

Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the justice of God had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love.



-Martin Luther

INSTANT SALVATION: RIGHT STANDING AND NEW BIRTH

One might think that for evangelical Christians justification by faith alone would be a 'slam dunk,' a universally accepted doctrine. Recent events, such as the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT)* and the document signed in Augsburg on Reformation Day, 1999, between Lutherans and Catholics, required this chapter. But then there are many other compromises of this glorious truth, which make it clear that the gospel is not just under eclipse but also under siege as well. According to surveys of George Barna, James Hunter, and others, 77% of Evangelicals say that mankind is basically good by nature and 87% say that in salvation God helps those who help themselves.¹

This is not unimportant or marginal truth. The Apostle Paul saw the compromises of this truth by the legalists in the Galatian churches as a major threat to the gospel of Christ. He accused them of deserting Christ for another gospel and twice repeated the warning that anyone who preaches a contrary gospel is accursed (Gal.1:6-9). Paul made very clear that law-works neither justify us before God nor matures us in the Christian life. Paul feared that he had labored over the Galatians in vain because of their legalistic reversion to mere observances (4:9-11). He told the legalists that they had cut themselves off from Christ and had moved outside of the pale of His grace (5:4).

As Paul later wrote his theological expansion of this to the church in Rome, he emphasized that the righteousness which comes from God in the gospel is available to sinful man only "by faith from first to last" (1:16-17 NIV). He went on to expound that glorious truth of *justification by faith alone*, which was the watchword of the Reformation.

The Reformers' concerns. Martin Luther said that justification by faith alone is the "article upon which the church stands or falls."² It was the

material principle of the Reformation, because it was the essential difference between the Romanist concept of salvation and the great biblical doctrine. He found the legalisms into which the Galatians had fallen closely akin to the legalisms of the Roman Catholic church.

Although it was the grossness of the sale of indulgences which triggered Luther's ninety-five theses against Romanist errors, the heart of his concern was the denial of justification by faith alone. Not only did Roman Catholics have an erroneous definition of justification as 'to make righteous,' and a serious confusion of justification and sanctification, but the whole Roman system itself was a denial of the faith-alone principle of Galatians and Romans. Their understanding of the sacraments as the means by which merit is distributed to the faithful from the Church's treasury of merit was totally opposed to the biblical doctrine.

The Reformers saw this as the essence of the gospel of Christ. 'Evangelical' comes from the Greek word for gospel, *euangelion*. Since the modernist-fundamentalist controversy (early 20th cent.), this word is used to describe those who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, because the essence of the gospel is dependent upon the trustworthiness of the Bible. Too frequently the word Evangelical is used merely as a synonym for Protestant, but it is clear that most Protestants no longer hold to the trustworthiness of the Scripture or the essence of the gospel— justification by grace through faith alone.

The Reformers saw Romanism as an eclipse of the true gospel. R. C. Sproul explains, "An eclipse of the sun does not destroy the sun. An eclipse *obscures* the light of the sun. It brings darkness where there was light. The Reformation sought to remove the eclipse so that the light of the gospel could once again shine in its full brilliance, being perceived with clarity."³

Since the Reformation, a number of other movements have also eclipsed the gospel: dead orthodoxy's minimizing the personal dimension, modernism's outright denial, neo-orthodoxy's philosophical word-juggling, postmodernism's relativism, and the cults' use of proof-texting* and extrabiblical authorities. Even within evangelicalism there are a number of theological movements which compromise the purity of justification by grace through faith alone.

Justification defined

First, the heart of Paul's statement in Romans must be set out:

"... being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24); "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law" (Rom. 3:28); "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (4:5); "But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the

many" (5:15); **"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (6:23).

A major problem in the dialog between Catholics and Evangelicals over the centuries has been the definition of terms. In the *ECT* dialogue, this is obviously a major sticking point. Chuck Colson admitted to R. C. Sproul in a private conversation that the two sides do not always agree on the meaning of statements in the *ECT* document.⁴ So it is imperative to focus upon the definition of terms used in the discussion.

The truth of justification has been obscured by the perpetuation of Latin-origin words in theological discussion. This goes back to the dominant use of the erroneous Latin Vulgate for over a millennium, by both Catholics and Protestants. Luther struggled with the righteousness of God as an attribute of God, since it seemed to mock him in his great sense of sinfulness. But when through his study of Romans he grasped for the first time that God makes righteousness available to the sinner by justification, he was born again and began to love God.

Since the Greek word which Paul uses (*dikaioein*) means "to declare righteous," it would have been clearer if the translators had simply translated it this way.^A But translators and theologians have stuck to the more obscure and ambiguous word, 'to justify.' The Greek word clearly has a forensic, legal connotation and was in the language of the courts. Paul presented the truth of God's declaration of the sinner as righteous in His sight based on faith alone, without works of any kind. Following Paul's teaching, the Reformers stressed that it was an *alien* righteousness, that is, alien to the sinner before conversion. Romanism stubbornly clung to the error of a prior, infused righteousness, that is, that God declares the righteous to be righteous.⁵ They objected to the 'legal fiction' of the evangelical doctrine. But Evangelicals have understood justification as an early step in the process of transforming a godless sinner into a saint, the last phase of which is our transformation by the resurrection at Christ's return.

Thus, although God's plan of salvation has many aspects, which include conversion, regeneration, sanctification, and ultimately glorification, God's declaration of repentant sinners to be righteous is distinct from, and not to be confused with, these other aspects. It is important to grasp the force of Paul's phrase, "the righteousness of God," throughout Romans.

It is not just the meaning of the Greek word, but the whole flow of Paul's thinking in Romans, which makes this concept abundantly clear. The Catholic Douay version, by translating the noun, *dikaiosune*, as the "justice of God," obscured the truth. The King James and subsequent translations partially clarified the idea by translating "the righteousness of God." But it

A. Abbott-Smith, *Manual Lexicon*, p. 116: "cl. to deem right, to do one justice; . . . in NT, as LXX (1) to show to be righteous, (2) to declare, pronounce righteous."; The BAG *Lexicon*, p. 196: "2. To justify, vindicate, treat as just; . . . 3a. Be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous."

was for the NIV to properly render the phrase “**a righteousness from God**” (Rom. 1:17; 3:21-22).^B The correctness of this translation is confirmed by Paul’s whole explanation in Romans 4 that justification involves God counting sinners like Abraham and David to be righteous by faith. Paul builds upon Genesis 15:6: “**And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness**” (Rom. 4:3), and upon Psalm 32:1-2: “**Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account**” (Rom. 4:8).

This truth of imputation becomes even clearer when seen in the light of the appropriate synonyms, as ‘reckon, count, account, or charge.’ Paul refers to a two-fold imputation: of the believer’s sin to Christ the sin-bearer, and of Christ’s righteousness to believing sinners (Rom. 4:1-8; Col. 2:13-14). Thus, not only are all believers’ sins charged to Christ’s account when He bore them on the cross, but also His righteousness is accounted to believers to give perfect standing with God. The whole argument of Romans is based upon this truth. A study of the development of Paul’s thought shows that this is exactly the main theme: a righteousness of which mankind is totally devoid (Rom. 1:18–3:23); a righteousness which God reckons to sinners by faith (3:24–5:21); a righteousness which God works in the life of the believer through the Holy Spirit (6:1–8:39); a righteousness which Israel missed and which is available to all humanity by faith (9:1–11:36); a righteousness which is worked out in human relationships (12:1–15:13); and a righteousness which is to be made known to the nations (15:14–16:27).

Based on faith alone

From Paul’s explanation of the justification of Abraham and David, it is obvious that they were not consistently righteous in their conduct. For that matter, neither were most of the other Old Testament saints like Lot, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, or Manasseh,. Even New Testament saints, such as Peter and the Corinthian Christians, manifested considerable inconsistencies which would destroy salvation, if it were not based upon faith alone.

During the Reformation, Roman Catholics objected that the Apostle Paul did not use the word ‘alone’ in his discussion of justification. This is technically true, but when we see the flow of his thought, it is obvious that his meaning is ‘by faith *alone*,’ since he contrasted faith with law-works, with circumcision, and with works of righteousness in general. Surveying Paul’s other letters reveals the same clarity: Galatians 2:16; 3:2-14; Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:5, etc. Paul arrived at that clarity, humanly speaking, through his conversion out of Pharisaic legalism, as the Holy Spirit revealed the gospel message in its bas relief, as described in Galatians 1:11-24

B. It could be the attribute of God which Paul has in mind, if he were using the genitive case. However, in the Greek the same form is also used for the ablative case, which would be translated, “**a righteousness from God,**” as in the NIV translation. Thus Paul would not be speaking about God’s attribute, but rather a righteousness which God makes available to sinful men.

Not uniquely Paul's doctrine. Some have claimed that Paul put his own spin on the gospel, standing in contradiction to the message of the Lord Jesus and the other Apostles, especially James. However, in the Gospels, the strong emphasis upon repentance and faith started right with John the Baptizer (Mt. 3:2) and was constantly reiterated by the Lord Jesus Himself (Mt. 4:17; 8:10, 13; 9:12-13, 22; 11:28-30; 18:3; 19:25-26; 20:28; 21:31-32; Mk. 1:15; 6:12; Lk. 5:20, 31-32; 13:3; 23:42-43; 24:45-49). The Lord Jesus did not choose to spell out the doctrine of justification by faith, since during His ministry the key issue was Himself and Israel's relationship to Him. Many years after Christ's resurrection and ascension, the Apostle John wrote his Gospel to focus on the necessity of believing on or receiving Him. The verb 'to believe' is found 96 times in this Gospel, with much teaching about the nature of that faith. In addition, all four Gospels record the Lord's consistent opposition to Judaism's traditionalism, externalism, and legalism, which is the basis upon which Paul built his theology. The survey of the apostolic preaching, (*kērugma*) in Acts also confirms that Paul's doctrine was in total harmony with this (Acts 2:28; 3:16; 5:31; 10:43; 11:17-18; 13:38-9; 15:11; 16:31; 17:11-12, 30; 20:21; 22:16; 24:24; & 26:18-20; cf. Ch. 7 & 18).

Harmony with the Apostle James. The major problem in the minds of many opponents of this is James' teaching in his epistle: "**You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone**" (Jas. 2:24). This requires clarification. It is clear that James did not write to contradict Paul, since James wrote before Paul. On the other hand, it is highly unlikely that Paul was writing to contradict James, since Paul wrote much about the importance of good works in the life of the believer (cf. Titus). Paul was not an antinomian in denying absolutes of morality, since he wrote about being under "the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). Luther wrongly thought to resolve the apparent contradiction by denigrating James' epistle.

The first clarification comes from the proper translation of 'to justify': 'to declare righteous.' The difference between Paul and James is clarified when the subject of this verb is considered. In Paul's writings it is God who declares the sinner righteous by faith alone. James, however, is concerned about how *other people* view a professing believer, and the necessity of showing faith to others so that *they* will declare the believer righteous: "**But someone may well say, 'You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works'**" (Jas. 2:18). In that case, others are the subject of the verb 'to declare righteous.'

A second consideration is the differing usage of the verb 'to believe' by Paul and James. Paul is obviously referring to genuine faith or trust in Christ, whereas James may be using it in the sense of a mere profession of faith. There is a clue in James 2:19: "**You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.**" Here believing could mean intellectual assent to the truth, rather than trust in Christ as Savior. Other examples of such usage are: John 2:23-25; 6:64-66; 8:32 and Acts 8:13, 18-24. However,

other good scholars have pointed out that even if James refers to true faith, the other considerations resolve the problem. Alternatively, James could be referring to ongoing faith in the Christian life, since the rest of the letter is addressed to believers.

Thirdly, recognize the differing definitions of ‘works,’ as both use the same word but with different terms in mind. By works Paul speaks of law-works or works by which people are trying to earn merit before God. James, on the other hand, means the fruit of true faith in the life of the believer. Believers are justified in the sight of men by leading consistent lives.

Both Paul and James use Abraham as an example to make differing points. Paul refers to Genesis 15:6, near the beginning of Abram’s life of faith, even before his name was changed. James refers to the triumphant pinnacle of his life of faith about forty years later, when he offered up Isaac on Mount Moriah. It is significant that almost half of the human race today believes that he offered up his son there (even though Muslims believe it was Ishmael). Thus, Abram was declared righteous by God based on his faith alone, as attested to by Genesis 15, but he was declared righteous by people based upon the fruit of his faith in the offering of his son.

Thus, Luther should not have denigrated the book of James in order to maintain the purity of Pauline doctrine. Indeed, Luther was so overwhelmed with the rediscovery of the marvelous truth of justification by faith alone that he reacted too far in the opposite direction by making the dichotomy between faith and works too sharp. Some today are doing the same.

The harmony of grace and faith

Paul made a special point of the perfect harmony of the principle of grace with a faith-alone salvation:

For this reason it is by faith, that *it might be* in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all ... (Rom. 4:16).

This is especially important because of the misconceptions of the meaning of the word ‘grace.’ It is clear from Paul’s usage that he means ‘the unmerited favor of God,’ because of the way he sets faith and works in contradistinction. He sets faith in opposition to law-works (Rom. 3:19-31; 4:13-15), to confidence in circumcision (4:9-12), and ultimately to any works of righteousness (Rom. 4:1-8; Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5).

The human race is so bent on self-salvation that even religions which parrot the word grace don’t have a clue to its real meaning. Roman Catholics abundantly use the word grace, but seem clueless as to its biblical meaning. They endlessly quote the erroneous translation, “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” and then go about trying to establish their own righteousness by their own works, including devotions to Mary, which is pagan.

This was true of the Pharisees in Christ's day as well (Rom. 9:30-32). The crowd of works-oriented Jews who had followed the Lord Jesus across the lake of Galilee asked, "**What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?**" His answer was incisive: "**This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent**" (John 6:28-29). Some have mistakenly thought He was saying that faith is a work. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Rather, He was seeking to wean them away from their works-obsessed mindset. Faith is to be set in contradistinction to works in order to maintain the grace principle of salvation (Rom. 4:16).

The gracious nature of salvation

The Lord Jesus and His Apostles had to constantly struggle with the legalistic mind-set of the Jewish nation out of which they had come. The issue came into special focus as the gospel went out into the Gentile world. Hebrew Christians struggled with the idea that these pagans could be directly saved through repentant faith without first becoming Jewish through circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:5). At the conference of the Apostles with the elders of the Jerusalem church on this issue, Peter defended the gracious nature of salvation (Acts 15:8-11):

And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.

Unfortunately the decision of the council did not satisfy those legalistic teachers, because they followed Paul's missionary itinerary and promoted legalism in the churches of Galatia and in Corinth. On his third missionary tour, while in western Asia Minor, Paul heard of the Galatian situation and wrote his fiery epistle to those churches to alert them to the serious problem of undermining the gracious nature of salvation:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;... But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:6, 8).

After reminding them of the outcome of the Jerusalem Council (2:1-10), Paul quoted the words he had used to correct Peter's inconsistent behavior when some of the legalists came down to Antioch of Syria:

We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified [declared righteous] by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of

the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.... I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes by the Law, then Christ died needlessly (Gal. 2:16, 21).

What Peter needed to be reminded of was that even Jewish Christians had been saved by grace through faith alone, in the same way Gentiles are saved. Although the specific issue there was circumcision and the works of the Mosaic Law, any additional requirement which people add to simple repentant faith is a serious lapse into legalism, whether it be baptism (which corresponds to circumcision) or any other human performance. Paul summarized his point so aptly in Galatians 3:22: **“But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”**

Some months later in Corinth, Paul had more leisure to pen his more reasoned theological explanation of the issue in his epistle to the church in Rome, which he hoped to visit. These two letters became the key to the Reformation, fifteen centuries later. In his later epistles Paul continued to emphasize the gracious nature of salvation. After reminding the Ephesian Christians of their previous depravity he contrasted a grace-through-faith salvation with human works in 2:4-10, and clarified the trusteeship of the newly revealed message of God’s gracious salvation given to him (Eph. 3:1-7). He even reminds his missionary protégés of this crucial aspect of the message (Titus 3:4-7; 2 Tim. 1:9). Peter and the other Apostles also wrote in harmony with this, although they did not emphasize it the way Paul did.

Instantaneous new birth by faith

Simultaneous with justification, or being put into right standing with God, is the work of the Holy Spirit in giving new birth to the sinner dead in sin. Both are contingent upon the sinner looking in faith to Christ for salvation. Since the Reformation, evangelical Christians have professed to believe in faith as a condition of justification. However, extreme Calvinists do not believe that faith is a condition for the new birth. Rather, they reverse the order to say that since those dead in sin cannot exercise faith, God must *first* give them new birth so that they may be able to believe. The inductive Scriptural data is very clear that they have got it backwards. There is a full examination of the biblical data in Chapter 17.

The term ‘born again’ is used so loosely today that we must be careful to define it biblically. There are half a dozen Greek words for it in the New Testament. The most common is *gennaein*, a word for either begetting or being born, which is used only by John (Jn. 1:13; 3:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; 1 Jn. 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). In His dialog with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus twice used the word *anōthen* with it, which has the idea of being born “from the top down,” meaning “all over again.” Three times He spoke to Nicodemus about being “born of the Spirit.” In his first epistle, John consistently refers to “being born of God.” Peter twice uses the same word with the prefix *ana*

(‘again’) in 1 Peter 1:3 & 23, where the new birth is seen as effected by the word of God. James uses a narrower term (1:18) which refers to the successful delivery of the baby at the end of pregnancy.⁶ In Titus 3:5 Paul used a compound noun, *palingenesia*, which is usually translated as ‘regeneration.’ In 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15 he speaks of a new creation; and uses the verb, ‘to create,’ in Ephesians 2:10. Lastly in that context he also uses a compound verb, “to make alive with” (Eph. 2:5). Thus we might define the new birth as *God imparting new divine life by the Holy Spirit through the word of God to spiritually dead sinners* (Eph. 2:1-5).

By the analogy with human birth, it seems clear that it is not a process, but an event at a point in time. Although human birth is not quite instantaneous, spiritual new birth must be so understood.^C Although the new birth is not expressly stated to be conditioned on faith, the eternal life which is its result is consistently said to be by faith (cf. Ch. 17).

Justification and sanctification

One most significant issue over the centuries has been the relationship of justification and sanctification. This was an issue between the Catholic church and the Reformers, between the Reformers and other Protestants, between Evangelicals with differing views of salvation truth, and even among Calvinists. Again, fuzziness of definition contributes significantly to the confusion. Therefore, the focus should be on definitions and relationships.

Definitions. Since justification is a declaration by God that the believing sinner is counted righteous in His sight, it must be a once-for-all declaration of God, not a continuing process (Rom. 4:5). Justification must be distinct from, but simultaneous with regeneration (the new birth), since both are conditioned upon faith. Believers are justified by faith and born again by faith. *Both are instantaneous and initial.*

Sanctification, however, is used in two tenses in the New Testament. It is used in the past tense of *positional sanctification* and in the present tense of our *progressive growth* in holiness. The translation into English is somewhat confusing, although not at all controversial. Both the Hebrew and Greek words have to do with being ‘separated from, set apart unto something’, and in that sense becoming holy or sanctified. Holy is the Anglo-Saxon word; sanctified is Latin-derived.

Believers are called “saints” sixty-one times in the New Testament, reflecting the truth that at the point of initial faith, they were *positionally* set apart for God. This term was used irrespective of the degree of holiness attained in their lifestyle. Paul said that the Corinthian believers “**had been sanctified**” (1 Cor. 6:11), even though some of them were “**yet carnal**” (3:3),

C. A major error which Augustine passed down to Luther is the notion that justification and the new birth are a *process*. This has been the root of much confusion. See David Anderson, “Regeneration: A *Crux Interpretum*.” *JOGTS*, 13:25 (Aug. 2000).

and there were serious moral problems in the church there.

On the other hand, believers are continually exhorted to progress in the ongoing process of *experiential sanctification*. Paul's exhortation in 2 Corinthians 7:1 uses the word holiness: "**Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.**" Many other terms and images communicate the same idea throughout Scripture. Theologically, this is the way the term sanctification is most commonly used, but positional sanctification must also be recognized and distinguished. It is appropriate to use the contrasts: position versus condition; standing versus state.

Relationships. Thus while positional sanctification, like regeneration, is simultaneous with, yet distinct from, justification, progressive sanctification must be kept far more distinct in our thinking. The new birth and positional sanctification begin the lifelong process of progressive sanctification. Although it is called 'progressive,' it is not always continuously up hill in the lives of all believers. Indeed, we all stumble and fall from time to time. But God's goal is that believers should be continuously separated from the world, the flesh, and Satan's forces, and set apart for the things of God.

The question that has troubled Christians over the ages is, does lack of progressive sanctification in the life of a believer in any way condition or cancel one's justification? Since justification is a declaration by God, the answer must be a resounding, NO! Lack of holiness in the life of a professing believer may raise serious questions in the minds of other Christians, but ultimately only God has the final answer as to the status of the individual. A fruitless believer may be challenged and questioned, but no one has the authority to write them off and condemn them, as many tend to do.

Many would object to the above by quoting the words of the Lord Jesus, "**You will know them by their fruits**" (Mt. 7:16). Here, as always, it is imperative to check the context. In the whole context He is warning about false prophets who come "**in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves**" (Mt. 7:15). These can be and must be discerned by their fruits, but there is not a verse of Scripture which states or implies that anyone can know for sure about a professing Christian who does not show the kind of fruit which should be manifested. Peter used a whole chapter of his second epistle to instruct the churches how to deal with false teachers. But there is neither example nor exhortation to write off fruitless or problem believers.

Fruitless believers may be disciplined and/or excommunicated for some of the more serious sins. But they must not be assumed to be unbelievers. God disciplined Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), and the Corinthian church was to excommunicate the unrepentant immoral man (1 Cor. 5), but it must not be assumed, as many do, that they were not true believers. On the other hand, Peter discerned from the words of Simon, the baptized magician, that he was not a real believer (Acts 8:20-23). When some of the Galatians fell into denial of justification by faith alone, Paul began to have

doubts about their salvation and challenged them (Gal. 4:9-11). But any doctrinal understanding which backloads justification by faith alone with a particular legalistic standard of progressive sanctification must be avoided. Does not God know ahead the outcome of each individual's life? He could not possibly justify a sinner and then later change His mind based upon lack of sanctification.

It is true that the New Testament does challenge us with tests of eternal life (as in 1 John), by which we can examine our own lives to see those lifestyle problems which seriously raise questions about our salvation. But we should also be concerned about the way that legalistic Christians write off problem believers, and the way that some fall back into an extreme introspection, which seriously undermines their own assurance.⁷

Repentance, faith, and conversion

There has been long-standing confusion about the relationship and definitions of repentance, faith, and conversion. Perhaps it started with the Roman Catholic mistranslation in the Douay Version of repentance (*metanoia*) as 'penance,' which implies some works on the part of man. Although this was corrected by Martin Luther, in the Protestant versions, and even in the contemporary Catholic versions, there still are a number of serious misconceptions about these key words and their relationships.

Repentance and conversion. Perhaps the most persistent error arises from the confusion of repentance and conversion since they are frequently linked together in Scripture. Although repentance and faith are the necessary conditions for conversion, it should be recognized that conversion goes far beyond initial repentance and faith. *Simply put, repentance is a change of mind or attitude, whereas conversion is a change of direction in lifestyle.* Before a person can change the direction of life, there must first be a change of mind or attitude. This can be illustrated by driving down an interstate highway in the wrong direction. First, there must be the realization that one is headed in the wrong direction, which is repentance. Only then can one look for the first exit to make a U-turn and get going in the right direction, which is conversion.

The danger of confusing the two is that conversion does not always, or even usually, occur overnight. It frequently involves *a process*, first of coming to repentant faith and then, after being born again, through progressive sanctification the lifestyle begins to turn around. In some cases it is sudden and radical, but in others it is slow and gradual. For example, the latter was the case with Abraham, Jacob, and many other saints in both testaments. The linguistic data does not at all support any equivalency between repentance and conversion. However, there is considerable confusion in the lexicons, theological dictionaries, and theologies, and even critical misstatements of fact (cf. App. G, *BCAA*)

Contributing to the confusion is the assumption on the part of many that

since these two terms are frequently coordinated by connecting them with a conjunction, they must be synonymous, such as, “repent and return.” Many examples can be given in both testaments. However, just because two terms are so associated does not imply that they are synonyms. This is as illogical as saying that apples and oranges means that apples equals oranges. Indeed, there is a logical progression of thought from repentance (a change of mind or attitude) forward to conversion (a turning around of the lifestyle). It is worth noting that many of the scholars who are guilty of this false assumption are part of a more legalistic, sacramental wing of Christendom. No, the Lord Jesus would have spoken out bluntly against any such confusion of internal change of heart with mere external change. Indeed, He frequently did so in excoriating the Pharisees.

There is some confusion in Calvinistic writings on this important distinction. Some define repentance as “a turning from all sin.” This is totally without linguistic foundation in the usage in Greek literature up to New Testament times. If this definition were correct, then no one will get to heaven, because no one has turned from all sin. Even conversion cannot be so defined without serious implications.

Repentance and remorse. Another area of confusion in the minds of many is failure to distinguish repentance from remorse. The first is the consistently correct rendering of *metanoia*; the second comes from the usage of *metamelomai*. The distinction can be best illustrated by contrasting Peter and Judas. After Peter denied the Lord, he repented and was restored into fellowship with Him. After Judas’ betrayal of the Lord did not work out the way he intended (He apparently hoped that the Lord would slip through the hands of His arrestors, as He had many times before), he went out, returned the money (Mt. 27:3), and committed suicide. This was remorse! Paul made the distinction clear in 2 Corinthians 7:10: “... **For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death.**” Although the usage of *metamelomai* is not always consistent, Thayer says that *metanoia/metanoiein* is the “fuller and nobler term.”⁸

The compromises of faith alone

The Roman Catholic compromise. The Roman Catholic compromise of biblical doctrine has already been noted. The Council of Trent (1547-8) unfortunately hardened their opposition to the Protestant position by hurling anathemas at those who affirmed the Reformation view. Rome has never retracted those anathemas. Ironically, *Evangelical and Catholics Together* did not make any reference to the teaching of justification by faith *alone*, either in the points agreed upon or in the points of disagreement for further study. *Thus they swept it under the rug!* It is clear that the sacramental system of salvation totally contradicts a by-grace-through-faith-alone salvation. No matter what word games such signatories play, Rome would have

to scrap its whole merit system to be consistent with a gracious conception of salvation. This involves the notion of a treasury of merit which Christ bestowed on the Catholic Church to distribute to its people in a piecemeal fashion by means of the five relevant sacraments and the other merit-earning devotions advocated by the Church. Sproul rightly says that the contradiction is foundational and systemic.⁹ It implies that the sacrifice of Christ was not sufficient for salvation, but that we must add to it.

To make the situation even worse, the fact is that now since Vatican Council II (1962-65) many Catholics do not hold to traditional Catholicism any more. There is a major liberal element in the Roman church, which holds to the evolutionary philosophy of Father Teilhard de Chardin. They retain Catholic symbolism, but the teaching is radically liberal and therefore rejects the evangelical gospel as well.

The Arminian compromise. It is not clear to what extent Jacob Arminius compromised the grace principle, but contemporary Arminianism does tend to do so by its denial of the eternal security of true believers. In their view, the believer's future salvation is contingent upon his own perseverance in faith and good works, involving a significant compromise of the by-grace-through-faith-alone principle.

The Puritan back-loading of the gospel. Recent studies, mostly coming out of Great Britain, reveal a strong tendency among the Puritans* or extreme Calvinists to back-load experiential sanctification into the salvation message. Michael Eaton observed a strong pattern of introspection and legalism, which he found unsettles the believer's assurance of final salvation. Given the Calvinist's doctrine of unconditional election, the burning question continues on through life, "How do I know whether I am among the elect, or not?" This causes them to look inward to their sanctification rather than Christward. Indeed, many great Puritan preachers went to their deathbed unsure of their elect status.¹⁰

This has been perpetuated to the present as manifest in the confusion of salvation and discipleship in the writings of Reformed Baptists, and others of reformed tradition. The "lordship salvation" teaching of John MacArthur also fails to distinguish salvation from discipleship.¹¹ In this sense it also back-loads the gospel with the works of sanctification (Cf. Ch. 11).

The sacramental compromise. Hundreds of millions of Protestants hold to a sacramental concept of salvation, which compromises the purity of gracious salvation. It starts with baptismal regeneration (cf. Ch. 18) and a sacramental concept of the Lord's supper adds to this, that is, the notion that in some magical way grace is communicated to the participant through the elements. This comes from the later church fathers, was perpetuated by the Roman Catholic Church, carried over into Protestantism, and is found especially among Lutherans, Anglicans (Episcopalians), and others.

The liberal denial. Since the end of the nineteenth century there has been a modernistic takeover of the major denominations in the western world. Kenneth Kantzer once stated that in 1890 all of the Protestant theological seminaries in the USA were evangelical except Harvard. By 1920 they had all become liberal, some more and some less. The control of these denominations fell into the hands of the liberals. (More recently the Southern Baptists alone have succeeded in reversing that trend by the Evangelicals regaining control of most of their institutions.)

The point is that liberalism, which denies the inspiration of Scripture, almost inevitably also denies the gospel of Christ. In the early twentieth century the “social gospel” replaced the salvation message in those denominations. Since then various forms of neo-orthodoxy, modernism, and now post-modernism have been in vogue in those denominations, all of which tend to undermine the gracious nature of salvation.

The charismatic de-emphasis. There is also a great danger in the charismatic movement (and to some extent in Pentecostalism as well) in shifting the emphasis away from the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone and the finished work of Christ, to the present subjective experience of the believer. Charismatic experiences become the focus, not the cross of Christ and the Pauline theology of the cross.

Conclusions

From all of this it is plain that the gospel of Christ is under siege in this present day. The human tendency to want to earn salvation has seriously compromised the gospel, even among professing evangelical believers.

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1. As quoted by R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, p. 12.
 2. Martin Luther, as quoted by R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, p. 18.
 3. Sproul, p. 19.
 4. *Ibid*, p. 37.
 5. Alister E. McGrath, *Institia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 1:31.
 6. Abbott-Smith, pp. 51-2.
 7. Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance*, pp. 23-25.
 8. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 405.
 9. Sproul, p. 68.
 10. Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance*, p. 4.
 11. John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*.