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## Justification by Faith Alone

This doctrine remains at the heart of Christianity. I am not speaking now only of the relation between faith and works. It is clear enough that works of the Law cannot justify us. Good works, whether they precede faith, or follow it, are never able to unite us to God. We are justified only by Christ Jesus through faith. That much of what justification is is certainly true.

What I am speaking of is the fact that we cannot justify ourselves in any sense, even though we try in almost every sense. To justify ourselves would mean that we are able to make of ourselves what only God can make of us. It would mean that we have the vision and power to put our intentions and actions within the scope of the will of God. But we do not possess God's vision or his power. The fact is that we do not even know always what our intentions and actions mean for us.

And yet, we try to justify what we are. We do this in many ways, by making excuses, by serving our self-image, and even by the use of divine gifts.

We make excuses for what "we have done and left undone." We fill our time with obligations that reflect our priorities. Demanding schedules force us to overlook the needs of the moment. We feel that we deserve time to ourselves, and so we schedule out time for others. All of these excuse us, or so we think, from things we ought to have done.

But the truth is we have no excuse for sins of omission or commission. We know what we should have done, and what we should not have done. Never mind those things buried so far down in our hearts that we do not remember them. As long as we are busy, we can make excuses.

Moreover, we sometimes choose our priorities to serve our self-image. This is how we want to appear to others, or more importantly, how we want to appear to ourselves. And so "good works" are often driven by ego rather than by the offering of charity. Success is often a mirror for ambition rather than for selfless sacrifice. We spend a lifetime sculpting our image. The more determined we are in our habits, the firmer the image becomes. And we will die in the effort.

Self-justification extends as well to Christian gifts. These are the gifts that identify our usefulness in the Church. They have been given to us and they are ours, but sometimes we use them as an alternative

means to another self-image. Our gifts can become the exclusive way that we think of our worth. And slowly we begin to imagine that God admits us into his fellowship because of the way that we exercise his gifts. So it can happen with the talented preacher, or the able administrator, or the teacher, or the choir member, or the volunteer.

It is at the moment when death approaches that the futility of our self-justification comes into focus. We are confronted then with all those things that we have done and left undone. Self-image dissipates before the face of Jesus Christ. We anticipate a divine accounting for how we have used God's talents. All of a sudden we seem very small to ourselves. But it is here that we gain true hope.

The singular theme that combines the Old and New Testaments is the truth that only God can justify mankind. Only God can make us what we are meant to be.

As for our sins of commission and omission, only God can absolutely forgive. When we think back over our lifetime and we rehearse the burdens and the missed opportunities, there is one word only that can take them away. It is the word of almighty power and mercy. Isaiah declares the divine justification, "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and as a cloud, thy sins: return to me; for I have redeemed thee" (44:22). Jeremiah reinforces the personal absolution of God, "I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more" (31:33). And John brings both of these to light in the perfect work of Christ, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9).

As for our lives, in which we spend so much time sculpting our self-image, only God can give the life that we need and truly want. Jesus declares, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (John 10:10). It is his life that is powerful now to remake us. "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 11:39). It is only in forsaking our self-image that we can begin to live into the life of Jesus. Only he can give the essential reality of human life. Our great and endless comfort is that he desires to give life freely. He was willing to pay the price himself. And now he offers that free gift to us. It is ours simply to reach out and to take it, that is, to take him.

As for the misuse of his gifts, he is merciful there as well. It is no accident that the Spirit comes to his own with words of admonishment and warning. We receive him at various times from different quarters - in the rebuke of a friend, in an argument with a member of the family, in the common experience of human suffering. God's gifts are given to us, not only for ourselves, but equally for others. And when we begin to flatter ourselves as we use the Lord's gifts, the Spirit will chastise us in ways that we do not expect, and in so doing make his gifts truly useful again. "For whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Hebrews 12:6). "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten, be zealous therefore and repent" (Revelation 3:19).

Only God can justify. Only God can make us who we are meant to be. If we allow him to do so, then we shall find that we are living into the life of Christ. As says St. Paul, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless

I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

And so finally we come to the place of faith. Faith is a word that means little in our day. It is overused and cheap. But in its essence faith means belief that something is true and worthy of our trust.

Faith in the Christian sense is the mind fixed on Christ. It is his words and deeds, vouchsafed to us in Scripture, which provide our way into a living relationship with him. And because we can trust our knowledge of him, we can seek him in love as the living Lord.

This is why Jesus has come to us, and first loved us, that we may put our whole trust and confidence in his mercy. His great love has justified us before God. And now, by grace, it is ours to believe in him every moment of every day. If we do, then we shall not perish, either in this life, or in the life to come. God shall make us into his beloved children who share in his being, where honor, glory, and pleasure are unimaginably real.

**The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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