

RIGHT WITH GOD:

Justification in the Bible and the World

edited by

D. A. CARSON

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Unit of the Theological Commission of the World
Evangelical Fellowship:*

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Text and Context

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An International Study

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Prayer in the Bible and the World

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Preface

This is the fourth volume to be produced by the Faith and Church Study Unit of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Like this one, the first three (*viz. Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context; The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study; Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World* — all published by Paternoster and Baker) were the products of consultations that brought together evangelical leaders from various parts of the world.

In each case, our method has been the same. Papers were assigned, prepared and circulated in advance. The consultation was spent not in delivering papers but in going over them paragraph by paragraph, sometimes line by line. Detailed notes were taken of the discussions, and each contributor was asked to revise his or her work in the light of the criticisms and suggestions raised. The revised papers eventually came to me, and I edited them and prepared them for the press.

The strengths and weaknesses of such an approach become more and more obvious each time we address a topic this way. To bring together people from such diverse backgrounds, facing challenges and experiencing God's blessing in ways far removed from the challenges and experiences of Christians in other parts of the world, goes some way to ensuring that our labour transcends merely parochial interests. The sense of personal enrichment and corporate oneness in Christ Jesus is considerable, something to be savoured and treasured. The procedure also makes it more likely that hermeneutical parochialism will be transcended.

On the other hand, the resulting papers are not uniformly 'technical' in the Western sense. That is both an advantage and disadvantage. Some Western readers will think (too quickly, in my view) that some of these papers are insufficiently rigorous; some readers in other parts of the world, little accustomed to the esoterica of Western academic debates, may be impatient (again, too quickly, in my view) with some technical discussions that have little immediate bearing on their own settings. Far better to learn from each other, so that by mutual forbearance we learn to correct our own (mis)understandings of the Word of God.

But perhaps the greatest difficulty with this sort of consultation came in the amount of disagreement that was aired at several points. I mentioned in the Preface of the second book of this series how gratifying it was to discover the

degree of unanimity amongst people from so wide a diversity of denominations and cultures. Although considerable unanimity was achieved through this consultation as well, we were simply unable at several points to agree on a number of important matters. Doubtless this is not surprising when strong-minded individuals from Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Anglican, Charismatic and other backgrounds get together to talk about justification — the more so if they come from widely divergent languages and cultures as well. Nevertheless, I would like to think that if we had had more time we might have achieved more unanimity; but perhaps that is wishful thinking.

Still, there was no doubt in the mind of anyone at the consultation as to the importance of justification, and of its vital bearing on any evangelical understanding of the gospel. Division arose as to how best to articulate it, or to understand the contribution made to it by this or that biblical corpus. Some of these matters are briefly aired in the introductory chapter.

As is inevitable in this sort of international study, the division of labour was partly dictated by the contributors themselves, and partly by considerations of space. We have not attempted to treat the theme of justification in every part of the Bible, but to tackle enough of the crucial corpora to indicate where we would go. Discussion of Paul was divided into two papers, partly because the greatest debate has occurred over him, partly because it was judged wise to attempt to divide a survey of Pauline thought on the matter from consideration of the enormous body of secondary literature that has sprung up on the subject during the last couple of decades.

Especially strong, in my view, were the contributions of those who sought to show what bearing the doctrine of justification has on the proclamation of the gospel in their own cultures. Collectively, these essays remind us that our work on such matters must never descend to the *merely* academic. Responsible it must be, but to be ultimately responsible it must be put to the service of the church and the glory of the Head of the church. If reflection on justification does not drive us to our knees in gratitude and to the world in evangelism, we have denied in practice what we confess on paper.

The consultation was held in November 1988 in the excellent facilities of Tyndale House, Cambridge. We are grateful to the Warden, Dr. Bruce Winter, and his staff for the many kindnesses shown us. Most of us were billeted in homes connected with Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge. To the many people who helped us for the sake of Christ, and especially to Mr. Stan Blake, who looked after the local logistics, we again extend our deepest thanks. Perhaps I should add that the production of the volume has been delayed by unforeseen and unavoidable difficulties. For most of these essays, the delay makes little difference; in the case of the contribution of Peter T. O'Brian, I must extend my apologies: his failure to interact with N. T. Wright and a little more with J. D. G. Dunn is the fault of production delay — not oversight. My heartfelt thanks to Mr. Mark Krause for compiling the indexes.

As usual, any profits from the sale of this volume will go to helping responsible bodies in the so-called 'Third World' prepare any part of this book for translation and publication in other languages. Application should be made in the first instance to the Publications Working Group of the World Evangelical Fellowship.

Soli Deo gloria.

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Introduction

D. A. CARSON

It is possible to approach the question of justification from many angles. But much can be said for an approach that begins with the widest possible angle, the most fundamental question: How shall anyone be right with God?

Of course, to put the question that way already presupposes that God is of such a nature, and we are of such a nature, that we are *not* naturally right with God. It also presupposes that it is desirable and possible to be right with this God.

Biblical Christianity leaves no doubt on either point. The God 'who is there' (as Francis Schaeffer used to say) is both personal and transcendent, and utterly holy. He is the Creator and the Sovereign; the basis of our responsibility lies in creation (he made us for himself), and the wretchedness of our defection must be gauged by his greatness, holiness and love. But if we were made for him, we shall be restless until we find rest in him, as Augustine rightly observed. If instead we pursue self-interest and cater to self-will, the heart of all sin, we shall find that this is God's universe still, and that we must give an account to him. On the last day, we shall confess him with joy at being forgiven, or with terror at being condemned. But confess him we shall.

Both for his glory and for our good, the most important thing we can pursue is being rightly related to God. The Bible insists that he alone lays down the ground-rules for such a relationship; it also insists that, because he is a God of grace and mercy, he provides the means of access to his presence that we could not gain ourselves.

That, in short, is what the Bible is all about: God pursuing sinful human beings to bring them into a right relationship with himself, both for their good and for his own glory. That is why we have placed the essay by Edmund Clowney at the head of the collection. Unless we see the plot-line of the Bible on a large canvas now and then, we are tempted to get lost in myopic discussions, or to conclude, quite falsely, that 'justification' is largely restricted to the Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans, simply because certain technical vocabulary congregates there. One does not have to agree with every detail of the exegesis in this sweeping essay to admire its breadth and power, and to appreciate its call to think about justification in a broader biblical context than is often done today.

The two essays that follow both focus on Paul, because that is the primary storm centre of the contemporary debate. The first, by Brian C. Wintle, the

Principal of Union Biblical Seminary in Poona, India, approaches Paul's thought primarily by the careful exegesis of several passages in Romans and Galatians, largely against the background of Judaism. Purposely, Wintle restricts the amount of interaction with secondary literature, partly so as to devote as much attention as possible to listening to the text, and partly because the next essay in the collection is entirely given over to an evaluation of current trends in such literature.

The second essay on Paul, then, by Peter O'Brien, the Vice-Principal of Moore College, addresses the contemporary debates directly. Amongst its more important findings are these: (1) S. K. Williams is right to argue that the meaning of the expression 'the righteousness of God' should not be established as a subset of the meaning of 'righteousness' (*dikaiosynē*): there are linguistic and contextual reasons for thinking that the former denotes God's righteous faithfulness to his covenant promises to Abraham, while the latter points to the resulting gift, a righteous status before God. The concerns of the magisterial Reformation are safeguarded in the latter; they should not be imported into the former. This analysis has substantial bearing on the debate over justification largely initiated by Ernst Käsemann. (2) O'Brien offers some thoughtful analysis of the slipperiness of much debate over the 'centrality' of justification in Paul, and, while interacting with some of the more important literature on the 'centre' of Pauline theology, argues that justification is central for Paul in the matter of becoming a Christian. Justification is thus foundational in that it marks the entry into Christian life, so that it is the fundamental blessing from which other blessings flow. (3) O'Brien also weighs the contribution of E. P. Sanders, and wrestles with current essays that argue for justification by faith but judgment according to works.

Norvald Yri examines 'justification' (*dikaiosynē*) in Matthew, and adopts a classic Lutheran resolution: here too, he argues, the 'righteousness' that outstrips that of the scribes and Pharisees can only be that which God himself provides. He candidly acknowledges that other Christians within the broadly 'evangelical' tradition might take a somewhat different approach to Matthew, but he reminds us of one broad stream in the church's approach to this question that is tightly self-consistent and exceedingly important in its own right.

The essay by Richard Gaffin, tracing the place of justification in Luke-Acts, begins by adopting a methodological posture rather different from that of Yri: it begins with some of the dominant themes in Luke-Acts and examines their bearing on the subject of justification, leaving aside word-studies and the exegesis of passages where certain relevant terms appear, until the broad strokes have been painted in. In particular, Gaffin studies, first, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the judgment theme in Luke-Acts, i.e. the relationship between Pentecost and justification; and second, the forgiveness of sins and its relation to saving faith. Only then are the disputed texts, Luke 18:14 and Acts 13:39, carefully probed. The result is a picture of justification in Luke-Acts that may not be articulated in the categories of Paul, but which is nonetheless bound up with God's saving activity at the end of time to bring men and women into a right relationship with him, a salvation that is apprehended by faith.

Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., reverts to the study of the *δικ-* (*dik-*) word-group

in his study of the Fourth Gospel. He is aware, of course, that Barrett thinks the *thought* of Jn. 5:24 is 'closely akin to the Pauline doctrine of justification'.¹ that 1 Jn. 2:2 can be tied to the crucial Pauline passage Rom. 3:20-26 through the *ἵλασμός* (*hilasmos*, 'atonement', 'propitiation') word-group, that at least in 1 John *δικαιοσύνη* (*dikaiosynē*, 'righteousness/justification') is something that one *does* (1 Jn. 2:29ff.), but he prefers to examine the vocabulary in the Fourth Gospel itself, and concludes that even here the *δικ-* (*dik-*) root is primarily forensic.

In a lengthy essay, Ronald Y. K. Fung of the China Graduate School of Theology subjects 'justification' in the Epistle of James to fresh analysis. He competently surveys the complex options, and concludes that the different usages to which the same vocabulary in Paul and James is put stem in the first instance from the quite different crises confronting them.

The concern of Russell Shedd is to demonstrate that a forensic understanding of justification must never be allowed to stand so entirely alone in one's system of theology that one fosters (wittingly or unwittingly) some weary and inexcusable form of antinomianism. Rightly understood, justification is never merely a 'legal fiction'. It is the entry-point to a life committed to holiness. Guillermo Mendez is concerned to tie justification to the still broader demands of social justice, without losing the forensic and individual focus of the concept in the New Testament. Along the way he takes us through a thoughtful survey of some of the debates that currently rage in Latin America, trying to tie down the concept of 'justice' to biblical categories, trying, too, to relate it to the fall, to eschatology, and to the nature of the church.

Of course, the debate over justification first arose to sharp prominence during the Reformation. It would be inexcusable, therefore, not to analyse current treatments of justification among some representative Roman Catholic scholars, and especially to evaluate the bilaterally-produced documents of Lutheran/Catholic and Anglican/Catholic discussions. Klaas Runia of the Reformed Theological Seminary in Kampen isolates many positive advances represented by careful and sympathetic attempts to understand one another's position, but concludes that the differences that remain are more substantial than ARCIC II allows, much more in line with the candid expressions of unresolved differences in the Lutheran/Catholic discussions. Runia's essay brings a great deal of order and careful evaluation to a debate made complex by the peculiar mix of biblical, historical and systematic theologies that lie behind it.

For many readers of this volume, the last three essays will prove the most innovative and informative: the relevance of justification by faith in Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist contexts is surveyed by three Christian leaders who have discharged their ministry in those three contexts respectively. Sunand Sumithra argues that a biblical grasp of justification cannot be appreciated in Hindu culture until the Bible's presentation of God is understood, and monism is rejected. Out of one's understanding of God emerges one's understanding of sin, and therefore of how to be reconciled to God. Chris Marantika, who has enjoyed years of fruitful ministry in Indonesia, which comprises the largest Muslim group in the world, emphasises those elements in justification (such as the sovereign initiative of God) that find a hearing amongst many Muslims. At the same time, he carefully lays out the

Christological connections that must also be unpacked in any honest proclamation of the gospel, and outlines from his own experience the ways these can best be presented so as to cause least unnecessary umbrage while making Christian distinctives clear and persuasive. And finally, Masao Uenuma relates justification to the Buddhism found in Japan, especially the Jodoshin Shu sect, which is often said to embrace a notion of grace very similar to that in Christianity. Uenuma allows the similarities, but carefully insists on the differences — differences which, once again, finally turn on the very nature of God.

Other topics cry out for treatment. A colleague who was scheduled to write a paper on the relevance of justification in an animist culture in Africa found himself overstretched and unable to meet the deadlines. Equally, a paper might have been commissioned to deal with the relevance of justification to the materialistic and increasingly secularised North Atlantic countries. But if these essays have not said all that needs to be said, perhaps they will have served an adequate purpose if they stimulate reflection and discussion amongst Christians in many parts of the world, as to the nature of the good news to which we bear witness, and how best to present it in the diverse contexts in which we live.