Justification

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The basic religious question is that of our relation to God. How can man be just with God? How can he be right with the Holy One? In our situation, however, the question is much more aggravated. It is not simply, how can man be just with God, but how can sinful man be just with God? In the last analysis sin is always against God, and the essence of sin is to be against God. The person who is against God cannot be right with God. For if we are against God then God is against us. It could not be otherwise. God cannot be indifferent to or complacent towards that which is the contradiction of himself. His very perfection requires the recoil of righteous indignation. And that is God's wrath. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:18). This is our situation and it is our relation to God; how can we be right with him? The answer, of course, is that we cannot be right with him; we are all wrong with him. And we all are all wrong with him because we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Far too frequently we fail to entertain the gravity of this fact. Hence the reality of our sin and the reality of the wrath of God upon us for our sin do not come into our reckoning. This is the reason why the grand article of justification does not ring the bells in the innermost depths of our spirit. And this is the reason why the gospel of justification is to such an extent a meaningless sound in the world and in the church of the twentieth century. We are not imbued with the profound sense of the reality of God, of his majesty and holiness. And sin, if reckoned with at all, is little more than a misfortune or maladjustment.

If we are to appreciate that which is central in the gospel, if the jubilee trumpet is to find its echo again in our hearts, our thinking must be revolutionized by the realism of the wrath of God, of the reality and gravity of our guilt, and of the divine condemnation. It is then and only then that our thinking and feeling will be rehabilitated to an understanding of God's grace in the justification of the ungodly. The question is really not so much: how can man be just with God; but how can sinful man become just with God? The question in this form points up the necessity of a complete reversal in our relation to God. Justification is the answer and justification is the act of God's free grace. "It is God who justifies: who is he that condemns?" (Rom. 8:33).

This truth that God justifies needs to be underlined. We do not justify ourselves. Justification is not our apology nor is it the effect in us of a process of self-excusion. It is not even our confession nor the good feeling that may be induced in us by confession. Justification is not any religious exercise in which we engage however noble and good that religious exercise may be. If we are to understand justification and appropriate its grace we must turn our thought to the action of God in justifying the ungodly. At no point is the free grace of God more manifest than in his justifying act--"being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

The truth of justification has suffered at the hands of human perversion as much as any doctrine of Scripture. One of the ways in which it has been perverted is the failure to reckon with the meaning of the term. Justification does not mean to make righteous, or good, or holy, or upright. It is perfectly true that in the application of redemption God makes people holy and upright. He renews them after his own image. He begins to do this in regeneration and he carries it on in the work of sanctification. He will perfect it in glorification. But justification does not refer to this renewing and sanctifying grace of God. It is one of the primary errors of the Romish Church that it regards justification as the infusion of grace, as renewal and

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sanctification whereby we are made holy. And the seriousness of the Romish error is not so much that it has confused justification and renewal but that it has confused these two distinct acts of God's grace and eliminated from the message of the gospel the great truth of free and full justification by grace. That is why Luther endured such travail of soul as long as he was governed by Romish distortion, and the reason why he came to enjoy such exultant joy and confident assurance was that he had been emancipated from the chains by which Rome had bound him; he found the great truth that justification is something entirely different from what Rome had taught.

That justification does not mean to make holy or upright should be apparent from common use. When we justify a person we do not make that person good or upright. When a judge justifies an accused person he does not make that person an upright person. He simply declares that in his judgment the person is not guilty of the accusation but is upright in terms of the law relevant to the case. In a word, justification is simply a declaration or pronouncement respecting the relation of the person to the law which he, the judge, is required to administer. It might be, of course, that our common use would not be the same as the use of the term in Scripture. Scripture must be its own interpreter. And the question is: does Scripture usage accord with common use? This question is very easily answered. The answer is that Scripture uses the term in the same way. There are several considerations which prove this conclusion.

1. In both Testaments there are numerous passages where the term "justify" cannot mean anything else but to declare to be righteous. For example, we read, "If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked" (Deut. 25:1). It was not the function of judges to make people righteous. The meaning is simply and only that the judges were to give a just judgment and therefore they were to declare the righteous to be righteous, just as they were to declare the wicked to be wicked. Again we read, "He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 17:15). Now it would not be an abomination to the Lord to make the wicked upright. It would be a highly commendable thing if we could convert a wicked man and make him a righteous man. That is what God does when he regenerates a man. The meaning is more than obvious; to justify the wicked is not to make him upright but simply to declare him to be righteous when he is not. The abomination consists in giving a judgment contrary to truth and fact. Hence justification in this case is concerned only with the judgment which we give. It is declarative. In the New Testament likewise we have the same thought. "And all the people when they heard, and the publicans, justified God" (Luke 7:29). Did the people and the publicans make God upright or righteous? The thought would be blasphemous. It means that they declared God to be righteous, a perfectly proper action. They declared the righteousness of God; they vindicated him. Many other passages in both Testaments are to the same effect. But these are sufficient to show that to justify does not mean to make upright.

2. Justification is contrasted with condemnation (cf. Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15; Rom. 8:33, 34). Condemn never means to make wicked, and so justify cannot mean to make good or upright.

3. There are passages in which the thought of giving judgment provides us with the sense in which we are to understand the word justification. "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth" (Rom. 8:33). The idea is not that of doing anything inwardly in the elect of God. What is in view is the accusation which an adversary may bring against the elect of God, and what is protested is that God's tribunal and judgment are ultimate. It is God's judgment that is in view when the text says, "It is God that justifieth."

Romans 8:33,34 is significant in another respect. Not only does it clearly show the meaning of the term "justify," namely, that it is judicial in its import, but this passage also shows that it is this judicial meaning that holds in God's justification of the ungodly. Paul is certainly using the word "justify" here in the same
sense as he does earlier in the epistle. The epistle to the Romans is concerned with this very subject, the justification of sinners. That is the grand theme of the first five chapters in particular. Romans 8:33, 34 conclusively shows that the meaning is that which is contrasted with the word "condemn" and that which is related to the rebuttal of a judicial charge. The meaning of the word "justify," therefore, in the epistle to the Romans, and therefore in the epistle which more than any other book in Scripture unfolds the doctrine, is to declare to be righteous. Its meaning is entirely removed from the thought of making upright or holy or good or righteous.

This is what is meant when we insist that justification is forensic. It has to do with a judgment given, declared, pronounced; it is judicial or juridical or forensic. The main point of such terms is to distinguish between the kind of action which justification involves and the kind of action involved in regeneration. Regeneration is an act of God in us; justification is a judgment of God with respect to us. The distinction is like that of the distinction between the act of a surgeon and the act of a judge. The surgeon, when he removes an inward cancer, does something in us. That is not what a judge does—he gives a verdict regarding our judicial status. If we are innocent he declares accordingly.

The purity of the gospel is bound up with the recognition of this distinction. If justification is confused with regeneration or sanctification, then the door is opened for the perversion of the gospel at its center. Justification is still the article of the standing or falling Church.

Justification means to declare or pronounce to be righteous. When equity is maintained such a declaration or pronouncement implies that the righteous state or standing declared to be is presupposed in the declaration. When a judge, for example, declares a person to be righteous in terms of the law which he is administering, the judge simply declares what he finds to be the case; he does not give to the person the righteous standing. This is why judges must justify the righteous and condemn the wicked (Deut. 25:1). Justification in such a case merely takes account of the character and conduct of the person concerned and the judge gives his verdict accordingly. He justifies those who are righteous. The declaration of the fact presupposes the fact which is declared to be.

The justification with which we are now concerned, however, is God's justification of the ungodly. It is not the justification of persons who are righteous but of persons who are wicked and, therefore, of persons who are under God's condemnation and curse. How can this be? God's judgment is always according to truth; it is not only one of equity but one of perfect equity. How then can he justify those who are unrighteous and totally unrighteous at that?

We are here faced with something completely unique. It cannot be denied that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5; cf. Rom. 3:19-24). If man were to do this it would be an abomination in God's sight. Man must condemn the wicked, and he may justify only the righteous. God justifies the wicked and he does what no man may do. Yet God is not unrighteous. He is just when he justifies the ungodly (Rom. 3:26). What is it that enables him to be just when he justifies sinners?

It is here that the mere notion of declaring to be righteous is seen to be inadequate of itself to express the fulness of what is involved in God's justification of the ungodly. Much more is entailed than our English expression "declare to be righteous" denotes. In God's justification of sinners there is a totally new factor which does not hold in any other case of justification. And this new factor arises from the totally different situation which God's justification of sinners contemplates and from the marvellous provisions of God's grace and justice to meet that situation. God does what none other could do and he does here what he does nowhere else. What is this unique and incomparable thing?

In God's justification of sinners there is no deviation from the rule that what is declared to be is presupposed to be. God's judgment is according to truth here as elsewhere. The peculiarity of God's action consists in this
that he causes to be the righteous state or relation which is declared to be. We must remember that justification is always forensic or judicial. Therefore what God does in this case is that he constitutes the new and righteous judicial relation as well as declares this new relation to be. He constitutes the ungodly righteous, and consequently can declare them to be righteous. In the justification of sinners there is a constitutive act as well as a declarative. Or, if we will, we may say that the declarative act of God in the justification of the ungodly is constitutive. In this consists its incomparable character.

This conclusion that justification is constitutive is not only an inference drawn from the considerations of God's truth and equity; it is expressly stated in the Scripture itself. It is with the subject of justification that Paul is dealing when he says, "For as through the disobedience of the one man the many were constituted sinners, even so through the obedience of the one the many will be constituted righteous" (Rom. 5:19). The parallel expressions which Paul uses in this chapter are to the same effect. In Romans 5:17 he speaks of those who receive "the free gift of righteousness" and in verse 18 of the judgment which passes upon men unto justification of life "through one righteousness." It is clear that the justification which is unto eternal life Paul regards as consisting in our being constituted righteous, in our receiving righteousness as a free gift, and this righteousness is none other than the righteousness of the one man Jesus Christ; it is the righteousness of his obedience. Hence grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:21). This is the truth which has been expressed as the imputation to us of the righteousness of Christ. Justification is therefore a constitutive act whereby the righteousness of Christ is imputed to our account and we are accordingly accepted as righteous in God's sight. When we think of such an act of grace on God's part, we have the answer to our question: how can God justify the ungodly? The righteousness of Christ is the righteousness of his perfect obedience, a righteousness undefiled and undeniable, a righteousness which not only warrants the justification of the ungodly but one that necessarily elicits and constrains such justification. God cannot but accept into his favor those who are invested with the righteousness of his own Son. While his wrath is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men, his good pleasure is also revealed from heaven upon the righteousness of his well-beloved and only-begotten. Those justified may well exult in the words of the prophet, "Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength. ...In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory" (Isa. 45:24, 25). "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels" (Isa. 61:10). "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord" (Isa. 54:17). And the protestation of the apostle becomes more meaningful: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth" (Rom. 8:33).

Justification is both a declarative and a constitutive act of God's free grace. It is constitutive in order that it may be truly declarative. God must constitute the new relationship as well as declare it to be. The constitutive act consists in the imputation to us of the obedience and righteousness of Christ. The obedience of Christ must therefore be regarded as the ground of justification; it is the righteousness which God not only takes into account but reckons to our account when he justifies the ungodly. This doctrine, however, needs further examination if the biblical basis for it is to be made more apparent.

In Genesis 15:6 it is said of Abraham that he believed in the Lord and he reckoned it to him for righteousness. This text is quoted repeatedly in the New Testament (Rom. 4:3, 9, 22; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23) and it might appear that it was the faith of Abraham which was reckoned as the righteousness on the basis of which he was justified, that faith itself was accepted by God as fulfilling the requirements necessary for a full and perfect justification. If this were the case then Abraham was justified and all other believers also are justified on the ground of faith and because of faith. It is important to observe in this connection that the Scripture never uses such terms. It speaks always of our being justified by faith, or through faith, or upon faith, but never speaks of our being justified on account of faith or because of faith. If, however, we are
justified on the basis of faith the expression that would most accurately express such a thought would be that we are justified on account of faith. The fact that Scripture, and especially the apostle Paul, refrains from such terms is itself sufficient to make us careful not to think or speak in any way which would suggest such a view of justification. But there are also numerous other considerations which show that faith is not itself the righteousness, as they also show that the righteousness of justification is not anything wrought in us or done by us. There are several arguments which may be set forth.

1. A righteousness wrought in us, even though it were perfect and eliminated all future sin, would not measure up to the requirements of the full and irrevocable justification which the Scripture represents justification to be. Such a righteousness would not obliterate the sin and unrighteousness of the past and the condemnation resting upon us for our past sin. But justification includes the remission of all sin and condemnation. Consequently the righteousness which is the basis of such justification must be one that will take care of past sin as well as provide for the future. Inwrought righteousness does not measure up to this need. And we must also bear in mind that the righteousness wrought in us by regeneration and sanctification is never in this life perfect. Hence it cannot in any sense measure up to the kind of righteousness required. Only a perfect righteousness can provide the basis for a complete, perfect, and irreversible justification. Furthermore, justification gives a title to and secures eternal life (Rom. 5:17, 18, 21). A righteousness wrought in us equips for the enjoyment of eternal life but it cannot be the ground of such a reward.

2. Justification is not by the righteousness of performance on our part; it is not of works (Rom. 3:20; 4:2; 10:3, 4; Gal. 2:16; 3:11; 5:4; Phil. 3:9). The Scripture is so insistent upon this that it is only by spiritual blindness and distortion of the most aggravated type that justification by works could ever be entertained or proposed in any form or to any degree. The Romish doctrine bears the patent hall-marks of such distortion.

3. We are justified by grace. It is not the reward of anything in us or wrought by us but proceeds from God's free and unmerited favor (Rom. 3:24ff.; 5:15-21).

We thus see that if we are to find the righteousness which supplies the basis of the full and perfect justification which God bestows upon the ungodly we cannot find it in anything that resides in us, nor in anything which God does in us, nor in anything which we do. We must look away from ourselves to something which is of an entirely different sort in an entirely different direction. What is the direction which the Scripture indicates?

1. It is in Christ we are justified (Acts 13:39; Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 6:11; Gal. 2:17). At the outset we are here advised that it is by union with Christ and by some specific relation to him involved in that union that we are justified.

2. It is through Christ's sacrificial and redemptive work (Rom. 3:24; 5:9; 8:33, 34). We are justified in Jesus' blood. The particular significance of this truth in this connection is that it is the once-for-all redemptive accomplishment of Christ that is brought into the center of attention when we are thinking of justification. It is therefore something objective to ourselves and not the work of God's grace in our hearts and minds and lives.

3. It is by the righteousness of God that we are justified (Rom. 1:17; 3:21, 22; 10:3; Phil. 3:9). In other words, the righteousness of our justification is a God-righteousness. Nothing more conclusively demonstrates that it is not a righteousness which is ours. Righteousness wrought in us or wrought by us, even though it be altogether of the grace of God and even though it be perfect in character, is not a God-righteousness. It is, after all, a human righteousness. But the commanding insistence of the Scripture is that in justification it is the righteousness of God which is revealed from faith to faith,
and therefore a righteousness which is contrasted not only with human unrighteousness but with human righteousness. It is righteousness which is divine in quality. It is not, of course, the divine attribute of justice or righteousness, but, nevertheless, it is a righteousness with divine attributes or qualities and therefore a righteousness which is of divine property.

4. The righteousness of justification is the righteousness and obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:17, 18, 19). Here we have the final consideration which confirms all of the foregoing considerations and sets them in clear focus. This is the final reason why we are pointed away from ourselves to Christ and his accomplished work. And this is the reason why the righteousness of justification is the righteousness of God. It is the righteousness of Christ wrought by him in human nature, the righteousness of his obedience unto death, even the death of the cross. But, as such, it is the righteousness of the God-man, a righteousness which measures up to the requirements of our sinful and sin-cursed situation, a righteousness which fulfills all these demands because it is a righteousness of divine property and character, a righteousness undefiled and inviolable. Grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:21). "Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance. In thy name shall they rejoice all the day: and in thy righteousness shall they be exalted" (Psalm 89:15, 16).

Justification is an act which proceeds from God's free grace. It is an act of God and of God alone. And the righteousness which supplies its ground or basis is the righteousness of God. It might seem that this emphasis upon divine action would not only make it inappropriate but inconsistent for any activity of which we are the agents to be given any instrumentality or efficiency in connection with justification. But the Scripture makes it quite clear that activity on the part of the recipient is given its own place in relation to this act of God's grace. The activity on the part of the recipient is that of faith, and it is faith alone that is brought into this relationship to justification. We are justified by faith, or through faith, or upon faith (cf. Rom. 1:17; 3:22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30; 4:3, 5, 16, 24; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 9; 5:4, 5; Phil. 3:9).

There have been good Protestants who have maintained that this faith is not the antecedent of justification, but the consequent, that we do not believe in order to be justified but we believe because we have been justified, and that the faith referred to is the faith that we have been justified. The witness of Scripture does not appear to bear out this view of the relation of faith to justification. It is true, of course, that there is a faith which is consequent to justification. We cannot believe that we have been justified until we are first justified. But there is good reason for insisting that this reflex or secondary act of faith is not the faith in view when we are said to be justified by faith and that this faith by which we are justified is the initial and primary act of faith in Jesus Christ by which in our effectual calling we are united to Christ and invested with his righteousness unto our acceptance with God and justification by him.

There are several considerations which favor this view of the Scripture teaching. I shall mention only two.

1. It appears quite unnatural and forced to regard the sustained emphasis of the Scripture that we are justified by faith in any other way. When the Scripture speaks of justification in these cases, it does not refer to our consciousness or assurance of justification, but to the divine act by which we are actually justified. Justification does not consist in that which is reflected in our consciousness; it consists in the divine act of acquittal and acceptance. And it is precisely this that is said to be by faith.

2. There is one passage in Paul which is quite illuminating in this respect. It is Galatians 2:16. "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law." Paul here says that we have believed in Jesus Christ in order that we might be justified by
the faith of Christ. In a word, faith in Christ is in order to justification, and is therefore regarded as antecedent to it (cf. also Romans 4:23,24).

We may conclude that the Scripture means to teach that the justifying act of God supervenes upon the act of faith, that God justifies those who believe in Jesus and upon the event of faith. But faith, we must remember, is an act or exercise on the part of men. It is not God who believes in Jesus Christ, but the sinner who is being justified. Therefore faith is an indispensable instrumentality in connection with justification. We are justified by faith and faith is the prerequisite. And only faith is brought into relation to justification. Why is this the case?

It could be sufficient for us to know that in the divine appointment it is so. Oftentimes in the revelation of the counsel of God this is all we can say and it is all we need to say. But in this case we can with good warrant say more. There are apparent reasons why justification is by faith and by faith alone. First, it is altogether consonant with the fact that it is by grace. "Therefore it is of faith, in order that it might be according to grace" (Rom. 4:16). Faith and grace are wholly complementary. Second, faith is entirely congruous with the fact that the ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ. The specific quality of faith is that it receives and rests upon another, in this case Christ and his righteousness. No other grace, however important it may be in connection with salvation as a whole, has this as its specific and distinguishing quality. We are justified therefore by faith. Third, justification by faith and faith alone exemplifies the freeness and richness of the gospel of grace. If we were to be justified by works, in any degree or to any extent, then there would be no gospel at all. For what works of righteousness can a condemned, guilty, and depraved sinner offer to God? That we are justified by faith advertises the grand article of the gospel of grace that we are not justified by works of law. Faith stands in antithesis to works; there can be no amalgam of these two (cf. Gal. 5:4). That we are justified by faith is what engenders hope in a convicted sinner's heart. He knows he has nothing to offer. And this truth assures him that he needs nothing to offer, yea, it assures him that it is an abomination to God to presume to offer. We are justified by faith and therefore simply by entrustment of ourselves, in all our dismal hopelessness, to the Saviour whose righteousness is undefiled and undefilable. Justification by faith alone lies at the heart of the gospel and it is the article that makes the lame man leap as an hart and the tongue of the dumb sing. Justification is that by which grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life; it is for the believer alone and it is for the believer by faith alone. It is the righteousness of God from faith to faith (Rom. 1:17; cf. 3:22).

It is an old and time-worn objection that this doctrine ministers to license and looseness. Only those who know not the power of the gospel will plead such misconception. Justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. Justification is not all that is embraced in the gospel of redeeming grace. Christ is a complete Saviour and it is not justification alone that the believing sinner possesses in him. And faith is not the only response in the heart of him who has entrusted himself to Christ for salvation. Faith alone justifies but a justified person with faith alone would be a monstrosity which never exists in the kingdom of grace. Faith works itself out through love (cf. Gal. 5:6). And faith without works is dead (cf. James 2:17-20). It is living faith that justifies and living faith unites to Christ both in the virtue of his death and in the power of his resurrection. No one has entrusted himself to Christ for deliverance from the guilt of sin who has not also entrusted himself to him for deliverance from the power of sin. "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Rom. 6:1, 2).