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Notes on Justification in the Book of Romans

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Introduction

Two interpretive principles should guide us in determining the meaning of justification in the book of Romans:

1. We must interpret justification in light of the historical situation which existed among the Roman Christians.
2. We must realize that all important New Testament words have an Old Testament background. *Justification* is related to the word *justice* both linguistically and theologically. It must be interpreted, therefore, in light of what the Old Testament says about the justice of God.

Unfortunately, the lines drawn in the sixteenth-century debate between Catholics and Protestants have so dominated studies on justification that we have tended to interpret *justification* in light of the sixteenth-century issues rather than in light of first-century issues. In some respects we must transcend the arguments of the sixteenth century, because recent studies have demonstrated that both Catholics and Protestants were hampered by sixteenth-century presuppositions and limitations.

The Historical Situation behind the Book of Romans

In recent years the application of the “historical method” to the book of Romans by Christian scholars has resulted in exciting new insights. The traditional understanding

of Romans as a “compendium of Christian doctrine” (Melanchthon) or a “systematic treatise” is now widely challenged. In this traditional view the actual historical situation of the Roman Christians plays no vital part in the interpretation of Romans.

But there is now a growing consensus that Romans, like the other Pauline letters, was written to deal with specific problems in the Christian community. The letter is therefore “occasional” or pastoral.

Paul . . . did not set out to write systematic theology, and to use occasional literature as the basis of a system must inevitably distort it. What happened was that Paul’s thought was in effect fossilized. 1

Romans addresses a concrete set of problems in the life of Christians in Rome. This methodological principle is of great importance since so many recent studies begin with the opposite assumption and never even explore the historical data available concerning Jews and Christians in Rome. 2

Obviously, Romans will have a very different meaning if it was conceived by Paul as an eternally valid summary of his theological position, or, if he conceived it as a response to an actual, acute problem of the first century, manifesting itself particularly, but not exclusively, in Roman Christianity. Only when one knows the meaning of an early Christian document in its first century setting can one adequately interpret and proclaim it in the twentieth. 3

The Background of the Christian Community in Rome

We now have access to considerable information about the situation in the Rome of the first century.

Since World War II, biblical scholars have learned more about the development of early Christianity and the formation of the New Testament than the combined scholarship of the preceding nineteen centuries. 4

How marvellously it has become possible in the last ten years, after seventeen centuries of obscurity, to begin to discern once again the features of the unknown face of the Primitive Church. 5

In Paul’ day there were fifty thousand Jews in Rome. They had a reputation for numbers, influence and clannishness. The Jewish synagogues were organized along ethnic lines— often bearing the name of the place of origin of the Jewish migrants. The lack of a central government among these independent synagogues proved conducive to the spread of the “Nazarene sect,” which reached Rome rather early.

The first Christians in Rome were Jews and continued to live as Jews and to operate from the base of the Jewish synagogues. The agitation over Jesus, however, resulted in such tumults among the Jews that all of them were expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius in A.D. 49. This included Jewish Christians (Acts 18:2). Although the Jews were allowed to return to Rome by Nero about A.D. 55-56, they were not permitted freedom of assembly.

The returning Jewish Christians found that their relation to the Christian movement had radically changed. In their absence the Gentile Christian community had grown and prospered. The Christian movement no longer had its base in the synagogue. In fact, it seemed far removed from its Jewish roots— especially since Gentile Christians paid no attention to the law (the Jewish Torah).

While the Christian community in Rome was composed of Jews and Gentiles, they did not exist as a single congregation. Paul, for example, does not address them as “the church at Rome.” Rather, they were divided into a number of competing house-churches which viewed each other with suspicion and even hostility.

The Jewish Christians kept the law, including the dietary regulations and rest days (Rom. 14), and were suspicious of Gentile Christians. In fact, some would not recognize that Gentile believers were entitled to any status in the Messianic community unless they kept the law. On the other hand, the Gentile Christians, influenced to some extent by the prevailing mood of anti-Semitism in Rome, looked down on the “weak” Jewish Christians who were not yet emancipated from the law and did not welcome them as they returned to Rome (Rom. 14:1; 15:7).

1. The ‘weak in faith’ who condemned the ‘strong in faith’ 6

First, let us collect the materials relevant to the identification of this group. By their adversaries they are ridiculed and despised as weak and incompetent (οἱ ἀσθενοῦντες 14.1; οἱ ἀδύνατοι 15.1). The word used to describe weakness was elsewhere used to describe illness (Matt. 25.36; Luke 4.40; 9.2; Phil. 2.26f.). The incompetence is that of men for whom certain actions have become impossible (Rom. 8.3; Luke 18.27). This illness or impotence is viewed by their critics as due to a deficiency in their faith. Their faith was not strong enough to permit them to eat all kinds of food (v. 2), but they condemned as a sinner the Christian who had no scruples whatever over food (v. 3). Their weakness in faith did not enable them to view all days of the week as equally sacred, but they required special reverence for one day, presumably the Sabbath and the festivals. They called down God’s curses on every Christian who disobeyed this commandment of the Decalogue. Thus they assumed the right, even the duty, of both defining and enforcing the rules of behaviour for all Christian brothers. This entailed the fixed conviction that some foods were by nature defiling and sinful (14.14). Their ban may have included the drinking of wine (14.21), at least in circumstances determined by the strong in faith. Not only did the weak abstain from certain foods as sinful and observe certain days as holy; their condemnation of their fellows proved that, in their judgment, the Lord would be quite unable to save who did not do likewise (14.4). Thus they heaped a pile of reproaches on the heads of those whom they labeled as lawless and libertine (15.3). The demands of both consistency and legality prevented them from table-fellowship and from common worship with the strong. ‘What fellowship can light have with darkness?’

This group was composed largely of converted Jews, but it may have included some Gentiles who, in becoming Christian, had accepted the yoke of the Law. Not all Jewish believers were members, nor were all its members of Jewish descent; but they were all inclined to exalt the ‘promises given to the patriarchs’ and Christ’s service ‘to the circumcised’ (15.8). This is why they avoided the unkoshered meats of the pagan city and observed the calendar of festivals and Sabbaths. Troubled by the synagogue’s rejection of the gospel, they attributed this rejection, at least in part, to the lawlessness of Gentile believers rather than to the blindness and sin of Israel. Before they could attract more Jews to the gospel the Christian cells would need to be purged of scorn for God’s Law. Uncleanliness must be eradicated; the lawless must be brought into line; Jewish converts must be persuaded not to forfeit their kinship to Abraham and Moses. Thus desire for the salvation of all Christians motivated this group to enforce the norms which for centuries had marked the boundaries between Jew and Gentile, between the righteous and the unrighteous.

2. The strong in faith who scorned and despised the weak in faith

In Rome the situation had become polarized. Each group of adversaries was becoming more frozen in its own position, a position which in turn solidified the extremism of its opponents. One can therefore outline the position of this second group simply by underscoring the antipathies of the first. The group called itself the strong, οἱ δυνατοί, in faith. Their faith enabled them to consider all foods

acceptable, to eat anything whether or not it had been banned from the diet of the righteous (14.2, 14). Moreover, they enjoyed wrangling with the scrupulous over this matter (14.1). In fact, they scorned and despised those who were inhibited by laws concerning food (14.3, 10). The word translated *despise* (ἐξουθενέω) indicates angry repudiation, since it is the word often used in the New Testament to describe men's rejection of Jesus (Mark 9.12; Luke 23.11; Acts 4.11). It fitted well a situation where one's self-righteousness was hidden by his pious protest against another's sinfulness (Luke 18.9). It indicated treatment of these fellow-believers as if they were non-persons or no bodies (1 Cor. 1.28).

The same freedom from religious taboos extended also to the calendar. All days are the same, none being more or less sacred than another (14.5). To reject the observance of special days was viewed as a form of giving thanks to God and of honouring the Lord. Had not the Messiah liberated men from the imprisoning bond of such regulations? πάντα καθαρά: All things are clean. (Not unlike the stance of modern Christians who claim that Christ is the end of religion; faith places one in a post-religious era; it enables him to live above and beyond religion.) It is altogether likely that these brothers celebrated the dawn of the kingdom of God by demonstrating radical emancipation from all such pious inhibitions (14.17). They were convinced that this same freedom ought to be displayed by every Christian and should be accepted as the norm for all. Those who did not yet share their freedom should not be welcomed until they had been fully converted. They were ill and must be healed. Ridicule and heated debates thus became a necessary form of therapy.

It is probable that most members of this faction were either uncircumcised Gentiles or Jews who had relished this exhilarating 'post-religious' liberty. As an example, Paul himself, although he was a Jew, identified himself with the strong, except for their scorn of the weak (15.1). Many members doubtless used their emancipation as added justification for pandering to the desires of the flesh. They had not refrained from what their Jewish brothers would consider revelling and drunkenness (13.13). More scrupulous brothers would easily charge them with sinning more wildly in order that grace might abound (6.1). They accepted the declaration, 'no condemnation' (8.1), with exhilaration and joy. It brought such exuberant vitality that they became suspicious of Christians who would try to re-establish old restrictions and obligations. Faith was the source of their strength. The stronger the faith, the greater is the freedom from regulations. As, W. D. Davies has written: 'Among Gentiles, who lacked any deep acquaintance with Judaism, antinomianism was always crouching at the door, ready to enter in under the cloak of grace.'

It is easy to understand why they should despise those weaker than themselves, who could not, for conscience sake, join in their exuberant celebrations. These 'weaklings' must have appeared to be pharisaic prudes, capable only of petty complaints and neurotic fears of contamination. The strong delighted in deriding their squeamishness, in needling them into 'disputes over opinions'. 7

Paul's Reasons for Writing Romans

It has been said that the Gentile problem was the great issue of the primitive Christian church until about A.D. 70. In his letter to the Romans Paul confronts a divided community (Jew and Gentile), which was inimical to his vision of Jews and Gentiles living unitedly in one church.

As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul must contend for their rights in the church. Obedience to the gospel means that Gentile believers must be given full and equal status with Jewish believers in the church. On the other hand, Paul, as a Jew, must urge the Gentile wing of the church not to look down on Jewish believers but to appreciate their indebtedness to Israel. Paul's idea of unity was not that Jewish Christians must live like Gentile Christians in disregard of the law or that Gentile Christians must keep the law like Jewish Christians, but rather that God would be

proved to be God of both Jews and Gentiles by their justification apart from the law (Rom. 3:28, 29).

It was written to assist the Gentile Christian majority, who are the primary addressees of the letter, to live together with the Jewish Christians in one congregation, thereby putting an end to their quarrels about status. 8

We have shown the existence of a strong anti-Jewish sentiment in Rome at the time of Nero and before. Positive statements regarding all of Israel occur for the first time in Paul's letter to the Romans and must be seen against this background. The Christian congregation in Rome is surrounded by a society marked by its aversion and rejection of everything Jewish. Paul acknowledges the people of his own heritage and develops a theology of history, which assigns them an important place at the end of history. Paul's statements not only aim at elevating the stature of Jewish-Christians in the eyes of Gentile-Christians to work against the formers' low esteem on account of their Jewish heritage, but are also written in consideration of that overwhelming majority within the Jewish community which had closed itself off from the Christian mission.' 9

As for the Roman brothers, the text makes it clear that the members of Group One viewed the behaviour of Group Two as making them accursed of God. Such sin required their exclusion from fellowship, and strenuous efforts ensued to protect the gospel from this perversion. It is equally clear that members of Group Two viewed members of Group One with scorn, ridicule, and pity, and that they used all kinds of pressures to get them to jettison their 'fads' and 'taboos'. These two groups considered that loyalty to God's saving work in Christ forced them to defend their mutually exclusive positions. Their faith was felt to be dependent on standing by these convictions. To them the point at issue was fundamental; otherwise it would not have been an issue at all.

And what do these chapters reflect concerning Paul's estimate of the issue? They make clear; to be sure, that he had a different idea of what was the point at issue. To him it was not sabbatarianism or vegetarianism. He respected those who in good conscience took opposing positions on those matters. But the point at issue was the daily treatment of opponents by both strong and weak; it was the cumulative and disastrous effect of their quarrels upon the doubters and upon the whole community. It was the demand by each faction that all other believers must live according to its own norm. To Paul this involved an implicit betrayal of the gospel by both factions. This entailed their misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom of God, along with distorted conceptions of God's justice and mercy. Could anything be more important for Paul than concern about the ruin of men for whom Christ died? Than the threat that 'the offering of the Gentiles' might be unacceptable (15.16)? Than the axioms of ch.14 which were rejected by the Roman antagonists? Why did Paul spend so much effort in dealing with the trouble makers if the issue was so ephemeral? Paul was not saying to them: 'a plague, on both, your houses'; or 'the issue at stake is too trivial for concern'. He was warning them: 'You are both a plague on Christ.' 10

The problem of Jew-Gentile relations was not peculiar to Rome, for Paul had to battle this same problem in church after church. The problem, however, was concentrated and superlatively exhibited in Rome. The following factors increased the urgency of the Roman situation:

1. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem with the special offering from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem Christians (Rom. 15:25-32). This offering and the acceptance of it were so important to Paul that he felt they were worth risking his life. Jerusalem had already accepted Paul's law-free mission among the Gentiles (Acts 15; 21:25), but the question regarding the status of Gentiles in the church had not been settled. To achieve the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the one church, it was important for Paul to have the support of the Jerusalem church. But Acts 21 confirms

that Paul's apprehensions (Rom. 15:25-32) were well founded. The leaders were cool, or at least embarrassed, by his visit; and many Jewish Christians were clearly hostile to Paul and his Gentile mission. Paul sought the support of the Roman Christians at the time of his visit to Jerusalem so that, as the apostle to the Gentiles, he might visit Jerusalem with the backing of all the Gentile churches.

2. Paul also wanted to make Rome a base for a planned mission to Spain. He desired the support of the Roman Christians for this important undertaking (Rom. 15:24). But, if Paul's vision of the union of Jews and Gentiles in one church should fail in Rome, his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles would be questioned and the realization of his vision threatened.

3. Bound up with the Jew-Gentile problem in Rome was the integrity of Paul's apostolic commission. In order to vindicate his mission Paul must explain (and vindicate) what God was doing with Israel and with the Gentiles. Leon Morris and others have persuasively argued that the central theme of Romans is God— God's promises, God's wrath, God's mercy, God's love, God's wisdom, or in short, God's righteousness." 11

When Paul brought the gospel to bear on the divided Christian community in Rome, he did so under the heading of justification by faith apart from the law (Rom. 3:28).

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The Old Testament Background and the Meaning of God's Justice

In recent issues of *Verdict* we have dealt with the Old Testament meaning of justice, especially the justice of God. 13 We found that it was not based on law but on grace. Justice did not mean giving to people what they deserved (distributive justice) but giving to them what God had promised. We also saw that the justice of God in Romans (Rom. 1:17; 3:21) especially meant God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham.

"The concept of justification is inextricably linked with that of justice, both linguistically and theologically."14 If we take the word group *just*, *justice* and *justify*, we see that we are simply dealing with the adjective, noun and verb forms of the one word group. The word *justify* is simply the verbal form of the word *justice*. To justify means to execute justice. To be justified (passive voice) means to receive justice.

The Relation of Justice to Justification

On the part of God, justification is the act of the Judge in rescuing the oppressed and bringing or restoring them to the rights of the covenant. It may involve rescuing them from captivity and giving them rights to their homeland, or it may mean rescuing them from the accusations and condemnation of the enemy (Isa. 50:8, 9). Whatever the actual circumstances, justification is the judge's acting to see that his saving

justice is done. The concept is dynamic. We must not here introduce the image of an aloof or even an impartial Western judge who simply renders a bare verdict according to some law. The Old Testament judge is one who actively intervenes on behalf of the one whose rights are denied. He not only renders a verdict, but sees to it that the verdict is carried out. The oppressed is delivered, and the oppressor is destroyed. When scholastic Protestantism progressively reduced justification to a bare verdict, it failed to do justice to the biblical concept of justice and justification.

On the part of man, to be justified by God means to be a recipient of his saving justice. It does not mean to be made just in the classical Roman Catholic sense of the term.

Justice for Jew and Gentile through the Gospel

We are now ready to deal with Paul's idea of justice and justification in the book of Romans.

The gospel is about God's Son, who was raised from the dead (Rom. 1:3, 4). This act of God was a revelation of God's justice (Rom. 1:17). The resurrection is the New Testament counterpart of the Old Testament Exodus. Christ's coming out of the grave corresponds to Israel's coming out of Egypt (Luke 9:31).

Jesus was the accused, condemned, forsaken, oppressed One (Isa. 53). The resurrection of Jesus is the New Testament demonstration that God's justice executes deliverance for all who are oppressed (Ps. 103:6). In the resurrection, justice was done to the oppressed One. Jesus was justified.

This act of justification by the resurrection of Jesus is the good news which saves all who believe, Jew or Gentile. It saves them because through faith they share in Christ's justification. In this, God's justice is revealed (Rom. 1:17). First, God's justice is manifested in respect to Israel, his elect people. In the resurrection of the Messiah, the King who represents and embodies Israel, God fulfilled all his promises to Israel. God thereby proved his righteousness by demonstrating his fidelity to his covenant with Israel despite her sins. In the book of Romans Paul repeatedly says to the Jew that in the gospel God has done what he promised in the law and the prophets. He has shown himself to be faithful even in the face of his people's unfaithfulness. His word, his covenant, his promise, his commitment has not failed. Second, God's justice is manifested in the gospel in respect to the Gentiles. The very reason God elected Israel in the first place was not to show favoritism, nor to show that he did not care for the Gentiles. Rather, Israel was elected so that God could bless the Gentiles with his saving justice. Paul shows the Jew that God was not acting contrary to the word of Israel's election in carrying out the Gentile mission; rather, in this gospel program to the Gentiles he was fulfilling his promise to Israel. It was by the inclusion of the Gentiles into his covenantal family, not by their exclusion, that God's real purpose for the world was realized. In the message of salvation to the Gentiles God was fulfilling

his eternal purpose of grace. He was being true to himself. He was manifesting his justice.

The Old Testament idea that God's justice is forgiveness and salvation is difficult enough for us to grasp. But the gospel's revelation of God's justice utterly bursts through our limited notions of justice. We are no different from the Jews who waited for God to manifest his justice in the punishment and destruction of sinners who clearly deserved to die (Rom. 1:18-32). God's justice is a scandalously surprising thing. He manifested his justice by giving rights to those who clearly have no rights and by granting the highest possible status to those who sit on the dunghill of human misery.

The Jewish Christian was prepared to accept a gospel that was so good that God would forgive Gentile sinners and give them covenantal status provided they became law-keeping Jews. But Paul insists that justice demands that believing Gentiles have the full rights and status of God's children without paying any attention to the law at all!

Justification in the book of Romans is the act of justice which includes both Jewish and Gentile believer in the justification of the risen Jesus of Nazareth. Irrespective of whether they still observe the law or disregard the law, all inherit the glorious things which God had promised Israel (Rom. 5-8) and should be treated as those who share in the status of Christ himself.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

1. Morna D. Hooker, *'A Preface to Paul'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 17.
2. Karl P. Donfried, "False Presuppositions in the Study of Romans," in Karl P. Donfried, ed, *The Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), p. 122.
3. Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, p xvii,
- 4, Karl P. Donfried, *The Dynamic Word: New Testament Insights for Contemporary Christians* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 1.
- 5, Jean Danielou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea*, vol. 1, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 5.
6. "Wherever these terms are used hereafter they should be thought of as partisan labels reflecting Roman prejudice and not as objective designations. The reader should therefore assume that they stand in inverted commas" (Paul S. Minear: *The Obedience of Faith*. [Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1971], p. 8n).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-11.
8. Wolfgang Wiefel, "The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity," in Donfried: *The Romans Debate*, p. 100.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
10. Minear: *The Obedience of Faith*, pp. 32-3.

11. See Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," in W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 249ff.
12. Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, p. xvii.
13. See: *The Christian Verdict*, Essays 6, 7 and 8, on "The Scandal of God's Justice."
14. A. E. McGrath, "Justice and Justification: Semantic and Juristic Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of Justification," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, no. 5 (1982): 404-5,

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