

# **Justification is a Forensic Act**

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By this the Reformers intended, in the first place, to deny the Romish doctrine of subjective<sup>1</sup> justification. That is, that justification consists in an act of God making the sinner subjectively holy. Romanists confound or unite justification and sanctification. They define justification as "the remission of sin and infusion of new habits of grace." By remission of sin they mean not simply pardon, but the removal of everything of the nature of sin from the soul. Justification, therefore, with them, is purely subjective, consisting in the destruction of sin and the infusion<sup>2</sup> of holiness.

In opposition to this doctrine, the Reformers maintained that by justification the Scriptures mean something different from sanctification. That the two gifts, although inseparable, are distinct, and that justification, instead of being an efficient act changing the inward character of the sinner, is a declarative act, announcing and determining his relation to the Law and justice of God.

In the second place, the Symbols<sup>3</sup> of the Reformation no less explicitly teach that justification is not simply pardon and restoration. It includes pardon, but it also includes a declaration that the believer is just or righteous in the sight of the Law. He has a right to plead a righteousness which completely satisfies its demands.

And, therefore, in the third place, affirmatively, those Symbols teach that justification is a judicial or forensic act, i.e., an act of God as Judge proceeding according to Law, declaring that the sinner is just, i.e., that the

Law no longer condemns him, but acquits and pronounces him to be entitled to eternal life,

Here, as so often in other cases, the ambiguity of words is apt to create embarrassment. The Greek word *dikaios* and the English word *righteous* have two distinct senses. They sometimes express moral character. When we say that God is righteous, we mean that He is right. He is free from any moral imperfection. So when we say that a man is righteous, we generally mean that he is upright and honest; that he is and does what he ought to be and do. In this sense the word expresses the relation which a man sustains to the rule of moral conduct. At other times, however, these words express, not moral character, but the relation which a man sustains to justice. In this sense a man is just with regard to whom justice is satisfied; or, against whom justice has no demands. Pilate said, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (Mat 27:24); i.e., of this person who is free from guilt; free from anything which justifies his condemnation to death "Christ also," says the Apostle, "hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust;" the innocent for the guilty (1Pe 3:18). See Rom 2:13; Rom 5:19. "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."

If, therefore, we take the word *righteous* in the former of the two senses above mentioned, when it expresses moral character, it would be a contradiction to say that God pronounces the sinner righteous. This would be equivalent to saying that God pronounces the sinner to be not a sinner, the wicked to be good, the unholy to be holy. But if we take the word in the sense in which the Scriptures so often use it, as expressing relation to justice, then when God pronounces the sinner righteous or just, He simply declares that his guilt is expiated,<sup>4</sup> that justice is satisfied, that He has the righteousness which justice demands. This is precisely what Paul says, when he says that God "justifieth the ungodly" (Rom 4:5). God does not pronounce the ungodly to be godly; He declares that notwithstanding his

personal sinfulness and unworthiness, he is accepted as righteous on the ground of what Christ has done for him.

### **Proof of the Doctrine just stated.**

That to justify means neither simply to pardon, nor to make inherently righteous or good is proved,

### **From the Usage of Scripture**

1. By the uniform usage of the word to justify in Scripture. It is never used in either of those senses, but always to declare or pronounce just. It is unnecessary to cite passages in proof of a usage which is uniform. The few following examples are enough. "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" (Deu 25:1). "I will not justify the wicked" (Exo 23:7) "Which justify the wicked for reward" (Isa 5:23). "He that justifieth the wicked" is "abomination to the lord" (Pro 17:15). "He willing to justify himself (Luk 10:29). "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men" (Luk 16:15). "Wisdom is justified of her children" (Mat 11:19). "A man is not justified by the works of the law" (Gal 2:16) "Whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (v. 6). Thus men are said to justify God: "Because he justified himself, rather than God" (Job 32:2). "That thou mightest be justified when thou speakest" (Psa 51:4). "All the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God" (Luk 7:29). The only passage in the New Testament where the word righteous (GK. dikaios) is used in a different sense is Revelation 22:11, "He that is righteous, let him be righteous still." Even if the reading in this passage were undoubted, this single case would have no force against the established usage of the word.

The usage of common life as to this word is just as uniform as that of the Bible. The word always expresses a judgment, whether of the mind, as when one man justifies another for his conduct, or officially of a judge. If such be the established meaning of the word, it ought to settle all

controversy as to the nature of justification. We are bound to take the words of Scripture in their true established sense. And, therefore, when the Bible says [that] God justifies the believer, we are not at liberty to say that it means that He pardons or that He sanctifies him. It means and can mean only that He pronounces him just.

### **Justification the Opposite of Condemnation.**

2. This is still further evident from the antithesis<sup>5</sup> between condemnation and justification. Condemnation is not the opposite either of pardon or of reformation. To condemn is to pronounce guilty or worthy of punishment. To justify is to declare not guilty, or that justice does not demand punishment, or that the person concerned cannot justly be condemned. When, therefore, the Apostle says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1), he declares that they are absolved from guilt; that the penalty of the Law cannot justly be inflicted upon them. "Who," he asks, "shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died" (8:33, 34). Against the elect in Christ no ground of condemnation can be presented. God pronounces them just, and therefore no one can pronounce them guilty.

This passage is certainly decisive against the doctrine of subjective justification in any form. This opposition between condemnation and justification is familiar both in Scripture and in common life. "If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me" (Job 9:20). "And wilt thou condemn him that is most just" (Job 34:17). If to condemn does not mean to make wicked, to justify does not mean to make good. And if condemnation is a judicial [act], so is justification. In condemnation it is a judge who pronounces sentence on the guilty. In justification it is a judge who pronounces or who declares the person arraigned free from guilt and entitled to be treated as righteous.

### **Argument from Equivalent Forms of Expression.**

3. The forms of expression which are used as equivalents of the word "justify" clearly determine the nature of the act. Thus Paul speaks of "the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works" (Rom 4:6). To impute righteousness is not to pardon; neither is it to sanctify. It means to justify, i.e., to attribute righteousness. The negative form in which justification is described is equally significant. "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin" (Rom 4:7, 8). As "to impute sin" never means and cannot mean to make wicked; so the negative statement "not to impute sin" cannot mean to sanctify. And as "to impute sin" does mean to lay sin to one's account and to treat him accordingly; so to justify means to lay righteousness to one's account and treat him accordingly. "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world...He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already" (Joh 3:17,18).

For "as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (Rom 5:18). It was judgment, a judicial sentence, which came on men for the offence of Adam, and it is a judicial sentence (justification, GK. dikaiosis) which comes for the righteousness of Christ, or, as is said in v. 16 of the same chapter, it was a judgment unto condemnation, a condemnatory sentence that came for one offence; and a free gift unto justification, a sentence of gratuitous justification from many offences. Language cannot be plainer. If a sentence of condemnation is a judicial act, then justification is judicial act.

### **Argument from the Statement of the Doctrine.**

4. The judicial character of justification is involved in the mode in which the doctrine is presented in the Bible. The Scriptures speak of Law, of its demands, of its penalty, of sinners as arraigned at the bar of God, of the Day of Judgment. The question is "How shall man be just with God?" The answer to this question determines the whole method of salvation. The

question is not, how a man can become holy? But, how can he become just? How can he satisfy the claims which justice has against him? It is obvious that if there is no such attribute as justice in God; if what we call justice is only benevolence, then there is no pertinency<sup>6</sup> in this question: man is not required to be just in order to be saved. There are no claims of justice to be satisfied. Repentance is all that need be rendered as the condition of restoration to the favor of God. Or, any didactic<sup>7</sup> declaration or exhibition of God's disapprobation<sup>8</sup> of sin would open the way for the safe pardon of sinners. Or, if the demands of justice were easily satisfied; if partial, imperfect obedience and fatherly chastisements, or self-inflicted penances, would suffice to satisfy its claims, then the sinner need not be just with God in order to be saved.

But the human soul knows intuitively<sup>9</sup> that these are refuges of lies. It knows that there is such an attribute as justice. It knows that the demands thereof are inexorable<sup>10</sup> because they are righteous. It knows that it cannot be saved unless it be justified, and it knows that it cannot be declared just unless the demands of justice are fully satisfied. Low views of the evil of sin and of the justice of God lie at the foundation of all false views of this great doctrine.

### **The Apostle's argument in the Epistle to the Romans.**

The Apostle begins the discussion of this subject by assuming that the justice of God, his purpose to punish all sin, to demand perfect conformity to his Law, is revealed from heaven, i.e., so revealed that no man, whether Jew or Gentile, can deny it (Rom 1:18). Men, even the most degraded pagans, know the righteous judgment of God that those who sin are worthy of death (1:32). He next proves that all men are sinners and, being sinners, are under condemnation. The whole world is "guilty before God" (3:19). From this he infers, as intuitively certain (because plainly included in the premises), that no flesh living can be justified before God "by the deeds of the law," i.e., on the ground of his own character and conduct. If guilty, he cannot be pronounced not guilty or just. In Paul's argument, to justify is to

pronounce just. *Dikaios* is the opposite of *hupodikos*, that is, righteous is the opposite of guilty. To pronounce guilty is to condemn. To pronounce righteous, i.e., not guilty, is to justify. If a man denies the authority of Scripture, it is conceivable that he may deny that justification is a judicial act. But it seems impossible that any one should deny that it is so represented in the Bible.

The Apostle, having taught that God is just, i.e., that He demands the satisfaction of justice, and that men are sinners and can render no such satisfaction themselves, announces that such a righteousness has been provided and is revealed in the Gospel. It is not our own righteousness, which is of the Law, but the righteousness of Christ, and, therefore, the righteousness of God, in virtue of which, and on the ground of which, God can be just and yet justify the sinner who believes in Christ. As long as the Bible stands this must stand as a simple statement of what Paul teaches as to the method of salvation. Men may dispute as to what he means, but this is surely what he says.

### **Argument from the Ground of Justification**

5. The nature of justification is determined by its ground. This indeed is an anticipation of another part of the subject, but it is in point here. If the Bible teaches that the ground of justification, the reason why God remits<sup>11</sup> to us the penalty of the Law and accepts us as righteous in his sight, is something out of ourselves, something done for us and not what we do or experience, then it of necessity follows that justification is not subjective. It does not consist in the infusion of righteousness or in making the person justified personally holy. If the "formal cause" of our justification be our goodness, then we are justified for what we are. The Bible, however, teaches that no man living can be justified for what he is. He is condemned for what he is and for what he does. He is justified for what Christ has done for him.

### **Argument from the Immutability of the Law**

6. The doctrine that justification consists simply in pardon, and consequent restoration, assumes that the divine law is imperfect and mutable.<sup>12</sup> [But] the law of the Lord is perfect. And being perfect it cannot be disregarded. It demands nothing which ought not to be demanded. It threatens nothing which ought not to be inflicted. It is in fact its own executioner. Sin is death (Rom 8:6). The justice of God makes punishment as inseparable from sin, as life is from holiness. The penalty of the law is immutable, and as little capable of being set aside as the precept.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly the Scriptures everywhere teach that in the justification of the sinner there is no relaxation of the penalty. There is no setting aside or disregarding the demands of the law. We are delivered from the law, not by its abrogation,<sup>14</sup> but by its execution. (Gal 2:19). We are freed from the law by the body of Christ (Rom 7:4). Christ having taken our place bore our sins in His own body on the tree (1Pe 2:24). The handwriting which was against us, He took out of the way, nailing it to His cross (Col 2:14). We are therefore not under the law, but under grace (Rom 6:14). Such representations are inconsistent with the theory which supposes that the law may be dispensed with; that the restoration of sinners to the favor and fellowship of God requires no satisfaction to its demands; that the believer is pardoned and restored to fellowship with God, just as a thief or forger is pardoned and restored to his civil rights by the executive in human governments. This is against the Scriptures. God is just in justifying the sinner. He acts according to justice.

It will be seen that everything in this discussion turns on the question, Whether there is such an attribute in God as justice! If justice be only "benevolence guided by wisdom," then there is no justification. What evangelical Christians so regard is only pardon or sanctification. But if God, as the Scriptures and conscience teach, be a just God, as immutable in his justice as in his goodness and truth, then there can be no remission of the penalty of sin except on the ground of expiation, and no justification except on the ground of the satisfaction of justice. Therefore justification must be a judicial act, and neither simply pardon nor the infusion of righteousness.



These doctrines sustain each other. What the Bible teaches of the justice of God proves that justification is a judicial declaration that justice is satisfied. And what the Bible teaches of the nature of justification proves that justice in God is something more than benevolence.

- <sup>1</sup> subjective - proceeding from or taking place within a person's mind.
- <sup>2</sup> infusion - to fill or cause to be filled with something.
- <sup>3</sup> Symbols - confessions, creeds, summaries or the articles of religion.
- <sup>4</sup> expiate - make satisfaction for an offense.
- <sup>5</sup> antithesis - the direct or exact opposite.
- <sup>6</sup> pertinency - suitable relation or relevance to the matter at hand.
- <sup>7</sup> didactic - morally instructive.
- <sup>8</sup> disapprobation - moral disapproval; condemnation.
- <sup>9</sup> intuitively - perceived by the mind instinctively.
- <sup>10</sup> inexorable - not capable of being persuaded.
- <sup>11</sup> remit - to pardon; to forgive; to cancel guilt.
- <sup>12</sup> mutable - subject to change.
- <sup>13</sup> precept - any commandment or order intended as an authoritative rule.
- <sup>14</sup> abrogation - abolishing, doing away with.

[From Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. HI, Soteriology.]