

A Response to Frank Macchia's
“Justified in the Spirit: A Pentecostal Reflection”

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The Assembly of God Church, Kolkata

22–26 July 2026

The doctrine of 'Justification by faith' is widely regarded as the central theological pivot of Christian history and the "material cause" of the Protestant Reformation. The rift it created between Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church decisively shaped the subsequent trajectory of Western Christianity. Martin Luther called it the article by which the church "stands or falls", but for most evangelicals today, especially those within the Reformed tradition the doctrine is a theological "sacred cow", an essential tenet of orthodox faith.¹

All that to say that when one seeks to advance a fresh perspective on this topic one has to tread carefully. It takes a theological heavy-weight like Macchia to venture into such territory and construct [in his own words] "a richly pneumatological understanding of justification in the light of a Spirit Christology". What Prof Macchia offers us is indeed a distinctively Pentecostal account of this cherished doctrine, emphasizing the essential role of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection of Christ over what he regards as truncated, strictly forensic models. Basing his construct essentially on certain key texts: 1 Tim 3:16, Rom 1:4 & 4:25, among others - he argues that justification should be understood not merely as a forensic declaration grounded in the cross, but as a pneumatological, Christological and resurrection-centered reality.

1.0 A Brief Sketch of Macchia's View

Prof Macchia's essential thesis, that Christ was "justified in the Spirit" at his resurrection and that believers participate in that justification through union with Christ in the Spirit, is grounded in the exegetical claim that 1 Timothy 3:16 should be translated "*justified* in the Spirit" rather than merely "*vindicated* in the Spirit." Christ's resurrection referred to in this phrase, was not simply a confirmation of his identity, it was his installation as the eschatological Son and Messiah. He validates this claim by appealing to Rom 4:25 which explicitly states that Christ was "raised for our justification", and to 1 Cor 15:17 where Paul clearly

¹For an introduction to the debate and the various approaches to the doctrine that have emerged since the mid-nineteenth century, see Ronald Fung's summary survey: 'The Status of Justification by Faith in Paul's Thought: A Brief Survey of a Modern Debate' in *Themelios* 6:3 [April 1981], 4-11.

asserts that without the resurrection believers would still be in their sins. Justification thus cannot be located exclusively in Christ's death and reduced to a legal acquittal secured only at the cross; the resurrection, too, is a saving event.

Furthermore, justification is both *forensic* and *participatory*: it is not merely a change of legal status but also participation in divine life. Macchia takes issue with models of justification which seem to focus on atonement as appeasement of divine wrath and retributive judgment. For him, God's love precedes the cross where Christ bears judgment in order to overcome it in suffering love. Resurrection reveals God's victory over sin and death rather than merely validating a prior legal transaction.

Justification, moreover, occurs "in the Spirit": the Holy Spirit unites believers to Christ in justification. But justification also has implications beyond individual salvation. It creates a reconciled community of faith, involves social inclusion of the poor and marginalized, and offers a foretaste of the renewal of all creation. The ultimate horizon of justification is thus resurrection and new creation. [*Whew...breath-taking, isn't it?*]

2.0 A Summary Theological Appraisal and Critique

Years ago, I heard one of my theology professors say: "*Every good theologian must have at least one respectable heresy!*". I struggled hard to find one in this paper, but I'm afraid, by that test, Prof Macchia may have failed my scrutiny! But while I could not find anything I disagree with seriously, in the interests of meaningful dialogue, I would like to draw attention to a couple of points in Macchia's construct which are open to dispute, where further clarification might be helpful.

2.1 Christ Was "Justified in the Spirit" [ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι]

Some pushback to Macchia's thesis has come from those who believe that in basing his construct on a fragment of an ancient Christ-hymn and forcing *edikaiōthē* to carry the weight of his distinctive interpretation of "justification", he may be overstretching the scope of his foundational pivotal text. Objections to Macchia's argument in this regard are both exegetical and theological.

a) *Macchia's preference for the KJV [and ASV] translation of ἐδικαιώθη as "justified" over most other translations which render it "vindicated"*.

Most commentators understand ἐδικαιώθη (*edikaiōthē*) here not as "justified" [declared righteous from guilt], but as "vindicated" [proved to be who he truly is]. The vast majority of both lexicographical² and exegetical sources seem to favour the latter. Apart from George Knight III who Macchia references, a number of other NT scholars also object to Macchia's interpretation on exegetical grounds. For instance, critical scholars, William Mounce and Philip Towner, in their commentaries on 1 Timothy, observe that *edikaiōthē* and cognates of δικαιόω have a broader semantic range than forensic justification, frequently translated "vindicate" in biblical Greek.³

b) *Macchia's interpretation of ἐν πνεύματι as a reference to the Holy Spirit*—consistent with his Spirit Christology, Macchia interprets this to mean that the Holy Spirit is the active agent of justification: Jesus was "justified *in the Spirit*" at the resurrection, and his resurrection "is the divine act of justification for all flesh". While Macchia's identification of ἐν πνεύματι with the Holy Spirit is by no means eccentric, it is again highly contested. A wide range of NT scholars interpret this in keeping with the poetic parallelism of the hymn and see ἐν πνεύματι referring not to the Holy Spirit, but the spirit realm of Christ's existence, a pivotal bridge between Christ's earthly humiliation ("manifest in the flesh") and his ultimate exaltation ("received up in glory").⁴ Gordon Fee advances perhaps the most compelling argument and sees the phrase as the natural

²See: Walter Bauer et al., **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature**, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 249; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains**, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 33.98.

³William D. Mounce, **Pastoral Epistles**, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000], 222-224; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006], 278-281.

⁴This echoes the language found in 1 Pet 3:18: Christ was "*put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit*"; The German scholar Joachim Jeremias notes that the hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 relies on ancient Near Eastern enthronement patterns, on the basis of which he sees the resurrection being the divine coronation that corrected an unjust execution and the phrase "justified in the spirit" signifying the formal, cosmic recognition of a king's legitimate right to rule, **The Prayers of Jesus** (pp. 102–104),

antonym of “in the sphere of humanity”, “the new ‘spiritual,’ supernatural realm of existence, entered by Christ through his resurrection.”⁵

This leads us then to the theological dilemma: if the term “*justified*” is applied to Christ it suggests that Jesus himself needed acquittal from sin. Thus, the obvious [layperson’s] question: *Does Christ who was completely sinless need “justification” from sin?* In what sense can we speak of Christ being “justified” if he was sinless? This is why most translators and exegetes alike judge that “vindicated” denotes the idea of God’s public confirmation of Christ’s Messianic identity, claims and sinless life through his resurrection and exaltation. Macchia may need stronger exegetical grounds to justify his thesis that *ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι* means *vindicated by/in the Spirit* rather than *justification from sin* transferable to believers.⁶

2.2 Penal Substitutionary View of the Atonement

Macchia clearly seems to have difficulty with the idea of Christ’s atoning death on the Cross resulting in the “appeasement of God’s wrath”. The God who needs his wrath towards sinners appeased is a “vengeful and bloodthirsty” who cannot at the same time be One whose love and mercy sent Christ to the cross. “[Christ] bears our judgment *not to appease wrath* but more substantially theologically *to overcome it* out of divine love so as to extend grace to sinners”.

He thus also prefers the ‘ransom’ motif language over that of propitiation: “God as the Judge pays the price for the criminal... [the Father] sends his faithful Son to pay the price for sin so as to triumph over it in love”. The weakness of the ransom motif is that in response to the question: *To whom was the ransom paid?* the atonement becomes essentially a cosmic legal transaction between God and Satan. We are also left wondering what Macchia means when he speaks of God’s wrath, judgment & punishment being

⁵God’s Empowering Presence, 766; also, Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction*, p. 88; Philip Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT, 2006), pp. 279–281; I. Howard Marshall *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC, 1999), pp. 521–524; Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Anchor Bible, 2001), pp. 232–234.

⁶See Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament. 2nd ed.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014, 608; N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress Press, 2003), 722-724.

“*overcome*”, rather than the more natural predicates: wrath needs to be “*appeased*” and judgment/punishment “*met/paid*”.

The dichotomy Macchia draws between *divine love* and *divine justice* seems needless and forced. Theologians who have held to penal substitution down through the centuries have not seen God’s holy justice and holy love in conflict as much as converging in the Cross of Christ. They do not see the Cross as an instrument that compels a reluctant Father to love sinners, but as the supreme expression of the Father’s love meeting the absolute demands of his holy justice [Rom. 3:25-26]. It is precisely the triumph of the Father’s love that provides a way for his wrath against sin and justice satisfied in the work of the Son.⁷

To be fair, Macchia does go on to outline his “sanitized” version of the wrath of God as “divine displeasure...a state of gracelessness that devastates the soul”. But it is hard to escape his discomfort with more “full-blooded” notions of divine wrath and judgment which we see consistently reflected through the Bible: the Flood in Noah’s time, Sodom & Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, Jesus’ depiction of hell in the parable of the Rich Man & Lazarus and the Lake of fire in the book of Revelation. Also descriptions such as: “*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” and our “*God is a consuming fire.*” [Heb. 10:31; 12:29 cf. Deut. 4:24].

It would be helpful if Macchia could clarify his views on the place of propitiation of God’s wrath, the biblical weight of cosmic guilt and the certainty of eschatological judgment—themes that find prominence all through Scripture and the history of doctrine.

3.0 The Significance of Macchia’s Pneumatological Interpretation of ‘Justification’ for the Church-in-Mission

Macchia’s ‘Justification’ framework is paradigm-shifting not because of its soteriological significance, but especially because of its implications for Christian nurture and discipleship. A critical

⁷Many recent responses have emerged in defense of Penal Substitution, the more convincing among them is William Lane Craig’s *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration*, Baylor University Press, 2020; see also Garry Williams, “Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50:1 (March 2007), 71–86.

question that Christian theologians have struggled with down through the ages, also the subject of endless controversy, debate and division has been: *Is justification essentially a legal action - the reception of forgiveness by faith, or an experience of personal transformation that occurs as we cooperate with grace?*

Following Luther & Calvin and the early reformers, and Lutheran and Reformed traditions which have largely shaped Protestant doctrine, evangelical and Pentecostal movements in recent times have tended to define justification in strictly forensic terms: *sola fide...faith alone!* The Reformers themselves, however, did not define the Protestant position in terms of *Justification by faith alone*. Rather their maxim was: *Justificatio est sola fide, sed fides non est sola*", which means ***Justification is by faith alone, but faith is not alone.***

3.1 Pastoral & Ethical Implications

[But here's the problem...] Not just Pentecostals, as Macchia points out—while Protestant theology generally has no difficulty associating the work of the Spirit with conviction, regeneration, sanctification, even notions of empowerment, it has, for the most part, at best minimized and at worst insulated the Spirit's role in the work of justification. But justification is in fact inextricably linked with the believer's union with Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, which was—and Macchia skillfully weaves this fact into his argument—a theme in the early reformers' theology of justification, but obscured in subsequent formulations which over-emphasized its forensic aspects. Macchia's work brilliantly mends this theological disconnect and restores seamless wholeness to the Christian soteriological scheme. Justification is thus not just a forensic event but, based on the work of Christ's atoning death and resurrection, is a participation in the life of the Spirit who regenerates, sanctifies, delivers and empowers.

Their concern to ensure that salvation rests entirely on the objective, finished work of Christ, rather than the believer's personal life-transforming experience, leads classical Protestants to affirm strictly the distinction between justification, regeneration and sanctification. Macchia is careful to clarify this distinction when he states explicitly that justification is never based on the "growing quality of our spiritual lives" but goes on to affirm that it is the same Spirit at work at every stage of the believer's experience. This 'distinct-

yet-continuous' nuance is one of the great gems in Macchia's proposal with significant pastoral and ethical potential.

Although those within the strictly forensic tradition may in theory view union with Christ as integral to justification as well as linked to sanctification, in practice a strict justification [conversion] by *faith alone* emphasis considerably dilutes any meaningful notion of union with Christ [What does it even mean apart from the mediation of the Holy Spirit?] and takes the teeth out of any impetus for moral transformation [sanctification]. Any wonder then that pastors so often have to struggle with complacency in discipleship, moral problems in the church and character issues in leadership. I would venture to go further and suggest this may also be one of the underlying reasons for the evangelical Church's general passivity towards issues of social engagement, while the Pentecostal emphasis on immediate experience of the Spirit's presence has produced relatively greater involvement in social concern within the Pentecostal movement.

3.2 Relevance to People of Other Faiths in Asia

The hidden genius of Macchia's proposal is its yet unexplored attractive prospects for Christian witness in Asia. I can do no more than open a window into the possibilities in the remaining moments of this response. We in Asia have for long struggled to present the gospel message focusing on sin and guilt, in line with a standard pattern received from the West. People in individualistic guilt-oriented western cultures relate easily to personal sin and guilt, but these notions do not easily connect with eastern cultures. The deepest spiritual aspirations within most Asian religious traditions are more commonly for some form of immediate spiritual experience of union with God.

An illustration from the Indian context with which I am most familiar. Sadhu Sundar Singh is one of the best-known figures from a Sikh-Hindu background to come to Christ. Sundar Singh believes that the unregenerate soul is burdened by the sense of its separation from God and longs for fellowship with him.: "As in the flint there is fire, so in the heart of man there is the yearning for communion with God." For him, the essential aspiration of all sincere seekers is for a mystical experience of communion with God, and the fulfilment of this aspiration is only found in a personal experience of communion with God through Christ.

Justification occurs when the seeker enters into communion with God through Christ, and her whole being is renewed as she begins her journey of becoming conformed to the image of Christ.⁸

Conclusion:

Macchia's 'justification by faith' construct is seminal Pentecostal theology at its best. Its most important achievement is the recovery of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection as constitutive elements of justification. *Is justification essentially a legal action—the reception of forgiveness by faith, or an experience of personal transformation that occurs as we cooperate with grace?* It effectively sets this big question that separates two great Christian traditions within a broader pneumatological theology of justification framework. Justification is simultaneously forensic, participatory, Trinitarian, ecclesial and eschatological - a vision that's compelling, brilliant in its creative originality and robust in the breadth of Christian tradition that it incorporates. This sophisticated justification framework needs to be distilled down and integrated practically into the lived experience of Spirit-filled churches across global Pentecostalism today.

⁸Ivan Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself Without Witness*, (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 167-168.