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Justification by Grace through Faith

Derek Drysdale

The age-old question to which religion addresses itself - and not just Christianity - is the indisputable fact that men and women are in many ways estranged from God their Creator. Even those who do not recognize the being of God are often out of tune with themselves and with creation itself and so demonstrate how deeply this estrangement runs.

In the OT this disruption between the Creator and creation is portrayed through the Genesis saga of the Fall and the disobedience of Adam and Eve with their subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

"Thus came sin into our world and all our woe"

This alienation is further symbolized by the story of the Tower of Babel and the escalating confusion and divisions among the peoples of the earth. Out of these divisions grows an inability to communicate, a loss of identity, and a defensive insecurity.

In a book like Amos, for example, we catch sight of those conditions in society that drove the OT prophets to declare a judgment on their times, to call for a return to the ways of the Lord and to seek atonement and the healing of broken relationships. What the prophet saw, as he addressed his word from the Lord to Israel, was not unlike what Charles Dickens saw as he looked out on the England of his day and then put pen to paper to describe the sharp contrast between the comfort and security in the homes of wealthy merchants and the cold hopelessness of the workhouses and debtors' prisons. Or what we see today when we look out from our developed parts of the so-called first and second worlds to the third world. And Amos was no "shrinking violet" when it came to denouncing those who bore most of the blame for the social injustices of his day, and their affront to human dignity. Much of what he saw in the humiliation and deprivations of the poor he attributed to the more powerful in society who lacked compassion

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"Woe to those who turn justice into wormwood,

throwing integrity to the ground." (Amos 5,7)

In this sense, Amos undoubtedly had a bias in his message; that bias that contemporary Liberation Theology has underscored, the "bias for the poor."

However, at a deeper level, behind the actions of deceitful, inconsiderate and power-hungry people, that create conditions of injustice in the world, the Bible points to our fallen, sinful nature. Whatever the symptoms, the roots of the disease lie there...back in our primeval disobedience and its contemporary expression in our own experience. And it is this inner condition of the human heart that the apostle Paul wrestles with in Romans 5. 1-11, this problem of sin in the individual which must be dealt with before we can come to grips, in any realistic way, with the social, economic, and political structures which so easily become expressions of humankind's sinfulness.

#### Romans 5. 1-11: Background comments

Ask anyone acquainted with Paul's doctrine of Justification by Faith, or, more accurately, "justification by grace through faith", where he most clearly sets out what he means by this idea, and they will probably refer you to Romans 5.1-11 among other texts. In actual fact, Romans 5 begins with an assumption: "Therefore since we are justified by faith....." What Paul means by this doctrine has already been expounded in the preceding chapters, and especially 3.21-31 where he deals with the very Jewish concept of "righteousness" and 4.1-25 where he elaborates on the theme of "faith"

Let us remind ourselves of what these key words mean, as they are crucial for our understanding of justification. First, a warning. Personally speaking, I am convinced that we in the Reformed Churches can make a very complicated theological jig-saw out of this doctrine of Justification. I even have reservations about that word "doctrine" with reference to Justification. It is, in fact, basically a simple picture or metaphor; Nevertheless, it is complex insofar as it is earthed in Jewish forensic categories of thought and language., and so its meaning is less than immediate and obvious for us today.

A further complicating factor is when we proceed - as theologians are apt to do - to construct an intricate doctrinal system around justification by faith. Gunther Bornkamm in his book on "Paul" switches on this red light when he writes: "A doctrine of justification that has been banished into a catechism as a proposition or into a treatise on dogmatics as a paragraph is most certainly not the doctrine as Paul knew it." /1, In other words, I am suggesting, at the risk of being simplistic, that the thinking round justification need not be as convoluted an argument as we sometimes imagine it, or, worse, make it.

### Justification

Most if not all of us grasp things more readily through pictures and images that stick in the mind. And the Bible is full of such symbolic analogies. Justification is such a picture, though, of course, it is much more in terms of its expression of a dynamic experience in our relationship with God in Jesus the Christ; but it is essentially a picture. For this reason I think it may well be more accurate in the first instance to speak of the metaphor, rather than the doctrine, of justification in the NT. In Paul's theology, however, the role of justification becomes much more than simply metaphorical.

The Jews were big on Law, and so also on Judgement, Paul had been an orthodox Jew, and indeed an ultra strict Pharisee, and it is this world of law and judgement that lies behind his justification imagery. It may well be that few other aspects of his justification in the gospel mark him out as a former practising Jew so much as this one. . Imagine a court scene: we, who know ourselves to be guilty as charged, are brought before the judge. We expect what we deserve; to be sentenced and punished; but, wonder of wonders, the judge acquits us and we are free. The judge justifies us and puts us in a new and "right" relationship with himself and with ourselves and offers us a new start.

How we respond to this merciful act - to such grace and such "unmerited favour" - will of course be vital.

The response anticipated is that we will act responsibly and keep faith with the judge's trust in us, so that we are really set at liberty with a fresh beginning and with hope. Such a response will set us at one with everything good and right and at peace with ourselves, and reunited with that righteousness from which we have become separated.

That is the picture. And it does it no disservice to add that like every picture it is not "the whole picture" and has its limitations. It helps to interpret the gospel but it does not do the whole job of interpretation.

God, then, as we extend this picture to embrace our experience of him as Christians, is a righteous judge who declares us righteous, so that we share his "righteousness"; "imputed righteousness" is how the old divines interpreted it. This is grace: God's gracious act. And to respond by faith, "accepting that we are accepted", as Paul Tillich puts it, is the only response asked of us. There is nothing therefore we have to do to earn this grace; nothing then that we can boast of, for we are asked only to accept this gracious act, to react positively and gratefully to it, and to believe this declaration that we are acquitted and to trust it.

Faith, then, in this sense, is both obedience and trust; taking the good Judge at his word, reorientating our life around it and so discovering the moral values and life-style that will follow from it. And at the same time go on to discover too, more and more of the meaning of "this grace in which we stand", Justification, therefore, is similar to Reconciliation, which is why the apostle Paul can use them interchangeably; or mix his metaphors if I may put it like that. An example of this interchange is found in Romans 5.9 and 10:

"Since, therefore, we are justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."

Reconciliation is undoubtedly working with a different picture, the one of estranged friends who have become enemies but who "make it up" and become friends again;

"righting" their "wrong" relationship. Though in the case of God and people, it is always we who have distanced ourselves from him and never God from us. It is God again, however, (the paradox of grace) who moves first to reconcile us to himself; God who is and always has been reconciled to us. How quickly, however, we can begin to "muddy the water" by fusing the imagery, like a bad sermon or homily with too many illustrations. So let us, as we turn briefly now to look at Romans 5. 1-11, hold on to this basically simple picture lying at the heart of justification in its context in Paul's thinking.

### Exposition

According to verse 1, the outcome of justification is Peace.

"Therefore since we are justified by faith,  
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus  
Christ"

The translation "We have peace with God" is, I think, to be preferred to the alternative, "Let us have peace with God". The whole of Paul's argument would seem to be that having been justified we are now at one with God; peace is an actual possession, the fruit of being reconciled. /2 Further, this new state of things is not just a present experience, but is also a future reality. It has eternal significance. We have entered what Paul Tillich calls "the Eternal Now". So as the apostle says, "We rejoice in hope of sharing the glory of God."

Two major problems, however, threaten this "grace in which we stand" and seem to contradict it: suffering and sin. Let us look briefly at them in turn Suffering.

The disturbing question that seems to be lying behind verse three is this: Does suffering not make it impossible to believe in and trust this justifying love of God. And there is no doubt that all of us who are pastors and teachers know only too well that there are few more agonizing and searching questions put to us than this question "Why?" Why do we suffer so? None of us can avoid setting down what the Bible says about God's

love in the light, or, rather the shade (even the darkness) of our experiences in this world; a world where people die, often miserably and without dignity; a world with the problems of Ethiopia and Lebanon, of Northern Ireland and South Africa, of conflicting ideologies and power blocs which crush the smaller and the weaker; a world where "man's inhumanity to man" is often acted out on a broad stage.

Yet, for all that, Paul's reasoning (indeed experience) here is that when we set down our suffering within the context of our faith, then we can interpret it differently than we do within the context of unbelief. That is not to minimize the mystery of suffering or to sweep aside its many unanswered, and often unanswerable, questions. Through justification the Christian's experience of the world is not now a matter of direct contact; but it is mediated through God's love in Christ. The believer is anchored to what God has done in justifying him or her, and then comes at life and the world with the conviction (born of faith) that there is nothing in "height or depth", in "things present and things to come" that can separate us from the "love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". In this sense suffering, rather than turning us bitter and away from God, draws us closer to him and to the meaning of the Cross; it may, therefore, as outlined here (v4) "produce endurance, and endurance produce character, and character produce hope...", I am reminded of Hemingway's words in "Call to Arms": "The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places".

### Sin

There is, then, this second problem challenging Justification, and it is the question that seems to be lying behind verse 6: "Can I really believe in the justifying love of God when I consider my sins?"

Paul's answer is to ask a further question: Did Jesus Christ die for us only after we had proved ourselves worthy of such a sacrifice? The answer is: not at all. Indeed, on the contrary, as we see from verse eight, Christ died for us - this supreme act of God's suffering love - while "we were yet sinners". In the face of the

Cross, then, and before the mystery of Calvary, how can we possibly doubt the love of God for sinners, or imagine that sin can undo the work of grace?

Finally verse ten changes the picture in order to reinforce the argument; Paul takes us into this other metaphor of reconciliation. We who were enemies and strangers from God, have now been reconciled to God. We did not achieve this reconciliation ourselves, for in fact we who remain in sin could not break out of our estrangement. So God in Christ broke into it, coming into our "far country", to bring us home and back to himself.

The passage ends at verse 11 with a note of rejoicing, the song, if you like, of "sinners saved by grace."

**"We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation"**

Some other words come to mind, those of Blaise Pascal, who, after much searching after God and efforts to justify himself, awoke to the miracle of grace and then summed up his experience of God like this, or words to the effect: "Thou wouldst not seek me hadst thou not already found me."

### Concluding Comments and Questions.

All this has, of course, been treating justification on an individual and personal basis; essentially the "I-Thou" relationship. And it must begin there, in your life and mine. The consequences, though, are much wider. Justification takes on social, community, world and even cosmic dimensions, as we find in other parts of the Pauline Corpus like the letters to the Galatians and Colossians. Let me draw out, in conclusion, some questions which arise, it seems to me, from this general exposition of Romans 5.1-11 and the overall theme of justification when viewed from where we are today, and not just where Paul was almost two thousand years ago.

The question has to be posed: is justification still a dynamic model for us today and a living metaphor, as distinct from a dead one, and is it still able to

express our experience of grace in the 1980s? Undoubtedly the power of this picture, in Paul's day and situation, lay in its forensic context. It was a situation in which law and an over scrupulous adherence to it in terms of religious legalism in Judaism, and elements within the early Church too had made of law a moral straitjacket.

Is it possible that what we see around us today is in many respects quite the reverse? Is our problem possibly more one of lawlessness and a critical loss of respect for authority? In a permissive, and now a profane and violent society is our problem not possibly more one of freedom from law, legal and moral, to the point of licence for "anything goes"? If so, to what extent does this change of context, if change it is, make justification a less than immediate and contemporary symbol of salvation?

Perhaps I might suggest also a further question which arises from the ecumenical context of Church life today. If grace means God's unconditional acceptance of us, then "in Christ" we too are called to accept others unconditionally. God's unconditional acceptance means that he accepted us "while we were yet sinners"...and that therefore God did not accept us only after we had made ourselves acceptable to him? Then, by implication it seems to me, that I also as a Presbyterian must accept Roman Catholics unconditionally and "while they are yet Roman Catholics", and Anglicans, "while they are yet Anglicans"... and Methodists, "while they are yet Methodists." And they in turn must accept me "while I am yet a Presbyterian."

What, then, are the implications of Justification by Faith for inter-church relations and what do they bring to the task of ecumenism?

May I also pose a final question which arises out of the evangelistic commission of the Church. I imagine all of us agree that in terms of justification the two essential elements in salvation are divine grace and the human response of faith. But where, I suspect, we may differ is in our understanding and interpretation of the response of faith. Is it primarily an individual decision? Is it a private and personal act arising spontaneously out of moments of revelation and spiritual

awakening, when the gospel of grace lays hold of us? Or is faith, even in its personal aspect, tied more to the community of faith and so arising out of the collective experience and nurture of a shared tradition and belief, and inseparable from the Church's sacramental life, repentance (or conversion) and the disciplines of liturgy and worship? Or is "the variety of religious experience" such that we must allow the response of faith to be capable of expression in various forms none of which may be regarded as exclusive? Here among these questions I imagine the evangelical debate opens up and the concern about how best we are to evangelize the world for Christ; for "I have other sheep" said Jesus, "not of this fold and I must bring them also... so there shall be one flock, one shepherd."

### Notes

1. G. Bornkamm, Paul, (London, 1971<sup>ET</sup>); 135
2. See any reputable commentary on Romans for the differing views on this division of the authorities between "We are at peace" and "Let us continue at peace, or let us have peace"
3. C.K. Barrett, Reading through Romans, (London) 22f

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