

Alan J. Spence

Justification: A Guide for the Perplexed (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 174 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 9780567077516.

If the doctrine of justification is indeed the article by which the church stands or falls, one might well be perplexed to find the doctrine so disputed over the last five centuries (to say nothing of the last five decades). No less perplexing is the fact that Christians in earlier generations were ready to die over the doctrine while many Christians today view it as a secondary issue at best. It is fitting then that Alan Spence has written “a guide for the perplexed”—and a fine guide it is too.

Spence opens by quoting the astonishing statement in Paul’s epistle to the Romans in which God is described as one who “justifies the wicked” (4:5). The rest of the book is, in effect, a survey and evaluation of attempts by influential Christian thinkers to elucidate the theology behind those three words.

Chapter 1 makes the important observation that to understand the significance of the doctrine of justification we need to appreciate the cultural and theological atmosphere in which it flourished, one centered on the conviction that there is a creator God who will hold us accountable at the final judgment for the way we have lived. If the doctrine of justification seems irrelevant or even unintelligible to people today, that is largely due to the erosion of the underlying worldview. Chapter 2 observes that this worldview’s conception of the human predicament, understood in terms of sin and divine judgment, is pervasive in the New Testament and rooted in the teachings of Jesus and Paul. Whatever else the doctrine of justification may be, it is primarily a solution to this dire human predicament.

Chapters 3 through 6 summarize the contributions of four major players in the Western tradition: Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Spence’s synopses and analyses are clear, concise, and fair-handed. He allows each theologian to speak for himself, emphasizing not only the common threads but also their distinctive insights. While noting how each one made positive contributions to the Christian understanding of justification, Spence also draws attention to the weaknesses in their accounts. Augustine recognizes that our righteousness must come from God and not from ourselves, but he fails to do justice to the central Pauline antithesis between faith and works. Thomas’s exposition is indebted to Augustine’s but goes further by identifying justification with the forgiveness of sins. Neither the Reformed nor the Tridentine doctrine can claim direct descent from his sophisticated and nuanced account; some elements are quite consonant with subsequent Reformed formulations, while other elements (such as the concept of mortal sins) paved the path to later ecclesiastical abuses.

Luther's great contribution is his clear distinction between two kinds of righteousness possessed by the Christian—the 'active' and the 'passive'—and his contention that Paul's doctrine of justification cannot be understood apart from this crucial distinction. (Spence rightly notes that this wasn't an innovation; Aquinas had drawn a similar distinction, although he didn't make nearly enough of it.) Calvin builds on Luther's insights, further developing the doctrine by connecting it with the idea of union with Christ and formulating a more nuanced account of the relationship between faith, justification, and good works. Chapter 6 rounds off with a summary of Trent's counterposition, highlighting four key points of difference with the Reformers.

Chapters 7 (Schleiermacher) and 8 (Barth) serve to illustrate how Enlightenment-driven reconfigurations of the doctrines of God, sin, and the person and work of Christ led inevitably to revisions in the doctrine of justification. Spence makes the provocative (but I think defensible) claim that the theologies of Schleiermacher and Barth, despite their great differences, together served to undermine the importance and intelligibility of the biblical doctrine of justification by removing the sting of divine wrath and judgment.

No contemporary survey of the doctrine of justification could omit a discussion of the so-called New Perspective. Chapter 9 therefore engages with N.T. Wright, whose work presents perhaps the most serious exegetical challenge to the Reformation tradition. According to Wright, the Reformers badly misread Paul: his doctrine of justification is really concerned with ecclesiology (who's in the church and why) rather than soteriology (who's saved and why). This radical proposal misses the mark, Spence argues, because it fails to do justice to Paul's primary calling as an evangelist and his obvious concern to explain how "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17; 3:21–22) addresses the basic human predicament.

The concluding chapter turns from analysis to synthesis. Spence suggests that despite cultural shifts the human predicament can still be recognized (e.g., in modern concerns about injustice) and thus a good case can be made for the continued relevance of the doctrine of justification. He offers an interpretation of Paul's teaching on justification that combines insights from all four pre-modern theologians, an account in which justification is centered on an immediate judicial pardon and involves the gracious divine gift of a righteousness *ad extra*.

The book is clearly tailored for a Protestant readership; those seeking discussions of the Eastern tradition or modern Roman Catholic developments will have to look elsewhere. Spence aligns with the Reformed tradition, but his approach is irenic rather than polemical. I do have some criticisms, however. The chapter on Aquinas gives the impression that baptism plays a merely

supporting role in his doctrine of justification, which is quite misleading. The conviction that faith is the sole instrument of justification, so important to the Reformers, receives insufficient attention. Likewise, the idea of the active obedience of Christ is barely hinted at, despite its prominence in later Reformed expositions of justification. Even in Calvin's *Institutes* justification isn't *merely* the forgiveness of sin. And while I agree that the New Perspective fails to make sense of the key Pauline texts, I find Spence's main criticism of Wright to be dubious. Does Wright really deny that faith is instrumental in salvation? Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, this book will go a long way toward relieving those perplexed by justification.

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