

[1973. *Concerning Justification. Christianity Today Mar. 16.*]

Concerning Justification

GORDON H. CLARK

To use a little scholastic terminology, the Protestant Reformation was based on, and evangelical religion is defined by, a formal and a material principle. The formal principle was *sola scriptura*. In the philosophy of religion the basic problem has always been and still is the source of authority. Are controversies of religion settled by an appeal to the pope, councils, and church fathers? Luther emphatically answered no. Is then the content of Christianity determined by mystic experiences and individual conscience? Again Luther answered no. Other claimants to authority may be and often have been in error; the Bible alone is inerrant. This is the formal principle of the Reformation.

Technically, the material principle is the total contents of Scripture: creation, the history of Israel, prophecies, the resurrection of the just and unjust, and all the rest. But because of the situation in the sixteenth century, particularly exemplified in the papal device of earning salvation by the purchase of indulgences, along with flagellation and other good works, the doctrine of justification by faith alone was popularly regarded as the content or material of the Gospel.

The two principles, taken together, define evangelical religion. Anyone who rejects either the inerrancy of Scripture or faith as the sole means of justification is no heir of the Protestant Reformation and has no historical or logical claim to the name evangelical.

The visible church has deteriorated seriously since Protestantism's first hundred and fifty years, until today some theologians try to defend erroneous authority. This deterioration has contributed to the development of a society that reeks with filth and bleeds with crime, and the decline even dims the Christian understanding of those who deplore it. This is the first post-Christian era when god is said to be dead. Faced with these conditions, perhaps we can benefit from reviewing one or two of the main emphases in the doctrine of justification by faith.

To prevent misunderstanding (to which short articles naturally conduce), we should first dispose of a preliminary matter; though it ought not to need mention, our present climate of opinion, as well as the situation in Paul's day, demands it. Quite simply, Christianity opposes sin.

There is no substitute for a moral and righteous life. We question the very sincerity of a man who claims to be a Christian while he continues to practice gross sins. The command is, “Be ye holy, for I am holy.” The doctrine of sanctification is write large in both Testaments.

Furthermore, although there is no space here to argue it, justification inevitably issues in sanctification. True grace and true faith never fail in this life to produce good works. Nothing in this article is to be thought to contradict the necessity of preparing for a future life on a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. Salvation has several elements, including regeneration, justification, sanctification, glorification. But they are different elements. What is true of one may not be true of another. When a short article restricts itself to one of these, nobody should assume that it denies the others. In fact, since a short article cannot cover even one such topic, nobody should assume that it denies what brevity omits. There is no contradiction between justification and righteousness. The idea of righteousness is essential to the doctrine of justification, but it does not function there as it does in sanctification.

To speak more plainly: justification by faith cannot be understood in isolation, all by itself. It depends on the concept of a just and righteous God; it is in fact an integral factor in a comprehensive system of doctrine. But systems require volumes.

The very first point about justification to be considered is the meaning of the term. The demand for precise definition may stifle loose conversation, but it is essential to sound conclusions.

Fortunately it is not hard to discover the most important element in the definition of justification. Several passages of Scripture are so worded that it is hard to misunderstand them. Luke 7:29, 10:29, and 16:15 are quite clear. The first of these says that “the publicans justified God.” The second says, “He, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus . . .” The third is, “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts. . . .”

In each of these three verses it is clear that justification is not the initiation of moral improvement. A certain New Testament professor tells his students that justification is a process of becoming more moral or righteous. But can anything be clearer than the impossibility of a publican’s improving God’s character? Would he even be stupid enough to try? The second verse speaks of a young man who wanted to justify himself. He was not attempting to grow in

righteousness: he aimed to show that he was already right. The third deals with covetous hypocrites who made false claims to honesty. In none of these cases does justification signify moral improvement.

The positive significance of the term can be seen well enough behind the negation; but Matthew 12:37 makes it inescapable: "By thy words thou shalt be justified and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." To this Romans 8:33 and 34 adds, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?" Since these two passages contrast justification with condemnation, the meaning of the one must be the opposite of the other. Now, condemnation does not justify a process of moral deterioration. If you and I condemn a person, we do not make him bad or change his character in any way. To condemn is to make a judicial pronouncement that the person, or act, is already evil. To justify is to pronounce a man already just. The judge, whether he condemns or acquits, does not alter the person's character in the least. That is why there is nothing ridiculous in a publican's justifying God. The publicans pronounced God just.

This forensic or legal definition of justification has met with objection in nearly every age. Some persons regard it as legalistic and strangely assume that anything legal must be bad. Such a view of the law, however, does not fit in with Jesus's order, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." The term *legalism* in theology used to designate a theory of justification by works. Liberals have now redefined it so as to exclude rules, laws, and obedience from moral living. Amorphous love replaces defined commands. This enables the liberals to transfer the odium of legalism in its historic sense to the evangelical view that is not subject to such a criticism.

The forensic view, the view that justification is God's judicial declaration that such and such a man is righteous, innocent, not guilty, is also criticized as immoral. God, they say, would be telling a lie if he called a man innocent who was factually and subjectively guilty. To assume that the merit of one person can be transferred to another is ethical chicanery, it is said; vicarious ethical action is an impossibility.

This objection to the evangelical view is very plausible. Its incipient form occurred in the Pharisaic reaction against Paul. It is embedded in every system that based salvation, even partially, on human merit. But it depends on some prior assumptions about ethical theory. One

must therefore ask, Where do the objectors get their system of ethics? By what argument did they establish the impossibility, immorality, or chicanery of vicarious righteousness? One thing is clear; their formulation was not derived from Scripture. Romans 5:12-21 emphatically asserts two cases, one of vicarious sin, one of vicarious righteousness. No honest exegete can remove the principle of substitution and representation from the biblical text.

Hence this ethical objection is the result of repudiating the formal principle of the Protestant Reformation. If one accepts the Scripture as the sole ultimate authority, he cannot use the liberal argument. Conversely, if one denies the evangelical view, he must either appeal to the pope or depend on psychological analysis of his religious experience. Dependence on analysis makes a man his own pope. He makes himself the ultimate authority on religion. But other people do not want him as pope; they prefer themselves. And their religious experiences are so varied and contradictory, so similar to irreligious experience, that several analyses produce incompatible conclusions. Furthermore, all analyses are invalid, for it is a logical impossibility to deduce normative principles from empirical description.

The contemporary reliance on the analysis of experience highlights by contrast an essentially related element in the doctrine of justification. Personal counseling, Alcoholics Anonymous, psychiatry, frequently talk about feelings of guilt. The emotionally disturbed person, so it is said, can be cured by being relieved of these guilt feelings. But however much these practitioners attend to guilt feelings, they are singularly blind to guilt.

Evangelical theology takes guilt very seriously. Sin is an offense against God and merits a penalty: a penalty, not merely rehabilitation, for after we have done all that is required of us we are still unprofitable servants. Relieving feelings of guilt does not dispense with the need for paying the penalty. While subjective peace of mind, at which the practitioners aim, may under other conditions be desirable, it is better to be tormented with guilt feelings if actually acquitted of guilt, than to be actually guilty and enjoy peace of mind. It is better to be an alcoholic, plead for mercy, and be saved by Christ, than to reform and congratulate yourself on your superior strength of will.

Before present apostasy had boldly based acceptance with God on one's own efforts and moral achievements, and in the case of universalism had assigned all men the same final felicity, thereby denying God's righteousness and a day of wrath, and in the case of humanism had

denied immortality and God altogether, there came a theory of infused grace or evangelical obedience. Here the need of grace was acknowledged, but to avoid the imputed righteousness of Christ and justification by faith alone, this view held that God accepts man on the basis of an obedience that is less than perfect. Admittedly, all men sin; but God supplies grace to some, probably to all, so that some make fair use of this grace and obey God more or less consistently. God then acquits them, declares them innocent, and accepts them into the family of God on the basis of their well-intentioned efforts.

One such theologian wrote, “When we say we are justified by faith, we do not exclude those works that faith requires and at the same time produces.” Another said, “God demands the obedience of faith, i.e. not a rigid obedience, equally of all as the law requires; but so much as faith, i.e. a firm persuasion of the divine promises, can effect in any one.” That is to say, God lowers his standard of perfect righteousness and is satisfied merely with a little less sin.

Of course, this view finds no support in Scripture. It faces three objections.

First, the prophets and apostles totally exclude reliance on works. Our righteousnesses are likely filthy rags; and if Abraham was in some respects better than other men, he had no ground of boasting before God. By grace, unmerited favor, have we been saved through faith; and even this faith is not a human product – it is the gift of God.

Second, in addition to the lack of direct textual support, in fact in addition to direct repudiation, the theory of infused grace and evangelical obedience is inconsistent with related scriptural doctrines. One point is the matter of past sins. The Bible talks about repentance. The Old Testament provides rituals for purification. It says, “Cleanse me from my sin. . . . Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” God did not say, “If you don’t do it again, David, I won’t hold it against you this time.” In view of Psalm 51, how is it possible for imperfect obedience henceforth to cleanse us from the guilt we incurred prior to our reception of grace, or after, as in David’s case? Will this theory suggest that all men from their mother’s womb (if they managed to escape murderous abortionists) have grace and try sincerely?

Now, third, for reasons already implied, the theory of evangelical obedience works havoc with the death of Christ. If good works cancel out past sins, what necessity is there for an

atonement? The Apostle John records that Jesus was introduced as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. No Jew of that day could fail to understand. For centuries the Jews had been sacrificing lambs to atone for their sins. Moral improvement was not enough. There had to be the shedding of blood. Only so could the penalty be paid. The theology of infused grace and evangelical obedience fails because it has no logical place for a penalty or a crucifixion.

This is enough, and more than enough, for anyone who chooses to accept the Bible. Those who reject the basic principle of evangelical religion, *sola scriptura*, can confidently analyze their religious experience and be assured that they will never find evidence for the existence of a God who is both just and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus.