

XXX.

Justification.

“Being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”—*Rom. iii. 24.*

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that true conversion consists of these two parts: the *dying* of the old man, and the *rising again* of the new. This last should be noticed. The Catechism says not that the new life *originates* in conversion, but that it *arises* in conversion. That which arises must exist before. Else how could it arise? This agrees with our statement that regeneration precedes conversion, and that by the effectual calling the newborn child of God is brought to conversion.

We now proceed to consider a matter which, tho belonging to the same subject and running parallel with it, yet moves, along an entirely different line, viz., *Justification*.

In the Sacred Scripture, justification occupies the most conspicuous place, and is presented as of greatest importance for the sinner: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (*Rom. iii. 24*). “Therefore, being *justified* by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rom. v. 1*); “Who was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our *justification*” (*Rom. iv. 25*); “Who of God is made unto us from God, wisdom and *righteousness* and sanctification and redemption” (*1 Cor. i. 30*).

And not only is this so strongly emphasized by *Scripture*, but it was also the very kernel of the *Reformation*, which puts this doctrine of “justification by faith” boldly and clearly in opposition to the “meritorious works of Rome.” “Justification by faith” was in those days the shibboleth of the heroes of faith, Martin Luther in the van.

And when, in the present century, a self-wrought sanctification presented itself again, as the actual power of redemption, it was the not insignificant merit of Köhlbrugge, that he, tho less comprehensively than the reformers, fastened this matter of justification, with penetrating earnestness, upon the conscience of Christendom. It may have been superfluous for the churches still truly Reformed, but it was exceedingly opportune for the circles where the garland of truth was less closely woven, and the sense of justice had been allowed to become weak, as partially in our own country, but especially beyond our borders. There are in Switzerland and in Bohemia groups of men who have heard, for the first time, of the necessity of justification by faith, through the labors of Köhlbrugge.

Through the grace of God, our people did not go so far astray; and where the Ethicals, largely from principle, surrendered this point of doctrine, the Reformed did and do oppose them, admonishing them with all energy, and as often as possible, not to merge justification in sanctification.



Regarding the question, how *justification* differs, on the one hand, from “regeneration,” and, on the other, from “calling and conversion,” we answer that justification emphasizes the idea of *right*.

Right regulates the relations between two persons. Where there is but one there is no right, simply because there are no relations to regulate. Hence by *right* we understand either the right of man in relation to man, or the claim of God upon man. It is in this last sense that we use the word right.

The Lord is our Lawgiver, our judge, our King. Hence He is absolutely Sovereign: as Lawgiver determining what is right; as Judge judging our being and doing; as King dispensing rewards and punishments. This sheds light upon the difference between justification and regeneration. The new birth and the call and conversion have to do with our *being* as sinners or as regenerate men; but justification with the *relation* which we sustain to God, either as sinners or as those born again.

Apart from the question of right, the sinner may be considered as a sick person, who is infected and inoculated with disease. After being born again he improves, the infection disappears, the corruption ceases, and he prospers again. But this concerns his *person* alone, how he is, and what his prospects are; it does not touch the question of right.

The question of right arises when I see in the sinner a creature not his own, but *belonging* to another.

Herein is all the difference. If man is to me the principal factor, so that I have nothing else in view but his improvement and deliverance from misery, then the Almighty God is in this whole matter a mere Physician, called in and affording assistance, who receives His fee, and is discharged with many thanks. The question of right does not enter here at all. So long as the sinner is made more holy, all is well. Of course, if he is made perfect, all the better. Clearly understanding, however, that man belongs not to himself, but to another, the matter assumes an entirely different aspect. For then he can not *be* or *do* as he pleases, but another has determined what he must be and what he must do. And if he does or is otherwise, he is guilty as a transgressor: guilty because he rebelled, guilty because he transgressed.

Hence when I believe in the divine sovereignty, the sinner appears to me in an entirely different aspect. As infected and mortally ill, he is to be pitied and kindly treated; but considered as belonging to God, standing under God, and as having robbed God, that same sinner becomes a guilty transgressor.

This is true to some extent of animals. When I lasso a wild horse on the American prairies for training, it never enters my mind to punish him for his wildness. But the runaway in the city streets must be punished. He is vicious; he threw his rider; he refused to be led and chose his own way. Hence he needs to be punished.

And man much more so. When I meet him in his wild career of sin, I know that he is a rebel, that he broke the reins, threw his rider, and now dashes on in mad revolt. Hence

such sinner must be not only healed, but *punished*. He does not need *medical* treatment alone, but before all things he needs *juridical* treatment.

Apart from his disease a sinner has done evil; there is no virtue in him; he has violated the right; he deserves punishment. Suppose, for a moment, that sin had not touched his person, had not corrupted him, had left him intact as a man, then there would have been no need of regeneration, of healing, of a rising again, of sanctification; nevertheless he would have been subject to the vengeance of justice.

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Hence man's case in relation to his God must be considered *juridically*. Be not afraid of that word, brother. Rather insist that it be pronounced with as strong an emphasis as possible. It must be emphasized, and all the more strongly, because for so many years it has been scorned; and the churches have been made to believe that this "*juridical*" aspect of the case was of no importance; that it was a representation really unworthy of God; that the principal thing was to bring forth fruit meet for repentance.

Beautiful teaching, gradually pushed into the world from the closet of philosophy: teaching that declares that morality included the right and stood far above the right; that "right" was chiefly a notion of the life of less civilized ages and of crude persons, but of no importance to our ideal age and to the ideal development of humanity and of individuals; yea, that in some respects it is even objectionable, and should never be allowed to enter into that holy and high and tender relation that exists between God and man.

The fruit of this pestilential philosophy is, that now in Europe *the sense of right* is gradually dying of slow consumption. Among the Asiatic nations this sense of right has greater vitality than among us. Might is again greater than right. Right is again the right of the strongest. And the luxurious circles, who in their atony (Ed. Note: Def. "lack of bodily tone or muscle tone") of spirit at first protested against the "*juridical*" in *theology*, discover now with terror that certain classes in society are losing more and more respect for the "*juridical*" in the *question of property*. Even in regard to the possession of land and house, and treasure and fields, this new conception of life considers the "*juridical*" a less noble idea. Bitter satire! You who, in your wantonness, started the mockery of the "*juridical*" in connection with God, find your punishment now in the fact that the lower classes start the mockery of this "*juridical*" in connection with your money and your goods. Yea, more than this. When recently in Paris a woman was tried for having shot and killed a man in court, not only did the jury acquit her, but she was made the heroine of an ovation. Here also other motives were deemed more precious, and the "*juridical*" aspect had nothing to do with it.

And, therefore, in the name of God and of the right which He has ordained, we urgently request that every minister of the Word, and every man in his place, help and labor, with clear consciousness and energy, to stop this dissolution of the right, with all the means at their disposal; and especially solemnly and effectually to restore to its own conspicuous

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place the juridical feature of the sinner's relation to his God. When this is done, we shall feel again the stimulus that will cause the soul's relaxed muscles to contract, rousing us from our semi-unconsciousness. Every man, and especially every member of the Church, must again realize his juridical relation to God now and forever; that he is not merely man or woman, but a creature belonging to God, absolutely controlled by God; and guilty and punishable when not acting according to the will of God.

This being clearly understood, it is evident that regeneration and calling, and conversion, yea, even complete reformation and sanctification, can not be sufficient; for, altho these are very glorious, and deliver you from sin's stain and pollution, and help you not to violate the law so frequently, yet they do not touch your juridical relation to God.

When a mutinous battalion gets into serious straits, and the general, hearing of it, delivers them at the cost of ten killed and twenty wounded, who had not mutinied, and brings them back and feeds them, do you think that that will be all? Do you not see that such battalion is still liable to punishment with decimation? And when man mutinied against his God, and got himself into trouble and nearly perished with misery, and the Lord God sent him help to save him, and called him back, and he returned, can that be the end of it? Do you not clearly see that he is still liable to severe punishment? In case of a burglar who robs and kills, but in making his escape breaks his leg, and is sent to the hospital where he is treated, and then goes out a cripple unable to repeat his crime, do you think that the judge would give him his liberty, saying: "He is healed now and will never do it again"? No; he will be tried, convicted, and incarcerated. Even so here. Because by our sins and transgressions we have wounded ourselves, and made ourselves wretched, and are in need of medical help, is our guilt forgotten for this reason?

Why, then, are such undermining ideas brought among the people? Why is it that under the appearance of love a sentimental Christianity is introduced about the "dear Jesus," and "that we are so sick," and "the Physician is passing by," and that "It is, oh! so glorious to be in fellowship with that holy Mediator"?

Are our people really ignorant of the fact that this whole representation stands diametrically opposed to Sacred Scripture—opposed to all that ever animated the Church of Christ and made it strong? Do they not feel that such a feeble and spongy Christianity is a clay too soft for the making of heroes in the Kingdom of God? And do they not see that the number of men who are drawn to the "dear Jesus" is much smaller now than that of the men who formerly were drawn to the *Mediator of the right*, who with His precious blood hath fully *satisfied* for all our sins?

And when it is answered, "That is just what we teach; reconciliation in His blood, redemption through His death! It is all paid for us! Only come and hear our preaching, and sing our hymns!" then we beseech the brethren who thus speak to be serious for a moment. For, behold, our objection is not that you deny the reconciliation through His blood, but

that, by being silent on the question of God's right, and of our state of condemnation, and by being satisfied when the people "only come to Jesus," you allow the *consciousness of guilt* to wear out, you make genuine *repentance* impossible, you substitute a certain discontent with oneself for *brokenness of heart*; and thus you weaken the faculty to feel, to understand, and to realize what the meaning is of reconciliation through the blood of the cross.

It is quite possible to bring about reconciliation without touching the question of the right at all. By some misunderstanding two friends have become estranged, separated from, and hostile to each other. But they may be reconciled. Not necessarily by making one to see that he violated the rights of the other; this was perhaps never intended. And even if there was some right violated, it would not be expedient to speak of the past, but to cover it with the mantle of love and to look only to the future. And such reconciliation, if successful, is very delightful, and may have cost both the reconciled and the reconciler much of conflict and sacrifice, yea, prayers and tears. And yet, with all this, such reconciliation does not touch the question of right.

In this way it appears to us these brethren preach reconciliation. It is true that they preach it with much warmth and animation even; but—and this is our complaint—they consider and present it as an enmity caused by whispering, misunderstanding, and wrong inclination, rather than *by violation of the right*. And, in consequence, their preaching of reconciliation through the blood of the cross no longer causes the deep chord of the right to vibrate in men's souls; but it resembles the reconciliation of two friends, who at an evil hour became estranged from each other.



XXXI.

Our Status.

“And he believed in the Lord: and he counted it to him for righteousness.” —*Gen. xv.*
6.



The right touches a man's status. So long as the law has not proven him guilty, has not convicted and sentenced him, his legal status is that of a free and law-abiding citizen. But as soon as his guilt is proven in court and the jury has convicted him, he passes from that into the status of the bound and law-breaking citizen.

The same applies to our relation to God. Our status before God is that either of the just or of the unjust. In the former, we are not condemned or we are released from condemnation. He that is still under condemnation occupies the status of the unjust.

Hence, and this is noteworthy, a man's status depends not upon what he *is*, but upon the decision of the proper authorities regarding him; not upon what he is *actually*, but upon what he is *counted* to be.

A clerk in an office is innocently suspected of embezzlement, and accused before a court of law. He pleads not guilty; but the suspicions against him carry conviction, and the judge condemns him. Now, tho he did not embezzle, is actually innocent, he is *counted* guilty. And since a man does not determine his own status, but his sovereign or judge determines it for him, the status of this clerk, altho innocent, is, from the moment of his conviction, that of a law-breaker. And the contrary may occur just as well. In the absence of convicting evidence the judge may acquit a dishonest clerk, who, altho guilty and a law-breaker, still retains his status of a law-abiding and honest citizen. In this case he is dishonorable, but he is *counted* honorable. Hence a man's status depends not upon what he actually is, but what he is *counted* to be.

The reason is, that man's status has no reference to his inward *being*, but only to the *manner* in which he is to be treated. It would be useless to determine this himself, for his fellow citizens would not receive it. Tho he asserted a hundred times, “I am an honorable citizen,” they would pay no attention to it. But if the judge declares him, honorable; and then they should dare to call him dishonorable, there would be a power to maintain his status against those who attack him. Hence a man's own declaration can not obtain him a legal status. He may fancy or assume a status of righteousness, but it has no stability, it is *no status*.



This explains why, in our own good land, a man's legal status as a citizen is determined not by himself, but solely by the king, either, as sovereign or as judge. The king is judge, for all judgment is pronounced in his name; and, altho the judiciary can not be denied a certain authority independent of the executive, yet in every sentence it is the king's judicature which pronounces judgment. Hence a man's status depends solely upon the king's decision. Now