

CHRISTLESSNESS, APOSTASY, AND NOVELTY: MODERN VIEWS ON JUSTIFICATION

In this article we turn to justification by faith as understood in modern theology. After briefly considering some of the more prominent accounts of justification proposed by modern theologians, we turn to the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which represents the peak of modern ecumenical discussions of justification by faith. Finally, we conclude with an evaluation of justification as understood by N. T. (Nicholas Thomas) Wright (1948)—the leading representative of a group of biblical scholars often identified as proponents of a “new” perspective on Paul (Campbell et al. 2:263).

Justification in Modern Theology

With the advent of the so-called Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the Christian faith came under increasingly harsh and public attack. Many of the foundational teachings of the Christian church were ridiculed as contrary to reason or inimical to moral progress, and this onslaught included an attack on justification by faith. Many attempts by modern Christian philosophers and theologians to salvage justification by faith (e.g., those of Immanuel Kant [d. 1804] and Friedrich Schleiermacher [d. 1834]) suffer from the same fatal defect, namely, that they do so without a divine Christ. Other attempts suffer from the conviction that the language and concept of justification are no longer relevant to modern people. According to Paul Tillich (d. 1965), for instance, the language of justification is a relic of Paul’s Jewish background, having no significance in the present. The primary concern of modern people, Tillich argues, is the quest to “find meaning in a meaningless world” (3:227). In light of this primary concern, Tillich urges us to understand justification by faith to be little more than our acceptance of the fact that God has accepted our lives as meaningful. Another prominent view among modern theologians is that objective justification is God’s declaration ahead of time concerning what He will do in the future life of the believers to make them actually righteous within. According to Karl Holl (d. 1926), for instance, “In God’s verdict of justification, the final outcome, the real sanctification of man, is the decisive

point. Otherwise, His act of grace would be a caprice and a self-deception” (13). Yet another novel approach has drawn on the modern speech-act theory of John L. Austin, which distinguishes between words that describe reality (e.g., “We are married”) and words that constitute reality (e.g., “I now pronounce you husband and wife”). When God justifies, some argue (e.g., Oswald Bayer [1939-]), He is not stating a counter-factual (e.g., this sinner is righteous) but bringing about a new state of affairs, namely, the state of righteousness.

All these distinctively modern accounts of justification attempt to evade the charge that the Protestant account of justification by faith is no more than a legal fiction. We agree, of course, that justification by faith is not a legal fiction. Justification by faith is based on the believers’ union with Christ as righteousness, but none of these thinkers appeal to this union. In this way, they have offered more confusion than help, distracting the believers from the Christ who is everything in God’s operation, not least of all, the righteousness of God and of the believers (Campbell et al. 2:263-272).

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

On 31 October 1999 in Augsburg, Germany, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation ratified the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, the long-awaited culmination of several decades of ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans and several years of intensive revision of the *Joint Declaration* itself. According to its preamble, the *Joint Declaration*’s intention is

to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining