

JUSTIFICATION FROM THE PATRISTIC PERIOD THROUGH LUTHER'S BREAKTHROUGH CONCERNING FAITH

In April 1948 Watchman Nee (d. 1972) told his co-workers: "In Luther we see the recovery of faith. However, Luther did not recover justification by faith. He only recovered faith; he was not so clear concerning justification" (CWWN 57:51). If we did not know and trust Brother Nee (as indeed some may not), we would easily view his statement as either full of hubris or short of understanding. After all, Martin Luther (d. 1546) is credited almost universally, by both his admirers and his detractors, as being the main one in history to promote justification by faith alone apart from works. But knowing and trusting Brother Nee, we should consider his observation carefully because, as we will see in this article, it is a piercing evaluation of Luther's contribution to the steadily progressing understanding of the divine truth in the Bible and one that will help us know more fully how God justifies His chosen ones for their salvation.

The impact of Martin Luther on the Christian church cannot easily be estimated, and it certainly cannot be limited to the impact of his understanding of justification by faith. Nonetheless, his most significant impact on the Christian church does lie in his understanding of justification by faith, which for him was "that central article of our teaching" (WA 40.III:335); "for when this article stands, the church stands; when it falls, the church falls" (WA 40.III:352). While he no doubt overestimated the value of justification in God's full salvation, and this has led to serious consequences today for many Christians, it was certainly the most important matter needing to be addressed in his day and the one matter that most hindered the progress of the believers at that time. Hence, his understanding of justification by faith deserves our particular attention here.

While most Christians commonly associate justification by faith with Martin Luther along with the Protestant Reformation that ensued from his stand against the Roman Catholic Church, there is ample treatment of this truth in those periods of the Christian church that precede him. It

is fair to say that the relative nebulosity in the centuries before Luther concerning this important truth allowed a number of misunderstandings and even some distortions concerning it to enter in, and these, we say, compelled the Lord to raise up Luther to recover this truth for all the church. Therefore, before we consider Luther's understanding of justification by faith, we should briefly look into justification as taught in the writings of the church prior to Luther.

In the Patristic Period (Second through Sixth Centuries)

Some modern writers have cautioned against looking for a solidified understanding of justification in the patristic period, while other scholars have tried to establish that there is indeed a developed doctrine of justification even in those early centuries. The truth depends on one's perspective. If we use the Reformation and Christian thought thereafter as the standard for a solid understanding of justification, we will be hard pressed to find something with that clarity and emphasis in the writings of the second through sixth centuries. We agree with one scholar that "the claim that the Fathers held to a Protestant doctrine of justification is untenable" (Lane 187). But if we can imagine what many patristic writers might think, we will have to admit that they would take great exception to being characterized as having no solid and unified understanding of this basic and important doctrine. If anything, they might find odd the later emphasis on justification over other aspects of God's full spectrum of salvation and take exception to that. The church in the patristic era did indeed have some depth in its understanding of justification. As careful readers of the New Testament, like those in later periods of the church, the patristic writers could see the importance of justification in the apostles' teaching, especially in Paul, and did not ignore it. While they had other important concerns that demanded their attention, many readily attended to justification not simply by repeating Paul's key phrases but more