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**How Does the Doctrine of Justification by Faith
Impact Christian Counseling?**

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Introduction

The conflicts and tensions that people experience have their root in the paradox of human nature. Our intended place at the pinnacle of creation is in stark opposition to how we actually are in our fallen state. In order for fellowship with God to be restored, guilt and tension experienced in our human conscience must be diminished. The pursuit of justification is one’s attempt to resolve inner-tensions and be reconciled with oneself in order to have inner-peace. It is at the point of forgiveness and grace that self-justifications must diminish in order for one to take responsibility, love self, and embrace God’s

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love, all of which I argue are closely tied to the idea of justification by faith. In my view, the doctrine of justification by faith is a launch pad for growth and healing in the work of counseling.

It could be stated that while Martin Luther was one of the most influential pioneers of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, he was at one time a troubled soul with looming symptoms of depression and anxiety. One scholar writes that Luther “felt himself tempted to believe that he was a castaway and a child of destruction, that he could never be redeemed. God loved everyone but him.”² Luther finally found peace through a new understanding of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. Evidenced by his lectures between 1513 and 1518, Luther developed a growing sense of clarity and maturity concerning Paul’s writings. Luther “suddenly felt the force of the words ‘The just shall live by faith’” as he sat in the tower studying the biblical text.³ Kenneth W. Allen quotes Luther:

I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, He justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn... and whereas before “the righteousness of God” had filled me with hate, now it became unto me inexpressively sweet in greater love.⁴

A standard edition of Luther’s lectures and writings consists of over one hundred volumes with about seven hundred pages each.⁵ With that alone, it is easy to see how, through Luther’s efforts, the Reformation commenced as “the greatest revival since Pentecost.”⁶ Luther’s new understanding of Paul’s exquisite writings spurred what we now refer to as the Doctrine of Justification by Faith.

A. Problem of Humanity—a Fallen People

William E. Hulme expounds on the fallen state of humanity and suggests that the four basic needs of troubled personalities have counterparts within what he refers to as the three major doctrines of Christian faith:

² Owen Chadwick, *The Penguin History of the Church vol. 3: The Reformation* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1990), 40–75.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴ Kenneth W. Allen, “Justification by Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135, no. 538 (April 1978), 109.

⁵ Helmut T. Lehmann, “Luther on the study of Luther,” *Word & World* 3, no. 4 (September 1, 1983), 398. See also Concordia Publishing House’s massive work on Luther’s writings.

⁶ Allen, 109.

Doctrine of Man,
Doctrine of the Priesthood of the Believer, and
Doctrine of Christian Liberty.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note Hulme's thoughts concerning the doctrine of man, which is that the conflicts and tensions that people experience have their root in the paradox of human nature.⁷

Likewise, in his article "Christian Counseling: A Synthesis of Psychological and Christian Concepts," Stanley R. Strong argues that the fallenness of humanity includes the person's proclivity toward the misuse of free will, the desire to make oneself the center of existence, and the inevitable result of cutting oneself off from God; ergo, fallenness is at the root of human problems.⁸ In other words, what we were intended to be in creation is in opposition to how we actually are as fallen and sinful people. In order for fellowship with God to be restored, thereby enabling "confidence and security to personality" to form, the guilt and tension experienced in the human conscience must be diminished.⁹ Constant and prolonged feelings of anxiety, guilt, insecurity, etc., undoubtedly impair one's ability to function, causing sufferers to feel helpless, hopeless, and meaningless. As in Luther's case, these feelings can certainly lead to self-condemnation, self-hatred, and indignation.

B. Theological Need for Justification

Stanley Strong suggests society is in hot pursuit of self-justification, a way to fight the void and angst of meaninglessness.¹⁰ The pursuit of justification is one's attempt to resolve inner-tensions and be reconciled with oneself, to have inner-peace, and to move from feelings of wretchedness to self-esteem (from Rom. 7:24 to Ps. 139:14).

In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul begins to state his case for humanity's need for justification before God. According to Paul,

⁷ William E. Hulme, "The Theology of Counseling," *Theology Today* 9, no. 2 (July 1952), 191.

⁸ Stanley R. Strong, "Christian Counseling: A Synthesis of Psychological and Christian Concepts," *The Personnel and Guidance Journal* 58, no. 9 (1980), 589–592.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁰ F. W. Dillistone, "The Recovery of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith," *Theology Today* 11, no. 2 (July 1954), 205.

there is the universal law written within the hearts of humans, and there is also universal accountability for a lack of adherence to the law. This accountability is most notably present through the human conscience. Because human beings do not live up to the universal law, and our conscience reminds us that we have “fallen short”—we are thereby universally guilty. Humanity’s guilt renders us in dire need of justification before God which cannot be obtained through works.¹¹ F. W. Dillistone describes two Old Testament views of justification. In the first view, justification is seen as God’s vindication of God’s honor and people before his adversaries. In the second view, justification is the process of bringing an offender into right-standing within the Old Testament covenant, which reconciles the offender to their neighbor.¹² In essence, the theological need for justification is reconciliation of humanity to God and to others. He quotes Tillich as stating that one’s “bad conscience” is defeated by accepting Jesus as God’s self-sacrificing Christ, and thereby reconciling with God:

God, so to speak, subjects himself to the consequences of his wrath, taking upon himself, thus re-establishing unity with us. The sinner is accepted as just in spite of his sinfulness.¹³

Allen sums it up like this:

[Through] His one great propitiatory offering, Christ turned away the wrath of God, provided an objective basis for mercy, and made it possible for God to justify the believing sinner while still vindicating His own righteousness.¹⁴

The response to the void of meaninglessness is a fresh proclamation of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith by modern-day seers and prophets.¹⁵ One way to put Reform theology’s premise of justification by faith is that it is

¹¹ Allen, “Justification by Faith,” 110.

¹² Dillistone, “The Recovery of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” 201.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁴ Allen, “Justification by Faith,” 112.

¹⁵ Dillistone, “The Recovery of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” 205.

the quintessential experience that ... God has accepted [human] life by taking it into God's self and changing it. The alienated person is justified before God only through faith in God.¹⁶

Dillistone writes, "It seems to me that this doctrine has taken on new relevance and even meaning through the witness of modern psychological studies."¹⁷

C. Christian Counseling and Justification by Faith

As the Christian counseling movement has continued to mature, there has been an increased attempt to integrate psychology and Scripture.¹⁸ This attempt to integrate seems logical since both arenas attempt to understand and answer the problem of humanity, but from very different vantage points. According to William Hulme, "Both psychology and theology are concerned with the same basic problem, namely, human nature."¹⁹ Likewise, Dillistone suggests that the psychological professional, theologian, and existential philosopher find common ground in the attempt to relieve the angst of human life resulting from one's desire for justification and the inadequacies of "self-justification."²⁰

According to Stanley Strong, despite the particular approach that one may use, Christian counseling espouses three basic tenets pertaining to creation, fallenness of humans, and forgiveness and grace. The tenet of creation holds that humans are good, have free will, are intelligent, are lovable, and are in need of a close relationship with God. Fallenness refers to how persons misuse free will, desire to make themselves the center of existence, and cut themselves off from God. Problems take root in our fallen nature and bear unhealthy fruit in our lives. The principle of forgiveness and grace suggests that the person who is well—whole—accepts their inner self as loved by God, owns their flaws, and gives love responsibly.²¹

¹⁶ Gerhard Sauter, et al., "God Creating Faith: The Doctrine of Justification from the Reformation to the Present." *Lutheran Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 17.

¹⁷ Dillistone, "The Recovery of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith," 204.

¹⁸ George G. Konrad, "Responsible Christian Counseling," *Direction* 7, no. 2 (April 1978): 23–32, <https://directionjournal.org/7/2/responsible-christian-counseling.html>.

¹⁹ Hulme, "The Theology of Counseling," 189.

²⁰ Dillistone, "The Recovery of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith," 204.

²¹ Stanley R. Strong, "Christian Counseling: A Synthesis of Psychological and Christian Concepts," *The Personnel and Guidance Journal* 58, no. 9 (1980): 589–592.

In psychoanalytical terms, people begin to develop defense mechanisms to protect a fragile ego from contrary feelings, such as anxiety, hopelessness, and despair.²² Another way of putting it is that we sometimes create and embrace self-justifications, or excuses, in an attempt to justify our actions and state of being when we are experiencing anxiety or angst. The field of Christian counseling is wide and varied; however, many scholars and practitioners seem to agree that in order for the counselee to find wholeness, they must come to accept responsibility for their own actions. This requires that the counselee desist from placing blame on others for their plight, and recognize that they are responsible for their spiritual destiny.²³ It is at the point of forgiveness and grace that self-justifications must diminish in order for one to take responsibility, love self, and embrace God's love, all of which I argue are closely tied to the idea of justification by faith. In my view, the doctrine of justification by faith is a launch pad for growth and healing in the work of counseling. One scholar quotes David Augsburger as stating:

I discover that as I own [faults/flaws/state of being], accepting full responsibility, I am then able to respond in new ways. I become response-able.²⁴

D. Doctrine as Platform for Healing

The doctrine of justification by faith is therefore a critical platform upon which the counselee finds healing and wholeness. From this doctrine, one sees the paradox of inherent goodness as God's creation side by side the sinfulness of human nature resulting from the fall. The doctrine points to the existence of feelings of guilt leading to anxiety, and the inevitable belief that one should be punished; yet the doctrine provides an explanation for how God's love has provided Christ as a propitiation to remove guilt and to take punishment in proxy of the wrongdoer. Hulme suggests that one gift of theology is the doctrine of atonement which satisfies the need for justice and meets humanity's desire for forgiveness and inner-peace. He states:

²² William E. Hulme, "Theology and Counseling," *Christian Century* 68, no. 8 (February 21, 1951): 239.

²³ Konrad, "Responsible Christian Counseling," 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

Through the receptivity of faith [man] has forgiveness and freedom. Theologically, this is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith.²⁵

Sauter, et al, also suggest that God not only reveals definitively who He is through His acts of salvation and justification, but that the act of justification causes the person to inquire into their current identity and who they will come to be.²⁶ The process of change and transformation can begin with justification by faith.

Gladding discusses the developmental and wellness approach to counseling, noting that this approach emphasizes “the positive nature and health of human beings.”²⁷ One of the strengths of the counseling profession is that it helps clients identify their strengths and coping resources, build upon those strengths, and that helps them to solve their own problems. This is called a strengths-based approach to counseling, and “refers to utilizing the positive attributes of a group of people, community, or society, and building on these strengths as a way to implement change and forge progress.”²⁸

The principles of Carl Rogers’ person-centered counseling method have been a good influence on pastoral counseling, because they teach respect for the image of God in man and give us a fresh understanding of the priesthood of every believer.²⁹ According to Howard Stone, the counselor must understand that the counselee has strengths that should be explored and built upon, for the counselee is the expert on their experiences and life.³⁰

Conclusion

One scholar states, “After we accept ourselves as sinners—even as God does—we can begin to understand ourselves.”³¹ We believe the doctrine of justification by faith provides a platform from which

²⁵ Hulme, “Theology and Counseling,” 239.

²⁶ Sauter, et al., 18.

²⁷ Samuel Gladding, “Personal and Professional Aspects of Counseling,” in M.D. Fossel & P.D. Bennett (Eds.), *Counseling—A Comprehensive Profession*, 6th Edition. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2009), 47.

²⁸ D. A. Harley, “The Black Church: A Strengths-based Approach in Mental Health,” in *Contemporary Mental Health Issues Among African Americans*, ed. D.A. Harley & J. M. Dillard (Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, 2005), 196.

²⁹ Hulme, “Theology and Counseling,” 238.

³⁰ Howard W. Stone, *Strategies for Brief Pastoral Counseling* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

³¹ Hulme, “The Theology of Counseling,” 195.

the process of healing for the counselee can be certainly launched. The doctrine speaks to a deep, theological underpinning of human dysfunction, especially to the fallen nature of humanity and our need for righteous vindication by and restoration to God and neighbor. Another scholar puts it like this: “The doctrine of justification by faith keeps ever before [our] conscience [that] ... [God] justifies the ungodly, he loves the unlovely, he accepts the unacceptable.”³²

While this paper considers the impact of the doctrine of justification by faith on Christian counseling, it is important to note that the umbrella of Christian counseling is broad, wide, and extremely diverse. Seegobin, et al, state that “a variety of counseling approaches, faith assumptions, and definitions of healing fall under the rubric of Christian counseling.”³³ In similar fashion, Konrad states that approaches to Christian counseling vary greatly and can lend themselves to the “pastoral counselor” being at a loss for which approach to take when helping others.³⁴

It is also important to note that there is a gap in the literature regarding the theological stance on justification by faith in counseling. Much of the literature that points to theological discourse in this regard seems to have been written in the 1950s and 1960s.

As such, the author suggests that more research be done in the area of justification by faith and the impact that embracing this doctrine could have on the effectiveness of treatment and the counselee’s experience in therapy. Within that research, operational definitions should be offered regarding the type of therapy or counseling that is being offered (i.e., pastoral counseling, spiritually-integrated psychotherapy, nouthetic counseling). Offering a more specific description of the counseling involved could help to narrow the focus with regard to the umbrella of Christian counseling and its related but often confused therapeutic counterparts.

Overall, justification by faith remains a critical to wholeness.

³² Dillistone, “The Recovery of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” 209.

³³ Winston Seegobin, Mark R. McMinn, Ryan C. Staley, and Kurt C. Webb, “Just What Is Christian Counseling Anyway?” *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice* 41, no. 5 (October 2010): 391.

³⁴ Konrad, “Responsible Christian Counseling,” 23.

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