

Protestant Reformation

The Greatest Reformational Battle of Our Time

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Part four of a series. Read [part three](#).

The central focus of the 16th century Reformation was the great spiritual battle concerning this question: "How is the individual made right with God?"

October 2022 - In our time, the battle over the doctrine of justification by faith alone has once again intensified. Self-described "Evangelical" and "Reformed" leaders are telling those who oppose the heresy of justification by faith-plus-works to "sit down and shut up." Churches and individuals who oppose this deadly error are, in present-day parlance, being "canceled". Today, past heroes of the faith who stood for the doctrine which is the only authentic Gospel are the subjects of historical revisionism; in other words, their godly deeds are obscured by a pack of lies.

At the root of these developments is denial of the doctrine of the sole authority of Scripture. As he continued his address, *Remembering the Reformation*,^[1] Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones reminded his audience of the fact that denial of the authority of Scripture alone

...has always been the trouble of the church in periods of declension, and we must come back to the Protestant Reformers' position and recognize that we have no authority apart from the authority of this Word of God. . . .

And then there was the great central doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ and His perfect finished work. They did not feel sorry for Him as they looked at Him on the cross, they saw Him bearing their sins, they saw God laying on Him the iniquity of us all, they saw Him as a substitute, they saw God putting our guilt upon Him and punishing Him for our guilt. The substitutionary atonement! They preached it; it was everything to them. The finished, complete, atoning work of Christ. They gloried in it! And that in turn, of course, led to the great pivotal central doctrine of which we were reminded in the reading [of Scripture], justification by faith only.

Who the Church Calls a "Christian" Speaks Volumes

Lloyd-Jones then cited two men who were called "great Christians" in Great Britain and around the world in his era fifty years ago - one an agnostic and the other a social-gospel liberal - and what this said about the degree to which even Evangelicals were losing their grasp of the

central doctrine of salvation through justification by faith alone. First he spoke of Gilbert Murray (1866-1957), a British classical scholar, intellectual, and humanist who was a delegate to the League of Nations and a leading figure in the Liberal party:

Now, I may be mistaken, but as I see the contemporary situation, the greatest battle of all, perhaps, at the moment is the battle for justification by faith only. 'Works' have come back! I was reading a religious newspaper a fortnight ago which carried the words 'Saint Gilbert' as a heading to a paragraph. The writer of the paragraph was of the opinion that this man whose Christian name was Gilbert was undoubtedly a saint and we must accord him the name and the dignity of a saint. Then he went on to say this: 'Of course I know that in actual practice he called himself a rationalistic agnostic.' Though this man Gilbert called himself a rationalistic agnostic, a so-called Christian paper says that nevertheless he was a saint. And they justified their assertion on the basis of his life: he was a good man, he was a noble man, he had high and exalted ideals, he gave much of his life to the propagation of the League of Nations union, and to uplift the human race, he tried to put an end to war, he made protests against war; therefore, the argument goes, though he denied the being of God, though he did not regard the Bible as the Word of God, though he did not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, nevertheless, he was a saint. What makes a man a saint? Oh, his works, his life!

He then spoke of Evangelical attitudes toward Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), a liberal theologian who did not even believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, much less in Christ's atonement for sin:

We are confronted again by a generation that no longer believes in justification by faith-only. We are told that 'the greatest Christian' of this century is a man whose belief in the deity of Christ, to put it at its mildest, was very doubtful, who certainly did not believe in the atonement, whose creed seemed to be what he calls 'reverence for life' - yet we are told that he is the greatest saint and Christian of the twentieth century! Look at his life, they say, look what he has done; he gave up a great profession and he has gone out to Central Africa, look what he has suffered, look what he has given up, he might be wealthy, he might be prosperous, but he is living like Christ, he is imitating Christ, he has done what Christ has done! You see, it does not matter what you believe. According to this teaching, it is the life that makes a man a Christian. If you live a good life, if you live a life of sacrifice, if you try to uplift

the race, if you try to imitate Christ, you are a Christian, though you deny the deity of Christ, though you deny His atonement, though you deny the miraculous and the supernatural, the resurrection and many other things, nevertheless you are a great Christian and a great saint!

Lloyd-Jones then spoke of the contrasting courage and conviction of the Reformers, based on the Word of God, not the opinions of sinful man:

My friends, John Knox and other men risked their lives, day after day, just to deny such teaching and to assert that a man is justified by faith alone without works, that a man is saved not by what he does but by the grace of God, that God justifies the ungodly, that God reconciles sinners unto Himself. It is all of God and none of man, and works must not be allowed to intrude themselves at any point or in any shape or form. The battle for justification by faith only is on again! And if this meeting and these celebrations do nothing else, I trust that they will lead us to a rediscovery of the absolute centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith only.

The Battle Over Justification Has Intensified

In the ensuing five decades since Lloyd-Jones spoke, the battle over the doctrine of justification by faith alone has intensified. Un-Scriptural revision and even open denial of the doctrine of justification by faith alone began to creep into reputedly conservative seminaries in the 1960s and 1970s, and began to bear its evil fruit in largely unsuspecting local churches in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1992 leading Evangelical spokesmen such as Chuck Colson, Bill Bright, and Pat Robertson, and Reformed leaders such as J. I. Packer and John White signed or endorsed the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* document. In 1997 a long list of Evangelicals signed the joint Evangelical-Catholic *Gift of Salvation* document, a followup to *ECT* that attempted to paper over Catholic-Protestant differences on the central doctrine of justification by faith alone. Among the Evangelical signers were Colson, Bright, and Packer; Harold O. J. Brown of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Os Guinness; Max Lucado; and Mark Noll of Wheaton College.

By the 1990s and 2000s men trained in reputedly conservative seminaries were now in Evangelical and Reformed pulpits, preaching justification by faith plus works. Evangelical leaders like Billy Graham and his son Franklin, and Reformed leaders like PCA minister and Westminster Theological Seminary president Peter Lillback, were speaking of the "Christian faith" of Pope John Paul II. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in

America, and other reputedly conservative churches were deeply infected with the cancer of justification by faith plus works. The OPC and PCA had both produced ineffectual study reports on the issue, and had failed to deal with it in judicial cases that were brought through the courts of the church, in which the issues were clear.

The Age-Old Battle Rages On Today

In the second decade of the new millennium, this spiritual battle continues.

Dr. Timothy Keller, the PCA minister who is admired by many Evangelicals today, said in a television interview that there may very well be some "back door way to Heaven" as he put it, other than Jesus Christ. Keller embraces every major tenet of liberation theology, the evil blending of Roman Catholicism and Marxism.

Dr. John Piper, the well-known author and pastor, asserts that people are, as he puts it, "made right with God" by faith - but they gain entry to Heaven ("final salvation" as he terms it) by their works. [2]

Both of these statements are heresy. The Apostle Paul in the first chapter of Galatians condemns these things as "another gospel, which is not another" - and he goes on to say, in Galatians 1 beginning at verse 8,

But even if we, or an angel from Heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

Yet Dr. Mark Jones, leading PCA pastor, defends Piper's position as orthodox, and attacks those who oppose him:

Here's the problem for these critics of Piper. This isn't really a problem. And if you write blog posts taking issue with Piper on this particular topic, but claim to be Reformed, you probably need to spend some time getting theological training and then, after that, publishing via peer-reviewed journals, books, etc., before you can be taken seriously. And even then, it's possible that you could have such a built-in bias against someone that you'd find a problem with them for saying "Jesus loves sinners." [3]

Dr. John Frame, another long-time defender of the heresy of justification by faith-plus-works, even condemns the degreed scholars who oppose it:

[I]t should be plain that such criticisms are stupid, irresponsible, and divisive. Theological professors who make such comments, in my judgment, do not have the intellectual, theological, or spiritual maturity to prepare students for gospel ministry. Similar comments can be made against pastors, writers, and web gurus who try to turn this debate into some kind of new reformation. [4]

In other words, if you do not have the right degrees from the right institutions, then sit down, shut up, and let the heretics have the floor. And even if you do have theological training, if you refuse to toe the Romish line, you are "stupid, irresponsible, and divisive."

This was precisely the attitude of the religious leaders of Jesus' days on earth, who repeatedly interrupted the Son of God to say,

By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things? (Mark 11:28)

The Pope of Rome said the same of Luther, Calvin, and the rest. The Pope chained the Bible to church pulpits and had it translated only into the Latin of Rome's scholars to prevent "non-peer-reviewed scholars" and laypersons armed with the Word of God and the indwelling Spirit from questioning the church's heresy of justification by faith-plus-works.

Here and there, God has raised up men and churches that have taken a firm stand for the centrality of salvation by grace alone, and justification by faith alone, through the person and finished work of Jesus Christ alone. True Christians must carry the battle forward.

The term "Protestant" means nothing unless those who claim the name understand its definition. Most Christians have no idea what the Protestant Reformation involved and why it was - and is - vital. That is because few pastors take the time to explain these things to their congregations; sadly, the majority of self-described Evangelical and Reformed pastors have no grasp of the facts themselves.

Next: What Was the Basis of the Reformers' Courage?

References:

1. Quotations in this article are from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Remembering the Reformation" in *Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions, 1942-1977* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth. 1989).
2. John Piper, "Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?" as viewed on 9/26/2017 at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-really-save-us-by-faith-alone>.

3. Mark Jones, "John Piper Compromising Sola Fide?" as viewed on 10/7/2017 at <https://calvinistinternational.com/2017/10/07/john-piper-compromising-sola-fide>.
4. John M. Frame, Foreword titled "A Note on Norman Shepherd, Covenant and Justification" in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective* (Nacogdoches, Texas: Covenant Media Press, 2004), xii.

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