

Introduction

Justification by faith – by faith alone – on the basis of God’s grace alone is a key gospel doctrine. Indeed, with Martin Luther, I would argue that it is the cardinal doctrine of the gospel.¹ Naturally, therefore, the devil can never leave it alone; he makes sure that it is constantly under attack – remorselessly undermining it.² He has been engaged in this nefarious practice right from the time of the apostles, and never has he let up! Nor will he until the end of the age (2 Thess. 2:3-12; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Pet. 3:3).

He has met with considerable success, and continues to do so – not least in that there are grim signs that the Apostolic Fathers and their doctrines are coming into vogue.³ Moreover, not a few former Evangelicals and Reformed are defecting to Rome or the Orthodox Church,⁴ both of which Churches are heavily dependent on the Apostolic (and later)⁵ Fathers. I deplore this rising interest in the Fathers, for they gravely impaired the doctrine of justification, the consequences of which are with us still.

¹ See my *Justification*.

² Several of my works deal with this: *Conversion; Hinge; Eternal*; and so on.

³ See my *Pastor; The Priesthood; Infant; Baptist Sacramentalism*.

⁴ See below for a remarkable example of a Reformed theologian who became exceedingly sympathetic to the Orthodox. But it is not all one way, praise God! See Richard Bennett and Martin Buckingham: *Far from Rome, Near to God: The Testimonies of Fifty Converted Roman Catholic Priests*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1997.

⁵ The Apostolic Fathers lived in the first two centuries. The later Fathers were men living in the 3rd – 7th centuries. Some, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyril, were Greek Fathers; some, such as Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, were Latin Fathers.

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(‘The Apostolic Fathers’ were men of the 1st and 2nd centuries, men such as Clement of Rome (35-99), Ignatius (35-108) and Polycarp (69-155), with the *Didache* (c80-140)⁶ and the *Shepherd of Hermas* (c150). The dates are vital; the defection from the gospel, of which I speak, was Gadarene – that is, headlong – see Mark 5:13).

And all this explains why I publish this designedly simple booklet on the work of Thomas F.Torrance: *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*.⁷ Torrance’s book is invaluable in this area. But the sad fact is – and I say this without any thought of patronisation – many believers will not know of his work, or, if they do know of it, will find it too technical to be of much use to them. It was, after all, a dissertation for a doctorate in theology. To make his conclusions accessible to a wider audience, therefore, I have produced this small volume.

By this annotated digest of Torrance’s work, I will set out how the Apostolic Fathers warped the doctrine of justification by faith.⁸ Consequently, to return to the Apostolic Fathers – which, as I have explained, not a few are doing – is to take a fatal step over this cardinal doctrine of the gospel. It really is that serious! I write, bearing in mind the apostle’s injunction to Timothy when faced with apostasy in his day: ‘If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of

⁶ The *Didache* was a Greek manual of morals and church order. To date it precisely has proved impossible, but the estimate given is the most likely. Thomas F.Torrance: ‘It is roughly contemporary with Ignatius, Polycarp and 1 Clement’ (Thomas F.Torrance: *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, 1996, p36). ‘The *Didache* is considered part of the group of second-generation Christian writings known as the Apostolic Fathers’ (Wikipedia).

⁷ Torrance’s book is a reprint of the work published by Oliver and Boyd in 1948.

⁸ Torrance, it goes without saying, included copious extracts from the Apostolic Fathers. The extent of the source material on the Fathers (primary and secondary) is massive.

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Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed' (1 Tim. 4:6).

I began by asserting that justification by faith alone on the basis of God's grace alone is the cardinal doctrine of the gospel. I also observed that this key doctrine is always under attack. So much so, in light of the Apostolic Fathers' distortion of the gospel, I need to add another 'alone', and set out what I am concerned to maintain in this booklet:

Justification is by faith alone, on the basis of God's grace alone, through the person and finished work of Christ alone.⁹

That is what I want to assert, doing so by showing how the Apostolic Fathers disastrously ruined this cardinal doctrine. As I have explained, I will make the case by annotating selected extracts from Torrance.

⁹ I could add another 'alone' – 'revealed in the Scriptures alone'. We are talking about what is known as 'The Five *Solas*': Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, the glory of God alone.