

"Will the Real 'Justification by Faith' Please Stand Up?"

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Part One

As a young boy I remember seeing a program on T.V. called "To Tell the Truth." There were three contestants who took the same name and claimed to be the same person. A panel of four celebrities was given a certain amount of time to ask probing questions. They were to ferret out which of these three was the real person. Then each panel member would vote on their choice. At the end of the segment, when the questions and voting was done, the moderator would ask the weekly question: "Will the real 'Mr. Jones' please stand up?" While the audience waited in suspense, there would be a pause and then one individual would stand and be revealed as the true "Mr. Jones." The audience knew that all the contestants couldn't be "Mr. Jones." Only one could be the real "Mr. Jones."

It is the same with the biblical teaching of justification by faith. Many different versions of this doctrine are put forth in Christianity today. All but one are pretenders. Only one is the true biblical understanding of justification by faith. There are not two or three versions, which are equally true, depending upon one's opinion, situation, or birth tradition. It is not an issue of tolerance - to each his own, while all are still right with God. One is right and one is wrong. Thus, it is very important for all of us to test these pseudo versions with penetrating questions and biblical investigation. This is so that we can separate the fictitious from the true. It is crucial to distinguish the genuinely biblical message of salvation from the inauthentic.

Transformed By Justification By Faith

Nearly seven years ago a revolution occurred in my faith. Understanding the biblical meaning of justification by faith for the first

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time led to this revolution. It led me to truly understand the Gospel for the first time. Because of this transformation, many of my other doctrinal understandings were challenged, brought under new biblical scrutiny and then transformed. I found that the great truth and meaning of justification by faith, as taught in Scripture, is central to all other Christian doctrines. It is the foundation stone for understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

My Decision

This understanding of justification by faith¹ necessitated my decision, as an ordained and licensed minister, to leave the United Pentecostal Church. I did so because my new understanding of justification conflicted with the UPCI articles of faith. I had no choice but to leave. This was no sudden, over-night decision. It took me a while to realize just how much my former beliefs conflicted with the biblical doctrine of justification. I was given little teaching on justification from the UPCI. There was nothing with which to compare my new understanding. For many years writers, teachers, preachers and leaders within the UPCI and other Oneness Pentecostal bodies gave little mention to the word "justification," let alone its meaning.

In more recent years, attempts are increasingly being made by the UPCI to account for justification by awkwardly equating the Acts 2:38 teaching of the UPCI with the classical, orthodox position of justification. Specifically, David K. Bernard, an ordained minister of the UPCI, has written and spoken on a number of occasions about justification by faith. His influence on the UPCI and their interpretation of justification is very significant.

¹Link to my summary of "[What is Justification by Faith?](http://www.inchristalone.org/WhatIsJust.html)" [<http://www.inchristalone.org/WhatIsJust.html>] or obtain the tract by contacting icamin@ameritech.net or calling 877 434-8804.

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Theological Amnesia & the Lost Meaning of Justification

The articles of faith of the UPCI state, under the heading "Repentance:" "Pardon and forgiveness of sins is obtained by genuine repentance, a confessing and forsaking of sins. We are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). This statement was carried over from the articles of faith of the Pentecostal Church, Incorporated (PCI), a ministerial association which joined with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ (PAJC) to form the UPCI in 1945. That they would make such a statement about justification reveals their roots in orthodox Christianity. The PCI ministers generally held to the view that a person was saved at conversion or repentance. The PAJC, being shaped more by the radical Holiness movement², held to a view of the "new birth" which saw obedience to Acts 2:38 as the only way to be "born again" and thus, to be saved.

The PCI ministers, in large part, did not agree with this. It made them reluctant to merge until W. T. Witherspoon, at a pre-merger meeting in 1945, drafted a statement of unity to encourage each group to tolerate each others views about the New Birth. Deep within the theological memory of the UPCI is a faint awareness of its link with orthodox Christianity. At times it comes to the surface and ministers, lay persons or Bible college students ask questions about justification.³ In another way, it can be seen in the way writers like J. L. Hall and David Bernard attempt to speak the language of evangelicals in order to present the ideas of the

²I am presently working on research that traces the genealogy of the radical New Birth teaching which was passed down to the UPCI primarily from PAJC leadership. A number of significant early leaders of what eventually became the PAJC were influenced by Charles Parham's radical Holiness-later-Pentecostal teaching. The radical Holiness teaching that came into Pentecostalism through Parham provided a unique soil for the seed of Frank Ewart's Oneness and New Birth teachings. These ideas were radicalized and later found increasing acceptance by a good number of ministers in the PAJC. This influence eventually prevailed within the theology of the UPCI, and today forms the majority view.

³A debate has always existed among Oneness Pentecostal as to whether one is saved by faith alone/repentance or by following the "New Birth" of Acts 2:38. This debate has all but disappeared. Questions about this history are downplayed today by some, or shouted down by more strident "New Birth" preachers.

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UPCI as less radical and more palatable to the general Evangelical community.⁴ But, generally, it works in the unconscious background, as an unresolved conflict in the UPCI's theological mind and self-perception. I believe the UPCI suffers from *theological amnesia*, and does not recall the cardinal doctrine buried deep in the soil of their historical roots.

Currently, there is a growing need by many in the present generation of the UPCI to provide theological answers – Oneness Pentecostal apologetics – to the larger Christian community. There is increasing contact and collaboration with evangelical denominations through various para-church ministries, drama/music concerts, local political/religious causes, seminary education, participation in societies, and church growth conferences. As UPCI churches are growing, interfacing other denominations, and becoming more accepted in their communities, they find themselves more received into many evangelical circles. There, as they relate with people from a variety of Christian denominations, they are urged to think anew about their historical/theological relationship with them.

Some lean away from the UPCI, or leave altogether, while others are drawn back from this contact, and galvanize people to redouble their commitment to their long held distinctives.⁵ These voices call for a greater devotion to the "Apostolic" truths by Oneness believers and to an increased separation from other Christian groups. Either way, there is an ever-growing pressure within the UPCI to legitimize or defend their practices and doctrines before the larger Christian community. For those who take the conservative doctrinal posture, and who seek to maintain their doctrinal distinctiveness from the rest of Christianity, the writings of David Bernard provide prepared and systematic answers. He gives the up-coming education conscious and culturally aware generation of UPCIers ready answers, where once there was little or no consideration.

⁴Citation of Hall and Bernard.

⁵This is the process that leads to the radicalization of a group's theology. This occurred in Pietism, Revivalism, Restorationism, Wesleyan Holiness, Oberlin Theology, Keswick, Pentecostalism, and Oneness theology.

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I left the UPCI because justification was rarely, usually never, treated and always misinterpreted. I have concluded that this problem is nothing less than the absence of the Gospel itself. It later surprised me to see that David Bernard (and others after him) would attempt to harmonize the unique UPCI interpretation of Acts 2:38, and their doctrine of the "New Birth," with the biblical teaching of justification by faith. While the attempt is ingenious, Bernard's efforts are a failure. I must painfully conclude that his version of justification is not biblical. It is contrary to Scripture.

While at times Bernard borrows from orthodox language and conceptions, he radically parts with it at crucial junctures. Rather than harmonizing or reconciling the UPCI doctrine with the orthodox teaching, he has created a hybrid highly influenced by Medieval Roman Catholic teaching. This more sharply points out the radical nature of the UPCI's view of Acts 2:38. I believe Bernard definition of justification is a ersatz shadow of the true, that attempts to represent itself as the biblical, orthodox doctrine, possibly to legitimize the UPCI's unique and extreme interpretation of Acts 2:38.

Through his numerous writings, David Bernard has become the unofficial (and often official) spokesman for United Pentecostal Church on historical/theological positions. By and large, the UPCI has followed Bernard's rendition of justification by faith, almost by default. Most do not really have the historical, theological or exegetical knowledge and capability to challenge him. I have found in over seven years of talking to a large number of Oneness Pentecostal, that most do not possess a fundamental understanding of what the Bible means by justification by faith.

Because so many within the UPCI look to Bernard for their view of justification, and strongly desire him to be right (because he defends what they believe), his interpretation has become the standard for the UCPI on this subject. That is why I address his writings particularly. It is my strong conviction that he is misleading several generations of the UPCI about the real nature of justification. I do not say that this is a conscious effort, nor

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do I question him for ulterior motives. I believe he writes out of deep personal conviction. Still, the problem remains the same. The Gospel is not being heard in the UPCI. The purpose of this paper is to point out some of the significant reasons why this is happening.

I believe it is extremely important to show the clear and distinct differences between Bernard's teaching about justification and that of Scripture. It is needful for all those who follow the UPCI, and teachers such as Bernard, to know that their teaching does not agree with Scripture. It is in sharp variance with the historic orthodox teaching of the Protestant Church.⁶ I will go further and say that Bernard's and the UPCI's teaching on justification by faith is contrary to the larger, consensual teaching of Christians from the time of the Apostles up to the present⁷.

Obviously, history documents many of the times when Christians of differing denominations and movements have diverged from this teaching.

⁶I mean by historic orthodox teaching of the Protestant church: that to which the majority of Protestant Christians, since the Reformation, have subscribed as the orthodox or correct doctrine. I do not mean this to be considered an authority equal with Scripture. I mean it to be a means of comparison with what the majority have believed. The ultimate authority of doctrine is Scripture. The doctrine of the Church is not be the object of our faith. God is the object of our faith. Scripture is the truth about God. Doctrine as the interpretation of Scripture is the expression of our faith. When I cite the historic orthodox position I am referring to a standard - a consensus of Christians who have confessed what faith in Christ ought to look like. It is not something to which all Christians must give implicit faith. This standard is used as a guide or as a means of testing differing interpretations of Scripture. The final test is Scripture.

⁷Because of the massive and highly skilled research of Thomas C. Oden, there is developing a more complete picture of what the Church has believed about justification by faith since the Apostles. In his new book, *The Justification Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), Oden makes a compelling case that the early Church Fathers believed in justification by faith – quoting directly from their own writings – as did Luther, Calvin, Knox, et. al., in the Reformation, and that the teaching of Middle Ages was a corruption of that earlier teaching. Oden, a first class scholar, has written one of the most comprehensive summations of what Church leaders have believed about justification throughout Church history. It is well worth the time to read his book *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), and the excellent section on "Justification by Faith Through Grace," in his *Life in the Spirit*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992. Pp. 108-177). Whether one agrees with all his conclusions, Oden challenges us to rethink what we have believed about the Church Fathers and the historical view of justification by faith.

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This happened during the Middle Ages. Luther and others, reacting strongly to this departure, led the Church to a rediscovery of these truths in what is now called the Reformation. Various sects and denominations today have neglected or minimized justification's importance. Nevertheless, God's truth has never been lost. The teaching that the message of salvation has been lost for 1800 years (except for a remnant) until 1913/14, is not only naive, it is plainly not consistent with the facts of history. The teaching of the Apostles concerning justification by faith is a deep, strong river that flows throughout the history of Christianity.

My effort to examine Bernard's teaching is in hopes that people who look to him (and those like him) for their Scriptural and theological guidance will be made to take a serious second and third look. How important is this? I believe the salvation of many people is at stake. As in "To Tell the Truth," I would hope that my friends would not find their version of justification still "seated" when the real justification by faith "stands up." This paper is offered with the greater hope that we all may come to stand upright before God on the basis of properly trusting in the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone!

Fatal Misunderstandings

Reading the writings of David Bernard, one finds commentary about Scripture texts and biblical doctrines, which appear to match those found in many of the traditional and respected, orthodox commentaries. In his book on Romans, he makes seemingly orthodox statements about justification:

Romans 3:21-26 is one of the key passages of the Book of Romans and indeed of the entire Bible. It explains the fundamental principles of salvation for all mankind and enunciates the doctrine of justification by faith: on the basis of Christ's death, God freely declares sinners to be righteous through their faith in Jesus Christ.⁸

⁸David K. Bernard, *The Message of Romans*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1987), p. 94.

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In his book *The New Birth*, there is a short treatment on justification near the end. For over a page he gives a description of justification that is orthodox. I think nearly all orthodox believers, even the Reformers, would accept the descriptions he makes there. Then, on page 327, he states something that counters the preceding comments:

Since justification comes through faith, it occurs when a person fully exercises saving faith, which includes obedience to the gospel (Chapter 2). Therefore, the full work of justification comes by faith as one repents, is baptized in Jesus' name, and receives the Holy Spirit.⁹

In this statement, he subverts everything he previously said. When he says that, "the full work of justification comes by faith as one repents, is baptized in Jesus' name, and receives the Holy Spirit," he leaves the historic, orthodox faith of the Church, and goes into the unsafe territory of the heterodox.¹⁰ Moreover, he leaves the biblical understanding of justification by faith, and teaches a concept of justification which was never taught by the Apostles. I will substantiate and explain my conclusion by listing and commenting below on a number of fatal mistakes that I find in Bernard's teaching about justification. Any one of these mistake is a serious break with the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. However, all of these together form a substantial case supporting the claim that the UPCI has moved away from the biblical doctrine of justification by faith and with it, the Gospel of Christ.

⁹David K. Bernard, *The New Birth*, (St. Louis, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1986), p. 327.

¹⁰Heterodox: "Not in agreement with accepted beliefs, especially in church doctrine or dogma." The American Heritage Dictionary.