

The Invalidation of Paul's Doctrine of Justification

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ABSTRACT

Key Words

Kingdom of God, life in the Spirit, return, law of love, scape-goat, ecumenical

In the Introduction to Martin Buber's I and Thou. (Third Edition, 1970), Harvard Professor Walter Kaufmann pointed out that St. Paul implicitly denied the doctrine of forgiveness by return (*t'shuvah*) that is central to the Hebrew Scriptures. 'If the doctrine of the return is true, Paul's theology collapses.'(17) Since Catholic and Protestant churches are now increasing their efforts to agree on Paul's doctrine of justification Kaufmann's claim should be seriously considered. In 1999 the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. In 2006 the Methodist Church signed onto the JDDJ. Discussions continue. That doctrine needs to be tested by reference to Jesus' teachings and actions and by the doctrine of return.

The gospel of Jesus was not explicitly about justification. The Kingdom was Jesus' main message. His preaching began in accordance with a central message from the Hebrew Scriptures, the call to repent, (*t'shuvah*), to return and believe in the Reigning of God. (Mark 1.15) The Kingdom is life in the Spirit, as Paul himself interpreted it. It is a new covenant, as the Letter to the Hebrews claimed (8.10-12), a renewed covenant, as predicted by Jeremiah (31.31-34). The parables, the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, the cleansing of demonic spirits, the healings through forgiveness, the sermon of Luke 4.16-27 in Nazareth, the feeding of the crowds, Jesus' wisdom sayings, his summary of the law

from Deut 6.5 and Lev 19.18, his calling God 'Abba' and saying that God sees the sparrow fall, his blessing of children, his tears over Jerusalem, his cleansing of the Temple, his reply to the one who asked what he must do to inherit life: 'If you would enter life, keep the commandments,' summed up as 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself,' his insistence on good will towards enemies, and his reminder to go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' (Matt 9.13, Matt 12.7) all reveal Jesus' message of life in the Spirit. It requires an entire Christology to spell out in detail what Jesus' life and teachings tell about life in the Spirit.¹

The new covenant of Jesus is in reality a renewed covenant, a spiritualizing of the laws of the great Hebrew covenant. (Deut 30.2-3, 11-20) The new covenant sharpens the focus on return to the benevolence of God accepted and celebrated in the ethics of mercy, compassion and good will. New life in the Spirit is given when repentance, return (*t'shuvah*), is done with the grace given by the Spirit. The love required by the covenant may lead to actions typical of Jesus such as associating with sinners, (Matt 9.9-13) healing on the Sabbath (Matt 12.7) or showing mercy even towards enemies, as Jesus did in his death.

Life in the Spirit, it must be said, is not a matter of 'works' righteousness.' The repentance and forgiveness and subsequent ethical living in the Spirit are all the work of the loving Spirit of God extended to any who will return (*t'shuvah*) and accept it. God's 'amazing grace' is essential in the process of return. Accepting the grace of the Spirit and reflecting that Spirit in ethical living is not a scheme of self-salvation any more than believing in justification is self-salvation. Life in the Spirit does involve

¹ See, for example, P. W. Newman, [A Spirit Christology: Recovering the Biblical Paradigm of Christian Faith.](#)

the freedom and sometimes anguish of accepting the call of God in the covenant as Jesus had to do in Gethsemane. That is the way the covenant with God works.

The letter to the Romans makes it quite clear how Paul focussed so strongly on his doctrine of justification as the means of forgiveness. Paul was convinced that God has intense wrath about the sin that characterizes human life. In Romans and I Thessalonians Paul confirms this with repeated mentions of God's wrath. (Cf. Rom 1.18, 2.5, 8, 4.15, 5.9, 12.19, 13.4, 5, I Thes 1.10, 2.16, 5.9) Paul's doctrine of justification is clearly focussed on sins that evoke the wrath of God and deserve God's punishment. He spells out what a lot of the sins are. (Cf. Rom 1.24-31) In his view, God's wrath is just and necessary. Sinners 'deserve to die.' (Rom 1.32) He claims that the death of Jesus fulfills 'the just requirement of the law.' (Rom 8. 4) It demonstrates the righteousness of God and achieves justification of sinners. It is a matter of retributive justice.

Paul claims that God forgives some sinners, chosen by God beforehand, (Cf. Rom 8.29-30) by providing redemption, retributive justice for their sins, by the substitute death of Jesus. (Cf. Rom 3.21-26) To be forgiven one only has to believe in this sacrifice of Jesus. Justified in this way a person can enter into life in the Spirit of Christ which is Paul's main gospel, the promise and hope for the world. Those who do not believe are to receive God's wrathful judgement. God 'has mercy on whom he chooses and hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.' (Rom 9.18) It appears to be a matter of double predestination.

Paul's doctrine of justification does not come from Jesus and is not consonant with Jesus who did not emphasize the priority of retributive justice. According to Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son and elsewhere, offenders are not first of all required to satisfy retributive justice. This parable is a classic story of return. The prodigal son is welcomed back

because he returned and repented, offering to do his duty. The story is an example of restorative justice. This is the way Jesus thought and acted. His treatment of Matthew, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, Peter who denied him, the woman caught in adultery and others clearly shows his emphasis on restoration. Jesus demonstrated that God loves all people, both sinners and saints. He associated with sinners and he spoke of God sending rain on the just and on the unjust. When he spoke of God caring for the enemies of Israel, Naaman and the widow of Sidon, it nearly cost him his life in Nazareth.

Paul diverts from Jesus' teaching when he insists on a unilateral action by God in justification. Paul does not speak clearly of life in the Spirit as a covenant. In fact the word covenant appears only four or five times in all of Paul's letters, always in reference to the covenant or covenants God made with the Jews. Most covenants in the Hebrew Scriptures are bilateral, requiring ethical commitments of people. One exception is the covenant with Noah. The doctrine of return is a bi-lateral covenant. Justification by faith alone is unilateral with no ethical conditions. (Cf. Rom 3.28) This is clearly unlike the way Jesus spoke of keeping the spiritual laws of love in order to have eternal life. In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18.23-35) and in the Lord's Prayer it is clear that forgiveness of others is a condition of receiving forgiveness. God's forgiveness is not unconditional. It requires human freedom and human decisions. It is, however, infinitely offered and infinitely available for repentance.

Paul's teaching about life in the Spirit after justification often insisted on the ethical behavior that Jesus advocated for returning sinners, but in claiming no need for circumcision of Gentiles Paul insisted that faith alone without any following of the law is all that is required for forgiveness. For Paul justification by faith alone solved his issue with the Jewish Christians who insisted on Gentiles keeping the ancient law about

circumcision, but it also created the problem of seeming to disregard the bi-lateral covenant's law of love that Jesus emphasized and that Paul himself saw as necessary in life in the Spirit. Paul almost admits being conflicted about keeping the law when he asks rhetorically 'Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.' (Rom 3.31) It is very difficult to follow Paul's logic here.

If Paul had spoken of the law of love to the Jewish 'circumcisers' as Jesus did when confronted by the Pharisees about the Sabbath laws, he might have relativized the law about circumcision as Jesus did the Sabbath laws. (Cf. Mark 3.4) Paul would thereby have achieved the same freedom for Gentiles as he did by dismissing the law in general terms. He certainly acknowledged the spiritualizing of the law elsewhere and might have had a better argument with the circumcisers than his claims for justification by faith alone. It certainly would have been more like Jesus.

Faith alone was not, in fact, the only issue relevant to Paul's conflict with the circumcisers. It was faith alone in the sacrificial death of Jesus that warranted freedom from the law of circumcision for the Gentiles. It was not faith in the primacy of love in the covenant as it was for Jesus in the Sabbath issue. Ironically, it was belief in the law of retributive justice that caused Paul to deny the law of circumcision for the benefit of Gentiles. There is a clear conflict about the law here in Paul's thinking. Paul's doctrine of justification was based on a law that he believed God had fulfilled in Jesus' death, thereby removing any necessity for people to keep the covenantal law of love in order to be forgiven. Paul's Pharisaic belief in the necessity of a death penalty for sin compromised his speaking clearly to the circumcisers about the spiritual law of love.

A major problem with the doctrine of justification is that it is clearly a scape-goat transaction. God's wrath is resolved and justice is achieved

by the death of a substitute taking the place of offenders who deserve to die for their sins.

René Girard, a French anthropologist, was an authority on scape-goating in numerous human societies. Modern people, he claimed, cannot easily believe in scape-goat transactions, and the churches are shrinking as a result. For many modern people it is simply incredible that God should be satisfied in any sense, or justice accomplished, by the substitute death of Jesus. Seen as a scape-goat transaction, it now seems outrageous to impute this gospel to God, even if it is explained as God's love for sinners. Transferring merit from an innocent man to achieve retributive justice for the guilty seems unethical as well as cruel. It seems to be 'eye for an eye' justice unlike the compassionate and restorative justice Jesus showed and claimed as God's love for people.

Justification as retributive justice assumes the validity of the death penalty, an assumption that has been discarded in much of the world, at least in civilian contexts. By continuing to emphasize justification, are the churches implicitly supporting the continuation of death penalties? Is owning a gun and using it to kill a threatening person acceptable because the killing of Jesus was necessary? If God can have Jesus killed for a good reason why should human beings, as the image of God, not kill others when they have a good reason? Justification by means of inflicted death is not consistent with the compassion of Jesus or his teaching about God.

The modern necessity of understanding Jesus to be a human being in all senses of the word supports the abhorrence felt by many about claiming that Jesus' death was arranged by God for the purpose of achieving retributive justice. Cyril's claim that 'It was no ordinary man...that God the Father delivered over on our behalf...but it was He Who transcends all creation... so that He might be seen to be amply equivalent for the life

of all² no longer convinces many modern people. Neither does Basil's claim that "It is only the God-man Who can offer to God adequate expiation for us all"³ Even a 'high' Biblical Christology like Paul's 'Son of God Christology' does not allow for the death of Jesus to be seen as other than the death of an innocent man. The doctrine of justification cannot remove the scandal many modern people feel about that logic of forgiveness. The doctrine has been invalidated and it should be left behind in the on-going mission of the Church. Otherwise, the churches will be left behind and may diminish as a result.

Is it not mistaken to insist that God's righteousness be defined as retributive justice? Parents typically forgive their children without requiring full retributive justice. Repentance and restitution, if appropriate, are necessary, but the One Jesus called 'Abba' forgives seventy times seven times, and more.

Ironically, it may be the compassion widely seen in Jesus that now discredits the scape-goat doctrine of his death. Girard claimed the world is much more compassionate than ever before because of the compassionate Spirit of Jesus moving in people inside and outside the churches. *Imitatio Christi* has influenced much of the world that may not even acknowledge his influence.

It appears that it was the priestly tradition in Hebrew religion that influenced Paul and some other New Testament writers to explain Jesus' death as a cultic sacrifice to end all sacrifices. In the prophetic tradition *t'shuvah, return*, rather than sacrifices in themselves led to reconciliation with God. Jesus consistently followed the prophetic tradition. He affirmed the prophetic statement 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice' (Cf. Hos 6.5-6) insisting 'something greater than the Temple is

² Quoted from J.N.D.Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 399

³ *Ibid.* 385

here.’ (Matt 12.6) Ending Temple sacrifices may have been what Jesus intended when he claimed that the Temple would be replaced and when he overturned the tables of those selling sacrificial doves. (Matt 21.12) Paul and others persisted in the belief that a cultic sacrificial death was necessary for God to forgive sinners and they interpreted Jesus’ death as God providing the ultimate sacrifice. This belief has come to the end of its life in the modern world.

Jesus’ death can be seen as a breakthrough in human history of love for enemies, an alternative to scape-goating that most cultures have hitherto believed in. Jesus’ commitment to non-lethal mercy in the way of the cross is the hope for salvation of the world and the way of salvation for individuals. Jesus is reported to say repeatedly in the Synoptic Gospels that if anyone would be his disciple they must take up their cross and follow him. Our crosses have to be ethical ‘crosses’ of all kinds, not cultic actions to satisfy retributive justice. The cross that Jesus suffered was an ethical event rather than a cultic sacrifice. It was the event of Jesus following the covenantal requirement of love for his enemies as he had taught it. It was his fulfilling of his ‘return’ to doing the will of God in his own obedience.

At the Last Supper Jesus asked his followers to remember him by the symbols of bread broken and wine shared, for his body was to be broken and his blood was to be shed as the ‘blood of the covenant.’ (Mark 14.24 and 1 Cor 11.25) This reference was surely to the blood of the covenant that required compassion for enemies rather than the blood of the cultic covenant as the church came to interpret it. The Kingdom that Jesus foresaw with his disciples sharing the symbolic meal with him after his death (Cf. Matt 26.29, Mark 14.25, Luke 22.16) was not to be realized by any cultic action on their part or on his part but by the disciples sharing the same ethical love that Jesus had in his dying. He saw his death coming and it was a great ethical struggle for him to trust that God could realize

the Kingdom despite his death. He asked his followers to remember the covenant of love in their ethical struggles by repetition of his breaking of bread and sharing of wine. The doctrine of justification misses the meaning of Jesus' call for his disciples to remember his ethical sacrifice and join with him in realizing the same covenantal, loving life in the Spirit. Instead, the sacrament in the churches has been predominantly a celebration of individual forgiveness with little or no reference to the covenant and its promise for the world. This could be changed if the churches changed the focus of the sacrament from justification to covenantal life in the Spirit.⁴ The change might have enormous influence for diminishing violence in the world!

Paul's doctrine of justification clearly focused on the salvation of individual sinners, although his teaching about life in the Spirit had a broader scope. Liberation theologians rightly claimed that salvation of the world requires a gospel that addresses all the systemic evils that cause infinite suffering. The gospel of the Kingdom is focussed on this.

While much of Paul's preaching is essential for Christian faith and life, his doctrine of justification has 'collapsed,' as Kaufman said, with the widespread discrediting of Jesus' death as a scapegoat sacrifice, the growing influence of Jesus' compassion, the widespread rejection of the death penalty and the recovery of the doctrine of return as central to Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul's great preaching about life in the Spirit needs to be liberated from justification and celebrated more unequivocally by the churches.

The place of Paul's doctrine of justification in Scripture and its centrality in past and present history make it difficult for many to challenge it.

⁴ Cf. Paul W. Newman, *The Sacrament of Nonlethal Love*, *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Summer 2017, Volume 52, Number 3, 459-464

Many, nonetheless, are able to ignore, or even challenge, other Pauline ideas such as Paul's view of double predestination, (Rom 9.18) his apparent tolerance of slavery, his homophobic denunciations (although these were largely aimed at extreme cultic practices of his era), his views of the place of women in the home and church (if these, in fact, come from Paul...There is a possibility of later insertions on the subject in Paul's letters), his shunning of sinners in the church (I Cor 5.11-13) which some churches have adopted, his acceptance of baptism on behalf of the dead (I Cor 15.29) which is practised by the Mormons, his short-term apocalyptic expectations and his cursing of any who preach a gospel contrary to his. (Gal 1.9)

Thankfully, few have followed the Medieval Inquisitors who appear to have followed Paul's advice to 'deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.' (I Cor 5. 5) Joan of Arc and many others paid the price for this advice, although Paul himself no doubt did not intend to call for the murder of sinners in order to save them. Delivering them to Satan probably meant excluding them from the church. He might curse and shun the sinner or even, on a bad day, wish for his castration (Cf. Gal 5.12) but he would not call for his murder. Paul's advice was to 'Leave room for the wrath of God,' (Rom 12.19) and he called consistently for love in living in the Spirit.

If many of Paul's ideas can be set aside because the world has changed since his time, should not justification now be set aside as the central pillar of the Christian gospel? Its emphasis on unconditional forgiveness seems to have made 'cheap grace' and 'the comfortable pew' attractive and diminished the bi-lateral covenant that Jesus taught.

As an aside, one can observe that the Canons of the Council of Trent (1547) appear to have come closer to the mind of Jesus than the doctrine

of justification. They, like Paul, declared that it is in error to claim 'that man can be justified before God by his own works...apart from the divine grace through Jesus Christ' and 'that without the prevenient inspiration of the Holy Spirit and his aid a man can believe, hope and love, or can repent,' They also stated that it is in error to hold 'that the free will of man, moved and aroused by God, does not co-operate at all by responding to the awakening call of God.' and 'that it is not in the power of man to make his ways evil but that evil works as well as good are wrought by God .' Other Canons of the Council also show better balance on the freedom of human beings *vis a vis* the law than Paul's doctrine of justification. So does James, the brother of Jesus, who insists that Abraham's obedience together with his faith accounted for his divine approval. (Jas 2.21-23)

The persistence of the scape- goat doctrine of Jesus' death appears to be damaging for churches and for the world. Jesus' gospel is desperately needed in both church and world. That gospel proclaims a renewed bi-lateral covenant that starts with prevenient grace in the return and continues with the grace of the Spirit coming as love, not of our own making, to give all the gifts and fruit of the Spirit. The laws of the covenant are spiritualized as requirements of love. Sin is spiritualized as all that is against the Spirit. The wrath of God is not a theological foundation of the gospel. Neither is retribution a main factor. The death penalty is not assumed to be necessary. God's righteousness is not so defined. Individual benefit is not the central emphasis. The return to seeking God's Reign embraces all the systems in creation, including beleaguered sinners, and promises God's Reign for the world.

In our times the urgent ecumenical question is: 'How can the gospel of Jesus, the covenantal return to seeking God's Reign, rather than the doctrine of justification, be lifted up (Cf. John 3.14) to draw the churches and the world together?'

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