

*Some Thoughts on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*

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It becomes obvious when reading the declaration that a lot of hard work and a lot of careful thought have been put into it, during a long period of conversation. The document contains some excellent expressions of faith and valuable insight into the matters of man's relationship to God. Considering all, this is a well expressed confession of faith of the people who worked on it and produced it. Nonetheless, the aim of this short reflection is to analyze certain ideas that I disagree with. Therefore, the following reflection will focus on these ideas.

Justification is made equal to forgiveness in this document, and the verses given as a support to this idea do not prove it. Justification occurs at baptism according to this document, which is not the NT idea. I also disagree with the idea that we are powerless to turn to God for help. While God may initiate the desire and thought for repentance, we still have to act upon it and make some choices. I disagree with the idea that Christ has overcome the law 'as a way to salvation'. The law was never a way to salvation, not even in the OT. If the law was a way to salvation then God would have given the Israelites only the law to obey it, he would have not given them sacrifices. But he also gave them sacrifices – sacrifices had to do with salvation, the purpose of the law was different. These were just some obvious objections to the document. Now I will turn to what I think to be the heart of the matter.

The document points out some of the ways to describe 'the gift of salvation'. Some of the listed concepts are reconciliation, new creation, sanctification, and according to the document, 'chief among these is justification'. 'The gift of salvation' which I would prefer to call the work of Christ, is certainly described in various ways in the New Testament. According to my own survey of the NT, I have found the following themes that describe the work of Christ: reconciliation, battle against evil, demonstration of God's love, redemption, justification, salvation, sacrifice, removal of sin and 'hilasterion'.

I would disagree with the idea that 'justification' is 'chief among' the ways to describe the work of Christ. The most frequent theme that runs through the NT writings is the theme of redemption, or ransom. It is the main idea used to describe the work of Christ. Unlike 'justification' which is favoured by Paul, the theme of 'redemption' is used by most of the NT writers. Moreover, Jesus himself is the one who used the idea of ransom, or redemption (Mt 20.28/ Mk 10.45) when referring to his work – specifically pointing to his death.

Jesus did use the concept of justification, but never related it to his death. For instance, 'you are the ones who justify (δικαιοῦντες) yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts.' (Lk 16.15); 'I tell you that this man (the tax collector) rather than the other (the Pharisee) went home justified (δεδικαιωμένος) before God.' (Lk 18.14); 'for by your words you will be justified (δικαιωθήση), and by your words you will be condemned (καταδικασθήση). (Mt 12.37)

If one takes a well known case of a justified man from the OT ('Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.' [Gen 15.6]), it appears that the idea of justification is not related to sacrifices – Abraham was not considered to be righteous because he offered a sacrifice, not even when he was willing to

sacrifice Isaac – he was considered righteous simply because he believed God, when God told him that his offspring would be as many as there are stars in heaven. (Gen 15.1-6). Therefore, just as in the OT justification was not necessarily related to the sacrifices, so in the NT Jesus did not relate the concept of justification to his death. It appears that Jesus used this concept in order to describe a kind of relationship people have with other people, ‘you are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men’, and to describe a kind of relationship people have with God, ‘I tell you that this man (the tax collector) rather than the other (the Pharisee) went home justified before God.’ Therefore, in these two cases it appears that ‘justification’ is relational rather than forensic concept. Nevertheless, the third example of Jesus’ use of this concept points to the eschatological day of judgement - ‘But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be justified (δικαιωθήσῃ), and by your words you will be condemned’. (Mt 12.36-37). In this case it appears that concept of justification has a forensic tone. Therefore, if concept of justification has to do with the work of Jesus, then according to Jesus’ use, this concept has to do with the day of judgement, rather than with the day of crucifixion. Moreover, according to the words of Jesus, the concept of justification appears to be primarily relational, as mentioned above, and it is unrelated to his death.

Of course, the general idea of justification tends to be derived from Romans, and Paul relates the concept of justification to the death of Christ - we have been ‘justified by his blood’. What would this mean? The main problem between the catholic and the protestant interpretation is - whether ‘justification’ is a forensic or an ethical concept. Does God formally declares us ‘not guilty’ in the heavenly courtroom, or God makes us right by infusing his righteousness into us? Is it an ‘alien’ righteousness, or an ‘inner’ righteousness? This debate has been going on for centuries. In order to understand the concept of justification one needs to be reminded of the metaphorical nature of the theme of justification, and Paul’s tendency to use metaphors. Just as redemption, ransom, salvation, forgiveness, sacrifice, ‘hilasterion’ and such, have been used not as literal concepts but as metaphors that describe the work of Christ, so is ‘justification’ in Romans a metaphor.

Justification, according to the protestant view, was understood to be a forensic concept – declaring of the sinners to be ‘not guilty’ in the heavenly courtroom. What happens if this is understood literally? Considering that the Western European legal systems have their roots in the Roman law code, and that the Western European mindset has developed in Graeco-Roman environment and tradition, today we have legal concepts that are not essentially different to those in the past; the time of the Reformation, for instance. Furthermore, one can even go to the time of the Roman Empire and will find the same principles as a foundation of their law system. So if ‘justification’ is understood literally, we will probably get a picture of a trial in a Roman Court. A good example would be the trial of Jesus. Pilat had the power to declare Jesus guilty or innocent; Jesus was innocent, but was punished, while the guilty Barnabas was declared not guilty. If we understand justification literally, we will see God as Pilat, Jesus suffering innocently in the middle, and us sinners as Barnabas being released instead of Jesus.

So, if ‘justification’ is understood literally and is related merely to the cross, one will see God crucifying Jesus and us getting away with our guilt. This is probably the way in which our Western minds operate. The question is whether Paul

had in his minds a Graeco-Roman paradigm, or a Hebrew paradigm when he wrote Romans 3.21-26? Considering that he wrote to the citizens of Rome, one would tend to think that he had the Graeco-Roman paradigm in his mind. Nevertheless, if he had the Hebrew paradigm in his mind, then the picture is completely different. Now judge becomes a powerful military liberator who solves the problem with his bare hands, rather than a solicitor-like Judge who does not actually solve the problem, but only deals with the formal, administrative part of the court process. In the Hebrew mindset the duty of the judge is liberation rather than punishment. In this case the cross would not be anymore a legal transaction, but rather an act of liberation. Nevertheless, the bottom line is - whatever paradigm Paul had in mind, it should not be interpreted 100% literally because he used a metaphorical language.

On the other hand, according to the catholic view, justification was understood to be an ethical concept – making sinners right by infusing righteousness into us. Does God really make us right when we turn to him? A reality check will easily prove that even repented, converted people are not perfect, not restored fully into God's image. However, the reality check will also prove that repented converted people are also changed people. So although they have not been restored to God's image fully, they have been partially 'made' right. Paul speaks of a firstfruit of the Spirit or 'a deposit of the Spirit' (2 Cor. 1.22/5.5) which causes a change in our lives already (in the moment when we encounter God), but only partially. It is just a deposit that gives us the assurance of the full transformation or glorification at the time of the Second Coming. So if we have been made right through justification, we have been made right only partially and 'meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling' (2 Cor. 5.2), and we will keep on groaning until the day of resurrection.

It appears that it is not the most important thing to know whether Paul had in mind forensic or ethical understanding of justification, or both, or none. What is essential to know is that Paul used metaphors in order to describe that which happens between man and God. Therefore, his message should not be interpreted 100% literally. Considering that Paul relates justification to the cross, one may say that whatever happened on the cross, it somehow caused a restoration of the relationship between man and God. On the one hand, illustration of the relationship between a judge and a convict (protestant view) is probably not the best illustration to describe what happens between man and God when man responds to God by trusting him. Also, as mentioned above, the reality check will easily prove that even repented people are not restored fully into God's image, not made right. Thus, whether forensic or ethical, understanding of justification is misunderstanding if taken absolutely literally.

According to Jesus' use of concept of justification, it appears that justification has a dual function. On the one hand, the concept is related to the eschatological judgement day when the Judge will either declare some 'guilty' and some not 'guilty' (Graeco-Roman paradigm) or when Judge will come and fight for his people and liberate them from their oppressors (Hebrew paradigm). On the other hand, the concept refers to a restoration of man's relationship to God, just as the tax collector was 'right with God' immediately after his repentant prayer – neither was he made right or restored to God's image, nor was he forensically declared 'not guilty'; neither was his justification related to the cross, nor to the judgement day. He turned to God and his relationship with God became right – he was in the right position because he

turned towards God, whereas the Pharisee turned to himself. The first one was justified by God, and the second one was self-justified (just as Jesus said about some Pharisees: ‘you are the ones who justify (δικαιοῦντες) yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts’ (Lk 16.15).

In order to have a relationship with God one does not have to be perfect, neither one has to be declared legally ‘not guilty’. One only needs to turn to God with trusting attitude, just as Abraham did or the prodigal son did, and God will consider him righteous.

In conclusion, rather than using the forensic term ‘to declare’, or the ethical term ‘to make’, perhaps a better alternative would be to use the simple word ‘to consider’ which does not have any strong connotations. When we turn to God he considers us righteous for he already sees the future, and he knows that because we are now in the right position one day he will actually restore his image fully in us. Therefore, when God considers us righteous, he sees at the same time the present potential of this relationship and the end product of this relationship which is glorification. At the same time, God sees us as repented sinners in the present, and as the glorified saints in the future. God’s perspective is different to our perspective – it is timeless.