

BACK TO BASICS: A RESPONSE TO THE ROBERTSON-FULLER DIALOGUE

W. Robert Godfrey*

This year (1983) is the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's birth. Various celebrations will mark the event. Luther himself would be most pleased by a thoughtful recommitment to the great doctrines which he taught. He would want us above all to celebrate the doctrine of justification by faith alone as the keystone of the Reformation. Justification remains the *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae* (the "article of the standing or falling church"). Protestantism will not be able simply to celebrate the doctrine of justification in 1983, however. Justification by faith alone must also be vigorously reasserted and defended.

Serious questions about basic elements of the traditional doctrine of justification have been raised within evangelical Protestantism itself. These questions emerge rather clearly from the exchange in this journal between O. Palmer Robertson and Daniel P. Fuller. Robertson wrote his book, *The Christ of the Covenants*, to teach and to refine covenant theology from the perspective of his own commitment to Reformed orthodoxy, and he reviewed Fuller's book in the light of that same perspective. Fuller wrote *Gospel and Law* to suggest a fundamental revision of Protestant theology's understanding of the relationship between the law and the gospel, and has interacted with Robertson's critique in an effort to defend his fundamental revision. The character and context of Fuller's proposed revision will be the focus of this response.

Fuller indicates how fundamental his revision is by arguing that not only dispensational and covenant theologies misunderstand the relation of law and gospel, but that Luther and Calvin did also: "I then had to accept the very drastic conclusion that the antithesis between law and gospel established by Luther, Calvin, and the covenant theologians could no longer stand up under the scrutiny of biblical theology" (p. xi).

Fuller sees his work as a product of exegetical theology. He is concerned about "biblical theology" (pp. 120, 196, 204). But Fuller's revision is so extreme and fundamental that a commitment to the *analogia fidei* and to the cohesion of theology requires reflection on the theological implications of his work. While he does reflect on aspects of his differences with dispensationalism and covenant theology, he needs to elaborate on the wider implications of his revision for systematic theology.

The clearest implication of Fuller's work has to do with the instrumental

*Dr. Godfrey is professor of church history, Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, California.

cause of justification. What is implicit in his book (e.g., pp. 56, 62) is made explicit in his interaction with Robertson's work where he states that faith and works are the instrumental cause of justification: "... Moses was justified by the work, or obedience, of faith. If Robertson were to agree with this, then he could handle the many passages in Scripture in which good works are made the instrumental cause of justification . . ." ("Response," p. 79). Fuller's position is a clear, explicit rejection of the Reformed doctrine that "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification . . ." (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, XI, 2).

Fuller's revision affects the basic understanding of the application of redemption. Historic Protestantism insisted that justification was by faith alone because faith alone looked outside of itself to rely on the perfect work of Christ. Faith justifies not because it is a virtue that pleases God, but because faith abandons all self-confidence and rests in Christ and his finished work. Faith trusts that Christ has fulfilled all righteousness and borne God's wrath for sin. Fuller, by contrast, changes faith's whole relation to justification. He defines faith in terms of obedience. Faith is work. Justifying faith then is not an exclusively extraspective resting in the work of another.

Fuller believes that he has protected himself from disastrous consequences in his revision by insisting that this working faith is not meritorious and therefore not an occasion for human boasting. In his response he writes that the obedience of faith is not like the workman who works "in order to be compensated for an equivalence of the value of the service he renders" ("Response," p. 75). That would be a meritorious work which seeks "commensurate compensation" ("Response," p. 75) from God. Any such meritorious obedience is "blasphemy against God" ("Response," p. 75) for Fuller.

Fuller's definition of merit is what medieval theologians would have called *condign* merit—merit that has earned what it receives. Fuller rightly rejects that notion that fallen man can achieve *condign* merit. But medieval theologians also wrote of a *congruent* merit. Heiko Oberman has defined *congruent* merit this way: "A merit meeting the standard of God's generosity In contrast with the *meritum de condigno*, the *meritum de congruo* has no other grounds on which reward is based than the mere generosity of God."¹ This sounds very much like Fuller's obedience of faith. Both are imperfect obedience that God in grace and mercy accepts for righteousness. For Fuller justifying faith is faith that repents, believes, and perseveres, and thereby fulfills the gracious condition of salvation established by God. Such faith is *congruent* merit. It is also a view of faith like the medieval one that insisted that only faith formed by love could justify. This view insisted that only faith as it is active in love, faith of which love is an essential

¹ Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 471-72.

component, can justify.

Such a reinterpretation of the instrumental cause of justification implies a different view of justification from that of the Reformers. The Reformers insisted that justification consisted in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. The believer is justified not on the basis of any internal change in him, but on the basis of an alien righteousness reckoned to him. By contrast Fuller's view of the obedience of faith implies that justification does not rest exclusively on Christ's imputed righteousness, but rests at least in part on an inherent or infused righteousness in the believer. Indeed Fuller does not discuss the imputation of Christ's righteousness. He most often seems to talk of Christ's work as an example to the believer (pp. 84-85, 115) and at best refers to Christ's work in terms of his passive obedience (p. 155). He does not write of the active obedience of Christ for the sinner.

Fuller's reinterpretation of faith goes even further and seems to affect his view of grace. He represents grace most often in terms of God's goodness in establishing the conditions of the new covenant rather than in terms of God's sovereignly applying salvation to the elect (pp. 103, 109, 118-120).

It is not certain that Fuller would embrace all the implications of his revision suggested above. But these conclusions do seem consonant with his expressions and seem entailed in his view of the instrumental cause of justification. Fuller seems to miss the essentials of Protestant theology. He does not give adequate place to God's holiness and his demand for absolute perfection (Jas 2:10). (Presumably Fuller's sharp rejection of the notion that God "needs" anything from man does not extend to the notion that God in light of his holiness can require things of man.)

Adam would have enjoyed eternal blessedness if he had kept the law perfectly. His failure necessitated a second Adam, Jesus Christ. Jesus perfectly kept the law in the place of his elect and bore the wrath of God on the cross for his elect. The perfect work of Christ is imputed to the believer so that in the sight of God the believer is perfect in the alien righteousness of Christ. Justification, then, is by faith alone, because faith alone rests in that imputed righteousness of Christ for forgiveness of sins and peace with God.

The centrality of imputation to Christianity is magnificently expressed by B.B. Warfield:

Thus it came about that in the hands of the great Protestant leaders of the sixteenth century, and of their successors, the Protestant systematizers of the seventeenth century, the threefold doctrine of imputation—of Adam's sin to his posterity, of the sins of His people to the Redeemer, and of the righteousness of Christ to His people—at last came to its rights as the core of the three constitutive doctrines of Christianity—the sinfulness of the human race, the satisfaction of Jesus Christ, and justification by faith. The importance of the doctrine of imputation is that it is the hinge on which these three great doctrines turn, and the guardian of their purity.²

Fuller is not alone in the position he espouses. There is a correspondence, for example, between Fuller and the position presented by Norman Shepherd while he served as associate professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Shepherd too wanted to stress a complete continuity between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. Shepherd wanted to give due weight to the Scripture passages which insisted on obedience for the Christian. Shepherd in 1975 taught that faith and works were the instrument of justification although later he changed his expression to say that obedient faith was the instrument.

Despite this basic similarity, there are differences between Shepherd and Fuller. Shepherd insisted that he was a covenant theologian whereas Fuller claims to go beyond covenant theology. Shepherd was unambiguous that all of salvation is of grace whereas Fuller is ambiguous. Fuller seems concerned about a legalism which he sees as a result of separating sanctification from faith. Shepherd was concerned about "easy-believism" prevalent in modern evangelicalism. Yet the similarities are striking. (Further similarities between Fuller and Shepherd as to expressions, lines of argument, exegesis and implications can be seen by comparing Fuller's book with the paper "Reason and Specifications Supporting the Action of the Board of Trustees in Removing Professor Shepherd," available from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.)

Fuller's revision has parallels not only within the evangelical Protestant community, but also outside of it. Fuller's book bears the same title as a 1935 work by Karl Barth which Fuller quotes approvingly (pp. 4-5) to show the dangers in Luther's distinction of law and gospel. The implications of Fuller's position are the same as Barth's position on justification as strikingly presented by Hans Küng in his work, *Justification*.³

Küng argues (and Barth in the Foreward of Küng's book agrees) that Barth's view of justification is not the same as that of the Reformers. Rather, Barth has seen the need to teach that justification is by both an imputed and an inherent righteousness. Küng's purpose in his book is to argue the great ecumenical potential for Barth's position since, Küng insists, the Council of Trent also allows for justification to be understood in relation to both the imputation and the infusion of righteousness. "But the Council in no way excluded the forensic and theocentric aspect. It is included. Only the exclusively extrinsic character is condemned."⁴ Küng's

² B. B. Warfield, "Imputation," *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1952), p. 266.

³ Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (New York: Westminster Press, 1964).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

summary is: "It is to be presupposed that the justified man is truly just—inwardly in his heart. At this point Barth does side with Trent against the Reformation Justification is not merely an externally pasted-on 'as if.' Man is not only *called* just but he *is* just."⁵

Fuller's position on the instrumental cause of justification must mean that he too stands with Barth and Küng against the Reformation.

Fuller might object that this response has been too theological and not adequately exegetical. Theology must rest on biblical exegesis. While there is no space here fully to examine Fuller's exegesis, several observations can be made. First, it must be said in general that Fuller does not take account of the strong New Testament contrast between Moses and Christ (John 1:17, Acts 13:39, 2 Cor 3:6-9). Second, Fuller's reinterpretation of Romans 10:5-8 and Galatians 3:10-12 (pp. 65-120) seems to rest on the contention that when Paul says "law," he means only "legalism." This argument is not convincing. The traditional exegesis of these passages (Calvin's for example) is sounder. The older exegesis sees with Paul that *any* possibility of achieving righteousness by law-keeping is excluded, and that "the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring . . ." (Rom 4:16). Third, Fuller rightly sees the call to obedience in Scripture as a call to faith, the means of sanctification. Yet the passages which he alleges to show works as an instrument of justification ("Response," p. 79) actually point to the ordinary progress of the Christian's life for salvation: from justification through sanctification to glorification. (See Calvin, *Institutes*, III, 14, 21 and III, 17, 7, 10, 15.)

In 1983 Protestants need to reassert the central doctrine of the Reformation that justification is by faith alone. We must do that first because it is biblical and second because it is vital to spiritual life. True Christian obedience will only grow from thankfulness to God for the perfect work of Christ by which the Christian has been justified. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8,9).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 236.