

Desmond Ford and the Righteousness by Faith Controversy

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Let me begin by saying that from 1968-1970 I was a student at Avondale College in Australia where Desmond Ford was head of the theology department and the major professor of theology. I spent many hours in his classroom and I still consider him one of the best teachers I ever had. His dismissal in 1980 was not because of his views on righteousness by faith; it was the result of his change in understanding the doctrine of the sanctuary and prophetic interpretation.

The Australian Scene

In the 1950s and 60s, the church in Australia was very conservative. It was the time when Robert Brinsmead preached his perfectionist gospel; and because of the way the investigative or pre-Advent judgment was proclaimed most Seventh-day Adventists had no assurance of salvation.

Enter Desmond Ford: he had completed a Ph.D. in Speech at Michigan State University¹ in December of 1960 and began teaching at Avondale in February 1961. Confronted with Robert Brinsmead's perfectionism he began emphasizing the topic of righteousness by faith. Righteousness by faith he declared is the same as justification by faith. This ran counter to the general Adventist understanding at that time that righteousness by faith includes justification and sanctification.

¹ His dissertation was "A Study of Selected Pauline Epistles as Written Addresses."

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For Desmond Ford, Paul's Epistle to the Romans was the cornerstone of his teaching on righteousness by faith. In class he summarized Romans 1-8 as follows:

- Ch. 1 The heathen are sinners and are lost—22, 24, 26, 28.
- Ch. 2 The Jews are also sinners and are lost—1, 11-13.
- Ch. 3 All men are sinners and lost—10, 23.
All men are saved the same way. How?
Through justification by faith apart from the deeds of
the law—24, 28.
- Ch. 4 The example of Abraham—3, 10-11.
- Ch. 5 The results of justification—1.
- Ch. 6 The new life in Christ—Sanctification—3-4, 11-12.
- Ch. 7 The battle in the new life—18-20, 24-5.
- Ch. 8 The life in the Spirit—1, 14.

He defined justification by saying that “Justification in Paul’s writings is the act of remitting the sins of guilty men and accounting them righteous freely by his grace, through faith in Jesus Christ; not on the ground of their own works but on the ground of the representative law keeping and redemptive blood shedding of Christ on their behalf.² Justification, he explained, is Christ’s work for us—on the cross, in the heavenly sanctuary. It happens outside of us; it is a change of status. Through justification we become children of God. Sanctification, on the other hand, is Christ’s work in us through the Holy Spirit. Sanctification changes us into the likeness of Christ.

Desmond Ford never separated justification and sanctification. He distinguished between them but he did not separate them. Some of his favorite sayings were: “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is not alone, works follow.” “Justification is the root, sanctification is the fruit.” Emphasizing that first we become children of God and then we bring forth works of righteousness.

Assurance of salvation, which many Adventists at that time were lacking, is based on what Jesus has done, he said, not on how perfect we are. Sermons preached by Ford were characterized by an emphasis on justification by faith, but not everyone was happy with his messages. Some felt that he was preaching cheap grace.

² “Introduction to Theology” class notes (1968).

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The years 1971 and 1972, Ford spent at Manchester University in England. After completing his second doctorate in New Testament at Manchester under F. F. Bruce, Ford returned to Avondale in the summer of 1972/73. In the years following, complaints against Ford's teaching mounted, and in February 1976 the South Pacific Division leadership called a meeting at Avondale College where the theology faculty, its supporters and critics could sit down together and discuss the various complaints. At issue was not just righteousness by faith but also the inspiration of Scripture, Ellen White, and the nature of a two-apartment sanctuary in heaven. After a two-day discussion, twenty-two participants voted in support of Ford, the sixteen critics remained opposed.³

The Palmdale Conference on Righteousness by Faith

The theological wrangling in Australia, however, did not stop. Its effects were also felt in America. On April 23-30, 1976, therefore, nineteen scholars and administrators from Australia and America met at Palmdale, California, to discuss the topic of salvation. The American delegation was led by Elder Robert Pierson, the General Conference president, and included Raoul Dederen and Hans LaRondelle from Andrews University. From Australia came R. R. Frame, the South Pacific Division president, several administrators, Desmond Ford, and Alwyn Salom, a New Testament scholar. The following papers were read and discussed at Palmdale:

D. F. Neufeld, "Word Studies in the area of Righteousness by Faith"

A.P. Salom, "The Concept of Righteousness in the New Testament"

R. W. Olson, "E. G. White's Concept of Righteousness by Faith"

R. Dederen, "Justification by Faith as understood by the Reformation Leaders"

D. Ford, "The Scope and Limits of the Pauline Expression 'Righteousness by Faith'"

K. H. Wood, "The Historic Adventist Concept of Righteousness by Faith"

H. K. LaRondelle, "The Eschatological Dimensions of Righteousness by Faith"

A. S. Jorgensen, "A Conspectus of the Righteousness of God"

D. Ford, "The Relationship between the Human Nature of Christ and

³ Milton Hook, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* (Riverside, CA: Adventist Today Foundation, 2008), 157.

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Righteousness by Faith”

K. H. Wood, “The Historic Adventist Concept of the Human Nature of Christ”⁴

The chief point of discussion at that conference was the meaning of the expression “Righteousness by Faith.” Did it refer only to justification or did it also include sanctification?

In his first paper “The Scope and Limits of the Pauline Expression ‘Righteousness by Faith,’” Ford outlined the problem that “Among Seventh-day Adventists it [righteousness by faith] has often been understood as a term comprehending justification and sanctification,”⁵ but in the writings of Paul the expression “Righteousness by Faith is identical with Justification by Faith.”⁶ On the basis of the outline of Romans 1-8 mentioned above, he emphasized that chapters 1-5 deal with justification and chapters 6-8 with sanctification.

Thus, Rom. 3:21-28 shows that Righteousness by Faith has to do not with holy works prompted by the regenerating Spirit but with a *new standing before God*,—the standing of one hundred percent righteousness freely bestowed to all who believe on the basis of Christ’s perfect life and atoning death. Inasmuch as only a *perfect* righteousness can give us such a standing, we see the impossibility of introducing sanctification as a means towards our acceptance, or in other words as a part of Righteousness by Faith. One hundred percent righteousness is found only in Christ. It has to be His gift; it can never be our attainment in this life, for “sanctification is the work of a lifetime.” Thus Righteousness by Faith must always mean Justification whereby we receive as a gift the imputed merits of Christ.⁷

⁴ Jack D. Walker in his pamphlet *Documents from the Palmdale Conference in Righteousness by Faith* (Goodletsville, TN: Jack D. Walker, 1976) includes a third paper by D. Ford titled “Ellen G. White and Righteousness by Faith.” This paper, however, according to the official summary of the papers, was not presented at Palmdale.

⁵ D. Ford, “The Scope and Limits of the Pauline Expression ‘Righteousness by Faith’” in Walker, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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P. Salom's paper was primarily a word study of *dikaiosyne* in the New Testament. He brought out the forensic meaning of *dikaiosyne*, emphasizing that "righteousness or justification is essentially a matter of right status in the sight of God and that this status shows that we are accepted with Him."⁸

In contrast to the Catholic position that teaches that "the meaning of the verb *dikaioō* is 'to make righteous,'" Salom stated that "the majority of contemporary scholars understand justification to involve a relationship rather than an ethical quality, and the distinctive Pauline meaning is 'to be accounted right with God.'"⁹ In his conclusion he said that because our theology must be based on Scripture alone "it is evident that our use of the term 'righteousness by faith' should be restricted to its biblical use as an equivalent for 'justification by faith.'"¹⁰

The official report of the Palmdale Conference, published in *The Review and Herald*, stated that the group "studied and prayed together, shared sweet fellowship and gained unity of spirit and viewpoint as the days passed."¹¹ Concerning the meaning of righteousness by faith, the report stated:

We agree that when the words righteousness and faith are connected (by "of," "by," et cetera) in Scripture, reference is to the experience of justification by faith. God the righteous Judge, declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus and repents. Sinful though he may be, he is regarded as righteous because in Christ he has come into a righteous relationship with God. This is the gift of God through Christ.¹²

This seems clear enough. However, the section on "Justification and Sanctification" also contains some ambiguous statements. For example:

In the last judgment our works of faith and love testify to the reality of justifying faith and our union with Christ; we are still saved by justification through Christ without any works of law, that is, without meritorious works. Thus Seventh-day Adventists have often used the

⁸ A. P. Salom, "The Concept of Righteousness in the New Testament" in Walker, 18.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ "Christ our Righteousness," *Review and Herald*, May 27, 1976, 4-7.

¹² Ibid., 4.

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phrase “righteousness by faith” theologically to include both justification and sanctification.¹³

No explanation is given as to whether this use of the phrase “righteousness by faith” should continue or not. Both sides therefore could claim that the statement supports their position.

Although only two presentations at Palmdale dealt with the nature of Christ, the larger part of the report dealt with this issue. Both views on the nature of Christ (sinless—by Ford) and (sinful—by Wood) are mentioned. Ford emphasized that righteousness by faith is nothing other than the appropriation of the merits of the righteous life and the atoning death of the God-Man. And these merits depended on who and what Jesus was. Therefore, he had to be without sin, both as to His nature and His actions, “else His life in human flesh and His death on the cross would have been of no more value in procuring grace for the sinner than the death of any other man.”¹⁴

From Avondale to Exile

After his return to Avondale, Ford reported on the Palmdale meetings in a series of speaking appointments in the islands of the Pacific and in Australia. However, the opposition to Ford continued. John Clifford and Russell Standish, two medical men, published a 160-page document titled *Conflicting Concepts of Righteousness by Faith*. In the preface they stated, “Imparted Righteousness is the crucial factor in salvation.”¹⁵ Ford wrote a reply that was endorsed by the Biblical Research Committee of the Australasian Division, but the controversy continued.

In 1977, therefore, it was thought best to remove Ford temporarily from the Australian scene and have him spend a few years at Pacific Union College with which Avondale had an affiliation agreement. “Among other features it involved a regular exchange of lecturers.”¹⁶ “And the rest is history,” as the saying goes. Ford began teaching at PUC in the autumn of 1977 and on Sabbath afternoon, October 27, 1979, he presented a lecture on

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ F.D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1978), 7:933, cited by Desmond Ford, “The Relationship between the Human Nature of Christ and Righteousness by Faith” in Walker, 26.

¹⁵ John Clifford and Russell Standish, *Conflicting Concepts of Righteousness by Faith* (Wahroonga, Australia: Burnside Press, 1976), ix, x, cited in Hook, 176.

¹⁶ Hook, 186.

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the investigative judgment to the Angwin chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums which led to the Glacier View Conference in August of 1980 and his subsequent dismissal from church employment.

Evaluation

Desmond Ford's emphasis on Righteousness by Faith, as taught by Paul in the book of Romans, was a necessary course correction to the prevailing perfectionism in the 1960s, particularly in Australia, but not only there. Associated with it was an almost total lack of assurance of salvation among church members.

Ford, like E. J. Waggoner in 1888, attempted to show that acceptance by God is on the basis of what Jesus has done, not on the basis of how good we are. Paul says, "He hath made Christ to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). What is the righteousness of God? Perfection—perfect works. Therefore, only perfect obedience is acceptable to God. No human being could render this to God, except Christ. He lived a perfect, sinless life in word, thought, and deed, and then He took our place on the cross and died that we may live. And this perfect obedience—his righteousness, the only righteousness God can accept, is given to us—if we believe. It is imputed to us, i.e., it is put to our account. This, said Ford, is righteousness by faith or justification.

Ford did not teach that therefore we have nothing to do in the plan of salvation. We cannot add anything to the gift of Christ's righteousness—we can only accept it by faith; but once we have it, once we are forgiven, once we are children of God, we have to hold on to the gift of righteousness because we can lose it again. This is clearly the teaching of the New Testament: "Behold, I am coming quickly! *Hold fast* what you have, that no one may take your crown" (Rev 3:11); "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, *if you hold fast* that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (1 Cor 15:1); "He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—*if indeed you continue* in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard" (Col 1:22, 23); "For we have become partakers of Christ *if we hold* the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end" (Heb 3:14). This is where obedience comes in.

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Justification is Christ's work for us—on the cross, in the heavenly sanctuary, outside of us—a change of status: we become children of God. *Sanctification* is Christ's work in us—through the Holy Spirit. Sanctification changes us into the likeness of Christ. *Justification* answers the question, how do I become a child of God? The answer is it is a gift of God. *Sanctification* answers the question, how do I remain a child of God? The answer is by obedience through Jesus. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure" (Phi 2:13). This is where the good fight of faith is fought. This is where the battle between spirit and flesh, between the old man and the new man takes place, not to achieve salvation, but to retain it.

The fact that Desmond Ford denied the pre-Advent judgment and was dismissed from the ministry does not change the positive impact his teaching on righteousness by faith had on the church. In this regard the church is indebted to him; and it behooves us to continue to preach the good news of righteousness by faith.

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