

Justification — A Brief Study

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"Justify" is a word with Roman (Latin) roots which is easily understood in a Latin (Roman) Catholic sense. In literal translation it means "make just" or "make righteous." It suggests a process of change and improvement.

Justificare is the Latin Bible's rendering of the Greek *dikaion*. And that verb does not mean "make just" or "make righteous." In every New Testament instance, as well as in the Old Testament's corresponding *hitzdik*, the word means "declare just or righteous," "acquit." This is commonly referred to as a forensic or juridical or judicial use of the word. When it is said that God justifies a person it does not mean that God makes a person righteous through an extended process of correction and improvement so that that person finally is righteous in his own right. Rather, it means that God grants the status of righteousness to a person, declares that that person is righteous. Stated negatively, He finds that person "Not guilty."

On whom does God pass such a verdict? What would motivate a just and holy and jealous God to make such a declaration on anyone who is not righteous? On what basis could He render such a decision? When did He do that? When these questions have been answered from the Bible the answers constitute the purest Gospel, the heart and core of Bible lore, the sure ground of faith. The answers also suggest further questions, but let us address these momentous questions first.

Scripture is clear and consistent in its teaching of justification, but the writer who treats it most comprehensively is the Apostle Paul. Of particular value for our understanding of God's justifying acts are Romans 3-5 and 2 Corinthians 5:15-21.

On whom does God pass the verdict of righteousness? Paul writes in verses 23 and 24 of Romans 3: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." All have sinned. The verb "justified" has the same subject, "all." The verdict of righteousness applies to "all," although "all" have sinned. Yes, "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (5:10)." All sinners, all enemies, all justified, all reconciled. "Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men (5:18)." Adam's trespass resulted in condemnation for the human race. In Christ God has pronounced the verdict of acquittal on the human race.

I have not entered into a discussion of the translation of *dikaion* ... *eis dikaiosin* in 5:18, which Dr. Becker treated in his final essay on June 12, 1984. As he pointed out, all the translations which are currently in use clearly speak of an all-inclusive, a universal justification.

The language changes but the teaching remains the same when Paul speaks of universal reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." "The world" unmistakably refers to the whole human race. "Reconciling" says that a change has taken place. It is neither a change in God nor a change in man. It is a change in the way God regards man, a change in man's status before God.

The words "not counting men's sins against them" in NIV are rendering the Greek *me logizomenos autois ta paraptomata auton*. The *autois* has "the world" as its antecedent, and so the meaning is not "some men" or "certain people: It is "all mankind," the world.

The same clause informs us what "reconciling" means and how the world's status has changed. God has forgiven the world's sins. He does not count, charge or impute them. To say that God justifies all, reconciles the world, is to say that He has forgiven the sins of all.

What would motivate a just and holy God to make such a declaration, effect such a reconciliation, forgive the sins of all? Paul tells us in Romans 3:24 that it is "by his grace." "Where sin increased, grace

increased all the more (Ro 5:20)." This grace "overflow(ed) to the many." The many who had "died by the trespass of the one man (5:15)." God's grace is his active love which prompted him to give his one and only Son (Jn 3:16). It brings salvation (Tit 2:11). This grace excludes any consideration of what men have done: "If by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace (Ro 11:6)." The Old Testament *chen* or *chesed* and the New Testament *charis* express God's undeserved mercy and love. The notion that it is something with which God infuses man so that he can live righteously and finally become righteous is an unbiblical fiction developed by the Latin theologians of North Africa and bequeathed to the Western Catholic Church.

On what basis did God justify all mankind? Paul writes in Romans 3:24, 25 that all (v 23) "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement." It is the redeeming work of Christ Jesus that provides the basis for this forgiveness. By His sacrifice on the cross He expiated our sins, rendered satisfaction for our iniquities, propitiated the wrath of God.

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man (cause?) someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him (Ro 5:6-9)!" He took our place under God's wrath and because of his substitutionary death we are acquitted.

Not in terms of justification but in terms of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins, Paul expresses the same truth in 2 Corinthians 5: "God was reconciling the world unto himself through Christ, not counting men's sins against them ... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (vv 19, 21)." Jesus was not a sinner. He did not know sin or have any experience with it in his thoughts or words or deeds. But "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." He treated him as sin personified, as the world's greatest sinner because all the sins of the world were laid on him. He did it "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That was His purpose and that was the result.

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn 2:2)." As the atoning sacrifice for our sins he can speak in our defense and be heard. He does not say "C'mon, Father, let's forget about it. They tried. They did their best. Don't be so touchy, so strict. Make allowances." No, the penalty of sin must be paid. Not because God is touchy or petty or loveless, but because he is God. God is holy. God is just. He does not consider mitigating circumstances or allow pleas of innocence by reason of ignorance or insanity.

But in his justice he accepts what his love has provided: "the atoning sacrifice." Even our good works fall short. Even our tears need washing. Even our repentance needs to be repented of. Jesus' innocence and agony have made satisfaction.

This is for the whole world. I need never doubt that it includes me. To know that it is for the whole world is better than having my own name appear in this passage. Someone else might have the same name and I would still have to wonder. But if it was for the whole world than it is for me.

Couldn't God have done it another way? He did it **this** way. "He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus (Ro 3:26)." Not in a vacuum, not by fiat, not unjustly but on the basis of Christ's righteous life and atoning death God has justified all sinners, reconciled the whole race, forgiven the sins of all.

When did God reveal that he has in fact justified the world? The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 4:25, "(Christ) was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." The Greek has *dia* with the accusative in both instances where most English translations read "for." "Because of" would be a more literal rendering and would make the verse more accurately intelligible. "Because of our sins" would reflect and summarize the vicarious atonement that was set forth in our earlier paragraphs. "Because of our justification" would express the truth that God has accepted the sacrifice, justified his Holy One, and justified us in Him. Luther put it something like this: "On Friday Jesus said, 'It is finished!' On Sunday God declared,

'Amen!' It is finished.'" Incidentally, Luther's "*um*" renders the *dia* quite accurately in his translation. In the essay of Dr. Becker that we mentioned earlier he quotes the 17th century dogmatician J. Gerhard:

By raising (Christ) from the dead, (God) absolved Him from our sins which had been imputed to Him, and therefore He also absolved us in Him that Christ's resurrection might thus be the cause and the proof and the completion of our justification.

What we have sketched so far is the good news that God has actually, in reality, in history forgiven all sins of all mankind. We have seen that he did this by grace, for Christ's sake, and that the proof of this lies in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This teaching has been quite generally referred to as "universal justification." Synodical Conference Lutheran theologians also used the term "objective justification" as a synonym and to emphasize that universal justification took place entirely on God's initiative, before and apart from any response on man's part, simply as God's declaration that all men are righteous (all sins are forgiven) for Christ's sake and that this is an objective fact.

This teaching excludes every human achievement, cooperation, conduct, activity, attitude, disposition or anything else in man as a condition, contribution or cause on which his salvation is based or assured. It invites and enables man to trust a trustworthy God in time for eternity. This teaching is "the gospel (which) is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last (Ro 1:16, 17)." Faith must have a reliable object and know that it is reliable, or it simply cannot trust. The object of our Christian faith is the verdict of acquittal (the declaration that we are righteous, the forgiveness of sins, the fact of reconciliation) which is revealed as a present reality in the Gospel.

This teaching was condemned by the Council of Trent, Session VI, Canon 11: "If anyone says that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost (Ro 5:5) and is inherent in them, or even that grace whereby we are justified is only the favor of God, let him be anathema." This teaching has no place in the documents of Vatican II. In the 1983 statement on justification by faith this teaching is not accepted by the Roman Catholic participants as **the** teaching of Scripture. Rather, ten Roman Catholic scholars—not speaking for anyone but themselves granted that this teaching is an alternative way to express the gospel.

With our reference to Romans 1:16, 17 above we have at last introduced the subject of faith. There is no point in talking about it until one has made clear what and why we can believe.

Let us return to Romans 1:16, 17 as we begin to address the question, "**How is this universal righteousness to be personally and individually received?**" Salvation is for "everyone who believes." The righteousness from God is "by faith from first to last," or, "from faith to faith." "The righteous will live by faith." Universal righteousness, the objective justification, is mine by faith. Trusting that God has done what the Gospel says he has done, I have it. Never does Paul ever say I have it **because of** faith (*dia pistin*). But it is *ek pisteos, dia pisteos, pistei*. The cause is always God's grace, Christ's merit. Faith only receives, accepts. When it is said, "The righteous will live by faith," it does not say that God will justify or forgive if we on our part believe. It says the justification and forgiveness that are already there are apprehended by the believer. That is, faith is not set up as a condition. It is rather described as the means of reception.

Justification by faith means justification apart from law or works of law. This has always been true. It did not begin during Jesus' ministry. It was not an invention of Paul. It is not an innovation of Luther. "Consider Abraham.' He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gal 3:6).'" "By faith (Abel) was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings (Heb 11:4)." The Law and the Prophets testify to a righteousness from God, apart from law, which "comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Ro 3:21f)." With Paul, "We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law (3:28)." Needless to say, faith itself is not a meritorious work, an observing of the law.

The Roman Catholic Church has always allowed faith to play a role in justification. Indeed, it regards it as necessary. But it has never accepted the clear teaching that justification is by faith alone. When Paul speaks of faith apart from works of law in Romans 3:21, 28 cited above, then he is leaving faith alone as the medium or means through which God's righteousness is apprehended. He does the same thing in Galatians 2:16, "(We) know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." Faith minus works of law equals faith alone.

"Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

Blessed are they
Whose transgressions are forgiven,
Whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man
Whose sin the Lord will never count against him (Ro 4:4-8)."

This passage reminds us again that justification and the righteousness of God and the forgiveness of sins are really one and the same thing, something Augustine never quite learned—and he was the most Pauline of Latin theologians. But this passage also demonstrates that God's verdict of acquittal is received by faith alone.

Could the Council of Trent have been dealing honestly with the inspired Word when it delivered its anathemas in Canons 12 and 20 of Session VI? Canon 12 reads: "If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits for Christ's sake; or that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified, let him be anathema." And so the Apostle Paul is anathematized. Canon 20 also rejects what Paul says in Romans 4:4-8 and elsewhere. "If anyone says that the man who is justified and how perfect soever is not bound to observe the commandments of God and of the Church, but only to believe, as if indeed the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life, without the condition of observing the commandments, let him be anathema." The recent joint statement of ten Catholic theologians on the subject of justification by faith still presents the Catholic view that justification is a process, effected by faith plus works. The works are spoken of in terms of sanctification, renewal, the indwelling of God, Christ in us and the transformation of the sinner to a perfectly righteous person. All of this leaves the sinner in doubt as to whether he will finally be justified. Certainty is regarded as presumption. In the Roman view, salvation is by grace alone, by Christ alone, but it is not by faith alone. And thus, it is not **really** by grace alone and Christ alone.

The May 1983 "Theses on Justification" of the Missouri Synod's CTCR includes a beautiful statement on the role of faith in justification, ruling out any idea of faith as a good work or condition that would be our contribution. Thesis 34 reads: "The sinner's personal justification, i.e. his having or appropriating Christ's benefits, forgiveness, and justification, does not take place because of his contrition or faith, or on the ground of his contrition or faith, or in view of his faith, or after he believes, but solely through faith." Faith is the empty hand into which God places his gift of life and salvation; "for where the forgiveness of sins is, there is also life and salvation."

Faith itself is a gift of God, A gift that is mediated by the Gospel. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ (Ro 10:17)." "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit (1 Co 12:3)." "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Tit 3:5)." "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God (1 Pe 1:23)."

When we understand the role of faith in apprehending God's salvation we will not make the mistake of pointing people to their faith for assurance. When we understand the implications of the truth that God has already forgiven the wicked, that reconciliation is an objective fact, we will steer people away from their

feelings, their emotions, their commitments, their decisions, even their faith, to the Savior. We do not advise the troubled and guilty and fearful soul to look inward with a microscope to examine his inner resources. We hand him the telescope that looks away from self and magnifies God's grace in Christ and brings it closer. Faith does not generate itself, cannot nourish itself. It is generated and nourished by God through the good news of what he has done for our salvation. Even in human relationships, trust is produced in us by someone else, by what he is and does. It is not the product of our will or resolution. We do not point sinners to their faith anymore than we would point them to their works. We point them to the object of faith, the Savior, for whose sake God has declared all men righteous.

Small faith, weak faith still has the justification that God has declared in the resurrection of his Son. Only unbelief, the lack of faith, condemns (Mk 16:16).

St. Paul's marvelous statement on salvation by grace through faith as the gift of God, not by works (Eph 2:8,9) immediately goes on to speak of good works. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (2:10)." It is obvious that works are in no way a cause of our justification. It is also obvious that they are a result of salvation, a necessary result. By the Gospel he has fashioned us for that very purpose. By the Gospel he enables and equips us for that purpose. That means, among other things, that he does not do it by the Law. That means we should not expect any good works to result from the Law. Compliance, perhaps, but not the good works which are a fruit of faith, which is effected by the Gospel.

Your program committee has asked me, as a kind of afterthought, to relate repentance to justification. More particularly, they suggested a discussion of what happens to the Christian who dies suddenly in some sin and does not "have time to repent." I do not regard this as a frivolous question because I know it has practical implications for pastors and teachers, whatever their specific assignment is. Nor is it an inappropriate question to address in a paper on justification, for **all** Christian teaching relates in some way to the doctrine of justification.

Even after we have been justified by faith our fear of, love for and trust in God are most imperfect. We could not possibly be justified on the basis of them. Indeed, on the basis of our failures to love God and the neighbor we deserve only condemnation. Even our sins of weakness, forgetfulness, rashness and carelessness are damnable. They are not unforgivable but they are in themselves damnable. Only God's gracious verdict of acquittal in Christ keeps us from the eternal death we deserve for our little sins, our unnoticed sins, our unconscious sins.

If we needed to make a conscious and explicit confession of all these damnable offenses and a conscious and explicit claim on God's forgiveness for each of them, we would simply be lost. Also, to think of repentance and forgiveness in that way would make God's favorable verdict conditional; it would make forgiveness dependent on something in man.

And yet, to quote Luther, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying 'Repent ye (Mt 4:17),' wanted the entire life of believers to be a repentance." That means daily acknowledgement of our sinfulness and our sins. That means daily remembering our Baptism and its significance. That means daily praying of the Fifth Petition. That means daily recollection of the Crucified and what he did for every human being and of what it means that he is risen. These are not exercises we perform or meritorious works on our part. Indeed, we are not capable of daily repentance any more than we were capable of initial repentance. It is the Holy Ghost's work in us, sanctification. We cannot even be contrite by ourselves, let alone penitent.

The reason our whole life needs to be a repentance is that we do lapse into sin, daily sin much, are even guilty of some of those sins cataloged by Paul in Galatians 5:19-21. People who practice (*prassontes*) such things will not inherit the kingdom. People who are guilty of them at all need to repent, that is turn from them and from their own righteousness to the righteousness which comes from God by his grace in Christ Jesus, which is apprehended through faith.

A life of daily repentance is a daily turning to the fact of objective justification. A life of daily repentance means never presuming on the fact of objective justification. "Continue to work out your salvation

with fear and trembling (Php 2:12)." Know that there is a line beyond which there is no repentance—not because God would not forgive but because man has become hard. Know that those who cross that line do not recognize it when it appears or realize that they are crossing it. Then turn from your pious resolutions or your smug rationalizations about avoiding that line. Turn to the promise of God which is in the completion of Paul's sentence about fear and trembling: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Php 2:13)." Our perseverance in the life of daily repentance is totally dependent on his grace, and there is no question about his grace.

Each of us knows that there are evil thoughts, words and acts of which we have not consciously repented. Sometimes it takes us years, a lifetime, to even recognize the sin as sin—especially sins of lovelessness. Does that mean we have been unbelievers, fallen from grace, impenitent during all that time? We must beware of making our conscious and explicit acts of repentance a condition or *sine qua non* of our subjective justification. We will never want to lose the confident assurance that lies in the simple and oft-repeated expression *en Christo*. Where He is there is forgiveness, life and salvation. There is justification. In him we have justification. To be in him is the same as trusting him, but notice that the emphasis is not on my faith but on my Savior. The root sin and the ultimate sin is unbelief. Unbelief has no forgiveness because it is the rejection of forgiveness. To die without a conscious and explicit act of repentance is not categorically the same as dying in unbelief. When a fellow Christian dies suddenly, under questionable circumstances, because of something he was doing at the time, in the act of doing something wrong I am not at all compelled to conclude that he died impenitent, unbelieving.

Rather, I will look at his whole life—what he confessed as a Christian and how he lived that confession. On the basis of that I will not be in a hurry to say that he died in unbelief. I will rather say hopeful and charitable things. And I will always remember that only God knows the heart of the living and the dying.

A willful sin, a sin against better knowledge is a denial of faith, a fall from grace. It must be repented of. How long does it take to repent? What is the prescribed form of repentance? We do not presume to answer these questions for the living. We should not speculate on them in cases of sudden death.

Only unbelief damns. When we say Saul, Ahithophel and Judas did not have time to repent after they committed suicide we are really saying that their time for repentance was past. They had been impenitent before, as their lives demonstrated. Their final acts were acts of unbelieving despair. It was their unbelief that brought them to perdition. The manner of their dying was an expression of that unbelief.

When a Christian dies under "doubtful circumstances" it does not necessarily follow that he has died in impenitence. We really ought not assume that he has, or even suggest that he may have. Let us remember again that the Christian's whole life is a repentance because he is in Christ, because the Holy Spirit dwells in him, because of the grace of God.

To suggest to people that their salvation may be forfeited unless their last sin is specifically repented of is a terrible teaching of the Law. It ought to leave most of us in despair, for most Christians do not die that way.

But our God does not want us to live lives of desperation and dread. That is why he has graciously declared all sinners righteous in Christ. By this Gospel he has called us to faith in Christ. Thus he has convinced us that we are among his elect and that he will graciously preserve us for eternal life. And so we can be sure that nothing will pluck us out of his hand. That is not so we can presume or be careless or turn liberty into license. It is to comfort us, strengthen us and motivate us for Christian living.

We can say with Paul, "I am convinced that (nothing) will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ro 8:38f)." We can say it because "through faith (we) are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pe 1: 5). "