

More Musings on 'Justification'

Colleagues,

Two weeks ago we sent you a scattershot post about Richard Dawkins, Romans 3 in English translation, and the God's Word version of Bible. One of those items garnered a response. It plunged the undersigned into some further musings. Here they are.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

In [our October 9 note about Romans 3](#), we touched among other things on the problem of using the word 'justification' to translate Paul's Greek. A day later Ed Schroeder sent us an amended snippet from [Thursday Theology #28](#) (3 December 1998):

"In Luther's day justification "by faith alone" was a phrase that jolted. Justification was not merely a courtroom term, but a gallows term. Capital criminals were "justified" (=given their due justice) when they were executed. (Bob Schultz has an essay on this forensic term in medieval jurisprudence. He also talks about a public executioner who, with mask on face and ax in hand, had "justified" so and so many criminals.) The big deal about JBFA is that sinners get justified (put to death) in their union with Christ. He dies our death with us and for us. Then, just as he was raised at Easter, Christ-connected sinners survive their own executions to walk in newness of life."

This prompts a couple of quick comments. First, I recall having

read this, those sixteen years ago when Ed first sent it out, and being “jolted,” as he says. The thought continues to startle. One justifies the murderer by chopping off his head. Said villain is now “cut down to size,” a further thought that lands us promptly in the territory of Mary’s Song, where God “brings down the mighty from their thrones,” etc., by showing “strength with his [ax-swinging] arm” (Lk. 1:51f).

We don’t talk like this in the churches I know. Few if any confess faith in a God who behaves this way. We’ve lost the nerve our forebears possessed to associate the Almighty with the reality we know, half of which is ugly, bitter stuff. Luther looked it in the face and saw the shadows of God’s alien work, impossible to miss, though equally impossible to delineate with any degree of precision. Today’s Lutheran pretenders are all too precise in denying God a role of any kind in the dirty, dismal work of restraining evil, a work that uses evil to answer evil. (Show me the death-dealing brigand who will call the policeman’s bullet “good.”) Jeremiah saw Nebuchadnezzar’s horde looming on Judah’s horizon and announced that Yahweh’s biceps were flexing (25:9). That side of Jeremiah’s thought gets hidden these days. Luther embraced it, and used it to explore the glory of the cross, a glory both exquisite and excruciating. What is the cross, if not evil met head on by the greatest act of evil ever committed, the killing of the Son of God? That this unfolds at the Father’s insistence and with the Son’s acquiescence is also a piece of the core witness that few people today seem willing to think deeply about without resorting to unfaith or blasphemy. (“God the child-abuser in whom I *will* not believe!”) Is the mystery monstrous? Yes. But only in it and through it do we arrive at that Easter eruption of Good-Beyond-Imagining in the everlasting Christ and the power of the Spirit, and, with these, the unfolding promise of God’s re-creating overhaul of evil, deadly people. Here Saul of Tarsus comes to mind.

Words shape how we think. Lacking a proper OED, I looked up 'justification' in a lesser one, the [Online Etymology Dictionary](#). It confirms the medieval usage that Ed's note reports: "administration of justice." Time was, apparently, when "self-justification" meant "frank expression of regret for wrong done," which runs along similar lines; but I daresay it's been a few centuries since anybody used the latter term in that particular striking sense. These days the whole point of justifying oneself is to avoid apology, apology being, after all, another dirty, deadly business, entailing shame and culpability with penalties attached. Self-justification in the current sense is what the Pharisee does in Jesus' parable about the two men praying (Lk. 18). In the archaic sense, it's what the tax collector does. Were the archaic sense still the norm in spoken English—it isn't; it won't be again—we might be more disposed than we are to acknowledge God's right to administer justice as God sees fit, whether by killing or making alive (thus Hannah, Mary's predecessor, 1 Sam. 2:6); whether by exacting the penalty, or flooding us with mercy, or both. The tax collector goes home "justified," having trusted God enough to let God exercise God's sense of justice as God alone sees fit. By contrast the Pharisee is still stalling, mired as he is in the sinner's penchant for telling God exactly what God would think and do, if only God knew right from wrong the way we know it.

Pharisees abound in the American church. The dustup over same-sex relationships is but one example of arguments, both recent and ongoing, that are shot through and through with the Pharisaic mindset, and this on both sides of the ditches we dig between us. More on that some other time. The point for now is simply to groan inwardly for the redemption of our wits, counting on the Spirit to intercede for us with those "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). God save us from the poverty of our

language, our thinking, our faith. God us save from the peril of refusing God's justification. God save us from the folly, utter and appalling, of wasting Christ.