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# Justification: Basic Linguistic Aspects and the Art of Communicating It

Theodore Mueller

Can the topic of justification ever be exhausted? The approach in this study stresses an aspect neglected in our circles, the linguistic component and the peculiarities of language. Linguistics has exerted a significant influence on recent Bible translators and modern theologians of the Calvinistic-Arminian persuasion and is used to promote their particular point of view and interpretation. Like any tool, however, it is useful not only to combat erroneous interpretations, but also to gain an ever deeper understanding of the truths of Scripture. Sound doctrine is linked to sound linguistic knowledge, a knowledge of how language serves as the tool of communication. (This approach is not to be confused with "Structural Exegesis.")

The pastor, as God's ambassador, is charged with communicating the central event of man's justification to God's people as well as to the world around him. His day-to-day activities are thus directly derived from this central doctrine; the practical aspects of the ministry, both the public and the private administration of the office, are intimately tied to this cardinal truth.

## I. Basic Linguistic Aspects of Justification

Justification by grace through faith is central to both the Old and the New Testament, and the key to understanding all of Scripture. It is assailed often today with phraseology echoing the Lutheran position, yet expressing the same synergistic spirit as Arminianism. Faith is seen as a quality or attribute which influences God in His decision, and thus a factor contributing to man's salvation. Therefore, the concept with its linguistic ramifications needs to be examined first.

### The Definition of Justification

Scripture deals with justification primarily through three word groups — those words meaning justification or righteousness *per se*, those denoting reconciliation, and those expressing forgiveness.

1. The Hebrew verb *sadaq* in the Qal means “to be just or righteous” (Is. 43:9); its Hiphil signifies “to pronounce ‘not guilty,’ vindicate, declare to be right, declare righteous.” It is used in a secular sense in Deuteronomy 25:1, and theologically as God’s vindication in Isaiah 50:8. The Hiphil, the causative verb-form, lends its peculiar color: God is the cause of my being righteous, causes to to be righteous, thus suggesting the forensic feature inherent in justification. The corresponding adjective, meaning “righteous,” expresses the imputed righteousness (Is. 60:22). Psalm 33:1 applies it to people. The corresponding noun implies vindication, justification, and salvation (Ps. 24:5; Is. 54:8; 51:6).

God’s righteousness is viewed in the testamentary relationship with Israel. The Israelites are God’s chosen people, belong to Him; He defends and vindicates them (Jer. 23:6); He imparts His righteousness to them (Is. 46:12-13; 45:24); He is the source of righteousness for His people (Is. 41:10). Even when all else fails His righteousness will never fail (Is. 51:6).

The imagery brings out the concept of imputed righteousness as only the Old Testament and its poetry can do it. Righteousness is intimately linked to salvation and the redemption of His people (Is. 45:8; 45:21; 51:5-6; 62:1; etc.). The robe of righteousness (Is. 61:10), with which He adorns and clothes His own, illustrates beautifully the forensic aspect and refutes the notion of an inherent quality on the part of man. Righteousness comes down from the heavens (Is. 45:8); and the Old Testament ends with the picture of the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2) which rises upon us and brings healing, again an outside source of righteousness.

The Old Testament clearly teaches the forensic aspect, the fact that our God declares His people righteous and is favorably disposed towards them: His righteous servant will justify many (Is. 53:11). Righteousness is imputed to Abraham (Gen. 15:6). Legal language is used: God pleads my case (Mic. 7:9); He has vindicated us (Jer. 51:10). And we can take comfort in the fact that our righteousness will soon be revealed (Is. 56:1). There is, therefore, no condemnation (Is. 50:9), and, consequently, all God’s people will be righteous (Is. 60:21). How can God’s favorable disposition towards His people be more forcefully declared and asserted?

The Greek word family based on *dikaioo* reiterates what the Old Testament teaches. The verb means “to justify,” that is, “vindicate, treat as just, declare righteous.” It is used in this sense with a secular meaning in Luke 10:29, with its usual theological

meaning as a forensic act in "God justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). In the passive, it has the same meaning: "be acquitted, be pronounced righteous" (Matt. 12:37), "be freed from guilt" (Acts 13:38-39; Rom. 3:28). Two nouns are based on this stem: *dikaio syne*, meaning "justification, vindication, acquittal." The first (Rom. 5:17) is associated with the notion of a gift from God, while the second is linked to Christ's resurrection as the proof of our acquittal (Rom. 4:25). The adjective *dikaio s* is used to characterize the one who does what is right (1 John 3:7) or keeps the law (Rom. 2:13); it then refers to the one who is just (1 Pet. 3:12); finally, it indicates the one who is blameless, the one to whom God's righteousness has been imputed (Rom. 1:17; Hab. 2:4) and who, therefore, will live eternally. Romans 5:19 names as righteous those who through Christ's obedience have been "made righteous."

The New Testament systematically presents justification as a forensic act, a declaration of the righteous God upon sinful human beings. God's righteousness comes from God (Rom. 3:21). The context demands this interpretation when Paul calls it a gift (Rom. 3:24; 5:16-19) and insists that such justification is without works (Rom. 3:21) of the law (Rom. 3:28). Paul presents the argumentation for the forensic meaning in Romans 3:21-28 and sums it up succinctly in Romans 4:5. Finally, the resurrection of Christ is adduced as the proof of man's acquittal in God's court (Rom. 4:25).

2. The word group denoting reconciliation also supports the forensic aspect of justification. In order to declare man righteous God must have laid aside His anger against sinners and thus be reconciled and favorably disposed toward man. The two concepts go hand in hand and complement each other. The Hebrew verb *kipper* and its derived nouns refer to the covering up of something, from which the meaning "to appease, placate, pacify" is derived. Jacob sends Esau gifts to placate him (Gen. 32:20). God has instituted the day of atonement when "atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you" (Lev. 16:30). The sacrifices of the Old Testament are meant to propitiate God, that is, to accomplish a reconciliation between God and man, to avert God's wrath. Propitiation rather than expiation is stressed, meaning that God's attitude is changed from one of wrath to one of loving-kindness. For this purpose man's offense must be wiped out, as God Himself promises (Is. 43:25); He, the offended party, provides the atonement with which to blot out our transgressions (Ps. 78:38). Likewise, Moses through his prayer effected a change

of heart in God, so that He repented and did not carry out His threatened disaster (Ex. 32:14). The concept of reconciliation is symbolized in the *kapporeth* or *hilasterion*, the cover for sin located in the Holy of Holies.

In Greek *hilaskomai* and particularly *katallasso* express the thought of reconciliation. In Romans 5:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 Paul argues the fact that God has been reconciled, laid aside His wrath, changed His attitude towards sinful man because of Christ's atonement. It is presented as a completed act which precedes all human action. The noun *katallage* is the expression of the changed relationship, a transformation from enmity to an attitude of grace, mercy, good will. It is God's unilateral act in Christ and is not conditioned by anything in man. Reconciliation thus is the equivalent of justification; negatively stated, our trespasses are no longer counted against us, and, positively stated, "we become the righteousness of God." Therefore, because God's enmity has ceased, we have peace (Rom. 5:1), the fruit of reconciliation.

Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5 must be interpreted as God's unilateral act and in no way related to man's attitude or response. Buchsel argues that reconciliation is a two-way street and can only be accomplished if both parties are engaged in the process. In his view, man actively participates in the reconciliation. He interprets the verbal phrase *en katallasson* as a progressive tense indicating the ongoing process and rejects the interpretation that God was in Christ to reconcile the world.<sup>1</sup> Our English language furthermore tends to support his exegesis, since in our culture a unilateral reconciliation is unthinkable. Thayer, however, citing Xenophon and Josephus, suggests the translation "to receive someone into one's favor" and for the passive "to be restored to God's favor, to recover God's favor."<sup>2</sup> Neither Robertson nor Blass-DeBrunner list the verbal phrase as a periphrastic use of the verb;<sup>3</sup> the word order with *en Christo* would make it very awkward. Furthermore, the context, involving the reconciling of the world, militates against such a use. It would require a loose interpretation of "world," meaning only some of the people in this world.

3. God's declaration of "not guilty" is also predicated on His unconditional forgiveness of our offenses. And again the Old and the New Testaments teach the same message. The Hebrew verb *nasa'* means basically "to lift up," and when a sovereign lifts up his countenance on someone, he pardons and is favorably disposed. When God lifts up His countenance on us, He forgives us our

trespasses (Num. 6:26), pardons takes away our sins (Is. 33:24; Ps. 25:18; 32:1) The verb *salah* means "to practice forbearance, to forgive." When the Lord forgives, He no longer remembers sins (Jer. 31:34), He forgives freely (Is. 55:7). And when sin has been removed and forgotten, He has only an immeasurable love for His people, as He tells us in Isaiah 40-44. Therefore, the Psalmists pray confidently, imploring God's mercy to forgive, blot out, remit sins, transgressions, offenses, iniquity (Ps. 51).

In Greek the verb *aphiemi* and its noun *aphesis* express forgiveness of sins, trespasses, debts. God forgives and thereby restores His relationship with man. The basic idea is cancellation, remission, letting go, putting away, resulting in sins not being remembered by God. When sins are forgiven, we are restored to God's grace and favor (Luke 1: 77-78) as illustrated in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:20ff.) or in Romans 8:31-35. The forgiveness of sins is a unilateral act on God's part and is not conditioned by anything in man. In His mercy He cancels our debt (Matt. 18:27). He is faithful, that is, faithful to His promise and to His name, and thus forgives (1 John 2:12). Because of Christ His justice demands it (1 John 1:9).

Christ's atonement and our faith have purposely been left out of the discussion thus far. The concepts of righteousness, reconciliation, and forgiveness have been presented primarily from a semantic point of view to establish clearly that justification is a forensic act, that is, a decree from God as judge pronouncing the "not guilty" on sinners and declaring the godless righteous. It is a unilateral act on God's part, not conditioned by anything man is or does, not dependent in any way, shape, or form on man: "While we were God's enemies, we were restored to God's favor" (Rom. 5:10). Christ's atonement as the cause and our trust in God as the instrument will be discussed subsequently.

One problem has arisen when the verb "to justify" is translated into informal English. Beck, in particular, uses the expression "make righteous" in Romans 4:5 as an analogy to Luther's translation "der die Gottlosen gerecht macht."<sup>4</sup> For English-speakers the question arises: Does God's verdict of being righteous transform the very nature of the individual, change his sinful human nature? No doubt, in conversion, with the first flicker of faith, a new life is created, a new beginning is made and man is a new creature. It is also true that the announcement and the preaching of God's justification brings about this intrinsic change, since by preaching man is brought to faith. Yet justification and conversion and subsequent sanctification are not the

same and must be treated as different topics (Apology IV:252). For our justification occurred two thousand years ago, when Christ was raised from the dead (Rom. 4:25), and we were justified while we were His enemies (Rom. 5:10). The problem resides in the assumption that the German and the English expressions convey the identical meaning. There is an essential difference in the two languages. In German, for instance, one can say, "Er hat den Teufel ganz schwarz gemacht," which must be translated into English as "He made the devil *appear* all black." In English the verb "to make" expresses an intrinsic change, a feature which is not necessarily expressed by the German equivalent. Beck's translation was influenced by the German language, and he failed to realize that the feature of intrinsic change is always present in the English verb.

Justification is the sentence of "not guilty" and the foundation of the entire Christian faith. For it reveals God's attitude (*Gottes Gesinnung*) towards us who have so grievously offended Him. Forgiveness of our sins and God's favor restored to us are its underpinning.

### The Cause of Justification

Justification is by grace for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior. There is a causal relationship; the vicarious atonement of Christ has changed God's attitude towards mankind. God's grace is the cause of justification. The Old Testament glorifies God's grace with a number of words: *hesedh* is His goodness, kindness, loving-kindness (Gen. 19:19; Jer. 31:3). *Hen* describes His favor, inclination, benevolence. It is the strong coming to the help of the weak (Gen. 39:21; Ex. 3:21). *Ratson* is God's favor, goodwill, acceptance (Is. 60:10; 61:2). It is linked to His faithfulness, fidelity, lasting-kindness (*'emeth*) (Gen. 24:27; Mic. 7:20). His grace is described as abundant and great (Num. 14:18-19) and everlasting (Jer. 31:11). It is not possible to give in a few lines the scope of this concept, which is the foundation of the entire Old Testament. It culminates in the history of how He deals with His people individually and collectively, and that despite their rebellion and stubbornness.

While the Old Testament is an object lesson of God's grace, the New Testament presents it systematically. Many words shade the concept: *charis* is God's gracious attitude, His favor, kindness, goodwill, affection (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2); *eleos* and *oiktirmoi* express His compassion, mercy, charity (Tit. 3:5; Rom. 12:1); *chrestotes* and *philanthropia* (Tit. 3:4) refer to His goodness,

kindness, generosity; *eirene* is God's attitude of peace and goodwill towards us (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3); His grace is synonymous with *agape* (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9), His love, the theme of the Apostle John.

Grace is God's favorable attitude toward mankind, an emotion in His heart, anthropomorphically speaking (John 1:14-17). It is universal (Tit. 2:11; John 3:16; 1 John 2:2), which is emphasized in that God does not want a single soul to be lost (2 Pet. 3:19; Ezek. 33:11). It is a fervent and efficacious attitude, not a complacent feeling; God earnestly desires the salvation of all men (Matt. 23:37). It is linked to Christ, apart from whom there is no grace.

God's gracious attitude must also be seen in relation to man's rebellion and opposition, that is, his sin. While an animal knows who feeds him and is therefore grateful, Israel does not know God and His grace (Is. 1). And yet, His grace persists towards them. The Old Testament characterizes man's attitude as stubborn and stiff-necked, unwilling to bow to God's wishes. The New Testament repeats this colorful description of man's condition in Romans 3:10-18, summed up in the words: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Yet, in spite of such rebellious opposition, God's attitude does not change — that is, grace, and undeserved loving-kindness, remains.

God's grace is inextricably linked to Christ and His atonement (1 Cor. 2:2). In the Old Testament the sacrificial cult as well as the priesthood pointed to Christ (Heb. 10), the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Isaiah 53 explicitly describes the suffering servant of God on whom God has laid the iniquity of all. God promises to blot out our transgressions "for His own sake" (Is. 43:25), which, according to Delitzsch, refers to God's absolute grace.<sup>5</sup> Again and again God is called the Redeemer (Is. 41:14; 47:4; etc.), who pays a ransom for His people, namely, Christ. In the New Testament God's grace is linked to Christ's redemption (*apolytrosis*) (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30). He has redeemed us, purchased us, paid a price for us, as one paid money to free a slave. Peter stresses the precious price with which we were bought (1 Pet. 1:18-19) and on which God's favorable disposition is based (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Atonement is a theological term summarizing Christ's satisfaction for our sins. God's wrath rests on mankind because of sin (Gal. 3:10), that is, the curse, which the Law has set on all who do not meticulously keep it. God's justice demands satisfaction and Christ made satisfaction; He is the *hilasterion* by His blood for the sins of all people (Rom. 3:25-26). He placed Himself under the



Law (Gal. 4:4-5), became a curse in our place (Gal. 3:13-14), and paid the penalty required by that Law (1 Pet. 3:18). He also kept the commands of the Law when He placed Himself under it and lived the holy life demanded by the Law.

Christ's work of atonement is a vicarious atonement, the English terminology being a pale translation of *Stellvertretende Genugtung*. Christ fulfilled the Law in the stead and in the place of everyone. The idea of substitution is basic and taught clearly (Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 Cor. 5:14). Christ is the mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). In our society the substitution of one human being for another is a rare occurrence. Yet it can be expressed. Compare the following sentences:

I work for my children.

I worked for George, who is sick.

In the first sentence my children benefit from my work, a beneficiary relationship expressed by the prepositional phrase. The second sentence states that I worked in the place of George, who could not come because of illness; this is a substitutionary relationship expressed by the same preposition *for*. Thus when Scripture states that Christ died for all, the preposition *hyper* must be clarified; Christ died in the place of the ungodly (Rom. 5:6). This substitution is the reason for God's love (v.8). God's grace in Christ is the cause of His declaring man righteous and is summarized by the phrase "justification by grace." The causal relationship expressed by the prepositional phrase needs to be stressed, since the English preposition "by" and the Latin ablative (*sola gratia*) do not necessarily imply it. It would be more precise to say "because of," or "in consequence of God's grace," which are, however, cumbersome expressions.

Whom has God declared righteous, justified? This question still divides the various Lutheran bodies today. Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is so designated already in the Old Testament, where the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Is. 53:6). Christ's death is the atonement for the sins of the entire world (1 John 2:2). Therefore, justification, that is, God's change of heart, also must extend toward the entire world. Otherwise, there is something in human beings which causes God to feel kindly towards some and remain wrathful towards others. Therefore, when Christ died on Good Friday saying, "It is finished," reconciliation and justification were accomplished. We were restored to God's favor "while we were God's enemies" (Rom. 5:10). Justification is a completed event (*un fait accompli*) and occurred two thousand years ago.

Scripture specifically names the world as the object of God's reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19) and adds that "He did not count men's sins against them." The men mentioned here is the world named in the same sentence. Nowhere is faith mentioned in the entire passage.

Likewise, Christ's resurrection is the public manifestation of a reconciliation which extends to all human beings. The fact that God raised Christ is emphasized; our trust is in God who raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 4:24; 10:9). This resurrection is associated with our justification (Rom. 4:25); the preposition *dia* indicates the reason for raising Christ, namely, our justification (*dikaiosis*). The resurrection is God's public absolution of the entire world: "Your sins are forgiven, all sins of all human beings; and there is no exception." This is the meaning of the technical term "objective justification." The objective justification is central to the doctrine of salvation and derives logically from the facts that God's reconciliation, forgiveness, and declaration of "not guilty" in no wise depend on the attitude or behavior of human beings. If objective justification is denied, then it must follow that those who are declared righteous in some way have contributed to God's change of heart; justification is then no longer solely the result of God's grace.

### The Instrument of Justification

"It is by grace that you have been saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8). Faith, the last element in the concept of justification, is the instrument by which the grace of God is appropriated to the individual and through which he is justified and saved. The Hebrew verb *batah*, meaning "to feel safe, to trust" (Ps. 9:10) and the Hiphil of *'aman*, meaning "to view as reliable" (Is. 28:16), "to trust, to rely on," are associated with man's salvation, as Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). In Greek the verb *pisteuo*, meaning "to be convinced of, to believe in, to trust," and its related noun *pistis*, "trust, faith," relate faith to justification.

But since God commands faith, is it an activity or action which man performs? Likewise, we confess, "I believe." Does not this assertion imply that *I* do something? An affirmative answer opens the floodgates of synergism. Actually, a linguistic analysis of phrases involving "believe" is needed to respond properly to these questions. Verbs can be classified into two groups — action verbs and stative verbs. An action verb denotes an activity (e.g., walk, run, write) for which there is an agent, that is, one who instigates and performs the activity on his own initiative and power. The

agent is usually the subject if the verb is active. A stative verb (e.g., doubt, know, feel, like) expresses a state of being or a psychological state of mind, or a certain disposition or condition. Its subject is not an agent, but names the person who is in that state; may be called an experiencer, for lack of a better term; and characterizes the one undergoing the sensation, emotion, or cognition. This distinction is essential for the understanding of faith.

Both the Greek and the Hebrew verbs for "believe" are stative verbs and express a psychological state and not an action, as is evident from the previous analysis of these verbs. Trust in God originates and increases as a result of or reaction to His word and promises, and not in function of one's decision, effort, or activity. Therefore, the subject of these verbs is not an agent but an experiencer undergoing the psychological state. Trust in secular literature is described as an involuntary attitude or a state of mind towards someone. This fact needs to be stressed, since in the popular mindset faith is either a feeling or mood which the individual must develop or a decision one must make. Both Old and New Testaments, however, mention faith in the sense described above. Paul, in particular, contrasts faith with activity, deeds of the Law, good works (Rom. 3:28).

The New Testament specifies the relation between justification and faith. God justifies *dia* or *ek pisteos*, usually translated "by" or "through faith." The noun *dikaiosisyne* is used with these two prepositions and also with *epi* and *kata* to refer to a righteousness existing on the basis of faith. The relationship is also stated negatively as not involving works of the Law (Gal. 3:11). God's favorable disposition to sinners is appropriated by the individual by or through faith, trust, confidence in Christ, not by or through works.

Grammatical relationships and their technical terminology are useful tools to elucidate meaning, here the relationship between faith and justification. Therefore, the "case relationship," as it is called, may be adduced here. In the following sentences the prepositional phrases express the relationship under question:

He broke the window *with a hammer*.

He acquired his wealth *by fraud*.

He succeeded *through her help*.

The prepositional phrases express the instrument through which something is done, what is called the "instrumental relationship." Similarly, faith is the instrument by which justification is appropriated. In this sense Pieper states: "Der Glaube is lediglich

instrumental.”<sup>6</sup> Quenstedt calls it *Werkzeug* — a tool. The Apology (IV:56) cites faith as a means of appropriation: “For faith does not justify or save because it is a good work in itself, but only because it accepts [better, appropriates] the promised mercy.” And according to the Formula of Concord (III:13), faith lays hold of and receives the merit of Christ. How is this relation best expressed in English? When both grace and faith are mentioned, translators usually use the formula “by grace through faith.” When a reference to grace is lacking, translators vary between “by faith” and “through faith.” Both prepositions express the instrumental case in English. It might be helpful to use “by means of faith.” The difficulty lies in the fact that faith is an abstract noun and there are few occasions where the instrumental case occurs with an abstract noun (e.g., “His case was aggravated by his grief,” or “through his grief”).

Protestant theology has changed faith from an instrument apprehending God’s grace to a good work for which man is responsible, whether it be a decision, an acceptance, or a feeling which man must produce and thus make himself worthy or acceptable to God. Such an understanding of faith is the result of an emphasis and insistence on faith out of its context. When faith is made the center-piece of God’s justification, when it is presented as a condition to be fulfilled, or when it is demanded from the pulpit, a misconception of faith is created or strengthened. One word in particular, “accept,” is used indiscriminately by our own publications as well as translations of the Confessions. *Webster’s Dictionary of Synonyms* specifies: “*receive* implies passiveness . . . *accept*, in contrast with receive, always implies a measure of mental consent, even approval.”<sup>7</sup> Faith is properly presented only in a context where it is pitted against works, the Law, good behavior, or the like.

The verb “to trust” has an object, that is, trust or confidence extends to someone or something; we trust in God or someone else. In Scripture, trust is directed towards Christ through the word (John 17:20). It is trust which relies on the promises which announce the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation. Thus, Christ is the object of a faith which is mediated through the words of Scripture. The Apology names the promised mercy of God as the object of faith (IV:56). Thus, faith clings to the promises of Scripture and through them relies on Christ in person. Scripture mentions faith in Christ (John 17:20) and faith in Scripture itself (John 2:22).

Faith appropriates to the individual what Christ has merited, that is, God’s favor, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. Thus,

through faith the individual is justified (Rom. 5:1), declared righteous (Rom. 4:5; 5:1). This is subjective justification. "We are accounted righteous for Christ's sake when we believe that God is reconciled to us because of Him" (Apology IV:97). The objective justification is God's unilateral declaration that on account of Christ's atonement He has laid aside His wrath towards mankind, that mankind has been restored to His favor and that all sins have been forgiven in God's forum. Subjective justification appropriates this forensic declaration to the individual by means of faith. The individual who trusts the Lord is justified, that is, declared righteous in God's court. Christ is righteous and holy (Acts 3:14; John 3:7). The same adjective *dikaïos* designates Cornelius (Acts 10:22) and all who believe in Christ. Such a righteous one shall live forever (Rom. 1:17). The adjective *hagios* indeed, designates the saints in Rome (Rom. 1:7) and at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2) and all who likewise trust in their Lord. Justification is God's unilateral verdict upon sinful man, pronouncing him not guilty, but righteous on account of Christ's atonement. Christ's righteousness is imputed to him. Sainthood is his through faith, that is, by trusting in the promises of Scripture.

## II. The Communication of Justification

God received the world into His favor, established the message of His love among us, and has commissioned His ambassadors to let it be known. The pastoral office fulfills this commission. Justification holds the central place in it and is its very foundation. Through the message of reconciliation Christ's ambassador builds and strengthens saving faith and thus leads His sheep to eternal life. The commonly used German term *Predigtamt* is a title which clearly delineates the function of the pastoral office — to preach and to administer the means of grace. There is no other purpose of the public ministry; this purpose must be kept quite distinct from all social purposes threatening to obscure the function of the office.

### The Public Communication of Justification

Under this head will be treated those functions which the pastor performs in a worship service or other public setting. The "private communication of justification" will deal with those activities in which the pastor deals with an individual in a non-public setting. This is an arbitrary distinction, since both functions proceed from the same divine authority and are complementary aspects of the *public ministry* of the Word and Sacrament.

1. Preaching is the most obvious function of the pastor and, together with teaching, his most important activity. It has as objectives faith and sanctification. Augustana V states of saving faith: "To obtain such faith God instituted the Office of the Ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the Sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith." This quotation might be expanded to say: "to obtain and to maintain faith." For contrary to Calvinistic teaching, faith can be lost and is lost by many. Therefore, the Lord has appointed shepherds to provide the spiritual food so that the sheep will remain His sheep. For our own flesh, the lure of the world, and the darts of Satan contrive to take faith away from His children.

The Gospel is the means by which faith is kindled and maintained. The "Gospel" is the account of Christ's suffering and death as atonement, as opposed to an emotional tale of one man's suffering and martyrdom. As such it is God's power unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). Through it the Holy Spirit is active in man's heart, brings him to faith, and maintains him in it. It is the only means through which God works in this way (Acts 4:12). Therefore, the message of justification is and must be the heart of every sermon; otherwise the preacher has nothing to say but pious prattle or even worse. The sermon is an exposition of the text, but an exposition with Christ and His atonement as its main content. For Christ is the heart of all Scripture (John 5:39). If a given text does not mention this Gospel specifically, it must be brought in from the context. "Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and in short the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity" (Large Catechism, 417:54). The Gospel must not be encumbered by presenting faith as if it were a command to be fulfilled or a condition for which man is responsible. Faith is the result of the proclamation of God's love. Even in human relations trust is not achieved by commanding or demanding it, but is a natural response to kindness, love, and concern. Likewise, the ultimate aim, the assurance of God's love, is achieved by announcing the love of God.

The Gospel is the means of grace whether it is preached or whether it takes the form of the Sacraments. The Sacraments have the same purpose as the Word of the Gospel and, like the Word, mediate the Good News of God's atonement. "They are signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith" (AC XIII). They confirm and seal to the individual through a visible sign the Gospel proclaimed in the word.

The Good News is summed up in the absolution: "Absolution is the voice of the Gospel forgiving sins" (Apology XII:105). Our worship service begins with a confession and absolution which set the tone for the entire service. A word needs to be said about absolution because of the newer liturgies which have flooded our churches. It seems that people begin to have itching ears and are no longer happy with the old, tried, and true. Thus new verbiage is introduced, and usually it vitiates the Gospel by denying objective justification. In the *Worship Supplement* one such wording reads: "There is forgiveness for all who turn to Christ."<sup>8</sup> The relative clause restricts the forgiveness and makes it conditional on something in man. Any absolution which introduces a relative clause to modify the announcement of forgiveness of sins is out of place, because it denies objective justification. Pieper reproves such conditional statements: The absolution cannot be based on one's contrition, repentance or confession. It is based solely on the objective justification and on God's command to announce forgiveness in the name of Christ.<sup>9</sup> The fine balance between objective and subjective justification is to be noted in the traditional absolution on page 16 of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. The first sentence announces God's unconditional justification; the second adds the promise that every one who trusts these words is God's child. It is a promise, not a condition.

In order to place the Gospel properly at the heart of the sermon, Law and Gospel must be divided properly. Gospel proclaimed without ever mentioning the Law loses its flavor.<sup>10</sup> For the sinner must know his lost condition in order to see the need of a Savior. Today's sermons are probably most deficient in this respect. We have lost the true concept of sin, or, if not lost, we hesitate to bring it to bear on our parishioners for whatever reason. The Gospel, however, must predominate in the preaching and teaching of the pastor.<sup>11</sup>

The Christian has been redeemed to be Christ's own, "and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness,"<sup>12</sup> an objective which does not point primarily to eternity, but begins here at the moment of conversion. We are "a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). Therefore the Augsburg Confession points out that sanctification is required: "such faith should produce fruits and good works and we must do all such good works as God has commanded" (AC VI). Sanctification follows as naturally as fruit grows on a healthy

tree. The good works are the fruits of faith which we produce because we are the branches ingrafted into Christ. Thus, the intimate relation between faith and good works is apparent. The Gospel is the power of sanctification, the energy which produces the fruits. It provides not only the desire but also the drive and the ability to lead the Christian life. "The Gospel offers counsel and help against sin" (Smalcald Articles IV). Therefore, again, the message of justification must be the heart of the sermon.

To preach the Gospel means more than mentioning Christ or His suffering and death. To proclaim this message means to place it into a central position so that all applications flow from it. The "therefore" sequence is crucial: God has redeemed you at such a costly price; therefore, live accordingly. It can be summed up in this way: God has made you His children, His own, His heirs, His saints; therefore live such a life to glorify His name. Such an objective affects the manner of presentation. While the Law lays out God's will for us, it is not its commands which produce good works. Paul and the other apostles urge, beg, entreat, implore, beseech, plead, appeal because of and through the mercy of our God (Rom. 12:1; Eph. 4:1; Gal. 5:13; 1 Pet. 2:11; Heb. 13:19; etc.). Sanctification should be commanded neither in words nor by tone of voice, but should be urged on the audience on the basis of God's mercy in a gentle tone of voice. This is evangelical preaching: The urging of God's will based on the message of justification, as summed up in Walther's twenty-third thesis on Law and Gospel.<sup>13</sup>

2. Teaching is the other major function of the pastoral office: instruction in the catechism for the children and new converts, Bible classes for everyone. The objectives of teaching are the very same as those of preaching: faith and sanctification. Therefore, the pastor dare not teach anything but that which Scripture teaches. His other insights must be left outside the classroom door. From secular knowledge only those things which help clarify the Scriptures can be adduced.

The setting of teaching differs from that of preaching. The pastor as teacher does not hold the same authority which the pulpit gives him. In the mind of the people he is not in the same position of speaking the oracles of God as when he is clothed with his alb or surplice. Furthermore, the teacher in today's society has lost his former authority as the one person who knows; he is challenged by inquisitive and skeptical minds. Such is the setting of any modern classroom; the good teacher succeeds through his skill and knowledge, and the poor teacher fails miserably. The



most effective procedures of pastoral teaching, therefore, will be some of the same ones used in secular teaching, when the methods of discovery and discussion are preferred over lecturing. This sort of instruction is an opportunity to teach people "to search the Scriptures." There is perhaps a greater intellectual emphasis in teaching as compared to preaching. People want to be shown intellectually what the Word of God says. However, ultimately, the same objectives prevail: a cognitive objective, the knowledge of what Scripture says; an affective objective, faith; and a skill objective, sanctification.

The pastor has one advantage over secular teachers; his authority rests on the Word. The secular teacher must convince his students rationally, by a process of deductions and reasoned arguments. The pastor relies on the authority of God's inerrant Word. Therefore the proof of any objection is borne by the objector. The pastor needs the skill of communication to show what the Bible says. His role is that of an interpreter; his skill is hermeneutics.

The content of each and every class is no different than the ultimate content of any sermon — justification and sanctification. Whether the lessons are dealing with a book of Scripture, the Confessions, or a topic of current interest, God's grace must always occupy the center of the class activity. The same balance between Law and Gospel must be observed as in preaching. The same care must be taken not to make faith a work, a condition, an attitude to be achieved by man. This latter point needs special attention, since faith is so widely misunderstood today.

The Bible class provides a unique opportunity to the pastor. If he teaches small groups, he can give each participant personal attention to his or her problems. Homogeneous groups permit a uniform intellectual level for communication. Such classes would seem to be the most efficient way of achieving the objectives of fostering faith and sanctification. Note that I do not intend to say that the Holy Spirit needs my help and teaching skill. But I can hinder His work by poor teaching and preaching, by less than favorable learning circumstances. The Bible class has certain features which are more advantageous than the worship setting to the attainment of certain goals.

### **The Private Communication of Justification**

This aspect of the ministry includes all the calls the pastor makes and the counseling done in his office. As the shepherd of God's people it is his duty and privilege to minister to the

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individual in special times of need. The pastor calls on troubled souls, on the sick and the dying. His objective is the same in all these cases — to foster joyful trust in the Lord and patience in suffering — faith and sanctification. The pastor's message is the objective justification: "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven; you are God's child and heir. He has loved you so much that He did not spare His only Son but gave Him for you into death." Word and Sacrament, the means of grace, are the tools which the pastor uses to achieve his objective.

Guiding individuals with particular problems in a God-pleasing life is also a function of the ministry. Counseling people in their difficulties is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the office. The pastor must recognize the limits of his ability and let professionals take over where he is not trained. However, there is a place for his service together with the professional counselor. The objective is to promote faith and sanctification. While the pastor may not be able to resolve a conflict or a particular problem of his parishioner, he is the only one who can provide the motivating force and power to do God's will while the counselor helps resolve the problem with his skills. The same message of objective justification is the means to this end. It is only God's love which heals the wounds and provides the energy needed for sanctification.

### Conclusion

Justification is the message that God has received the world back into His favor, is reconciled to all human beings because of Christ's atonement (objective justification). This message is transmitted through Word and Sacrament and produces and maintains faith (subjective justification), which in turn leads to sanctification. This message is the tool which God has placed in the pastor's hands to accomplish his mission of feeding the Lord's sheep. It is his only tool, but a very powerful tool. The pastor is the ambassador of his Lord and, as such, merely communicates God's Word. Through it he leads people to faith, sanctification, and eternal life.

## FOOTNOTES

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