

Josiah Tucker on Justification: Source for a Wesley Letter

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John Wesley repeatedly found it necessary through the course of the Methodist revival to clarify his emphasis on justification by faith and the imputation of the merits of Jesus Christ to the believer. In the early years these clarifications were frequently occasioned by Anglican charges, such as that by Josiah Tucker (currently a priest in Bristol and later Dean of Gloucester), that he affirmed justification by faith *alone* in a way that led to antinomianism.¹ Over time the clarifications increasingly shifted to focus on the danger of antinomianism that Wesley perceived in the larger evangelical movement. The latter concern is particularly evident in Wesley's *Letter to a Gentleman of Bristol*, published in 1758.²

As Wesley recounts, this letter was in response to a request for his opinion about a debate in Bristol. The debate was sparked when "Dr. T." published a paper addressed to the inhabitants of St. Stephen's parish, cautioning against some current misunderstandings of the doctrine of justification of faith. This paper provoked a strongly worded response titled *A Seasonable Antidote against Popery*, which accused "Dr. T." of teaching works-righteousness, and thus being a papist in disguise. Wesley's letter makes clear that he read both pieces, and that his sympathy lay more with the concerns of "Dr. T." He specifically defends the claim that faith and repentance are *conditions* of justification—against the one-sided emphasis on "imputed righteousness" in the *Seasonable Antidote*.

This defense in itself is interesting; identification of the participants with whom he was engaged adds further insight into the tension within which Wesley struggled to defend and define his affirmation of justification by faith. The author of the *Seasonable Antidote* was William Romaine, one of the more vigorous Reformed voices among the clergy sympathetic with the revival.³ Romaine's target—Dr. T—turns out to be (again) Josiah Tucker, still serving as a priest in Bristol and a defender of the Anglican mainstream.

¹Cf. Josiah Tucker, *A Brief History of the Principles of Methodism* (Oxford: James Fletcher, 1742), 32–36; and Wesley's response in *The Principles of a Methodist*, §§2–10.

²A convenient copy can be found in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 3:244–50.

³Cf. William Romaine, *A Seasonable Antidote Against Popery; in a Dialogue upon Justification* (London: for John Palmer, Bristol, 1757). The English Short Title Catalogue lists ten extant copies of this 35-page booklet (ESTC t25834).

Confirming this latter identity was difficult, because Tucker’s “paper” was a single-sided broadsheet. Only one copy appears to remain extant, in the library at Lambeth Palace.⁴

On comparison with Romaine’s original, the quotes in Wesley’s *Letter* prove fair and quite representative—giving a good sense of Romaine’s argument and tone. By contrast, Wesley’s account of Tucker’s paper is quite sketchy. As such, and in view of its rarity and the congeniality with which Wesley viewed it, students of Wesley may benefit from the transcript of this paper which follows:

**Inhabitants
of the
Parish of St. Stephen in the city of Bristol,**

This little paper (drawn up with a view towards the prevention or removal of dangerous errors, the taking away of the groundless presumptions of some, the clearing up of the unnecessary doubts and scruples of others, but at the same time, towards exciting the serious attention of all, and keeping their consciences awake as to real duties) is most humbly addressed by their faithful pastor,

Josiah Tucker

**A Short and Familiar Way of Explaining the Important Doctrine of Justification,
and the Points dependent on it, agreeably to Scripture,
and the Church of England**

Justification is a law term derived from judicial proceedings, and is opposed to condemnation. When applied to persons in this life, it anticipates the idea of a day of judgment, and declares the happy issue of a certain process supposed to be carried on in the court of conscience between God and the soul.

This being the case, when a person is brought to the bar, and acquitted by his judge, he is then said to be ‘justified’; that is, he is declared to be *just* and *innocent* in regard to the charge laid against him. But there is in this circumstance in the Christian, wherein it differs from all other justifications—viz., that the justified person is not only *acquitted* but *rewarded*, and this reward is an eternal weight of glory.

Therefore take notice that the first indictment brought against you in the court of conscience is that you have *sinned*, and therefore broke the law of God. And against this indictment you can make no defence, but must be infallibly cast and *condemned*. For all the world are become guilty; all having

⁴Shelfmark YC911 63.22. Cf. ESTC t212659.

sinned and come short of the glory of God. But Christ's merits are here pleadable in arrest of judgment. For when you can make no defence on your own, and would otherwise be necessarily condemned, you can plead the merits of your saviour and assert that, as far as relates to the covenant of works, or the covenant of a never-failing obedience, you are freed from the curse and sentence attending the breach of it by the mediation of Christ and the imputation of his righteousness. You can assert also that this mediation and these merits have obtained for you a covenant of better hopes, one more gracious in nature, being attended with the assistance of God's Holy Spirit, *and upon all accounts* more easy for you to perform—viz., the covenant of faith and repentance, to the performance of which a *free* promise of immortal happiness is annexed.

The man is therefore brought to the bar a second time, and is then to be tried upon the terms of this new and better covenant—viz., whether he has so co-operated with divine grace, and so improved his talent, as to have repentance and present obedience towards God and faith and gratitude towards our Lord Jesus Christ. If he has these qualifications his plea is allowed of, his person accepted, and he is 'justified'. So that were he to die that moment, he would be secure in the inheritance of eternal glory. But if he is found destitute of true faith and sincere repentance, his mouth is stopped and he has no plea to make, nor apology to offer. As to the sacrifice and satisfaction of Christ, his merits, his obedience, or imputed righteousness; the consideration of them will only serve to aggravate his guilt and increase his punishment, instead of lessening them, because these things were *never intended* to supersede the necessity of repentance and a return to obedience, but on the contrary, to make this repentance and this return to duty become valid and acceptable in the sight of God, and to *purchase* for them that reward of immortal happiness to which the most perfect obedience (supposing such an obedience possible) could have no right or claim without the *free* promise of God in Christ.

To say more than this concerning the effects of Christ's imputed merits is blasphemous *antinomianism*, which opens a door for all manner of sin and wickedness, by taking away the necessity of personal virtue and inherent holiness, and by making an imaginary transfer of Christ's righteousness to serve as a cloke⁵ for the unrighteousness of mankind.

To say less is Socinianism⁶ (but one remove from modern deism) which destroys the idea of a saviour and redeemer, and sinks the Christian covenant of grace and mercy into a mere system of moral duties.

Between both these extremes lies that happy gospel medium which displays the mercy of God to the returning and repenting sinner, and his justice on the impenitent and incorrigible.

⁵I.e., cloak.

⁶I.e., Socinianism.

Hence therefore a rational and scriptural evidence of your justification; hence a genuine and authentic proof of your being a new creature; and the proper, never-failing credential that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. For if you have true faith and sincere repentance, you want no other signs or evidences. But if you have not these, to pretend to any other assurances, tokens, feelings, or experiences is vain and delusive.

Hear therefore the judicious decision of our excellent church as the conclusion of the whole matter:

Oh, but how shall I know that the Holy Ghost is within me? Some man perchance will say: 'Forsooth, "as the tree is known by his fruit, so is also the Holy Ghost"'. The fruits of the Holy Ghost (according to the mind of St. Paul) are these—love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance, etc. Contrariwise, the deeds of the flesh are these—adultery, fornication, uncleanness, wantonness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, debate, emulation, wrath, contention, sedition, heresy, envy, murder, drunkenness, gluttony, and such life.' ☞ Here is now *that glass* wherein thou must behold thyself and discern whether thou have the Holy Ghost within thee, or the spirit of the flesh. If thou see that thy works be virtuous and good, consonant to the prescript rule of God's word, favouring and tasting not of the flesh but of the Spirit, then assure thyself that 'thou art endued with the Holy Ghost'. Otherwise, in thinking well of thyself thou dost nothing else but deceive thyself. (The 1st part of the homily on Whitsunday)