

## JUSTIFICATION: A DOCTRINE IN CRISIS

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The modern ecumenical effort to reconcile long-standing Protestant-Catholic doctrinal differences has not met with spectacular success. Although important differences have been identified, no great progress has been made in surmounting them. Most Roman Catholics view their received dogma as essentially without error, whereas Protestant critics insist that Rome promotes views that Scripture disallows. The Orthodox Church has not been aggressively engaged in dialogue, despite its affiliation with the World Council of Churches.

Few theological issues have divided the communions more centrally than that of justification by faith. Specially noteworthy in this connection are the two ecumenically-oriented reports entitled *Justification by Faith: U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue* (1983) and *Salvation and the Church: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*. Many less formal conversations have occurred.

Some professedly evangelical denominations refuse to attach to the rubric of justification the decisive significance on which the Protestant Reformers and the evangelical mainstream insist. They focus instead on the centrality of sanctification, or on some post-conversion charismatic experience, or on the decisive importance of Jesus Christ. But justification nonetheless remains a forefront concern, one that has gained new intensity through the controversial 1994 declaration entitled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together."

Justification is God's declaration and implementation of his eternal will giving sovereign assurance in a divine verdict that we otherwise doomed sinners are by faith now acquitted. To quote the Heidelberg Catechism: "Without any merit of my own and of His mere mercy [God] gives me the perfect satisfaction and holiness of Christ, and accounts that I have never committed or had any sin, but have myself fulfilled the obedience which Christ has achieved for me, if only I receive this benefit with a believing heart."<sup>1</sup>

In his epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians the apostle Paul stresses the impossibility that sinful man can become just before a holy God by legalistic piety or law-keeping or human works. But God's merciful verdict declares man justified in God's sight on the ground of the substitutionary

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<sup>1</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 60 ("How art those righteous before God?").

life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 4:25). Sinful man is acquitted in a forensic divine declaration solely on condition of personal faith in God's divinely-provided mediation. Justification, in short, is by faith alone.

Faith is the antithesis of works. It rests on the sheer mercy of God and not at all on sinful man's achievements. "From the standpoint of biblical theology," Karl Barth remarks, "the root is cut of all the later conceptions which tried to attribute to the faith of a man a merit for the attainment of justification or co-operation in its fulfillment, or to identify faith, its rise and continuance and inward and outward work with justification."<sup>2</sup>

Paul's letter to the Galatians has been called "the Magna Charta of Christian liberty." In it he stressed that Christ and Christ alone could provide what attempted law-keeping could not: right standing before God. Those who twisted the Christian message by adding to the gospel a requirement of human works as a condition of justification so altered the gospel that Paul called them "deserters" (Gal 1:6-7).

Paul's struggle for Christian liberty turned on an issue peculiar to the apostolic age, when some contended that apart from observance of the rite of circumcision there could be no salvation for Gentiles. In our time other issues are mixed with Christ as the ground of the sinner's divine acceptance: the rite of baptism, attendance at mass, charismatic speaking in tongues, or insistence on partial sanctification as at least a condition of justification.

Augustine (354-430) conflated the immediate act of justification with the process of sanctification and consequently misrepresented justification as a "making righteous."

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) also viewed justifying grace as a supernatural quality infused into the sinner. Justification he depicted in terms of operative divine grace transmitted in the sacraments. The Roman Church's elevation of Thomism as its official theology proliferated the view that justification is an inner state dependent upon sacramental observance.

Luther and the Reformers refused to yield an inch on the nature of justification, insisting that the sinner's efforts to keep the law could not in whole or in part achieve our right standing before God. To yield on this matter, they contended, would in principle nullify the necessity of the substitutionary death of the Savior. They stressed the Pauline doctrine that in justification Christ's righteousness is by faith imputed to us.

The situation that Paul had confronted in Galatia was not overt renunciation and contravention. Rather it was the dilution of the gospel by those who by a dangerous admixture ventured to supplement the doctrine of grace.<sup>3</sup>

So too the Catholic alternative did not involve outright rejection of salvation by grace or of justification by faith. Paul emphasized that if one proclaims justification in whole or part by circumcision or by any works whatever (Gal 5:1), one not only cancels "the offense of the cross" but also detaches one's self from Christ and the gospel of grace. The intolerable ad-

<sup>2</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, p. 615.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. T. George, *Galatians* (New American Commentary 30; Nashville: Broadman, 1994) 178.

mixture of justification and works provoked the orthodox Christian emphasis on *sola fide*—faith alone.

Neither the Reformers nor Rome denied that grace is necessary for salvation. What Rome denied was justification by faith alone. Klaas Runia tells us that justification is “the central and determinative theme in the Christian doctrine of salvation and the Christian life.”<sup>4</sup> The doctrine was the spearpoint of the conflict between Luther and Rome.

To be sure, some scholars have in recent decades argued that justification is not the center of Pauline thought but is rather a subsidiary doctrine. In its place they have proposed other integrating doctrines. Barth thinks that the confession of Jesus Christ is more basic than justification, which he defends—although he offers a novel doctrine of both: Justification he considers but a new insight into an already universally effective Christological salvation. Yet many others, including J. Gresham Machen and Leon Morris, have championed the evangelical mainstream view that justification is basic and central.

The Council of Trent (1547) rejected the Reformers’ view of justification. Contrary to their teaching it held that justification is “not a bare remission of sins, but also sanctification and the renewal of the inner man.” It contended that justification is not only a declarative act of the remission of sins but also a transformist act of inner renewal and sanctification. Justification is therefore viewed as an aspect of sanctification. Salvation allegedly depends in part on an inherent righteousness that can be lost through deadly sins and depends also on good works that must accompany divine grace extended to the sinner.

Evangelical critics reply that when one speaks of justification it is indeed necessary but not really sufficient to emphasize that believers are both justified and kept by grace. For the ground of divine acceptance needs to be made transparently clear. It is not by our works, not even by our love, that we are justified—even in part. Sinful humans do not love aright until after the Holy Spirit indwells them. Nothing that we ourselves contribute is a partial ground of our justification. Baptism is excluded as a work: Never does the Bible attribute justification to it.

In line with these emphases the eleventh of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England notably affirms: “We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deserving.”

Barth asks rhetorically: If Augustine and Catholic exegesis and dogmatics had the epistle to the Galatians at all in view, could they possibly “have understood justification as a process which is fulfilled in the human subject, allowing it simply to begin with faith and to be completed with the infused grace of love?”<sup>5</sup> He protests that exponents of the Council of Trent’s decree on justification seem wholly to ignore the Reformers’ concerns regarding

<sup>4</sup> K. Runia, “Justification and Roman Catholicism,” *Right with God* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 221.

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, p. 623.

faith and works. They describe justification, he adds, as a process in which man fulfills the demands of the Church's redemptive system and enjoys its blessings—akin to the doctrine of works that the apostle Paul vehemently opposed. Barth asks question upon question in response to Trent.<sup>6</sup> In the Tridentine doctrine of justification he finds it "difficult to see . . . anything better than what Paul meant by another gospel."<sup>7</sup> "With its doctrine of justification the Roman Church closed the door to self-reformation and deprived itself of all possibility of seizing the initiative in uniting the divided church. It was impossible for the Evangelical Churches to return to fellowship with Rome when the decisive point of dispute was handled in this way. They could not surrender truth to unity."

The question of the priority of truth or of unity is currently being raised anew through "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Some signers ask why the doctrinal concerns of sixteenth-century Churchmen (the Reformers) should be considered decisive. Others reply that the same question might well be addressed to thirteenth-century scholastics (notably Thomas Aquinas), or perhaps more fundamentally even to the apostolic age. It is clear that the nature of justification has again become a matter of crucial theological debate.

Catholic scholars have difficulty with Luther's emphasis: at once justified and a sinner. By speaking of justification and sanctification as two aspects of one and the same divine act they cloud the fact that the two are clearly distinct and that they are not effected simultaneously. The significance of sacraments, the significance of merit and the proper significance of good works are thereby obscured. Catholics hold that the sufferings of the penitent in purgatory can be applied to beseech God's pardon, a doctrine lacking Biblical basis. John Henry Newman, the Anglican scholar who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845, commented: "Whether we say we are justified by faith, or by works, or by sacraments, all these but mean this one doctrine that we are justified by grace which is given through sacraments, impenetrated by faith, manifest in works."<sup>8</sup>

Schleiermacher, the father of Protestant modernism, blurred the distinction between justification and regeneration by regarding them simply as different aspects of the believer's union with Christ. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries modernist theologians dismissed the Biblical doctrine of justification as artificial. But twentieth-century theological study has reinforced its Biblical legitimacy and importance.

After World War II sharp ecclesiastical antagonism over the doctrine was somewhat moderated. Protestant ecumenical scholars probed possibilities of dialogue. Some Catholic scholars no longer referred to the Reformers as evil or as heretics but regarded them rather as pious scholars seeking to conform the Church to NT teaching. Some theologians argued that all Church for-

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 625–626.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 626.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. Newman, *Lectures on Justification* 303.

mulations must be considered historically time-bound. Others contended that the Vatican and the Reformation espouse identical positions.

Hans Küng, in a dissertation under Barth in 1957, alleged (although few Catholic scholars shared his view) that Calvin in fact held the Catholic doctrine and, moreover, that Barth and Rome essentially agree. Luther distorted the doctrine of justification, Küng argued, and Trent in its attempted corrective additionally somewhat distorted it. Catholics who take this course seek to align Calvin with a closer relationship between justification and sanctification.

But the attempt to divide Calvin and Luther on this issue remains unconvincing. Küng insists that Trent was directed against heresy and that Protestant theologians mistook Trent as teaching synergistic salvation. He contends further that according to the Reformers the declaratory act of justification included becoming righteous and that the Roman transformist view included the declaratory act. Barth wondered whether this analysis accurately states the facts with its cryptic disclosure of some erstwhile hidden continuities whereby Thomas Aquinas and the Reformers should now be found in essential agreement.

In any event, it is not to Church history but rather to Scripture that we must look for a decision as to which view of justification is correct. Luther appealed insistently to the NT in affirming justification. Many Roman Catholic scholars now concede that Paul uses the verb "justify" in a declarative, forensic sense.

At the same time some Protestant (including Lutheran) theology is moving away from the centrality of justification and rejects the contrast of the forensic and the transformationist views. Not a few complicate the discussion by adding a universalist theory of salvation to the debate.

An Anglican-Roman Catholic commission recently concluded that salvation is not an area where differences justify continued separation of their communions. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1978 edition) either overstates the factualities or it resorts to semantic ambiguity when the entry entitled "Justification" avers that "there is no division at the confessional level between the Protestant and Catholic doctrines of justification if both are rightly understood."<sup>9</sup> A contributor of the essay on justification in *The Dictionary of the Bible and Religion* (1986) says it is erroneous to hold that Roman Catholics and Protestants differ widely on justification.

Although the Scriptural doctrine of justification is that of an imputed—and not of an imparted—righteousness, some Biblical passages nonetheless suggest that justification is not to be wholly disconnected from God's power for righteousness as well. The righteousness in view is not simply forensic or imputed righteousness, for example, in Rom 10:4 ("Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"), or in 8:30 ("Whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified"), or in 1 Cor 6:11 ("Ye are washed, . . . sanctified, . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus

<sup>9</sup> *Micropedia*, vol. 5.

and by the Spirit of our God"). None of the Reformers denied that justification issues in love. What they denied is that love or any other work or works by the sinner in whole or part enters into divine justification.

Much as he maintained it at the heart of the gospel, Calvin in fact expounded justification under his teaching on the Christian life. He portrays justification as part of a divine sequence: The work initiated by divine predestination leads on to the glorification of believers (Rom 8:30). Justification by faith is the divinely provided entry to the sinner's redemptive relationship with God in Christ.

Yet Calvin can hardly be charged with blending justification and sanctification. Debate no doubt continues over the meaning of Paul's phrase "the righteousness of God." Does the apostle mean civic righteousness that God honors, or God's own inherent righteousness, or God's gift to penitent sinners, or some amalgam or alternative? The nature of justification turns on the answer.

Luther emphasized the gift-character of God's righteousness—not sinlessness in the sense of moral perfection but in the sense that God does not reckon the believer's sins against him and assigns him the status of righteousness. Justification is God's gracious acquittal of guilty sinners without prejudice to God's own justice or righteousness. God declares the sinner righteous "in Christ," the Righteous One.

Scripture does indeed speak of God "making sinners righteous." But it uses other terms than justification (e.g. sanctification, adoption, heirship) to depict this activity. Justification by contrast is God's remittance of the sins of the guilty and freely accounting them righteous by grace, on the ground solely of Christ's law-keeping in our behalf and stead.

An important issue has been how to reconcile the Pauline view of forensic justification (Rom 4:5; 5:6–11; 8:31–34) with his view of a future universal judgment of human works (2:12; 14:10; 1 Cor 3:15; 4:5; 2 Cor 2:10; etc.). Justification by faith carries assurance of deliverance from the coming wrath (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9; Rom 8:30–34).

Are one's character and works then wholly irrelevant? By no means. Good works are evidence of having received justification by faith. They attest the presence of true faith. Not to backsliders only but to all believers Paul speaks a warning and notes the prospect of reward. He links faith and love (Gal 5:6) with Christian works (1 Thess 1:3).

But the ground of justification lies in God's revealed grace (Eph 2:8–10).<sup>\*</sup> Justification of the sinner is by faith alone on the ground of Christ's substitutionary work (Rom 3:28 RSV). If one trusts the "alien" righteousness of Christ he is at that very moment assured of salvation. The NT call to believe in Christ is not the engendering of a "work." It is the antithesis of works. Faith is not a ground of our salvation. The gospel links justification with Christ's saving work in our stead, and we are called to believe.

That Christ died for our sins is basic Pauline truth (1 Cor 15:3). He "died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6), and we are justified "in his blood" (5:9). God set him forth as a propitiation (3:24–25).

The Damascus-Road narrative dramatizes all this. Paul was persecuting the very Lord he thought he was serving. He did so even or especially when trusting his own righteousness. Our so-called morality does not and cannot save us. Its inadequacy condemns us. The pharisaically-educated religionist came to see that not even his most zealous attempts to keep the law enabled him to stand in God's presence. If the effort of law-keeping had been able to give life, Christ need not have come (Gal 3:21).

The resurrection of Jesus attests that the Father approves his life and works. It discloses the quality of humanity God accepts going into the eternal future. The resurrection is the seal evidencing the saving significance of Jesus' perfect life and atoning death.

God's justification is all of grace. It is the gift of God (Eph 2:1-10). Faith is not a meritorious ground of salvation, although there is no justification without it. Nothing but the historical work of Christ is the ground of our salvation. Forgiveness is bound to justification. Where there is faith in Christ's atoning death and resurrection there is justification.

The elements of justification, in brief, are God's forgiveness of sins and his reckoning of sinners as righteous (Rom 4:5-8; Acts 13:38-39). Justification is not an infusion of new life but the declaratory imputation of righteousness. In justification God looks not upon our (supposed) righteousness but upon Christ's holy atonement. Justification is, to be sure, only one element of salvation. But it must not be confused with sanctification. Yet if no righteous life follows, there is no evidence of a redemptive relationship with God. The eclipse of the doctrine of justification issues in a loss of Christian assurance.

God's declaration of justification expresses his own eternal intention and determination. It is God—for his own glory and purposes—who does the predestining, the calling, the justifying, the glorifying (Rom 8:30). It is by God's direction that we are exonerated, and there is no higher authority. For his own glory God acquitted those he called, and not because some modicum of their works impressed him, for we have none. Justification is not a human achievement. The sinner's inner selfhood and outer activity are a constant reminder that he/she is a moral rebel who copes continually with the old self. Whatever role works have in human salvation they have none that invites justification.

Justification is thus astonishing and highly improbable good news proclaimed in the midst of man's sinful condition and heralded in connection with the incarnation and resurrection of the crucified Jesus. God has turned the highly improbable and more than likely impossible into a new possibility. Sin—however rampant—no longer decides our destiny. God does, since we are under grace.

If justification is real, if it is factual, can it at all be so other than through the sovereign power of God? Can one even be grateful for it unless he is aware first that God alone has shaped its possibility? Our confession of justification, if genuine, will call us to faith that God can do in himself if he so wishes and also with us and in us what we ourselves cannot do. Surely

no self-exhibition of the justified man's private righteousness can attest its factuality, because we have no inherent righteousness and we seriously misunderstand justification if we think we can ourselves legitimate it.

If we look to ourselves we have more to hide than to display. In thought, word and deed we seem nonetheless to live still in the past that God in principle has overruled. The old nature still survives, and the sinful yesterdays empty into a sinful today. We have to confess that it is God's verdict alone that we are guiltless and that this reality exists only in God and not yet in our nature and activity. In the midst of our wicked and wretched condition God nonetheless declares the verdict of justifying grace. Yet the divine declaration of what we are in God's purposes takes priority over what we must confess that we in ourselves are. Only in that justificatory invasion of our sinfulness can humans live in hope. So far Barth is right: "The goal . . . has precedence over the beginning; that which God's child already is in virtue of God's explicit pardon has precedence over what he still is in virtue of what is implicit in it."<sup>10</sup> The justified sinner knows himself to be at once gloriously justified and wretchedly in his sins.

Yet unmerited grace carries with it promise of the new man in fact and not alone in prospect. The declaration of justification is not alone a reason for gratitude. It is an occasion also for bewailing an actual condition that speaks at once of undeserved pardon and of deserved death. Complete justification means sins forgiven—past, present and future. In affirming that forgiveness God exhibits his supreme lordship over man in an act of creative power that has finally in view a new man bearing the image not of fallen Adam but of the risen Christ.

If we ask who is this divinely justified sinner we had better not hastily nominate ourselves, or exclude all our theological rivals, or some others who are now quite indifferent to spiritual realities. Yet surely we are not here concerned only with a religious fiction, or with simply some abstract self-invented by theological reflection. When we read that Christ died for sinners it is not mythical beings that we are discussing, any more than a mythical Savior, but rather specific humans. Yet in our spiritual meditation we can apart from faith be surer, can we not, that we are sinners than that we are absolved sinners? We know quite well the factualities of our own condition.

Personal faith in God's revealed mercy is the instrument through which God gifts us with internal assurance. Without confidence in God's sovereign Word humanity has no prospect whatever of pardon for transgressions. Man knows that by nature he is anything but a friend of God and that he stands in need of some supreme reversal of his condition and destiny. Confidence that one might impress the Deity by one's righteous works has long since lost Biblical credibility.

The notion that God might declare sinless the wretched self I know myself to be is beyond imagining. But God asks us to believe, not primarily for our sakes but rather for his sake, that he declares righteous those who by faith affirm that the holy Lord has himself provided the ground of our forgiveness

<sup>10</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, p. 591.

and justification. Such faith is the work of the Holy Spirit who nurtures confidence that God makes things that are out of things that are not.

Faith is no human achievement or virtue. It is, of course, a human exercise. But it is God's gift. It is not that man by his faith postulates divine pardon and justifies himself. It is not man-produced faith that offers justification, for that could only be self-justification. It is not some inner quality of the religious man by which he precipitates divine pardon.

In the activity of faith man remains a sinner who knows he cannot justify himself. Justification by faith opposes the notion that all or any works (including the "work" of believing) are salvifically meritorious. It is God's gift, and God honors it as the subjective counterpart to his righteousness. It is the first step on the road that leads to sanctification and glorification.