# JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH:
## DISTORTIONS OF THE DOCTRINE

THE devil, as our Lord has said, is a liar and the father of lying (John viii. 44), and a study of the Church's theological history provides the clearest possible demonstration of his incessant activity as a perverter of the truth of God from the beginning right up to the present day. The doctrine of justification by faith has been and still is a focal point of his attack. This assault on the truth has been sustained with a varied ingenuity of approach and technique which may correctly be termed diabolical, and yet it is possible to discern one cardinal strategic principle running through the whole, namely, an emphasis on externals. The principles of the Gospel, grace and faith, are essentially internal principles: they are not perceptible to the external senses. Thus faith is defined as " the proof of things that are not seen " (Heb. xi. 1); that is, it has to do with the eternal verities and is in no way dependent upon corroboration of an external nature, for the New Testament declares that visible, external things are temporary and impermanent, whereas the things that are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. iv. 18). Emphasis on things external and visible, therefore, cuts at the very root of the doctrine of justification by faith.

It is plain from the New Testament that " confidence in the flesh ", confidence, that is, in externals, was the greatest menace to the spiritual integrity of the Apostolic Church. Even these earliest Christians were fatally prone to trust in mere external rites, sacraments, and relationships and to pass by those truths and significances on the apprehension of which their eternal security depended; it was necessary for them to be reminded constantly that their salvation was " by grace, through faith, not of works " (cf. Phil. iii. 3–9; Eph. ii. 8 f.; Tit. iii. 5; 2 Tim. i. 9; Rom. xi. 6; Gal. ii. 16, iii. 2 f., v. 2–6; Rom. ii. 28 f.; 1 Cor. i. 13–17). It is disconcerting to observe how soon, in spite of these apostolic warnings, the organized Church developed an emphasis on things external. This was in part due to the early appearance of schismatic and heretical movements within her ranks, which induced her to attempt to safeguard her corporate and doctrinal unity by intensifying the rigidity of her organization; and this in turn began to involve her in an undue preoccupation with externals. Occupation with externals is inevitable in the proper government of the Church, but the really serious thing was that the measure of her pre-occupation with externals was also the measure of her deflection from the spiritual principles of Holy Scripture. Divisive excursions during the first fifty years or so of the second century, such as the revolt against legalism in the Church under Marcion the Gnostic and the revolt against worldliness in the Church under Montanus the ascetic, indicated, whatever the errors associated with such movements, that matters were far from well within the Church and at the same time encouraged the hardening of her external standards and disciplines. Sins were coming to be categorized as remissible and irremissible, venial and mortal, ante-baptismal and post-baptismal, and the doctrine of penance was invented and invoked to bolster up the Church's flagging discipline.

Discipline is undoubtedly a very necessary mark of the Christian Church, but penance was not a scriptural way of ensuring it. The New Testament doctrine of repentance is something very different from the ecclesiastical doctrine of penance. The former points to the grace of God, the latter to the works of man, and yet so great is the propensity for perversion that the latter early began to supplant the former. The barren impositions of ecclesiastical authoritarianism increasingly obscured the evangelical freedom of the spirit and led by degrees to the subjugation of the ordinary members of the Church to the dictation of a hierarchy that was out of harmony with the apostolic pattern. Supposed human merit cast a shadow upon the perfect merit of Jesus Christ, robbing it of its unique worth and nearness, and, for a Christian who had sinned, the way back into the favour of God was no longer by the purgation of the precious blood of Christ, but by the fulfilment of a toilsome penitential discipline of works imposed upon him by the Church—the purgatory of penance.

Even martyrdom was coming to have an " external " significance. Already in an early sub-apostolic writing, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, we meet with a suggestion that those who suffer martyrdom are rewarded with a greater glory than other Christians (*Vis.* iii. 2). It is hardly without admiration that, in the *Epistles* of Ignatius, we watch the Bishop of Antioch posting passionately to his martyrdom in Rome, near the commencement of the second Christian century. Four or five decades later the *Letter of the Smyrnaeans* on the martyrdom of Polycarp

speaks with disapproval of the practice of voluntarily courting martyrdom (Sect. 4). Such a vogue was closely connected with the teaching now winning sanction that martyrdom cancelled out all sin of every description and opened the gate to the highest glory of heaven.

These ideas of meritorious living and dying were also leading at the same time to the view of Christian society as consisting of two levels—a lower level for the ordinary Christian, and a higher level for the extraordinary Christian. The apostolic age is hardly over before readers of the *Shepherd of Hermas* are instructed that it is no sin for a widower or widow to marry again, but that those who do not remarry " gain greater honour and glory with the Lord " (*Mand.* iv. 4). From this it was not a far step to the lauding of celibacy or perpetual virginity as a virtue of perfection.. Still more serious is the teaching in *Hermas* that although after baptism there should be no further opportunity for repentance, yet God in His mercy permits a man who sins after baptism to repent, but *once only*: he who sins and repents frequently will find his repentance of no avail (*Mand.* iv. 3). Of course, not an iota of scriptural support is adduced for this doctrine, because there is none. No doubt such instruction was intended to engender a high standard of Christian morality within the Church, but none the less it constituted a grave removal from the apostolic teaching concerning repentance, faith, and grace, and already the cumbersome structure of penance, merit, and purgatory was developing from it. The things Church members did or did not do were being reckoned more and more as the measure of their acceptability before God, and, correspondingly, less and less did their acceptance because of what Christ had done for them receive proper emphasis.

Towards the end of the second century Clement of Alexandria writes in similar vein about two repentances, the first at conversion, after which a man ought not to sin again, and the second after conversion, mercifully " vouchsafed in the case of those who, though in faith, fall into any transgression ". " Continual and successive repentings for sins," he explains, " differ in no way from the case of those who have not believed at all," and are only " the semblance of repentance, not repentance. itself ". But even the man who obtains pardon at the second repentance " ought to fear, as one no longer washed to the forgiveness of sins " (*Strom.* ii. 13). The implication of

this last warning is that, as the washing of baptism cannot be repeated, so too cleansing in the blood of Christ cannot be expected a second time—a theory which is more explicitly stated by Origen, Clement's pupil and successor.

It was now necessary for the Church to declare on what grounds this second pardon could be obtained, and the elaboration of an answer to this problem was carried further by Tertullian, a contemporary of Clement. He too speaks of a second repentance, which is also the *last* repentance, though he is careful to advise that this opening for repentance should not be regarded as an opening for sinning. Thereafter there is no further hope. This second repentance must be exhibited by the outward display of contrition known by the Greek term *exomologesis* (that is, utter or full confession), which involves submission to rigorous discipline and self-humiliation. In performing it penitents are required to " roll before the feet of the presbyters and kneel to God's dear ones ", and also to undergo " bodily inconveniences, so that, unwashed, sordidly attired, estranged from gladness, they must spend their time in the roughness of sackcloth and the horridness of ashes and the sunkenness of face caused by fasting ". *Exomologesis*, according to Tertullian, is calculated to move God to mercy and to appease His displeasure; the severe treatment a man in this way inflicts upon himself acts as a satisfaction for the sins which he has committed, and he is encouraged to hope that " temporal mortification " will serve to " discharge eternal punishments ". " Believe me," says Tertullian, " the less quarter you give yourself, the more will God give you."

" If you shrink back from *exomologesis*," he exhorts again, " let your heart consider hell-fire, which *exomologesis* will extinguish for you; and imagine first the magnitude of the penalty, that you may not hesitate about the adoption of the remedy." Tertullian, it is true, affirms that this penitential discipline of *exomologesis* was " instituted by the Lord ", but the only scriptural support that he succeeds in conjuring up for this assertion is the example of Nebuchadnezzar " working out his *exomologesis* by a seven years' squalor, with his nails wildly growing after the eagle's fashion and his unkempt hair wearing the shagginess of a lion ", to which is later added a somewhat extraordinary reference to Adam, " restored by *exomologesis*

to his own paradise ".[1] Such support is so weak as to be no support at all. Here, indeed, less than two centuries after our Lord's offering of Himself as one sacrifice for sins for ever, we observe the doctrine of justification by works of penance usurping the Christian's birthright of justification by faith in the perfect work of Christ alone.

We may follow the lamentable process as it is carried yet further by Origen during the first half of the third century. The Church is now obliged to pronounce which sins are mortal and which are not, a task, as Origen admits, that is by no means easy (*In Exod. Hom.* x. 3). He declares that the soul of a Christian who commits a mortal sin is dead, basing his assertion on the words in Ezekiel (xviii. 4, 20), " The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Into such a soul, he infers, Christ cannot enter, because life cannot coexist with death nor light with darkness. " Therefore," he concludes, " if anyone is conscious that he has a mortal sin within himself, let him not expect that Christ will enter into his soul until he has cast out his sin from himself through the penance of fullest satisfaction " (*In Levit. Hom.* xii. 3). In the Church, then, a twofold remission of sins is now officially recognized. Firstly, there is remission by baptism, and this baptism may be either the baptism of water, when profession of trust in Christ is made, or the baptism of blood, namely, martyrdom: both forms of baptism ensure immediate and full remission of all sins. Secondly, there is remission by penance, as imposed by the Church, for sins committed after water-baptism, and this method is prolonged and painful.

Had Origen carried his argument to its logical end, he would have been forced to conclude equally that Christ cannot enter into the dead soul of the unbeliever, and therefore that there is no hope of conversion for anyone. It is not the unbeliever, however, but the believer whom he deprives of the only scriptural ground of justification, which is the perfect atoning work of Christ. The believer is told, in fact, that after baptism the blood of Jesus Christ no longer avails for the cleansing away of sin, nor is it sufficient for the Christian who has sinned to make confession of his sin to God; it is necessary for him to confess his sin in the Church and to embrace humbly the penitential remedy prescribed by the hierarchy, if there is to be any hope of his winning his way back into the favour of God.

[1] The above references are from Tertullian's *De Paenitentia*, vii–xii.

The unhappy stage has been reached where the unambiguous apostolic assurance, *written to Christians*, that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from *all* sin, both ante-baptismal and post-baptismal, is obscured from view by a thick fog of externalism, and believers are defrauded of their great heavenly Advocate, Jesus Christ the Righteous, who is Himself the propitiation for their sins and, indeed, for the sins of the whole world (1 John i. 7, 9; ii. 1 f.). This and other scriptures leave absolutely no place for the supposition that certain sins have to be propitiated by means of the indignities of penances because the Christian may no longer seek forgiveness by the blood of Christ. Such a supposition is the very negation of the Gospel. It undermines the believer's security in Christ and places him in uneasy dependence upon the pronouncements of the human hierarchs of the Church.

The difficulty and uncertainty associated with the remission of post-baptismal sins was a dreadful burden for the average Christian. It was only during one or other of the spasmodic outbursts of persecution that the more precipitate spirits could have a reasonable chance of undergoing the martyr's baptism of blood. Consequently, converts to Christianity became reluctant to take the irrevocable baptismal plunge, and the practice of deferring baptism as long as possible became widespread. Thus people would wait, if possible, until the approach of death, or at least until a serious illness which might prove fatal intervened, and then they would request the sacrament, placing their confidence in the immediate remission of all sins which was supposed to accompany its administration.

With the promulgation of Constantine's Edict of Toleration in A.D. 313 the door to martyrdom was closed within the Roman Empire, and, as though by way of compensation for this " loss ", the protracted self-martyrdom of the ascetic life, hitherto followed by the few, began to win large numbers of devotees. The popular and undiscriminating surge into the Church's ranks, which resulted from the official approval and encouragement of Christianity by the state, could not fail to include many opportunists and gave a tremendous impetus to the division of Christian society into an ascetic aristocracy and a proletariat of a supposedly low spiritual level. It also lent impetus to a movement away from society altogether, which was the practical expression of the thought that only by with-

drawal from the world could the conditions most suitable for the ascetic and contemplative life be realized. No longer, it was felt, could the Church with its immensely swollen ranks be regarded as herself a protest against the surrounding worldliness: the tide of the world had broken her defences and flooded into her very heart. And so the monastic movement developed and, as might be expected, made a strong appeal to many who were earnestly striving after higher things.

For the Christian, the road to heaven had become a steep, treacherous, and uncertain ascent. He was taught that only by rigorous self-affliction and detachment from the affairs of this world could he have any prospect of reaching the summit: the harsher and the more unpleasant the disciplines he inflicted upon himself, the greater were his hopes of final success. There was none of the apostolic joy and security of being already seated in the heavenly places in Christ. The emphasis was on arduous personal effort and personal training in the struggle for the goal, not on the goal as being already assured in Christ for every believer.

This view of the religious life was the product partly of the penitential theology which, as we have seen, had become so firmly established in the Church, and partly of the infiltration into Christian thought of notions that were distinctive, in the main, of Greek philosophy. Chiefly responsible for the introduction of these philosophical concepts was the Neoplatonism which flourished in Alexandria from the first century onwards and which had been adopted and adapted by the leaders of the catechetical school there in pursuance of their thesis that between philosophy and Christianity there existed a fundamental harmony. Of these imported notions the basic one was that of a dualism of body and spirit: matter, and therefore the body, was regarded as essentially evil, and consequently the wise man would not expect to achieve happiness through the bodily sensations and desires. On the contrary, he would subdue his body and its appetites by every means possible in an endeavour to be as nearly as possible independent of it, in order that, by a progressive exercise and concentration of the spirit, he might ascend the ladder, stage by stage, to the goal of the intellectual contemplation of the ineffable essence of God, and mingle his spirit with the supreme Spirit and Source of all. This

direct vision of God was the very bliss of heaven itself, but it was only the rare soul who could ever hope to achieve it.

The New Testament, however, teaches that through faith the knowledge of God is vouchsafed in Christ to even the humblest and most inexpert believer. Faith is, indeed, the key to knowledge, for in Christ, who is the object of faith and the Revealer of the Father, " are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge " (Col. ii. 3; John i. 18). Again, the New Testament constantly stresses the importance of concern for others and of self-abnegation. The body, it is true, is not to be indulged: it is to be kept under and brought into subjection (1 Cor. ix. 27), but it is not to be despised and neglected, for it is God's handiwork and a glorious resurrection awaits it (1 Cor. xv. 42 ff.). Mystical asceticism, for all its voluntary rigours and severities, is by its very nature preoccupied with self rather than with others, and this is true of monasticism in general, for the prime consideration of the individual monk, even when a member of a community, was the salvation of his own soul. It is for this reason that in history the line of asceticism and mysticism has been fundamentally a selfish line: they represent a way of life that, despite the sincerity of so many of their followers, is at heart autocentric and hence, judged by the standards of the New Testament, eccentric.

From the first, the dualism of body and spirit was a governing factor in the development of monasticism. Nearness to God was estimated in accordance with the extent of the indignities heaped upon the body. Some even considered the natural functions of the body to be evil and wished futilely to win their way to an angelic state of the cessation of these functions. The mere sight of a woman could be regarded as a dire calamity! To take a bath was a great wickedness, and it was not long before dirt and self-neglect came to be viewed as a mark of sanctity! Holiness and self-mortification, in fact, became synonymous terms; yet it would be a mistake not to recognize that it was justification even more than sanctification which the monk hoped to win by means of the rigours of his mortification of the body. It may, in fact, be remarked that justification and sanctification continued to be confused in the theology of the medieval Church, and this confusion still persists to-day in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Justification by works was implicit even in the three " counsels " or basic rules of

monasticism, namely, poverty, chastity, and obedience, for in them once again the emphasis is placed on externals. This indicated the inherent weakness of the monastic system, which, despite all the centuries of its prevalence in Europe, was all along doomed to spiritual failure because it was a structure built on the sand of human merit. In short, it was founded upon law rather than upon grace, and the vast majority of its exponents demonstrated how hopelessly they had failed to grasp the New Testament truth that it is only through grace that the law can be kept, and only by faith in Another's work that the sinner can be justified.

Evangelistic zeal, missionary enterprise, and concern for the souls of others have always flowed from the proclamation of the doctrine of free grace and its rider, justification by faith alone. The monastic concept of separation from the world, no matter how laudable its original intentions may have been, is the clearest indication of the distance to which monasticism had departed from the command of our Lord to go to the uttermost parts of the earth and preach the Gospel to every creature. The shutting up of Christians in isolation from the outside world ran quite counter to this injunction and was certainly not in line with the example of the Apostles. This isolationism was only possible because the monastic perspective had lost sight of the Gospel and limited its purview with the self-centred notion that contact with mankind is prejudicial to the safety of one's own soul.

Another factor that the followers of the monastic ideal failed to take into account was that, no matter how successfully a man may shut himself away from the outside world and all its iniquity, he is quite unable to get away from himself and the corruption of his own nature. In other words, it is futile for a man to think that he can isolate himself from sin, because, as our Lord taught, the things that defile a man do not come from without, but from the dark depths of his own heart. This explains the fact that in course of time the monasteries in general became dens of corruption—corruption which manifested itself in the greedy amassing of personal possessions, the vilest impurity of life, and unabashed lawlessness, the very antithesis in fact of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience which the members of the monastic orders had solemnly sworn to maintain. It was not that the monks were worse than other men, but that the disclosure of what went on behind many

monastic walls once more afforded stark proof that the heart of man is desperately wicked and that beneath the cloak of religion the most horrible sins may flourish. Even the attempts to bring about a reform of the corruptions of the system prior to the Reformation—which Professor G. G. Coulton has chronicled with such careful erudition in his *Five Centuries of Religion* (Camb. Univ. Press, 1951)—were spiritually fruitless for the reason that they were simply attempts at enforcing the monastic rules as it were from without; theirs was still an external emphasis, whereas the true need was for internal reform, from within the human heart, through the inward principles of grace and faith. It was not until the Reformation, when the great scriptural doctrine of salvation " by grace, through faith, not of works ", burst again at last before the attention of a spiritually groping Europe, that the secret of pure spiritual religion was rediscovered.

Distortions of the doctrine of justification by faith have always resulted from erroneous or inadequate views of the condition of man before God. The extreme of aberration was voiced in the fifth century by Pelagius, who denied the corruption of human nature, and affirmed not only that it was possible for men to live sinless lives apart from the grace of the Gospel, but that there had in fact been men who were without sin even before the advent of Christ. Pelagius, however, with his assertion of man's total ability, came up against a redoubtable opponent in the person of Augustine who vigorously championed the doctrine of man's total inability, attacking with a heavy barrage of passages from Scripture.

Alluding to Paul's words in 1 Cor. vii. 25, Augustine writes: " He does not say, ' I obtained mercy because I was faithful,' but ' in order that I might be faithful ', thus showing that even faith itself cannot be had without God's exercise of mercy, and that consequently it is the gift of God." In further support of this position he adduces Eph. ii. 8 f., as stating plainly that faith is the gift of God. " And," he continues, " lest any should claim to have deserved so great a gift by any works of their own, the Apostle immediately adds, ' Not of works, lest any man should boast '; not that he means to deny good works, or to empty them of their value, because he says that God renders to every man according to his works; but he would have works proceed from faith, and not faith from works. Therefore it is

from Him that we have works of righteousness, from whom comes also faith itself, concerning which it is written, ' The just shall live by faith ' " (Hab. ii. 4; Rom. i. 17) (*De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, 17). Later on in the same work Augustine remarks that Paul " constantly puts faith before the law, since we are not able to do what the law commands unless we obtain the strength to do it by the prayer of faith " (ibid., 28).

Augustine proceeds to explain that it is God who initiates the work of grace in the heart which is dead because of sin, and that He does this by His prevenient and operating grace, man himself being unable to contribute in any way to this work. But once the will has been roused by the grace of regeneration then it co-operates with the Holy Spirit. As Augustine puts it, God " prepares the human will and perfects by His co-operation what He initiates by His operation. . . . He operates without us in order that we may become willing; but when we once possess the will, and so use it as to act, He co-operates with us " (ibid., 33). It follows that there is " most certainly no such thing as prevenient merit, otherwise the grace would be no longer grace " (ibid., 44; cf. Rom. xi. 6). It is thus " the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . by which alone men are delivered from evil, and without which they do absolutely no good thing, whether in thought, or will and affection, or in action " (*De Correptione et Gratia*, 3).

Pelagianism, despite Augustine's refutation of its errors, did not cease to dominate the theological scene with varying degrees of intensity during the succeeding mediæval centuries. Mediæval theology as a whole tended to be semi-Pelagian in character—that is, in expression it avoided the extremes of Pelagianism proper; it regarded man as partially capable, as sick rather than dead because of sin, and thus as able in some measure to help towards his own salvation. But in practice the mediæval Church walked along the edge of the Pelagian precipice. Its members were taught to go about to establish their own righteousness. Hence doctrines of merit were elaborated which affirmed the ability of man to perform works of a meritorious nature not only after but even before justification. Indeed, the hierarchy went so far as to invent works of supererogation, works, that is, over and above what God demands of a man, and the resulting hypothetical treasury of surplus merit, which was made available, at a price, to those whose balance

of merit was on the debit side, proved a lucrative source of income for the replenishment of the papal coffers. Worse still, it removed the attention of needy souls from the perfect and only merit of Jesus Christ, and led them to seek justification from another quarter.

In the seventeenth century Pelagianism, which the Reformers had repudiated in no uncertain manner, reared its head in the Protestant ranks under the guise of Socinianism. Almost simultaneously, semi-Pelagianism reappeared in the teachings of Arminianism. The Socinian system was a compound of a number of ancient heresies and was built upon the premiss of the supremacy of reason in religion, whereas the Arminian position was governed to a large extent by sentiment. It is not without significance, as a contemporary Socinian scholar has pointed out, that the rise of Arminianism " was undoubtedly favourable to the spread of Socinian influences " (H. John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England* [Oxford, 1951], p. 20). The tendency of semi-Pelagianism is always towards Pelagianism and away from the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone, without works of any kind. This tendency is manifest also in Roman Catholicism, which, though semi-Pelagian in theory, degenerates towards Pelagianism in practice, as is evidenced by her liturgical formalism, *ex opere operato* views of the sacraments, the confessional, penances, and so on.

Finally, it may be remarked that so-called " subjective " conceptions of the atonement represent a departure from the New Testament doctrine of justification, since they are man-centred in perspective and reject the idea that reconciliation between God and man can be effected only through satisfaction being made for sin. The atonement, in short, is regarded as producing a beneficial effect upon man rather than as meeting the demands of God's justice. Hence the doctrine of justification is very much at stake. The " moral influence " theory propounded in the twelfth century by Abelard and Peter Lombard explained the death of Christ as an exhibition or pledge to man of the love of God, whereby it was intended to stir up a response of love in the heart of man, and this response was held to be the ground of justification: " the death of Christ justifies us," wrote Peter Lombard, " inasmuch as through it charity is stirred up in our hearts " (*Sent*. III, Dist.

xix. 1). The Socinian theory of the seventeenth century was thoroughly Pelagian in declaring that justification consists in the following of the example of Christ; while the Ritschlian theory of last century stressed the sheer love of God to such a degree that every suggestion of justice and wrath was disallowed, and explained the death of Christ as a proof to man that, after all, everything is well between him and God and that his misgivings and feelings of guilt are but the projections of faulty thinking on his part. Here the New Testament concept of justification has been entirely discarded. Such subjective views are by no means uncommon at the present time. There is beyond doubt a subjective aspect of the atonement, but if the scriptural doctrine is to be preserved intact it is essential that the objective aspect should ever be kept in the forefront of our thinking. The ground of our justification resides precisely in this objective fact, namely, " that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself: . . . for He hath made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him " (2 Cor. v. 19, 21). It is for us to appropriate by simple faith this perfect work of God performed on our behalf once for all in Jesus Christ.

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