

Universal Justification

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INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod issued an excellent statement on the doctrine of justification which our Synod would be able to accept without changes. At about the same time a Lutheran - Catholic committee drew up an even longer statement on the same doctrine. The first of these was almost certainly published with the hope of stemming a new controversy that was threatening to erupt in the LC-MS, and the second was a manifestly vain attempt to settle an old controversy which dates back to the days of the Lutheran Reformation and the Council of Trent.

Two years ago the developing controversy in the LC-MS showed signs of spilling over also into our own Wisconsin Synod and it is very likely against that background that we can see why the topic of this year's convention essay was chosen. It will, of course, be impossible to deal in detail with the whole doctrine of justification in the time allotted to this subject at this convention. Because the controversy of which we have spoken centered mainly on the universal aspect of justification we shall for the most part limit our discussion to that feature of this doctrine.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The term universal or general justification is self-explanatory. By this term we mean to say that God has justified, declared righteous, or acquitted, the whole world of sinners, or, in other words, that God has in His heart forgiven the sins of all men. An alternate term for universal justification in our circles has been, for many decades, "objective justification." We have used the two terms almost interchangeably without sensing any distinction between them.

However, we should be aware that also a Calvinist, who would most assuredly reject the doctrine of universal justification, could perhaps feel perfectly at ease with the concept of objective justification. Strictly speaking, the term objective justification means that a sinner is justified by God whether he believes it or not. Many Calvinists believe that this is true of the elect. While they might therefore be willing to accept our terminology when we speak of "objective justification" they would vehemently reject the concept of "universal justification" because that would conflict with their doctrine of limited atonement.

If justification is universal, it must of necessity be objective. For if the sins of all men have been forgiven in the heart of God, then men are forgiven by God whether they believe it or not. On the other hand, however, at least hypothetically, justification could be objective without being universal. The justification is objective is taught by St. Paul when he says that God "justifies the ungodly" (KJV; NIV: "wicked"). The word which he uses in the original Greek is equivalent to "unbeliever." God acquits or justifies the unbeliever, that is, he announces to the unbeliever that his sins are forgiven and through the message the Holy Ghost creates faith in the unbeliever's heart.

JUSTIFICATION AND ATONEMENT

Human reason will always have difficulty with the doctrine of universal justification. It is always inclined to say that if God has really forgiven the sins of all men, then it is impossible to

see how He can still send unbelievers to eternal damnation in hell. Because of this, some Lutherans, who want to be orthodox are afraid that universal justification will lead to universalism, the doctrine which says that all men will finally be eternally saved.

We will never see a way out of that difficulty until we have a clear understanding of the distinction between law and gospel. The statement that God has forgiven the sins of all men, outside the framework of law and gospel, would actually be an untruth and a false doctrine. When a well-known modern theologian, for example, says that God has resources of love that go beyond His justice, he implies rather clearly that in the end all men will be sharers in heavenly glory because God will finally stop punishing sin and just cancel out all past wrongdoing.

The biblical revelation makes it clear that no one has a right to believe that God has forgiven every sin without at the same time believing that God has punished every sin. To say the one without also saying the other would be a clear denial of the unmistakable teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

This we learn from one of God's earliest revelations of Himself. When Moses asked God for the privilege of seeing Him in His glorious majesty the Lord did not grant the prophet's request because it could only have ended in the destruction of Moses. But in His mercy God promised to tell Moses in what His glory consisted. He promised to tell Moses in human words what kind of God He is. In biblical terms, He promised to proclaim to Moses "the name of the Lord."

What follows in fulfillment of that promise is certainly one of the key passages of the Old Testament and of the whole Bible. When God proclaimed the name of the Lord to Moses he said, The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin, Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. Thus God revealed Himself to Moses as the merciful and gracious God who forgives sin and the just and holy God who punishes sin.

The Pharisaic heart with which every man is born is always inclined to imagine that God's forgiveness is for those whose good deeds outweigh the evil they have done, while God's punishment is for those whose wickedness is especially flagrant. But that is not what God says in His Holy Word. Before the apostle Paul treats the justification of the sinner before God, he spends over two chapters demonstrating that this apparent contradiction in God's revelation to Moses cannot be resolved in the Pharisees' way. He concludes that there is no difference between men for all have sinned and for that reason all men will always fail to receive the favorable verdict which he calls "the glory of God," or "the praise of God," the praise that God gives when He declares men righteous in His sight (Ro 3:23).

God forgives sins and God punishes sins. Both of these statements are eternally, universally and unchangeably true. Yet to the human mind they can not be reconciled, for human reason says that if God punishes He does not forgive and if He forgives He does not punish.

If men therefore proclaim a universal forgiveness which in any way ignores universal punishment they are not calling men to the God who has revealed Himself to us in the Holy Scriptures. There is only one place in all the universe where men will find it possible to believe that every sin is punished and that every sin is forgiven. That place is the "green hill far away" outside the city wall, where the place of the skull and the open tomb in which the crucified One was buried lie close by each other. On the cross where the eternal Son of God was forsaken by His heavenly Father to suffer for the sins of the world which the Lord had laid on Him, we see

the sins of the whole world being punished. At the open tomb from which the lowly and meek Jesus of Nazareth rose in the glory of the Father we see that the sins of the whole world have been paid for in a way that satisfied the Father who raised Him from the dead. They are truly paid for, canceled, wiped out and forgiven. It deserves to be repeated that what was paid for there were the sins of the whole wide world.

Modern theology has much to say about the love and mercy of the Lord and His constant willingness to forgive; yet at the same time it calls the theology of the cross an out-of-date “blood-religion” and it characterizes the God who sent His Son to Calvary by the determinate counsel of His will as a blood-thirsty tyrant who demands His Shylocking pound of flesh before He forgives. A spokesman for that kind of theology has said that a God whose forgiveness must be purchased, and a Father who must be reconciled to His children is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This surely ought to convince us that it is possible to preach forgiveness and yet be guilty of teaching the most damnable heresy.

That is why Lutheran dogmaticians sometimes seem to have difficulty deciding what is the central doctrine of the Christian religion. Usually we say that the doctrine of justification is the doctrine by which the church stands and falls. But occasionally the dogmaticians speak of the vicarious atonement, the substitutionary obedience, suffering, death and resurrection of the Savior, as the heart of the Christian religion. At other times they speak of the resurrection of Christ as the cornerstone of the Christian faith. And this is not surprising for these doctrines are so closely interwoven with one another that, one of them can be taught correctly unless all of them are. Without the vicarious atonement justification or forgiveness is impossible, and without justification or forgiveness the vicarious atonement has no significance for us and the resurrection is meaningless.

THE SINS OF ALL MEN ARE FORGIVEN

Against that background it is possible to speak of universal forgiveness without danger of drifting into universalism. God forever remains the God who punishes all sin and at the same time He is forever the God who forgives every sin. And only the person who by God’s grace has in the vicarious atonement of Christ found a way to believe both worships the God of the Bible.

That God has punished the sins of all men in Christ finds few questioners among Lutherans who are still interested in such questions as those we are discussing today. But, sad to say, there are some Lutherans who want to be conservative and orthodox who find it very difficult to say with equal fervor and vigor that God has forgiven the sins of all men in Christ.

Anyone who is at home in the literature of the old Synodical Conference surely must know that this was the unanimous and unquestioned position of our Synodical Conference fathers. We will make no effort to demonstrate that fact with actual quotations. Our Synodical fathers and our orthodox dogmaticians believed and confessed in unmistakable terms that justification is universal, that the sins of all men are forgiven. They confessed it because they believed that this was the clear teaching of Scripture. And in that confession and belief they were correct. If we let the Scriptures stand as they read, without trying to force them into a preconceived pattern, we will soon learn that the message of the Gospel brings the good news to all men, “Your sins are forgiven, taken away, atoned and paid for by the holy life and innocent death of God’s own Son.”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:19

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ not counting men’s sins against them.” (2 Cor 5:19). This NIV translation obscures the teaching of Paul to a certain extent. Paul’s actual words say that God was reconciling the world to

Himself not counting their sins against them. The only possible antecedent of “their” in that sentence is “the world,” and the world certainly includes all men. What Paul actually says, therefore, is that God does not count the sins of all men against them. In his letter to the Romans the apostle indicates beyond question that not to count a man’s sin against him means to forgive his sin. Paul writes, “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.” We are therefore justified in saying that Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19 teaches that in Christ God has indeed forgiven the sins of the whole world. God reconciled the world to Himself by forgiving the sins of all men.

ROMANS 5:18

Paul teaches the same truth in his epistle to the Romans (5:18). There he writes, “Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (NIV). Because of the sin of Adam all men were condemned or declared guilty by God. In the same way all men were justified or declared innocent, righteous, not guilty because of what Christ did as their substitute.

Because of the importance of this passage for the doctrine of universal justification it deserves closer study. It is impossible to make an idiomatic English sentence by using only Paul’s Greek words in this verse because the Greek sentence does not contain a verb. It will be helpful if we take a look at what the various translations have done with this verse. We have underlined the words that were added to make the sentence complete in English).

KJV: As by the offense 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.

NASB: As through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.

Beck: As by one sin all people were condemned, so by one righteous work all people were judged to be righteous (Beck adds here “and alive”, which is obviously incorrect.)

NEB: As the issue of one misdeed was condemnation for all men, so the issue of one just act is acquittal ... for all men. (The NEB at... adds “and life” which again is incorrect and unjustified by the original Greek.)

RSV: As one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal ... for all men. (The RSV also says, “and life.”)

Berkeley: As the one fall affected all men for their condemnation, so through one righteous act there is for all men a justified life.

NIV: Just at the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.

Smith-Goodspeed: As one offense means condemnation for all men, just so one righteous act means acquittal ... for all men. (S-G also says, “and life.”)

Phillips: As one act of sin exposed the whole race of men to God’s judgment and condemnation, so one act of perfect righteousness presents all men freely acquitted in the sight of God.

20th Century NT: Just as a single offense resulted for all mankind in condemnation, so, too, a single decree of righteousness resulted for all mankind in that declaration of righteousness which brings Life.

All of these translations in the final analysis say that in Christ all men are justified, but if I were asked to choose the best of these translations, my choice would be the last one listed. It is the only English translation (of which I know) which renders the Greek word *dikaioma* with “a decree of righteousness.” Over a quarter of a century of teaching Romans has convinced me that this translation is the right one, although, for the sake of clarity I would prefer “a verdict of

acquittal” instead of “a decree of righteousness.” Almost all other modern English versions translate the word with “a righteous act,” or an equivalent phrase. While such a translation can be understood correctly it does not completely reflect exactly what Paul said.

The translation “a righteous act” for *dikaioma* is all the more surprising in view of the fact that the same word is used two verses earlier by Paul and no translation of which I know renders it with “a righteous act” in that verse (Ro 5:16). The translators generally agree that in verse 16 it means “a decree of righteousness,” even though none of them uses that particular phrase. Most of them (KJV, NIV, NASB, RSV, Phillips, and Berkeley) in Romans 5:16 use “justification” as a translation for *dikaioma*. Smith-Goodspeed uses the word “acquittal”. The NEB and, surprisingly, the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible render it with “verdict of acquittal.” What Paul says is that one verdict of acquittal was the justifying of all.

The one verdict of acquittal that he has in mind is the verdict that God spoke over the crucified Christ when He raised Him from the dead. One of the Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth century made this point very well in his comments on Paul’s letter to the Romans, in which he wrote,

By raising [Christ] from the dead, [God] absolved him from our sins which had been imputed to Him, and therefore He also absolved us in Him, that Christ’s resurrection might thus be the cause and the proof and the completion of our justification (J. Gerhard: *Annotationes in Epad Rom.*, ed . Jenae 1666 , p .156)

ROMANS 4:25

The Apostle Paul teaches this when he writes, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Ro 4: 25). The Greek preposition which both the NIV and the KJV translated with “for” is perhaps better translated in modern English with “because of,” so that the passage would read, “[Christ] was delivered over to death because of our sins and was raised to life because of our justification.” We could also translate, “He was delivered over to death because we had sinned, and was raised to life because we had been justified.” Some Lutherans, who deny universal justification, insist that since the previous verse speaks of believers, therefore the truth expressed in this verse must be limited to believers, because only believers are justified. But surely there is no Lutheran who would hold that Christ was delivered over to death only for the sins of believers. He died for all. He paid the ransom price for all. He took away the sin of the world. He is the propitiation or the cover for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. His resurrection is the proof that the sins of the world are canceled and forgiven .

I TIMOTHY 3:16

Paul refers to this same truth when he writes (1 Tim 3:16) that Christ “was pronounced righteous in spirit” (20th Century NT). When Christ was raised in that new spiritual mode of existence which both Peter (1 Pe 3:18) and Paul (Ro 1:4) call “spirit”, He was justified. But since the sins from which He was justified (Ro 4:25, cp. also the original Greek of Ro 6:7) were the sins of all men, it follows that all men were justified in Him. Christ’s work is so completely vicarious that all men died when He died (2 Cor 5:14). In the same way, all men were condemned when He was condemned (Ga 3:13) and all men were justified when He was justified (Ro 4:25).

JUSTIFICATION AND LIFE

Earlier, when we discussed Paul’s words in Romans 5:18 we expressed disagreement with those translators who said that the work of Christ resulted in “justification and life” for all

men. Neither the original Greek nor the context of Scripture allows such a translation. Not all men will live forever because of the work of the Savior. What Paul says is that a “justification of life” resulted from the Savior’s work which brought him a verdict of acquittal from His Father, a verdict of acquittal in which all men share. This acquittal is an acquittal of life. All that can be concluded from that phrase is that there is some kind of connection between the acquittal and life. What that connection is must be determined from other contexts.

Paul tells us very clearly what this connection is when he writes, “The just shall live by faith.” In the Gospel God’s messengers proclaim to us that the sins of all men are forgiven. Those who hear that message and reject it in unbelief will find no comfort, no hope, no relief from a troubled conscience that drives them farther and farther away from God, the source of all life. That is what John means when he tells us that the wrath of God remains on those who do not believe.

But those who believe it when they hear God say, “The sins of the world have been forgiven,” when He says to them in the absolution, “Your sins are forgiven,” find peace and comfort and joy for all eternity in the message. They are at peace with God through that faith. They have found a way to overcome the awful fear that must fill the human heart when it comes face to face with the justice of God that demands eternal punishment for every sin. In this life the unbeliever can often stifle that fear by a thousand tricks suggested by the devil, but in eternity none of those ploys will work and those who die in unbelief will forever be without any remedy. In that sense unbelief will be its own eternal punishment. In eternity none of the tricks by which man evades the sense of God’s wrath will work anymore. Atheism, which denies the existence of an angry God, will not work. Secularism and materialism, which ignores the existence of an angry God, will not work. Pharisaism, which imagines that the anger of God can be appeased by human effort, will not work. Idolatries, both modern and ancient, which substitute a false God for the God who proclaimed His name to Moses, will not work.

But those who believe God’s message of forgiveness and continue to believe it until they die, will rejoice in that message through all eternity. They know that the anger of God has been appeased by the death of His Son and in that knowledge they can live in joyful communion with the God who punishes every sin and who forgives every sin. This is what the Bible calls “everlasting life” and we would do well to remind ourselves that the Bible speaks of that life as beginning at the time of our conversion when we begin to believe that we are redeemed, restored, forgiven through Jesus’ precious blood. At that moment, the moment when faith in the promise of forgiveness is kindled in our heart, we pass from death to life (Jn 5:24), to that life that will never end. In that sense, the justification that came upon all men through Christ is a “justification of life” (KJV), or a “justification that brings life” (NIV).

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSAL JUSTIFICATION

The doctrine of universal justification which teaches that the sins of all men are forgiven, and the doctrine of objective justification, which teaches that a man’s sins are forgiven whether he believes it or not, are extremely important. These doctrines, or perhaps it is better to say, these two aspects of the one doctrine of universal justification, form a solid foundation for assurance and confidence concerning salvation.

The doctrine of salvation by works, which we call the *opinio legis*, is so deeply embedded in the sinful human heart that it is difficult to keep it from obscuring also the doctrine of justification and forgiveness. Ever since the devil planted in the heart of Eve the thought that her complete happiness and satisfaction was something to be achieved by her own efforts rather

than something that she already possessed as a free gift of God's love, man has been born with the notion that we can be saved by what we do.

Lutherans may think that they have been effectively vaccinated against this spiritual disease. From childhood on most of us have had it dinned into our ears that we are not saved by works but by grace. It is probably true of everyone of us that if someone were to wake us at two in the morning and ask, "Are we saved by works or by grace?" we would reply without a second thought, "By grace alone, without works. "

And yet many Lutherans still labor under the delusion that God does not forgive us unless we believe. Instead of seeing nothing more than the spiritual hand with which we make the forgiveness of God our own, they see it as a reason why God forgives us. They believe that Christ has indeed provided forgiveness for all men, that God is willing to forgive, but before He really forgives He first of all demands that we should be sorry for our sins and that we should have faith. Just have faith, they say, and then God will forgive you. All the right words are there. The only thing wrong is that the words are in the wrong order. God does not forgive us *because* we have faith. He does not forgive us *if* we have faith. He has forgiven us long ago, when He raised His Son from the dead. The risen Savior commanded His apostles to preach that good news of forgiveness to every creature, to all nations. And the apostles are still preaching it today through their writings and through those who by word of mouth pass the same message on, whether they are pastors or laymen, men or women, adults or children.

Faith is important. It is important just because forgiveness is encased in a message. Forgiveness comes to us through words. And when we hear the words one of two things will always happen in the hearer. Either he will believe what he hears or he will reject it in unbelief. If he believes it, all the blessings that the message offers to the human heart will be his. If he does not believe it, the message will bring him no peace, no comfort and no hope. But whether he believes it or not the message will remain true. Paul spoke of the unbelief of the Jews and asked, "Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?" and he answers, "Not at all!" (Ro 3:3,4). At another time he wrote, "If we are faithless (i.e. do not believe), He will remain faithful, for He cannot disown Himself" (2 Tm 2:13). That is why the Apology of the AC says that refusing to believe that our sins are forgiven is the same as accusing God of being a liar (Apol. XII, 62). Melancthon writes, "If anybody, therefore, is not sure that he is forgiven, he denies that God has sworn to the truth; a more horrible blasphemy than this can not be imagined" (Apol. XII, 94). And Martin Luther once said that those who do not believe God's message of forgiveness will someday find out how surely their sins were forgiven even though they did not believe it (LW 40:356 366).

If forgiveness were dependent on faith in the sense that God does not forgive until we believe, we would always have to be sure that we are believers before we could be sure that we are forgiven. We may not see how dangerous that is, until one of those moments of temptation and doubt comes to us in which we no longer know that we are believers. In such a time we will have no place to go unless we can say, "God has told me that in Christ He has forgiven the sins of the world. My faith or my unbelief, will neither make God's Word true or untrue. He does not lie. He justifies the ungodly (Ro 4:5). Even if I am the most ungodly, the most wicked man on earth, I know that He has justified and forgiven me. To that promise I will cling, even if my heart tells me that I am without faith, without love, without hope. I know that God is greater than my heart and knows all things (1 Jn 3:20).

"I believe in what my Savior taught,
And trust it whether felt or not."

Only the doctrine of universal justification makes it possible for a believing child of God to have such a sure foundation for his faith. God grant that our church may never surrender that doctrine. Amen.