

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE IN ORIGEN'S *COMMENTARY ON ROMANS* AND ITS RECEPTION DURING THE REFORMATION ERA

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This article originally appeared in *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition*.

L. Perrone, ed. (Louvain: Peeters, 2003).

Introduction

1. Origen's understanding of justification and faith

In the CRm Origen does not treat the doctrine of justification systematically or take it up as a special problem, although he does discuss it quite extensively. He seems to define it, or rather picture it, as the reception of God's gift of grace by human beings which puts an end to the reign of sin and death in them and confers life and the reign of Christ to their souls. In justification God makes human beings just, that is, beings in whom the justice of God dwells. Origen identifies this justice or righteousness with Jesus Christ on more than thirty occasions. The negative aspect of justification is the remission of past sins in which sin is put to flight and exterminated from our flesh; the positive aspect is the sanctification of the soul in which the infusion of all the virtues results in the justification of the law beginning to be fulfilled in us. Seen negatively, justification is a state of purity that will render the soul irreproachable on the judgment day. Seen positively, it is the inundation of love, which follows faith and hope, that fills our minds and is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Faith is a necessary pre-condition for receiving the grace of justification. The pagan's lack of faith excludes him from justification in the sense of being saved in the final judgment. Yet an unbeliever can still be justified in the sense of being recompensed by God for his inherent justice, and there are various degrees of being justified. Origen is far from saying that all the deeds of unbelievers are sins. On the contrary he admits that their good works have value and will receive reward, though eternal life is reserved for believers. Genuine faith necessarily involves adhesion to revealed truths. For Origen considers the faith of the heretics to be a would-be faith. Faith to be sure consists in a certain disposition of trust in Christ's saving power as in the case of the hemorrhaging woman who touched Jesus' garment. But faith is not a mere

sentiment or mere trust but signifies a moral life. Without its practical fruits it cannot justify, and, moreover, justification itself can be lost. To cease to do good and to act unjustly *is* to repudiate the grace of justification. Faith must necessarily become effective in good works. Origenes Contra 'Iustificatio Sola Fide'

2. Anti-Gnostic polemic

In the CRm Origen uses the expression 'faith alone' on numerous occasions, both approvingly and disapprovingly. While explaining Rom 2,6, Origen polemicizes against the Gnostic doctrine of natures. In the first place, he says, Paul's words about the righteous judgment of God refute the heretics who claim that the natures of human souls are either good or evil. They need to realize that God pays back to each one not on account of his nature but on account of his works. "In the second place let believers be edified by these words lest they think that the fact alone that they believe can suffice for them, but let them know that God's righteous judgment will pay back to each one according to his own works". In this passage Origen repudiates the heretical doctrine of salvation by natures by an appeal to a final decisive judgment based upon works. However the view that salvation is by faith alone is rejected not merely because of heretical doctrines but apparently because certain Christians were denying a future judgment based upon works.

3. Root and branch analogy

In a much-discussed passage Origen adds the qualification "only" to the Pauline term, "believe".

The apostle is saying that it is only on the basis that one believes in him who justifies the ungodly that righteousness is reckoned to a man, even if he has not yet produced works of righteousness. For faith which believes in the one who justifies is the beginning of being justified by God. And this faith, when it has been justified, is embedded in (*haeret*) the soil of the soul like a root that has received rain so that when it begins to be cultivated through God's law, branches arise from it which bring forth the fruit of works. The root of righteousness, therefore, does not grow out of the works, but the fruit of works grows out of the root of righteousness, namely out of the root of righteousness which God accepts even without works.

This passage has attracted a fair amount of attention through the centuries. Heither sees here proof of her depiction of Origen as a advocate of Paul's "radical" doctrine of justification by faith alone, claiming that Origen "solves" the problem of faith and works in this passage. "Faith obtains the righteousness out of which works emerge; and this relationship is not reversible. Only upon the way of faith does man obtain forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God". This does not seem to be an inaccurate summary of Origen's intention in this passage. But the danger in proposing that Origen intends to "solve" the problem of justification and works by citing a single passage in his writings is that it may tend to reduce Origen's thought and fail to take adequate account of the larger picture and of other passages. It seems to me that Origen makes clear in other texts that good works *can* effect reconciliation with God, and that not all faith is capable of doing so, nor is faith *alone* capable of doing so, except in exceptional cases.

4. Equal necessity of faith and works

For throughout the commentary Origen insists that faith and works are equally necessary for salvation. One without the other is condemned, "seeing that faith without works is called dead (Jas 2,17,26); and no one is justified before God by works without faith". Faith and works cleave (*adhaerens*) to one another and are consummated. In 8.2 Origen again shows awareness of persons who do not seem to be heretics who do not understand the equal necessity of faith and good works in salvation. He refers to them as he expounds Rom 10,9.

For it will seem to some through this that even if the advantages of good works are lacking someone, even if he does not pay heed to the virtues, nevertheless, in this, that he has believed, he would not perish but would be saved and would possess salvation, even if he would be unable to have the glory of blessedness.

Origen does not identify these people, but it is not apparent that he is speaking of the heretics. What is evident is that Origen rejects this theology in what follows, where he insists that belief in Christ's resurrection and public confession of his lordship does not profit one at all if his resurrection is not realized in the life of the believer. In fact Christ is still in the tomb for us, if we have not subjected ourselves to his lordship by embracing the virtues. Elsewhere he says that whoever complies with the lusts of the flesh nullifies the cross and undoes the work of reconciliation. In other words, when Origen is confronted by the proposal that salvation is by faith alone, he rejects it.

To emphasize the unity of faith and works of righteousness in justification Origen cites the example of the thief on the cross. Origen says that this thief had fulfilled Rom 6,5-6, in that he had been planted together in the likeness of Christ's death and of his resurrection, and for that reason he deserved paradise since he had been joined to the tree of life. Interestingly, Origen had earlier used the good thief as an illustration of one justified by faith alone without works in a passage I will come to. The current passage seems to make clear, however, that even in the case of the thief, both his faith and his works contributed to his justification. Initially he was justified by faith alone in the sense that Jesus freely forgave him his past crimes and demanded no antecedent works before this first justification. But his faith was effective in the just works of publicly confessing the Lordship of Christ and rebuking the other thief who was blaspheming, and therefore, having been liberated by divine grace, this robber deserved to be justified. By God's wonderful gift of life to him he was made just and worthy of paradise through his active adhesion to the living Christ. Origen makes clear in many other passages as well that faith alone is not adequate for salvation, as in 4.7 where he says that if we do not lay aside the old man with his unrighteous deeds, faith cannot be reckoned as righteousness.

5. The key: the identification of Christ with all the virtues

Origen says that to be alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6,11) means to be alive to God in all the virtues, which are identified with Christ. This identification of the indwelling Christ with the virtues, especially with *dikaiois/unh*, has been rightly perceived by M. Wiles to point to Origen's most fundamental resolution of the problem of faith and works in his CRm. Wiles summarizes Origen's thought as follows.

Our relationship to Christ is automatically our relationship to wisdom, righteousness, truth and all the other virtues. To be 'in Christ' is to be 'in' all the virtues; to have Christ in us is to have them in us. To be 'in Christ' is the same as to serve him, and to be his servant is to be the servant of all the virtues. To put on Christ is to put on all the virtues, and conversely to put on the armor of God is to put on Christ. Clearly therefore according to this analysis there can be for Origen no faith without works. Faith in Christ does not need to be supplemented by the virtuous life; *it is* the adoption of the virtues [emphasis Wiles']. Thus the connection between faith and works is a logically necessary one.

In my view Wiles has correctly identified the heart of Origen's solution to the problem of faith and works. For a justified Christian to continue in sin or lack inherent justice and virtue is not so much a regrettable alternative as a logical impossibility. This confirms that Origen conceives justification to be an effective sanctification in which sin is expelled and grace is established in the believer's soul. This perception is relevant to the question of which side is really supported by Origen's thought in the Catholic-Protestant debate over the nature of justification. In my opinion Verfaillie is probably correct when he says that Origen's thought is far removed from the Protestant doctrine which admits no other condition for justification but faith alone. "Not only does he affirm with the Church the equal necessity of faith and works; but to this elementary catholic teaching his theological analyses already carry a felicitous precision".

Origenes Pro 'Iustificatio Sola Fide'

6. Faith alone sufficed for the thief on the cross

In light of all this what are we to do with the many striking statements in Origen's CRm where he insists that justification *is* by faith alone? We have already looked briefly at 4.1 (see par. 3) where such language is used. In 3.9 Origen paraphrases Paul in Rom 3,28 as follows. "He is saying that the justification of faith alone suffices, so that the one who only believes is justified, even if he has not accomplished a single work". Origen's statement strikes the reader as a formal contradiction to his words in 2.4, "They must not think that the fact alone that they believe suffices for them". Origen then looks for someone in the Bible who has been justified by faith alone without works of the law. He finds the sinful woman in Lk 7 and the good thief who called out, "Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" (Lk 23,42). In the Gospels nothing else is recorded about this thief's good works, but for the sake of this faith alone Jesus said to him: "Truly I say to you: Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23,43). Through faith this thief was justified without works of the law, since the Lord did not require in addition to this that he should first accomplish works, nor did he wait for him to perform some works when he had believed. By his confession alone Jesus, who was about to begin his journey to paradise, received the thief as a justified traveling companion with himself.

7. Boasting in the 'works of the law' is excluded

The solution to the problem of Origen's simultaneous acceptance and repudiation of the formulation 'faith alone' is found in my opinion in his understanding of works. It is clear that when Origen adds the qualification 'alone' to the Pauline term 'faith,' he is aiming to exclude the works of Judaism. He makes this explicit in 8.6 while explaining Rom 11,6 where he says,

One should know that the works which Paul repudiates and frequently criticizes are not the works of righteousness which are commanded in the law, but those in which they boast who keep the law according to the flesh; that is, the circumcision of the flesh, the sacrificial rituals, the observance of Sabbaths and new moon festivals (cf. Col 2,18). These and works of a similar nature are the works by which he says no one can be saved.

The boasting that arises from works of the law avails nothing, "because it does not embrace the humility of the cross of Christ". The limitation of Paul's *ojuk jex]ergwn* to ritual law implicitly safeguards moral works which Origen deems to be absolutely necessary for salvation.

And yet Origen extends this repudiation of boasting beyond mere Jewish boasting over works of the law to all religious boasting entirely. Inspired by Gal 6,14, he insists that not only is all Judaic boasting in works of the law excluded, so is the Christian's boasting over his own virtues. In light of texts like Mt 5,28, Prv 20,9, 1 Cor 1,21, and Isa 64,6, Origen concludes that the Christian's virtues of chastity, wisdom, and righteousness cannot provide him valid grounds of boasting, since the only legitimate boasting is based upon faith in the cross of Christ which excludes all that boasting that derives from the works of the law. Thus in Origen's view in the Christian dispensation man cannot lay claim to works of any kind as a grounds for boasting, including moral and religious works, in light of the cross of Christ.

Reception of Origen's Doctrine during the Era of the Reformation

8. Protestant reception

Now let us turn to the reception of Origen's doctrine of justification during the Era of the Reformation. To my knowledge the first detailed response to Origen's doctrine of justification by a Protestant was Phillip Melanchthon's *De Ecclesia et de Autoritate Verbi Dei* (1539). Melanchthon summarized Origen's understanding of the proposition "We are justified by faith, not by works," in these words: "He understands this *kat/a sunekdoc\hn* [as synecdoche], we are

just by faith, that is, by a perfect faith embracing all the virtues. And this he makes known, saying that the same thing can be said about the other virtues. We are just by mercy, namely by a perfect [mercy] embracing the other virtues”. As we have seen above this seems to be a correct understanding of Origen’s thought as far as it goes. But then Melanchthon characterizes Origen’s view as Pelagian (without naming Pelagius): “This is no different from saying that men have the remission of sins and are just on account of works and on account of their own virtues”. Melanchthon does not seem prepared to confess with Origen that these works and merits and virtues are divine gifts to man and not mere human achievements. Melanchthon concludes of Origen, “since he does not pay attention to what Paul is doing, what he calls faith, what he means by that exclusive [phrase], ‘not by works,’ he adds confused and perplexed explanations, nor is he consistent with himself. For sometimes he pours forth some tolerable statement, but soon thereafter he ruins it”. Melanchthon gives two examples of “tolerable statements”. First he names the passage cited above, that faith alone is the beginning of justification and works spring forth from it like branches from the root of righteousness. Melanchthon also approves the passage about the thief on the cross and the woman in Luke, where Origen admits the exclusive aspect that men are justified by faith alone. But then Melanchthon indicates how Origen corrupts his own thought.

But after declaring these things, he seems to mean this, at the beginning man attains the remission of sins by faith alone. Afterward he is just by the other virtues, as he himself says later: Faith is reputed for righteousness to him who is converted, but later righteousness is reputed for righteousness. Farther on there is a strange variety and perplexity of explanation, even though he grants that man at the beginning attains remission of sins by faith alone, nevertheless if later he imagines that the converted are without sin on account of the other virtues, he dissents from Paul and from the rest of Holy Scripture, as this: “No one living will be justified in your sight;” and again, “If we say that we have no sin, etc”.

Melanchthon strongly reproaches Origen’s understanding of law, Spirit, and especially flesh, by which, Melanchthon thinks, Paul means the nature of man. He concludes: “These passages show that Origen runs off course, nor does he attend to what Paul is doing”.

It is interesting to note that Erasmus of Rotterdam criticized Melanchthon’s own

Commentary on Romans because “he arrogantly rejects Origen and Augustine”. Part of the difficulty is that the theology of Magisterial Protestantism was not independent of Augustine’s categories for interpreting Paul, categories which were foreign to Origen’s, as Bammel has pointed out. Since “there is no Reformation theology without anti-Pelagian theology”, it is no wonder that Origen did not fare well in Wittenberg, or for that matter in Geneva. This anachronism of judging Origen’s thought by later theological standards, without taking into account his historical context or even the true meaning of his words, helps to explain why these Reformers rejected Origen. Interestingly, however, this negative reception of Origen’s doctrine of justification did not prevail among Protestants. In his *Magdeburg Centuries*, the Lutheran Church historian Flacius Illyricus depicted Origen as a representative of the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works. Martin Chemnitz cited Origen’s CRm favorably in his attack on the Council of Trent. In one passage he quotes the text from CRm 3.9 to substantiate Paul’s claim to boast not in his own purity but in the cross alone. A few decades later the Anglican theologian Richard Montague called Origen “the perfect Protestant” for his alleged doctrine of justification by faith alone. “As direct a Protestant as ever wrote, Calvin, or Chemnitius could say no more”. Montague’s opponent, the Roman Catholic theologian John Heigham, had cited Origen’s CRm 4.7 as evidence against the Protestants to show that they dissent from the Fathers when they deny the absolute necessity of good works for salvation. Montague for his part claimed Origen as a proto-Protestant on this matter and found the Arminian doctrine of justification to be “Origen’s doctrine absolutely. ... in all points he [Origen] sided with the Protestants”.

9. Catholic reception

In spite of this naive appropriation of Origen by Protestants, as I would consider it, on the Catholic side Origen’s understanding of justification as a transformational process, that is, as a renewal of the old Adam and a state that can be increased, decreased or lost altogether, and not merely as an imputation, was fully endorsed at the Council of Trent. Verfaillie noted that Origen in his CRm anticipated the following principal affirmations of the Council of Trent’s decree on justification: an original fall but not a total corruption of humanity, the necessity and efficacy of the redemptive work, its application through the indivisible cooperation of God and man, the effective sanctification of the soul through grace, the meritorious value of the soul’s actions in view of glory. “Such are the doctrines opposed by the Church to the Reformed. Yet they are all

already found clearly in the writings of Origen”.