

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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The Ground of Justification

Edited by John W. Robbins

It is not sufficient to speak of justification as God's declaring the sinner just. In fact, to stop there would be to fall into very serious error. We need to ask: On what ground can a holy God make this declaration about a sinful man? What is the basis of God's acquittal?

Those Who Deny the Necessity of the Ground of Justification

Some assert that since God is Almighty, he does not need any "ground" to forgive sin. In fact, they argue, to insist upon such a ground is to dishonor God. Such an insistence casts reflections upon God's omnipotence. God is quite capable of forgiving sin and restoring the sinner without having recourse to any ground. In this particular emphasis forgiveness is seen as that which comes from the Sovereign. Justification, in their view, is mere pardon. Justification is not at all related to justice; it is the act of sovereign power. Of course, the Biblical evidence for the omnipotence of God is well nigh endless. Ironically, many people who hold this view of justification do not believe what the Bible says about the omnipotence and sovereignty of God.

Others say, God is all loving, and therefore to insist upon any such ground on the basis of which God must forgive sin is to deny that love. The only ground, so to speak, is the love of God's heart. All expressions such as "redemption by ransom,"

"substitution," "satisfaction," "propitiation," and "expiation" are unworthy of God. In this view the cross is not seen as the propitiation of God's wrath, but rather as the unsurpassable demonstration of the love of God. Christ suffers with and in the sins of his people but not for their sins. He does not pay the penalty those sins deserve. This view has been advocated by ancient teachers in the church (Origen and Abelard) and by more modern ones (Bushnell in America; Robertson, Maurice, Campbell and Young in Great Britain; Schleiermacher and Ritschl in Germany). These theologians say that the demonstration of God's love at the cross affects not God but man. This love acts upon man and brings forth love from men's heart. Rather than the death of Christ removing any obstacle in the path of the sinner's reconciliation with God, that death, it is said, demonstrates to the sinner that there is no obstacle at all between himself and God. This view of the atonement has been aptly called the "magnet view." The crucifixion acts as a great magnet to bring men and women to repentance, and God is said to accept them on that basis (that is, their repentance) alone.

The third attribute within God that is called upon to deny the necessity for any ground of justification is, interestingly enough, the justice of God. For God to require a "satisfaction," it is said, would involve him in blatant injustice. Christ is innocent, and for God to punish an innocent Christ in the place of guilty sinners is less than just. In fact, it is downright unjust! Such a concept is cruel and

vindictive and smacks of a God who cares more about his precious holiness and law than about human beings. This is an "immoral" view of God.

So, to deny the necessity of any ground upon which God justifies the sinner, men appeal to something within God himself: (a) his omnipotence; (b) his great love; or (c) his infinite sense of fairness. None of these views is correct. All of these views contradict the Bible. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul declares that "the righteousness of God" is the ground on which a sinner is declared righteous in the sight of God.

Those Who Concede the Necessity of a Ground but Give Unsatisfactory Views of It

In addition to appealing to the attributes of God to deny the necessity of the ground of justification, some people also make an appeal to man. They understand "the righteousness of God" as an inward righteousness in man.

However, referring the righteousness of God to something within man is mistaken. *2 Corinthians* 5:21 is decisive against that view. Paul means us to understand that the believer is made the righteousness of God in the same way as Christ is made sin. It is out of the question to say that Christ was made sin by an impartation of sin into his being, and so it is out of the question to speak of the believer being made the righteousness of God by infusion, or impartation, or by conferral. Though sin was *on* Christ, it was not *in* Christ. Likewise, though the righteousness of God is *on* the believer, it is not *in* the believer. As the sin condemning the elect was outside of Christ, so the justifying righteousness of God is outside of the believer.

Then there have been those who see *faith itself* as what is meant by "the righteousness of God." Though there are different modifications of this view, none of them sees the justifying righteousness of God as something that is outside of man. The mind is not thrown onto Christ for its foundation but rather back onto itself. Much modern preaching on faith reflects this particular view. These people

undermine justification by making faith the ground, rather than the mere means or instrument, of justification. When faith is seen as the ground on which God justifies the sinner, faith is made into a new law. When this new law is fulfilled (that is, when a person believes), God is pleased, and because of the sinner's faith justifies him. Such a view of faith (as a "work," an "evangelical work") is in flat contradiction to the clear teaching of the Scriptures that we are justified neither by a work done by us nor a work done in us but solely because of the work of another—namely, Christ. His work was done *outside of us* and *for us*.

Those who elevate faith to the ground of justification represent God as accepting an imperfect title for a perfect one. In this view God accommodates his standards to the capability of the sinner. He lowers his standards. If this were the case, what would stop God from waiving his requirements altogether? It is obvious that God would require very little of men if faith were the ground of their acceptance. It is not so obvious why he could not waive his requirements altogether. But God has not lowered his standard for entering Heaven. The entrance requirement is, and has always been, and will always be, sinless perfection. God does not accept faith as a substitute for perfection.

The True Ground of Justification: The Righteousness of God

The ground of justification is called "the righteousness of God" because God in his great love and mercy initiated and authored it.

"The righteousness of God" is the work of the God-man, Jesus Christ. The Mediator between God and man cannot be God only or man only (*Galatians* 3:20). The Mediator represents two parties between whom he intervenes. Hence, the Mediator must be related to both and the equal of either (*1 Samuel* 2:25; *Job* 9:33; *Hebrews* 10:5). The Mediator must be both God and man. Because the righteousness of God is the work of the God-man, such righteousness is also literally perfect, infinitely valuable, and eternally valid. It is also a completely

voluntary righteousness, capable of being given away!

The righteousness of God has, as its standard, the divine attribute of righteousness mirrored in the law of God. The divine character is seen chiefly in two respects: (1) It is seen in the *demand* for satisfaction. Jesus Christ in the flesh, maintaining the law of God, is the declaration of the just God, who is true to himself. (2) The divine character is also seen in the *provision* of the satisfaction. Jesus Christ in the flesh, fulfilling the law of God, is the declaration of the infinite love of the just God seeking the salvation of his people. Jesus Christ is the declaration of both the justice and mercy of God. He both upheld and fulfilled the law of God. He neither denied nor disobeyed the law of God.

The law makes a twofold claim upon men: (1) sinless obedience as the only way to life (*Galatians* 3:12); (2) a curse incurred by those who violate it (*Galatians* 3:10-13). The God-man, Jesus Christ, was made under the law—voluntarily made under the law—that he might meet the demands of the law in both respects *on our behalf*. The living and dying of the Son of God was a living and dying not for himself but for all who believe. Through the instrument of faith, by which a sinner consents to the divine provision of the required righteousness, God reckons Christ's living and dying to the account of the sinner. This living and dying is the righteousness of God of which the apostle Paul speaks, and it is the only ground of the sinner's justification.

We may now ask: Why was this ground necessary? Why could not God have behaved in a sovereign way and pardoned the sinner without the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ? In the first place, *the character of God* would not permit this. Each of the arguments set forth at the beginning of this article is based upon an arbitrary selection of the attributes of God. God is all-powerful. But he is also all holy. To declare that God ignores the law (for such is what mere pardon does) because he is all-powerful, is to neglect the important teaching of Scripture that God has an all-holy aversion to sin (*Habakkuk* 1:13) and that he determines to punish it. The true picture is that the God and Father of

Jesus Christ exercises his omnipotence, not to waive the law, but to deal adequately with the sin of those who believe. The law had already been broken. Even an abrogation of the law by God would have come too late. Furthermore, God's law is an essential part of his plan to display his justice and mercy by saving some and punishing others. An abrogation of the law for some would have destroyed that plan.

Once again, the great love of God exercises itself, not in the arbitrary abolition or inconsistent application of the law, but in the minute fulfillment of both precept and penalty of that law by his Son. To see the cross as a demonstration of only the love of God is to fail to see it as the clearest proclamation of how seriously God takes his law, the transgression of his law, and its consequences.

Accusing God of injustice implies a denial of the Trinity. If we view Jesus Christ as merely human, then the accusation of injustice may be inescapable. However, if we hold to the Biblical (and Trinitarian) position that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself," then what is said to be unworthy of God is the greatest tribute to God's character. God provides the very satisfaction that his law demands.

No less disrespect and dishonor is done to the holiness of God by those who concede the necessity for a ground of justification but who make that ground either an inward righteousness of the believer or his faith. The character of God not only demands a ground of justification, but also an adequate ground. The only adequate ground recognized by Scripture is the perfect obedience of Christ and his sinless death, fulfilling both the demands and the penalties of the law. We might even say it is to concur in word, thought, and deed to the extent that God himself concurs. Away then with imperfect substitutes such as the "holiness" of sinful men and their faith. Not only does the character of God demand an adequate ground for justification, but also so does *the nature of sin*. All who deny the necessity of the ground of justification or who propose insufficient grounds have a false view of both God's law and sin. The

unrelieved heinousness of sin demands adequate atonement.

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A Timely Message From Screwbaal

Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Screwbaal (please, not Screwball): a demon of no small magnitude. My great uncle Screwtape was likewise a high-order demon and well acknowledged and respected by those in our camp years ago. As an arch demon, I have been given numerous tasks by our Father Below. The first and foremost was to overthrow those Christians who hold to the Reformation principles established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those were bad times for my side; the worst work produced during this time was the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Those Puritan theologians were serious. "What do I do?" I queried. "How do I proceed?"

"Use any method that works," my superiors replied.

Pragmatism is very big in Hell. It is, of course, a real victory for our side that we see it used so prevalently in Christian circles today. Hallelubaal!

My first goal was to move the church away from the Reformation principle of Scripture alone. Second, I wanted to introduce the irrationalism of earlier centuries into Christian circles, especially within (so-called) orthodoxy. These, thought I, are key issues. If I can only achieve success here, the rest will all be downhill.

But how to proceed? Well, my foredevils had some success by causing certain elements of the church to believe that the apostolic gifts, such as prophecy and tongues, were still valid. That, of course, was prior to the writing of the great sixteenth and seventeenth century confessions. And after the Westminster Assembly had so succinctly stated in

chapter 1 of the *Confession*: "Those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased," and then again: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life [what else is there?] is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men," I thought, this could never work again. But, Satan be praised, I was wrong.

You could probably guess that the easiest prey was that segment of Christianity that is not Reformed in theology. Men like Jimmy Swaggart (boy, there was a real lulu) and Pat Robertson (I thought for a while that I could make him president of the United States—can you conceive of the fun I would have had?). As it is, I did get him to start the "Christian Coalition." That was a piece of pork.

The early 1960's were great years. It was at this time that we were able to cause the emotional Pentecostal and charismatic movements to cross denominational barriers. Centuries before "the enthusiasts" had tried to bait Martin Luther into switching his emphasis from salvation by grace through faith alone to "the inner experience" of the Spirit. Sadly, the German Reformer refused, and several of my good friends ended up with slaps on their snouts and ink in their eyes.

But now there is no Luther around to abuse demons. Now, the twentieth century "enthusiasts" have affected most every Protestant church. And at the end of the 1960's we had seen this movement take hold in Roman Catholicism. In earlier centuries, of course, the concept and institution of the papacy was a tremendous work of my foredevils. After the Reformation, though, we never even dreamed that Romanism could be used so effectively again. But the strength of Pentecostal/charismatic thinking allowed us to bridge the gap between Rome and Protestantism once again. (Just recently we have made great inroads uniting Protestants and Romanists in an ecumenical fog. We even have men such as Charles Colson and J. I. Packer endorsing it.)

The truly Reformed camp was more difficult. Nevertheless, undaunted, I set out to accomplish my goal. And within a relatively short period of time (thirty years is not a long time to us), we had not only introduced "the ongoing use of gifts" concept within Reformational Christianity, but we had scored so big, that the Presbyterian Church in America (at least in practice) had acquiesced. How I chortled at Presbytery meeting after Presbytery meeting (you think we don't go?) where one excuse after another was used for accepting men into the ministry who fostered the idea that the "gifts" were still valid. Confessional orthodoxy has become a virtual anachronism in much of Presbyterianism anyhow, thanks to our efforts.

I found another way to attack Scripture in philosophy. If I could only get the church to adopt the notion that one is able to come to a knowledge of the truth by sense experience as well as religious experience, then great progress would be made. Sadly, God raised up a philosopher named Gordon Clark to combat this onslaught of mine. Over and over again in his writings Clark showed how Scripture taught that the Bible alone (and not science or philosophy) has a monopoly on truth. This fellow had to be stopped, but how? Ahh, I mused, I will destroy his credentials before Presbytery. If this can be accomplished, even within his own denomination, we will have gained much headway. I pondered: How about if I can get the Westminster Theological Seminary faculty to attack Clark for being too rational? Well, as you may know, the rest is church history. Thankfully, today's seminaries don't require Clark's works to be read (with the exception of Whitefield Theological Seminary; something must be done about that institution). And few if any "Christian" journals or "scholars" acknowledge his writings. There is still, however, this annoying fly of an institution: The Trinity Foundation, which is trying to reintroduce the thoughts of Clark and Christianity to the church.

Well, this brings me to the second offensive against the church, that is, the reintroduction of irrational thought. It was C. S. Lewis who once wrote: "Those who call for nonsense will find that it comes." I really liked that, and have sought to implement it in the church. The secular academic community has

been anti-intellectual for so long that one philosopher has dubbed the twentieth century the "Age of Irrationalism." But surely the church would not fall into this trap, would they? Well, I thought, it is worth a try. And try I did, with amazing success. Neo-orthodoxy is a direct result of these endeavors. Karl Barth was a real "Satan-send," as was Emil Brunner. They imbibed the illogical. Then, when I got Dooyeweerd and the Amsterdam Philosophy group to erect a "boundary" between God and man, a boundary so fixed that the laws of logic exist only on man's side of the boundary, I had them as well. The real difficulty, or so I thought, would be to infiltrate the Reformed segment of Christianity. After all, these guys are students of Scripture, Augustine, Calvin, and the Westminster divines, men who recognized that the laws of logic are simply the way God thinks, and therefore indispensable in the study of the Bible. I asked my tor-mentors, "Where then should I start?"

"Start at the top," they replied. "Begin with the seminaries."

"Are you joking?" I replied.

"We don't do much of that," said they.

So I went to work, beginning with Fuller and Westminster; and "my, oh my, what a wonderful day!" Within a relatively short period of time we had at least some of the faculty teaching that the Bible contains mistakes and logical paradoxes, that "mere human logic" is not to be trusted, and (shades of Dooyeweerd) that God's logic is different from man's logic. Hallelubaal, "nonsense had come." By the way, I am already making real progress at the other "sems." In fact, we are so sure of our victory that I have received approval to make our successes known more widely. There are, however, still some hold-outs. This guy Clark "still speaks even though he is dead" through his books and the writings of The Trinity Foundation. I have been unable to penetrate this pocket of rational Christianity, but I have not yet given up. The best I have been able to do so far is to make people believe that their writings are not worth reading. I am certainly not pleased with this, particularly now that more and more people are studying Clark and Scripture. But

for now, that's where things stand. I need more help, but bad help is hard to come by these days.

I really need to be off. So much to do, you see. But, Satan willing, I will be back to update you on the whole matter in the months ahead.

Affectionately yours,

Screwbaal, D.D.