

REVIEW ARTICLE

Justification By Faith Alone

Reviewed by
Gerald L. Priest*

Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by Which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls, by John MacArthur, Jr., et al., edited by Don Kistler. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995. 188 pp. \$12.95.

Justification *sola fide* is the centerpiece of Pauline theology. This doctrine launched the Protestant Reformation, it inaugurated America's Great Awakening, and it has been the special object of Satan's attack against historic biblical Christianity. For some time liberal ecumenists have sacrificed this, along with other essential doctrines of orthodoxy, in order to produce a united church of Catholics and liberal Protestants. Evangelicals have traditionally and correctly viewed this attempted amalgamation as evidence of apostasy. But the incredible happened in September 1992. Professing evangelicals and Roman Catholics, most of whom are active in the pro-life movement and charismatic renewal,¹ met together to seek "unity that is pleasing to God,...unity in the truth."² The product of that meeting was a joint affirmation in March 1994 that was anything but doctrinally true and God-pleasing. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium" (ECT) is a betrayal of the truth. It asserts that devout Catholics are Christian "brothers," and that doctrinal points of difference are not serious enough to keep evangelicals and Catholics apart. But the differences amount to what is the true gospel versus what is false, such as "sacraments and ordinances [are] symbols of grace or means of grace," and "Baptism as sacrament of regeneration or

*Dr. Priest is Professor of Historical Theology at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI.

¹Cf. Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelical and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995), p. xi.

²Ibid., p. xii.

testimony to regeneration.”³ There is a great gulf fixed between these differences which no amount of searching “for a better understanding”⁴ will ever resolve. Such an attempted resolution virtually jettisons the pure gospel of Christ and replaces it with another gospel having God’s curse on it (Gal 1:6–9).

Response to ECT was both swift and varied. Publishers churned out rebuttals and counter-replies. Among those mounting a well-reasoned scriptural attack on ECT were John Ankerberg and John Weldon in *Protestants and Catholics: Do They Now Agree?*⁵ and John F. MacArthur in *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern*.⁶ As expected, those who were quickest to defend ECT were its promoters: evangelical Charles Colson and former Lutheran-turned-Catholic Richard John Neuhaus. They, along with George Weigel, Mark A. Noll, and Avery Dulles, S.J., produced *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward A Common Mission*. Keith A. Fournier, Dean of Evangelism at Franciscan University of Steubenville (Ohio) advocates with co-author William Watkins what he calls a “winning alliance for the twenty-first century” in *A House United? Evangelicals and Catholics Together*.⁷ Fournier earlier wrote a call for Christian cooperation under what many Protestants would consider an oxymoronic title, *Evangelical Catholics*.⁸

³“Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 18.

⁴This kind of rhetoric is used throughout the ECT document.

⁵Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995.

⁶Wheaton: Crossway, 1994. MacArthur condemns ECT in chapter five.

⁷Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1994. Robert N. Wilkin, Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society, criticized Fournier’s work in “A Critique of Keith A. Fournier’s *A House United? Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A Winning Alliance for the 21st Century*,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 8 (Spring 1995): 11–29. See also William Watkins’ response in “A Dangerous Book or a Faulty Review? A Rejoinder to Robert Wilkin’s Critique of *A House United?*” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 8 (Autumn 1995): 3–37.

⁸Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990. For articles against ECT, see John F. MacArthur, Jr., “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 6 (Spring 1995): 7–37; “Evangelical-Catholic Cooperation,” editorial in *Baptist Bulletin* 60 (June 1994): 27; R. C. Sproul, et al., “Crying Wolf Or Sounding the Alarm?” a series of articles in *Tabletalk* 18 (November 1994); James Singleton, “Catholic Cooperation?” *Frontline* 4 (Fall 1994): 29–31; and Dave Hunt, “The Gospel Betrayed,” *Voice, An Independent Church Journal* 73 (July–August 1994): 21–24. Most of the articles in support of ECT are to be found in the pages of *Christianity Today*. They are Charles Colson, “Why Catholics Are Our Allies” 38 (November 14, 1994): 136; Alister E. McGrath, “Do We Still Need the Reformation?” 38 (December 12, 1994): 28–33, in which he insists that the Roman Catholic Church does not officially teach justification by works; and J. I. Packer, “Why I Signed It,” *Christianity Today* 38 (December 12, 1994): 34–37. These articles, like ECT, affirm that devout Catholics are true Christians, which is a ma-

What aroused the most criticism against ECT was its statement on justification. In a list of affirmations, the second (after “Jesus Christ is Lord”) is “we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.” As the case is with most of the affirmations, this one is suspect not so much for what it says but for what it does not say, i.e., it does not say “by faith *alone*.” As a signer of ECT, J. I. Packer dismisses the dispute on this point as a squabble over mere “theories” of justification: “The Tridentine assertion of merit and the Reformation assertion of imputed righteousness can hardly be harmonized.... What brings salvation, after all, is not any theory about faith in Christ, justification, and the church, but faith itself in Christ himself. Here also ECT, fairly read, seems to me to pass muster”⁹ If imputed righteousness is only a theory, then we have a gospel foreign to the New Testament. If, as Luther said, justification by faith alone, the sinner being declared righteous (having the imputed righteousness of Christ), is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls, then it is imperative that we assert it as an absolute propositional truth necessary for salvation. Such a truth cannot be dismissed as a theory; it is vital to the Christian faith; without it, there is no Christian gospel. This is the contention of the various writers of *Justification by Faith Alone*.

Since justification *sola fide* is the central *doctrinus cruxus* of the Protestant Reformation, since it is a doctrine vital to the Christian faith, and since it is coming under subtle attack by those professing to be evangelical, several conservative writers have risen to defend it.¹⁰ Don

nor point of disagreement between evangelicals. That is, how can Roman Catholics who pray to Mary, believe in baptismal regeneration, view the mass as communicating saving grace, and hold to various other extra-biblical tenets, still be considered evangelical simply because both evangelicals and Catholics have a common confessional point of reference in the ancient creeds and profess a “love for Jesus”?

⁹Packer, “Why I Signed It,” p. 37. Acknowledging serious doctrinal differences but allowing cooperation between Catholics and evangelicals are conservative theologians who should know better, such as Timothy George and Norman Geisler. See George’s editorial, “Catholics and Evangelicals in the Trenches,” *Christianity Today* 38 (May 16, 1994): 16–17, and Geisler with Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Romans Catholics and Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). In citing areas of major doctrinal agreement and differences between Catholics and Protestants, Geisler and MacKenzie do not see critical doctrinal disparity as serious enough to prevent bilateral participation in practical endeavors. In spite of all the pious rhetoric in defense of fundamental doctrine, the new evangelicals concede a low view of it when they are willing to encourage “Christian cooperation” without a real scriptural consensus on the fundamentals.

¹⁰A work receiving probably the most attention is R. C. Sproul’s *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). In reviewing this work, Donald G. Bloesch cogently argues that “whereas both Scripture and the Reformation affirm justification as a divine imputation of righteousness to those who believe, the Roman position enunciated at the Council of Trent maintains that we are justified to the extent that we are morally renewed through human cooperation with God’s prevenient

Kistler, President of Soli Deo Gloria Ministries, a Reformed enterprise focusing on Puritan writings, has gathered together a collection of essays by noted conservative evangelicals defending justification by faith alone. The work was published on the premise that “biblical faith can only exist in the presence of biblical truth” (p. viii). If the biblical truth of justification by faith alone as the imputed righteousness of Christ to hell-deserving sinners is lost, then the biblical faith is lost.

John MacArthur, Jr. begins the series of five articles (plus an addendum and postscript) by saying that “no doctrine is more important to evangelical theology than the doctrine of justification by faith alone” (p. 1). His essay entitled “Long Before Luther (Jesus and the Doctrine of Justification)” maintains that justification as the judicial act of God imputing Christ’s righteousness to the guilty sinner is the gospel according to Jesus Himself. This message stands in stark contrast to the teaching of Rome, derived from Trent, that justification is a process dependent on infused righteousness in the believer. According to Roman Catholicism, the believer gains salvific merit through “inherent righteousness—which must be perfected by sanctification and purgatory...the grounds for our acceptance before God” (p. 12). MacArthur rightly argues that “when justification is mingled with sanctification” [the teaching of Trent], the grounds for justification becomes [*sic*] the sinner’s own imperfect righteousness rather than the perfect righteousness of Christ” (p. 11).

R. C. Sproul describes the forensic nature of justification in his essay, “Justification by Faith Alone” (pp. 23–52). Sproul succinctly explains the differences between the Augustinian (Roman Catholic) view of justification of being made righteous as a process of sanctification and the Protestant biblical view of being counted or reckoned just before a holy God. All the authors of this book cite the standard Council of Trent references in their criticism that Roman Catholic justification is not by faith *alone*. However, Sproul weakens his opposition to the Catholic view of justification by faith *plus* merit when he says that “it is slanderous to Rome to charge them with a pure Pelagianism that teaches justification by works.” Technically, “pure” Pelagianism may not apply to Catholicism, but semi-Pelagianism certainly would in the Tridentine dogma that “the sinner is [not] justified by faith alone.” Trent states that anyone saying “that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to

and sanctifying grace” (“An Evangelical Response,” *Christianity Today* 40 [October 7, 1996]: 54–55). A claim that is common in all the recent apologies for *sola fide* against ECT is that the historic Protestant position *is* the scriptural position. The implication is that ECT’s emasculated statement of justification actually undermines the authority of God’s Word. Even one of the patriarchs of new evangelicalism, Carl F. H. Henry, bemoans the trend to place more emphasis on a distorted view of sanctification and less on the decisive significance of justification by faith alone (“Justification: a Doctrine in Crisis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 [March 1995]: 57–65).

obtain the grace of justification,...let him be anathema” (p. 32, cited from Canon 9, Sixth Session, Council of Trent). Sproul surely must realize that such soteriological syncretism is just as bad if not worse than blatant Pelagianism. Both are a denial of divine monergism, which was the chief complaint of both Luther and Calvin.¹¹ Sproul adeptly answers the Catholic criticism that forensic justification is a legal fiction, i.e., no *real* change takes place in the sinner. He replies that a judicial decision does not make the matter any less real. “It is a real imputation of real righteousness of a real Christ” (p. 39).

In this reviewer’s estimation, the finest article by far in the series is “Justification *by* Faith Alone” (pp. 53–105) by Joel R. Beeke, editor of *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*. Writing in a style reminiscent of Puritanism, Beeke brilliantly describes the relation of faith to justification. In doing so, he effectively explodes the faith plus works view of Catholicism and defends the biblical view exegetically, historically, and theologically. This essay alone is worth the price of the book. He makes it clear that it was Trent who distanced the Catholic Church from the biblical Protestant view of justification by faith alone when it made justification a process of sanctification via infused righteousness contra the Protestant position of an imputation of the alien righteousness of Christ. Beeke sets works in their proper relationship to faith, as its result, not its condition, and affirms that grace is not mediated via the sacraments, but by simple faith, the instrumental cause of our justification. Commenting on ECT, Beeke says that “cooperation [between Catholics and Protestants on justification] can only be based on evasion rather than on explanation” (p. 91). An added bonus of his treatment is his use of justification by faith alone to counter the errors of Arminianism and Antinomianism. “Arminianism errs in making part of justification’s foundation to rest upon faith” (p. 91). But it is not faith that saves; Christ saves and only Christ. Like the Catholic, the Arminian “earns” grace by his faith; however, faith, like grace, is a free gift from a gracious God. As Horatius Bonar affirms, “It is not the strength of faith, but the perfection of the sacrifice, that saves” (cited on p. 94). Beeke is also critical of the hyper-Calvinist Antinomian position of eternal justification, suggested by Abraham Kuyper, William Gadsby, and others. Here is a justification from eternity that tends to negate the need for *actual* justification in personal experience. If the Catholics confuse sanctification and justification, the hyper-Calvinists confuse election and justification. However, in his attack on Antinomianism, Beeke is guilty of Legalism by returning the saved sinner “who was condemned by the

¹¹Benjamin B. Warfield writes, “There is nothing...against which Calvinism sets its face with more firmness than every form and degree of auto-soterism” (*Calvin and Augustine* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], p. 494).

law prior to being justified by faith, back to the law to live out of gratitude under His lordship” (p. 97).

The least beneficial article of the series is also happily the shortest—“Justification by *Faith Alone*” by John H. Gerstner, in which he attempts, in his uniquely terse and erratic style, to describe the nature of justifying faith. He makes union with Christ the condition of justification and supports the imputational view of justification by citing, of all people, Thomas Aquinas: “This is why I claim Thomas Aquinas for Protestantism. He teaches the *justificatio impii*, the justification of the impious or wicked, just as Paul teaches in Romans 4:5” (p. 111). However, unlike Paul, Aquinas taught the necessity of sacraments as the media of saving grace. It was from Thomistic theology that Trent derived its doctrines of condign and congruous meritorious works for justification. Aquinas was a thorough-going Roman Catholic in his idea of justification as the infusion of righteousness.¹²

Justification by Faith concludes with an essay (chapter five) entitled, “Justification by Faith *Alone*,” an examination of the sufficiency of faith for justification, by John H. Armstrong, editor of *Reformation and Revival Journal*. This article forms a nice summary to what precedes in that it essentially restates the basic arguments for the Protestant biblical position for forensic imputation with an emphasis on the singularity of faith as the instrumental means of justification. For those mistakenly thinking that modern Catholics generally adhere to the evangelical Protestant position of *sola fide*, Armstrong proves otherwise by noting contemporary Catholic theological opinion. Hans Küng, for example, writes that “the sinner is justified by faith alone.” But this faith is not *fiducia*, complete reliance on or trust in God for salvation, but mere assent. “Thus works,” Armstrong writes, “and observance of the sacraments are added as also necessary for salvation. Küng adds, ‘What is all important is that faith and baptism belong together.... The sinner is justified through faith alone, but not through a faith which stands op-

¹²For a masterful rebuttal of Gerstner’s view of Aquinas as expressed in a similar article, “Aquinas Was a Protestant” (*Tabletalk* 18 [May 1994]: 13–15, 52), see Robert L. Reymond, “Dr. John H. Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant” (*Westminster Theological Journal* 59 [Spring 1997]: 113–21). In the foreword to a reprint of Charles Hodge’s excellent work *Justification by Faith Alone* (Hobbs, NM: Trinity Foundation, 1995), Reymond also expresses his disappointment with J. I. Packer for endorsing ECT in view of the fact that “the word ‘alone’ after the word ‘faith’ in the statement’s proposition on justification is thundering by its absence” (p. x). What is particularly valuable in Hodge’s apology for justification by faith alone is his counter to the Arminian view that justification is “merely pardon” (p. 135 ff.). If pardon (including acquittal and forgiveness), necessary as it is, was the only result of justification, the forgiven sinner would still not be acceptable before God; he must be clothed in the positive righteousness of the sinless Savior to be justified and received into God’s favor. This necessitates imputation, the very heart of the doctrine of justification.

posed to works” (pp. 148–49). Such language is typical of neo-orthodox double-talk for which Karl Barth (Küng’s teacher) was notorious. Armstrong also demonstrates that the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) has only added to the confusion of justification with sanctification and has continued to affirm the Tridentine dogma (reaffirmed by Vatican II) that justification is conferred at the time of baptism and is the infusion of God’s love in the soul (pp. 149–50).¹³ Armstrong concludes his defense of *sola fide* with an insightful comment:

In our time much talk regarding revival centers exclusively around experience. We desperately need the perspective of the gospel if we would pray for revival that will honor God and bring showers of true blessing upon the church. Revivalism, of the type seen in the past 150 years or so, has much more in common with Roman Catholic doctrine than *sola fide*. Until men and women cry out, “How can I be made just in the sight of a holy God?” rather than, “How can I find peace, save my marriage or remove the financial pressures of the moment?” I do not think we shall see another Great Awakening. As Puritan Thomas Taylor wrote, “The reason so few are willing to ask ‘What must I do?’ is because so few will ask, ‘What have I done?’”

Modern evangelicals, with their emphasis upon the infusion of power, security and peace are much closer to Rome at this point than most of them could possibly imagine (pp. 158–59).¹⁴

In view of recent ecumenical developments, including not only ECT, but Billy Graham-type inclusive evangelism and the ever-growing Promise Keepers movement,¹⁵ this book can be of invaluable help by placing in perspective the doctrinal issues that divide Catholics and Protestants. To play down or simply ignore the monumental differences on such vital issues as justification is to trivialize the gospel of Christ. If

¹³An excellent critique of the *Catechism* is James G. McCarthy’s *The Gospel According to Rome: Comparing Catholic Tradition and the Word of God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995). Part one of the book compares the Roman Catholic and scriptural views of justification.

¹⁴My only complaint with Armstrong is that, in his attempt to objectify justification by faith, he minimizes experience as a necessary part of salvation. It is true that genuine faith “must be grounded in His [God’s] work for us,” but Armstrong goes too far in saying that “this gospel is.... not an experience, at least not my experience” (p. 154). It would have been better to say that experience must be based on the objective reality of Scripture.

¹⁵Recently, Promise Keepers changed its doctrinal statement from “...accepting through faith alone God’s gift of salvation...” to “only through faith, trusting in Christ alone for salvation....” The transference of *alone* is a telling indictment of Promise Keepers’ accommodation to Catholicism (cf. Rob Looper, “Whatever Happened to *Sola Fide?*” *World* [October 18, 1997]: 14).

we can ascertain any real benefit of ECT, it is the conservative reaction it has produced vis-à-vis the clear biblical pronouncements on justification by faith alone.