tremendous strides were made - strides that have had a direct bearing on the rich and unprecedented availability of biblical knowledge, political freedom and social equality that is available to so many of us today.

Justification by Faith

Luther never saw his "rediscovery" of the biblical truth of justification by faith as anything other than just that. He never maintained that it was a new doctrine but rather the same doctrine that Paul and the other leaders of the first century church preached. But as in any age it was the bondage of his own circumstances and the flagrant hypocrisy of the religious life of his own day that caused his mind to be confronted with the truth that salvation was the free gift of God, received only through faith, rather than a reward received on the basis of human goodness or on the basis of the religious rituals, indulgences or pilgrimages of his day.

For Luther, as for us, the key sections in Romans for understanding the biblical truth of justification by faith were: 1:16-17; 3:19-26; 4:1-25, 5:1-5:21 and 8:1-3, 31-39. Perhaps the most important of these sections is 3:19-26. To begin our study here we will look at a very simple and clear definition of the words 'justify' and 'justification' as given in a note on Rom. 3:24 in the *NIV Study Bible* (p. 1710):

The term describes what happens when someone believes in Christ as his Savior: From the negative viewpoint, God declares the person to be not guilty; from the positive viewpoint, he declares him to be righteous. He cancels the guilt of the person's sin and credits righteousness to him ... The central thought in justification is that, although man clearly and totally deserves to be declared guilty, because of his trust in Christ God declares him righteous.

Simple enough except for one question: how can a righteous and holy God declare sinful man to be righteous solely on the basis of faith and still be a righteous and holy God? After all, the Old Testament makes it clear that it is the responsibility

of the judge to acquit the innocent and condemn the guilty (Deut. 25:10) - not to let the guilty off free! "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"

It is precisely at this point that we come face to face with the wondrous truth of the gospel of the grace of God. For "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (I Cor. 15). He who "knew no sin became sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Cor. 5:21). Or, in the words of Romans, "he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). Simply put, Christ died for us - 'on our behalf' or 'in our place' - and took our sin upon himself. He was the "ransom sacrifice" which took away the sin of the world.

To more fully understand the biblical concept of justification and its corresponding idea of righteousness I will first quote from the late G.E. Ladd's *A Theology of the New Testament*:

The Pauline doctrine of justification can be understood only against an Old Testament background. Among the Greeks, righteousness was an innate human quality. Plato designated *dikaiosyne* as one of the four cardinal virtues: justice, wisdom, temperance, and courage or fortitude. These virtues were emphasized by the Stoics and sometimes found their way into Hellenistic Judaism. However, in the Old Testament righteousness is a distinctly religious doctrine ...

Righteousness in the Old Testament is not primarily an ethical quality. The basic meaning of the word is "that norm in the affairs of the world to which men and things should conform, and by which they can be measured." One who is righteous is one who conforms to the given norm. The verb "to be righteous" means to conform to the given norm, and in certain forms ... it means "to declare righteous" or "to justify."

... Basically, "righteousness" is a concept of *relationship*. A person is righteous who has fulfilled the demands laid upon him or her by the relationship in which that person stands. It is not a word designating personal ethical character, but faithfulness to a relationship.

As such, righteousness becomes a word of great theological significance. Righteousness is the standard God has decreed for human conduct. The righteous person is the one who in God's judgment meets the divine standard and thus stands in a right relationship with God. The norm of righteousness depends entirely on the nature of God. Ultimately it is only God who can decide if a

person has met the norm that he decreed for human righteousness. The back-ground of righteousness and justification is ... the concept of God as the ruler, lawgiver, and judge of the world.

The idea of righteousness is often understood in a forensic [law court] context: the righteous person is the one whom the judge declares to be free from guilt. It is the business of the judge to acquit the innocent and condemn the guilty (Deut. 25:1; see also I Kings 8:32). God is often pictured as the judge of human beings (Psalm 9:4; 33:5; Jer. 11:20). The verb appears almost exclusively in the forensic sense. An individual is righteous who is judged to be in the right (Exod. 23:7; Deut. 25:1), i.e., who in judgment through acquittal stands in a right relationship with God.

... The striking - indeed to a Jew, the shocking - thing about Paul's use of the word is his affirmation that in Christ God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). If the ungodly were treated as they deserve, they would be condemned. A judge in Old Testament times who justified or acquitted the wicked would prove to be an unrighteous judge. Righteousness means upholding the norms of right conduct - the acquittal of the innocent and the condemnation of the guilty. Paul asserts that in the very act of justifying the ungodly, God has shown himself to be righteous (Rom. 3:26). Furthermore, this acquittal comes entirely apart from the works of the Law (Gal. 2:16; 3:11) - by faith alone (2:16) (pp. 480-482).

... The shedding of Christ's blood, i.e., his sacrificial death, provides the means of propitiation on the ground of which acquittal or justification can be bestowed upon humanity as a free gift ... Thus the death of Christ is a demonstration in the present time that God is both righteous and that he declares righteous those who have faith in Jesus ... and we can only conclude that this act of righteousness consisted in visiting upon Christ, who was ethically sinless, the guilt and doom that sin deserves, namely, death ... It is because God manifested both his righteousness and his love by visiting upon Jesus the guilt and the doom of sin that he can now in perfect righteousness bestow the vindication of acquittal upon the sinner (pp. 489-490).

... There are several points at which the Pauline teaching is radically different from the Jewish concept; and one of the essential differences is that the future eschatological justification *has already taken place*. "Since therefore we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9). "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). "You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 6:11). In these instances the

verb is in the aorist tense, expressing an act that has been accomplished. Through faith in Christ, on the ground of his shed blood, people have been justified, acquitted of the guilt of sin, and therefore are delivered from condemnation ... An essential element in the salvation of the future age is the divine acquittal and the pronouncement of righteousness; this acquittal, justification, which consists of the divine absolution of sin has already been effected by the death of Christ and may be received by faith here and now (pp. 482-484).

The Firstfruits of the Spirit

The key element in effecting, or bringing to pass, this justification of the believer is God's gift of his Spirit. This "firstfruits of the Spirit" is the "first-installment" of God's gift of salvation that will be received in all of its fullness at Christ's return. It is through the agency of his own Spirit that God imparts his righteousness into the life of the believer so as to make a new creation "in Christ." The believer can then bring forth the fruits of that righteousness and be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

But it should be emphasized that for the believers of the 1st century Church these were not simply dry theological dogmas contained in theological textbooks but vivid realities made real by the visible presence of the Spirit in their lives. They had been "washed, sanctified and justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (I Cor. 6:11). And when questions arose as to the proper status of Gentile believers within the newly constituted 'people of God' Paul's response was to appeal to their initial, evidential and continued experience of the Spirit which they had received at the time they believed the gospel message (Gal. 3:1-5; cp. Eph. 1:13-14; Rom. 8:16; Titus 3:4-7). They had received the Spirit, they had manifested the Spirit and now they were to continue to "walk in the Spirit" so as to bring forth its fruits in their lives (Gal. 5:16-25).

Justification by faith then is simply one aspect of the entire biblical concept of 'salvation' - a salvation that for the believer in Christ has already begun with the reception of the Spirit. F.F. Bruce speaks directly to this issue:

Paul's doctrine of justification, together with his other doctrines, is set in the context of the new creation that has come into being with and in Christ. That the acquittal of

the day of judgment is pronounced in advance here and now on those who believe in Jesus is part and parcel of the truth that for them 'the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun' (2 Cor. 5:17, NEB) - a truth made real in their present experience by the advent and activity of the Spirit (*Romans*, p. 39).

Gordon Fee in his massive work, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) echoes the same thoughts in more detail:

Probably the one feature that distances the New Testament church most from its contemporary counterpart is its thoroughly eschatological perspective of all of life. In contrast to most of us, eschatology - a unique understanding of the time of the End - conditioned the early believers existence in every way. The first clue to this outlook came from Jesus' own proclamation of the kingdom - as a present reality in his ministry, although still a future event. But it was the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the promised (eschatological) Spirit that completely altered the primitive church's perspective, both about Jesus and about themselves. In place of the totally future eschatology of their Jewish roots, with its hope of a coming Messiah and the resurrection of the dead, the early church recognized that the future had *already* been set in motion. The resurrection of Christ marked the beginning of the End, the turning of the ages. However, the End had only *begun*; they still awaited the final event, the (now second) coming of their Messiah Jesus, at which time they too would experience the resurrection/transformation of the body. They lived "between the times"; *already* the future had begun, *not yet* had it been consummated. From the New Testament perspective the whole of Christian existence - and theology - has this eschatological "tension" as its basic framework

This changed eschatological perspective absolutely determines Paul's theological outlook: how he talks about Christ, salvation, the church, ethics, the present, and the future. This is reflected both in his language and in many of the presuppositions that determine how he expresses himself. "We are those," he reminds the Corinthians, "upon whom the ends of the ages *have come*" (I Cor. 10:11). Christ's death and resurrection ... have already passed sentence on the present age (2 Cor. 5:14-15), which is thus "passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31). With the coming of Christ the new order has begun; all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17).

For Paul, therefore, salvation in Christ is a thoroughly eschatological reality, meaning first of all that God's final (eschatological) saving of his people has already been

effected by Christ. The future condemnation which we all richly deserve has been transferred from the future into the past, having been borne by Christ (Rom. 8:1-3). Thus we "have been saved" (Eph. 2:8). But since our final salvation has not yet been fully realized, he can likewise speak of salvation as something presently in process ("we are being saved," I Cor. 1:18) and as yet to be consummated ("we shall be saved," Rom. 5:9).

"Redemption" is both "already" (Eph. 1:7) and "not yet" (Eph. 4:30), as is our "adoption" (Rom. 8:15 and 23) and "justification" (= the gift of righteousness; Rom. 5:1 and Gal. 5:5). It is this understanding of salvation, as both "already" and "not yet," that keeps Paul from being a triumphalist. Because we are "already," we presently experience the power of Christ's resurrection; but because we are "not yet" we also presently participate in his sufferings (Phil. 3:10).

This essential framework likewise conditions Paul's understanding that the church is an eschatological community, whose members live in the present as those stamped with eternity. We live as expatriates on earth; our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). Ethical life, therefore, does not consist of rules to live by. Rather, empowered by the Spirit, we now live the life of the future in the present age, the life that characterizes God himself ...

For Paul this "changed eschatological perspective" derives from two experienced realities, both of which took place at the very beginning of his life in Christ: his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road ("I have seen the Lord," he avows to the Corinthians) and the subsequent gift of the eschatological Spirit. In Paul's own prior understanding of things, the resurrection of the dead and the gift of the Spirit were the two primary events that marked the end of the ages. Both of these have now been set in motion.

First, the resurrection of the dead is for Paul the final event on God's eschatological calendar, the unmistakable

evidence that the End has fully arrived. For Paul *the* resurrection has already taken place when Christ was raised from the dead, thus setting in motion the final doom of death and thereby guaranteeing our resurrection ... Believers therefore live "between the times" with regard to the two resurrections. We have *already* been "raised with Christ," which guarantees our *future* bodily resurrection (Rom. 6:4-5; 8:10-11).

Second, ... I have above regularly referred to the Spirit as the "eschatological Spirit." That is because apart from the eschatological dimension of "promise and fulfillment" and "already but not yet," neither Paul's own experience of the Spirit nor his perception of that experience are intelligible. From his Jewish heritage he well understood that the Spirit was part of the promise for the future. The promises of the new covenant had been put into an eschatological frame by Jeremiah [Jer. 31:31-34] and Ezekiel [Ez. 36:36-37:14] and had become thoroughgoing in later Jewish expectations on the basis of Joel 2:28-30. This is why the Spirit is so crucial to Paul's understanding of Christian existence. The gift of the out-poured Spirit meant that the messianic age had already arrived. The Spirit is thus the central element in this altered perspective, the key to which is Paul's firm conviction that the Spirit was both the *certain evidence* that the future had dawned, and the *absolute guarantee* of its final consummation (pp. 803-806).

[For excellent studies dealing with many aspects of this topic and others related to it I highly recommend *Romans* by F.F. Bruce in the *Tyndale NT Commentary* series (be sure to read its Introduction); *A Theology of the NT* by G.E. Ladd; *The Epistle to the Galatians* by Ronald Y.K. Fung in the *New International Commentary of the NT* series; and, despite its ardent trinitarianism, Gordon Fee's *God's Empowering Presence* or the shorter adapted version *The Holy Spirit in Paul*]