

Influence of Doctrine of Justification at the Reformation

by John Owen

The doctrine of justification was the main thing whereon the reformation turned, and its preservation is crucial for a holy life.

Scripture: Romans 3:24, Romans 4:5, Romans 5:1, Galatians 2:16, Galatians 3:24, Ephesians 2:8, Titus 3:5

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Reformation Theology"

Description

John Owen discusses the significant impact of the doctrine of justification during the first Reformation, emphasizing its influence on the entire reformation movement. The doctrine of justification was crucial to the reformers, who diligently sought the truth to bring deliverance to consciences burdened by fear and uncertainty under the Papacy. The introduction of Christianity brought about notable changes in the pagan world, despite initial opposition. The first reformers labored to declare and defend the doctrine of justification, leading to freedom, peace with God, and a fruitful life. Owen warns against compromising this essential doctrine, as it is foundational to true Christian faith and holiness.

Transcript

Eighthly, Influence of the doctrine of justification into the first Reformation -- Advantages unto the world by that Reformation -- State of the consciences of men under the Papacy, with respect unto justification before God -- Alterations made therein by the light of this doctrine, though not received -- Alterations in the Pagan unbelieving world by the introduction of Christianity -- Design and success of the first reformers herein -- Attempts for reconciliation with the Papists in this doctrine, and their success -- Reminders of the ignorance of the truth in the Roman church -- Unavoidable consequences of the corruption of this doctrine

Eighthly. To close these previous discourses, it is worthy our consideration what weight was laid on this doctrine of justification at the first Reformation, and what influence it had into the whole work thereof. However the minds of men may be changed as unto sundry doctrines of faith among us, yet none can justly own the name of Protestant, but he must highly value the first Reformation: and they cannot well do otherwise whose present even temporal advantages are resolved thereinto. However, I intend none but such as own an especial presence and guidance of God with them who were eminently and successfully employed therein. Such persons cannot but grant that their faith in this matter, and the concurrence of

their thoughts about its importance, are worthy consideration.

Now it is known that the doctrine of justification gave the first occasion to the whole work of reformation, and was the main thing whereon it turned. This those mentioned declared to be "Articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesie," and that the vindication thereof alone deserved all the pains that were taken in the whole endeavour of reformation. But things are now, and that by virtue of their doctrine herein, much changed in the world, though it be not so understood or acknowledged. In general, no small benefit redounded unto the world by the Reformation, even among them by whom it was not, nor is received, though many bluster with contrary pretensions: for all the evils which have accidentally ensued thereon, arising most of them from the corrupt passions and interests of them by whom it has been opposed, are usually ascribed unto it; and all the light, liberty, and benefit of the minds of men which it has introduced, are ascribed unto other causes. But this may be signally observed with respect unto the doctrine of justification, with the causes and effects of its discovery and vindication. For the first reformers found their own, and the consciences of other men, so immersed in darkness, so pressed and harassed with fears, terrors, and disquietments under the power of it, and so destitute of any steady guidance into the ways of peace with God, as that with all diligence (like persons sensible that herein their spiritual and eternal interest was concerned) they made their inquiries after the truth in this matter; which they knew must be the only means of their deliverance. All men in those days were either kept in bondage under endless fears and anxieties of mind upon the convictions of sin, or sent for relief unto indulgences, priestly pardons, penances, pilgrimages, works satisfactory of their own, and supererogatory of others, or kept under chains of darkness for purgatory unto the last day. Now, he is no way able to compare things past and present, who sees not how great an alteration is made in these things even in the papal church. For before the Reformation, whereby the light of the gospel, especially in this doctrine of justification, was diffused among men, and shone even into their minds who never comprehended nor received it, the whole almost of religion among them was taken up with, and confined unto, these things. And to instigate men unto an abounding sedulity in the observation of them, their minds were stuffed with traditions and 66stories of visions, apparitions, frightful spirits, and other imaginations that poor mortals are apt to be amazed withal, and which their restless disquietments gave countenance unto.

"Somnia, terrores magici, miracula, sagæ

Nocturni lemures, portentaque Thessala,"

[Hor., Ep. ii. 2, 209.]

were the principal objects of their creed, and matter of their religious conversation. That very church itself comparatively at ease from these things unto what it was before the Reformation; though so much of them is still retained as to blind the eyes of men from discerning the necessity as well as the truth of the evangelical doctrine of justification.

It is fallen out herein not much otherwise than it did at the first entrance of Christianity into the world. For there was an emanation of light and truth from the gospel which affected the minds of men, by whom yet the whole of it, in its general design, was opposed and persecuted. For from thence the very vulgar sort of men became to have better apprehensions and notions of God and his properties, or the original and rule of the universe, than they had arrived unto in the midnight of their paganism. And a sort of learned speculative men there were, who, by virtue of that light of truth which sprung from the gospel, and was now diffused into the minds of men, reformed and improved the old philosophy, discarding many of those

falsehoods and impertinencies wherewith it had been encumbered. But when this was done, they still maintained their cause on the old principles of the philosophers. And, indeed, their opposition unto the gospel was far more plausible and pleadable than it was before. For after they had discarded the gross conceptions of the common sort about the divine nature and rule, and had blended the light of truth which brake forth in Christian religion with their own philosophical notions, they made a vigorous attempt for the reinforcement of heathenism against the main design of the gospel. And things have not, as I said, fallen out much otherwise in the Reformation. For as by the light of truth which therein brake forth, the consciences of even the vulgar sort are in some measure freed from those childish affrightments which they were before in bondage unto; so those who are learned have been enabled to reduce the opinions and practices of their church into a more defensible posture, and make their opposition unto the truths of the gospel more plausible than they formerly were. Yea, that doctrine which, in the way of its teaching and practice among them, as also in its effects on the consciences of men, was so horrid as to drive innumerable persons from their communion in that and other things also, is now, in the new representation of it, with the artificial covering provided for its former effects in practice, thought an argument meet to be pleaded for a return unto its entire communion.

67But to root the superstitions mentioned out of the minds of men, to communicate unto them the knowledge of the righteousness of God, which is revealed from faith to faith, and thereby to deliver them from their bondage, fears, and distress, directing convinced sinners unto the only way of solid peace with God, did the first reformers labour so diligently in the declaration and vindication of the evangelical doctrine of justification; and God was with them. And it is worth our consideration, whether we should, on every cavil and sophism of men not so taught, not so employed, not so tried, not so owned of God as they were, and in whose writings there are not appearing such characters of wisdom, sound judgment, and deep experience, as in theirs, easily part with that doctrine of truth wherein alone they found peace unto their own souls, and whereby they were instrumental to give liberty and peace with God unto the souls and consciences of others innumerable, accompanied with the visible effects of holiness of life, and fruitfulness in the works of righteousness, unto the praise of God by Jesus Christ.

In my judgment, Luther spake the truth when he said, "Amisso articulo justificationis, simul amissa est tota doctrina Christiana." And I wish he had not been a true prophet, when he foretold that in the following ages the doctrine thereof would be again obscured; the causes whereof I have elsewhere inquired into.

Some late writers, indeed, among the Protestants have endeavoured to reduce the controversy about justification with the Papist unto an appearance of a far less real difference than is usually judged to be in it. And a good work it is, no doubt, to pare off all unnecessary occasions of debate and differences in religion, provided we go not so near the quick as to let out any of its vital spirits. The way taken herein is, to proceed upon some concessions of the most sober among the Papists, in their ascriptions unto grace and the merit of Christ, on the one side; and the express judgment of the Protestants, variously delivered, of the necessity of good works to them that are justified, on the other. Besides, it appears that in different expressions which either party adhere unto, as it were by tradition, the same things are indeed intended. Among them who have laboured in this kind, Ludovicus le Blanc,¹⁵ for his perspicuity and plainness, his moderation and freedom from a contentious frame of spirit, is "pene solus legi dignus." He is like the ghost of Tiresias¹⁶ in this matter. But I must needs say, that I have not seen the effect that might be desired of any such undertaking. For, when each party comes unto the interpretation of their own concessions, which is, "ex communi jure," to be allowed unto them, and which they will be sure to do in compliance with their judgment on the substance of the doctrine wherein the main stress of the difference lies, the distance

and breach continue as wide as ever they were. Nor is there the least ground towards peace obtained by any of our condescensions or compliance herein. For unless we can come up entirely unto the decrees and canons of the Council of Trent, wherein the doctrine of the Old and New Testament is anathematized, they will make no other use of any man's compliance, but only to increase the clamour of differences among ourselves. I mention nothing of this nature to hinder any man from granting whatever he can or please unto them, without the prejudice of the substance of truths professed in the protestant churches; but only to intimate the uselessness of such concessions, in order unto peace and agreement with them, whilst they have a Procrustes' bed to lay us upon, and from whose size they will not recede.

Here and there one (not above three or four in all may be named, within this hundred and thirty years) in the Roman communion has owned our doctrine of justification, for the substance of it. So did Albertus Pighius, and the Antitagma Coloniense, as Bellarmine acknowledges. And what he says of Pighius is true, as we shall see afterwards; the other I have not seen. Cardinal Contarinus, in a treatise of justification, written before, and published about the beginning of the Trent Council, delivers himself in the favour of it. But upon the observation of what he had done, some say he was shortly after poisoned; though I must confess I know not where they had the report.

But do what we can for the sake of peace, as too much cannot be done for it, with the safety of truth, it cannot be denied but that the doctrine of justification, as it works effectually in the church of Rome, is the foundation of many enormities among them, both in judgment and practice. They do not continue, I acknowledge, in that visible predominancy and rage as formerly, nor are the generality of the people in so much slavish bondage unto them as they were; but the streams of them do still issue from this corrupt fountain, unto the dangerous infection of the souls of men. For missatical expiatory sacrifices for the living and the dead, the necessity of auricular confession, with authoritative absolution, penances, pilgrimages, sacramentals, indulgences, commutations, works satisfactory and supererogatory, the merit and intercession of saints departed, with especial devotions and applications to this or that particular saint or angel, purgatory, yea, on the matter, the whole of monastic devotion, do depend thereon. They are all nothing but ways invented to pacify the consciences of men, or divert them from attending to the charge which is given in against them by the law of God; sorry supplies they are of a righteousness of their own, for them who know not how to submit themselves to the righteousness of God. And if the doctrine of free justification by the blood of Christ were once again exploded, or corrupted and made unintelligible, unto these things, as absurd and foolish as now unto some they seem to be, or what is not one jot better, men must and will again betake themselves. For if once they are diverted from putting their trust in the righteousness of Christ, and grace of God alone, and do practically thereon follow after, take up with, or rest in, that which is their own, the first impressions of a sense of sin which shall befall their consciences will drive them from their present hold, to seek for shelter in any thing that tenders unto them the least appearance of relief. Men may talk and dispute what they please, whilst they are at peace in their own minds, without a real sense either of sin or righteousness, yea, and scoff at them who are not under the power of the same security; but when they shall be awakened with other apprehensions of things than yet they are aware of, they will be put on new resolutions. And it is in vain to dispute with any about justification, who have not duly been convinced of a state of sin, and of its guilt; for such men neither understand what they say, nor that whereof they dogmatize.

We have, therefore, the same reasons that the first reformers had, to be careful about the preservation of this doctrine of the gospel pure and entire; though we may not expect the like success with them in our endeavours unto that end. For the minds of the generality of men are in another posture than they were

when they dealt with them. Under the power of ignorance and superstition they were; but yet multitudes of them were affected with a sense of the guilt of sin. With us, for the most part, things are quite otherwise.

Notional light, accompanied with a senselessness of sin, leads men unto a contempt of this doctrine, indeed of the whole mystery of the gospel. We have had experience of the fruits of the faith which we now plead for in this nation, for many years, yea, now for some ages; and it cannot well be denied, but that those who have been most severely tenacious of the doctrine of justification by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, have been the most exemplary in a holy life: I speak of former days.

And if this doctrine be yet farther corrupted, debased, or unlearned among us, we shall quickly fall into one of the extremes wherewith we are at present urged on either side. For although the reliefs provided in the church of Rome, for the satisfaction of the consciences of men, are at present by the most disliked, yea, despised, yet, if they are once brought to a loss how to place their whole trust and confidence in the righteousness of Christ, and grace of God in him, they will not always live at such an uncertainty of mind as the best of their own personal obedience will hang them on the briers of; but betake themselves unto somewhat that tenders them certain peace and security, though at present it may seem foolish unto them.

And I doubt not but that some, out of a mere ignorance of the righteousness of God, which either they have not been taught, or have had no mind to learn, have, with some integrity in the exercise of their consciences, betaken themselves unto that pretended rest which the church of Rome offers unto them. For being troubled about their sins, they think it better to betake themselves unto that great variety of means for the ease and discharge of their consciences which the Roman church affords, than to abide where they are, without the least pretence of relief; as men will find in due time, there is no such thing to be found or obtained in themselves.

They may go on for a time with good satisfaction unto their own minds; but if once they are brought unto a loss through the conviction of sin, they must look beyond themselves for peace and satisfaction, or sit down without them to eternity. Nor are the principles and ways which others take up withal in another extreme, upon the rejection of this doctrine, although more plausible, yet at all more really useful unto the souls of men than those of the Roman church which they reject as obsolete, and unsuited unto the genius of the present age.

For they all of them arise from, or lead unto, the want of a due sense of the nature and guilt of sin, as also of the holiness and righteousness of God with respect thereunto. And when such principles as these do once grow prevalent in the minds of men, they quickly grow careless, negligent, secure in sinning, and end for the most part in atheism, or a great indifferency, as unto all religion, and all the duties thereof.

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