JUSTIFICATION BY THEOLOGY EXAM

Posted on February 7, 2024 by Eddie

We are going to be surprised by some of the people we meet in heaven because, while they may not fit into our theological or ecclesiastical boxes, they do have faith in Christ. Thankfully, it is God who makes this call, not us.
Category: Observations

One of the things which I value most from my tradition is the stress on "justification by faith", that is the concept that we are forgiven and reconciled to God through trusting in what he has done, rather than through any merit of our own.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faithâ€"and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God*
>
> *Ephesians 2:8*

However, while I thoroughly agree with the concept of justification by faith (knowing the person that I am, I would have no hope without it), I do have some reservations about where this belief takes us, sometimes.

It would be impossible to count how many times I've heard people say that people from one Christian tradition or another can't be real believers because they don't believe in justification by faith. Just pause and think that one through. What is happening here is that the doctrine of justification by faith has been replaced with a doctrine of justification by believing in justification by faith. Entry to the Kingdom is granted not by faith in Christ, but by having the right theology.

When I point out that I've known and worked with people from the "wrong" Christian traditions who had a real faith in Christ, I've often been told that their faith was not in Jesus, but in their works, because that's what their church teaches. Frankly, some people need to get out more and to meet with Christians from other traditions!

Yes, of course there are people who put ritual and performing certain acts at the centre of their belief. Then again, I know plenty of Reformed Evangelicals who make church attendance, having a quiet time or reading the right books a sign of being a true believer. The thing is, the interaction between faith and works is more complicated than we sometimes let on. The discipline of regular prayer or confession can lead to real faith in Christ, just as faith in Christ should lead to us performing certain actions. If things were as straightforward as we sometimes like to claim, there would not be an apparent tension between Paul and James.

Let me repeat, in case anyone thinks I'm being heretical, justification is by faith alone, not by works. However, just as faith should lead to works, so works can lead to faith.

Let me give an example which may or may not help. When we heard Kouya people preach the Gospel, they would always emphasise that their hearers had to burn the idols and fetishes that they kept in their houses. To turn to Christ involved, indeed necessitated, the act of burning a load of stuff. There was very little, if any, discussion of repentance and faith in terms that we would understand. However, in reality, for animists in the rain forest, disposing of the things that they had held on to for protection for years involved massive amounts of faith and keeping ourselves from idols is something that John tells us to do. The actual burning is a physical representation of repentance. Faith and repentance were very much at the centre of the process, but it looked as though it was all about works.

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However, it isn't just in eternity that we will need to get to grips with this. The call to unity in John 17 is an important one, though in my tradition, we tend to hold it secondary to getting our theology correct. However, the world has changed. The recession of the church in the West and the growth of World Christianity, where vibrant faith is often expressed in very different ways to the ones I grew up with, should force us to rethink some of our approaches. What does genuine catholicism (note the lower case c) look like in our day and age? What does our fellowship look like if we make faith in Christ the basis and not adherence to a historic and very Western approach to theology?

In closing (and in case I haven't upset enough people), I'd like to touch briefly on two other topics which are tangentially related to the notion of justification by faith.

One of the things that we do is to define in our minds what faith actually looks like; in particular in Western culture we view it in purely individual terms. We tend to see salvation as an individual act, people turning on their own, to Jesus, their own personal saviour. When the Bible or church history presents us with examples of communities coming to faith together, we struggle with the concept and often rationalise it away. Again, if we are to get to grips with what God is doing around the world, or our own history for that matter, we will need to rethink this.

Let me close with a word about other religions. It is a staple of conservative evangelical teaching to say that Christianity is different to religion, because we believe in salvation by grace, while all of the other religions rely on works. Without wishing to sound too controversial, this is rather simplistic!

For a start, many other religions have no concept of salvation (or God or most other things) in the same way that we have. To compare say, Buddhism, with Christianity is like comparing apples and oranges. You simply can't lump them together and then start describing Buddhism using Christian concepts.

Islam is often presented as the ultimate "works religion" because Muslims are expected to carry out certain "works" such as the Haj to Mecca and praying five times a day. However, even here, things are not quite as clear as one might think. The primary reason for doing these things is not to earn salvation, but simply out of submission to God (Islam means submission). Yes, many Muslims hope that the things they do will earn them favour with God, but even then the Q'ran is clear that God blesses people according to his own will, *not* according to what they do. Oh, and in the Gospels, Jesus says that God will judge us according to what we have and have not done.

Yes, we should highlight the fact that the Bible teaches that we can't earn our salvation and that it is a gift from God. But we shouldn't simplistically extrapolate from this that all other religions teach the opposite. As I said above, some people need to get out more and learn what people of other religions say and believe, rather than just studying what Christians say about them. (For more about Christianity as a religion, read this.)

So, to conclude, salvation is only possible through faith in Jesus Christ, we can't do anything to earn it ourselves; but faith may be preceded by works and it certainly should be followed by them. In fact, the whole notion of salvation only makes sense through the incarnation of Jesus. The problem with other religions isn't that they demand too many works, it is that they don't have enough Jesus! While our problem can be that we don't accept people who have Jesus if they don't have him in *our* way.