

JUSTIFIED BY



ALONE

R.C. SPROUL

*Justified by Faith Alone*

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The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals exists to call the church, amidst our dying culture, to repent of its worldliness, to recover and confess the truth of God's Word as did the Reformers, and to see that truth embodied in doctrine, worship, and life.

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# PREFACE

These are not good days for the evangelical church, and anyone who steps back from what is going on for a moment to try to evaluate our life and times will understand that.

In the last few years a number of important books have been published all trying to understand what is happening, and they are saying much the same thing even though the authors come from fairly different backgrounds and are doing different work. One is by David F. Wells, a theology professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. It is called *No Place for Truth*. A second is by Michael Scott Horton, vice president of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. His book is called *Power Religion*. The third is by the well-known pastor of Grace Community Church in California, John F. MacArthur. It is called *Ashamed of the Gospel*. Each of these authors is writing about the evangelical church, not the liberal church, and a person can get an idea of what each is saying from the titles alone.

Yet the subtitles are even more revealing. The subtitle of Wells's book reads *Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical*

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*Theology?* The subtitle of Horton's book is *The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*. The subtitle of John MacArthur's work proclaims, *When the Church Becomes Like the World*.

When you put these together, you realize that these careful observers of the current church scene perceive that today evangelicalism is seriously off base because it has abandoned its evangelical truth-heritage. The thesis of David Wells's book is that the evangelical church is either dead or dying as a significant religious force because it has forgotten what it stands for. Instead of trying to do God's work in God's way, it is trying to build a prosperous earthly kingdom with secular tools. Thus, in spite of our apparent success we have been "living in a fool's paradise," Wells declared in an address to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1995.

John H. Armstrong, a founding member of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, has edited a volume titled *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*. When he was asked not long afterwards whether he thought the crisis was still coming or is actually here, he admitted that in his judgment the crisis is already upon us.

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals is addressing this problem through seminars and conferences, radio programs, *modern* REFORMATION magazine, Reformation Societies, and scholarly writings. If you are troubled by the state of today's church and are helped by this book, we invite you to contact

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the Alliance at 1716 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103. You can also phone us at 215-546-3696 or visit the Alliance at our Web site: [www.AllianceNet.org](http://www.AllianceNet.org). We would like to work with you under God “for a modern Reformation.”

James Montgomery Boice  
Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals





CHAPTER  
ONE

# WHAT WAS WRONG WITH LUTHER?

What was the matter with Martin Luther? some might ask. The matter with Luther was a matter of the greatest possible urgency. The matter with Luther was that sin matters. The matter with Luther was that salvation matters, ultimately and eternally. Luther felt the weight of these matters to a degree few people, if any, have felt them in human history. These issues mattered enough to Luther to compel him to stand against the authority of church and state in a lonely and often bitter contest that made him Luther *contra mundum*.

Following the ancient Aristotelian form-matter schema, historians have pinpointed the doctrine of justification by faith

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alone (*sola fide*) as the material cause of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. It was the chief matter under dispute. Luther considered it “the article upon which the church stands or falls.” At a personal level he understood that it was the article upon which he himself stood or fell.

Thus, since the Reformation the doctrine of *sola fide* has been the defining doctrine of evangelical Christianity. It has functioned as a normative doctrine because it has been understood as essential to the gospel itself. Without *sola fide* one does not have the gospel; and without the gospel one does not have the Christian faith. When an ecclesiastical communion rejects *sola fide*, as Rome did at the Council of Trent, it ceases being a true church, no matter how orthodox it may be in other matters, because it has condemned an essential of the faith. Whereas at Worms Luther stood, at Trent Rome fell and remains fallen to this day.

## THE CHARACTER OF GOD

The dilemma Luther experienced in the anguish of his soul was related in the first instance to his correct understanding of the character of God. One of the essential attributes of God (essential in that without it God would not be God) is his justice. The Scriptures clearly reveal that the God of heaven and earth is just. This means far more than that the judgment he renders is equitable. It is not only that God

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does what is just, but that he does what is just because he is just. His righteous actions flow out of his righteous character.

That God is eternally and immutably just posed for Luther (as it should also pose for us) the ultimate dilemma, because we are not just. We are sinners lacking the perfect justness of God. Our sin violates the supreme standard of righteousness found in God's character. This is the burden Luther felt so keenly, but which we tend to treat lightly. We are inclined to think that God is so merciful that his mercy will annul or cancel out his justice. We assume that God will grade us on a curve and that he is quite willing to negotiate his own righteousness.

As sinners with recalcitrant hearts, human beings have no fear of the justice of God, in part because they are ignorant of his Law and additionally because, when they are aware of it, they hold it in contempt. We have all become, as Jeremiah said of Israel, like a harlot who has lost the capacity to blush (Jer. 6:15; 8:12). We assume that our works are good enough to pass the scrutiny of God at the final tribunal. And we do this despite the apostolic warning that by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified (Rom. 3:20).

People who consider themselves just enough in their own goodness do not tremble before the Law and feel no need for the gospel. For such, the matter of justification is not of great

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importance. It is merely a “doctrine,” and to the contemporary church few things are deemed less important than doctrine. “Doctrine divides,” we are told. “What matters is that we have a personal relationship with Jesus. The doctrine of justification doesn’t save us; it is Christ who saves us.”

## DOCTRINES UNITE

Certainly doctrines do divide. Certainly doctrines do not in themselves save us. Certainly we are called to have a personal relationship with Christ. However, doctrine also unites. It unites those who share one Lord, one faith, one baptism. And though doctrines do not save us, they correctly inform us of how we are saved.

It must be added, too, that having a personal relationship with Jesus does not save us unless it is a saving relationship. Everyone has a personal relationship with Jesus. Even the devil has a personal relationship with Christ, but it is a relationship of estrangement, of hostility to him. We are all related to Christ, but we are not all united to Christ, which union comes by faith and faith alone.

Luther understood what David understood when he asked the rhetorical question, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O LORD, who could stand?” (Ps. 130:3). The question is rhetorical because no explicit answer is given. The answer is nevertheless obvious: “No one.” No one by himself

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can stand before a God who takes note of our iniquities, for we are all sinners. The problem is that the Lord does mark iniquities and promises to bring every one of them into judgment. Moreover, as long as we remain outside of Christ we are continually heaping up judgment against the day of wrath.

The only way an unjust person can escape the day of God's wrath is to be justified. Only the justified will stand in that day. That is why the matter of justification is so vital. It is not a mere theological abstraction or a petty doctrine. The struggle of the Reformation was not a contest of shadowboxing, nor was it a tempest in a teapot. It is perilous to think it was much ado about nothing or simply a misunderstanding among theologians and clerics. To be sure there were issues that were confused and obscured in the heat of the debate. But it was crystal-clear that the core issue was the way of justification, and the two sides took not only differing positions but mutually exclusive and irreconcilable positions in the debate.

## WHAT IS JUSTIFICATION?

Justification refers to a legal action by God by which he declares a person just in his sight. The Protestant view is often described as “forensic justification,” meaning that justification is a “legal declaration” made by God.

What is often overlooked in discussions about justification

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is that the Roman Catholic communion also has its version of forensic justification. That is, Catholics agree that justification occurs when God declares a person just. However, when evangelicals speak of forensic justification, the phrase is used as a kind of theological shorthand for *sola fide*, and what is tacit is the assumption that God declares people to be just who in themselves are not just. Rome teaches that God declares people just only when they are in fact just. They are declared to be just only if and when justness inheres within them. Both sides see justification as a divine declaration, but the *ground* for such a declaration differs radically.

Rome saw justification as meaning “making just,” based on the Latin roots for the word *justificare* (*justus* and *facio, facere*), which in Roman jurisprudence meant “to make righteous.” For Rome, God only declares to be just those who have first been made just.

The easiest way to understand the evangelical doctrine of justification is to place it against the backdrop of the Roman Catholic view.



Why is the doctrine of justification by faith alone so important? Luther said that *sola fide* is “the article upon which the church stands or falls.” As R. C. Sproul puts it, “We are either justified by a righteousness that is in us or by a righteousness that is apart from us. There is no third way.”

This short work surveys the main tenets of the doctrine of justification in Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism. While there are some similarities, evangelical Christians must understand and appreciate the differences between the two. The issues in this historic theological dispute are of critical importance, and nothing less than the central message of the gospel is at stake.



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