

REVIEW ARTICLE

*THE DELIVERANCE OF GOD:
AN APOCALYPTIC REREADING OF
JUSTIFICATION IN PAUL* BY DOUGLAS A. CAMPBELL

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Douglas Campbell's *The Deliverance of God* is a remarkable book.¹ Never have I encountered a book that attacks so fiercely and with such assurance a theological view so widely held. Campbell's target is "Justification Theory," a soteriological paradigm that lies at the heart of much of western Christianity. Yet this paradigm, claims Campbell, badly misreads its key biblical witness, the apostle Paul. Its assumption that Paul works with a forensic/retributive notion of justification leads to all kinds of unfortunate consequences, ranging from an incoherent Paul to possible complicity with state-sponsored persecution of homosexuals, Christian "fascism," and the Holocaust (pp. 205–8; cf. p. 172 for a qualification of the "Christian fascism" claim). As an unrepentant defender of the essence of what Campbell calls "Justification Theory," I can only be grateful that he does not blame the theory also for global warming and world poverty.

A review this short cannot begin to do justice to Campbell's many-faceted, detailed, and comprehensive argument. Part 1 of the book has a largely negative function. He begins with a description of "Justification Theory" and then moves on in three chapters to enumerate and describe, successively, "intrinsic difficulties" and "systematic difficulties" with this construal of Paul's justification language. From there follow chapters showing how "Justification Theory" struggles to explain satisfactorily Paul's engagement with the Judaism of his day and how Paul's description of his conversion contradicts assumptions about a "first phase" of struggle with the law that Campbell claims is intrinsic to the theory. In a chapter "Beyond Old and New Perspectives," Campbell, with a considerable degree of repetition, lays out the problems of "Justification Theory" in terms of several debates about Paul and his theology current in the academic community. In part 2, Campbell turns to issues relating to his method in arguing his own theory. Positively, he lays out his own method, one that relies heavily on a careful reading of Paul's discourse. Negatively, Campbell insists that such a reading must be careful

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not to “lock in” Paul’s language to a particular historical construal of Paul’s teaching or to the strictures of modern European ways of thinking.

In part 3, Campbell turns his attention to Romans 1–4, which he calls the “citadel” of “Justification Theory”: the text that provides the strongest argument for the theory. Campbell’s argument is that, if he can show that “Justification Theory” does not work here, he can prove it anywhere. He therefore devotes much of the book to a consideration of this passage. He begins negatively, by outlining the way “Justification Theory” interprets the text and then noting all the problems with its interpretation. He turns next to attempts to “save” the theory by “reframing” (e.g. Francis Watson) or “re-reading” (James Dunn) the passage: efforts that he deems to be failures. In part 4, he develops his alternative theory, an “apocalyptic” construal of justification that avoids the problems of “Justification Theory.” This proposal focuses on God’s “righteousness” and justification as a fundamentally unconditional act of “deliverance” or “release” that does not entail a problematic penal substitution theory of atonement or the “contractual” focus on human faith as the means of accessing God’s deliverance that characterize “Justification Theory.” The focus is again on Romans 1–4. Finally, in part 5, Campbell more briefly argues that the new approach he developed for Romans 1–4 works equally well for the rest of Romans, for Galatians, and for several other key Pauline texts. At the end of the book, Campbell throws down the gauntlet to justification theorists. The view he has outlined, he claims, requires detailed refutation if “Justification Theory” is to be rescued: “The conventional construal of Paul’s Justification texts has been only the least worst alternative, and with a new, superior alternative now present, it has much work to do beyond the hermeneutics (and politics) of assertion. Justification must adapt to a brave new world—or quietly expire” (pp. 935–36).

Whew! Quite a claim—but typical of the breathtaking assurance with which Campbell advances his novel theory. However, while his somewhat immodest claims (to put it no more strongly) must be taken with not a few grains of salt, he is right to claim that convincing responses to his book must ultimately grapple with the complex exegetical, logical, and theological arguments that he musters on behalf of his self-described “apocalyptic” reading of Paul’s righteousness language. That interaction must await another occasion. To say anything meaningful, I must severely restrict my target. So I will focus on a pivotal text for Campbell’s interpretation, Rom 1:16–17. Before turning to that text, however, I want to make a few preliminary remarks about method.

First, while Campbell grounds his interpretation in detailed exegetical interaction with the text, his handling of that text does not always inspire confidence. He misstates or misapplies Apollonius’s Canon as if that Canon applied only to subjective genitives (pp. 644–45); and his claim that the position of the word *dynamis* in verse 16 before the verb strongly implies it must be the subject of the sentence is simply wrong (p. 703).

Second, Campbell generates considerable traction for his own reading by painstakingly detailing the problems with “Justification Theory.” His outline of this theory and its exegetical basis in the “citadel” of Romans 1–4 is quite

expansive. Yet this expansive outline of the theory creates some problems. Campbell's "Justification Theory" is a bit of a pastiche, drawn from exegetes, theologians, and Christian ministries and confessions over many centuries. The result is that he includes in "Justification Theory" some elements that most supporters of a traditional reading of Pauline justification, would label as optional at best. I am especially unconvinced that "Justification Theory," to be coherent, must presume a preparatory phase in which sinful humans recognize their failure to follow God's law and make an "empirical" decision to accept in faith the offer of salvation in Christ. My own reading of Pauline justification suggests that the apostle systematically denies that humans can gain right standing with God by means of what they do. However, my view by no means demands that every person must consciously move through this journey of despair. The traditional understanding of justification can easily accommodate a "from-solution-to-plight" reading of Pauline justification. Campbell's contrary claim, that the theory requires not only a logical but also an experiential "from-plight-to-solution" movement, is grounded in his logical analysis rather than in actual defenders of the teaching. This issue is methodologically significant and directly related to our discussion of Romans 1–3 in that Campbell uses any dissonance between the text and this "first phase" to discredit the theory in general.

Third, central to Campbell's recasting of Pauline justification is his definition of justification language in "forensic/liberative" as opposed to "forensic/retributive" terms and a shift of the locus of Paul's "faith" language from the Christian to Christ. Before turning to Campbell's argument that Rom 1:16–17 should be read in this way, it is worth putting these claims in broad historical perspective. While Campbell suggests in some places that "Justification Theory" is a typically Protestant construct and a product of modern European thought (e.g. p. 7), we should note that, in fact, defined in terms of these two key points, "Justification Theory" has characterized the western church's reading of Paul from the beginning (see, e.g., Thomas C. Oden's *A Justification Reader* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002] for the patristic period). Obviously, the specific unpacking of "righteousness," the source, nature, and context of faith, and, not least, the significance of justification within Christian soteriology have been much debated. However, on the two fundamental points that constitute Campbell's key target, there has been quite widespread agreement. These two central components of "Justification Theory" can hardly be dismissed, then, as unconscious and unfortunate reflections of a modern world view.

While disinclined to label Rom 1:16–17 as the "thesis statement" of the letter, Campbell recognizes that, with 3:21–26, these verses constitute one of the two key "thesis paragraphs" that any interpretation of Pauline justification must explain. Here, for the first time in the letter, we find Paul bringing together the contested terminology of "righteousness of God"/"righteous" and "faith." Campbell's claim that "righteousness of God" has a basically positive, or saving, connotation is not contested. The key question is whether this positive connotation has in view a certain denotation of "righteousness" language in terms of "retributive justice." Campbell, following Richard Hays,

thinks that Paul is alluding to Ps 98:2, where the Lord is portrayed as the divine king who “makes known his salvation” and “reveals his righteousness to the nations.” Against this monarchical background, God’s righteousness must be seen as a fundamentally liberative action rooted in God’s benevolence and not in any assessment of merit. In contrast, then, to “Justification Theory,” which confines righteousness language to a “forensic/retributive” framework, Campbell construes “the righteousness of God” and related righteousness language as liberative, a reflection of a God who is fundamentally benevolent.

I have three points to make in response to this construal. First, Campbell, not entirely unfairly in a book that is already very long, ecshews any sustained treatment of the lexical data. He even suggests that such an analysis might fall under Barr’s linguistic strictures against “etymologizing.” Yet this is not only to misapply the language of “etymology,” but it is to opt out of a fundamental task of any exegete: to explain why an author has chosen to use a particular lexeme and how that particular lexeme functions in the argument.

Second, Campbell’s fundamental differentiation of two kinds of “righteousness,” both “forensic” but operating within different frameworks, must be questioned. Campbell claims that “Justification Theory” restricts the idea of “forensic” to a “retributive” notion, in which the judgment rendered is “correlated tightly with criteria concerning the rectitude, or not the figure(s) being judged” (p. 662). In contrast, Paul operates with a “non-retributive” notion of righteousness, in which “attention to prior criteria might be relaxed or absent.” God’s righteousness in Paul, then, is a performative forensic event that enacts liberation, that “effects release” for those held captive by sin and death. Several problems with this approach are evident.

Campbell’s choice of the term “retributive” as the key distinguishing factor in interpretations of what “forensic” righteousness means is unfortunate. It not only has a generally negative connotation, but it also misrepresents the fundamental issue by focusing on the merits or demerits of the persons being judged. Certainly “Justification Theory” has never claimed that God’s righteousness must be understood in such terms. Rather, justification theorists have argued that God’s righteousness, in its positive, or salvific, sense, operates on the basis of “evidence” of some kind; that the performative act of “righteousing” a person is not arbitrary but takes account of some kind of “justifying criterion,” whether that criterion be God’s covenant faithfulness or his own person or the righteousness of Christ. The “righteous” acts of the divine king in the Psalms, to which Campbell appeals, are consistently correlated with such an evaluation. As Campbell notes, the divine king’s intervention to save his people and judge his enemies is not arbitrary: it is “right,” in some sense of that word. In Psalm 98, for example, the Lord’s display of righteousness is related to his love and faithfulness to Israel (v. 3). “Righteousness” in verse 9 of this psalm is the basis on which or context in which the Lord “judges the world” “in equity” (*mēsharim/euthytēs*). Psalm 143, to which Campbell appeals, makes a similar point. While explicitly denying that his plea could be based on his “righteousness” (v. 2), the psalmist appeals to

both the Lord's "faithfulness and righteousness" (v. 1) and to his own commitment to God (vv. 8–9). The point, then, is that the "righteousness," or "deliverance" that the divine king gives to his people is not an act of sheer benevolence; it is not an "amnesty." It is explicitly motivated by and based on some consideration of what is "right."

Campbell tacitly admits this point in his interpretation of Rom 1:17. "The righteousness of God" in this verse, he argues, is God's deliverance of "his messianic agent, Christ" through resurrection; and, he says, "it is 'right' for God to act in this way on behalf of his chosen Son, who has been unfairly executed" (p. 699). I think it highly unlikely that 1:17a makes even an indirect reference to Christ's resurrection. Yet the point is that Campbell recognizes that Paul's use of "righteousness" language carries over from his OT sources the nuance of an evaluation of "rightness" on the basis of which God's deliverance takes place. God does not simply, out of his benevolence, "deliver" Christ; he "establishes his right," he "vindicates" him. Unfortunately, Campbell does not follow through on this point, as he tends to interpret God's righteousness and justification in purely "liberative" terms (see p. 663 on 3:24). God's righteousness might result in liberation or even include liberation; but it is questionable whether it means liberation—Paul had other words at his disposal to signify that concept. The basically forensic rather than liberative notion of Paul's righteousness language is confirmed in Romans 5–8, where the language is set in contrast to the clearly judicial language of "condemnation" (see esp. 8:33–34; and also 5:16, 18).

A further reason to doubt Campbell's demarcation of two kinds of righteousness is the evidence of Rom 1:18–3:20. Campbell knows that this passage creates severe problems for his overall thesis; for Paul seems here to assume that "righteousness" language operates in a "forensic/retributive" framework. Thus, in one of the book's most breathtaking maneuvers, he dismisses this evidence by attributing the relevant passages to a "Teacher" in Rome whom Paul is correcting and opposing. My third reason for questioning Campbell's construal of Pauline justification in "forensic/liberative" terms is his failure to establish this vital point. Campbell grounds his identification of an opposing "Teacher" in Rom 16:17–19, where Paul unexpectedly lashes out against false teachers in the Roman community. Campbell is probably right to claim that this text receives too little attention in reconstructions of the occasion of Romans. Yet his move from a criticism of *false teachers* to the identification of a single "Teacher" whose voice Paul extensively "quotes" in Rom 1:18–3:20 is another matter. I have no quarrel with the idea that Paul, following rhetorical conventions of his time, might use the device of "speech in character" to advance his own argument. However, if viciously circular argument is to be avoided, one must present clear and convincing evidence for such a shift in "voice." Campbell fails to do so. The stylistic features he notes are minor and easily explained by the unique subject matter. He argues that ancient authors sometimes shifted characters without explicit indication. Yet the examples he cites from Epictetus do not inspire confidence in this claim: in all the texts from the *Discourses* that he cites, Epictetus explicitly signals a change in speaker (p. 533; cf. p. 1078 n. 24; although the references

to *Discourses* 1:10, 20–22, and 26–49—taken directly from Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric in Its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004] 93—appear to be in error). The same is true in 1 Corinthians, to which Campbell also appeals. The removal of retributive ideas such as are found in 1:18–32, 2:6–11, and 3:19 from Paul's own worldview is vital for Campbell's redefinition. Campbell's surgical removal of this body of evidence that is uncongenial to his interpretation smacks of special pleading. If this evidence is allowed to "count" in our delineation of "justification" in Paul, then it is clear that an evaluative notion is fundamental to his use of the language.

If a redefinition of "righteousness"/"justification" in fundamentally liberative terms is one of the key planks in Campbell's rereading of Romans 1–3, a particular Christological construal of faith is the second. Campbell, of course, does not deny the role of the Christian's own faith in Romans. But he insists that *pistis* should be understood basically as "fidelity," that the Christian's fidelity is tied closely to Christ's own fidelity in a participatory sense, that Christ is not clearly the object of faith, and that the Christian's fidelity is not so much a means of accessing God's liberating righteousness as it is a mark of those who belong to Christ. I doubt every one of these points, but, following my self-imposed agenda, I want to focus on some aspects of Campbell's argument about *pistis* in Rom 1:16–17.

First, Campbell's claim that the usual interpretation of Rom 1:17 and 3:21 by advocates of "Justification Theory" cannot explain these texts must be challenged. His case rests on the interpretation of *apokalyptō* (1:17) and *phaneroō* (3:21) as meaning "disclose"; and, he claims, God's liberating righteousness surely cannot be said to be disclosed by means of human believing (*ek pisteōs*; "explicitly and unavoidably of disclosure"—p. 379). However, it is quite unlikely that these verbs must have the visual or epistemological sense that he gives them. As the parallel use of *apokalyptō* in verse 18 suggests, the verb in verse 17 refers not to visible disclosure but to historical manifestation (Campbell's own paraphrase of v. 18 is: "the wrath of God is *itself* being revealed in some sense *from heaven against the cosmos*" [p. 543; italics his]; see also *apokalypsis* in 2:5). More important, justification theorists generally argue that "the righteousness of God" refers not to God's *offer* or *announcement* of justification but to the *accomplishment* of justification. Campbell may disagree with this interpretation of "righteousness," but it is not fair to claim that an explicit reference to the instrument by which humans access this righteousness is incoherent. It makes just as much sense to claim that God's righteousness is "revealed" for those who believe, as it does to claim that God's wrath is "revealed" against ungodliness and unrighteousness (v. 18).

Second, Campbell's Christological interpretation of Hab 2:4 must be challenged. He rests a lot on this text, arguing that Paul draws his characteristic instrumental use of *ek pisteōs* from it. He is not alone in thinking that "the righteous one" in this text is Christ, but this interpretation is not very likely. There is, of course, no precedent for a messianic reading of this verse in the OT or Judaism; so rather clear markers of this novel view would have to be

present. Yet the evidence of Romans as a whole tends to confirm the usual interpretation. Never does Paul in Romans call Christ “the righteous one.” Readers of Romans would expect the “righteous one” in 1:17 to refer to those who later in the letter, again and again, are said to possess or be characterized by “righteousness.” (The only text in Romans that uses any *dik-* words with reference to Christ is 5:18, where *dikaiōma* refers to Christ’s “righteous act.”) And, trying to be careful here not to fall into a circular argument, it must be noted that, of the ten later occurrences of the phrase *ek pisteōs* in Romans, four clearly refer to Christians (Rom 4:16 [2]; 14:23 [2]), while none explicitly refers to Christ. Matters are less clear when it comes to the language of “living” and “life.” Yet, on any interpretation, this language is more frequently used in Romans of Christians than of Christ. Finally, and broadening my argument a bit here, we note that Paul cites four OT texts in support of his teaching about “faith” in Romans: Hab 2:4, Gen 15:6, Isa 28:16, Isa 53:1; and three of these refer unarguably to human faith.

However, the real issue is not whether Paul in this verse or in others refers to Christ’s own faith or faithfulness—a view that many justification theorists hold. The issue is whether we can diminish the role of human faith in justification to the degree that Campbell does. We would have to look carefully at many texts to assess Campbell’s argument adequately. However, I want to note one facet of his argument on this point because it is part of an important larger methodological concern. Campbell frequently argues that any significant role for human faith in the experience of God’s righteousness introduces a “voluntarism” that fundamentally contradicts Paul’s portrayal of God’s righteousness as an unconditional act. It is this unconditionality in God’s deliverance that Campbell seems to mean when he labels his interpretation an “apocalyptic” reading. Bypassing for now this appropriation of the word “apocalyptic,” I will simply say that I find the very tension that so bothers Campbell precisely one of the virtues of the traditional reading. “Justification Theory,” in its best advocates, preserves a tension between divine activity and human activity that is built into the warp and woof of Scripture. The same is true of many (though not all) of the other key tensions that Campbell cites as problems for “Justification Theory” (p. 185). We might also ask Campbell a series of questions, that, as far as I can see, he never clearly addresses: If “faith” is not the means of accessing God’s righteousness, what is? If God’s deliverance is unconditional, is it therefore necessarily universal? If not, why not?

A second methodological concern is the degree to which Campbell’s interpretation creates tension with other parts of Scripture. Of course, a key motivating factor in his own re-reading is his conviction that “Justification Theory” cannot satisfactorily explain the connection between Romans 1–4 and 5–8. This opens up a long and complex debate about the character of Paul’s theology. I can only say, briefly, that I think an appropriate emphasis on the central Pauline motif of union with Christ is able to explain how a purely forensic, or, if you will, “positional,” justification in Romans 1–4 can be integrated neatly with the two great themes that both Campbell and I think characterize Romans 5–8. On the one hand, therefore, the believer’s present

justification “in Christ” provides complete assurance for the eschatological judgment. On the other hand, participation in and with Christ provides all the resources necessary to overcome the problem of sin. Indeed, on Campbell’s reading, one must ask why Paul, outside of the debated Rom 6:7, does not appeal explicitly to “deliverance,” which he construes in terms of liberation from sin and death, as ground for ethical competence in Romans 5–8.

However, my main focus here is on the possible dissonances that Campbell’s interpretation of Romans (and Paul) creates with other biblical material. While not entirely fair to Campbell, since he does not claim to be providing an interpretation that coheres with the broader scriptural witness, the “fit” with Scripture generally will obviously be of concern to many interpreters and theologians, this one among them. To mention just one such issue: How does the Johannine stress on “believing in [*eis*] Christ” fit with Paul’s apocalyptic construal of “deliverance”? Campbell’s repeated claim that Paul’s quarrel with the “Teacher” is, at root, a debate about two different conceptions of God (p. 184), or even two different “Gods” (p. 812) raises a more serious question. Campbell insists that the “Teacher” is not a representative of Judaism as such, espousing instead a Jewish-influenced Christian aberration. Yet his description of the “Teacher’s” program is hard at many points to differentiate from widespread Jewish views (his claim that the “Teacher” was advocating for his view a “significant *ethical* advantage” and a “decisive *eschatological* advantage” [p. 562] sounds a lot like typical Jewish claims for their religion). And, as Campbell recognizes, in texts such as Rom 9:1–5 and 10:1–3 Paul appears to be explicitly dealing with Judaism as such. Moreover, his claim that there is “no *retributive character to the God revealed to Paul by Christ*” (p. 706; italics his) sets Campbell’s construal of “Paul’s God” off from the revelation of the OT God (see, e.g., Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12; Isa 59:18). Talk of “two different gods” in this context appears to me to leave Campbell’s construal open to the charge of incipient Marcionism.

I recognize that my review of Douglas Campbell’s important book has been strongly biased toward the negative. Yet I thought it important to make clear the quite serious issues I have with his book. I should say, on the other side, that, while I do not think Campbell has always fairly described the best of “Justification Theory” and I do not agree with all of his conclusions, his research is incredibly broad, he tries to deal with all the data, and he interacts, often in great detail, with all the significant contrary arguments. By attacking so massively the very roots of so much Western soteriological interpretation, Campbell has forced us to take a hard and fresh look at that paradigm and its fundamental exegetical underpinnings. While I continue to think, despite Campbell’s concluding remarks, that the essence of the “Justification Theory” paradigm more satisfactorily explains Romans than does his particular form of “apocalyptic” paradigm, I am grateful to him for the stimulus to go back to “first things.”