

Justification by Faith at Ground Level (An Example)

Colleagues,

I've been working on a couple of essays these past few weeks. The writing comes slowly. Too slowly, I fear, to satisfy anybody's reasonable expectations of timely posts. I hope one of them will be ready for you in a day or two.

Meanwhile we find ourselves in the waning hours of another Reformation Day. There were big doings in Sweden today that merit comment. If any of you care to weigh in on the topic—Pope Francis and the Lutherans—I'd be glad to hear from you, especially if you've been tracking the conversation that led up to it. My own watching-from-afar has been far too casual to generate any rumination worth passing along.

Instead I send you something entirely prosaic, though even so germane to today's big themes. I ran across it by happy accident in my files a few hours ago. It's a little set of eleven theses on the topic of justification by faith as it applies to ordinary people going about their ordinary days in ordinary jobs. I put it together some years back for a study group at the congregation I serve. It cuts to one of the most important issues that front-line servants of the Gospel are obliged to tackle, and an issue, moreover, that Crossings has sought to specialize in. How do you crack open old language and spill out the contents in a way that people can hear it? How indeed do you do that when the stuff sloshing around inside is ridiculously good news that God wants real-time sinners to savor and enjoy?

Does the little effort below accomplish that? You be the judge. Meanwhile, Happy Reformation!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

How Jesus Justifies My Job

Some Thoughts with reference to Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

1. Speaking for all but professional church workers: what two things on earth could have less to do with each other than Jesus and my job? To hint at such a connection would get co-workers staring at me in most workplaces. To propose it openly and seriously would, in some workplaces, get me fired. Or so I suspect.
2. Still, all jobs need at some point to be justified (that includes church jobs); and, says St. Paul, if anyone has this justification business down pat, it's Jesus. More on that below.
3. The pressure to justify my job comes at me from many quarters: from bosses or boards that are fretting over the bottom line; from ambitious underlings who wonder if I deserve my higher pay and position; from spouses and children who want more of my time; from the voice inside that wonders if I'm spending my life well.
4. All these take it for granted that I'm the one who has to do the justifying. In other words, it's up to me to demonstrate that the job itself is worth doing, or that I'm the right person to be doing it.
5. For every person in every job there will always come a point—more likely, many points—at which these questions become pressing. There will also come a further point at which I fail the test that the questions pose. That these things are inevitable is a piece of what St. Paul has in mind when he speaks of the wrath of God (v. 9; see also 1:18).
6. In other words, the real voice behind all those other pressuring voices is God's voice—his word that both forces and seduces me to prove the impossible, that I am at all times the right person in the right position. The alternative is to admit that I'm not up to the job; i.e.

that I'm a failure; i.e. that I've fallen short of the glory of God (3:23).

7. This, of course, is something that self-respecting human beings struggle mightily against admitting. Thus the fear and the fakery that to some extent or another infects every work place—and every worker.
8. Enter Jesus, whose enormous gift is freedom from the burden of having to prove anything about myself, least of all that I'm the right person for the job—any job. That's because Jesus, in his dying, proved himself to be the one and only person who was exactly right for the job of justifying sinners, that is, of making them all right with God no matter (among other things) what job they themselves might happen to be doing or how well they're doing it.
9. To be "justified by faith" (v. 1) means simply that God finds me to be perfectly all right when he catches me trusting that Jesus has made me so.
10. Confidence in Jesus' rightness for me is bound to undermine my compulsion to demonstrate how worthy I am in own right. Paradoxically, it makes me the right person for any job that any one might see fit to hire me for. Why? Because I'll be doing the job for its own sake instead of using it to prove something about myself. I'll also be at liberty to walk away when it becomes apparent that somebody else can do the job better.
11. In practice, I find myself constantly torn between trusting Jesus and trying to prove something about myself. That struggle, however, does not negate the fact that Jesus is and always will be right for me.