

## **Justification by Faith – Mufid Farid**

A right understanding of justification is absolutely crucial to the whole Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

I consider the doctrine of justification by faith to be at the heart – the central core - of the Christian church. Without it Christianity would be merely equal to any of the world's other religions. Christianity without justification by faith would have no particular right to existence. Justification by faith gives Christianity its distinctive. Without proper understanding and careful personal application of this doctrine we are left with no bases for any personal relationship with our Creator God. The Christian church then becomes deprived of her true mission – spreading the Gospel of reconciliation between God and humankind.

I consider this to be one of the greatest issues facing the church in Sudan. We are muddled and befuddled over what we believe. How are we personally “saved”? Sometimes the crackly and whistling loudspeaker systems used at some of our meetings obscure our teaching and preaching. Other times our preaching itself, instead of making the gospel clearly understood loses the Christian message among lots of other good-sounding words!

It seems to me that a considerable number of teachers and preachers are confused over justification by faith. Almost automatically this means the average believer is confused as well. Church pulpits are marked by the message of salvation by good deeds instead of the gospel of grace. We are told to “do this, then that, followed by the other thing” and we may be saved. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has gone missing!

This missing good news is that God Himself has reached out to sinners where we are, in our own sin. We do not have to reach up to God! God has reached out to us once and for all. He now embraces sinners and accepts us – not after we clean up our own lives by sweeping through a multiplicity of good works – but simply because of the atoning work He has done Himself as God the Son, Jesus Christ. When I simply believe it, everything Jesus accomplished on the cross of Calvary counts for me! Once Father God agrees with any individual person about this crucial point He then starts turning them – His children – into His

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem Systematic Theology (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1994, page 722.

holy saints. God the Holy Spirit starts a very practical and daily process of sanctification, making His children more like His only Son, Jesus. God trains us in doing good works, not to reward us with a ticket into heaven, but to reveal to people all around us that *He has already seated us in the heavenly realms.*<sup>2</sup>

Since great numbers of Sudanese people are illiterate they depend a lot on verbal learning. In such situations denominational leadership should be paying careful attention to whom the job of teaching and preaching is given in their churches. We have to ensure an adequate degree of training in justification by faith is given to our church ministers and pastors. Otherwise the Christian testimony in Sudan will end up being distorted and even destroyed (as happened earlier in our history).<sup>3</sup>

I have noticed the strangest of things about this issue. In most Sudanese Christian churches their statement of faith or other doctrinal documents contain the correct doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>4</sup> The words are right. However, in practice many of the members of these denominations think and believe differently to their church roots. Sadly this shows great failure in us ministers and leaders. We are supposed to be keepers of the faith.

Much can also be said about the role Christian training institutions have to play in this area. From my own experience in teaching Bible schools I find the majority of students believe that a person is justified by good deeds! When I ask a class the question "How is a person justified before God?" the best answers I can get are, "By faith in Jesus Christ *and* by doing good"! What kind of believers and what kind of churches are we expecting such graduates to produce in their future ministries? A great deal of carefully targeted effort needs to be taken to explain, to apply, to emphasise and to re-emphasise the doctrine of justification by faith during our pastoral training programmes.

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<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 1:3,7-10, 18-23.

<sup>3</sup> Christianity, certainly present since the second century and may be before, was almost destroyed in Sudan by the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Sudan Ancient Treasures (London: The British Museum) 2004, p.160 and p.202-208.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion and comparison of some Sudanese Church statements see Colin Salter Christian Theology in a Sudanese Context (Khartoum) 2004, p.147-163, and the adjacent chapters in that book.

Are we not unwittingly reproducing the Galatian heresy?<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of justification by faith is vividly and plainly explained throughout the teachings of scripture. It seems to me impossible to miss. But we know from Christian history worldwide that the Christian church has needed frequent reform, often when justification by faith has been neglected from her teaching and practice. The apostle Paul devoted his whole letter to the Galatians and great portions of his letter to the Romans to dealing with this doctrine. It is found elsewhere in the scriptures too.

### **The causes behind this mindset**

1. In Sudan this is a natural way of thinking. It is taught to everyone in every day life. When you do something you get something. You work and so you get money. If you do not work you do not earn money. No-one expects to join university without first studying to get the qualification that makes him or her worthy of being accepted by the university. Our general mindset is that we receive only what we can earn. So when a Christian preacher tells us we can be saved and justified before God *without having to do anything ourselves*, it seems very strange to our minds. That God freely makes us acceptable to Himself is foreign to our natural way of thinking.

Most human beings think similarly to this. It's not just the Sudanese! We expect to work for everything we receive. Because heaven is a higher and a more valuable place to be than life here on earth, then accordingly we think we must have to work very hard to get there! This is natural thinking. But it is not Christian thinking. The Bible teaches something completely different. The Christian good news is that God's grace gives us what we can never earn for ourselves.

2. Followers of the majority religion among whom we live in Sudan also hold this view of obtaining one's salvation by personal merit. They believe in a credit balance of personal good things outweighing personal bad things before entering paradise. This background belief of the majority has obviously played a great role in shaping even the Sudanese Christian mind.

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<sup>5</sup> "All false teaching has one trait in common: a departure from revealed truth", Roy B.Zuck [A Biblical Theology of the New Testament](#) (Chicago: Moody Press) p.337. The Galatian heresy added Jewish good works to the gospel, see Galatians 1:6-9.

The absence of sound systematic teaching of the word of God and its salvation doctrines such as justification by faith has left this faulty mindset go unchallenged. Without realising it we Christians in Sudan have been badly influenced by the dominant community spirit of the age.

### **The biblical stand point**

If *regeneration* is imparting new life in dead sinners<sup>6</sup>, and *conversion* is the responding of any person in faith for salvation<sup>7</sup>, then *justification* is God responding to our faith by forgiving our sins. Justification is a word with a legal sense. God declares us innocent when we are in Christ. God – the ultimate Judge – no longer counts sin against us. The Christian gospel is "that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, *not counting men's sins against them*. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation", 2 Corinthians 5:19 (emphasis mine). Let us grasp this fully, then let us preach it clearly.

### **What Justification is not – “not by works”**

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – *not by works*, so that no one can boast", Ephesians 2:8-9 (emphasis mine).

Here it is clearly stated that salvation does not come to anyone by them doing any good works. "*Not by works*". Before we ask how then we should be saved, perhaps we need to ask first why it cannot be by works?

### **We are dead**

The first reason we cannot save ourselves by our good deeds is because we are dead! The Bible says we are "dead in transgressions and sins", Ephesians 2 : 1.

Nothing is expected from a dead person! In fact, if a dead person says or does anything everyone listening and watching would be scared to death themselves! God does not expect anything of us *before He does something in us*. God imparts new life into us. God spiritually awakens us.

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<sup>6</sup> See James Montgomery Boice Foundations of the Christian Faith (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1986, p.401-407.

<sup>7</sup> See Wayne Grudem Systematic Theology (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1994, p.709-717.

Humankind is in a state where no maintenance will work to make him better. We all need to be reborn. We need to be recreated from outside of ourselves. Spiritually dead people (that is, all of us) need the living God to save them. I need God to save me. You need God to save you.

### **We cannot score 100% by our works**

Giving humankind a set of rules or laws to follow will not help us to be saved. James says "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it", James 2:10.

This makes sense especially when we remember we are talking about God's standards, not about ours. God expects perfection. Is perfection practically possible? In the light of Romans 3:12 "All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one", the answer is a great big "NO"! Nobody will ever be perfect, so this is the second reason nobody can save themselves.<sup>8</sup>

### **It is not the function of God's Law to save anybody**

The law proves that we are wrong but it cannot do more than condemn us. The laws of God tell us we are failures. We fall below God's requirements. In the law God says, "Here is my standard. Look at it and look at yourself. Now understand, you can never ever live up to this". Paul writes in Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his (God's) sight by observing the law; rather, *through the law we become conscious of sin*", (emphasis mine). Consciousness of personal sin is an important part on the road to personal salvation, but it is our response to that consciousness of personal sin which is crucial. Will we try to save ourselves? Or will we trust in God's provided Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ? Our own efforts are doomed to failure. Jesus Christ is God's truthful way to life.

In fact we are under God's curse for breaking the law. "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything

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<sup>8</sup> Paul is expounding Psalm 14:1-3; Psalm 53:1-3 and Ecclesiastes 7:20.

### **What Justification is – “By Grace and Faith alone”**

The Bible says we can only be saved by God's grace as we respond to it with faith.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God", Ephesians 2:8.

Grace is defined as, "Favour or kindness shown without regard to the worth or merit of the one who receives it and in spite of what that same person deserves"<sup>10</sup>

Faith is the hand we stretch towards God to receive His grace. Faith is to depend on something – Someone – outside of ourselves. Faith is trusting and believing what God says and what God promises. God graciously promised that whoever puts his trust in God the Son will be saved because of the substitutionary atoning death of Christ. Christ achieved our salvation. Christ earned our salvation. Christ merited our salvation. We get it freely because Christ has paid the greatest of costs.

"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe", Romans 3:21-22. What a wonderful message. This deserves to be called the *Gospel*. This is God's good news for us. We do not deserve it. We are unable to earn it. But we can receive it with simple trust. As a gift of grace held out by Father God we reach up to accept from Him, and we say a grateful, "Thank You".

### **An Old Testament Example**

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<sup>9</sup> see also Deuteronomy 27:9-10, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson) 1986.

In his treatment of how man can be justified or counted righteous by God by faith alone Paul refers to the Old Testament. He sees in Abraham an illustration of this teaching, see Romans 4:1-5.

Abraham was justified by faith alone. Abraham was justified only by his faith even before he offered his own son Isaac in obedience to God, see Genesis 15 :6 and Genesis 22. Not by doing anything, but by just trusting in God's promise, Abraham was considered by God to be righteous. Because of this Paul sees God as the only One to have the glory for saving Abraham. Even Abraham did nothing to deserve what God gave him.

This Christian gospel is not complicated, but it does run against general human nature. Our nature has fallen into a sinfully warped, biased and eternally fatal view of how any person can be saved.

### **Practical conclusion**

There is a great need among our Sudanese churches to reinforce this doctrine of justification by faith. Our pulpits should have space deliberately allocated for teaching it. Our Bible schools should pay attention to its centrality in their curricula. Our evangelistic preaching needs to be clearly in line with its truth. God is not a God of confusion! Newcomers in our meetings should be sensitively but intensively taught that the heart of the Christian gospel is justification by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I pray and I hope all the readers of this chapter will take a moment to see where they stand personally before God. In whom are you trusting for your own salvation? Yourself and your own efforts? Or your God-given Saviour – Jesus? If you are a pastor I urge you to examine your own recent teaching and see if you emphasise this teaching of the Bible enough.

We need to realise that most people who make a decisions for Christ in mass meetings or in church special events make their decisions reflecting their need to know God and their awareness of the burden of sin and guilt upon their lives. In most cases these people will not

have a full understanding of what happened to them as they accepted Christ. They can be true believers, but believers without a right understanding of the nature of salvation and justification. As such they are unlikely to be serving and witnessing Christians who bear good fruits in their lives. They need to be brought into a full understanding of the true Gospel. In my experience they tend to be paralysed children of God who are unable to develop into useful Christian disciples. I believe this breaks the heart of Father God.

Therefore we urgently need to reconsider our position and our approach to welcoming new believers into the body of Christ. People should undergo a systematic teaching of the basics of Christian belief and living. They need to learn how to be disciples for Jesus Christ. These newcomers of today will be the elders, evangelists and pastors of tomorrow. If we allow them to lean to the wrong side of the truth they will grow in age but not in understanding of the things of God. The church as a whole will pay the high price of desperately poor leadership as years pass by. We owe it to future generations to act right and to act now. Let us restore the core of the Christian gospel to the hearts of our people and so to the heart of our witness.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”, Romans 5:8.

### **Discussion guide**

*Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:*

1. Why is any confusion over “How we are personally saved” such a disaster for Christianity in Sudan (or elsewhere for that matter)?
2. Share *in your own words* how any person can be justified before the Holy Creator God. Use at least two or three Scripture passages to back your argument.
3. What impact do illiteracy, *and* the lack of good Christian books in tribal languages, *and* the fact that people who can read often do not read, have on the beliefs of many Christians in Sudan? Explain the vital importance of sound practical Biblical teaching.
4. What impact does living with the majority Islamic mindset have on Christians?

Is this positive or negative for Christian truth? Why?

5. "God declares us innocent when we are in Christ". Using *only* Romans chapters 3-8 find as many verses as you can which back up this statement.

Read them out, apply them to yourselves, and rejoice in your salvation!

(If you are a preacher try preaching a sermon series on some of these!).

Can you find any verses that contradict this truth?

6. Why are our good works *irrelevant* to earning our own salvation?

Consider and quote from Galatians 3:1-14 in giving your answer.

7. In what way are our good works *relevant* to our everyday Christian lives?

In answering, consider and quote from James 1:19-27; James 2:12-26.

8. "Faith is the hand we stretch towards God to receive His grace".

Explain what a person needs to have faith (active and committed belief and trust) in.

Share your own testimony about this.

9. How will people who decide to follow Christ at a special meeting of your church grow in their understanding of justification by faith (of how they are saved)?

What plans should your church make for nurturing new believers?

Consider the examples in Acts 11:19-26; Acts 18:24-28; Acts 28:30-31.