

Rectification ('Justification') in Paul, in Historical Perspective and in the English Bible: God's Gift of Right Relationship

Part Two: Paul's Doctrine of Rectification in Its Historical Development

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Richard Kingsley Moore

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Reviewer: John D Calvert, lecturer in church history and dean of students, Bible College of South Australia

This is the second volume of a three-part series authored by Richard Moore, formerly head of the New Testament Department at the Baptist Theological College of Western Australia and a lecturer at Murdoch University, on Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. This middle volume examines the doctrine of justification in its historical development, builds on initial discussion of the doctrine in volume one and is a bridge for volume three.

A substantial, clearly printed, hard-cover publication of 427-plus pages, the book includes appendices, indexes and a comprehensive thirty-page bibliography. The three-volume production belongs with a continuing series of Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, listed in the back of the book, which at last count numbered fifty-four.

The title introduces the term 'rectification' ('justification'), a new word for me. Moore writes in the Preface that Part One, which I have not read, 're-examined the doctrine of rectification ('justification') in the writings of the Apostle Paul' (p 11). He announces that this second volume will cover the era from the end of the apostolic period to the conclusion of the twentieth century, a formidable task even in four hundred plus pages.

An Introduction in any academic presentation sets directions and allows the reader to know the writer's emphasis. It is essential not only to spend time with the Introduction but to recognise that this volume is set between two others. Although each of the three volumes is complete in itself, they have the continued theme of 'rectification', so in that sense the start and finish are elsewhere.

Focusing on Galatians and Romans, Moore claims that the interpretation of the 'body of exegetical tradition' that developed about Paul's statements concerning 'God's rectification of the ungodly' were soon 'completely misunderstood and misrepresented...In the majority of cases Paul's ideas were completely turned on their head.' He argues that 'works-righteousness' became the thrust of the developing church (p 1).

Many today might argue that the twenty-first-century church also understands 'justification and grace' as work-righteousness.

After describing the official Roman Catholic view of 'justification' as a moral *process*, 'to make right' morally, Moore examines the Protestant position and introduces his

understanding of the main two theological views in God's action of *dikaioun*. He writes that the one with widest support is the *forensic* view of justification, in which the action of God is as judge and the death of Christ is a substitutionary sacrifice. In this action God's wrath is appeased through Christ paying the penalty of sin by his death. He describes Christ's death from such perspectives as the sacrifice of an innocent victim through which moral righteousness can be transferred to the believing sinner. Moore explains that this Protestant doctrine was dominated by the view 'that in rectification the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer...Christ has borne the punishment demanded because of human sin and provided that perfect (moral) righteousness which alone will satisfy God' (p 3).

Moore refers to the ongoing *process* of sanctification for those declared morally righteous but whose 'lives still fall short of the ideal of moral righteousness' (p 3). No reviewer can know what other understandings are in the author's mind and, despite the above statements being introduced in the Introduction and obviously not meant for development, the explanations do not go far enough. Justification in the forensic understanding means that a holy God declares a person righteous through the death and resurrection of Christ, the God/man. He, Christ, is the ideal, for we never achieve an ideal, else it becomes an idol.

The author then turns to an alternative view, one that he believes has its genesis in the nineteenth century and one which he seeks to defend in his thesis: 'Not a *moral* righteousness but a rightness of *relationship*' (p 3). Moore adds that through rectification God brings the person who had accepted the gospel about Christ and has come to faith into a right relationship with himself, therefore the relational model is adequate *in itself* and does not need propping up by other approaches. Moore explains that this can 'equally well be expressed as *the act by which God gives the gift of a right relationship* to the ungodly person who has responded in faith' (p 4). Again there is the matter of not knowing what the author is thinking beyond his computer. Is this good news about Christ presented, as Paul has presented it in Romans, in the context of unrighteousness, evil and sin and being short of the glory of God? The presented explanation has too many unknowns for this reviewer and requires expanding so that the reader understands more clearly the author's position of coming to such a *relationship*. Certainly God brings us into the gift of a right relationship with himself, but only through the death and resurrection of Christ, and Moore does not emphasise this.

The inclusion of bibliographic listings at the start of the chapters and the use of footnotes rather than end notes is most appropriate for further study.

Moore begins the main chapters in the patristic period prior to Augustine with a brief focus on the Apostolic Fathers, the apologist Tertullian, then Cyprian and a few lines on Hilary of Poitiers. His first sentence may surprise some who imagine that the church did not move away from apostolic theology until the later middle ages, but Moore is correct: 'When we trace the fortunes of Paul's doctrine of "justification" among his immediate spiritual heirs, we are faced with the remarkable fact that the doctrine which constitutes the main theme of both Galatians and Romans is scarcely to be encountered' (p 5). His sources, including K E Kirk, T F Torrance, J N D Kelly and J Pelikan, support his argument.

The next chapter features Augustine, ‘the doctor of grace’ (p 13), then thirty-five pages on the medieval period and the place of ‘justification’ in medieval thought. Included also are Thomas Aquinas, Johannes Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

Luther, Erasmus and the influence of Melanchthon are noted, with Melanchthon in his final German 1555 edition of *Loci communes* presenting ‘a view of “justification” that is thoroughly Christocentric (as did Luther). Christ, as mediator between God and humankind, has become the means by which our “justification” is possible’ (pp 79 and 86). The early English Reformers, the Council of Trent, then Calvin and the Puritan traditions, along with the Westminster Confession, John Owen, John Bunyan and Jonathan Edwards receive attention in respect to their understanding of ‘justification’. However, Moore sums up at the end of this long section that ‘the attribute emphasized in God (the Father!) was “wrath”, while the role of Christ the Son was presented primarily propitiatory, to appease the wrath of the Father’. He believes that this emphasis ‘brought about a distortion of Paul’s presentation of the divine initiative (motivated by grace and love) in sending his Son into the world as a sin-offering for the sin of humankind (Gal 4:4; Rom 3:24)’ (p 214). If this is so, where is the power of the gospel of Christ? Grace and love are too often presented as soft options, and surely God’s wrath is an expression of his love, not an entity in itself.

Nineteenth-century expressions are presented, with ‘justification’ still understood in forensic terms, along with stirrings pointing to a change of status, a new relationship established by God (p 215). The chapter comprises familiar names like J H Newman, C G Finney, H A W Meyer, A B Ritschl and C H Spurgeon. It is helpful to have one’s opinions and theological thinking challenged, and the author does this on a number of occasions. The chapter concludes with a questioning word on Spurgeon: ‘The most influential preacher of the nineteenth century (Spurgeon), like the Apostle Paul, placed a great deal of emphasis on “the Gospel”, but—unlike the apostle—hardly ever spoke directly on the theme of rectification, and when he did so Spurgeon utilized categories drawn from the historical development of the doctrine of “justification” rather than expounding it in Pauline terms’ (p 241).

The final section of twentieth-century insights includes inter-denominational dialogue, treated in broad chronological order. The reader is prepared for additional examination of ‘rectification’ in volume three by the introduction here of some New Testament translations. Reference is made to Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, where his ‘understanding of “justification” was thoroughly forensic’ (p 261). Hans Küng’s response to Barth is an essential inclusion in this volume.

The necessary Summary Essay refers to Alister McGrath’s comprehensive history of ‘justification’, in which he rightly states that the doctrine ‘has undergone development in its own right, independent of biblical roots’.

Moore would not expect everyone to agree with his own thesis, but he would expect continued evaluation by serious readers (p 354).

Many Bible stories appear similarly, if not identically, in the books of the different monotheistic religions. The more texts that are collected that tell the same storyline, the greater and stronger their historical accuracy is believed to be. For example, Muslims agree with the other monotheistic faiths that Lot and his tribe were destroyed in the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is the most accurate history we have of those times. We live in an age of science and technology. Frankly, from a scientific perspective, many of the "facts" of the Bible may be too outrageous to believe. Can man really be swallowed by a whale and live to tell his tale? How can it be that snakes that had vocal cords once no longer have them? 'Right with God' is a study of what the Bible has to say about justification, along with reflections as to how this teaching ought to work out in a variety of contexts, around the world. In addition to the essays on particular parts of the Bible (Paul, Matthew, Luke, Acts, John, James), the book includes an essay assessing recent thought on justification, and another attempting to put together a synthesis of biblical perspectives on this important theme. One chapter relates justification and personal Christian living; another weighs the relationship between justification and social justice. The gospel is about God's faithfulness to his covenant. Jesus through his faithfulness ("the faith of Jesus Christ") fulfilled the role that Israel failed to fulfil, dying for us on the cross as our representative and substitute. We receive justification "i.e. the status of being members of the covenant" as we are united with him through faith. Wright also insists that in Paul salvation is through the death of Jesus, but the criterion in final judgment is our works "works which are the result of the Spirit's work in the believer." Wright points out that there is no one "new perspective" on Paul. His perspective is an attempt to make sense of the jigsaw of evidence that Paul's letters present, and he argues that his critics often fail to take account of various important pieces in the jigsaw.