

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_canadian-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php)

# Righteousness from God

KENNETH HAMILTON

Protestantism was born out of the struggle for the doctrine of justification by faith. This idea is strange to the man of to-day and even to Protestant people in the churches. . . . This whole complex of ideas which for more than a century—not so very long ago—was discussed in every household and workshop, in every market and country inn in Germany, is now scarcely understandable to our most intelligent scholars.

THESE words of Paul Tillich<sup>1</sup> are not to be taken too literally, especially in view of what Tillich has said elsewhere about the way the teaching of Martin Kaehler on justification took root and budded in his own understanding<sup>2</sup>. In our present age theology is certainly more remote from the market and the workshop than it used to be—as well as more remote from the life of the churches than it ought to be—and few doctrinal issues have aroused much heat of debate among any but theologians. The doctrine of justification has passed largely into academic hands, where it may have become partly petrified into a formula. Yet the theologians have, at the worst, never quite forgotten it; and, in the twentieth-century revival of Reformation theology associated with the name of Barth, it has come back again as a living issue. Not only so, for the expansion of the ecumenical movement has made it a focus of controversy. Once more it is the centre of a struggle. Happily, this time it is primarily a struggle to understand. Theologians who find themselves divided by theological traditions which belong on opposite sides of the fence with regard to this doctrine are taking pains to find out precisely where their differences lie and how essential or non-essential their conflict of view-point is. It is one of the signs of the times that the latest volume carrying the title of *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*<sup>3</sup> is the record of a conference on this subject attended by representatives of the "Catholic" and "Evangelical" schools of thought within the Church of England. (Incidentally, the appearance of such a book is a reminder that the ecumenical movement is not just an inter-denominational affair moving in the direction of Church union, but even more essentially a growing toward Church *unity*).

But if the doctrine of justification is coming again into the theological picture in no uncertain way, it is coming with a difference. This is not simply because the church background to-day is very unlike that of the days of the Reformation, and Christians are learning how to speak the truth in love. It is also because Christian theologians in every ecclesiastical tradition are looking at this historic doctrine with pre-suppositions belonging to the twentieth century and not to the sixteenth. The doctrine can never

mean to us exactly what it meant to our fore-fathers, because we do not stand in their shoes or look from earth to heaven with their eyes. In this relation, even the most learned historical scholarship will fail to bring alive the doctrine out of the past. Not that its truth has changed, but to-day we put to it new questions and so receive new answers. And perhaps what our generation is asking most anxiously and persistently of the doctrine is what it can tell us about man's nature and his capacity for receiving God's grace. Does goodness come from God's side only when He justifies men, or does some element of goodness in men reach out to meet God's goodness?

Of course, in a sense the doctrine has always been concerned to answer this question, which has been debated often enough in the past. When Luther looked back for support in connection with his "discovery" of justification by faith alone, he found it in Augustine's argument against Pelagius that grace was God's free gift and not the result of man's moral effort. But in Reformation times the doctrine was prized above all because it brought with it certainty of salvation. To-day, although the questions at issue are all ones that have been raised before, the emphasis appears to be less upon the kind of salvation man receives than upon the kind of man it is who receives salvation: an *anthropological* rather than a *soteriological* emphasis. Even when it is the nature of salvation which is being discussed, most often the terms applied to salvation seem to be chosen with a view to their suitability for establishing a doctrine of man.

This emphasis on the human end of the encounter between man and God is most clearly seen when justification "according to Luther" is under critical fire. A short time back, the present Archbishop of Canterbury asked for some statements to be prepared by groups who should review the theological situation in England as it affected the possible future of Church union. The first of these statements was produced from the Anglo-Catholic side and was called *Catholicity*.<sup>4</sup> In it, Luther's "by faith alone" was mentioned and rejected. But the treatment of justification was subordinated to an attack upon what the authors of *Catholicity* took to be Luther's view of the natural order of creation, so that when an answer appeared from the British Free Church side<sup>5</sup> this was forced to give much more space to an exposition of what Luther had in fact taught about man in creation, total depravity, the scope of the human intellect and free-will, than to justification itself. The concern to uphold the status of the natural order (and thus of man) evidenced in *Catholicity* arises as a protest against Luther's having made redemption the central issue in theology. Appeal to the doctrine of creation in this context is made in order to establish some positive value inhering in the nature of unredeemed man. It is noteworthy that no single point in Barthian theology is so often quoted as Barth's denial of a "point of contact" between man and God existing in man himself; Barth's description of man, and not his insistence upon the unlimited sovereignty of God, has provoked scandalized reactions. Recently, in this *Journal*, A. S. Dewdney found the central argument of Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros* unaccept-

able because of its rejection of *eros* (man's natural striving to rise to the good) as the point of contact with divine *agape* (God's condescending grace).

Nygren expounds an uncompromising Reformation theology. He holds to the central Lutheran tradition by assuming that any Christian doctrine of man must be drawn from a Biblical doctrine of redemption, and not *vice versa*. In so doing he not only offends "Catholic" and "liberal" theologians. His complete separation of *agape* and *eros* has not been looked on with favour by such severe critics of liberal Protestantism as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Yet his consistency is impressive. It is much easier to find fault with his conclusions than to refute his arguments. It is one thing to point out that there are alternative views which can claim support from passages in the New Testament. It is quite another thing to show that these alternatives do not fall before Nygren's own criticisms as being alien in spirit to the New Testament and false to the Gospel proclaimed there. To proceed as Mr. Dewdney has done, for instance, and to label Nygren a heretic for neglecting the "wholeness" of Catholic truth is to appeal to just that theological tradition which Nygren repudiates. To insist that truth lies with "synthesis" is to declare invalid the Reformation theology Nygren is presenting, without taking into account the ground upon which that theology is based.

Nygren does not insist on God's outgoing *agape* (descending to man apart from any upward reach of *eros* from man to God) because he has arbitrarily chosen to concentrate upon one element in the New Testament to the exclusion of other equally prominent elements. He argues that if the *agape* of the New Testament is accepted, then *eros* must of necessity be ruled out. In *Agape and Eros* much space is given to showing that when a union between *agape* and *eros* is attempted, the result is always to destroy any true understanding of *agape*. Those who seek God in this fashion are shut off from the grace which comes down to them as sinners powerless to rise to God by their own efforts. This is not mere theory, but has been demonstrated in the history of the Church. Men have constructed "heavenly ladders" by means of which they have thought to climb up to God by their own efforts: the Way of Merit, the Inner Way of Mysticism, and the Way of Speculative Thought. Reformation theology broke with the synthesis of philosophy and theology achieved by Rome because it saw the results of this synthesis and was compelled to repudiate them as evidence of a betrayal of the Gospel of Christ. On any other count, the Reformation must be regarded as an error and a lamentable misfortune, even if excusable in the light of history. Nygren believes that the Reformation was a recovery of a true Christian witness, and that Luther's watch-word, "by faith alone", was the authentic note of that witness.

For the positive basis upon which the inability of man to respond to God was proclaimed we should turn to Nygren's powerful *Commentary on Roman*.<sup>6</sup> which, if not so much of a theological land-mark as Barth's famous

book on the same Epistle, is likely to "date" less than the other. Nygren finds that the main theme of Romans is the new righteousness which came with Jesus: the righteousness belonging to the Kingdom of God. This new righteousness exceeded the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees because it superseded the righteousness of the law. It was *the righteousness of God*, or—it was the same thing—*righteousness from God*. Nygren quotes Philippians 3: 4-9: "If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: . . . as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ . . . For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."<sup>7</sup> This righteousness from God, being quite other than the righteousness of the law, makes it impossible for us to imagine that it has anything to do with any righteousness we may happen to possess. In Romans, says Nygren, Paul uses every kind of device to drive home the point that *we* do nothing about God's righteousness but receive it. Luther wrote in the beginning of his exposition of the Epistle: "The sum total of this epistle is to destroy, root out, and bring to naught all carnal wisdom and righteousness."<sup>8</sup> Of course, a certain righteousness does belong to man, in so far as he obeys the law of God, and this relative righteousness is of great importance in man's ethical relation to his fellows. But the new righteousness which comes from God, and by which man is related to God, is not ethical righteousness or else it would come under the law and effect nothing new.

By separating these two kinds of righteousness, Nygren is able to show that a common view of justification by faith, which makes faith a substitute (perhaps an easy substitute) for good works, is mistaken. God does not replace the moral obligation to obey the law by the moral obligation to have faith. God's righteousness "depends on faith", but it depends upon God's gift of faith and not upon man's decision to have faith. Nygren finds it strange that theologians should have so misunderstood faith as to "have assigned co-operative roles to God and man, attempting to determine what each must contribute in the work of salvation"<sup>9</sup>—as though the Gospel were only a power for salvation when man reacted on his side with faith. That a man has faith is rather evidence that the Gospel has exercised its power on him. The contrary view has been put forward by F. H. Maycock, Principal of Pusey House, Oxford, in an essay on "Justification by Faith and the Means of Salvation" from the above-mentioned *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*. Principal Maycock writes that, when reconciliation of man with God takes place, "The means by which it is accomplished in man is man's discovery of his powerlessness and of the nature of sin; as a result he hands himself over to Incarnate Charity and his recreation in Christ begins".<sup>10</sup> Such a statement would strike Nygren as quite unintelligible. How can any one who is powerless *hand himself over*? To speak in one breath of man's

powerlessness and also of man's decision being the means of his salvation is a halting between a theology of grace and a theology of works which succeeds in making the worst of both theological worlds. Either we take the will's impotence seriously, or we do not. Either we accept grace as God's free gift or we make it wait upon our own choosing, which means that our response itself is a grace which God cannot give us, but which we possess in our own right.

The Reformation theology expounded by Nygren has never hesitated to confront men with a decisive Either/Or instead of encouraging them to think they can have their cake and eat it too. Luther's "by faith alone" means that, if we believe that righteousness is from God, we do not at the same time save a little corner for human righteousness in order to safeguard, perhaps, moral experience. It means that we ought to face up to the truth that the experience of faith is not moral experience and may well negate such experience.

Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free;  
Force me to render up my sword,  
And I shall conqueror be.

The nineteenth-century piety of George Matheson's lines retains the paradoxical form exhibited also in the writings of a Luther, a Kierkegaard, or a Barth. But, taken merely as piety and as poetry, such sentiments lose the *scandalizing* quality that theological assertions possess. Not the least virtue which belongs to Nygren's drastic division between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of man is that, by cutting through a moralistic and legalistic approach to faith, it opens up the way for a truly creative Christian ethics. The pages in *Commentary on Romans* dealing with Paul's moral teaching refute the charge often brought against such theologies as Nygren's: that they make God into a tyrant and thus destroy the foundations of morality.

If Nygren's division between the righteousness from God and man's righteousness does not deny the need for moral effort, it may still be objected that it creates an unbridgeable gulf between creation and redemption which, by its disparagement of the natural order, displays an almost Manichean contempt for God's creation. This objection arises because of a fundamental difference in method which distinguishes the type of theology aiming at "synthesis" and a theology of Either/Or. The first attempts to read Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation, and Redemption as points on a map which can be grasped in one sweep of the mind. We can survey this map and find the relation of each feature on it to one another, in this way being enabled to guess the purpose of the whole. Such a theology is willing to speculate on the reason for Creation, or whether the Incarnation would have been necessary had there been no Fall. Its assumption is that nature is

not to be destroyed but perfected in God's plan of redemption. To quote Principal Maycock again on what Justification means:

As Christians grow in grace it is clear to them that they are not being turned into something different disconnected with their nature, nor are they being left unaffected by the application of some external remedy. The process is rather the uncovering and releasing of the created image of God in them, the collecting together of the relics and fragments of Original Righteousness in them and the re-making of the original pattern . . . It is best seen as the restoration to man of his original endowment and the additional gift of forgiveness and healing so that he may become an adopted Son of God united to Christ in His joyful and eternal self-offering to the Father.<sup>11</sup>

The imagery in this passage has as its key words *pattern* and *process*. A static pattern is pictured, which is shattered and later restored—with additions not radically altering it. The process of re-making is a temporary interval without significance except that of making possible a return to the original perfection of the pattern. Such a view *sub specie aeternitatis* is quite foreign to the Biblical view of God's self-revelation in history which, as Nygren finds in Romans, is essentially dynamic. Paul's conception, according to Nygren, is of two aeons: the old aeon where God's wrath is displayed against man's unrighteousness, and the new aeon where God manifests His glory by displaying His righteousness. Instead of a restoration, the coming of Christ ushers in a new age. Instead of an "additional gift", through Christ is given life, peace with God and salvation from the wrath to come. In this context it is meaningless to speak of nature being perfected but not destroyed; the new aeon abolishes the old. Has Creation then no value? So far as the question arises for man, Nygren answers in effect, the *present* creation is in opposition to God. Arguing that Paul's cry to be delivered from "this body of death" belongs to his experience of the Christian life and is no mere recalling of his state of mind before conversion, Nygren says that in this life every believer lives in the two aeons and feels the tensions between them. The Christian still is part of the old aeon while he is "in the flesh", although "in Christ" he partakes of the new.

Nygren's reading of the story of our salvation is thus one which denies *any independent* worth to Creation. On the other hand, it is one which retains to the full the Biblical emphasis on the finality of God's intervention in history and His self-revelation in His Son. To the criticism that he has not fully grasped the "wholeness" of the Gospel, Nygren would probably reply that he has been concerned solely with faithfulness to the Gospel, and, unless he is proved faulty in this respect, what he has rejected must be regarded as unwarrantable additions—"another gospel"—contrary to the Word of God.

It is extraordinarily difficult for those who belong to a tradition of theology which proceeds by way of synthesis, and which has harmonized the New Testament with a "perennial philosophy", not to dismiss a Biblical

theology as extreme and one-sided. It is just as difficult for those in the opposite camp not to dismiss their critics in turn, saying that they have neglected the commandments of God for the traditions of men. But, if the ecumenical spirit is to thrive, it must be by patient willingness to hear what others believe the Spirit has taught them, and by refraining from accusations and counter-accusations. The doctrine of justification by faith, raising as it does the problem of the doctrine of man, is just the kind of meeting-place where we may best seek to face our differences squarely. Those whom we believe to be wrong may be those who, in the Providence of God, have been sent to open to us truths we have shut out of our hearts. The discipline of theology is of limited use if we employ it only to measure all theologies by the standards which govern our own thinking. Its real value is to help us to penetrate, by means of the theological symbols other people have constructed, to the faith on which their theology is grounded.

## NOTES

1. "The Protestant Message and the Man of Today" from *The Protestant Era* by Paul Tillich (translated by James Luther Adams), p. 196. University of Chicago Press, 1948.
2. *Ibid.*, Preface, pp. xiv-xv.
3. G. W. H. Lampe, Ed. A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1954.
4. *Catholicity. A Study in the Conflict of Christian Traditions in the West. Being a report presented to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury.* Faber and Faber, 1947.
5. *The Catholicity of Protestantism. Being a report presented to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury by a group of Free Churchmen.* Edited by R. Newton Flew and Rupert E. Davies. Lutterworth Press, 1950.
6. References are to the translation by Carl C. Rasmussen in the edition published by the SCM Press, 1952.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13. I have shortened Nygren's quotation.
8. P. 15.
9. P. 70.
10. P. 87.
11. Pp. 94-95.