

The Doctrine of Justification Today

[Address, June 27, 1967]

Troeltsch's objection that the doctrine of justification has outlived its usefulness for modern man may well have underestimated both that doctrine and modern man as well. Could it just be not only that the doctrine of justification still has something to say to us, (which seems almost too grudging a concession to evoke much enthusiasm) but also that it has something to say to us exactly at those points where we are most modern? The following outline explores that possibility on five fronts, five features of life which men today especially appreciate: immanence, "the subject-object antithesis," "the problem of God," the personal, and human compassion – all of them vaguely subsumable under the modern sensitivity to history. Biblical references are to the Epistle to the Romans.

1. Immanence and the Law

a. "Justification by faith" makes most sense when it is contrasted with its polemical opposite, the spurious justification "by works of the law" (3:20,22,28; 4:2,6,13; 9:32; 10:4). But doesn't this traditional polemic assume what in fact is no longer the case? Men today no longer are interested in being justified, not even by works of the law. And no wonder. They no longer recognize such a law – a transcendent, specially revealed, divine law. All is immanence, so they are anomists. At least so it is said. (Cf. Quentin's opening speech in Arthur Miller's After the Fall.) It would seem then that the doctrine of justification is as irrelevant as modern man is 'without the law.'

b. The trouble with that conclusion is not only that it misconstrues the doctrine of justification – though not, alas, some versions of it – but also that it overlooks a strategic opportunity, a beachhead, right within modern man’s appreciation of immanence. The doctrine of justification is not confined to men who “pursue the righteousness which is based on the law” (9:30,31). Not even the law is confined to such men (2:25-3:19). Or if it is, then at least this much is so: that same function which the “law” – the specially revealed “old written code,” the “commandment” (7:6,8) – performs for those who are uniquely “under the law” (2:12) is likewise being performed by other agencies – by the divine “wrath” (1:18) or “judgment” (2:2) or “condemnation” (5:18) or by “God” directly (1:24,26,28)– for “all men” (2:1,9-12; 3:19,20). That function is: “that the whole world may be held accountable to God,” (3:19) “without excuse” (1:20; 2:1). Hence with or without the law that same divine activity, rendering everyone everywhere inexcusable, operates (and this is the point) with an all-pervasive immanence.

c. Even those who are explicitly “under the law” are incriminated, not just by a specifically revealed verdict, (3:10-19) but also by the immanent events of their own lives. When the law commands specific behavior, it thereby identifies “sin” by its specific “transgressions,” (3:20; 4:15; 5:13) thereby discloses new ways of sinning, (7:7-8,11,12) thereby “increases the transgressions,” (5:20) thereby exploits a man’s very lawfulness for his own doom, (7:9,23,24) thereby “inflicts wrath” (3:5; 4:5). The antithesis to justification by faith, therefore is not merely justification by works of the law, which is an illusion. No, there is a prior reason why such works do not justify: “since through the law comes the knowledge of sin” – and it “comes” to all too immanently.

d. However, also those “without the law,” for whom such explicitly wrathful judgment still waits to be revealed,

(2:5ff.) are already being incriminated right from within their own experience. Their very hostility to God, indeed their ignorance of him, (not to mention their crasser vices) is itself God's immanently judging them by abandoning them to sin (1:18-32). The temporary reprieves from wrath which their lives clearly enjoy are only incurring for them, because of their impenitence, greater judgment eventually (2:4-5). By their conflicts of conscience, their accusing and excusing themselves, they acquiesce ironically in God's judgment against them (2:14-16). So do they when they pass judgment upon one another, thus testifying by their own criticalness that God's judgment upon their sort of sin is "according to truth" (2:2).

e. Men are not first made accountable to God by the "preaching of the law." Rather the preaching of the law only identifies and interprets to them that existing order of accountability which immanently shapes their history, that order of "law" which by itself is "holy and just and good", (7:12) in fact is indispensable, which no sinner can live without – or with (2:21-23; 7:7, 10, 12-13; 13:8-10; 8:3; 6:14). It is the coram Deo dimension in all his existence.

2. "The Subject-Object Antithesis" and Faith

a. Justification is always "by faith," (3:25-30; 5:1; 10:4,10) and the righteousness which is unto life is always the righteousness "of faith" (1:17; 3:22; 4:13; 9:30,32:10:6). This pistei or ek pisteoos is another feature of the doctrine of justification which has much to say to us men today, particularly in view of the dilemma which vexes us in the notorious, "subject-object antithesis." How to do justice to the believer as a real subject without forgetting that everything he has comes from the divine Object whom he believes? And how to

proclaim God as the bestowing Subject so that his gifts really do get bestowed on us, not just as objects but as subjects?

b. The accent which the doctrine of justification (like other biblical doctrines) places upon faith does convey an appreciation of the human subject, perhaps even of “truth as subjectivity.” So it does, but not without grave risk. The risk is that we forget the uniqueness of faith – that is, the unique way in which faith enjoys “righteousness” – and by fixing only upon its subjective character as “decision,” “response,” “obedience,” “act,” (all of which of course it is) we reduce its unique righteousness to the very opposite, to a “work of the law.” To safeguard against this subjectivistic distortion it is not enough to point out that faith is not the believer’s own doing but the creation of the Spirit. That much, after all, is true of every Christian fulfilling of the law (12:6-8; 9:32; 8:4-6,11,13,26; 15:13,16).

c. But then the safeguard against subjectivism, one is tempted to conclude, must lie at the opposite extreme, in an objectivistic imputationism. And this temptation is encouraged, at first sight, by references to faith’s being “reckoned as righteousness” (4:3-5, 9-11,22-25). Still, that is no safeguard either, if we understand God’s “reckoning” to mean that he somehow pretends faith is righteous when in fact it is not. (Cf. “reckon” also in 3:28, 5:13.)

Such a caricature only encourages the notion that God’s justifying the ungodly could just as well have been done behind their backs and without their knowing it, and it accounts less than ever for the biblical emphasis on faith. After all, faith is extolled also in other soteriological motifs in Scripture even though these do not, like the doctrine of justification, employ the idea of “reckoning.”

d. What finally is “righteous” about faith – or, as we might

say, what is “right” about it – is what it believes, the One it trusts. But that object, in turn, is what is right or righteous about the believers themselves; it is what justifies them in believing it. If we believe that “God is for us,” that “he spared not his own Son,” that “we are more than conquerors,” then what is the one condition which is needed to qualify our faith as “right”? Simply this: God really is for us, he really did not spare his own Son, we really are more than conquerors. If so, it would make sense to say either “That is right” or, since it comes to the same thing, “We are right.” What is righteous about this faith is not in this instance its character as “work”, its behavioral how, but is what and whom, the reality and veracity of its object.

e. Faith is, as the Hebrew of Genesis 15:6 suggests about Abraham’s faith, the “truth” or “being in the truth” or “holding the truth” (though not of course merely propositionally.) (Cf. Our cognate word “trust.”) The opposite of the believers are those who “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth,” having “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” (1:18, 25). Faith is the way “the truth about God” lives in the believing subject, “in the heart.” “For man believes with his heart and so is justified” (10:10).

f. Yet the believer, alas, is not only a believer. He is also the opposite, “the ungodly,” a “sinner”, “wretched man”, “flesh” (4:5; 5:8; 7:18,24). And it simply is not enough for him to be partially righteous, if indeed “righteousness” can ever mean anything but “righteous altogether.” God’s mercy, however, supplies the need by “reckoning” righteousness, not to his faith, but “to him,” to the whole Abraham (4:3,6,10,11,22-24).

3. “The Problem of God” and Its Resolution in Jesus Christ

a. So the “righteousness of faith,” of the faith which trusts that God loves sinners, is just that: he truly does. But is that righteousness? More pointedly, is God righteous – if he “shows his love for us...while we were yet sinners,” (5:8) if “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God,” (5:10) if he “justified the ungodly,” (4:5) and all of this simply “by his grace as a gift” (3:24)?

b. Maybe this precise question is not what men are asking today, if they ever did. Maybe, as always, they simply take for granted and “presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance” (2:4). Maybe it is only as they take seriously that other “righteousness of God” – which comes as “wrath” and “judgment” and, from our side, as “wickedness” and “falsehood” (3:5-7) – that they could even so much as question the “righteousness” of his “forebearance”. Maybe. Yet if, as we claim, our age is especially beset by “the problem of God,” then the one form of that problem before which all other theodicies pail is the question: How can the same God whose righteousness is wrathful nevertheless “have mercy upon all” and still be righteous?

c. Moreover, the solution that problem gets in the doctrine of justification is worked out, in action, right within that favorite locale of modern man, in history.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own

Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh...(8:3).

This “expiation by his blood...was to show God’s righteousness,

because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins" (3:25). In the bold idiom of theodicy, "It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous..." (3:26)

d. "...And that he justified him who has faith in Jesus" – this is the other side, our side, of "the problem of God." "The problem of God has its obverse in the problem of the godless man." (T.C. Murray) The faith of the believers, namely that God is pleased with them, would not be righteousness at all but sheerest blasphemy and godlessness were it not that their faith is vindicated "in Jesus." It is in him alone that both "the righteousness of God" and "the righteousness of faith" converge and are "proved."

4. Personalism and the Life-Giving Righteousness

a. One of the blessings which modern man yearns for, perhaps just because there is so little of it abroad, is a recovery of the personal. The doctrine of justification ministers also to this need, and in several ways. For example, it dares to risk the whole precious boon of the sinner's justification on such a vulnerable person-to-person transaction as preaching and hearing – on "the word" (10:6-8, 14-17).

b. But the feature in justification which underlines the very nature of personal existence is this: "life" presupposes "righteousness." "He who...is righteous shall live" (1:17). Under the law, of course, this means "that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it" (10:5). Failing such righteousness, however, the rule still applies: "the wages of sin is death" (6:23; 1:32).

c. But the divine mercy, which is no less righteous for being

merciful, interrupts this fatal sequence from sin to death. Finding men who cannot live off a biographical righteousness of their own, God interposes instead his own righteousness, "through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (3:24) and "by preaching Christ Jesus," (10:17) so that "those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ: (5:17). Their faith is their living off this "one man's act of righteousness" (5:18) – which by the way means, not his so-called "active obedience" but his death, (4:25; 5:6-10; 6:2-11) and not so much his compliance with the law as his victory over it (6:14; 7:1-6; 8:1-4) – both by their being "baptized into his death" and by their being, in the same Christ Jesus, "alive to God" (6:4,11). Therefore, "he who through faith is righteous shall live" (1:17).

d. Accordingly, in justification by faith, as in all personal existence, a man lives (or he dies) by what he "identifies with." "To set the mind on the flesh is death..." (8:6) Then what is the alternative? To set the mind on the law? True, it might well be that "I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,...I of myself serve the law of God with my mind," Still, that is small comfort, for to identify with the law, with "what is right," is not life but death, since simultaneously "with my flesh I serve the law of sin" (7:22,25). No, what is "life and peace" is "to set the mind on the spirit," "the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of Christ," "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead" (8:6,9,11). And the life which ensues from this identification with the Spirit is "new" and "free", (6:4,7) cordially "obedient," (6:17) progressively holy, (6:19) immortal, also physically, (8:11) as befits divine offspring (8:14-17).

5. Compassion and Justification

a. Perhaps what our age cries out for most of all (and this reflects not only its neediness but also its remarkable humanitarianism) is compassion. Here too – although strangely enough it has been at this point sometimes that we are least confident about the doctrine of justification – the doctrine abounds with help. The same forensic words recur, “law” and “judgment.” But now (with apologies to Bultmann or at least to Paul) the terms are de-nomologized.

b. It is not as paradoxical as it sounds: those who are no longer under the law but are free from it are the very ones who are free to fulfill it (8:4, 7-9; 6:14-15). Not that they are preoccupied with fulfilling it; they are free even from that. Now their consuming preoccupation can be with the neighbor, by the loving of whom the whole law is fulfilled (13:8-10). Still, this love of the neighbor, so tidy as a formula, is in practice so prolific and variegated that no phenomenology of its expressions can exhaust it: everything from food and drink and cash and taxes to cheerfulness and hospitality and godly hatred (12:8-20; 13:5-10). Nevertheless, believers can safely be exhorted to all this, even bluntly and in great detail, without constantly reminding them that their justification is not “by works of the law” – precisely because they are believers.

c. These believers, in turn, have no reason to pass judgment on the brother, even through (or especially though) the brother may be a weak believer. For judging one another, as those do who are without Christ, only perpetuates that whole other, deadly order of divine judgment. But the brother has been freed from that order and should not be re-consigned to it by renewed judgments. Rather he ought to be suffered in love so as not to “cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died” (15:15). And if love is requited with reproach, then that is a judgment which can be

borne with good hope, so as to confirm, as Christ did, the
"truthfulness" of God's gracious promises (15: 7-8).

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6/27/67

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