

XXXII.

Justification from Eternity

“The righteousness which is of God by faith.” —*Phil. iii. 9.*

It has become evident that the question which most closely concerns us is, not whether we are more or less holy, but whether our *status* is that of the just or of the unjust; and that this is determined not by what we are at any given moment, but by God as our Sovereign and Judge.

In Adam's creation God put us, without any preceding merits on our part, in the state of original righteousness. After the fall, according to the same sovereign prerogative, He put us, as Adam's descendants, in the state of unrighteousness, imputing Adam's guilt to each personally. And in exactly the same manner He now justifies the ungodly, *i.e.*, He places him, without any previous merit on his part, in the state of righteousness according to His own holy and inviolable prerogative.

In the creation He did not first wait to see whether man would develop holiness in himself, so as to declare him righteous on the ground of this holiness; but He declared him originally righteous, even before there was a possibility on his part of evincing a desire for holiness. And after the fall He did not wait to see whether sin would manifest itself in us, so as to assign us to the state of the unrighteous on the ground of this sin; but before our birth, before there was a possibility of personal sin, He declared us guilty. And in the same manner God does not wait to see whether a sinner shows signs of conversion in order to restore him to honor as a righteous person, but He declares the ungodly just before he has had the least possibility of doing any good work.

Hence there is a sharp line between our *sanctification* and our *justification*. The former has to do with the quality of our being, depends upon our faith, and can not be effected outside of us. But

justification is effected outside of us, irrespective of what we are, dependent only upon the decision of God, our judge and Sovereign; in such a way that justification *precedes* sanctification, the latter proceeding from the former as a necessary result. God does not justify us because we are becoming more holy, but when He has justified us we grow in holiness: “Being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.” (*Rom. v. 9*)

There should never be the least doubt regarding this matter. Every effort to reverse this established order of Scripture must earnestly be resisted. This glorious confession, declared with so much power to the souls of men in the days of the Reformation, must continue the precious jewel, to be transmitted intact by us to our posterity as a sacred inheritance. So long as we ourselves have not yet entered the New Jerusalem, our comfort should never be founded upon our sanctification, but exclusively upon our justification. Tho our sanctification were ever so far advanced, so long as we are not justified we remain in our sin and are lost.

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And if a justified sinner die immediately after his justification is sealed to his soul, he may shout with joy, for, in spite of hell and of Satan, he is sure of his salvation.

The deep significance of this confession is faintly discernible in our earthly relations. In order to do business on the floor of the exchange, a trader must be an honorable citizen. If convicted of crime, justly or unjustly, he will be expelled from exchange, tho he be ten times more honest than others whose fraudulent transactions have never been discovered. And how will this dishonored man be restored to his former position? On the ground of future honest business transactions? That is out of the question; for as long as he is counted dishonorable, he is not allowed to do business on the floor. Hence he can not prove his honesty by any dealings on exchange or in the market. So in order to start again, he must *first* be declared an honorable man. Then, and not before, can he set up in business once more.

Call this doing of business *sanctification*, and this declaration of being a man of honor *justification*, and the matter will be illustrated. For as this merchant, being declared dishonorable, can not do business so long as he continues in that state, and must be declared honorable before he can begin anew, so a sinner can not do any good work so long as he is counted lost. And so he must first be declared just by his God, in order to transact the honorable business of sanctification.

To prove that this is effected absolutely without our own merit, doing or not doing, and entirely without our actual condition, we refer to the royal prerogative for granting pardon and reinstatement. Altho, among us, decisions of the judiciary are rendered in the name of the king, and yet not by the king himself, a certain opposition between the king and the judiciary is thinkable. It might occur that the judiciary declared a man guilty and dishonorable, whom the king wished not to be so declared. To keep the majesty of the crown inviolate in such cases, the prerogative of granting pardon and reinstatement is retained by almost every crowned head; a prerogative which in the present day is narrowly circumscribed, but which nevertheless represents still the exalted idea that the decision of the king, and not our actual condition, determines our lot. Hence a king can either grant pardon, *i.e.*, remit the penalty and release the guilty person from all the consequences of his crime, or, stronger still, he can grant reinstatement, *i.e.*, he can restore the accused and condemned to the condition of one who had never been declared guilty.

And this exalted royal prerogative, of which on account of sin there remains in earthly kings but a faint shadow, is the inviolable right in which God rejoices, Himself being the Source and all-comprehending Idea of all majesty. Not you, but He determines what His creature shall be; hence He sovereignly disposes, by the word of His mouth, the status wherein you will be set, whether it be of righteousness or of unrighteousness.



It is also evident that the sinner's justification need not wait until he is converted, nor until he has become conscious, nor even until he is born. This could not be so if justification depended upon something within him. Then he could not be justified before he existed and had done something. But if justification is not bound to anything in him, then this whole limitation must disappear, and the Lord our God be sovereignly free to render this justification at any moment that He pleases. Hence the Sacred Scripture reveals justification as an *eternal* act of God, *i.e.*, an act which is not limited by any moment in the human existence. It is for this reason that the child of God, seeking to penetrate into that glorious and delightful reality of his justification, does not feel himself limited to the moment of his conversion but feels that this blessedness flows to him from the eternal depths of the hidden life of God.

It should therefore openly be confessed, and without any abbreviation, that justification does not occur when we become conscious of it, but that, on the contrary, our justification was decided from eternity in the holy judgment-seat of our God.

There is undoubtedly a moment in our life when for the first time justification is *published* to our consciousness; but let us be careful to distinguish justification itself from its publication. Our Christian name was selected for and applied to us long before we, with clear consciousness, knew it as our name; and altho there was a moment in which it became a living reality to us and was called out for the first time in the ear of our consciousness, yet no man will be so foolish as to imagine that it was then that he actually received that name.

And so it is here. There is a certain moment wherein that justification becomes to our consciousness a living fact; but in order to become a living fact, it must have existed before. It does not spring *from* our consciousness, but it is mirrored *in* it, and hence must have being and stature in itself. Even an elect infant which dies in the cradle is declared just, tho the knowledge or consciousness of its justification never penetrated its soul. And elect persons, converted, like the thief on the cross, with their last breath, can scarcely be sensible of their justification, and yet enter eternal life exclusively on the ground of their justification. Taking an analogy from daily life, a man condemned during his absence in foreign lands was granted pardon through the intercession of his friends, wholly without his knowledge. Does this pardon take effect when long afterward the good news reaches him, or when the king signs his pardon? Of course the latter. Even so does the justification of God's children take effect, not on the day when for the first time it is *published to their consciousness*, but at the moment that God in His holy judgment-seat declares them just.

But—and this should not be overlooked—this publishing in the consciousness of the person himself *must necessarily follow*; and this brings us back again to the special work of the Holy Spirit. For if in God's judiciary it is more particularly the *Father* who justifies the



ungodly, and in the preparing of salvation more particularly the *Son* who in His Incarnation and Resurrection brings about justification, so it is, in more limited sense, the *Holy Spirit* particularly who reveals this justification to the persons of the elect and causes them to appropriate it to themselves. It is by this act of the Holy Spirit that the elect obtain the *blessed knowledge* of their justification, which only then begins to be a living reality *to them*.

For this reason Scripture reveals these two positive, but apparently contradictory truths, with equally positive emphasis: (1) that, *on the one hand*, He has justified us in His own judgment seat *from eternity*; and (a) that, *on the other*, only in conversion are we justified *by faith*.

And for this reason faith itself is fruit and effect of our justification; while it is also true that, for us, justification begins to exist only as a result of our faith.



XXXIII.

Certainty of Our Justification.

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

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The foregoing illustrations shed unexpected light upon the fact that God justifies the *ungodly*, and not him who is actually just in himself; and upon the word of Christ: “Now are ye clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.” (*John xv. 3*) They illustrate the significant fact that God does not determine our status according to what we *are*, but by the status to which He assigns us He determines what we shall be. The Reformed Confession, which in all things starts from the workings of God and not of man, became again clear, eloquent, and transparent. So the divine Word, ordinarily lowered to a mere *announcement* of what God finds in us, becomes once more the *fiat* of His creative power. He found an ungodly man and said, “Be righteous,” and behold he became righteous. “I said to thee in thy blood, Live.” (*Ezek. xvi. 6*)

In this way the various parts of the redemptive work are arranged chronologically each in its own place.

So long as the false and narrow idea prevailed that a man was justified *after* conversion on the ground of his apparent holiness, justification could not *precede* sanctification, but must *follow* it. Then man becomes first holy, and, as a reward or as a recognition of his holiness, he is declared righteous. Hence sanctification is *first*, and justification *second*; a justification, therefore, without any value, for what is the use of declaring that *a ball is round*?

The Scripture refuses to acknowledge a *posterior* justification. In Scripture, justification is always the *starting point*. All other things spring from it and follow it. “Christ was made unto us wisdom and righteousness,” and only then “sanctification and redemption.” (*1 Cor. i. 30*) “Therefore *being justified by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we also have access.” (*Rom. v. 1*) “Being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (*Rom. iii. 24*) And, “Whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified.” (*Rom. viii. 30*)

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For this reason the Reformation made justification by faith the starting-point for the conscience, and by this confession bravely and energetically opposed Rome’s justification by good works; for in this justification by good works that priority of sanctification found its root.

The Church of Christ can not deviate from this straight line of the Reformation without estranging itself and separating itself from its Head and Fountain of Life, vitally injuring itself. Sects which, like the Ethicals and the Methodists,²³ detract from this truth sever the faith

23 See section 5 of the author’s Preface.