

## *Hair-Splitting Justified Over Justification*

Hair-splitting has a bad name.<sup>1</sup> And, in most cases, rightly so. Nit-picking, gnat-straining, quibbling over tiny details, is a wretched business, one which should almost always be left to the small-minded. There are, however, occasions when hair-splitting is commendable; indeed, when it is essential; there are topics about which we cannot give too much attention to detail. In this article, I am concerned with one such: justification.

When thinking about the doctrine of justification, hair-splitting is not only justified; it is an absolute necessity. Unless we are prepared to split hairs in the matter of justification, we shall ruin the gospel – or allow it to be ruined under our very noses. And the consequences of that will be horrendous beyond contemplation.

What, precisely, do I have in mind? Since I have, in several works, set out the doctrine of justification,<sup>2</sup> in this present article I am concerned solely with the necessary precision we need to exercise in our definition of justification. I want to

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Puritan’ was a pejorative nickname their opponents gave to those within the pre-1660 Church of England who wanted scriptural reform while retaining the Church’s uniformity as the State Church. Moreover, the Puritan emphasis upon precise obedience to Scripture, coupled with discipline in the church, earned them other nicknames, such as ‘Disciplinarians’ or ‘Precisians’. When one Puritan was told that he was too precise, he retorted: ‘Sir, I serve a precise God’. See my *Battle for the Church: 1517–1644*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *Justification: The Make-or-Break Doctrine; Christ’s Obedience Imputed; Four ‘Antinomians’ Tried and Vindicated: Tobias Crisp, William Dell, John Eaton and John Saltmarsh*; ‘What is Justifying Faith?’; ‘Justification: Fact or Feeling?’.

focus on where we should be fastidious when we are talking about ‘justification by faith’.

Let me state it this way:

Justification is on the basis of God’s grace alone, and received by the sinner through faith alone.

The two nice points I have in mind are these:

1. The *basis* of justification is grace; faith is its *means*. It is vital to distinguish between the two. Making faith the basis of justification, allowing faith to become the basis of justification, is fatal.

2. Having cleared that hurdle, it is essential to hold on to the word ‘alone’, doing so with tenacity. The basis of justification is grace – and grace *alone*; the means of justification is faith – and faith *alone*.

Now both these essential principles are under threat today. Sometimes the danger arises inadvertently; more often it is comes by reason of heavy attack.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the cause, the result, alas, is the same. Unless we believers are wide awake, we run the very serious risk of allowing the biblical doctrine of justification by faith to be ruined.

Alarmist? I think not.

Now this is nothing new, of course. Satan has always attacked justification by faith, the very citadel of the gospel. But I want to draw the attention of believers to issues we face today. And stand and face them we must. Otherwise, as I have said, the consequences will be horrendous beyond contemplation.

Let me tackle the first point I raised:

1. The *basis* of justification is grace; faith is its *means*. It is vital to distinguish between the two. Making faith the basis of

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<sup>3</sup> As for the latter, see, for instance, my *Conversion Ruined: The New Perspective and the Conversion of Sinners; The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T. Wright’s view of Baptism and Conversion*.

justification, allowing faith to become the basis of justification, is fatal.

Take Romans 4:16. Some Bible versions, alas, use words like ‘depends on’; principally,<sup>4</sup> the English Standard Version:

That is why it [that is, the promise, justification itself] *depends on* faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace.

Now herein lies the danger. The words ‘depends on’ need thought; very, very careful thought indeed. Of course, faith is essential. I have said so. Without faith no sinner will be justified. Faith is an absolute necessity; without it, we cannot come to God at all (Heb. 11:6). In that sense, justification ‘depends on’ faith, yes. No saving faith, no saving trust in Christ, no justification.

But... and there is a serious ‘but’.

The Greek word in question is *dia*. Now I recognise that this very small word carries a huge range of meanings. It is often the way. The smaller the word, the greater, it seems, its breadth of meaning, the greater its weight and importance. So here. Hence the need for this hair-splitting. The question is: How can we – amidst this plethora of meanings – decide the proper translation of *dia*? The rule is as it always is: the context must decide.

But before we get to that, let me make my point as clearly as I can. Here are some of the other major contemporary versions of Romans 4:16:

Therefore, the promise comes *by* faith, so that it may be by grace (NIV).

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<sup>4</sup> I say ‘principally’, but this needs qualification. The ESV was derived from the RSV. It is no surprise then to find that ‘depends on’, or something very like it, is used in the RSV, NEB, Jerusalem Bible, and the like.

Notice, however, how the NIV weakens the first ‘by’ by the second ‘by’; this should be ‘according to’. The same applies to this:

Therefore it is *of* faith, that it might be by grace (AV or KJV).

Better by far are these versions:

For this cause it is *of* faith, that it may be according to grace (ASV).

This is why the promise is *by* faith, so that it may be according to grace (HCSB).

For this reason it is *by* faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace (NASB).

Now all these versions have ‘of’ or ‘by’ faith: justification is *by* faith. They rightly steer well clear of any thought of justification being ‘because of’ faith, justification being ‘on the basis of’ faith. The ESV, however, with its use of ‘depends on’ gets uncomfortably close to it. It is playing with fire. It can lead to the notion of a sinner’s justification being *grounded on* his faith, the sinner being justified *because of* his faith, his justification being *on account of* his faith, *on the basis of* his faith. I accept that ‘depends on’ can be perfectly acceptable if the fine nuance is preserved. My fear is that this fine tuning will not always be understood or held on to. And herein lies the danger.

What, precisely, is this danger? If we ever get to think that faith is the *cause* of our justification, if we come to think that we are justified *because* we believe, we have, at the very least, turned faith into a work. Now we know that the desire to work for justification is inherent, deep-seated, in the natural man. As sinners, we are convinced that we can do it. We always want to do something. Rome and the cults tap into this ingrained desire. Again, how many times do we hear an unbeliever, when challenged about being right with God, bold as brass tell us: ‘I always *do* my best’?

The jailer asked Paul and Silas: ‘What must I *do* to be saved?’ (Acts 16:30). True, Paul told him to ‘believe’ (Acts 16:31), to trust Christ. But when setting out the doctrine of justification by faith – see below – Paul took the greatest pains to leave no room for the notion of justification by works.

What about the encounter between Christ and the Jews? The Jews asked Christ what they had to *do* to please God. No doubt, they were asking how could they earn their way into God’s good books, what would satisfy him: ‘What must we *do*, to be *doing* the works of God?’ (John 6:28).<sup>5</sup> Naturally, the Jews thought in this way. After all, they were children of the old covenant. And the old covenant was a covenant of works. Perfect obedience to the law of God through Moses to Israel would bring salvation. The Jews knew this full-well. As God had told them:

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD (Lev. 18:5).

When, on their return from captivity, the children of Israel confessed their nation’s sin to God, in their confession they repeated the principle in question:

You [that is the LORD] warned them [that is, Israel] in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey (Neh. 9:29).

God could justly complain:

I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live... But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live (Ezek. 20:11,13).

And Paul could not have been more explicit:

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<sup>5</sup> I am not saying they were sincere.

Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them (Rom. 10:5).

Oh yes, the Jews knew that under the old covenant, justification came by perfect obedience to the law. And this is why, as I have explained elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> Christ came into the world under the law, with the intention of fulfilling the law completely. Which he did. Thus the sinner, upon his trusting Christ, is fully justified in and by Christ's fulfilment of the law, and is declared righteous before God in the Redeemer on the basis of his finished work.

This is why Jesus, in his reply to the Jews, took up their word, and used it for his own purpose:

This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (John 6:29).

This word play must not be read as though Christ was saying that faith is a work. Rather, he was calling for faith, saying that trust in him (Christ) was what God required.<sup>7</sup> This is the doctrine of the new covenant. This is how justification is received – by faith.

Right from the start, however, the doctrine of justification by faith met with heavy attack in the early church. And that explains why Paul could not have taken more steps than he did to destroy this dreadful, mistaken notion of attempted justification by our own works.

Let me spell out his extended argument.

For a start, there is no justification by the law:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have

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<sup>6</sup> See my *Christ's Obedience Imputed*.

<sup>7</sup> See my *The Gospel Offer Is Free*.

sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness... at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Rom. 3:21-28).

Justification is by faith! Not by law! Not by works!

The apostle, without a break, presses home the point:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works (Rom. 4:1-6).

On the basis of grace, justification is received by faith, not on the basis or by our works.

Paul still has not finished. As he goes on to declare, justification is not by circumcision:

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the

footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:9-12).

Justification is on the basis of grace, it is received through faith, not by any rite, ceremony or ordinance.

Again:

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void (Rom. 4:13-14).

Justification is on the basis of grace, it is received by faith, not by our works.

The consequence:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1-2).

Paul never tired of the theme. Take just one example: the letter he wrote to the churches of Galatia.<sup>8</sup> He could not have been more explicit: no justification by the law. As he declared:

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:16,21).

It gets worse. Not only is there no justification by the law, but all who attempt it inevitably bring upon themselves the condemnation of God and the curse of the law:

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<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the common view, Galatians is not about justification. It is about justification by faith leading to progressive sanctification, and neither are brought about by the law. See my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law; Sanctification in Galatians*.



All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written: ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them’. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’. But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them’. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10-14).

Moreover, there is no justification by circumcision:

I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness (Gal. 5:2-5).

And so on.

All this can be – must be – generalised. It must not be restricted to the law of Moses and the rite of circumcision. The fact is, no works of ours – under any law whatsoever – no observance of any rite or ceremony, not even any God-given ordinance – contributes to our justification. Justification is on the basis of God’s grace, and is received by faith. The basis is grace, not any work that we might do – not past, present or future.

As Horatius Bonar put it:

*Not what my hands have done  
Can save my guilty soul;  
Not what my toiling flesh has borne  
Can make my spirit whole.*

*Not what I feel or do  
Can give me peace with God;  
Not all my prayers, and sighs and tears  
Can bear my awful load.*

*Thy work alone, O Christ,  
Can ease this weight of sin;  
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,  
Can give me peace within.*

*Thy love to me O God,  
Not mine, O Lord, to thee,  
Can rid me of this dark unrest,  
And set my spirit free!*

*Thy grace alone, O God,  
To me can pardon speak;  
Thy power alone, O Son of God,  
Can this sore bondage break!*

*No other work, save thine,  
No meaner blood will do,  
No strength save that which is divine,  
Can bear me safely through.*

In short, justification, though received by faith, is on the basis of grace. These two – faith and grace, the means of justification and the basis of justification – must never be confused.

So much for my first concern. Now for the second.

2. Having cleared that hurdle, it is essential to hold on to the word ‘alone’, doing so with tenacity. The basis of justification is grace – and grace *alone*; the means of justification is faith – and faith *alone*.

I can say that justification is by faith. Excellent! So it is. But any Church Father, any Papist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Federal Vision man, New Perspective advocate, Baptist Sacramentalist... could say ‘Amen’ to it.<sup>9</sup> What I have left out is key. What have I omitted to say? Justification is by faith

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<sup>9</sup> See my *Infant Baptism Tested; Conversion Ruined: The New Perspective and the Conversion of Sinners; The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T.Wright’s view of Baptism and Conversion; Luther on Baptism: Sacramentalism in the Raw; Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists*.

*alone*. Luther felt the point so keenly, he actually distorted his translation of Romans 3:28 into German to include the ‘alone’, though it is not in Greek. He had no need to do this since the apostle goes on to make the case very clearly, ruling out any contribution from circumcision or law.<sup>10</sup> Even so, Luther was right to say:

Whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this rejection of works will have to say: ‘Faith alone justifies and not works’.

Silence when men are thinking salvation is by faith and... is guilty silence. Plain speaking, leaving no room for doubt, is essential under such conditions. In other words, hair-splitting is essential.

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<sup>10</sup> As Luther himself saw. Commenting on his use of ‘alone’, and the criticism he met for it, he said: ‘The text itself, and... Paul’s meaning, urgently require and demand it. For in that passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine; namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. Paul excludes all works so completely as to say that the works of the law, though it is God’s law and word, do not aid us in justification. Using Abraham as an example, he argues that Abraham was so justified without works that even the highest work, which had been commanded by God, over and above all others, namely circumcision, did not aid him in justification. Rather, Abraham was justified without circumcision and without any works, but by faith, as he says in chapter 4: “If Abraham were justified by works, he may boast, but not before God”. So, when all works are so completely rejected – which must mean faith alone justifies – whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this rejection of works will have to say: “Faith alone justifies and not works”. The matter itself and the nature of language requires it’. In his ‘Open Letter on Translating’, Luther stated: ‘Furthermore, I am not the only one, nor the first, to say that faith alone makes one righteous. There was Ambrose, Augustine and many others who said it before me’. For my contribution to this issue, see my ‘The “But” of John 1:17: Absent but Vital’.

Paul, of course, had set the pattern, long before Luther. He had recognised the problem I am talking about. Writing to the Ephesian believers, he told them:

By grace you have been saved through faith (Eph. 2:8).

Enough said? No! He did not leave it there:

By grace you have been saved through faith... not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

Why did the apostle not stop at ‘faith’? Why the negative? Why did he state the case from the opposite point of view? Why did he add ‘through faith... not a result of works’? Is it not obvious that Paul spotted the danger that some might think that their works – even thinking of their faith as a work – might contribute to their salvation? I am convinced of it. Plenty of people do think in terms of ‘faith and...’ – and that, despite the apostle’s demolition of the claim! Consequently, he took the necessary steps to close the loophole. He was thinking of his readers, was he not? He did not want them to run away with a wrong impression. So he did all he could to make sure they couldn’t.

*And he did not leave it even there!* For he went on immediately to add:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

Paul, having stopped one danger, knew he had, at once, to correct yet another! Having removed the notion that a sinner’s work could contribute to his salvation, having stressed the sovereign and free grace of God in salvation without the sinner’s works, the apostle saw the risk that his readers might run away with the idea that works don’t count at all! ‘Out of frying pan into the fire’! So he stopped it before it could start. Hair-splitting, you see.

Let me set out the apostolic teaching on this.

A sinner cannot work for his salvation, but once he is saved he is duty-bound, under apostolic command, to work out the salvation that God has already worked in:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

James put it as clear as noonday. A sinner is justified on the basis of grace alone and is received by faith alone, but the faith which justifies never comes alone:

Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say: 'You have faith and I have works'. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says: 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' – and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead (Jas. 2:17-26).

And this is why Paul hammered home all these points to the Ephesians, making sure he established salvation by faith alone, without works, but also making it clear that once a sinner is saved he will inevitably go on to produce good works, that it is his duty<sup>11</sup> so to do:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of

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<sup>11</sup> Do not miss the 'should'.

works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

The fact is, if Paul had not painted the full picture, he would have failed, and worse; if he had not been willing to split hairs, he would have been cavalier, acting irresponsibly. But he, having a true pastoral heart, was not confining his thinking to the theoretical; he had his readers and their eternal welfare in mind, and so he took steps to make sure they got the right message, the complete message, and thus prevented any possible misunderstanding.

I am convinced that Paul was a hair-splitter when it came to justification in all its aspects. I am further persuaded that we must be the same. Justification is on the basis of God's free grace alone and is received by faith, and by faith alone. It leads to good works, certainly, but justification is by faith alone because of God's grace alone. We must never yield an inch on this principle. We must proclaim this gospel doctrine with all the vigour and passion we can muster. In short, we must be hair-splitters when it comes to justification by faith alone on the basis of grace alone.