

JUSTIFICATION

SALVATION IS BY GRACE
THROUGH FAITH

*Clearly no one is justified before God
by the law, because,
"The righteous will live by faith."*

GALATIANS 3:11

✚ The doctrine of justification, the storm center of the Reformation, was a major concern of the apostle Paul. For him it was the heart of the gospel (Rom. 1:17; 3:21-5:21; Gal. 2:15-5:1) shaping both his message (Acts 13:38-39) and his devotion and spiritual life (2 Cor. 5:13-21; Phil. 3:4-14). Though other New Testament writers affirm the same doctrine in substance, the terms in which Protestants have affirmed and defended it for almost five centuries are drawn primarily from Paul.

Justification is a judicial act of God pardoning sinners (wicked and ungodly persons, Rom. 4:5; 3:9-24), accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with himself. This justifying sentence is God's gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:15-17), his bestowal of a status of acceptance for Jesus' sake (2 Cor. 5:21).

God's justifying judgment seems strange, for pronouncing sinners righteous may appear to be precisely the unjust action on the judge's part that God's own law forbade

(Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15). Yet it is in fact a just judgment, for its basis is the righteousness of Jesus Christ who as "the last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45), our representative head acting on our behalf, obeyed the law that bound us and endured the retribution for lawlessness that was our due and so (to use a medieval technical term) "merited" our justification. So we are justified justly, on the basis of justice done (Rom. 3:25-26) and Christ's righteousness reckoned to our account (Rom. 5:18-19).

God's justifying decision is the judgment of the Last Day, declaring where we shall spend eternity, brought forward into the present and pronounced here and now. It is the last judgment that will ever be passed on our destiny; God will never go back on it, however much Satan may appeal against God's verdict (Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10; Rom. 8:33-34). To be justified is to be eternally secure (Rom. 5:1-5; 8:30).

The necessary means, or instrumental cause, of justification is personal faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Savior and risen Lord (Rom. 4:23-25; 10:8-13). This is because the meritorious ground of our justification is entirely in Christ. As we give ourselves in faith to Jesus, Jesus gives us his gift of righteousness, so that in the very act of "closing with Christ," as older Reformed teachers put it, we receive divine pardon and acceptance which we could not otherwise have (Gal. 2:15-16; 3:24).

Official Roman Catholic theology includes sanctification in the definition of justification, which it sees as a process rather than a single decisive event, and affirms that while faith contributes to our acceptance with God, our works of satisfaction and merit contribute too. Rome sees baptism, viewed as a channel of sanctifying grace, as the

primary instrumental cause of justification, and the sacrament of penance, whereby congruous merit is achieved through works of satisfaction, as the supplementary restorative cause whenever the grace of God's initial acceptance is lost through mortal sin. Congruous, as distinct from condign, merit means merit that it is fitting, though not absolutely necessary, for God to reward by a fresh flow of sanctifying grace. On the Roman Catholic view, therefore, believers save themselves with the help of the grace that flows from Christ through the church's sacramental system, and in this life no sense of confidence in God's grace can ordinarily be had. Such teaching is a far cry from that of Paul.

ADOPTION

GOD MAKES HIS PEOPLE HIS CHILDREN

*But when the fullness of time had come,
God sent his Son, born of a woman,
born under the law . . . so that we might
receive adoption as children.*

GALATIANS 4:4-5 (NRSV)

✚ Paul teaches that the gift of justification (i.e., present acceptance by God as the world's Judge) brings with it the status of sonship by adoption (i.e., permanent intimacy with God as one's heavenly Father, Gal. 3:26; 4:4-7). In Paul's world, adoption was ordinarily of young adult males of good character to become heirs and maintain the family name of the childless rich. Paul, however, proclaims God's gracious adoption of persons of bad character to become "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17).

Justification is the basic blessing, on which adoption is founded; adoption is the crowning blessing, to which justification clears the way. Adopted status belongs to all who receive Christ (John 1:12). The adopted status of believers means that in and through Christ God loves them as he loves his only-begotten Son and will share with them all the glory that is Christ's now (Rom. 8:17, 38-39). Here and now, believers are under God's fatherly care and

discipline (Matt. 6:26; Heb. 12:5-11) and are directed, especially by Jesus, to live their whole lives in light of the knowledge that God is their Father in heaven. They are to pray to him as such (Matt. 6:5-13), imitate him as such (Matt. 5:44-48; 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35; Eph. 4:32-5:2), and trust him as such (Matt. 6:25-34), thus expressing the filial instinct that the Holy Spirit has implanted in them (Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:6).

Adoption and regeneration accompany each other as two aspects of the salvation that Christ brings (John 1:12-13), but they are to be distinguished. Adoption is the bestowal of a relationship, while regeneration is the transformation of our moral nature. Yet the link is evident; God wants his children, whom he loves, to bear his character, and takes action accordingly.

SANCTIFICATION

THE CHRISTIAN GROWS IN GRACE

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? . . . And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9, 11

✚ Sanctification, says the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q.35), is “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” The concept is not of sin being totally eradicated (that is to claim too much) or merely counteracted (that is to say too little), but of a divinely wrought character change freeing us from sinful habits and forming in us Christlike affections, dispositions, and virtues.

Sanctification is an ongoing transformation within a maintained consecration, and it engenders real righteousness within the frame of relational holiness. Relational sanctification, the state of being permanently set apart for God, flows from the cross, where God through Christ purchased and claimed us for himself (Acts 20:28; 26:18; Heb. 10:10). Moral renovation, whereby we are increasingly changed

from what we once were, flows from the agency of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13; 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 6:11, 19-20; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22-24; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 13:20-21). God calls his children to sanctity and graciously gives what he commands (1 Thess. 4:4; 5:23).

Regeneration is birth; sanctification is growth. In regeneration, God implants desires that were not there before: desire for God, for holiness, and for the hallowing and glorifying of God's name in this world; desire to pray, worship, love, serve, honor, and please God; desire to show love and bring benefit to others. In sanctification, the Holy Spirit "works in you to will and to act" according to God's purpose; what he does is prompt you to "work out your salvation" (i.e., express it in action) by fulfilling these new desires (Phil. 2:12-13). Christians become increasingly Christlike as the moral profile of Jesus (the "fruit of the Spirit") is progressively formed in them (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19; 5:22-25). Paul's use of *glory* in 2 Corinthians 3:18 shows that for him sanctification of character is glorification begun. Then the physical transformation that gives us a body like Christ's, one that will match our totally transformed character and be a perfect means of expressing it, will be glorification completed (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:49-53).

Regeneration was a momentary monergistic act of quickening the spiritually dead. As such, it was God's work alone. Sanctification, however, is in one sense synergistic—it is an ongoing cooperative process in which regenerate persons, alive to God and freed from sin's dominion (Rom. 6:11, 14-18), are required to exert themselves in sustained obedience. God's method of sanctification is neither activism (self-reliant activity) nor apathy (God-reliant passivity), but God-dependent effort (2 Cor. 7:1;

Phil. 3:10-14; Heb. 12:14). Knowing that without Christ's enabling we can do nothing, morally speaking, as we should, and that he is ready to strengthen us for all that we have to do (Phil. 4:13), we "stay put" (remain, abide) in Christ, asking for his help constantly—and we receive it (Col. 1:11; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:7; 2:1).

The standard to which God's work of sanctifying his saints is directed is his own revealed moral law, as expounded and modeled by Christ himself. Christ's love, humility, and patience under pressure are to be consciously imitated (Eph. 5:2; Phil. 2:5-11; 1 Pet. 2:21), for a Christlike spirit and attitude are part of what law-keeping involves.

Believers find within themselves contrary urgings. The Spirit sustains their regenerate desires and purposes; their fallen, Adamic instincts (the "flesh") which, though dethroned, are not yet destroyed, constantly distract them from doing God's will and allure them along paths that lead to death (Gal. 5:16-17; James 1:14-15). To clarify the relationship between the law and sin, Paul analyzes in a personal and dramatic way the sense of impotence for complete law-keeping, and the enslavement to behavior one dislikes, that the Spirit-flesh tension produces (Rom. 7:14-25). This conflict and frustration will be with Christians as long as they are in the body. Yet by watching and praying against temptation, and cultivating opposite virtues, they may through the Spirit's help "mortify" (i.e., drain the life out of, weaken as a means of killing) particular bad habits, and in that sense more and more die unto sin (Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5). They will experience many particular deliverances and victories in their unending battle with sin, while never being exposed to temptations that are impossible to resist (1 Cor. 10:13).