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# Interpreting Justification Today

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The Westminster Shorter Catechism is a good summary of the historic Protestant view: 'Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.' (Q33)

## Modern Scholarship

Traditional Roman Catholic teaching has taken the verb 'to justify' to mean 'to make righteous', maintaining that justification involves an inner change in the individual making him into a righteous person and thus confusing justification and sanctification. More recently the Jesuit scholar, John Bligh, admits that 'to justify' often occurs in judicial contexts and sometimes means 'to acquit'. Commenting on Gal.2:17 he remarks that justification is "the act by which God transfers a man from the flock of goats...to the flock of sheep...but in the process of transferring him he transforms him - intrinsically...So justification is more than forgiveness; it is forgiveness plus transformation." Here justification and sanctification are being fused into a single divine act. Bligh states: "when God forgives and declares just, justice is imparted to the believer".<sup>1</sup> There are other examples within modern Catholicism where God's forensic declaration of righteousness is recognised as creating not only a new relationship between the sinner and God but also a change within the sinner. This confusion is present in the agreed statement on justification by faith in ARCIC II: "Justification and sanctification are two aspects of the same divine act".<sup>2</sup>

Over the last one hundred years, scholars of a non-catholic persuasion have made various attempts at interpreting the meaning of the verb 'to justify'. Sanday and Headlam, for instance, while they translate the verb 'to be pronounced righteous' and strongly disapprove of 'to make righteous', remove any ground for the charge of legal fiction by insisting that justification is "simply Forgiveness, Free Forgiveness".<sup>3</sup> This will not do, however, because justification is more than forgiveness. Again, Jeremias admits that forensic language is used but says "Justification is forgiveness, nothing but forgiveness but forgiveness in its fullest sense. It is not merely a covering of the past...it is a new creation by God's Spirit".<sup>4</sup> In saying this he not only emasculates justification but confuses justification and regeneration. Barrett, on the other hand, objects to translating the verb as 'to declare righteous' because it would be a legal fiction for God to say to an unrighteous person - 'I declare you righteous before the law'. "Not even God may pretend that black is white". He prefers the translation 'to make righteous', but not in the Roman Catholic sense of 'to make behaviourally right' (ethically right), but in the sense of 'to be in a right relationship'.<sup>5</sup>

## The Influence of E P Sanders

There have been some significant developments in the last twenty years in the study of Paul's doctrine of justification. An influential book was written in 1977 by E P Sanders, in which it is argued that Judaism of the first century was not a religion of 'works'.<sup>6</sup> It is "completely wrong", he says, to think of Rabbinic religion as a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. He criticises those scholars, like Strack-Billerbeck, who have relied too heavily on fifth century Jewish sources for their view of first century Palestinian Judaism. The material Sanders uses is limited to the early Rabbinic (Tannaitic)

literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphical writings. From this background he shows that the Judaism of Paul's day can be described as "covenantal nomism". Salvation depended on God's covenant with them - his electing love, his provision of atonement for their sins and his promise of salvation for all faithful Israelites. Obedience to the law was not a means of winning God's favour but a demonstration of their response to God's grace and served to maintain their covenant relationship. Their keeping the law showed their distinctiveness as the people of God. When Sanders comes to discuss Paul's doctrine of justification by faith he argues that Paul was not attacking Judaism because it was legalistic (which it never was according to Sanders) but simply because Paul now sees that salvation is only available in Christ. For Sanders the point that Paul is making is simply this, that Christianity is a different religion from Judaism. It is a different understanding of what it means to be the people of God. He sees no continuity between the one and the other.

Sanders also argues that though the verb 'to justify' can mean 'to acquire', the sense changes according to the context. Its meaning can range from 'be reconciled', 'be cleansed', 'be forgiven', to 'become Christian', or simply 'be saved'. Paul's theology is not to be viewed from a legal perspective. The apostle is more interested in union with Christ. He also insists that Paul's gospel starts with the solution and only indirectly deals with the plight of humanity. The content of Paul's preaching was God's saving action in the death and resurrection of Christ and he called his hearers to participate in that action by believing. Repentance and forgiveness have no central role in the apostle's message. The real plight of man is that he is not in union with Christ and under the Lordship of Christ. It is believing not repenting, that brings us into union with Christ.<sup>7</sup> In a later book he makes the further controversial point that though Paul's view of the law is unsystematic he did think that it was possible to observe the law perfectly.<sup>8</sup>

There is much that is fresh and stimulating in Sanders' writings. Of particular value is his thorough treatment of first century Judaism. His picture of that Jewish pattern of belief in Paul's day is not unlike the view of Mosaic religion presented in Reformed theology. Sanders rightly criticises the traditional Lutheran interpretation which sees Judaism as a purely meritorious system to earn acceptance before God, in the same way as Reformed theology has criticized Lutheranism for thinking of Mosaic religion as a religion of legalistic works. However, to dismiss or ignore the NT evidence (already apparent in the OT) of that natural human tendency to look to one's own works to gain divine approval or to supplement God's work is a basic flaw in his argument. He does not accept the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and the Pastoral Letters, yet they are, at the very least, first century evidence of a Pauline tradition which emphasised that humanity is not saved by works of merit but entirely by the grace of God. (Eph 2:8; 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:4-7).

**Sanders cannot deny that forensic language is used by Paul, yet he is biased against a legal understanding of justification and dismisses evidence he does not find congenial to his thesis.** The fact is that sin, guilt, atonement, repentance, forgiveness, and forensic justification are all vital elements in the Pauline message and cannot be marginalized. While we would agree that it is possible for the law to be kept perfectly - the Man, Christ Jesus, actually did keep it - Paul shows in Rom 1-3 and elsewhere that the whole of humanity (Jews included) is in no position to do so. Sanders, however, dismisses these chapters as "internally inconsistent" and "a gross exaggeration".

Many have rightly criticised Sanders for the anticlimax to his thesis when he concludes: "In short, this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity." But Paul does far more than this. He shows that the unconverted Jews of his day had failed to perceive the true purpose of their own law. The OT Scriptures, which formed so much a part of their religion and worship, point forward to God's intervention in Christ. With the

coming of Jesus, God's Son, the Messiah has arrived and fulfilled the law and the prophets.<sup>9</sup>

## Recent Evangelical Opinion

Sanders has influenced the thinking of such men as John Barclay<sup>10</sup>, James Dunn<sup>11</sup>, Alister McGrath<sup>12</sup>, Tom Wright<sup>13</sup> and Don Garlington<sup>14</sup>. These scholars emphasise the **relational aspect of justification at the expense of the forensic**, and view justification more in terms of membership of the covenant family, and less in terms of the individual's status before God.

## Forensic v Relational

Morris<sup>15</sup>, Murray<sup>16</sup>, Packer<sup>17</sup>, Ridderbos<sup>18</sup>, etc all express justification in the traditional Protestant sense and have emphasised the forensic nature of righteousness. Sinners are in rebellion against God and have broken the law which reveals God's righteous character. By that righteous standard they are guilty and condemned, and will be finally sentenced by the divine Judge to eternal punishment on that eschatological day of judgment. Jew and Gentile alike are sinners so that no one on the basis of their works belongs to the class of the righteous. Being righteous, God cannot be expected to justify sinners. In the gospel, God has provided a way to justify sinners that meets his own righteous requirements. God's justifying action is his declaration that the guilty sinner is acquitted, pronounced not guilty, given a full pardon, and judged to be in a right standing or relation before God and his law. The astonishing judgment is made on account of Christ's representative activity on behalf of sinners. He lived the righteous life, kept all the covenant demands and endured the covenant curse as the federal head of a new righteous humanity. The righteous are those sinners who rely entirely on Christ as their Saviour and are united to him. Jesus satisfied the divine wrath on account of their sins and his guiltless, righteous life and position is reckoned or imputed to them. They are no longer under condemnation and are assured that on the day of judgment they will be vindicated and blessed for ever. It is through faith alone that God justifies them. Their faith in Christ is not regarded as a work, but the means whereby they embrace his person and work.

The more recent approaches maintain that the biblical understanding of righteousness and justification<sup>19</sup> must be considered not against the Graeco-Roman or present day court background but in the context of the OT covenant.<sup>20</sup> Righteousness in the OT is fundamentally concerned with relationships, with activity and behaviour which would be true to the demands arising out of that relationship. It is covenant loyalty, covenant behaviour, activity which befits the covenant. It is something which one has in relation to others.<sup>21</sup> On the divine side, righteousness is God's faithfulness to the covenant in saving, helping and judging, etc. On the human side, it means belonging to the covenant and behaving according to the demands of that covenant relationship.

**Allister McGrath** has become a leading authority on the subject of justification.<sup>22</sup> Righteousness is primarily seen as covenant faithfulness, sin is viewed as covenant faithlessness - a betrayal of a personal relationship, and the verb 'to justify' is best expressed by the definition: "to declare to be within the covenant".<sup>23</sup> There is little or no consideration of righteousness as an attribute of God, and the law is not presented as an expression of the righteous character of God. Righteousness is not to be thought of as conformity to a norm. Another exponent in this shift of emphasis is **James Dunn** who speaks of righteousness as God's activity of drawing people into covenant relationships and sustaining them within it. According to him the verb 'to justify' can include both 'to make righteous' and 'to count righteous' because it has to do with God's action in bringing about a new relationship in the covenant. This is acceptable as far as it goes even

though it is confusing, but then he and McGrath seem to agree with recent German scholarship where the divine righteousness is both a gift *and a transforming power*.<sup>24</sup> If this involves some kind of change in the sinner then they have confused justification with regeneration and growth in holiness. Justification is being merged with other elements of the gospel in such a way that the particular truth is lost. Paul stated that it is the gospel of Christ which is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16), whereas the present emphasis regards the righteousness of God in justification as a creative power.

In his laudable attempt to apply the biblical truth to today's world, McGrath is in very real danger of so widening the meaning of justification that what Protestants have always held to be the essence of the matter is lost or weakened. His ecumenical approach to the subject would also take the church back to a medieval, Augustinian position in which justification would embrace the whole Christian life, including both "the *event* of being treated as righteous and the *process* of becoming righteous".<sup>25</sup> He maintains that Calvin, when he taught the doctrine of justification, used contemporary legal terminology to make the truth relevant to his generation. The modern preacher must use terms appropriate to the "felt needs of modern humanity". This is why relational rather than forensic language is considered more appropriate and is, in his view, more in line with the biblical stress. But it is Calvin who is more biblical for stressing the forensic, and it is that same emphasis that is still relevant and very necessary in the ecumenically confused climate of today.

**Tom Wright** likewise sees justification in terms of membership of the covenant family.<sup>26</sup> He states that justification is not how God makes someone a Christian, but God's declaration that the believer is already a Christian. His particular contribution pertains to the matter of faith. Justification takes place *on the basis* of faith, "because true Christian faith...is the evidence that the believer is already within the covenant"<sup>27</sup>. Instead of law being the sign that a person is a covenant member, as in Judaism, faith is the sign. Faith is not a work of merit or what a person does in order to get in to the covenant family but the badge or sign that one is already in. Faith is the work of the Spirit and the evidence of grace. It is described in terms of its object - Jesus Christ. It is like a window: the person sees out and light can get in. It is belief that "Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead". Wright maintains that "when God sees *it* he therefore rightly declares that the believer is in the right" (italics mine) and a member of the covenant family. It is because God sees faith that he declares what actually is the case because faith is the indication that the sinner is in the covenant. He objects to the Reformed position which presents faith as the means or instrument of our justification because, in his view, it merges justification with the atonement and makes faith a luxury.<sup>28</sup>

Wright's view seems to lean toward thinking of faith as primarily assent and when he takes this faith as the ground or basis of justification, he is in danger of merging justification with regeneration because God would then be justifying on the ground of change within the sinner. Of course, justification takes place in the context of regeneration. Justification is never divorced from regeneration, just as justification is not divorced from sanctification. Nevertheless, as justification must not be confused with sanctification so justification must not be confused with regeneration. God does not justify sinners on account of the Spirit's work in granting faith. Justification is never *on the basis* of faith but *through* or *by* faith, and that faith involves a personal reliance on the person and work of Christ alone.

There is much that can be profitably received from these newer insights and **we must not drive a wedge between the forensic and relational aspects of justification**. They are not mutually exclusive. It is not a case of either/or, but of both/and. The danger is, however, for the forensic dimension to be weakened, and this is particularly so when

every forensic reference is made to fit into a covenantal framework. While the covenant does provide an important setting for the forensic, it is not the only context. Some, like Dunn, realising this, especially in connection with Rom 1:18ff, where Paul deals with the Gentiles who are outside the covenant, still view righteousness in relational/covenantal terms of Creator and creature.<sup>29</sup> But the condition of humanity in rebellion against God is not only perceived in terms of a broken relationship, but of a new legal position where God is now the Judge and all humanity face him as guilty, condemned sinners. The questions put to Adam and Eve in Eden, demanding an account of their disobedience, point to the divine Judge, as do the verdict and sentence that follow. Again, in relation to the impending judgment on Sodom, Abraham pleads. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 3:9-24;18:25). It is against this background of God's judicial conviction of sinners and sentencing them to punishment that the glorious truth of God's justification of sinners shines out. When justification is only presented as God's declaration that a person is within the covenant this clear biblical forensic aspect is muted. In Rom 5:16-17 and 8:1 justification is contrasted with condemnation, a point not given sufficient attention by these scholars.

The same applies to righteousness and sin. While these concepts are used within a covenant context in a relational sense, they also have a legal or forensic connotation. By concentration on the relational there is the danger of being influenced by an age which dismisses absolute standards of right and wrong. Sin is not only faithlessness, it is a falling short of what God requires, a transgressing of the divine law. God's law is the expression of his righteous character (Rom 7:12) and all are guilty before that law. No-one is good or righteous. **In the modern emphasis there is a distinct failure to present righteousness as an attribute of God.** In Gen 9:27 Pharaoh has to acknowledge: "The LORD is righteous, and my people and I are wicked". While, for instance, Cranfield<sup>30</sup> sees in Rom 3:26 God's righteousness as a reference to his character (cf Lloyd-Jones: "one of God's own glorious attributes"<sup>31</sup>) Dunn sees it as his activity as covenant God of Israel<sup>32</sup>. It is noticeable that repentance does not figure large in the discussions and propitiating the wrath of God, of foundational importance in appreciating God's justifying grace to a previous generation of, becomes of secondary importance.<sup>33</sup>

The influence of Sanders is nowhere more clearly evident than in the complete dismissal of the old merit-orientated background to Paul's teaching. While we may accept that Paul is attacking those who boast in their Jewishness and who insist that Gentiles must become Jews in order to be members of God's people, that is not the whole story. There were those who looked to works as a way of gaining acceptance before God and boasted in their works. Hence Paul's insistence that we are justified "not by works of righteousness that we have done" and that it is all of grace "not of works lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8f; Tit 3:4-7). Again, Christ's righteous life as meritorious comes in for criticism. Those who emphasise the relational have no place for it in their scheme. Tom Wright claims that there is no reference in Paul to the righteousness of Christ. It follows from this that there is no such concept as Christ's imputed righteousness. If 'to justify' means to be declared a member of the covenant community then there is no need for a verb like 'to impute' or 'to impart' righteousness. But surely 1 Cor 1:30 states that Christ is indeed our righteousness.

If this view of justification is right then it has profound theological and practical implications. It means that the Reformation was a catastrophic mistake by both sides, a complete misinterpretation of the Bible on this vital gospel truth. **Our modern evangelical scholars have solved the problem and done the ecumenical movement a great service! Justification is no longer about accounting righteous rather than making righteous, for it is both.** It involves a declaratory act and transforming power. It is no longer about imputed over against imparted righteousness. It is simply God's declaration

of a person to be within the covenant. Moreover, this fresh interpretation of justification, though it may well lead to closer visible unity with Rome, will do so without there being any fundamental change in her understanding of the essence of the gospel and her many other unbiblical teachings and practices. This change of emphasis will assist an increasingly serious trend among Evangelicals of regarding the old Protestant evangelical faith as but one of many acceptable interpretations within a united Church.

### **Status before God v Status within the community**

In the traditional Protestant understanding of justification it is the sinner's acceptance before the righteous God that is central whereas recently, a shift has taken place and it is the sinner's acceptance in the covenant community that is emphasised. Now there should not be an either/or here either. Reformed theology, in contrast to the individualism of certain branches of popular evangelicalism, has sought to keep a proper balance. But the modern stress on the communal, covenantal aspect of justification is minimising the Godward aspect and tying justification too closely to the doctrine of the church. Wright, for instance, agrees with ARCIC II setting justification against the wider background of salvation and the church. "Justification is not an individualist's charter, but God's declaration that we belong to the covenant community."<sup>34</sup> It sounds good, but this presentation of a gospel, where sin as rebellion against God and the need for repentance are not emphasised, is likely to lead to many nominal professions and a false sense of security. Membership within the visible covenant community cannot shield us from the day of judgment and wrath.

### **Conclusion**

Whatever new insights scholars may present there are no grounds for shifting the emphasis away from forensic justification. Justification is not only a declaration of covenant membership, it is the opposite of condemnation. The acquittal verdict on the final day of judgement is brought forward and anticipated in the present on the basis of Christ's righteous life and propitiatory death, which are embraced by the repentant sinner. At the present time there are strong pressures to modify the Reformers' definition of God's justifying grace in the interests of ecumenism. If justification is reduced to a declaration of covenant membership or broadened to become a synonym for salvation the heart of the gospel will be lost, the errors associated with Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestant Liberalism will continue unchecked, and the Church will enter another Dark Age.

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