

insights: justification by grace through faith; the priesthood of all believers; the supremacy of Scripture. Within the Church of England there are those also who voice the same fear. Theology must take them seriously. In three essays, the first of which is published this month, Mr John Baker examines these formulations afresh, in the hope that those who care for them much, and those who care for them little, may both care for them anew.

Justification by Grace through Faith

Re-Union: Theological Explorations, 1

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Christian history does not suggest that, where theological traditions differ, the parties are very likely to be reconciled either by trying to convert one to the views of the other, or by seeking a common formula which shall embrace the beliefs of both. It is more promising for both sides to combine their individual gifts in exploring *de novo* the meaning of the doctrine in question, and in working out together a new statement of it, a statement which will then frequently be found to contain all that has gone before. The three essays in this series are offered as the attempt of an Anglican to think again from scratch on each in turn of the three points specifically mentioned at the Methodist Conference as calling for further study in the confrontation with Anglicanism, namely, justification by grace through faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the supremacy of the Scriptures, and as a small stimulus and contribution to a joint theological search for the truth.

It is not altogether unfair to say that there have always been logical perplexities attaching to the doctrine of justification, and that these lie at the root of the divergent traditional treatments. One such perplexity may be put this way: why are we not to describe faith as a work by which we help to bring about our own salvation? This difficulty goes back historically to the very beginnings of the whole question, since some Jewish exegetes, in contrast to the Apostle Paul, expounded Hab. 2: 4 – “The just shall live by his faith” – precisely as implying that faith was the one work needful for salvation.¹ A similar view is found in the New Testament at John 6: 28 f.: “They said to him, What must we do, to be doing the works of God? Jesus answered them, This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”²

¹ References in H. W. Heidland, *Die Anrechnung des Glaubens zur Gerechtigkeit*, 1936, pp. 90 ff.

² For a judicious exegesis of these verses cf. Lightfoot, *St John's Gospel*, 1956, *ad loc.*

Now it does not quite meet the point to argue, as some commentators have rightly done, that faith is not a work *of merit*. We may agree that it is not, and still be left with a problem. For if the act of believing is indispensable to justification, and if this is an act which Man himself performs, then his justification is partly his own work – and if so, why should he not get the credit for it? Attempts have been made to avoid this difficulty by arguing that faith is not strictly an action, but a response called forth by God's action in Christ. This, however, is a suicidal line to pursue. All three of the basic Christian attitudes, belief, moral responsibility, worship, must be free or they are worthless. The divine stimulus in Christ must be such that it is possible not to respond to it – as indeed it obviously is. Hence any response, whether of faith or unfaith, is clearly in some sense our own "work", and the dilemma remains, to be resolved only by a rigorous predestinarianism and a theory of grace as coercive. In other contexts the nature and language of personal relationship enable us to exorcize these mechanistic demons; and we will do well not to raise them again simply to help us with the problem of justification – whatever St Paul may have felt forced to do (cf. Rom. 9–11!). There must be a better way.

It might be more helpful to begin by asking what it is which God does, and to which faith responds. There is in Paul's thought an intimate connexion between atonement and justification,¹ as there must be, seeing that they represent the same divine salvation in Christ conceived by way of two different models, the sacrificial and the juristic. In atonement faith is needed to apprehend and lay claim to the expiation effected on the Cross. What is the corresponding function in justification?

Here the determinative imagery may indeed be juristic, but much depends on the particular process of law which we have in mind. In the apocalyptic picture of judgment a record of the evidence is assessed by the Judge, and sentence is passed accordingly, without any question of entering a defence. This was entirely suitable to the spiritual vision of later Judaism, where salvation and damnation went by personal performance; but such a vision is, of course, the one both Paul and we are concerned to replace. The essential modification, which converts the inexorable process of impersonal Justice into a personal dialogue between the Judge and arraigned Man is that now, because of Christ, there is a plea to be entered which can *rightly* result in acquittal. The spiritual activity which perceives what this plea is, and presents it, is faith.

As to the content of the effective plea there has never been any argument. It is the claim to be clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ himself. This brings us to another complex of problems continually raised by justification doctrine. How are we to conceive the communication of Christ's righteousness to us? If it is a legal fiction, then how does justification differ from simple divine forgiveness? And what need was

¹ Cf. especially Rom. 3: 21–26. We shall see later that the same is true of the OT.

there for Jesus to become Man, or to suffer? One answer which has played a major part in Christian piety may be summed up as follows. A sacrifice was needed to atone for the sin of Man; Jesus made this sacrifice, and in so doing consummated his own perfect righteousness; God imputes this righteousness to all who believe in Jesus as the one who has taken away the sin of the world. This preserves the close link with atonement doctrine, and provides us with an objective divine act, the removal of the sin of the world, but it fails to answer the question which is the crucial one in the specifically justification context. The expiation of my sins, past, present, or to come, simply is not the same thing as my being either "made" or "accounted" righteous. The crux of the matter is this: assuming Christ's perfect righteousness, how do I partake of it *in such a manner that the Judge of all the earth can acquit me, and yet do right?* The miracle of redemption, seen from this angle, is precisely that in acquitting me God is acting justly. And this apparent impossibility has been made possible by Jesus.

It has often been recognized that an individualistic approach can never provide the answer to this question. Any attempt to transmit Christ's righteousness across the gap between two completely independent entities, Jesus and myself, will not work. Now if we are looking for a corporate condition, in which his righteousness can properly be shared, then "being in Christ", or a "member of the body of Christ", at once suggests itself. But, for all that this seems to offer an attractive synthesis of Pauline concepts, it is untrue to Paul, and intrinsically illogical. Incorporation into Christ is arrived at through baptism (Rom. 6: 3-5), but faith is a prior condition of baptism, and justification is something actualized in each individual at the moment of faith.¹ This reading of the Scriptures, perfectly sound in itself, has led some to conclude that baptism was therefore otiose. In fact nothing could be further from the truth; for baptism, precisely because it is a sacrament, provides the one unbreakable, and therefore indispensable, safeguard against any idea of salvation by works. The believer can never suppose that it is his own faith activity which has, so to speak, qualified him, and made his entry into the body purely formal and automatic, since in the sacrament he is perforce a wholly passive recipient; it is God who freely accepts him there as a brother of his Son. The twin requirements, belief *and* baptism, are essential if justification doctrine is not to be compromised. Nevertheless, despite this mutual necessity, justification remains logically prior to baptism, because it is itself the content of the faith which desires to be baptized.² Hence the corporate condition of being in Christ, as subsequent

¹ This would seem to be the natural interpretation of Paul's words in Rom. 3: 22-26, esp. vv. 22, 25 ("to be received by faith"), and 26 ("justifies him who has faith in Jesus"). The specific content of justifying faith will occupy us shortly.

² Cf. the liturgical pattern reflected in Acts 8: 37, probably an insertion into the story of Philip and the eunuch; also Gal. 3: 25 ff.

to faith, can hardly provide the medium through which Christ's righteousness is communicated.

What then does provide such a medium? The Scripture presents its own clear answer, when it says: "God so loved the *world*", and, "God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself". We have suggested that the solidarity which communicates Christ's righteousness to men cannot be that of the Church, visible or invisible. This leaves us only one other solidarity, the one which the doctrine of the Incarnation demands, that of the whole human race. What we say is that Christ's perfect human life has objectively changed the situation of every human being faced with the judgment of God. This can only be by virtue of a shared humanity – for at this stage nothing else is shared – and therefore the change must be expressed in terms of that humanity. In justification imagery this means that, because of Christ, we can now do what before we could not do, namely, enter a plea in defence, and a plea which will rightly secure our acquittal. And the content of that plea is this: *I know that the true goodness of Man is not to be found in me. But there was One who was good, Jesus; and because of him alone I, as his brother man, can be proud to exist.*

To say this is to do precisely as St Paul urges, to have no righteousness of one's own, but only Christ's. In these terms *simul justus et peccator* is literal truth. Moreover, this affirmation is a faith-statement, both because there is no method of verifying that Jesus is the sole and supremely good man, and because it is not simply intellectual assent to a proposition, but existential involvement of one's whole person. Again, the plea is entered on the basis of that which we share with Christ, whether we believe or no, and which God alone has created through the Incarnation; that is to say, it gives God's act of justification objective content independent of any human response of faith. Nevertheless, only faith can enter this plea, a plea which is valid, and therefore sure of acceptance.

It may be Paul's awareness of, on the one hand, the eternal reality of the divine act, and, on the other, the uncertainty of human response, which explains the tension in the Epistle to the Romans between passages which seem to describe justification as affecting all men, and others which predicate it only of believers. Thus in Rom. 3: 21–26 justification is restricted to those who believe, while in chap. 5 St Paul appears to extend justification to all: "Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (v. 18), and again: "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (v. 19). Such verses call to mind an analogous tension in 1 Cor. 15: 21 f.: "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive". In both passages the Adam–Christ parallelism is certainly at work. There has been much argument whether St Paul was in fact a universalist; but for either side there are embarrassing texts to be over-

come. It might be better, therefore, to say that these apparent contradictions reflect his awareness of the facts of salvation, namely, that in Jesus all mankind has been put into a new situation, but that, since relationship with God is a personal dialogue, this new situation calls for an acknowledgment by Man, the response of faith through which the new condition is existentially actualized in each individual. Thus, only the believer is justified; but everyone, believer or not, is now objectively in the same situation.

There are anticipations of this doctrine in the O.T. Abraham's plea for Sodom (Gen. 18), possibly the meditation of a devout Yahwist in the generation before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., is feeling toward it. But the most striking instance is, of course, the fourth Servant Song (Is. 52: 13-53 end).¹ It is generally agreed that the Servant in this poem, whether an individual, a group, a corporate personality figure, or an ideal, is an Israelite, as are those who primarily benefit from his obedience.² In Second Isaiah at large the sufferings spoken of are normally those of the Exile; and if this holds good in the Servant Songs, then we have here an assertion that the Servant's endurance of these sufferings availed as a sin offering (53: 10) to take away the sin of Israel as a whole. But the prophet clearly believes that for the majority of Israel the Exile was a punishment (40: 1 ff.). One possible solution, therefore, is that he sees the sufferings of the righteous and of the wicked, though identical in content and circumstance, as yet differing in value in the eyes of God. In the Exile many suffered who deserved to suffer, and who were paying the penalty of their disloyalty to Yahweh; but some also suffered who had been loyal, and their misery had aroused many agonized questions (Jer. 31: 29; Ezek. 18: 2). What answer could one give? Second Isaiah affirms that those who had been loyal, and thus fulfilled the rôle of the Servant, had by their unmerited suffering made a sin offering, the atoning value of which had been instrumental in procuring the restoration of their sinful, disloyal fellow countrymen. This thought is summed up in 53: 11: "By his knowledge" (i.e. knowledge of God expressed in obedience; cf. Hosea) "shall the righteous one, my servant, make many³ to be accounted righteous" (AV "justify many"; MT *hišdik*) "and he shall bear their iniquities". The parallel with NT faith in Christ, and with justification

¹ So many interpretations of this famous text already exist that the bald statement of yet another must be somewhat presumptuous. The following exegesis, however, of which the writer hopes to give a fuller account elsewhere, is neither meant to be exclusive of other insights nor does it lack a good deal of common ground with more accepted views.

² 52: 13 ff. does not require us to see the Gentiles as the beneficiaries, a view which demands the unsupported emendation of 53: 8, "for the transgression of *my people*". The natural explanation of 52: 13 ff. sees it as a further instance of a theme constantly expressed in Is. 40-55, namely that it is the miraculous restoration of Israel which is to astound and convert the Gentiles.

³ Cf. Rom. 5: 19.

doctrine in particular, is striking, not least in the fact that recognition of the Servant, and understanding of the meaning of his sufferings, seems to be a key requirement by God (53: 1-6).

Finally, some such approach as we have outlined seems to make easier a relation between justification and sanctification. There is no need to bring into the concept of justification the righteousness which the Spirit of God will eventually create in the sinner. It is for Christ's righteousness that we are acquitted, not for our own, even if that is the work of grace in us. But there is a profound relationship between seeing in Christ the perfection that God wills for Man, and oneself being perfected later. For to recognize that the manhood of Christ is the only ground on which you as a human being can be allowed by God to exist is to accept that manhood as an absolutely valid norm for human life; in other words, to accept the Cross as wisdom and power and as the one thing in which to glory and rejoice. This is to overturn all natural outlooks on human life, to die to one's own understanding. But this is not something that comes only after the act of faith. It is there already in seed in the act of faith, if that faith is genuine. The response element in justification is the beginning of sanctification, which is only what we would expect, since encounter with God either sanctifies or destroys.

The whole justification doctrine stands in intimate and organic theological connexion with that of the priesthood of all believers, which is to be the subject of the second of these exploratory essays. But how, at this stage, may we sum up the discussion?

In his Incarnation the Son of God did not become a member of the Church, for there was none, but of mankind. His life, and his alone, is the perfection of human existence. In bringing this about God, solely by his own act, has objectively changed the situation of the whole human race, since it is now open to any man to plead Christ as the justification of his own person *qua* man. But not all will do this, since for many Christ contradicts what they think human life ought to be. Only faith discerns. The vital watchword, the "most wholesome doctrine", justification by grace through faith, may therefore be unpacked as follows: that in Jesus alone God has provided a justification for mankind in general, and for each child of man in particular; that this has been done by God alone, irrespective of any human response, and is thus "by grace"; and that faith, the acknowledgment that Christ is our only justification, is alone the way in which a man can rightly stand before the questioning of his existence in ultimate judgment.