

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: LEGAL OR EXPERIENTIAL?

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Is it true that when Christ died upon the cross He effected a legal or forensic justification for “all men”? Or did He confine His sacrifice to a mere “provision” contingent upon the initiative of the sinner in accepting it? Is the sacrifice of Christ ineffective until the sinner repents and accepts it? Does the sinner’s “acceptance” start the wheels of justification rolling?

Certainly it is true that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is a “provision” in the sense that it was provided; but is it “provisional” in the sense that it is ineffective until the sinner takes the initiative? Is Christ the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world, or does He merely *offer* to light every man?

It is essential that these questions be answered correctly, otherwise we shall find ourselves forced into an antinomian position. This will become apparent as we proceed.

This paper will examine Scripture teaching on the subject, which the author believes fully supports the 1888 message. There he learned the “good news” that salvation in Christ is not a mere provision, but a fact; that Christ is not merely *offered* to every man, but *given* to every man; that the Lord loves us so much that we cannot be lost unless we resist the Holy Spirit; that it is easy to be saved and hard to be lost, in view of this great salvation; that when

Christ died on the cross, He actually did something for “every man”; that it is God who takes the initiative in effecting our salvation, and that it is impossible to be lost unless we take the initiative in resisting and rejecting what He has effected for us; and that justification by God’s free grace is effected for “all”, God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, “all men” owe even their physical life to Christ’s sacrifice and by His stripes they are healed. This all sounds like “good news” to me. But the world does not know or understand it because no one is telling it to them, or at least very few are; and those in the remnant church who should understand it and proclaim it powerfully and effectively are themselves confused by conflicting concepts of justification by faith. Here are several Scripture passages which seem to support the 1888 view:

(a) “We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our’s only, but also for the sins *of the whole world.*” 1 John 2:1, 2. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 4:10.

Truly this “propitiation” applies to “all men.” It is more than a mere “provision”, for “never one, saint or sinner, eats his daily food but he is nourished by the body and the blood of Christ. The cross of Christ s stamped on every loaf.” (DA 660). “Our Saviour Jesus Christ . . . hath brought *life* and immortality to light through the gospel.” 2 Tim. 1:10.

The “propitiation” therefore is already effective for “all,” “saint or sinner.” “All men” live because of it. *It is the basis for justification.* Only because of the “propitiation” is it possible for God to overlook “the sins of “the whole world” and send “His rain on the just and on the unjust”, and open His hand, to satisfy “the desire of every living thing” (Mt. 5:45; Ps. 145:16). (Note above that John says the “propitiation” was offered for those who did *not* love God).

(b) “When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the *ungodly* . . . God commendeth His love toward us, in that while we were *yet sinners*, Christ died for us . . . *When we were enemies, we were reconciled* to God by the death of His Son.” Romans 5:6-10.

The death of Christ made effective a *forensic* justification applicable to all men. Legally, “all men” were justified, because He died for “all” (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). And He died for them “while we were yet sinners.” “When” we were still “enemies, we were reconciled . . .”

That sounds like a blatant contradiction, doesn’t it? How can you be “reconciled” while you are still in enmity? The answer is: we were *justified legally* by a sacrifice made for “all men,” and the reconciliation is included.

But let’s be careful here: legal justification and “receiving the atonement” are two different things. We *receive* the atonement [reconciliation] only when we *believe*. “We have *now received* the atonement [reconciliation],” Paul says in Romans 5:11, when we are “justified *by faith*” (verse 1). To

confuse legal justification with justification by faith will not help us finish the work in this generation; it will set our clock back to the 16th century, and lead to antinomianism. Instead of completing the Reformation begun by Luther and Calvin, such confusion will only retard its progress.

(c) “Therefore as by the offence of one [Adam] judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of One *the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.*” Romans 5:12.

Again we have what appears to be a contradiction! How can Paul contrast the “judgment” which came by Adam upon “all men to condemnation” with the “free gift . . . unto justification” coming *likewise* “upon all men”? The vast majority of “all men” certainly do not exhibit any of the fruits of “justification by faith”! The answer to this apparent contradiction is simply to say that that is true—“all men” do *not* exhibit the fruits of justification by faith because they have not been justified by faith. They have only been justified *legally*; and the simple fact that they live is evidence of that legal justification. “All men” would not be able to draw even one breath if that forensic justification were not effective for them. The very fact they live is proof that Christ died for them, and is the “propitiation” for their sins. Only by virtue of this sacrifice can God “wink at the times of this ignorance.” (Acts 17:30).

Here is where the “gospel” comes in. We are commissioned by the Lord to “go into all the world” and tell “all men” that they have been justified. We are to bear “good news.” God has no chip on His

shoulder against them. He is not imputing their trespasses unto them. The propitiation is already a fact, not a mere provision. And when some *believe*, that moment they are “justified by faith.”

(d) “If One died for all, then were all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves . . .” 2 Cor. 5:14, 15.

All *would* be dead if He had not “died for all.” The grave is what we deserve. The very fact “all” live is evidence that a forensic justification has been effective for them in that “our Saviour Jesus Christ . . . hath brought *life* to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). “Life” has thus been provided for “all men” who deserve only death. More than this, those who *appreciate* the “Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world”, those who “*believe*,” for *them* Christ Jesus also “hath brought *immortality* to light through the gospel.”

(e) “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” Verse 19.

Clearly, God does not “impute” any man’s trespasses unto him until he rejects Christ. Therefore, the only sin for which anyone will be condemned in the Judgment is the sin of unbelief, that is, the sin of not appreciating the sacrifice which effected a legal justification for all (cf. DA 58). When Christ died, He did something for every man, woman, and child in the world. He was “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world”. John 1:9. This “Light” is not a mere provision—it is effective. “In Him was life; and the

life was the light of men.” Verse 4. No one, saint or sinner, ever knows a moment of joy, ever smiles, but by virtue of the sacrifice of Christ. This is “news” the world needs to hear; and for those who believe it, it is “*good news*”.

(f) “For all alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine splendour, and all are justified by God’s free grace alone, through His act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus.” Romans 3:23, 24, NEB.

This “all” means what it says, for it harmonizes with the other passages. The NEB correctly translates the Greek “justified,” which is a present participle with the word “all” as its proper subject. (The KJV is also clear). Since God’s grace is “free,” it must be equally manifested to “all.” If it is a mere provision subject to certain conditions it cannot be described as “free.” But this “justification by God’s free grace alone” obviously must be forensic, for “all men” do not believe it and receive it. Paul continues in verses 25-28 to discuss justification, proceeding from the forensic justification effected for “all” to the experiential justification which brings “remission of sins” “through *faith* in His blood.” And because faith is counted for righteousness, God can “be just and the justifier of him which *believeth* in Jesus.” This involves a change of heart! Justification *by faith* is not merely forensic, a judicial “declaring” millions of light-years away. It includes *remission* of sins! “Remission” is not a mere entry in a legal record, without relation to the heart of the sinner. “Remission” is the actual taking away of the sin, accomplished in justification *by faith*.

SUMMARY

As noted above, the sacrifice of Christ was made “for the sins of the whole world.” Adam’s sin brought condemnation “upon all men,” but the propitiation offered by Christ cancelled the “condemnation” so that “the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.” Do you not agree that the Scripture words are clear?

Paul and John do not say that “the free gift” of justification has been accepted or believed by “all men” unto *eternal* life. But they do say that by His propitiation Christ effected a justification for “all men,” even “for the whole world.” Obviously, this must be forensic.

The sinner has been “nourished by the body and the blood of Christ” all his life, and in his unbelieving state it has been unwitting, and ungratefully received. But when he hears “the truth of the gospel,” one of two responses takes place in “all men”: either he *disbelieves* or he *believes*.

If he *disbelieves*, he crucifies to himself the Son of God afresh, puts Him to open shame, treads under foot the Son of God, counts the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and does despite to the Spirit of grace. Heb. 6:6; 10:29. (But God’s grace is so great that it pursues “all men” for a lifetime before the sinner continues to “resist” until this tragic unbelief is final).

If the sinner *believes* (thank God!), his *heart* is moved by a sense of appreciation for the propitiation offered for him. NT “faith” is not a mere mental assent to certain doctrines. It is not a choice motivated by egocentric concern, whether a desire for reward in Heaven or a fear of Hell. NT “faith” is

of the *heart*—“with the heart man believeth unto righteousness” (Rom. 10:10). “God so *loved* the world that He *gave* . . . that whosoever *believeth* . . .” Jn. 3:16. Note that the “believing” becomes possible for the sinner only when he realizes that God did the loving and the giving! This most popular verse in the Bible gives the true definition of NT faith—a heart appreciation of the divine love revealed at the cross.

Since the “fall of Babylon,” or rather, because of it, Seventh-day Adventists find themselves left “holding the bag” as it were with this original NT definition of faith unique unto themselves. The reason is that the foundation stone of “Babylonian” theology makes NT faith impossible *as an experience*. This is the source of much confusion. I refer to the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul.

This false doctrine deprives the love of God of its true self-giving nature and debases it into an egocentric love. It has the Saviour assuring the thief on the cross, “*Today* shalt thou be with me in Paradise,” so that Christ did not truly die, did not suffer the equivalent of the “second death,” did not drink the cup to its bitter dregs, and the Father did not truly *give* His Son but only *lent* Him. According to this false doctrine, Christ Himself was sustained throughout His ordeal on the cross by egocentric concern! “Babylon” has Christ doing the very thing that Satan tempted Him to do in the Garden of Gethsemane,—endure a measured amount of suffering short of making an infinite sacrifice. Do

you not see how this idea of limited love is debased and “fallen”?

In the same way, the idea of “faith” related to such an egocentric love must itself be debased and “fallen.” Thus the popular evangelical idea of faith becomes a mere egocentric exercise of the soul, a mere “trust.” It is not with the *heart* that “man believeth unto righteousness,” but with the clever head. The so-called “believer” is on the lookout for a bargain, and judges “salvation” to be excellent security; his “faith” is acquisitive in nature. Simply because of selfish concern he “trusts” in Christ for security. Such “faith” is identical to the “trust” a client manifests in his insurance company when he signs on the dotted line, or the “trust” we manifest in our dollar, or our “trust” in government or police service. We trust all these agencies for material security. In like manner, say the proponents of this brand of “righteousness by faith,” we are to “trust Christ” for our eternal security.

Such a doctrine has God “declaring” a man to be “just” on the basis of such self-motivated, acquisitive “faith,” while his heart remains cold and unappreciative of the genuine truth of Calvary. Could such “righteousness by faith” produce any other kind of experience than lukewarmness?

Note how the Lord’s servant emphasizes the real truth of NT faith:

“It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Saviour’s matchless love, revealed throughout His pilgrimage on earth, from the manger of Bethlehem to Calvary’s cross,

and the sight of Him attracts, it softens and subdues the soul. Love awakens in the heart of the beholders. They hear His voice and they follow Him.” (DA 480).

Note also how clearly the Apostle Paul describes this genuine subjective experience of justification *by faith* which rests upon an appreciation of God’s objective justification effected for the world:

“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, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past . . . that He might be just and the justifier of Him which believeth in Jesus . . . Boasting . . . is excluded . . . by the law of faith.” Rom. 3:23-27.

God could not be “just” if He “justified” a sinner who did not have such faith! And if the sinner is motivated by a mere concern for his personal security without a heart appreciation of the offering of that “blood,” there can be no “remission of sins that are past” because the very root of sin itself is left intact in the soul—self-centeredness.

Obviously, as long as the root of sin is left intact in the human soul, any profession of “Christ” becomes mere antinomianism. If, as Paul says, “love [agape] is the *fulfilling* of the law” (Romans 13:10), self-love is the very essence of *breaking* the law.

This is the reason why proponents of a “justification by faith” based on an egocentric concern invariably declare that it is “impossible” to obey God’s law truly. They recognize the continuing

rule of self-love after they profess to be so “justified by faith”, and to accommodate to it. Thus they openly and shamelessly confess that no truly justified person can possibly render obedience to God’s laws. In order to evade the claims of the Sabbath commandment, many Sunday-keeping ministers and theologians declare that the law of God is abolished; this false doctrine we rightly declare to be antinomianism. What practical difference is there in our maintaining that the law of God cannot be obeyed? If we develop a brand of Adventist antinomianism, we shall prepare a people to accept the mark of the beast, for why should one risk economic security or life itself to be loyal to a law that he believes cannot be kept?

The fundamental error is a misunderstanding of justification by faith—a misunderstanding of justification itself, and a sadly deficient understanding of faith itself.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that the cross means a justification effective for the world, otherwise God would have to “impute their trespasses” unto the world. But the cross is not a mere provisional propitiation; the Apostle Paul and John declare it to be positive and effective.

The sinner has the power to resist it. But if he does not resist, he will be saved. In this light, should we give the impression that it is merely provisional, that God does impute men’s trespasses unto them before they hear and reject the gospel in its fullness? Is it not a libel on His character to represent God as carrying a chip on His shoulder

against mankind, doing nothing, standing back with divine arms folded, waiting for us to take the initiative? NT teaching seems crystal clear that God has taken and continues to take the initiative in justifying “the world.” In view of this, He “hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” We are to proclaim “good news” of a reconciliation effected and say, “Be ye reconciled to God.” 2 Cor. 5:20.

NOTE: Much confusion results from the use of illustrations based on an inadequate understanding of the NT doctrine of justification by faith. For example, here is the popular one of a person in an oarless boat being swept over Niagara Falls. This represents the sinner being lost. But someone standing safely on shore throws a rope to the “sinner” in the oarless rowboat. This is said to represent salvation “offered” by Christ. This is the “provision” made for his rescue, or salvation. The person in the boat must “do” something, take the initiative of grasping the rope thrown to him, in order not to be swept over the Falls.

This illustration hardly represents the magnificent truth of NT justification by faith. In order to harmonize this illustration with NT teaching, a strong divine Swimmer must grasp the drifting boat midstream and arrest it in its fatal journey to the Falls. Instead of a rope merely thrown to the fast-drifting sinner, the helpless boat is securely tied to a mighty Rock. But God cannot force the sinner to be saved against his own will. He has the power to “resist”, but “if he does not resist,” he will be saved (SC 27). God has taken the magnificent initiative;

the sacrifice of Christ is effective. *The only way the sinner can be lost is to cut the rope that has secured his boat to the Rock, or beat the divine Swimmer down.* In this light, it is seen that if we are saved, it is *God* who takes the initiative; if we are lost, it is *we* who take the initiative.