

# Justification in Nickel Words

Colleagues,

For this week's Thursday Theology, we have again raided the pages of *Gospel Blazes in the Dark*, the festschrift for Ed Schroeder that we first mentioned in [ThTheol #702](#) (Topic: Plain Speaking). In fact, this week's essay follows closely on the heels of #702, in which Timothy Hoyer reflected on Ed's urgent call for preachers and theologians alike to use "nickel words," rather than polysyllabic jargon, in their telling and probing of the Gospel. This week's essay is by our own Jerry Burce, who has been writing in this space since Ed retired from it. Here Jerry takes up the concept of nickel words in the context of justification. In so doing, he teases out the tangled interplay of syntax and semantics that can make words such fascinating, tricky, and powerful little beasties.

To make Jerry's essay fit the Thursday Theology format, we've had to make some cuts, including the omission of his introductory and concluding analyses. (If you want to see the entire essay, which is well worth the read, please let me know by reply to this e-mail and I'll send you a copy.) In his original introduction, here omitted, Jerry explains that Ed is a consummate practitioner of the "nickel words" technique that he preaches. As you will surely note as you read below, Jerry himself is another gifted craftsman of the stuff of nickel words. I myself learned this fact about Jerry years ago as a member of Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio, where he now serves as Senior Associate Pastor. In the pews at Messiah, I grew up on years of Jerry's sermons, which were full of indelibly earthy words and images-things like dirty fingernails and smelly feet and pangs of joy or sadness or conviction felt in the pit of the belly. And, of course, all

these good, strong, Anglo-Saxon nickel words served a purpose far deeper and greater than the simple joy of beautiful language. In their everyday dirtiness and directness, they pointed to the Word who Himself took on the dirt and grime and everyday language of the people for whom He was sent. As the Christmas words of John 1:14 still echo in our ears, may you find in this essay a renewed appreciation of the power of words, and of the one Word, full of grace and truth, who took on flesh and dwelt among us.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editors

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Nowhere does theology need the Schroederian gift of plain speaking more badly than in discussions of the doctrine of justification. Such discussions have, for centuries, floated in the ether of abstraction, certainly as they've been conducted in English though also in German. Let the Germans, at least, hang their heads as being without excuse. When they take up the subject they get to work with a sturdy native compound, *Rechtfertigung*, that puts the basic issues out in the open where savant and clodhopper alike can grab hold of them. At stake is *die Recht*, what is right, and at issue is how to end questions about this-to render them *fertig*, or, as Americans are these day so abysmally prone to say, to bring closure to them. That such questions suffuse the muck and mire of every person's everyday life ought to be obvious. To theologians serving the God whose glory was to wallow in that muck, it ought to be equally obvious that their work is not done until they've engaged the matter at precisely that level.

Such things are by no means as transparent for speakers afflicted with the Latin compound, justification. Latin is the helium of the English language, and often its hot air. The point

from the beginning was to raise the chosen few above the burlap-clad peasantry by cloaking their tongues with the verbal equivalent of linen. Along the way the chosen few became the middle class, and the middle class decided that learning Latin was a waste of time. The consequences for thought and conversation were two. Early on we lost sight, strictly speaking, of what we were talking about. Then we severed the mental connections that had tied us, however feebly, to facts on the ground. Away we float. Today's average seminarian will not have a prayer of extracting *facio* from "justification." One hopes she'll dig out "just." But if she does it cannot occur to her as a matter of course that she's wandering on turf ploughed by the likes of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. Weak in Greek or too lazy to use it, she'll then spend her preaching career not noticing how her English translations in all their versions make a listener's hash of Romans by rendering the same family of words with Old English compounds here and Latin compounds there, with the result that Average Joe, sitting in the pew, can't begin to hear how the apostle is speaking throughout to his own gnawing sense that "things ain't right"-*ungerecht*, as Cousin Hans would say.

Meanwhile, the theologians who ought to be jumping in to help at this point-don't. Says the cynic, there's something seductive about sucking on that helium. To argue theories of justice is somehow more ennobling than to tackle Joe's anxiety head on, using Joe's basic terms: "right"; "wrong"; "making right." Indeed, merely to speak of something as "just" is already to have floated several feet above the gritty question of whether it's right. Joe, in the meantime, is still stuck on the ground wondering about the stuff that ain't right and how it gets fixed. Whence cometh his help? From the Lord who made heaven and earth, to be sure-*Verbum caro factum est*-though not, as a rule, from the Lord's theologians who are surpassingly reluctant to

reduce their own *verba* to the immediacy of Joe's anguish.

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It would be a mistake, of course, to read the above as a backhanded plea to strip modern English of its Latin-based vocabulary. It cannot be done. Theologians and other academics are not the only ones who would notice this. So would Average Joe. He would notice, for example, that the very word "notice" is suddenly off limits, along with a few thousand other words that crop up in his everyday conversation. Among the words Joe would miss badly are those of the *just-* family. "Justice" to be sure, but also "justify" and-yes-"justification." "Can you justify that deduction?" Joe asks his tax counselor. Or his boss: "You want *another* personal day? What's your justification for it?"

This raises an obvious question. If "justification" is a piece of Joe's everyday vocabulary, why is it hard for him to grasp what theologians are talking about when they use the word? One will object, perhaps, that a prior question is being begged, namely whether Joe really is in the dark when the theologians speak. Answer: he is. The data supporting that answer are as clear and accessible as the theologians' own memories of how long it took them as undergraduate seminarians to figure out what their professors were carrying on about, or, as they struggled to make sense of what they were hearing, how it was (for example) that the participle "justified" could properly be modified with the phrase "by faith."

To recall such struggles and then to puzzle them out is to recognize a subtle though quite distinct shift in meaning as the key words pass from everyday usage into the realm of theology or vice versa. Theologians, locked in conversation with distant predecessors and therefore wrestling with words on the predecessors' terms, should expect themselves still to be

investing those words with shades of meaning that have long since passed from common currency. This is certainly so where “justify” and “justification” are concerned. Consider the leading American translations of Romans 4:5, where one trusts him who “justifies” either the ungodly (RSV, NRSV) or the wicked (NIV). Here “justify” is an intensely active verb that effects a change in its object, a human being. But this is not how Joe uses that verb these days. “Justify” for Joe is a far feeble thing, more limited in its application. Three aspects of its weakness bear particular noting.

First, when Joe uses “justify,” the verb’s direct object is never a human being. As his work day unfolds or as he sorts things through at night with his spouse, Joe justifies decisions, actions, qualities, characteristics, appearances, etc. He does this incessantly. He does it always for what he construes as the benefit of human beings, beginning with himself as First Human Being; but these human beneficiaries always stand grammatically in indirect relation to the verb itself. Thus he will justify his child’s bad grades to the end that the child’s frustrated mother will get off the child’s back. He will never say, however, that he is justifying the child.

Second, Joe’s “justify,” while technically an active verb, is functionally passive. It does not alter, accomplish, or effect. It merely makes an argument about that which is and always will be the case regarding its object. The child’s string of D’s, justified, do not suddenly become B’s. What does change, presumably, is the mother’s opinion of the D-producing child and her consequent approach to it. For example, instead of deeming it lazy she now deems it incapable and lightens up a little. But the grades themselves still stink. Joe, not only average, but also honest, will be the first to admit this.

Third, Joe takes for granted that some things-many things-cannot

be justified. They are, as he will say, “unjustifiable.” Here the gap between the common and the theological uses of “justify” becomes vivid. In theology the verb’s object, a sinner, may be unjustified; but a sinner is never unjustifiable, for the obvious reason, one might suppose, that the justifying agent is the God with whom all things are possible. But to speak of a justifying agent is already to mystify Joe, again, by employing “justify” in a way that is foreign to him. In theology both roots of the word, *just-* and *faci-*, are busy and active. In Joe’s usage the second root, like the human appendix, has withered into decorative futility. His concern as a justifier is only whether the thing at issue is already right, or at least right enough to deflect an adverse judgment on whoever may be deemed responsible for it. Tellingly, when a thing is wrong or even less than good, Joe thinks that justifying it is a lesser and a shabby alternative to making it right. “It’s wrong?” he barks. “Then fix it. Make it right. But *don’t* try to justify it!” No wonder eyes glaze with incomprehension when pastors read from Romans on Sunday morning.

To help cut through the glaze the faithful theologian will need to push Schroeder’s dictum one step further. Use nickel words, yes. But in using them attend also to their semantic currency, that is, to nickel meanings.

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One may well ask whether the nickel and the theological meanings of “justify” are so at odds that theologians, preachers, and translators ought to quit using the word altogether, if not among themselves then certainly in their communication with the theologically untutored. But first one does well to take a last look at Joe’s “justify.” It happens these days that he or someone he knows-his secretary; his word-processing child-is regularly using the word in a secondary, technical sense. Says

the secretary: "Remember, this report will be landing on the desks of some finicky people. It needs that finished professional look So let me justify the right margin."

It is doubtful that the secretary, saying this, will make a connection between "justify" as she's presently using it and the justifying she'll do when she makes her pitch for a pay raise at the annual performance review. But the reason for this lies not so much in the conceptual gap between the activities in question as in the manner in which the verb gets used. When she tells Joe that she'll justify the margin she is suddenly employing the word not as she ordinarily does but as theologians do. Both roots are in play. Now it's a genuinely active verb, portending a vivid change in the object on which it bears directly, of which it cannot be said that the thing is unjustifiable.

So it turns out that Joe knows the theologians' syntax after all. In that conversation with the secretary he uses it himself. The faithful theologian, recalling Joe's earlier lament about ragged and broken reality, will find here a point of contact through which to slip him the good news of God's justification of the ungodly in terms that she, the theologian, is entirely at home with. Herewith a proposal as to how that might be done with a measure of wit and imagination.

"You have heard," says the theologian, "about the great book that St. Peter consults at the Pearly Gates, the one in which is written every deed ever done. Set that legend aside, for legend it is, and not because it makes too much of St. Peter (though it does) but because it makes too much of our deeds. Of themselves our deeds don't matter. What matters are those things that others say about our deeds. What finally matters is what God says about them. The day God gets around to final matters is known quite rightly as the Day of Judgment.

“Imagine, then, not a book but instead a great piece of paper, a single sheet on which is written every word ever spoken in true and honest judgment on human beings. Each person gets her line, I mine, you yours, and on my line are all those things that others have said of me, things to my credit in black, unhappy things in red. So also for you. It is, to say the least, an enormous paper.

“Look now at the lines. All begin neatly, as you’d expect, over there on the left side of the page. Immediately past that the jumble begins. Some lines are incredibly long and still growing: Plato’s, for example, or Attila the Hun’s. Death, after all, is not the end that people crack it up to be. That you die does not mean, necessarily, that people will stop talking about you. Sometimes, depending on how you die, it merely increases the talk, as in the case of Elvis, or Julius Caesar, or recently and horribly, Mohammed Atta.

“This happens too: sometimes, as the talk-beyond-death unfolds it changes in character. The words, stretching out on the page, turn from black to red or vice-versa. That’s what happened on the Thomas Jefferson line a few years ago when the Sally Hemings episode came to light. Who knows what color ink old Tom will be getting a couple hundred years from now?

“Most lines, of course, are fairly short, some scarcely more than a word or two. On the vast majority of lines activity has stopped and the ink is old. That’s because most human beings aren’t worth talking about for very long at all. That said, every line is unique. Each ends in a different place on the page. Each is differently mixed with red and black letters. Taken as a whole, the page is a horrible mess.

“Got the picture? Good. Let’s go on.

“In this picture your line and mine are still in process.



Neither of us can know how it will look when it's done-how long it will be, or how mixed with red and black. We are not, as a rule, privy to the things that are said about us. Nor do we really know what kind of words our deeds will produce. We can see in other lines the amount of red ink that do-gooders have gotten on account of the "good" they thought they were doing. That by itself will dismay us. Worse, perhaps, is the thought that even as we sit here talking together we cannot know what color ink we're generating for each other, or how much of it. I won't tell you, not really, not fully. You won't tell me. There is not a living soul who controls his own ink. That people deny this simply earns them more red.

"This leaves us in a horrible pickle, even if we interpret the picture glibly, the way popular American religion might. In that view our final outcome will depend on the amount of ink we get, and in what proportion. St. Peter counts letters, it is thought, and he does so for God. More red than black, and you burn. More black than red, and he gives you a harp. Lots more black-a nice long line of black-and you get a super-harp.

"Does this sound silly and crude? It should because it is. The biggest flaw in this theory is that it sells God short. It accuses him of sloppy standards. Look again at the great page with all those lines, some short, some endlessly long and still growing, almost all of them badly mottled. You would not yourself accept a report in that condition. You would tell whoever was responsible for it to go clean it up, or else throw it away. Why should God's standards be lower than yours?

"In fact God's standards are infinitely higher than yours. What he demands is perfection in every line, clean black text stretching out to an infinitely far right margin. Every line that ends sooner disappoints him. A single red letter jars and offends him.

“What shall be done with the mess on the great paper? The doing, whatever it is, has got to be God’s for reasons too obvious to waste your time in spelling out. One solution is to delete every line that offends. But that would mean a blank and empty paper. Scriptural stories tell us that God toyed a few times with that solution. In every instance he backed away from it.

“The other solution is to clean the lines up. Enter Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh as St. John calls him, or as you yourself might say, Joe, the Word-Processor of word processors-XP Word, where XP is not the Microsoft system brand (please!) but Chi Rho, the first two letters of “Christ” written in Greek. Christ comes so that through him God can justify us, that is, he can straighten out and extend the living lines of text that we finally are. Here’s how he does it. First, Christ absorbs all the red ink ever spilled or yet to be spilled in any description ever thought, spoken, or penned of any human being. (‘I forgive your sins,’ he says.) Second, in his dying-his deletion on the cross-the red ink is deleted with him. (‘He bore our sins on the tree,’ it says.) Third, in his rising he pronounces a new judgment on us. (‘Peace be with you,’ he says.) That judgment overlays every other judgment ever uttered about us, and it puts down, for each of us, a line of clear black text that runs from the left hand side of the Great Page endlessly to the right. That text, by the way, is no longer just about me or just about you. Instead it’s an unending comment on what Christ did for us-God’s comment first and foremost, though not only God’s. The holy angels are pitching in for good measure (remember the fields of Bethlehem?) and these days the saints as well, they and anyone or anything else that’s able to tell it like it really is when it comes to Jesus. The comment, every last multiplying letter of it, is uniformly positive. On and on the words run, along your line and mine and everyone else’s too. Implicit in the running is the promise of our own resurrection

from the dead so that Christ's words to us and about us will continue forever, as will the words others speak about Christ being for us, as will the words we get to say about Jesus in our own turn. That's how the page gets all straightened out.

"Think of it, Joe, like this. When your secretary, using MS-Word, wants to clean up a report, she justifies the margins. Here's how. She highlights the text and hits Control-J. Bingo. There it is, all beautiful, just the way you wanted it. "In the same way when God, using XP-Word, wants to clean up the Great Page of humanity, your line and mine included, he justifies the ungodly. Here's how. He highlights the text and hits Control-JC. Bingo. There it is, all beautiful, just the way God wanted it.

"And that, dear friend, is what justification is about. You can trust it or not. Be warned: there is not another program out there that will do for you as Christ has done. In the end, God will deal with you according to the word and standard-the line of text- that your own heart clings to: If Christ's, then according to Christ; if another's, then according to that other. If necessary the Delete key is still standing by.

"Are you ready for the kicker? When God sees you trusting Jesus, as in Jesus-for-you, it tickles him so well that he starts talking about you. Just about you. 'All right,' he says. 'Bravo.' The letters are clear, the letters are black, and on and on they go for all eternity. As some wise old Lutherans once said, "For God will regard and reckon this faith [i.e. in Christ-for-me] as righteousness in his sight." [*The Augsburg Confession*, Article VII. From *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Kolb and Wengert, editors. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000, p. 40.]

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Joe will get this. Theologians will argue about it. To some it

will seem trite, to others wrong. Many will regard it as both trite and wrong. But this is why conversation continues among theologians. What is urgently needed is that the conversation continue (or perhaps begin) on the ground, at Joe's level, around terms, meanings, and metaphors that ordinary people ordinarily use. Otherwise the purpose of theology is thwarted. That purpose, as the late Gerhard Forde convincingly argued, is to equip preachers to preach Christ. [See esp. p. 30 of Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).] Christ preached, of course, is preached to Joe and all the other members of the milling crowd, harassed and helpless, for whom Christ in his compassion commissions preachers in the first place (Mt. 9:36; 10:1).

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

January 5: Bishop John Roth, "How to Disagree Well," thoughts on how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.

January 12: Steve Albertin responds to Bishop Roth's "How to Disagree Well."