

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

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"Justification by Faith"; the phrase is weighty alike with Scripture and with history. In Holy Scripture it is the main theme of two great dogmatic epistles, Romans and Galatians. In Christian history it was the potent watchword of the Reformation movement in its aspect as a vast spiritual upheaval of the church. It is not by any means the only great truth considered in the two epistles; we should woefully misread them if we allowed their message about Justification by Faith to obscure their message about the Holy Spirit, and the strong relation between the two messages. It was not the only great truth which moved and animated the spiritual leaders of the Reformation. Nevertheless, such is the depth and dignity of this truth, and so central in some respects is its reference to other truths of our salvation, that we may fairly say that it was the message of Paul, and the truth that lay at the heart of the distinctive messages of the non-Pauline epistles too, and that it was the truth of the great Reformation of the Western church.

With reason, seeing things as he was led in a profound experience to see them, did Luther say that Justification by Faith was "the articles of a standing or a falling church." With reason does an illustrious representative of the older school of "higher" Anglicanism, a name to me ever bright and venerable, Edward Harold Browne, say that Justification by Faith is not only this, but also "the article of a standing or a falling soul" ("Messiah Foretold and Expected," ad finem).

IMPORT OF THE TERMS

Let us apply ourselves first to a study of the meaning of our terms. Here are two great terms before us, Justification and Faith. We shall, of course, consider in its place the word which, in our title, links them, and ask how Justification is "by" Faith. But first, what is Justification, and then, what is Faith?

By derivation, no doubt, JUSTIFICATION means to make just, that is to say, to make conformable to a true standard. It would seem thus to mean a process by which wrong is corrected, and bad is made good, and good better, in the way of actual improvement of the thing or person justified. In one curious case, and, so far as I know, in that case only, the word has this meaning in actual use. "Justification" is a term of the printer's art. The compositor "justifies" a piece of typework when he corrects, brings into perfect order, as to spaces between words and letters, and so on, the types which he has set up.

But this, as I have said, is a solitary case. In the use of words otherwise, universally, Justification and Justify mean something quite different from improvement of condition. They mean establishment of position as before a judge or jury, literal or figurative. They mean the winning of a favorable verdict in such a presence, or again (what is the same thing from another side) the utterance of that verdict, the sentence of acquittal, or the sentence of vindicated fight, as the case may be.

I am thinking of the word not at all exclusively as a religious word. Take it in its common, everyday employment; it is always thus. To justify an opinion, to justify a course of conduct, to justify a statement, to justify a friend, what does it mean? Not to readjust and improve your thoughts; or your actions, or your words; not to educate your friend to be wiser or more able. No, but to win a verdict for thought, or action, or word, or friend, at some bar of judgment, as for example the bar of public opinion, or of common conscience. It is not to improve, but to vindicate.

Take a ready illustration to the same effect from Scripture, and from a passage not of doctrine, but of public Israelite law: "If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them, then they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked" (<Deut. 25:1>).

Here it is obvious that the question is not one of moral improvement. The judges are not to make the righteous man better. They are to vindicate his position as satisfactory to the law.

Non-theological passages, it may be observed, and generally non-theological connections, are of the greatest use in determining the true, native meaning of theological terms. For with rare exceptions, which are for the most part matters of open history, as in the case of the [homousion (grk 3669)], theological terms are terms of common thought, adapted to a special use, but in themselves unchanged. That is, they were thus used at first, in the simplicity of original truth. Later ages may have deflected that simplicity. It was so as a fact with our word Justification, as we shall see immediately. But at first the word meant in religion precisely what it meant out of it. It meant the winning, or the consequent announcement, of a favorable verdict. Not the word, but the application was altered when salvation was in question. It was indeed a new and glorious application. The verdict in question was the verdict not of a Hebrew court, nor of public opinion, but of the eternal Judge of all the earth. But that left the meaning of the word the same.

JUSTIFICATION IS A "FORENSIC" TERM

It is thus evident that the word Justification, alike in religious and in common parlance, is a word connected with law. It has to do with acquittal, vindication, acceptance before a judgment seat. To use a technical term, it is a forensic word, a word of the law-courts (which in old Rome stood in the forum). In regard of "us men and our salvation" it stands related not so much, not so directly, to our need of spiritual revolution, amendment, purification, holiness, as to our need of getting, somehow-- in spite of our guilt, our liability, our debt, our deserved condemnation a sentence of acquittal, a sentence of acceptance, at the judgment seat of a holy God.

Not that it has nothing to do with our inward spiritual purification. It has intense and vital relations that way. But they are not direct relations. The direct concern of Justification is with man's need of a divine deliverance, not from the power of his sin, but from its guilt.

MISTAKEN INTERPRETATIONS

Here we must note accordingly two remarkable instances of misuse of the word Justification in the history of Christian thought. The first is found in the theology of the School-men, the great thinkers of the Middle Ages in Western Christendom-- Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, and others. (See T. B. Mozley, "Baptismal Controversy," chap. VII.) To them Justification appears to have meant much the same as regeneration, the great internal change in the state of our nature wrought by grace. The other instance appears in the sixteenth century, in the Decrees of the Council of Trent, a highly authoritative statement of Romanist belief and teaching. There Justification is described (vi. c. 7) as "not the mere remission of sins but also the sanctification and renovation of the inner man." In this remarkable sentence the Romanist theologians seem to combine the true account of the word, though imperfectly stated, with the view of the Schoolmen. It is not too much to say that a careful review of the facts summarized above, as regards the secular use of the word Justification, and the Scriptural use of it in the doctrine of salvation, is enough to negative these explanations. They are curious and memorable examples of misinterpretation of terms; that most fruitful source of further, wider and deeper error.

JUSTIFICATION IS NOT THE SAME AS PARDON

The problem raised then, in religion, by the word Justification, is, How shall man be just before God? To use the words of our Eleventh Article, it is, How shall we be "accounted righteous before God?" In other words, How shall we, having sinned, having broken the holy Law, having violated the will of God,

be treated, as to our acceptance before Him, as to our "peace with Him" (<Rom. 5:1>), as if we had not done so? Its question is not, directly, How shall I a sinner become holy, but, How shall I a sinner be received by my God, whom I have grieved, as if I had not grieved Him?

Here let us note, what will be clear on reflection, that Justification means properly no less than this, the being received by Him as if we had not grieved Him. It is not only, the being forgiven by Him. We do indeed as sinners most urgently need forgiveness, the remission of our sins, the putting away of the holy vengeance of God upon our rebellion. But we need more. We need the voice which says, not merely, you may go; you are let off your penalty; but, you may come; you are welcomed into My presence and fellowship. We shall see later how important this difference is in the practical problems of our full salvation. But one thing is evident at first sight, namely, that this is implied in the very word Justification. For Justification, in common speech, never means pardon. It means winning, or granting, a position of acceptance. "You are justified in taking this course of action," does not mean, you were wrong, yet you are forgiven. It means, you were right, and in the court of my opinion you have proved it. In religion accordingly our Justification means not merely a grant of pardon, but a verdict in favor of Our standing as satisfactory before the Judge.

THE SPECIAL PROBLEM OF OUR JUSTIFICATION

Here in passing let us notice that of course the word Justification does not of itself imply that the justified person is a sinner. To see this as plainly as possible, recollect that God Himself is said to be justified, in <Ps. 51:4>, and Christ Himself, in <1 Tim. 3:16>. In a human court of law, as we have seen above, it is the supreme duty of the judge to "justify the righteous" (<Deut. 25:1>), and the righteous only. In all such cases Justification bears its perfectly proper meaning, unperplexed, crossed by no mystery or problem. But then, the moment we come to the concrete, practical question, how shall we be justified, and before God, or, to bring it closer home, how shall I, I the sinner, be welcomed by my offended Lord as if I were satisfactory, then the thought of Justification presents itself to us in a new and most solemn aspect. The word keeps its meaning unshaken. But how about its application. Here am I, guilty. To be justified is to be pronounced not guilty, to be vindicated and accepted by Lawgiver and Law. Is it possible? Is it not impossible?

Justification by Faith, in the actual case of our salvation, is thus a "short phrase." It means, in full, the acceptance of guilty sinners, before God, by Faith. Great is the problem so indicated. And great is the wonder and the glory of the solution given us by the grace of God. But to this solution we must advance by some further steps.

WHAT IS FAITH?

We may now properly approach our second great term-- Faith-- and ask ourselves, What does it mean? As with Justification, so with Faith, we may best approach the answer by first asking, What does Faith mean in common life and speech? Take such phrases as, to have faith in a policy, faith in a remedy, faith in a political leader, or a military leader, faith in a lawyer, faith in a physician. Here the word Faith is used in a way obviously parallel to that in which, for example, our Lord uses it when He appeals to the Apostles, in the Gospels, to have faith in Him; as He did in the storm on the Lake. The use is parallel also to its habitual use in the epistles, for example, in <Romans 4>, where Paul makes so much of Abraham's faith, in close connection with the faith which he seeks to develop in us.

Now is it not plain that the word means, to all practical intents and purposes, trust, reliance? Is not this obvious without comment when a sick man sends for the physician in whom he has faith, and when the soldier follows, perhaps literally in utter darkness, the general in whom he has faith? Reliance upon thing or person supposed to be trustworthy, this is Faith.

PRACTICAL CONFIDENCE

To note a further aspect of the word. Faith, in actual common use, tends to mean a practical confidence. Rarely, if ever, do we use it of a mere opinion, however distinct, lying passive in the mind. To have faith in a commander does not mean merely to entertain a conviction, a belief, however positive, that he is skillful and competent. We may entertain such a belief about the commander of the enemy--with very unpleasant impressions on our minds in consequence. We may be confident that he is a great general in a sense the very opposite to a personal confidence in him. No, to have faith in a commander implies a view of him in which we either actually do, or are quite ready to, trust ourselves and our cause to his command. And just the same is true of faith in a divine Promise, faith in a divine Redeemer. It means a reliance, genuine and practical. It means a putting of ourselves and our needs, in personal reliance, into His hands.

Here, in passing, we observe that Faith accordingly always implies an element, more or less, of the dark, of the unknown. Where everything is, so to speak, visible to the heart and mind there scarcely can be Faith. I am on a dangerous piece of water, in a boat, with a skilled and experienced boatman. I cross it, not without tremor perhaps, but with faith. Here faith is exercised on a trustworthy and known object, the boatman. But it is exercised regarding what are more or less, to me, uncertain circumstances, the amount of peril, and the way to handle the boat in it. Were there no uncertain circumstances my opinion of the boatman would not be faith, but mere opinion; estimate, not reliance.

Our illustration suggests the remark that Faith, as concerned with our salvation, needs a certain and trustworthy Object, even Jesus Christ. Having Him, we have the right condition for exercising Faith, reliance in the dark, trust in His skill and power on our behalf in unknown or mysterious circumstances.

<HEBREWS 11:1> IS NOT A DEFINITION

It seems well to remark here on that great sentence, <Heb. 11:1>, sometimes quoted as a definition of Faith: "Now faith is certainty of things hoped for, proof of things not seen." If this is a definition, properly speaking, it must negative the simple definition of Faith which we have arrived at above, namely, reliance. For it leads us towards a totally different region of thought, and suggests, what many religious thinkers have held, that Faith is as it were a mysterious spiritual sense, a subtle power of touching and feeling the unseen and eternal, a "vision and a faculty divine," almost a "second sight" in the soul. We on the contrary maintain that it is always the same thing in itself, whether concerned with common or with spiritual things, namely, reliance, reposed on a trustworthy object, and exercised more or less in the dark. The other view would look on Faith (in things spiritual) rather as a faculty in itself than as an attitude towards an Object. The thought is thus more engaged with Faith's own latent power than with the power and truth of a Promiser. Now on this I remark, first, that the words of <Heb. 11:1> scarcely read like a definition at all. For a definition is a description which fits the thing defined and it alone, so that the thing is fixed and settled by the description. But the words "certainty of things hoped for, proof of things not seen," are not exclusively applicable to Faith. They would be equally fit to describe, for example, God's promises in their power. For they are able to make the hoped-for certain and the unseen visible.

And this is just what we take the words to mean as a description of Faith. They do not define Faith in itself; they describe it in its power. They are the sort of statement we make when we say, Knowledge is power. That is not a definition of knowledge, by any means. It is a description of it in one of its great effects.

The whole chapter, <Heb. 11>, illustrates this, and, as it seems to me, confirms our simple definition of Faith. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses-- they all treated the hoped-for and the unseen as solid

and certain because they all relied upon the faithful Promiser. Their victories were mysteriously great, their lives were related vitally to the Unseen. But the action to this end was on their part sublimely simple. It was reliance on the Promiser. It was taking God at His Word.

I remember a friend of mine, many years ago, complaining of the skeptical irreverence of a then lecturer at Oxford, who asked his class for a definition of Faith. <Heb. 11:1> was quoted as an answer, and he replied, "You could not have given me a worse definition." Now this teacher may have been really flippant. But I still think it possible that he meant no contempt of the Scripture. He may merely have objected, though with needless roughness, to a false rise of the Scripture. He felt, I cannot but surmise, that <Heb. 11:1> was really no definition at all.

DEFINITION AND EFFECT

It is all-important to remember alike this simplicity of definition and this grandeur of effect in the matter of Faith. It is all-important in the great question of our salvation. Here on the one side is an action of the mind and will, in itself perfectly simple, capable of the very homeliest illustration. We all know what reliance means. Well, Faith is reliance. But then, when the reliance is directed upon an Object infinitely great and good, when it reposes upon God in Christ, upon Him in His promise, His fidelity, His love, upon His very Self, what is not this reliance in its effects? It is the creature laying hold upon the Creator. It is our reception of God Himself in His Word. So, it is the putting ourselves in the way of His own almighty action in the fulfillment of His Word, in the keeping of His promise.

"The virtue of Faith lies in the virtue of its Object." That Object, in this matter of Justification, so the Scriptures assure us abundantly and with the utmost clearness, is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who died for us and rose again.

Here the simplest reliance, so it be sincere, is our point of contact with infinite resources. When lately the Vast dam of the Nile was completed, with all its giant sluices, there needed but the touch of a finger on an electric button to swing majestically open the gates of the barrier and so to let through the Nile in all its mass and might. There was the simplest possible contact. But it was contact with forces and appliances adequate to control or liberate at pleasure the great river. So Faith, in reliance of the soul, the soul perhaps of the child, perhaps of the peasant, perhaps of the outcast, is only a reliant look, a reliant touch. But it sets up contact with JESUS CHRIST, in all His greatness, in His grace, merit, saving power, eternal love.

FAITH, NOT MERIT

One momentous issue from this reflection is as follows: We are here warned off from the temptation to erect Faith into a Saviour, to rest our reliance upon our Faith, if I may put it so. That is a real temptation to many. Hearing, and fully thinking, that to be justified we must have Faith, they, we, are soon occupied with an anxious analysis of our Faith. Do I trust enough? Is my reliance satisfactory in kind and quantity? But if saving Faith is, in its essence, simply a reliant attitude, then the question of its effect and virtue is at once shifted to the question of the adequacy of its Object. The man then is drawn to ask, not, Do I rely enough? but, Is Jesus Christ great enough, and gracious enough, for me to rely upon? The introspective microscope is laid down. The soul's open eyes turn upward to the face of our Lord Jesus Christ; and Faith forgets itself in its own proper action. In other words, the man relies instinctively upon an Object seen to be so magnificently, so supremely, able to sustain him. His feet are on the Rock, and he knows it, not by feeling for his feet, but by feeling the Rock.

Here let us note that Faith, thus seen to be reliance, is obviously a thing as different as possible from merit. No one in common life thinks of a well-placed reliance as meritorious. It is right, but not righteous. It does not make a man deserving of rescue when, being in imminent danger, he implicitly

accepts the guidance of his rescuer. And the man who, discovering himself, in the old-fashioned way (the way as old as David before Nathan, Isaiah in the vision, the publican in the temple, the jailor at Philippi, Augustine at Milan), to be a guilty sinner, whose "mouth is shut" before God, relies upon Christ as his all for pardon and peace, certainly does not merit anything for closing with his own salvation. He deserves nothing by the act of accepting all.

"God," says Richard Hooker, in that great "Discourse" of his on Justification, "doth justify the believing man, yet not for the worthiness of his belief but for the worthiness of Him which is believed" ("A Discourse of Justification," chapter 33). So it is not our attitude which we rely on. Our attitude is just our reliance. And reliance means the going out upon Another for repose.

Once for all let us remember that we may make the falsest use, even under the truest definitions, of both ideas, Justification and Faith. We may think of either of them as the object of our hope, the ultimate cause of our salvation. So thought of, they are phantoms, nay, they are idols. Seen truly, they are but expressions for Jesus Christ our Lord as He is given and taken. Justification is no Saviour, nor is Faith. Justification by Faith-- what is it? It is the acceptance of the guilty by reason of a Trusted Christ.

"BY" SHOULD BE DEFINED

So now we may take up the question of that middle and connective word in our title, "by." Justification by Faith, what does it mean? This divine welcome of the guilty as if they were not guilty, by reliance upon Jesus Christ, what have we to think about this?

We have seen a moment ago that one meaning most certainly cannot be borne by the word "by." It cannot mean "on account of," as if Faith were a valuable consideration which entitled us to Justification. The surrendering rebel is not amnestied because of the valuable consideration of his surrender, but because of the grace of the sovereign or state which amnesties. On the other hand, his surrender is the necessary means to the amnesty becoming actually his: It is his only proper attitude (in a supposed case of unlawful rebellion) towards the offended power. That power cannot, in the nature of things, make peace with a subject who is in a wrong attitude towards it. It wishes him well, or it would not provide amnesty. But it cannot make peace with him while he declines the provision. Surrender is accordingly not the price paid for peace, but it is nevertheless the open hand necessary to appropriate the gift of it.

In a fair measure this illustrates our word "by" in the matter of Justification by Faith. Faith, reliance, is, from one side, just the sinful man's "coming in" to accept the sacred amnesty of God in Christ, taking at His Word his benignant King. It is the rebel's putting himself into right relations with his offended Lord in this great matter of forgiveness and acceptance It is not a virtue, not a merit, but a proper means.

UNION WITH CHRIST

The word "by," per, lends itself meantime to the expression of another aspect of the subject. One of the great problems attaching to the mighty truth of Christ our Righteousness, our Merit, our Acceptance, is that of the nexus, the bond, which so draws us and Him together that, not in fiction but in fact, our load can pass over to Him and His wealth to us. The New Testament largely teaches, what lies assuredly in the very nature of things, as it puts the facts of salvation before us, that we enter "into" Christ. we come to be "in" Him, we get part and lot in the life eternal, which is in Him alone, by Faith. "He gave power to become the sons of God, to them that believed on His Name." "Believing, we have life in His Name" (<John 1:12; 20:31>). Faith is our soul-contact with the Son of God, setting up (upon our side) that union with Him in His life of which Scripture is so full. And thus it is open to us, surely, to say that Justification by Faith means, from one momentous aspect, Justification because of the Christ with whom through Faith we are made mysteriously but truly one. Believing, we are one with Him, one in the

common life with which the living members live with the Head, by the power of His Spirit. One with Him in life, we are therefore, by no mere legal fiction but in vital fact, capable of oneness with Him in interest also.

THE MARRIAGE-BOND

"Faith," says Bishop Hopkins of Derry, "is the marriage-bond between Christ and a believer; and therefore all the debts of the believer are chargeable upon Christ, and the righteousness of Christ is instated upon the believer Indeed this union is a high and inscrutable mystery, yet plain it is that there is such a close, spiritual, and real union between Christ and a believer So Faith is the way and means of our Justification. By Faith we are united to Christ. By that union we truly have a righteousness. And upon that righteousness the justice as well as mercy of God is engaged to justify and acquit us" (E. Hopkins, "The Doctrine of the Covenants.")
(from Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth)