

THREE

Justification as a Work of Grace

IN ITS doctrine of justification the Christian faith possesses a succinct and striking means of expressing its own distinctive character. This is not the only, nor the only legitimate, means which it possesses, but it may reasonably be claimed as the most suggestive and challenging. Yet the doctrine of justification, at least under that name, can hardly be said to hold a prominent place in modern Christian discussion and propaganda. The very word 'justification' (which is used freely enough in ordinary speech) seems to strike a jarring note in a religious context. Associated pre-eminently with two, or perhaps three, great names in Christian history, it seems to belong, with them, to the past. But it is surely not without significance that these names have become symbols of epoch-making moments in Christendom, moments when the gospel, threatened with eclipse or largely obscured, suddenly shone forth again in full vigour and undimmed.

The Apostle Paul, Martin Luther, and John Wesley, despite all distance of time and dissimilarity of circumstance between them, have one thing in common. Each of them wrestled with the same personal problem; each of them found the same answer; and each proclaimed his discovery, with startling and well-known results. Their problem was the fundamental religious question, how they were to adjust their relationship to God; their answer was the specifically Christian solution, formulated in terms of the doctrine of justification. Whatever else may have influenced the men and their work, this problem and its solution furnished the dominant impulse of their lives. Their one supreme aim was to present the gospel to their world in all its fullness and unalloyed.

It is not, however, the intention of this chapter to discuss the

historical emergence and development of the doctrine of justification, nor to enter into the controversies that have been raised around the outstanding figures we have named. Its intention is rather to show how the Christian doctrine of justification provides an effective, if summary, formulation of the essence of the Christian gospel; how it answers in a way that cannot be surpassed the fundamental question of all religion; and how it adequately meets the deepest needs of human life.

The word 'justification' itself is a term with legal associations, and its theological usage is coloured by the legalistic conception of religion typical of Judaism.¹ God is there conceived as the righteous Judge, who will one day judge every man in strict accordance with His law. The law is the expression of God's holy and righteous will, and in the Judgement only those who have conformed to its requirements will be 'justified' or pronounced righteous. No one who has transgressed the law of God has any hope of justification, unless he repents; that is, unless he ceases from disobedience and learns to obey; for God 'will not justify the wicked' (Ex 23⁷). According to the verdict finally pronounced, reward or punishment will be meted out. The righteous will 'enter the kingdom of heaven', and 'inherit eternal life'; the wicked and sinners will be excluded from the kingdom and forfeit the life. And since in the present world it is generally the wicked who prosper and flourish, while the righteous suffer and are despised, the final reckoning will mean a vindication of righteousness to which the godly can look forward with eager longing and hope.

From this Jewish view the Christian differs profoundly, though its terminology is very similar. God is still a righteous Judge, and the awe of His judgement remains. It is still only the justified who gain the life of the kingdom of God. The law is still an expression of God's will, and as such is 'holy and just and good' (Rom 7¹²). Indeed, the deepest intention of the law is

¹ By Judaism here is meant, not the faith of the Old Testament, but that post-exilic development of the religion of Israel which found its most characteristic expression in Pharisaism.

first truly seen when it is interpreted and fulfilled by Christ, who sums up the will of God for us in the words: 'Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5⁴⁸). This, however, is to demand the impossible. Even the most scrupulous observance of the law does not attain this; and in the light of Christ it is only too plain that 'all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3²³). (Or will anyone seriously claim to be as good as Christ, as good as God? Yet God wills nothing less.) Who, then, can possibly be justified?

It is at this point that the astonishing and revolutionary thing happens. God, who abominates the unjust human judge (Prov 17¹⁵, Ex 23⁷), actually 'justifies the ungodly' (Rom 4⁵); he opens the kingdom of heaven and grants eternal life to sinners. And this He does on the ground of His pure mercy and grace alone, out of His freely given and unmerited love. The sole condition required on man's part is faith: what is offered must be accepted, the gift must be received, the grace appropriated.

The term 'justification' has often been criticized as too redolent of the law-court for Christian use, where it is said to introduce an improper and even dangerous note into theology. There is an element of truth in this criticism, especially if we consider only the etymology of the word. Etymology, however, is rarely a safe guide to doctrine, for the real meaning of any word is only to be found in its context; and from the context we have just outlined it should be clear that even in Judaism 'justification' is not something purely forensic. It is never a mere verdict of acquittal and nothing more, but it is an acquittal that carries with it admission to God's kingdom and a share in His eternal life. A similar caveat should, incidentally, be entered regarding other terms which may be used to express the same idea as justification. The remission or forgiveness of sins, for instance, never means the mere cancellation of a debt.

However that may be, when Christianity speaks of 'justification by faith' or 'by grace', or 'the justification of the sinner', it is clear that if we are in a law-court, a remarkable change has taken place in the atmosphere. In fact, the language of the law-court

has been used, with deliberate intent, to destroy the very idea of legalism in religion. Free forgiveness is neither the rule nor the exception in a court of law; still less a forgiveness of this kind, which means not simply that the case is dismissed, but that the guilty sinner is received into fellowship with the holy God.

Now if, in the broad outline we have drawn, we have rightly interpreted the Christian meaning of justification, it is not difficult to see that it does effectively formulate the essential content of the gospel. Thus far we have considered it simply in idea, but we may now turn to the reality which underlies this idea. On what grounds does Christianity base its paradoxical view? If Judaism expects the justification of the righteous at some Great Assize in the future, where and how is the justification of the sinner realized according to Christianity? The answer to these questions lies in the content of the Christian message; that is, in Jesus Christ. In the Incarnation, Cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in His church with its Word and sacraments, the idea of justification finds its concrete reality; these are the facts on which the theory is based.

When the Christian faith affirms that in Jesus Christ the eternal and living God is present among men, this can only mean that God does in fact receive sinners into fellowship with Himself. The teaching of Jesus itself is sufficient to dismiss all thought of human merit or desert as a factor determining God's dealings with men. God makes His sun shine and His rain fall on the just and the unjust, and is kind to the unthankful and the evil (Mt 5⁴⁵, Lk 6³⁵). The wages of the Labourers in the Vineyard bear no relation whatever to the hours they have worked (Mt 20⁸⁻¹⁶). The Publican, who appears before God as a sinner with nothing to plead, goes home 'justified', rather than the scrupulously dutiful Pharisee who claims his reward (Lk 18⁹⁻¹⁴). Such a claim is absurd, for even when men have done all that is commanded, they can say no more than 'we have done that which it was our duty to do' (Lk 17¹⁰). Who can claim a reward for meeting his obligations?

But what is already clear in the teaching of Jesus becomes even more plain from His conception and fulfilment of His own mission. 'I came', he says, 'not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mk 2¹⁷); and He became notorious as one who 'receiveth sinners, and eateth with them' (Lk 15²). He came 'to seek and to save that which was lost' (Lk 19¹⁰), and He created a scandal by becoming 'a friend of publicans and sinners' (Mt 11¹⁹). There were even occasions when he plainly and explicitly anticipated the prerogative of God, and pronounced to sinners the absolution and remission of their sins (Mk 2⁵, Lk 7⁴⁸).

Here, however, a problem arises which might well have been raised above, and which certainly occurred to those who observed the behaviour of Jesus or heard the preaching of Paul. If Jesus deliberately cultivates the friendship of publicans and sinners, must He not be a sinner Himself? If God 'justifies the ungodly', how can He be righteous Himself? The answer is that He can and He does—at the cost of the Cross. This answer is indicated, though not elaborated, where St Paul speaks of Christ as one 'whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood, to shew his righteousness . . . that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus' (Rom 3²⁵⁻⁶).

It is of course beyond our province here to examine all that is involved in the 'propitiation', or to examine the many and varied theories of the Atonement. What is of importance is that when the holy God enters into fellowship with sinful men, He can only do so at this great price. As a matter of historical fact there were only two possible ways in which Jesus could have avoided the Cross: He could have acquiesced in human sin, or He could have left sinners to their fate. He could have accepted the standards of value and the understanding of life maintained by the men whose fellowship He sought, or else He could have withdrawn Himself from their society. But in neither case would He have fulfilled His mission; and He therefore refused to do either, though He knew that the refusal must inevitably

lead to the Cross. He offered men His fellowship, but on His terms and not theirs; and the friendship of the Son of God for sinful men quite literally cost Him His life. It is little wonder, then, that the Cross has become the supreme sign and seal of divine grace and love, since 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5⁸).

Were it not for the Incarnation and the Cross, the idea of justification would be a mere theory, if it had ever existed at all. But were it not for the Church with the Word and sacraments of the gospel, the Incarnation and the Cross would scarcely be more than an ancient tale. It is through the fellowship of the Church, the body of Christ, animated by His Spirit, that justification becomes a present reality for all who believe. The Church is the medium through which He still continues His characteristic work of love. When the Word of the gospel is preached, it is Christ Himself who, through halting human words, still comes 'to call sinners'. When the Bread is broken and the Wine poured out, it is Christ Himself who still 'receiveth sinners' and shares with them His very life. Whenever 'two or three' are met in His name, He is there present with His own (Mt 18²⁰). It is here that 'justification' is realized, for it is here that He leads sinful men into real and actual communion with the living, holy God.

The essential meaning of the Incarnation, the Cross and the Church is crystallized in the doctrine of justification; and this meaning is the ground for saying that the doctrine answers, in a way not to be surpassed, the fundamental question of all religion.

All real religion is, or claims to mediate, communion with the eternal, fellowship with God. The question of questions for any religion, therefore, is how this fellowship or communion is brought about. The difference between the various religions is nowhere more apparent than in the different answers they give to this question when it is put to them. Broadly speaking, however, there are only two main types into which they can be divided. Either the realization of fellowship with God depends

primarily on something that man does or is, or else it depends primarily on what God is and does. In Judaism we have seen an example of the former type. Man finds favour and acceptance with God if he fulfils the law; for then he is righteous, and can rightly claim a place in God's kingdom; that is the due reward of his merit. In Christianity we find precisely the opposite. Man finds favour and acceptance with God, simply because God wills to show favour to him; in himself he is a sinner, who has no claim to a place in God's kingdom; and if he receives a place, it is by the free gift of God's grace and unmerited love. Beyond the point which Christianity thus reaches, it is impossible to go; for here the realization of man's fellowship with God is conditioned solely, and not just primarily, by God.

It is true, of course, that even in Christianity there is a condition to be fulfilled on man's part if he is really to enter into fellowship with God; he must have faith. It must be a faith, moreover, that acknowledges God as 'the justifier of the ungodly', the forgiver of sins. That is to say, faith in the Christian sense of the word is inseparable from repentance, or the confession that one is a sinner and the willingness to be forgiven. For the offer of forgiveness, or justification, as it is proclaimed in the gospel, implies the judgement that those to whom it is made are in fact sinners. To offer forgiveness is not to pretend that no wrong has been done, but to assert that it has. That is no doubt why many people do not like the gospel, for they are unwilling to believe that they are sinners. On the other hand, there are those who are only too painfully conscious of their own sinfulness, but are unable to believe in God's willingness to forgive them. Consequently, although 'all have sinned' and Christ 'died for all' (2 Cor 5¹⁴), so that God's grace and love are freely offered to all, yet not all men live in fellowship with God, not all have faith.

Does not this, then, suggest that in the last resort we must say that even in Christianity the realization of fellowship with God depends at the decisive point on man? Or shall we say that faith itself is the gift of God, and so risk becoming entangled in the

problems of predestination? With those problems we cannot deal here, though something will be said about them in a later chapter; but at this point two observations may be made. First, if faith is a 'condition' of fellowship with God, it is one quite unlike that constituted by the 'works' of legalistic religion. These meritorious deeds profess to form the legitimate basis of a claim to divine favour; but faith is not the basis of any claim. It is rather the actual claiming and appropriating of a favour that is freely offered. In Judaism the favour is absent if the works are lacking; but in the gospel the favour is there whether faith is present or not. To say that justification is 'by faith alone' is to describe the human aspect, so to speak, of a relationship which in its divine aspect exists 'by grace alone'. Both phrases sound the death-knell of all legalism and merit.

Secondly, when faith is asserted to be a gift of God, this is in order to prevent its ever being regarded as another kind of 'work' or meritorious achievement on the part of man. The gospel does not say 'Unless you have faith, God will not love you', but rather 'God loves you, therefore have faith, believe in His love for you'. Faith, in the Christian understanding of it, is a human response to the forgiving love of God. That is why we cannot lightly disregard the assertion that faith itself is a gift of God. Such faith would be a literal impossibility apart from the divine grace of the Incarnation and the Cross and the unceasing initiative of divine love through the Church. We could not be justified and enter into fellowship with God through faith if He did not draw from us that response by the revelation of His grace.

The reality of this divine love, that humbles itself and takes the form of a servant for the sake of an utterly undeserving world, is what vindicates the claim of Christianity to be the final and absolute religion. That does not mean that there are no traces of divine initiative in other religions, for without action on the part of God there could be no religion at all. But in no other religion is the divine initiative so central, so sovereign, so complete. For whenever God becomes a factor of serious

moment in a man's life, so that the question of his relationship to God grows urgent, it seems to be a natural assumption that man must in some way become worthy of God and attain to God's level in order to have communion with Him. Whether by his own efforts or with divine aid, man must scale the heights in his quest for God. Christianity, however, puts an end to all this; for it both effects what all religions seek to do, and at the same time rejects their methods. So far from being yet another form of man's age-long quest for God, it proclaims God's own quest for man; and it offers a real and certain communion with God, not on the high level of God's holiness, but on the low level of man's sinfulness. There can be no certainty or assurance of attainment, where everything depends on what man achieves; but here the emphasis is placed, not on man, but on God and His unfathomable grace. And it is on God that the emphasis ought to be placed in any religion worthy of the name. If God is really to be God, He must be sovereign and supreme; and He is never more truly God than the exercise of His justifying grace.

At this point, however, an obvious objection can be raised. When Christianity offers fellowship with God 'on the level of sin' (Nygren), it undoubtedly meets the deepest religious needs of man, but it might well seem to do so at the expense of destroying the foundations of his ethical life. If God receives the sinner so freely, is there not every reason for making the anti-nomian assumption that ethical considerations are irrelevant? If heaven is not gained, nor hell avoided, by seeking to do what is good and right, why should we trouble to do it? Why should we not 'continue in sin, that grace may abound?' (Rom 6¹).

The shortest answer to this question is St Paul's 'God forbid!'; but it is not difficult to see that more can be said than this. To begin with, it should be clear that if we seek to do what is good and right as a means to some end beyond itself, we are not really doing what is ethically good. To practise honesty because honesty is the best policy is not really to be an honest person at all, and to obey the commandments of God from fear of hell or hope of heaven is not really to do the will of God. It is

rather to do our own will, since our eye is on the end that we wish to attain—namely, our own salvation. From this difficulty, however, the doctrine of justification delivers us. The justified man is set free from any concern about rewards and punishments, and the will of God can be done freely and for its own sake. It is true, of course, that in the New Testament and in the teaching of our Lord Himself there are statements about rewards and punishments in connexion with a Judgement yet to come; and such statements must be taken seriously. But they clearly must not be understood in such a way as to conflict with the principles of our Lord's teaching which we have already observed. How they are to be understood, the following considerations will show.

Just as Judaism looked forward to a final Judgement of the world, so also does Jesus. He therefore distinguishes between present and final justification. In the present time He is the mediator of God's forgiveness to sinners who recognize their sinfulness and need of forgiveness; and this is present justification. But those thus justified and set right with God are more than once warned of the Judgement they still have to face. In this final reckoning, moreover, it seems that the verdict will be pronounced on men according to what they have done or failed to do—that is, according to their 'works'. But it is important to notice the nature of these 'works'. For Christians, the disciples of Jesus, the question will be whether they have openly confessed their faith in Him (Mt 10³²⁻³) and have been obedient to the will of His Father (Mt 7²¹⁻³), persisting in faith to the very end (Mk 13¹³) and showing to others a forgiving and merciful spirit like that which has been shown to them (Mt 18²³⁻³⁵, 6¹⁴⁻¹⁶, 5⁷). In other words, the 'works' by which they are to be judged are nothing else but the evidence of a living faith.

The question is not dissimilar with regard to the heathen, whose Judgement is described in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Naturally nothing is said here about faith, or the confession of Christ, but instead the verdict is pronounced according to certain 'works' that men have or have not done.

But again it is important to notice the nature of the works. They are nothing else but works of mercy, acts performed simply and solely for the purpose of helping those in need. This fact is emphasized by the surprised questions of the parties concerned, both on the right hand and the left (Mt 25^{37, 44}). Neither group is conscious of having performed (or omitted to perform) acts by which they would be judged in the sight of God. But their unselfconscious behaviour, motivated by no thought of its possible future consequences in the shape of reward or punishment, reveals the kind of persons they are, and whether they are the kind who belong to God's kingdom or not. Jesus is always more concerned about the kind of people we are than about the legal rectitude of our conduct, as He shows supremely by His interpretation of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. And the right kind of people are for Him those who are merciful as the heavenly Father is merciful, who is kind to the unthankful and the evil (Lk 6³⁵⁻⁶).

The relationship between present justification and future Judgement, as Jesus conceives it, can be very well illustrated from the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18²³⁻³⁵). Here is a man who has contracted an immense debt, which he cannot possibly pay, and he thoroughly deserves to be punished. But when he pleads for mercy, and for time to pay, even greater mercy is shown to him than he requests; for his debt is quite simply cancelled. This is an act of pure grace on the part of his master. Yet immediately afterwards the man shows that he has completely failed to appreciate its significance, by refusing to show any mercy to a fellow-servant who owes him a quite trifling debt. He shows himself, that is to say, entirely out of tune with his master; and he forfeits the kindness that has been shown to him, because he has never really grasped it. Not that he would have earned or merited it, even if he had shown mercy to his fellow-servant, for we do not have a *right* to the forgiveness of our debts because we forgive our debtors.

If, therefore, we are justified at the Last Judgement, this is as much an act of grace as our present justification. There is

nothing meritorious in the 'works' to which reference is made in connexion with it. In the case of Christians, such works are nothing else but evidence of living faith—that is, of a right response to the grace that has been shown to them in Christ. In the case of the heathen, the works are evidence that they are the kind of people to whom the gospel of grace would have appealed, and who will find themselves entirely at home in the kingdom of a gracious God.¹ The absence of such works, in the case of anyone who has had opportunity to perform them, is quite clear testimony that the person concerned has nothing in common with God and His kingdom, and would be quite out of his element in heaven. For what place can there be, for one who does not believe in showing mercy and forgiveness, in a kingdom where mercy and forgiveness are the supreme characteristics of the King?

In the light of what has now been said, a final point may be added with regard to the relation between justification and sanctification. It is sometimes said that in present justification God accepts the sinner with a view to, and in anticipation of, his sanctification, which is something that he cannot attain without divine aid, but which is the necessary condition of his final justification. It is not, however, difficult to see that in this view we have a rationalization of the doctrine of justification, which is little else but a very thinly disguised legalism. Undoubtedly it is true that God wills our sanctification; He does not want us to remain sinful, but to become holy and righteous and good; and that is something which is possible for us only through communion with Him. But we may not therefore say that God justifies us, or takes us into fellowship with Himself, simply in order to make us good. Fellowship with God is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Religion is not the handmaid of morality, although in modern preaching it is often represented as such.

¹ The heathen who are saved, though they never had the opportunity to respond to the gospel, may perhaps be thought to have responded to the 'grace of Creation', of which something is said in a later chapter.

Justification and sanctification must certainly never be separated, but they can and must be distinguished: Sanctification is neither the purpose nor the cause of justification, but rather its result. It is the fruit of faith, the effect of grace. Not that entire sanctification is the immediate result of present justification. The sinner who is received into fellowship with God is still a sinner, and he is likely to remain a sinner to the end of his earthly days. He has acquired, without doubt, a new motive and centre for his life, but the old centre does not disappear forthwith. He is not yet wholly God-centred, but is still in some measure self-centred, so that we might describe him as, in the literal sense of the word, 'eccentric'. He is *simul justus et peccator*, both righteous and a sinner; and although he becomes daily more sanctified as his communion with God deepens and grows, there is no promise that the final goal will be reached in the present world.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that the Christian doctrine of justification nowhere suggests that God accepts the sinner in easy-going tolerance of his sin, but always in spite of it. The very word 'justification' here proves its value, by reminding us that God is, after all, the Judge, who judges us to be sinners, and whose good and perfect will remains as an absolute obligation for us, even though He justifies sinners. It is in the light of this will that we are seen to be sinners at all—that is, precisely in the light of God's good will toward us. The God who justifies the sinner is the God who makes His sun shine and His rain fall on the just and the unjust, who loves His enemies and gives His only Son to die for them. This selfless, self-giving love is what judges us precisely in the act of justifying us; for *we* do not behave like that. This is the righteousness of God, supremely revealed on the Cross, which both exposes and pardons our sin. And it is such a love as this, which God Himself has given to us, that He desires us to pass on to others. The ethics of justification can be summed up in the words: 'Freely ye have received; freely give' (Mt 10⁸).