

REVIEWS

Justification Alone

Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification, by R. C. Sproul. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995.

Faith Alone explores the doctrine of justification by faith in its “biblical and historical context” (48). In this work, R. C. Sproul takes up the centuries-old standard of the Reformation to contend for the biblical truth of justification by faith alone. He proves to be a faithful standard-bearer, enunciating this fundamental truth according to a pure interpretation of the Reformation tradition. In this strong polemic, Sproul seeks to preserve the pristine thread of apostolic teaching, as he fights for the gospel. As he handles this essential matter, Sproul touches a jewel of the divine revelation, and he does so with skill and clarity. But there is also a clear indication that the book’s vision of the divine revelation concerning the purpose of God’s justification is not complete.

Faith Alone is Sproul’s reaction to what he calls “the current collapse of Evangelicalism,” whose weakening presents a “major calamity for the church” (190). At the heart of this calamity is the perceived trend among certain prominent Evangelicals to compromise the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone. The major motivation for this book seems to have been the publication of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (ECT). This document, signed by well-known spokesmen of the evangelical community, is a statement of the “common convictions about Christian faith and mission” which are jointly held by Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics although “advanced in diverse ways” (26-28). Sproul contends that arriving at these “common convictions” involves a compromise of the truth of the gospel.

Two main controversies form the central issues of this book. The first is the “justification controversy” (28). Sproul establishes that the formula of justification as discovered by the Reformers is this: Justification is by grace alone through faith alone (*sola fide*) because of Christ alone. As an effective academic, he demonstrates a strict and careful attention to words, and it is indeed the one word—*alone*—which is the fire at the core of his message. The word *alone*, he reminds us, was the particular usage “on which the entire Reformation doctrine of justification was erected” (36). In Reformation theology, *sola fide* is a doctrine “no less essential than the Trinity or the dual natures of Christ” (19); Luther called it “the article upon which the

church stands or falls” (18). According to Sproul’s book, ECT affirms that in both Evangelical and Catholic theology, faith is a necessary condition for our justification, but it never states that justification is through faith *alone*. It is by negotiating away “the very heart of historical Evangelicalism” (47), he asserts, that the founders and signatories of ECT can find common convictions.

After preparing the battleground for theological debate, the book begins the real work of defining justification in the light of the Reformation. Justification, he tells us, is a strictly legal matter. “The Reformers viewed justification as being forensic, resting on God’s judicial declaration that the sinner is counted as just or righteous by virtue of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ” (44). More central to the justification debate, Sproul continues, is the manner in which justification is effected in the believer, and this pivots around the concept of imputation. Righteousness, the Reformers strongly declared, is *extra nos*, alien to us; it is “apart from or outside of us, not a part of us” and must therefore be imputed to us (73). *Iustitia alienum* is contrary to the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification, in which righteousness is inherent in (infused into) the one who believes by a preparatory work of grace. According to Sproul, imputation versus inherence is “the question of the Reformation” (101, italics his), the concept with which “the biblical gospel stands or falls” (106). Inherent righteousness stabs at the heart of Calvinism. To Calvin, a believer is only deemed and regarded, by judicial decree, to be righteous. He is never so in himself, for salvation is predicated on *iustificatio impii*, the justification of a sinner, by which the sinner, clothed with the righteousness of Christ, in Calvin’s words, “appears in the sight of God not as a sinner, but as righteous” (101). Such righteousness by appearance allows us to be, in Luther’s words, “at the same time just and sinner” (102). Imputed righteousness was all-important in the Reformation formula of justification. Ironically, what was a shining light related to justification gave rise to a certain dull spot in the Reformed tradition related to the full revelation of God’s complete salvation. The Reformation emphasis on alien righteousness and its necessary objectivity has, over the centuries, issued in a general abhorrence of subjectivity in the Christian experience. This has resulted in a general neglect, even disdain, of the experiential, organic aspects of salvation.

In his final chapter, Sproul draws the net on his polemic. The Reformers, he says, categorically affirmed that *sola fide* is essential to the gospel. Therefore, its denial is a denial of

the gospel and is an act of apostasy. Contemporary American Evangelicalism has touched this apostasy by moving away from the centrality of *sola fide*. Throughout the course of the book, J. I. Packer is singled out as an antispokesman of the centrality of *sola fide*. According to the book Packer alludes to *sola fide* merely as the “fine print” or “small print” of the gospel (13, 183). Here the book finds a parallel in Galatians 1—2: “What Paul experienced in the first century and Luther in the sixteenth, we are experiencing in our time: a quick and facile departure from the purity of the gospel” (184). As Paul condemned those who perverted the gospel, the book denounces all who are “betraying the gospel” and have “trivialized the Reformation” (191), though they be men “of repute” (Gal. 2:2, 6).

The second, subsidiary issue in this book is the “Lordship salvation” controversy, which addresses the question of whether or not a person can be justified “by embracing Jesus as Savior but not as Lord” (25), that is, without the fruit of works, which works result from holding Christ as Lord. Sproul states, “The Reformers insisted that true faith necessarily, inevitably, and immediately yields the fruit of works” (26). Thus, “Justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone” (155). Others insist that justification and sanctification must not only be distinguished but divided. A carnal Christian, they say, may receive the Lord as Savior but never know Him as Lord. Sproul clearly positions himself in the former camp by agreeing that the latter view is a “blatant form of antinomianism and a departure from both the biblical view of justification and the historic Protestant view” (25); it is “antinomianism with a vengeance” (171). Here, perhaps, the book is too strong. Far from being a call to baptize the unbelieving masses, the latter view is a recognition that the seed of the gospel is sown on different kinds of grounds (Matt. 13:1-23), only some of which are fruitful. The fruitfulness of those who are justified and the extent of the growth of the divine seed within them will be tested at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10), where “the work of each will become manifest” (1 Cor. 3:13). In debating the difficult subject of faith and works, modern Evangelicals must consider the place of the judgment seat of Christ.

Faith Alone makes it abundantly clear that there is no consensus among Evangelical Protestants even on the fundamental doctrine of justification. Despite his stand on the particulars of the debate, however, the reader must admit that Sproul handles this treasured inheritance well. We are justified by faith alone, and this gospel has its guardians to this day. But there is fault in *Faith Alone*, a fault which lies not in its details but on the Reformation emphasis in general. The reader is left with an impression of a gospel that is limited to justification alone, a gospel of which justification is the beginning, center, and end. “The heart of the Reformation was the recovery and heroic defense of the gospel of *sola fide*” (191). Sproul quotes Luther, “The article

of justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines” (67). Elsewhere he states, “To be declared just on the sole grounds of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was to them [the Reformers] the very essence of the gospel” (44). To the Reformers, therefore, justification was the preeminent item and very essence of the gospel.

Such a conclusion is not in line with the scriptural revelation of the complete salvation of God. The complete salvation of God has two aspects—the judicial aspect and the organic aspect. The judicial aspect is the procedure of God’s salvation through the redemption of Christ, while the organic aspect is the fulfillment of God’s salvation through the life of Christ. Romans 5:10 tells us that having partaken of the judicial aspect of salvation, “much more we will be saved in His life.” This “much more” is the organic aspect of salvation. Organic salvation comprises regeneration, in which the life of God is added to us in addition to our natural life (John 3:15); organic shepherding, in which Christ feeds us that we might exist and grow in His life (10:10-11; 21:15-17); dispositional sanctification, in which the believers are sanctified in their disposition that they may partake of God’s holy nature (Rom. 6:19, 22; 2 Pet. 1:4); renewing, in which the Holy Spirit dispenses the divine essence of the new man into our being, beginning from our mind (Rom. 12:2; Titus 3:5; Eph. 4:23); transformation, in which the Lord Spirit moves within us to bring forth a metabolic change through the increase of the element of the divine life (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 12:2); building, in which we are joined and knit with others as fellow members of Christ through our growth in the divine life (Eph. 4:15-16); conformation to the image of Christ, the consummation of the believers’ transformation in life (Rom. 8:29); and glorification, the spreading forth of Christ’s glory from the believers by their growing to maturity in the divine life (v. 30). God’s judicial redemption as the procedure is purposeless without God’s organic salvation; that is, judicial redemption has organic salvation as its goal. Moreover, the ultimate goal of God’s complete salvation is to build the Body of Christ, which will consummate the New Jerusalem as an organism constituted with the processed Triune God and His regenerated, transformed, and glorified elect as the enlargement and expression of God in eternity.

The Reformation, which recovered the lost treasure of justification by faith alone, was indeed *lux post tenebras*, the light after darkness. However, the recovery of the entire divine revelation—the complete gospel—did not stop with Luther, Calvin, and justification. In the words of a hymn by George Rawson, “The Lord hath yet more light and truth / To break forth from His Word.” The believer who is current with the revelation of God’s complete salvation must be a guardian of much more than justification alone.

by John Campbell