

# The Doctrine of Justification

## As Taught by the English Reformers

Churchman 76/3 1962

Philip E. Hughes

“We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings: wherefore that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine.” So says the eleventh of the Thirty-Nine Articles. And it is also a thoroughly apostolic doctrine, taken from the pages of the New Testament. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is, moreover, one of the central doctrines of the Reformation, being at the very heart of the Gospel. In view of its significance in those days of renewal, it is not surprising that Luther should have called it the article of a standing or falling Church. It was, however, a doctrine which needed very careful definition and explanation if it was not to be misapplied and misrepresented. This the Reformers were soon to learn. It is not faith as such and by itself that saves. Indeed, there can be no such thing as bare faith; for faith must have an object. And the object of Christian faith is Christ.

\* \* \* \*

In the first place, then, it must be emphasized that the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith is entirely Christ-centred, and not at all man-centred. Faith that is not directed upon Christ as our Saviour and the Bearer of our sins is neither saving faith nor Christian faith. “Catch thou hold of our Saviour,” preaches Hugh Latimer,

“believe in Him, be assured in thy heart that He with His suffering took away all thy sins . . . When we believe in Him it is like as if we had no sins. For He changeth with us: He taketh our sins and wickedness from us, and giveth unto us His holiness, righteousness, justice, fulfilling of the law, and so, consequently, everlasting life: so that we be like as if we had done no sin at all; for His righteousness standeth us in so good stead, as though we of our own selves had fulfilled the law to the uttermost” (*Sermons*, pp. 329f.).<sup>1</sup>

“Who is righteous but he that trusteth in Christ’s blood, be he never so weak?” writes William Tyndale in his work on *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*. “Christ is our righteousness, and in Him ought we to teach all men to trust and to expound unto all men the testament that God hath made to us sinners in Christ’s blood” (*Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 95. This work was first published in 1528. A second edition appeared in 1536 with the expanded title: *A Treatise of Justification by Faith only, otherwise called The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*. This indicates more precisely the scope of this work, to which I shall have occasion to refer not infrequently during the course of this article).

“The sum and whole cause of the writing of this epistle,” says Tyndale again, in his *Prologue to the Epistle to the Romans*,

“is to prove that a man is justified by faith only; which proposition whoso denieth to him is not only this epistle and all that Paul writeth, but also the whole Scripture, so locked up, that he shall never understand it to his soul’s health . . . And by justifying, understand no other thing than to be reconciled to God, and to be restored unto His favour, and to have thy sins forgiven

thee. And when I say, God justifieth us, understand thereby that God for Christ's sake, merits, and deservings only, receiveth us unto His mercy, favour, and grace, and forgiveth us our sins. And when I say, Christ justifieth us, understand thereby that Christ only hath redeemed us, bought, and delivered us out of the wrath of God and damnation, and hath with His works only purchased us the mercy, the favour, and grace of God, and the forgiveness of our sins. And when I say, that faith justifieth, understand thereby that faith and trust in the truth of God and in the mercy promised us for Christ's sake, and for His deserving and works only, doth quiet the conscience and certify her that our sins be forgiven and we in the favour of God . . . Finally, that we say, Faith only justifieth, ought to offend no man. For if this be true, that Christ only redeemed us, Christ only bare our sins, made satisfaction for them, and purchased us the favour of God; then must it needs be true that the trust only in Christ's deserving and in the promises of God the Father, made to us for Christ's sake, doth alone quiet the conscience and certify it that the sins are forgiven" (*op. cit.*, pp. 508f.).

This deserves to be taken as the classic definition of the Reformed doctrine of justification. It is this teaching which pervades, or undergirds, all the preaching and writing of the Reformation.

We may quote also Archbishop Cranmer, writing no less classically of this great doctrine. Referring likewise to the Epistle to the Romans, he points out that there are three things

“which must concur and go together in our justification: upon God's part, His great mercy and grace; upon Christ's part, justice, that is, the satisfaction of God's justice, or price of our redemption, by the offering of His body and shedding of His blood, with fulfilling of the law perfectly and thoroughly; and upon our part, true and lively faith in the merits of Jesu Christ, which [faith] yet is not ours, but by God's working in us: so that in our justification is not only God's mercy and grace, but also His justice, which the apostle calleth the justice of God; and it consisteth in paying our ransom, and fulfilling of the law: and so the grace of God doth not exclude the justice of God in our justification, but only excludeth the justice of man, that is to say, the justice of our works, as to be merits of deserving our justification; and therefore St. Paul declareth here nothing upon the behalf of man concerning his justification, but only a true and lively faith; which nevertheless is the gift of God, and not man's only work without God” (*Homily on Salvation*, in *Works* Vol. II, p. 129).

“This proposition, that we be justified by faith only, freely, and without works, is spoken for to take away clearly all merit of our works,” Cranmer explains further in the same treatise,

“and thereby wholly to ascribe the merit and deserving of our justification unto Christ only and His most precious blood-shedding. This faith the Holy Scripture teacheth; this is the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion; this doctrine all old and ancient authors of Christ's Church do approve; this doctrine advanceth and setteth forth the true glory of Christ, and suppresseth the vain-glory of man; this whosoever denieth is not to be reputed for a true Christian man, nor for a setter-forth of Christ's glory, but for an adversary of Christ and His Gospel, and for a setter-forth of men's vain-glory . . . Justification [continues Cranmer] is not the office of man, but of God: for man cannot justify himself by his own works, neither in part nor in the whole; for that were the greatest arrogancy and presumption of man that antichrist could erect against God, to affirm that a man might, by his own works, take away and purge his own sins, and so justify himself. But justification is the office of God only, and is not a thing which we render unto Him, but which we receive of Him; not which we give to Him but which we take of Him, by His free mercy, and by the only merits of His most dearly beloved Son, our only Redeemer, Saviour, and Justifier, Jesus Christ. So that the true understanding of this doctrine, we be justified freely by faith without works, or that we be justified by faith in Christ only, is not that this our own act to believe in Christ, or this our faith in Christ, which is within us, doth justify

us, and merit our justification unto us (for that were to count ourselves to be justified by some act or virtue that is within ourselves): but the true understanding and meaning thereof is, that although we hear God's Word, and believe it, although we have faith, hope, charity, repentance, dread, and fear of God within us, and do never so many good works thereunto; yet we must renounce the merit of all our said virtues, of faith, hope, charity, and all our other virtues and good deeds, which we either have done, shall do, or can do, as things that be far too weak and insufficient and imperfect to deserve remission of our sins and our justification; and therefore we must trust only in God's mercy, and in that sacrifice which our High Priest and Saviour Christ Jesus, the Son of God, once offered for us upon the cross, to obtain thereby God's grace and remission . . . So that our faith in Christ (as it were) saith unto us thus: It is not I that take away your sins, but it is Christ only; and to Him only I send you for that purpose, renouncing there-in all your good virtues, words, thoughts, and works, and only putting your trust in Christ" (*ibid.*, pp. 131f.).

\* \* \* \*

The Reformed doctrine of *by faith alone* cannot be understood apart from the Reformed doctrine of *by grace alone*. They are the two sides of the same coin. Together they set forth that ascription of all the glory for what we are and do to God, and to God alone—*soli Deo gloria*—which is the hallmark of the Reformation. The importance of this emphasis cannot be overstated, because it is characteristic of fallen man to ascribe glory to himself instead of to God, to whom alone it belongs. Self-glory is vain-glory: it is an expression of the sinful desire of the creature to be as God. The twin doctrine of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* is, therefore, essential for every age; but it was, in a historical sense, especially necessary when the Reformation came, because for centuries it had been to all intents and purposes submerged and stifled under an unevangelical accumulation of doctrines of merits by works, penances, and payments, whereby men were led to hope that they might perhaps win some acceptance with God. This inevitably meant that man's justification before God, inasmuch as it was mixed up with what man did, became a matter of uncertainty. The rediscovery of the Bible, however, and with it the Gospel of free grace, involved also the rediscovery of the believer's eternal security in Christ. Salvation in which man has even the smallest hand is thereby invested with a degree of doubt. But salvation which from beginning to end is entirely the work of God is invested with complete assurance; as God's work, it cannot fail or be frustrated.

Within this setting of the total inability of man and the total ability of God in the work of salvation we are able to reach a proper understanding of Article X: of Free Will, which states: "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God: wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will".

Thus Tyndale admonishes us that "the right faith springeth not of man's fantasy, neither is it in any man's power to obtain it; but it is altogether the pure gift of God poured into us freely, without all manner doing of us, without deserving and merits, yea, and without seeking for of us; and is (as saith Paul in the second to the Ephesians) even God's gift and grace, purchased through Christ. Therefore is it mighty in operation, full of virtue, and ever working; which also reneweth a man, and begetteth him afresh, altereth him, changeth him, and turneth him altogether into a new nature" (*The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, p. 53). Again, he describes the priority of God's grace in the following words: "God chooseth us first and

loveth us first, and openeth our eyes to see His exceeding abundant love to us in Christ; and then love we again, and accept His will above all things, and serve Him in that office whereunto He hath chosen us” (*ibid.*, p. 87). And in his *Prologue to the Book of Leviticus* he declares that “all that repent and believe in Christ are saved from everlasting death, of pure grace, without, and before, their good works; and not to sin again, but to fight against sin, and henceforth to sin no more”. Tyndale, with the other Reformers, knew, from Scripture and also from experience, that “all the deeds in the world, save the blood of Christ, can purchase no forgiveness of sins” (*op. cit.*, p. 427).

So, too, Cranmer insists that “our justification doth come freely by the mere mercy of God, and of so great and free mercy that, whereas all the world was not able of themselves to pay any part towards their ransom, it pleased our heavenly Father, of His infinite mercy, without any our desert or deserving, to prepare for us the most precious jewels of Christ’s body and blood, whereby our ransom might be fully paid, the law fulfilled, and His justice fully satisfied” (*Homily of Salvation*, p. 130). And listen to the inimitable Latimer preaching on the clause in the Lord’s Prayer:

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us”: “Do I now, in forgiving my neighbour his sins which he hath done against me, do I, I say, deserve or merit at God’s hand forgiveness of my own sins? No, no; God forbid! for if this should be so, then farewell Christ: it taketh Him clean away, it diminisheth His honour, and is very treason wrought against Christ. This hath been in times past taught openly in the pulpits and in the schools; but it was very treason against Christ: for in Him only, and in nothing else, neither in heaven nor in earth, is our remission; unto Him only pertaineth this honour. For remission of sins, wherein consisteth everlasting life, is such a treasure, that passeth all men’s doings: it must not be our merits that shall serve, but His. He is our comfort: it is the majesty of Christ, and His blood-shedding, that cleanseth us from our sins . . . So you see, as touching our salvation, we must not go to working to think to get everlasting life with our own doings. No, this were to deny Christ. Salvation, and remission of sins, is His gift, His own and free gift” (*op. cit.*, pp. 419f.).

The necessity of faith is not a necessity of human initiative, but a necessity of response to the divine initiative. Faith, as Latimer graphically says, is the hand wherewith we receive Christ’s benefits (*ibid.*, p. 418, cf. p. 454). But its consequence is even more than a receiving: it is a union. And it is this oneness with and in Christ that is the guarantee of our eternal security: the believer’s destiny is none other than the destiny of Christ Himself. “Christ is thine, and all His deeds are thy deeds,” says Tyndale. “Christ is in thee, and thou in Him, knit together inseparably. Neither canst thou be damned, except Christ be damned with thee: neither can Christ be saved, except thou be saved with Him” (*The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, p. 79). It is, moreover, God the Holy Spirit who seals this assurance to the believing heart: “Whosoever repenteth, believeth the Gospel, and putteth his trust in Christ’s merits, the same is heir with Christ of eternal life; for assurance whereof the Spirit of God is poured into his heart as an earnest” (*ibid.*, p. 113).

\* \* \* \*

There is, however, a faith which is not unto salvation. The Reformers, indeed, frequently point out that there are two kinds of faith—a right faith and a wrong faith, a dead faith and a lively faith. Tyndale addresses his reader as follows: “I pray thee how many thousands are there of them that say, ‘I believe that Christ was born of a virgin, that He died, that He rose again,’ and so forth, and thou canst not bring them in belief that they have any sin at all! . . .

For though they believe that Christ died, yet believe they not that He died for their sins, and that His death is a sufficient satisfaction for their sins; and that God, for His sake, will be a father unto them, and give them power to resist sin” (*ibid.*, pp. 121ff.). And Cranmer admonishes:

“That faith which bringeth forth (without repentance) either evil works, or no good works, is not a right, pure, and lively faith, but a dead, devilish, counterfeit, and feigned faith, as St. Paul and St. James call it. For even the devils know and believe that Christ was born of a virgin, that He fasted forty days and forty nights without meat and drink, that He wrought all kinds of miracles, declaring Himself very God . . . These articles of our faith the devils believe, and so they believe all things that be written in the New and Old Testament to be true: and yet for all this faith they be but devils, remaining still in their damnable estate, lacking the very true Christian faith. For the right and true Christian faith is not only to believe that Holy Scripture and all the foresaid articles of our faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence in God’s merciful promises, to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ: whereof doth follow a loving heart to obey His commandments” (*Homily of Salvation, op. cit.*, p. 133).

Although the Reformers strenuously denied that by his works or dispositions man could contribute anything at all to his justification, yet it was very far from being the truth that they had no place in their system of Christianity for good works (as was commonly and maliciously charged by their enemies). On the contrary, they gave particular prominence to the importance of good works. They excluded them only as a means to justification: good works do not, and cannot, precede justification; but they must follow it, as light and warmth follow the rising of the sun. Justification is not the reward of good works; but good works are the proof of justification. “How,” asks Cranmer,

“can a man have this true faith, this sure trust and confidence in God, that by the merits of Christ his sins be remitted, and be reconciled to the favour of God, and to be partaker of the kingdom of heaven by Christ, when he liveth ungodly and denieth Christ in his deeds ? . . . These great and merciful benefits of God, if they be well considered, do neither minister unto us occasion to be idle, and to live without doing any good works, neither yet stir us by any means to do evil things; but contrariwise, if we be not desperate persons and our hearts harder than stones, they move us to render ourselves unto God wholly, with all our will, hearts, might, and power, to serve Him in all good deeds, obeying His commandments during our lives, to seek in all things His glory and honour, not our sensual pleasures and vain-glory; evermore dreading willingly to offend such a merciful God and loving Redeemer, in word, thought, or deed. And the said benefits of God, deeply considered, do move us for His sake also to be ever ready to give ourselves to our neighbours, and, as much as lieth in us, to study with all our endeavour to do good to every man. These be the fruits of the true faith” (*ibid.*, p. 134).

In his *Homily of Faith*, Cranmer explains how “a true faith cannot be kept secret”, but “will break out and show itself by good works”. He marshals evidence to demonstrate that “all Holy Scripture agreeably beareth witness that a true lively faith in Christ doth bring forth good works”, and that

“therefore every man must examine himself diligently, to know whether he have the same true lively faith in his heart unfeignedly, or not; which he shall know by the fruits thereof”. “Deceive not yourselves,” he exhorts, “thinking that you have faith in God, or that you love God, or do fear Him, when you live in sin; for then your ungodly and sinful life declareth the contrary, whatsoever ye say or think . . . If these fruits do not follow, we do but mock God, deceive ourselves and also other men. Well may we bear the name of Christian men, but we do lack the true faith that doth belong thereunto. For true faith doth ever bring forth good works, as St. James saith: ‘Show me thy faith by thy deeds’. Thy deeds and works must be an open

testimonial of thy faith: otherwise thy faith, being without good works, is but the devil's faith, the faith of the wicked, a fantasy of faith, and not a true Christian faith . . . Therefore, as you profess the name of Christ, good Christian people, let no such fantasy and imagination of faith at any time beguile you; but be sure of your faith: try it by your living" (*op. cit.*, pp. 136ff.).

Similarly, Thomas Becon affirms, in the Preface to his *Commonplaces of the Holy Scripture*, that "works are the fruits of faith, and good testimonies unto our conscience that our faith is true and unfeigned; but helpers unto our justification or salvation they are not . . . As the sun cannot be without light nor the fire without heat, no more can the true and Christian faith be without good works . . . If faith ceaseth to work, then it is not an evangelical but an historical faith" (*Works*, Vol. III, p. 291).

The good works that follow and testify to a right faith are no more meritorious, however, than are works performed apart from true faith. They are, indeed, acceptable and pleasing to God, and they are required of Him; but they are performed by reason of the inward operation of the Holy Spirit in the regenerate life, and all the glory belongs to God who thus enables man to perform what He commands. "We are sure," says Tyndale, "that God hath created and made us new in Christ, and put His Spirit in us, that we should live a new life, which is the life of good works . . . The life of a Christian man is inward between him and God, and properly is the consent of the Spirit to the will of God and to the honour of God. And God's honour is the final end of all good works" (*The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, p. 90). Again: "A Christian man hath nought to rejoice in as concerning his deeds. His rejoicing is that Christ died for him, and that he is washed in Christ's blood" (*ibid.*, p. 97).

It is true that the New Testament speaks in terms of rewards for those who prove to be good and faithful servants of their heavenly Master. But even so all the merit is Christ's, and the faithful servant works not for the sake and for the love of the reward (in so far as he does, he is self-centred and unfaithful), but for the sake and for the love of Christ. His work is freely rendered, and without all self-seeking. "When the Gospel is preached unto us," says Tyndale again,

"we believe the mercy of God; and in believing we receive the Spirit of God, which is the earnest of eternal life, and we are in eternal life already, and feel already in our hearts the sweetness thereof, and are overcome with the kindness of God and Christ; and therefore love the will of God, and of love are ready to work freely . . . So let thine eye be single, and look unto good living only, and take no thought for the reward, but be content; forasmuch as thou knowest and art sure that the reward, and all things contained in God's promises, follow good living naturally; and thy good works do but testify thee only and certify thee that the Spirit of God is in thee . . . For they that look unto the reward are slow, false, subtle, and crafty workers, and love the reward more than the work; yea, hate the labour; yea, hate God who commandeth the labour; and are weary both of the commandment and also of the commander; and work with tediousness. But he that worketh of pure love, without seeking of reward, worketh truly" (*ibid.*, pp. 65f.).

"Your reward shall be great in heaven," quotes Latimer when preaching on the Beatitudes.

"*Mercēs*, 'reward': this word soundeth as though we should merit somewhat by our own works; for reward and merit are correspondent, one followeth the other; when I have merited, then I ought to have my reward. But we shall not think so: for ye must understand that all our works are imperfect; we cannot do them so perfectly as the law requireth, because of our flesh, which ever hindereth us. Wherefore is the kingdom of God called then a reward? Because it is merited by Christ: for as touching our salvation and eternal life, it must be merited, but not by our own

works, but only by the merits of our Saviour Christ. Therefore believe in Him, trust in Him: it is He that merited heaven for us" (*op. cit.*, p. 488).

Tyndale sums the matter up admirably when he writes: "All that I do and suffer is but the way to the reward, and not the deserving thereof"; and again: "Christ is Lord over all, and whatsoever any man will have of God he must have it freely given him for Christ's sake. Now to have heaven for mine own deserving is mine own praise, and not Christ's. For I cannot have it by favour and grace in Christ and by mine own merits also; for free giving and deserving cannot stand together" (*Prologue to the Book of Numbers*, pp. 434, 436).

\* \* \* \*

The controversy over works and merit in the sixteenth century was, it must be remembered, a controversy concerned with the question of man's justification. It revolved around the doctrine of salvation. The question concerning the common grace and providence of God, whereby a measure of social and civic goodness is preserved in the world at large, including unregenerate society, was not debated. It is against this background that Articles XII, XIII, and XIV of the Church of England must be understood. Article XII, entitled "Of Good Works", relates to those works that are performed subsequently to justification:

"Albeit that good works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily from a true and lively faith; insomuch that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit".

The scope of Article XIII is defined by its title, "Of Works before Justification", and it reads as follows:

"Works done before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of His Spirit are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace of congruity: yea, rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin".

And Article XIV, "Of Works of Supererogation," addresses itself to the assumption that there is a possibility of doing more than God requires, so that a bank of surplus merit is established which may be drawn upon, at a charge, by those whose works fall short in performance. "Voluntary works," it reads,

"besides, over, and above God's commandments, which they call works of supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety: for by them men do declare that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for His sake than of bounden duty is required: whereas Christ saith plainly, When ye have done all that are commanded to you, say, We are unprofitable servants."

The conception of works of supererogation implied a two-level view of Christian morality. Such supererogatory works belonged not to the sphere of the ordinary man and woman but to the small super-Christian minority who, by voluntarily living as solitary hermits or in monastic communities, by voluntarily submitting themselves to the rule of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and by voluntarily afflicting their bodies with painful indignities, were regarded as having achieved a holiness which was above what was required of them. But

with ordinary-level Christianity the situation was very different. It was not long after the apostolic period when, with a view to improving the discipline of Christian living, and coupled with a particular application of passages like Heb. 6: 4ff, and 10: 26f., the doctrine was developed that at baptism all sins were washed away by the blood of Christ, but that this blood did not avail for sins committed after baptism, with the result that such sins could be expiated only by the endurance of such pains and penances as the church might impose on the offender. This led to the phase in church history when it became a common practice for persons to postpone their baptism, if possible, until the hour of death, in the hope that in this way they might be assured of passing into the next world free from sin. Such, indeed, was the spiritual insecurity and uncertainty which this teaching naturally engendered that it led further to the doctrine of purgatory, according to which, no penances, however many and severe, being sufficient to purge away all the defilements of sin, the Christian man would ordinarily have to pass through a prolonged period of purgation by flames after death before he was fit to enter into the heavenly state. For ordinary-level Christians, accordingly, and that meant the great mass of church members, the Christian way after baptism became one of self-effort and self-suffering, without that assured confidence in the redeeming work and suffering of Christ in which the New Testament encourages us alone to trust. And for Christianity at both levels life became a preoccupation with the inescapable problem of one's own justification and acceptance before God.

The rediscovery of the Gospel which brought in the Reformation inevitably meant the exposure of the falsity and unevangelical nature of all such teaching. Hence the statement of Article XVI, entitled "Of Sin after Baptism":

"Not every deadly sin willingly committed after baptism is sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after baptism. After we have received the Holy Ghost we may depart from grace given and fall into sin, and by the grace of God we may arise again and amend our lives. And therefore they are to be condemned which say they can no more sin as long as they live here, or deny the place of forgiveness to such as truly repent".

Thomas Becon uses the apostle Peter as an example:

"That sinners may receive remission of their sins, though they sin after they have known the truth and are baptized, it is manifest by divers places of the New Testament. Who doubteth but that Peter was both baptized and knew the truth when he confessed Christ to be the Son of the living God? . . . Yet did he fall again after that when he denied Christ . . . Did not he afterward, when he repented, obtain mercy at the hand of God? . . . Hereof doth it follow that remission of sins is not denied unto sinners, if they repent and believe" (*The Potation for Lent*, in *Early Writings*, p. 96).

"When they say that Christ hath made no satisfaction for the sin we do after our baptism," writes William Tyndale,

"say thou with the doctrine of Paul that in our baptism we receive the merits of Christ's death through repentance and faith, of which two baptism is the sign; and though when we sin of frailty after our baptism we receive the sign no more, yet we be renewed again through repentance and faith in Christ's blood; of which twain that sign of baptism, ever continued among us in baptizing our young children, doth ever keep us in mind, and call us back again unto our profession, if we be gone astray, and promiseth us forgiveness. Neither can actual sin be washed away with our works, but with Christ's blood; neither can there be any other sacrifice or satisfaction to Godward for them save Christ's blood: forasmuch as we can do no



works unto God, but receive only of His mercy with our repenting faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord and only Saviour: unto whom, and unto God our Father through Him, and unto His Holy Spirit, that only purgeth, sanctifieth, and washeth us in the innocent blood of our redemption, be praise for ever. Amen” (*Prologue to the Prophet Jonah*, p. 466).

As for purgatory, “that fiery furnace that hath burned away so many of our pence”, as Latimer feelingly described it (*op. cit.*, p. 36), the Reformers denounced it with one voice as unscriptural and dishonouring to Christ. Their attitude to it is summed up in the words of the *Homily concerning Prayer* (attributed to Bishop Jewel):

“The only purgatory wherein we must trust to be saved is the death and blood of Christ, which if we apprehend with a true and steadfast faith, it purgeth and cleanseth us from all our sins, even as well as if He were now hanging upon the cross” (*op. cit.*, p. 356).

Article XXII dismisses “the Romish doctrine concerning purgatory” as “a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God”. In his *Answer to the Fifteen Articles of the Devon Rebels* Archbishop Cranmer writes concerning the demand that prayers and masses should be offered for the souls in purgatory:

“What a contumely and injury is this to Christ, to affirm that all have not full and perfect purgation by His blood that die in His faith! Is not all our trust in the blood of Christ, that we be cleansed, purged, and washed thereby? And will you have us now to forsake our faith in Christ, and bring us to the pope’s purgatory to be washed therein, thinking that Christ’s blood is an imperfect lee or soap that washeth not clean? If he shall die without mercy that treadeth Christ’s blood under his feet, what is treading of His blood under our feet if this be not? But if according to the catholic faith, which the Holy Scripture teacheth, and the prophets, apostles, and martyrs confirmed with their blood, all the faithful that die in the Lord be pardoned of all their offences by Christ, and their sins be clearly sponged and washed away by His blood, shall they after be cast into another strong and grievous prison of purgatory, there to be punished again for that which was pardoned before? . . . And is God no truer of His promises but to punish that which He promiseth to pardon? Consider the matter by your own cases [he invites the rebels]. If the king’s majesty should pardon your offences, and after would cast you into prison, would you think that he had well observed his promise? For what is to pardon your offences but to pardon the punishment for the same? If the king would punish you, would you take that for a pardon? Would you not allege your pardon, and say that you ought not to be punished? Who can then, that hath but a crumb of reason in his head, imagine of God that He will after our death punish those things that He pardoned in our lifetime?” (*op. cit.*, pp. 181f.).

\* \* \* \*

Closely linked in the Reformers’ minds with the doctrine of justification was that of predestination. The Apostle describes the spiritual state of fallen man in terms of being “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2: 1). Man, as we have seen, commensurably with this teaching, is able neither to save himself nor even to contribute in the smallest degree to his salvation. His will is enslaved; his god is the god of this world. Like Lazarus, swathed from head to foot with burial wrappings and corrupting in the tomb, he is bound by his sins and his nature is corrupted in the death of separation from the true God. Like Lazarus, too, his only hope is to be raised to newness of life through the utterance of the divine voice. Salvation, therefore, from beginning to end is the sovereign work of almighty God. God’s bestowal of grace, however, is not capricious, haphazard, or dependent on an unpredictable development of events. Those who through His grace are brought to salvation have been chosen from all eternity and “predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the

counsel of His own will” (Eph. 1: 11). They are taken up into the scheme of God’s everlasting purpose. All is of God, from eternity to eternity, and it is on this truth that the Christian’s eternal security in Christ rests. It is with this theme that Article XVII, “Of Predestination and Election”, is concerned:

“Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) He hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour”.

This leads to a statement of the order or sequence of the whole sweep of salvation. “Wherefore,” the Article continues,

“they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God’s purpose by His Spirit working in due season: they, through grace, obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God’s mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.”

This doctrine is a source of unfailing assurance to the believer and a constant spur to holy living, and it also enables him to take a proper view both of himself and of God, and causes him to ascribe all the praise and the glory to the sovereign goodness of divine grace. Thus the Article proceeds to state that

“the godly consideration of predestination and our election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God”.

The order of salvation is, indeed, a matter of some importance for those who wish to understand the nature and the sequence of God’s dealings with His creatures in bringing them to newness of life. This order is expressed in its fullest scope in Rom. 8: 29f., where the Apostle says that whom God did foreknow “He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son; . . . moreover, whom He did predestinate them He also called; and whom He called them He also justified; and whom He justified them He also glorified”. Nothing could emphasize more effectively that God alone is the author of man’s salvation in its entirety. The Reformers insist that in the experience of justification there must be a succession from repentance to faith, and from faith to love. “Note now the order,” says Tyndale in his *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*:

“first God giveth me light to see the goodness and righteousness of the law, and mine own sin and unrighteousness; out of which knowledge springeth repentance. Now repentance teacheth me not that the law is good and I evil, but a light that the Spirit of God hath given me, out of which light repentance springeth. Then the same Spirit worketh in mine heart trust and confidence, to believe the mercy of God and His truth, that He will do as He hath promised, which belief saveth me. And immediately out of that trust springeth love toward the law of God again . . . Now love doth not receive this mercy, but faith only; by which love I pour out again upon my neighbour that goodness which I have received of God by faith. Hereof ye see that I cannot be justified without repentance; and yet repentance justifieth me not. And hereof ye see that I cannot have a faith to be justified and saved, except love spring thereof immediately; and

yet love justifieth me not before God. For my natural love to God again doth not make me first see and feel the kindness of God in Christ, but faith through preaching. For we love not God first, to compel Him to love again; but He loved us first, and gave His Son for us, that we might see love and love again . . . And when we say, faith only justifieth us and forgiveth us, we mean not faith which hath no repentance, and faith which hath no love unto the laws of God again, and unto good works, as wicked hypocrites falsely belie us” (P.S., pp. 195f.).

Again, in *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, Tyndale analyses the apostolic method of proclamation and instruction in the following way:

“This order useth Paul in all his epistles: first, he preacheth the law, and proveth that the whole nature of man is damned, in that the heart lusteth contrary to the will of God . . . Then preacheth he Christ, the Gospel, the promises, and the mercy that God hath set forth to all men in Christ’s blood; which they that believe, and take it for an earnest thing, turn themselves to God, begin to love God again, and to prepare themselves to His will, by the working of the Spirit of God in them. Last of all, exhorteth he to unity, peace, and soberness; to avoid brawlings, sects, opinions, disputing, and arguing about words; and to walk in the plain and single faith and feeling of the Spirit; and to love one another after the example of Christ, even as Christ loved us; and to be thankful, and to walk worthy of the Gospel and as it becometh Christ; and with the example of pure living to draw all to Christ” (*ut sup.*, pp. 96f.).

The question naturally arises concerning the justification of the Old Testament saints who lived before the coming of Christ. If salvation is through faith alone in the atoning work of Christ, what standing can they have? To this question the Reformers have but one answer, namely, that the saints of the old dispensation had the same faith in Christ as Saviour as we have, only they believed in the promises of God yet to be fulfilled, whereas we believe in those promises already fulfilled. Ours, indeed, is a fuller and more perfect knowledge, for we enjoy the light of the new covenant; but the promises of that covenant are the same, and it is one and the same Redeemer in whom we trust. “They believed in Abraham’s Seed which was promised,” says Latimer:

“which faith stood them in as good stead, and they were as well saved through that same belief, as we now through our belief. For it is no difference between their belief and ours, but this: they believed in Christ who was to come, and we believe in Christ who is come already” (*Sermons*, p. 378).

In his famous sermon on the Plough he says, with reference to Christ as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13: 8) and as “a continual sacrifice”, that

“all men that trusted in the death of Christ shall be saved, as well they that were before as they that came after; for He was a continual sacrifice, as I said, in effect, fruit, operation, and virtue, as though He had from the beginning of the world, and continually should to the world’s end, hang still on the cross; and He is as fresh hanging on the cross now, to them that believe and trust in Him, as He was fifteen hundred years ago when He was crucified” (*ibid.*, p. 73).

This is genuinely biblical existentialism (to use a term of our twentieth century): while the unique once-for-allness of Christ’s redeeming death is stressed over and over again by the Reformers, yet it is present “in effect, fruit, operation, and virtue” throughout all the ages of human history.

“All these fathers, martyrs, and other holy men whom St. Paul spoke of [in Heb. 11] had their faith surely fixed in God, when all the world was against them,” writes Cranmer in the *Homily of Faith*.

“They did not only know God to be Lord, maker, and governor of all men in the world, but also they had a special confidence and trust that He was and would be their God, their comforter, aider, helper, maintainer, and defender. This is the Christian faith which these holy men had, and we also ought to have. And although they were not named Christian men, yet was it a Christian faith that they had; for they looked for all benefits of God the Father through the merits of His Son Jesus Christ, as we now do. This difference is between them and us: for they looked when Christ should come, and we be in the time when He is come. Therefore, saith St. Augustine, ‘The time is altered, but not the faith’ [*Tract. in Joann*, XLV]. For we have both one faith in one Christ. The same Holy Ghost also that we have had they, saith St. Paul . . . God gave them then grace to be His children, as He doth us now. But now, by the coming of our Saviour Christ, we have received more abundantly the Spirit of God in our hearts, whereby we may conceive a greater faith and a surer trust than many of them had. But in effect they and we be all one: we have the same faith that they had in God, and they the same that we have. And St. Paul so much extolleth their faith because we should no less, but rather more, give ourselves wholly unto Christ both in profession and living, now when Christ is come, than the old fathers did before His coming” (*op. cit.*, p. 138).

\* \* \* \*

It is the doctrine of justification, finally, which unlocks for us the whole purpose of Holy Scripture; for it must not be forgotten that the revelation of the Written Word is an integral part of the divine scheme for the redemption of mankind. In the reading of Scripture we meet with two things: firstly, the laws and requirements of God in comparison with which we stand condemned as guilty sinners and rebellious lawbreakers and become aware of our urgent need for justification before God; and, secondly, we are confronted with the gracious promises of God’s covenant and Gospel, and are assured that these promises are given, as William Tyndale says,

“unto a repenting soul that thirsteth and longeth after them, of the pure and fatherly mercy of God, through our faith only, without all deserving of our deeds or merits of our works, but for Christ’s sake alone, and for the merits and deservings of His works, death, and passions that He suffered altogether for us, and not for Himself”. These two points, says the Reformer, “if they be written in thine heart, are the keys which so open all the Scripture unto thee, that no creature can lock thee out, and with which thou shalt go in and out, and find pasture and food everywhere” (*Prologue to the Prophet Jonah*, pp. 463f.).

No wonder the Reformers proclaimed from the housetops with such joy and constancy this glorious truth, by which they themselves had been liberated and transformed, that justification is not by our works but by faith alone in the perfect atoning work of our Saviour Christ, not according to our merits and deservings but by the grace alone of our merciful heavenly Father, not by our intentions and dispositions but by the inward regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, and not according to our finite imaginings and uncertainties but according to the eternal purposes and promises of our sovereign Creator! No wonder their watchword was “To God alone be the glory!” And this truth is vital for our own day no less than it was for theirs. Let us pray, then, that we may be enabled to grasp it and that we may be given power to proclaim it no less boldly and joyfully than they did.

## **Philip Edgcumbe Hughes**

Endnotes:

- 1) References are to the Parker Society edition of the works of the English Reformers.