

# **VERDICT**

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## **Justification by Faith and Human Rights**

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In the sixteenth century, *justification* was understood as *acquittal* before the bar of justice—the declaring of a sinner righteous on the ground of Christ’s imputed righteousness. We now suggest that this orthodox Protestant interpretation of justification by faith does not exhaust the biblical understanding of the term and may even fail to reach its deeper meaning.

While the matter of justification by faith was a burning issue in the sixteenth century, many today question whether this great Pauline doctrine is even relevant to modern man. There are apparently two reasons for this: (1) Protestant scholasticism has turned the doctrine of justification into a theological abstraction, and (2) modern man does not suffer as much from the troubled-conscience syndrome as sixteenth-century man did.

Modern man is preoccupied with human rights. From the outbreak of the French Revolution there has been a cry for the fundamental human rights—“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” About the same time, across the Atlantic, the Founding Fathers of the American nation struck a blow for human rights in their Declaration of Independence. That document states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Founding Fathers saw that in their struggle for human rights they were involved in a great experiment, not only for the benefit of their own nation, but for the blessing of the entire world.

Since this beginning there has been an exploding demand for the rights of ordinary human beings far beyond anything the sixteenth-century Reformers were prepared to grant. Acknowledgment of the right to civil liberty was followed by the demand for religious liberty. The movement for the abolition of slavery became irresistible in the nineteenth century. The right of the heathen to hear the gospel was also urged. Christians in the sixteenth century were content to confine the gospel within Christendom. They scarcely entertained the thought of a worldwide mission. Their ideas on election stifled the missionary spirit. But in the succeeding centuries many Christians reasoned that if Christ died for all men, then all men should hear the gospel. Great Bible societies and missionary organizations were formed and in a few years did more to proclaim the gospel outside Christendom than had been accomplished in centuries.

The nineteenth century also saw the launching of the movement for women's rights, and the thrust of this movement has not yet abated. In more recent years movements have championed the rights of the black and of other races, the right to a fair trial, the right to work, the right to strike and even the rights of the unborn.

The right to equal opportunity has been pressed far beyond the bounds the Reformers considered proper. Luther may have advanced the revolutionary concept of the priesthood of all believers, but after the Wittenberg disturbances and the formation of the Lutheran ecclesiastical system, he retreated into sixteenth-century conservatism. In that age of kings, princes, lords and serfs, it was thought that Providence had assigned each man the station in which he was to be content. In most instances religion became the staunch ally of the *status quo*. The idea that peasants and servants should have equal opportunity with the privileged classes was not seriously entertained by the Reformers. And in the history of Protestantism the doctrine of justification by faith has been construed individualistically so that there was not a powerful impetus for social change. Probably the most serious criticism leveled against the Protestant doctrine of salvation is its individualism.

In recent years sympathy for the poor and for the victims of oppressive power structures has spurred a new theological thrust known as liberation theology. While liberation theology may err in putting economic and political redemption in the place of the total redemption the Bible bears witness to, this theology does express a legitimate concern for human rights. Unfortunately, the church has not always been in the forefront of the battle for human rights. In fact, it has often been a partner to those oppressive power structures which have resisted human-rights movements.

We want to state unequivocally that the entire matter of human rights is a legitimate concern of modern man. To deprive human beings of their rights is to degrade and to dehumanize them. This is the greatest indignity and punishment that can befall man. Every Christian should be deeply concerned with human rights. To our shame, non-Christians have often shown more genuine concern for human rights than have Christians, who seem too preoccupied with getting their own souls to heaven.

## Justification by Faith in Broader Perspective

To the question, “What does justification by faith have to do with the matter of human rights?” - We answer, “It has everything to do with human rights, for it goes to the heart of the issue.”

The biblical word group, *righteousness, justice, justify, justification, righteous*, is related to justice and right. When Moses, for instance, spoke of justifying the innocent, he was concerned with a dispute over rights (Deut. 25:1). Girdlestone therefore makes this comment on the biblical meaning of *justify*:

**The judge, by justifying one of the parties, decided that the property in question was to be regarded as his. Applying this aspect of the matter to the justification of man in the sight of God, we gather from Scripture that whilst through sin man has forfeited legal claim to any right or inheritance which God might have to bestow upon His creatures, so through justification he is restored to his high position and regarded as an heir of God. 1**

Schrenk further points out that in the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament, the word justify can mean “to champion someone’s cause, to secure justice for him, before the judgment.” 2 Justification implies being given rights—for example, “the right to inherit” or “the right to take a wife.” 3 In the meaning of justification as found in Philo, Josephus and the Septuagint, David Hill includes a “plea or claim of right,” a “just claim,” “the giving of what was due.” 4

In Paul, justification is not only a favorable verdict which gives the believer “the status of ‘being in the right before God’.” Being “in the right” is also a judicial sentence which grants every legitimate human right. According to Paul the righteousness which comes by faith bestows the right to the inheritance which God promised Abraham (Rom. 4:13, 14). The justified also have right to the “glory of God”— i.e., the glorious future that God has planned for his people (Rom. 5:1, 2). Justification is said to bestow the right to eternal life (Rom. 5:18, 21). Justification is shown to grant the right of freedom from sin and freedom from living by the Old Testament law code (Rom. 6 and 7). Justification also gives the right to the life-giving Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:10).

The rights which God’s justification brings to the believer are not only vertical (before God); they are horizontal (within the family of God). He whom God has justified through faith alone becomes a fully-accredited member of God’s household in heaven and on earth. As there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of heaven, so there should be no second-class Christians in Christ’s body on earth.

Through sin the human rights invested in Adam by creation have been forfeited. An appeal to creation, therefore, is not a legitimate basis to contend for human rights. But through the redemptive act of Christ, the forfeited inheritance has been regained for all men if they will only believe the gospel.

## The Historical Setting of Galatians and Romans

Galatians and Romans are the two New Testament epistles in which the apostle Paul expands on the matter of justification by faith alone. In writing these books,

however, it is doubtful that Paul intended a treatise on the doctrine of justification. We need to ask why Paul considered justification by faith only in these two books— or at least so directly only in these books. The evidence indicates that behind these two epistles lay Paul's deep concern for the Gentile mission— the chief problem of the church from A.D. 34 to 60.

Paul was called to be the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. The scriptures which consider his calling (Acts 9:15; 22:14, 15, 21; 26:16-18; Gal. 1:13-16) are reminiscent of the prophetic call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5-7), of Ezekiel (Ezek. 2) and of the Servant of Yahweh (Isa. 49:1, 6). Paul's mission to the Gentiles (Acts 26:18) is a reflection of Isaiah's prophecies about the opening of the eyes of the blind in the age of the Messiah (Isa. 35:5; 42:7, 16). Paul was moved by the consciousness that the eschatological moment had arrived when God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham's seed was to be fulfilled. For centuries the Jewish Law had been a barrier to prevent the Gentiles from being a part of God's chosen people. But Paul was given insight into the mystery that Christ had abolished this barrier (Eph. 2:15) so that the Gentiles could be included among God's people without having to become proselytes to the Jewish Law. Thus to the Gentile believers Paul could write:

**Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. – Eph. 3:2-6.**

The first Christians were Jews, and the first church was the Jerusalem community. They continued to live as devout Jews, faithful to the Law of Moses. For a few years they confined their witness to fellow Jews. Indeed, their strict adherence to the Law made it impossible for them to reach the Gentiles, with whom they could not even eat.

But after the martyrdom of Stephen, when the Greek-speaking or Hellenistic Jews—who adopted a far more liberal attitude toward the Law— were driven from Palestine, they ventured to preach the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. This Gentile outreach, which ignored the strictures of the Jewish Law, met with astonishing success. Soon a flourishing, Law-free community of Gentile believers was established in Antioch. It was from this base that Paul and his helpers launched their grand design of taking the gospel to the nations.

After the Gentile mission had been under way for about ten years, the Jewish Christians grew increasingly uneasy over the prospect of becoming a minority party within the Christian church. For centuries they had been educated in the idea of Jewish privilege. The Law of Moses (Torah), given to Israel as a sign of her election, had become the badge of the Jewish right to be the children of Abraham and the heirs of God's promises. It was not easy, even for Jewish Christians, to discard some of these ideas. Eventually some of the Jerusalem Christians demanded that Gentile Christians become Jewish proselytes— i.e., they must be circumcised and become

subject to the Law (Acts 15:5). If the Jewish Christians could force the Gentile believers to become practicing Jews, this would guarantee the superiority of the Jews and their right to control the fledgling Christian church. We would suggest, therefore, that the primary concern of the Jerusalem church was not a matter of guarding the morals of the church (as some scholars have indicated), but their concern was guarding the preeminence of Jewry. Furthermore, the Jewish Christians undoubtedly thought they could not hope to win their non-Christian Jewish brethren to the faith unless they could be assured that their rights as God's special people would not be eroded by becoming a minority party within the Christian movement. Hence, to some Jewish Christians there was only one solution—the Gentiles could be accorded full and equal rights with the Jewish Christians only if they were subject to the Law like the Jewish Christians.

Paul vehemently opposed these Jewish Christians. He contended that the Gentile believers had full and equal rights in the family of God apart from subjection to the Jewish Law (Torah). Galatians and Romans may therefore be seen as a vindication of Gentile rights to stand on an equal footing with Law-keeping Jewish believers and to share the inheritance with them. Thus Paul vindicated the rights of the Gentiles under the concept of justification apart from Law (e.g., Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16).

As in all his thinking, in employing the concept of justification Paul returned to the Old Testament background. Here the justifier is the judge who vindicates and who by juridical sentence *establishes* the right of one who is *declared* to be in the right. In the Psalms the vindicator is the ideal King who champions the rights of the downtrodden and oppressed (Ps. 72). In Deutero-Isaiah it is the Redeemer (Hebrew: *Go' el*), who assumes the cause of the poor, guilty captives. In justifying them the Redeemer gives them the right to be a free people. He gives them the right to repossess the land of their inheritance. Again, justification is vindication. As a declaring to be in the right by divine sentence, it is not an abstract decree. For in the Old Testament the ideal King is a judge who follows his sentence of right with action for the oppressed and against the oppressor. Thus, when the exiles in Babylon were justified, they were restored to full rights as God's covenant people. But the prophet to the exiles also declared that the Gentiles would likewise be embraced in the saving action of Yahweh.

With the Galatians the issue was the right of the Gentile believers to become the children of Abraham and inheritors of all that God had promised him. This is called the inheritance the promised Holy Spirit, and the blessing of righteousness (Gal. 3:2, 6-14, 16-19, 29; 5:5). In their confrontation at Antioch Paul had to remind Peter that both Jews and Gentiles are justified apart from observing the Law (Torah) (Gal. 2:16). While justification primarily means the right to favor with God, it is inseparable from all the rights that God's favor implies. Through the gospel, Gentiles "are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6). Entitlement to full rights in the body of Christ comes "apart from ... the law" (Rom. 3:28). Such rights are granted purely out of grace on the sole

basis of the doing and dying of Christ (Rom. 3:24; Gal. 2:21). In other words, it is Christ alone and not the observance of the Law which entitles either Jews or Gentiles to the blessings of the new age.

In Galatians Paul argues that the Law did not contribute anything to realizing any of the covenantal rights, for these rights were granted to Abraham by promise 430 years before the Law was given to Moses. Rather than giving Israel their full rights of sonship, the Law actually kept Israel in confinement and, though they were heirs, treated them like infant children and slaves (Gal. 3:23, 24; 4:1-3). It was Christ, not the Law, who brought freedom, righteousness, sonship and the gift of the Holy Spirit. If the Galatians, who had been justified and had become sharers in the gift of the Holy Spirit, would now become subject to the Law, they would go backward, not forward. Far from placing them in full possession of their rights as children of Abraham, their subjection to the Law would enslave them again (Gal. 4:1-10) and would even jeopardize their rights under the regime of grace (Gal. 5:4).

In Romans Paul addresses a mixed Jewish-Gentile church. Here he agrees with the Jewish claim that by their sins the Gentiles have forfeited all right to life. But then Paul virtually says, “And so have the Jews” (Rom. 2). The only way to be vindicated before God’s judgment seat and to be given the right to life (the new life of the Spirit, which is the beginning of eternal life) is by the redemptive act of Jesus Christ (Rom. 2; 3:24, 25; 5:1-5, 18; 8:1, 2, 10). Paul not only contends for the right of Gentiles to be grafted into the good olive tree and to enjoy all the rights of being God’s people (Rom. 9-11); he even pleads that the sensitive Jewish believer—”weak in the [Freedom of] faith”—be treated by Law-free Gentile believers with the uninhibited acceptance that the truth of justification by faith demands (Rom. 14). Then Paul makes that magnificent statement which defines the horizontal implication of justification by faith: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you” (Rom. 15:7). To be justified means to be given the right to be accepted by the body of Christ on the basis of Jesus Christ apart from compliance with the Law. (At the time the Epistle to the Romans was written, the Jewish Christians kept the Law and Gentile Christians did not.)

In the providence of God great diversity existed in the primitive church between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. They did not share the same forms of worship or the same life-style. God was to be glorified in this diversity, especially since he would thereby demonstrate that he was the God of both Jew and Gentile. Those who wished to force the Gentiles to live like Jews, or even to force the Jews to live like Gentiles, exposed themselves to the displeasure of the apostle. This diversity was one of the greatest testimonies to the fact that neither the observance of the Jewish Law nor its non observance entitled Christians to any of their glorious rights. Such rights were based on the justification which comes by grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, received through faith alone.

## The Lesson for Today

Justification apart from Law means justification apart from religion— our way of saying and doing things. 6 As nothing makes a sinner a member of God's family except faith in the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ, so nothing makes a person a member of the Christian church but that same forgiveness of sins. To be "in Christ" means to be in the body of Christ.

A person may think that his form of worship— baptism, Supper, holy days— and his theological belief system are correct. We will not dispute that. But he must also demonstrate in history that God has forgiven sinful people with or without his form of baptism, with or without his way of approaching the Supper, with or without his theological belief system, with or without his Sabbatarianism. If he grants that such persons can be forgiven by God on the ground of Christ alone, then he must grant them full rights in the body of Christ.

Justification apart from Law/religion means that all believers are given full rights in the body of Christ and that we are commanded to receive any child of faith as we would receive Christ himself. Whatever is sufficient for acceptance with God must be sufficient for acceptance within the body of Christ. If the religious position of other Christians does not exclude them from the possibility of God's forgiveness, it must not exclude them from the possibility of communion with us.

Only when a Calvinist can successfully argue that John Wesley could not possibly be acceptable to God can he with consistency exclude an Arminian from the right of full Christian fellowship. Only when a Lutheran is prepared to argue that those alone who accept a Lutheran view of the Supper can be justified can he credibly exclude all others from Christ's Supper (or is it the Lutheran Supper?). Do not all those who belong to Christ have an equal right to come to his Supper?

Justification apart from Law/religion therefore means that full rights are offered to sinful, undeserving people on the sole ground of what Christ has already done. We dare not allow men to make their religion a mid-wall of partition in the body of Christ (Eph. 2:14, 15).

We must go even further and declare that Christ invites the entire world of sinners to the gospel Supper— to the eschatological feast of joy. Has not his sacrifice made an atonement for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), and has he not commanded that the good tidings be proclaimed indiscriminately to all? (Matt. 28:18, 19) Our abstract theologizing on the doctrine of election must not qualify in any way the invitation of Christ. People are more important than our theological system— whatever it may be. That is what Paul learned when Christ rather than Law/religion became the center of his life.

As Christians, we need to rise up and address the great questions of human rights. While men of the world grapple with these weighty matters, we Christians too often

fuss and feud over petty religious issues (“circumcision”) which have no relevance to the real world. We must bring the gospel to bear on the great questions of our time.

Some Christians base their stand on human rights upon creation rather than upon Jesus Christ and his redemption. They probably do this because they see that God is the Creator of all, but hesitate out of deference to their systematic theology, to think that Christ is the Redeemer of all. It is clear that an appeal to the doctrine of election has had no small part in protecting the privileges of some at the expense of others—even in racial matters. Basing human rights on creation is inadequate. Because of the Fall, all human rights have been forfeited. Whatever good man enjoys on this earth is due to grace— grace purchased by the blood of Christ. The basis for all human rights is the death and resurrection of Christ. He has redeemed such rights by his life, death and resurrection. Christ’s representative role is as wide as Adam’s (Rom. 5:14-19), and therefore we may affirm that in Christ the human race is elected to life, freedom, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to the eternal inheritance— excepting only those who refuse to believe the gospel and who willfully sin against the Spirit. As Christians, we must therefore work for human rights, not in the name of some human philosophy, but in the name of Jesus Christ, who died to restore the dignity of human rights for all without respect of persons. A Christian should be the greatest champion of human rights, because he believes that Christ takes the side of those who have no rights, and even of those who are clearly, in the wrong (Rom. 4:5).

## Notes and References

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

1. Robert B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament: Their Bearing on Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (1897; reprint ed., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), p. 161.
2. Gottlob Schrenk, *Theological Dictionary New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964) 2:212.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
4. David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 102-3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 142. Cf. p. 150.
6. See Robert D. Brinsmead and Geoffrey J. Paxton “The Proper Distinction between Religion and the Gospel,” *Verdict* 5, no. 2 (1982): 6-16.

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