

The Doctrine of Justification: A Survey of James Buchanan's Historical View

By [Billy C. Sichone](#)

Central Africa Baptist University

General Background of the Doctrine of Justification

Since the days of the Reformation, the doctrine of Justification has always remained under threat and attack. While the legalist has insisted that it was not enough to simply believe in Jesus for salvation, the antinomian does not rightly understand the nature and function of the law in relation to the divine acquittal. They abuse this pivotal doctrine. Still others have insisted that a person cannot find everlasting peace with God unless they contribute something, in one way or the other. This latter group holds that Justification is a daily occurrence rather than a once and for all forensic act in the courts of Heaven. Some leading contemporary theologians have even gone to the extent of attempting to overthrow historical forensic Justification as taught by the apostles and their successor alleging that all these misunderstood the Lord¹, let alone, the true nature of Justification (Piper 2007). For Martin Luther, this was a defining doctrine for the Christian Church that determined whether the said Church stood or fell. In an introductory essay, one past theological giant, J.I. Packer pithily states it thus with respect to Luther's views:

*Martin Luther described the doctrine of justification by faith as *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*—the article of faith that decides whether the church is standing or falling. By this he meant that when this doctrine is understood, believed, and preached, as it was in New Testament times, the church stands in the grace of God and is alive; but where it is neglected, overlaid, or denied, as it was in mediaeval Catholicism, the church falls from grace and its life drains away, leaving it in a state of darkness and death.*

Indeed, James Buchanan's trained eye spotted these dangerous trends long ago² and thus diligently put pen to paper to restate and probably, foster historic Justification by faith as taught and understood by his countless predecessors. Many years have passed since his landmark monumental volume was produced but the relentless attacks have persisted, if not become worse, with the passage of time, the chief enemies of this great doctrine being the Roman Catholic

¹ Or His word

² As far back as 1867 or earlier when he produced this colossus on Justification

theologians. Even sadder is the fact of once established Evangelical theological minds like Nicholas Thomas Wright have suggested revisions to the understanding of historic Justification, alleging that the apostles were actually misunderstood and in effect, misrepresented by the Reformers (Wright 1997; Piper 2007)! There is need to refresh our memories and consider again this grand doctrine ensuring that it is safely and carefully passed on to the next generation in its purest form. As earlier asserted, the early Reformers strongly asserted that true Christianity stood or fell on this pivotal doctrine, and we heartily agree and stand in this tradition with them (Needham 2004; Jones 1985; Sichone 2017).

To effectively synthesize and re-affirm what Buchanan wrote in his book, *The Doctrine of Justification* (1866), we highlight some aspects offering comments and thoughts before concluding.

To kick start our review, we need to state that the book is divided into three parts with a preliminary section hosting the introductory essay, a short biographical account of the author and capped by an introduction. The book then delves into the History of the Doctrine right across the scriptures from Genesis tracing it right through history to the Church of England into the 1800s. The second part defines the doctrine in its various aspects such as the meaning, nature, relation to the atonement of Justification among several others aspects. Buchanan closes off with an apt conclusion, urging the Church to rise to the occasion and ensure the Doctrine reclaims its rightful place among the central pivotal doctrines of the Christian faith. We have adopted his structure in this assessment. The winds of liberalism, higher criticism and relativism blow most ferociously in our day but we need to steadfastly remain contending for the faith of our fathers. Without much ado, let us transition to briefly synthesize each part and respective chapter of the aforementioned parts of this monumental work:

Abstract of the Book on Justification

The introductory essay sets the tone and highlights the salient points of this most important doctrine. Rightly written by Professor JI Packer, the doctrine is defined and to some extent, defended. Packer gives a brief historical back ground, echoing Luther's words *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* literary meaning 'the article of faith deciding whether the Church is standing or falling'. To Luther, this doctrine was non-negotiable and a mighty bulwark against the onslaughts of encroaching Roman Catholicism that had snuffed out the brilliant light of Christian liberty there-by enslaving the church for nearly a thousand years. This truth was lost, being recovered during the Reformation and has largely be held since, although recent developments would unsettle the Reformed mind. It is Packer's view that the doctrines of Election, Effectual Calling, Regeneration and all other related Soteriological-connected doctrines find their root and fountain in the grand doctrine of Justification by faith. Any attempt to eject or ignore this

doctrine spells untold doom, confusion and acrimony. Many souls stand in danger of Hell fire and in the event they are genuinely converted, robbed of evangelical peace as found in Jesus Christ. Packer concludes this short essay by stating that Buchanan's work is still the best work on the subject and as such every saint should read and familiarise themselves with its contents. No doubt, J.C. Ryle would have said or held similar sentiments had he been of a different generation but was a contemporary and a formidable one at that.

Before drilling deep into the work itself, perhaps we do our selves service if we had an idea of the remarkable volume's author. We firmly resist to say much except to mention that James Buchanan's biodata and progress is helpful to appreciate the context and times in which he lived. It also gives us an idea what a just estimation of his person could have been as he unwrapped these this cardinal truth during the famed *Cunningham Lectures*. In fact, the Reformation Room site gives an estimate and value of Buchanan's seminal work in the following words "*The key tenet of Luther's theology was 'justification by faith alone' and there is no better exposition of that vital doctrine than Buchanan's magnum opus.*"³ Born in Paisley, Western Scotland in 1804, of Scottish descent, James studied at Glasgow University rising to become a theological giant, in the process authoring several books and dying in 1870, after an illustrious career as a law doctor (LL. D) and Theology (D.D). Evidently, he was not only competent but at expert at what he did.

Introduction to the Book on Justification

At the outset, we interface with Buchanan himself as he introduces the doctrine from both a historical and exegetical perspective. James explores ancient thoughts and developments over the years which may have contributed to prompting him authoring the book, although originally given as lectures over a period of time. Positively, the Doctor demonstrates that the doctrine is of immense comfort to the saint that sorts out a lot of issues despite being under constant attack from those that hate free grace. It may be said that the two basic reasons for writing the treatise are as follows:

1. To direct novices not sure about the doctrine and
2. To assure the doubting saints.

These objectives are excellently and convincingly met at the end of the treatment although the contemporary mind may feel a bit lost by this approach, detail and language. Being dynamic, language can be quite menacing apart from the fact

³ Refer to Reformation room accessible at: <https://www.thereformationroom.com/single-post/2017/03/23/reformation-book-review-justification-by-buchanan> date viewed: 22nd April, 2022. The site divides the work into two sections namely 1. The History of the Doctrine of Justification and 2. An exposition of the Doctrine of Justification. In our view, this is a fair classification.

that Buchanan is quite technical at some points. Deep concentration is required. That said, the reader goes away richly edified having digested the work. Without much ado, we transition to the respective book parts as outlined in the ensuing sections:

Part I

History of the Doctrine in the Old Testament

The first part basically surveys the doctrine as to its historicity from both the Bible (OT & NT) as well as its historical development. James kicks off the enquiry from the OT with the following words

By Justification we mean-man's acceptance with God, or his being regarded and treated as righteous in His sight-as the object of His favour, not of His wrath; of His blessing, and not of His curse. This formal definition, or generic description of it, whether it be considered as an act on the part of God, or a privilege on the part of man. Many have taken a partial and defective view of it, as if it consisted merely in the pardon of sin; but in the case of a moral and responsible agent, placed in a state of probation, with a view to reward or punishment, there might, and there would, have been justification, had there been no sin to be forgiven, as is evident from that of angels who 'kept their first estate.

From this quotation alone, it is evident that for Buchanan, many people may have a lopsided view or an incomplete picture of the doctrine and thus comes along to set the record straight as clearer. The doctrine is thus traced throughout the OT landscape proving that the ancients were also Justified on the same premise, ground and way.

History of the Doctrine in the Apostolic Era

Next, Dr Buchanan surveys the doctrine as taught by the apostles. He makes some striking observations such as proving that the doctrine was held by all the apostles of Christ although some imposters sowed a different seed appearing to be contrary to what was originally and generally held. The apostle Peter, James and Paul all deal with this subject, although some have tended to misunderstand James, Luther included. Happily, this apparent misunderstanding is now largely resolved. The Judaisers generated not a little controversy when they attempted to add extra demands beyond simple faith. Thus, Paul violently reacts to their machinations in favour of Free grace. Galatians is replete with these arguments as is Philippians. Paul further proves that both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin and desperately need this justifying grace as it is in Jesus Christ (Romans 1-3). Buchanan does a great work here as in the Old Testament review section.

History of the Doctrine in the Times of the Fathers and Scholastic Divines

The post apostolic era had its own challenges and lessons. What has come to us is largely from the writings of these fathers. James Buchanan suggests that what we know is largely from Historical Theology i.e. from the scriptures (i.e. Acts) and of the Church. Much needs to be gleaned and reviewed from these twin sources in order to come to a sound conclusion. However, as researchers trace doctrinal development in time, particularly during the dark ages, the doctrine appears to have been lost along the way. Although Augustine advocated some form of Justification by faith, not even him had complete and clear views of the doctrine. He is none the less a torch bearer from the ancient times. For this, the Church, particularly the Protestant stands in debt to this towing North African Theologian.

History of the Doctrine at the Era of the Reformation

As mentioned in an earlier part of this work, the doctrine disappeared from the radar and was only recovered by the Reformers that included Martin Luther, Zwingli and later others like John Calvin (1509-1564; Jones 1985). All these held that Justification is by faith alone, apart from works. An alien righteousness is essential and that from God. Thus when the Reformation era initially came round, a thick blanket of darkness engulfed the world but would only be removed by a number of valiant men and women who stood on the written page of scripture. The Reformation ruffled many waters, which hit hard at the Roman Catholic Church effecting some minor changes in their doctrine though it remains essentially a salvation by works unlike what the Reformers taught or stood for. It needs to be said that prior to the Theological giants mentioned above, history has lone voices dotted around the world that laboured and taught principles of the Reformation including Justification by Faith, albeit not as clear as later reformers. In this category, we include the fore-runners to the Reformation like John Wycliffe, William Tyndale and to some extent, Savonarola. These paid the price for standing for Reform with their lives. Although Buchanan does not deviate from his original assignment in his work, it is important to mention the contributions of other equally formidable men and women. Reform takes time and often moves along slowly, gathers moss and then triggers change, as did the great Reformation. Tudor Jones (1985) captures and narrates this extremely well in his work.

History of the Doctrine in the Romish Church after the Reformation

It is fitting to state that the arguments and controversies that ensued at the Reformation continued on for many generations after wards, showing no sign of abating, though taking different forms and shades, unlike in the earlier days following the 1517 epoch. This controversy is still with us today although in a different mode or form, with some claiming that there never was a problem at all doctrinally (Sichone 2017)! Buchanan says the following in introducing this particular *Cunningham* lecture:

The controversy between Rome and the Reformation was carried on, with much keenness and with great ability on both sides, long after Protestantism had acquired a firm footing in Europe, and assumed a distinct and permanent form, as an ecclesiastical organisation. The history of that protracted struggle is replete with interest and instruction;-no part of it is more important than that which relates to the doctrine of a sinner's Justification in the sight of God.

Buchanan proceeds to highlight some important points as relates to the doctrine mentioning some objections and slight modifications to the Romish doctrine largely based on the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Of interest and importance is the Council of Trent sessions (1545-63) where some land mark doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church were announced and enforced. As may have been noted by the keen reader, these sessions were in reaction to or a counter reformation attempt, though nearly 20 years following the initial Reformation spark of 1517. It appears, and in sync with Buchanan's conclusion, that the fires of the Protestant Reformation ran deep and obviously disconcerting to the Pope and his cohorts. It equally must be stated that there was a 30-year war in Europe-On and off, between Protestants and Roman Catholics, though on rare occasions, these sworn enemies, conflicting parties mated out similar sanctions against others (Peterson 1999; Renwick & Harman 1999; Jones 1985). We have in mind here Calvin and Rome over the Anabaptists and Servetus as examples. Apart from that, they differed sharply on the doctrine under consideration.

History of the Doctrine as a subject of Controversy Among Protestants

No doubt, among the Protestants, although distinct a group from the Roman Catholic Church different shades and interpretations of the doctrine existed, generating schisms. Although agreed in the major tenets, they tended to differ in some respects as relates to hermeneutics, application and implications of the doctrine. For instance, Luther and Zwingli did not see eye to eye on some points and agreed to differ despite many noble efforts to reconcile them. Soon, many versions crept on the scene ranging from Legalism to Antinomianism. In between this continuum, we have the Socinians and Arians among many other views on offer. Some views were closer to the Reformed position while others directly opposed the historical position of Free Justification by faith as stated by the Reformers. Antinomians loathed any restrictions arising from the doctrine or auxiliary teachings by the Reformers such as the Regulative Principle. The same holds today, though in a modified form and garb.

History of the Doctrine in the Church of England

The Church of England, although originally connected to the Romish church at one time, seceded from Pope-dom and replaced by the English Crown⁴ in many senses initially carried on the Roman Catholic doctrine based on works. It was after the King of England (i.e. Henry VIII; 1534) was declared head of the established Church that people with a Reformed conviction were gradually absorbed and appointed to high offices, triggering the Reformed movement within the Church's vale. Cranmer, Ridley, Hooper and others soon became influential, having imbibed evangelical views from the continent (Ryle 1960). It was during the tenure of these Reformers that the 39 articles with Reformed leaning were drafted and entrenched into the Church of England vein, although some Romish tendencies lingered around here and there. The Doctrine of Justification was thus inserted in the official Church doctrine, although the 1662 great ejection removed the major heart and soul of the Puritans that championed this doctrine. On paper, the Established Church still holds Justification by faith though in practice, it espouses Romish views such as baptismal regeneration and a mixture of works and grace. This is saddening for sure but a golden age once existed, the last on a grand scale, perhaps being during J.C. Ryle's time (1800s).

Part II

Having traced the historical roots, we proceed to very briefly state the doctrine from a Biblical perspective as Buchanan unveils it in his book. In several headings, he treats the various aspects of the doctrine as listed in the ensuing sections. We merely list the heading with a sentence or two to describe what is communicated in the relevant section:

Justification; The scriptural meaning of the term:

The word "*Justification*" is derived from the word "Justify" and has to do with How God declares guilty sinners righteous on account of Christ's imputed righteousness⁵. Though the word may be defined and used differently, the biblical definition is made plain and clear in this chapter; a court room scenario, forensic in nature. Although Wright (1997) and others contend that Jerome is responsible for painting this misleading scenario, we hold with Buchanan that Historic Justification is true. It is not a crafted idea introduced into the Latin Vulgate but has been there long before.

Justification; The proper Nature of the Blessing:

⁴ i.e. the King or Queen of England becoming the Head of the Church of England rather than the Pope of Rome. In recent times, the Anglican Church seems to have march back to Rome full blown although even then, a remnant of Reformed Brethren remain. Ryle, Packer, Wright and Stott have been some of its shining lights for a time though some have eclipsed their light by several compromises in some area. That said and given the difficulty under which they operated, these brethren ought to be commended.

⁵ As related to the atonement

Dr James Buchanan explains how this doctrine is a blessing given its nature and effect. In Justification, guilty sinners are declared righteous on account of Jesus' work on the Cross for there is an exchange that ensues with sinners garbed with Christ's righteousness while Christ is punished in their stead. Being forensic in nature, it is an act whereby guilty sinners are pardoned and deemed as though they have never sinned. This results in peace with and from God for the subjects.

Justification; Its relation to the law and Justice of God:

Obviously, the subject generated a lot of acrimony and debate even in the first century. Buchanan navigates his way through scripture clearly demonstrating that the doctrine hinges on God's law and the satisfaction of divine justice in Christ's atonement. While remaining Just in punishing sin, pardoned sinners walk free in the newness of life. Justification is a legal act pronounced in the courts of heaven procured by a substitutionary atonement (i.e. expiation and propitiation). Pink brings out both these arguments in his work on the Doctrine, a well worth read. We have, in another paper reviewed his work too.

Justification; Its relation to the Mediatorial work of Christ:

The work of Christ, both passive and active (obedience) is shown to constitute what God would term as satisfactory. Jesus is not only the Priest, he is also the Mediator of the new covenant in that he stands before a sinful people and a holy God thereby facilitating reconciliation. The offices of Prophet, priest and King of Jesus come clearly in this chapter, building on Owen and Watson before him. In effect, it is God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself without which men are hopelessly lost.

Justification; Its immediate and only ground the imputed righteousness of Christ:

Although already hinted at earlier in our paper, we need to say that the writer (i.e. Buchanan) effectively demonstrates that the only ground of Justification is the imputed righteousness of Christ where the sinner is clothed in Christ's righteousness alone. This is a legal forensic action where a person's standing is altered not an infusion of holiness. Justification takes place in the courts of Heaven by God as the Judge rather than as monarch. It is an act meaning that it is done only once. A person thus cannot be justified several times. Once justified, they are justified forever.

Justification; Its relation to Grace and works:

A justified person will inevitably bring forth fruit without which one's claims to having been justified comes into sharp dispute. On the one hand, God forgives sinners by His matchless grace and in the same breath, imparts a righteousness

that enabling them to do good works, acceptable to God. Prior to this, all their best works are like filthy rags before God (Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:1-3; Titus 3:3-5; John 6:44).

Justification; The Nature and Reason of its Connection with Faith:

The author (i.e. Buchanan) now shows how faith and Justification are related. Faith is the instrument by which the sinner appropriates the privileges offered in Justification. Although faith in and of itself does not save or Justify a sinner, it is none the less the ordained means by which people receive mercy from God. This confuses many today but needs to be grasped.

Justification; Its relation to the work of the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit works in a regenerate person in keeping with God's Justification from eternity. In one sense, we can say that the Spirit applies the work of redemption leading to the Fruits of Justification.

Evidently, Buchanan has done the Church great service in those lectures and the resulting work. It has gone where he could not physically go. In a sense, what the Puritan Watson once said holds true in this work. He said something like this: "Some men are their own descendants" because through their work, they still speak and yet long dead. We need to hurry to our conclusion now and hope this overview has proved handy!

Conclusion

James Buchanan concludes that Justification is a most essential and necessary doctrine that one ignores at their own peril. The Christian Church must once again retrace her foot steps and re-enthroned this herculean pivotal doctrine. With Luther and Buchanan, we echo the sentiment; The Church stands or falls on this doctrine. In its absence, we soon march back to Romanism and superstition. The Christian's peace and privileges of hope will in time be ripped away and plunge people once again into bondage and fear. It happened once and can happen again, if not already. Men turn to human mediators instead of the glorious liberty in Christ (Ephesians 3:12). Christ has not given us a spirit of fear but of liberty and a sound mind⁶ as offered in this pearl of doctrines, Justification!

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⁶ 2 Timothy 1:7

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