

Justification – Jargon or Jewel?

Colleagues,

Richard P. Jungkuntz, of blessed memory [1918-2003], was one of the major confessors (and also, casualties) in the Missouri Synod Wars of 40 years ago. One distinction he held was that not just once, but twice, he was sacked by Jacob A.O. Preus from his position in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. First one came when Preus became president at the LCMS seminary (Springfield, Illinois) where Jungkuntz was already on the faculty and his New Testament scholarship and Lutheran confessional commitment “got him in trouble with the boss.”

Rescued at that time by LCMS president Oliver Harms, Richard became the chairman of the synod’s prestigious Commission on Theology and Church Relations. However, when Preus later on became president of the Missouri Synod—in a coup that unseated Harms—Jungkuntz once more became persona non grata, and soon was looking for work. He completed his long years of church service as Provost at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

Richard once told me that he had this recurring dream: He dies and meets St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. Just as Peter welcomes him and swings open the gate, out from behind Peter jumps Jacob Preus slamming the gate shut, shouting “Oh no, you don’t!”

After the 1974 explosion in Missouri, Jungkuntz served as chair of the Seminex Board of Directors.

His son Richard W. D. Jungkuntz, a Seminex grad, has been going through his father’s papers. He sent me this one on justification—about which he says “I can find neither the date

when, nor the audience to whom, Dad presented this. But if you want to distribute it to our Crossings crowd, here it is.”

It’s too good to stay behind the gate, so for this week’s ThTh, here it is – for you.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

“Justification: Jargon or Jewel?”

By Richard P. Jungkuntz

We propose in these days to talk together about “justification.” For four and a half centuries Lutherans have been saying that this is the article of faith by which the church stands or falls. But if this is really so, as I for one believe it to be, then surely something very strange, not to say dismaying, is afoot when we see how small and insignificant a role the article of justification really plays in the life of the church today.

And this is the case, it seems to me, whether you look at our theology, our pedagogy, our pastoral practice, or our personal day to day living. How remote in fact the notion of justification by faith is from our actual churchly as well as individual thinking and doing becomes quite evident also in the clumsiness and stumbling futility that characterized our occasional spasmodic efforts to make this cardinal doctrine somehow “relevant” – as they say – in a world of revolutionary change, technological expansion, social upheaval, and all the rest of our contemporary apocalyptic realities.

And let me add at once that I am all too painfully aware of how aptly such terms as clumsiness and futility may apply to the very presentation of the topic that is being offered now to you

at this conference. But this fact is really not so much an excuse, as it is a reason, and a good one too, for making the effort at all. Our inadequacy and awkwardness in relating the article of justification to all Christian doctrine and to all of Christian life is going to be overcome, if indeed it will be overcome at all, not by embarrassed evasion nor by mindless repetition of once potent formulation long since martyred by evisceration, but only under God through the effort to deal with it afresh in all candor and concreteness.

Such an effort cannot be carried out alone. It simply will not come off as a solo, virtuoso performance. It can succeed only in the fellowship of believers. It requires mutual correction, mutual assistance, mutual trust and encouragement. And it cannot be done in one shot, nor in three. It takes a lifetime of ongoing common effort and commitment. But a beginning can be made at any time; it can in fact be made right here. So let's.

For a number of reasons the concept of communication is, I think, a good one with which to begin our discussion of "Justification: Jargon or Jewel?" Some of these reasons, I hope, will become clear as we go along. One of them, perhaps the most obvious though not necessarily the most important, is the plain fact that for fifty years or more the church has to a very great extent simply not been communicating to anyone but herself when she talks about justification. And precisely to that extent all her talk, however pious, has been jargon, [in Hamlet's words] caviar to the general.

What has happened, of course, is that the operational meaning of the term has, in American usage, come to differ widely and variously from its "exegetical" or Biblical "proper" usage. Robert Schultz's CRESSET article describes some of the ways in which the meaning of "to justify" has changed in our vernacular from the connotations it bore in the 16th century, to say

nothing of what it meant in New Testament days. Offhand it might seem, in view of this fact, that the logical thing to do is simply to correct people's notions of what "justify" or "justification" really means, at least when used in a Biblical or theological way.

Unfortunately, the trouble is that it is simply and universally impossible to legislate the meaning of language. Words will continue to mean nothing else but what their popular usage compels them to mean. Certainly in a sermon or commentary on a particular Biblical text in which a specific term occurs it is entirely appropriate to explain as accurately as possible just what the expression originally meant for the writer and his readers. [Perhaps in our discussion later it will also be possible to do that here.] But normally the content of Biblical teaching is best conveyed by immediate translation into language that is current and readily understood without elaborate linguistic legerdemain. Relying on your indulgence, therefore, I shall for the present by-pass the lexical issues connected with the doctrine of justification, and move directly into the question of its significance for human communication as such.

Whatever it may mean specifically and in detail, the justification of the ungodly proclaimed by Holy Scripture (cp. Rom. 4:15) unquestionably has to do with a matter of personal relationship, most immediately with the relationship between man, the ungodly, and God, but at the same time with the interpersonal relationship between man and man.

The paradigm of all interpersonal relationships is the relationship between God and man that is defined by the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the eternal Word of God that became incarnate, historically personal, in Jesus of Nazareth. "In the beginning was the Word," says St. John, "and the Word was with God, and the word was God,...and the Word became flesh and dwelt

among us." This corresponds to the testimony of the writer to the Hebrews: "In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son,...through whom also He created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature."

In Jesus Christ, therefore, God has made preeminently clear that the primal relationship between Himself and man is dialogical. Overused though the term may be, "dialogue" is in fact what God aims to establish with men. He is first and foremost DEUS LOQUENS, the God who speaks, as every page of Scripture testifies. All creation is a vast, ongoing response to God speaking. But above all, man is the creature who is meant to listen to God speaking and to respond to the God who addresses him.

This fact can hardly be over-emphasized. If we think of man simply as a creature capable of "knowing," we see him standing over against whatever else that there is as over against things. All other creatures, animate and inanimate are merely the object of his knowing; his act of knowing requires no interaction with them. When, however, with Scripture we regard man, not merely as a knower, but as a listener, then we see him engaged in his proper role, i.e., in person-to-person relationships. You know THINGS, but you listen to SOMEONE. Listening is the human activity that relates you as a person to some other person who opens himself to you by speaking.

Above all else, listening is the activity that relates you to God. For when you listen to Him, then suddenly He ceases to be a distant object for your pious meditation, He ceases to be safely enclosed in a chapter of dogmatics. Instead He becomes for you what He is indeed, a Person who calls you personally, who summons you to respond. And thus you yourself become a person. You acquire identity and selfhood in being addressed and in responding. In short, dialogue with God is the process through

which you become who you are.

But God does not deal with you nor with anyone in isolation. God deals with man, not as an entity by himself, but as an intersocial being who is always involved in many human relationships. The Biblical story of creation makes this clear from the very start, and our observation serves only to confirm the fact. Man's personal structure is dialogical. That is to say, he becomes what he is as a person out of the continual dialogue in which he is involved with others.

What a man knows or thinks he knows as a basis for decision and action, the way he feels or thinks he ought to feel under given conditions, the very words with which he expresses his thoughts but which have already shaped and limited his thoughts even before they come to expression – all this, without which he would not be the person he is, has been woven into the fabric of his personal being only through his relationship in dialogue with father and mother, brothers and sisters, teachers and friends, and countless others who as persons themselves have come close enough to touch him with their address and response. In short, man becomes a person only in community. It is for this that God has made him. But here precisely is also man's problem.

On the one hand, he truly longs to be a real person, he deeply desires the sense of personal identity. But as soon as he listens to God speaking to him, and summoning him to respond, then what a moment ago had been his desire and longing is turned into fearful obligation. The God who made him is continually calling him to account. His Creator is demanding that he really be someone, that he be the person he was made to be, that he respond to His Maker by corresponding [pun?] to Him. But man does not, for he cannot. Hence there is no justification for his existence. No matter how he keeps score, no matter how he figures it, his life always adds up to zero before God. There is

no way he can justify himself. His justification can come only from beyond himself, from someone other than himself. Ultimately it must come from God.

And so it does. If Holy Scripture is clear on anything, it is clear in its unanimous testimony that God Himself has acted decisively in His Son Jesus Christ to justify the ungodly. In other words, God Himself has accepted the existence of ungodly man; He has let it make a difference to Himself and to His own existence. The existence man cannot justify God has judged and condemned once and for all in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ He has Himself embraced this human existence all the way to its dead end in utter alienation from friend and foe and heaven itself.

Thus in the very judging of it He has affirmed as valuable to Him the existence that negated all values. Now for man to be justified is to accept God's acceptance, not for one's own merit or worthiness, but alone for Jesus' sake. In Christ Jesus God gives back to man his unjustifiable existence – justified. And the way it happens is the way of dialogue: God speaking, man listening. For "justification is no psychic change; it is a word of God spoken to the sinner" and heard by him.

[Question: Did Richard leave us the full manuscript? Seems to end abruptly. Given my long association with him I can't imagine him stopping there without adding a few paragraphs on faith (sola fide—faith alone) as the avenue whereby the heard-word of justification becomes true for me, my new relationship with God. Perhaps from frequent prior practice he just ad-libbed such a conclusion. When I mentioned this to Richard, Jr., he suggested: "for Dad that would probably have been another whole lecture." ES]

Richard Jr. then adds:

Here are some bonus notes at the end of Dad's presentation:

1. Fundamental idea among Greeks is that DIKAIOSYNE [regularly rendered in English as either justification or righteousness] is a virtue natural to man
2. Fundamental to OT usage is notion of RELATIONSHIP
3. OT includes BOTH FORENSIC & SOTERIOLOGICAL element
4. Nexus between "justice" and "salvation" is found in idea of COVENANT
5. DIK = chesed, emuth, mishpat!
6. Synagogue basis is doctrine of MERIT
7. Synagogue had difficulty reconciling God's JUDGMENT & His MERCY
8. NT usage outside Paul = human behavior in HARMONY WITH GOD'S WILL, uprightness of life
9. Matt. makes DIK a GIFT OF GOD John. makes it result of union c. X
10. James makes 1st distinct move toward Pauline concern by putting good works under heading of divine, not human, righteousness.
11. James' plea is that faith not be substituted for work, but for faith that produces right kind of work!
12. Paul reaches NEW truth of right. of God; new relationship c. God uses sacred word of Judaism in service of his polemic vs. the Jewish conception of the law TRUE: Only the righteous can have fellowship but no effort on man's part qualifies; only God's sovereign grace in X FOR man
 - 1a. not only individual but affecting whole race
 - 2a. God's r. is DYNAMIC
 - 3a. occurred at PARTICULAR TIME, PLACE
 - 4a. JUSTICE & MERCY in one

- 5a. FORENSIC – yet contrary to rules – paradox parabolic
- 6a. more than forgiveness : RENEWAL
- 7a. OBJ. achievement & SUBJ. approp. BY FAITH
- 8a. characterized by HOPE
- 9a. mystic union
- 10a. power of new LIFE
- 11a. NOT a “virtue”

on “punishment” as part of DIK – concept in Kittel’s Woerterbuch
“Righteousness”

p. 12

p. 56f

p. 67

p. 68

cf p. 70 on fluctuating meaning

p. 71 top!