

Reinterpreting “Justification by Faith”: A Theology of Reconciliation for Sri Lanka Today

K. Karunasekara¹

When I was reading for my diploma in ecumenical studies at Bossey (Switzerland) in 2001, the World Council of Churches (WCC) declared the years 2000-2010 as the Decade of Overcoming Violence (DOV). Coming from a war zone area in Jaffna peninsula (northern part of Sri Lanka), I was so touched by this decision. Another incident that hit the USA and affected the whole globe which added more relevance to the WCC's declaration of DOV was 11 September 2001.

Some may ask why I am interested in writing this article after half the decade is over. I have three very good reasons. First, in the recent past the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), with the mediation of Norwegian Government, held peace talk negotiations at Bossey. Second, I have had little free time to think and reflect on the prevailing unstable situation of my country and write an article after I was sent to the Theological College of Lanka by the Methodist Church of Sri Lanka to teach subjects related to New Testament.

Third, I am for peace and reconciliation and I wanted to toil for it at any cost. Not a single civilian or a religious community of Sri Lanka wanted this conflict between the LTTE and the state—what with the loss of innocent lives of children, women and the aged. Besides, I was brought up in a community where all my relatives and friends belonged to different religions, ethnic groups, and communities and we have lived in harmony, peace and justice as a small community bound together. But things have now changed over the decades because of the prevailing situation in my country. People are divided based on their religion, race, and community, and they are suspicious of their friends and relatives over many things. Violence, dispute, conflict, jealousy, and oppression are the outcome of the ongoing ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Hence, the community which was bound together is now divided into fragments. This is the reality not only in my small village but of the entire country. The recent attempt of the state to pass an anti-conversion bill caused further hostility and antagonistic feeling between the religious communities. To some extent this religious disharmony has also become another reason for the new conflict. Some churches have been burned down in and around Buddhist areas. The outbreak of social, religious, economic, and ethnic disharmony has made this country the worse in the continent of Asia.

Protestant Reformers

As a student of the New Testament, I am very much enlightened by St. Paul's attempt to bring ethnic and religious harmony, which was the major issue that disturbed the early church, which was supposed to live in harmony. The Pauline approach to bringing harmony between groups and reconciliation between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile

¹ The Rev K. Karunasekara is a lecturer in New Testament at the Theological College of Lanka, Piliathalawa, Sri Lanka.

Christians led them to accept and respect each other in Christ (Gal. 3:28) irrespective of race and class differences. I was prompted to follow some scholars who are trying to understand Paul in different aspects of his idea that has become the famous phrase, “justification by faith”, for his mission of reconciliation from his original background of the early church, i.e. the middle of the first century (CE). Martin Luther was the pioneer to introduce the phrase “justification by faith” as a core teaching of St. Paul for salvation. He made this phrase as a main doctrine to the reformed churches and for the salvation of humanity. However, others say that Luther’s writings are the source of monumental confusion and distortion. Theologians of Catholic and Protestant Churches have been debating for centuries whether Luther correctly conveyed the Apostle’s thought.²

John Calvin said that in order to apply the Bible properly to our own historical context it is first necessary to understand it within its own cultural and historical context.³ Therefore, to interpret Paul, Christians must know something about Judaism as a matter of priority. Luther’s bad handling of Paul’s relationship to Judaism led many to confusion on his thought on ‘justification’. Paul’s understanding was that the forgiveness of sins by the grace of God is an essential requirement for justification. Grace is available for all without any discrimination as Jew or Gentile.

German scholar William Wrede says that ‘justification’ is Paul’s polemical doctrine composed for refuting his opponent, in which he employs a defense of his ideas. But it is unimportant to his primary doctrine of soteriology.⁴ The new religion of redemption (Christianity) had to defend itself in two ways. On the one hand, the mission to the Gentiles had to keep free of the burden of Jewish practices. On the other hand, the primary doctrine of Christian belief had to secure over Judaism. Wrede therefore regards Paul’s statements on ‘justification’ as merely an outward form adopted for arguing his case.⁵

Pauline Concept

Paul’s understanding of living within the mystical body of Christ, i.e. living “in Christ”, made him to think that if one enters into Christ, the *status quo* of this world becomes meaningless. Therefore, anyone who claims that a “mark in the flesh”, namely circumcision, is necessary to salvation, has not recognized as existing “in Christ”. For this reason a Gentile does not need to be circumcised to be in Christ. Similarly, the Jew must not refrain from their observance of *Torah* (the book of the Law). Both Gentiles and Jews were asked to remain in the race and culture to which they belonged. Paul was very firm to avoid conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, as we can see at the Jerusalem Council where some of the Apostles wanted to impose circumcision on the Gentiles as a means of preserving the ceremonial purity of Jewish believers (Acts 15).

² William Wrede, Albert. Schweitzer, E. P. Sanders.

³ T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 49-68.

⁴ William Wrede, *Paul* (Lexington: American Library Association Committee, 1962), 85.

⁵ Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Churches’ Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 19-21.

During the era in which Paul lived, the Jews viewed the law as unique sign that God had chosen them and entered into an eternal covenantal relationship with their race alone. Therefore, the law was viewed both as a mark of Israel's special relationship with God and as a boundary marker between them and others.⁶ This social aspect of the law is precisely what Paul rejected, saying, "We have believed in Jesus in order that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by work of the law" (Gal 2:16). Here Paul does not find fault with the law or claim that the law leads to salvation by work. Instead, he takes an issue with the law, which makes a racial barrier to exclude Gentiles from entering with the people of God. Such limitation is actually a violation of the law itself. Those who understood the law in this way (racial barrier) are therefore subject to correction because they give too much to physical and national factors and too little to faith and love, which are pronounced by the law. Therefore, it is obvious that Paul is dealing with a concrete pastoral problem in the church between Gentiles and Jews to reconcile them.

For reconciliation, love is important. It is not the self-seeking love (*eros* of human beings), but the selfless love of God (*agape*). In the gospels, love is expressed in the whole content of the Christian message in many areas. The selfless love, the suffering and death of Christ for many became very cheap and diluted, while for others it is very deep, and the golden rule of the Christian life. Love is a pure commandment of Jesus: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Mt. 22:39, cf. Mk. 12:31, Lk. 10:27); "So whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them" (Mt. 7:12, cf. Lk. 6:31). Similarly, Paul speaks about love in 1 Corinthians 13 and asserts that any work or deed, any spiritual power, prophesy, or the different tongues, are not valid unless they flow from the fountain called love. Love is an action, which was shown at the cross by Jesus Christ, and by which he reconciled the entire world and us to the heavenly father irrespective of race and caste. This was what Paul meant by justification. The cross has justified both the Gentiles and the Jews in order to live a life reconciled to God and to other communities (Col. 3:11). For Paul, "Love binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14).

In the gospel accounts of the rich young man (Mk. 10:17-31; Mt. 19:16-30 and Lk. 18:18-30), he asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. The question was answered by referring to the Ten Commandments and the young man claimed that he had observed them from his youth. In this narrative, works and righteousness are stressed. But Jesus demanded one more thing from him for the sake of his neighbor, the poor and the outsider. This point, which is central to the narrative, made him sorrowful. He does not want to pay attention to the people in need. An act of love, concern and compassion is important to bring people into the process of reconciliation. In both Acts 15 and Gal. 2, we see the stress on the continuity of the Torah and the emphasis on unity. This shows the uniqueness of Paul and the special task of his mission. God gave this mission to him and the right hand of fellowship of the apostles (Gal. 2:9) acknowledged this mission.

Interpreting Paul at a Different Time

We often misunderstand the Pauline historical description. As a historical person, Paul lived in a specific time and situation and wanted to solve a particular problem. Obviously,

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 222.

we cannot understand Paul unless we understand his context. Removing Paul from his original context can lead to a misconstruction of his intention to solve a problem in his ministry by using the concept of “justification by faith”. For instance, when Paul wrote the Epistles to the Romans, the Gentiles were the majority and the Jewish Christians were a minority. This led to a dispute on superiority and inferiority among believers. This dispute was not on the attitude of the gospel versus attitude of the law, but the relationship between two communities and their coexistence in the mysterious plan of God. This primary concern of Jew-Gentile relationship was lost in later Christian interpretation when the church took the side of yes to “faith” and no to “law” as it was influenced by protestant Christians. Removed from the context of Jew-Gentile relationship then, Paul and his teaching become detached from his intended mission. Removed from its setting within the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, the teaching on justification by faith becomes part of Pauline teaching about salvation.⁷

Broken relationships, violence, and enmity are common in human societies. These cause disturbance and destruction of the community. The church, civil society, other faith communities and the state have to find a mechanism to end this situation by maintaining justice. We have seen the system of a minority ruling the majority and superiority based on the color of one’s skin, religion and language. When this situation is reversed, the oppressed people take vengeance upon the people under whom they had earlier suffered. However, at a time like this we must work on the concept of reconciliation, which is the path to peace. Paul tried to introduce the phrase “justification by faith” when communities were fractured and in conflict. After living in peace for centuries, each community in Sri Lanka has different issues of violence, which cause conflict. The myth that was circulated in later stages, namely, the so-called wounds of the past, made people blame each other. These perpetual memories would not help to resolve the problem as all would rather keep the negative memories alive, and therefore effect new cycles of violence. Reconciliation depends on healing memories of the past and breaking the cycles of violence in order to walk forward.⁸

While preparing this paper, the television flashed scenes of sporadic civil war and killings in my own country, Sri Lanka. The Trincomalee naval base, air force runway and Palali Army camp were under attack. The road was closed to civilians of the north. The army retaliated and was in control of the situation. In the meantime, the deputy director of peace secretariats was shot at his house and he died on the spot. These were some of the news in this decade of overcoming violence. The world is rocked with hate, hostility and violence, which cause untold suffering on innocent people, including children who are deeply affected mentally, psychologically and often physically for the rest of their lives. What can we do as Christians while we are divided among ourselves on many other issues such as doctrines and social issues? For instance, some Christians quote from the Bible to support the war, while other Christians quote from the same Bible to affirm the values of Christianity. We, Christians, have to admit that we are divided as to how to read and interpret the Bible. However, can we (the church) bring harmony to this world

⁷ Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 4-5.

⁸ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Axis of Peace: Christian Faith in Times of Violence and War* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 126-127.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

of chaos?⁹

A Christian should get involved in the affairs of the country. In other religions like Islam and Judaism, political life and religious life are knit together and this knitting together is understood as a revelation of God. We must bring the religions together and acknowledge that no religions are for war; they all stand for peace, unity, love and harmony. No religion supports war, violence and conflict, although some elements of violence are found in all of them. We must go deeply into the background of all religious scriptures and realize in which circumstances they were written.

We, Christians, in Sri Lanka can learn from Paul. We must attempt the impossible task of bringing the two communities together, namely, the Sinhalese and Tamils, with the spirit of the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Turn the other cheek", "love your enemies", "bless them that curse you", "pray for them that persecute you", "do not repay evil for evil", "overcome evil with good". We must be deep in our religious consciousness to avoid divisions, dispute, jealousy, envy, and prejudices, and be deeply rooted in the spirit of reconciliation to bring harmony to our society. We must live our lives in the right way to be worthy to our nations and religions.¹⁰

Justification by Faith Today

In times of turbulence and combat, human values decline and hopes for peace, justice and freedom are dashed down. The World Council of Churches (WCC) had its 9th General Assembly in Brazil in February 2006 on an appropriate theme, "God, In Your Grace, Transform the World". Transformation is only possible by reconciliation. It means bringing healing to the broken community as a sign of God's reign, by listening to each other, trusting each other, understanding each other, and being sensitive to and respectful of each other's concerns. God has reconciled this world through the event of the cross of Jesus and embraced us to be in communion with him although we were unworthy in our natures. Inequality and injustices are the main causes of violence and enmity among human beings. People always have struggled for life, dignity and human rights. The involvement of churches in bringing about reconciliation is much required. Are the churches ready to face this challenge in the complexities and ambiguities of the world along with their own programmes and agendas?

Ultimately, the entire church will lose her credibility if she fails to interact with the problems of the people and contribute to a qualitative solution to them. In the early church Paul addressed the problem of circumcision and resolved the dispute among Christians for the sake of the gospel. Paul took measures to bring healing and reconciliation, as Jesus intended, to the broken Christian community. The churches cannot ignore this mission; ignoring this mission of healing and reconciliation will only bring the community to more tensions and divisions. A self-sufficient and inward-looking church cannot survive when violence and insecurity are rampant. The church should be challenging, helping as efficient and credible instruments of God's mission of reconciliation irrespective of our

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹¹ "Report of the Moderator", World Council of Churches 9th General Assembly, 14-23 February 2006, Porto Alegre, Brazil, Document No. A 01, pp. 1-8.

divergences and tensions. The church must break the walls of separatism and take lead in the mission of reconciliation in this fragmented world.¹¹

When the WCC launched the DOV at Harare, the assembly assured the world that the churches would work together to overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence and foster their prophetic vocation to be agents of reconciliation and peace with justice.¹² This is only possible by promoting values of life, tolerance, compassion, and reconciliation. This must be the priority of the mission of the church. By looking at the root cause of the conflict and disturbance of any kind, the church must find possible ways and means to heal hostile memories, forgive opponents, and accept each other. The church should help the masses be aware that they too are agents of God's reconciliation (2 Cor. 5: 16-21). The church must proclaim reconciliation and justification boldly and unequivocally, otherwise her message would be like an arrow thrust without an aim. Churches have a unique responsibility to provide such leadership. Churches are called upon to be the community of believers who strive to show the love of God as experienced in Jesus Christ with peace, justice and reconciliation. As it is said in the gospel:¹³

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. The whole Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets depend on these two commandments. (Mt. 22:37-40)

Conclusion

The Love of God embraces all humanity. We must consider everybody as worthy and accept them as they are and work for social change. This is the central teaching of our theology based on the gospel. While we appreciate the 15th century reformers, we must be able to demythologize their understanding of soteriology of the Pauline concept of justification by faith and socialize the text with our context. The work of Rudolf Bultmann challenges us to demythologize the scriptures. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called for Christianity apart from established religion. Paul Tillich insisted that God must be approached as the "ground of all being". These discourses will enable us to understand the Bible and its teaching in the prevailing socio-religious and political situation today. We cannot always rely on interpreting the Bible in the way of the reformers or the way the West had wrapped it up for us. We cannot continue to live inside the theological straitjackets of their interpretation of the Bible which was eagerly forced upon us.

Therefore, we must not give a too spiritual or psychological interpretation to the concept of "Justification by Faith" as the fundamental teaching of Pauline soteriology. It is not fair to follow the reformer's interpretation without giving importance to Paul's intended purpose of coining the term. We cannot allow the secondary source to supercede the primary. We must understand the differences between Paul and Luther. Luther was a man who labored under the demands of the church law and grappled with the question how to find a gracious God. The harder he tried, the more he fell short. Luther had many shortcomings before God, a person who walked to the very gate of hell. Luther's religious experience (tower experience) was in contrast to Paul's. Paul was a happy and successful Jew; he claimed

¹² *Minutes of the Fifty-First Meeting*, World Council of Churches Central Committee, Potsdam, Germany, 28 January-16 February 2001, p. 177.

¹³ "Report of the Moderator", WCC 9th General Assembly, 12-13.

that he was righteous under the law and blameless (Phil. 3:6). He experienced no troubles, no problems, no feeling of shortcomings. Paul only mentioned his sin when he persecuted the church (1 Cor. 15:9) and he made up for it by working for God more than the other apostles (1 Cor. 15:10). Paul was a man with a quite robust conscience.¹⁴ To present the true Paul to our people is not an easy task. It is harder to interpret Paul's doctrine to one who only half-understands him. Therefore, it is important for the churches to understand the social context (*Sitz im leben*) of Paul and to carry the mission of reconciliation as our primary call for mission. It is not enough to work only for our salvation and justification as individuals but as a collective church. My intention here is not to eradicate the mission of the churches towards spiritual salvation of humanity, but to enable them to see another side of church mission through the eyes of Paul. It is the mission to fragmented races of Jews and Gentiles. It is time for us to work as a church among broken individuals, families, races, religions, cultures, and to toil for a peaceful and reconciled community of Sri Lanka. This is the intended reign of God by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and for which

¹⁴ Krister Stendahl, 12-14.