Original Sin and Justification by Faith

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THOMAS BECON, Archbishop Cranmer's chaplain, wrote an allegory about a private dinner party through which he expounded the way of salvation. The first of the four courses which the cook served up consisted of texts from scripture which set out the sinfulness of man's condition " This is a bitter dish to begin the meal," a guest complained. " Its bitterness is necessary to be digested," his host replied, " that you might the better appreciate the delicacy of the dishes that follow. A knowledge of ourselves is necessary to understand God's grace ".

Scripture teaches clearly that all humanity is sinful. No child of Adam avoids sin.[1] This testimony of scripture is clear; but we should not need the light of scripture to arrive at this elementary truth about human nature, at least in this generation when the marks of human sinfulness are so clearly to be discerned all around us. The question arises, why is sinfulness universal? Pelagius had an answer, viz, the bad example of society into which children are born. There are modern sociologists who give the same reply. Change the environment, isolate the child from the entail of the past, and the sinful propensities will not develop. But experience shows that this is not so. Sinfulness is innate, an integral part of human nature as it now is.

The Bible does not speak much of the origin of sinfulness in the individual. Romans 5. 12 is the crux. In this verse we are in difficulty exegetically because St. Paul has not completed his sentence. But it is plain that he is contrasting Adam and Christ. The point of the comparison is that the actions of both affect a wider area than their individual lives. Christ's single act of obedience has brought life to multitudes. St. Paul's point would be lost if he did not believe that Adam's act of disobedience had brought death to all; death passed upon all, for that all sinned, presumably in Adam.

Different explanations of how Adam's sin involve his posterity have been given. Origen arguing in parallel to Hebrews 7. 10, said all of us sinned in Adam, in the same way as Levi paid tithes to Melchisedek. A later view, popular in reformed circles, was that, Adam being the federal head of the human race, God imputed his sin to his descendants. It is worth remembering that neither Archbishop Cranmer nor John Calvin held this view.

Another view, which has affinities to Augustine, is that just as all men share Adam's physical life, by an unbroken physical connection, so we share his character and soul by an unbroken succession of descent.

This is true. However we think of the origin of the human race,

[1] Romans, iii. 23; iii. 10-18; I John i. 10.

about which so little is known scientifically, we all have an unbroken physical connection with the first humans, and have had passed on to us what is called human nature. And that nature, not only by the testimony to scripture, but also from easy observation, universally has a deep rooted proneness to sin. The origin of this is not so important as the fact.

Hitherto in this article we have assumed that we know what sin is, without defining its meaning. Shall we define it as that which is contrary to the mind of God? Thus a state of affairs can be sin, as much as the active trespass or offence. Or perhaps we might define the word eschatologically, to keep within the fashion of modern theology! Sin, then, is that which must receive the condemnation of God, whenever judgment is passed on it; that which cannot come within God's presence; that which must be excluded from heaven.

On these definitions, it is plain that man's inclination to sin is in itself sin. It is contrary to the will and mind of God. It is the opposite of the idea of man as God created him, and wished him to remain. Whenever God passes judgment on a nature which contains so deep-rooted within it this inclination to sin, He must condemn it as less than perfect, as contrary to His will, as unsuitable to remain in His presence, as excluded from heaven. "Proneness to sin," wrote William Tyndale, "is damnable". Tyndale brought the example of snakes. Men kill snakes because they condemn their nature, long before the snake has bitten them. It is the snake's nature to poison, and this is so even while within the egg. It does not become a snake because it bites, but it bites because it is a snake. So no matter how immature the snake may be, even while it is still unborn, man is its enemy, for it is the enemy of man, for its nature is to poison. Man condemns snakes, whatever degree of development, whether embryo or full grown, which the individual snake has reached. Similarly all humanity—whether infant or full grown, infected as it is with a proneness to sin which becomes actual as soon as opportunity is given—stands under God's eternal condemnation, for it is contrary to His mind and will. This conclusion is fully in line with scripture. The wrath of God abides on all (except those in Christ).[1] Men are by nature sons of disobedience, on whom the wrath of God comes.[2]

Human sentimentality does not like to think that all men, even the smallest child, have a nature which God must surely condemn; or as the Bible says, on which the wrath of God abides. We dislike to think this about ourselves, that even when we are at our very best we come so far short of God's glory that we must in ourselves be excluded from Heaven where nothing but perfection abides. And if excluded from heaven, nothing but hell remains for us, nothing but the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of the teeth. Such is the proper portion of all those who share a sinful nature. We do not like the thought, but facts are facts.

Against this background God's grace shines brightly. "God commendeth His own love toward us that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." The love of God is the basis of the Gospel, which is that God will save all that call upon Him. This introduces the subject of

[1] John iii. 36. [2] Col. iii. 6; Eph. v. 6; ii. 2.

justification. How is it that any men who are very far gone from original righteousness ever enter heaven? The answer is that when they come up before the judgment seat of God—and this does not wait to the final day, but is an ever present activity—God passes the judgment on them that they are righteous, and thus fit for His presence, now and through eternity. But how is this so; how is it that God, Himself the embodiment of righteousness, can pass a judgment apparently so contrary to the facts? Some theologians resolve the paradox by minimizing sin. They argue that sin is not so grievous a thing but that God may ignore it. One act of compunction is sufficient. The fact that man's nature is awry and not after God's mind is glossed over. Although our natures made us what we are, these thinkers distil the ego from the nature to say that God accepts us because we are not responsible for our natures.

Any minimizing of sin is a step away from the truth, away from the teaching of Jesus. Christ spoke of hell and eternal judgment more frequently than the rest of the New Testament. To seek an explanation of God's justification by glossing over the heinousness of sin is a blind alley. Yet the glorious fact is that God does justify the ungodly. How so?

The Roman Catholic Church gives an answer that God's verdict of just is only given at the completion of a long process of sanctification by which sin is purged out and virtues grown in the soul till at last the human soul attains perfection and is rightly admitted to heaven. The Roman Catholics give the name of justification to this process, which for most sinners is a long one, extending to thousands of years in purgatory. The means by which (according to the Roman Catholics) God works out this process of justification (or as we would say sanctication) are many—the reception of the sacraments, ascetism, pilgrimages, good works of all descriptions. For the Roman Catholics the phrase "God justifies the ungodly" is no paradox but a straightforward, almost platitudinous statement that God makes bad people better.

The Roman Catholic view cannot stand the test of scripture. The word 'justify' does not mean 'make just' but 'declare just'. This has been established beyond doubt lexicographically.

The Bible strictly forbids men to justify the ungodly. "He that justifieth the wicked and he that condemneth the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. xvii, 15). But no sacred writer would forbid the making of bad men better, which is the meaning of justify according to the Council of Trent. It is foolish to suggest that the Bible forbids us to make the wicked good. That should be an aim of every Christian. What is forbidden is passing a sentence of just on those not just, yet this is what St. Paul says God does; and the answer St. Paul gives is that God is righteous in doing so, because of Christ's sacrifice.

Space does not allow the examination of the doctrine of the atonement or what it was that Christ endured on the cross. Much of this will always remain unknown to us here. We can glimpse, but cannot fathom as yet (and I hope for all of us never) the awful consequences of sin. But this we may say clearly, from scripture and from experience,

that the result of Christ's death is that men are offered by God salvation, that is to say, forgiveness of their sins, justification, reconciliation, adoption, glorification; and this they may have for the asking.

Justification may be defined as acceptance with God, and the scriptures say that this is offered as a present reality, acceptance now and at the last day. There is little difference in scripture between forgiveness and justification. Both are the result of being "in Christ". Men are justified through being forgiven. God does not take account of the believer's sins. "Blessed is the man whose sins the Lord will not impute." (The Greek is very strong.) God's forgiveness is so complete that our sins are cast into the depth of the sea, cast behind God's back. When we forgive we seldom forget; with God forgiveness is forgetfulness. The Christian stands before his judgment bar without spot or wrinkle, so that there is no question but he is adjudged just. He is justified.

The ultimate ground of our justification is God's character. God is gracious and loving to men. The gracious character of God is revealed in the Old Testament and in the New. In Eden the protevangelium (God's promise of Christ to Adam and Eve) is a proclamation of what God will do for men. In all our Salvation the initiative is with God. At Sinai God revealed Himself as "the Lord, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy and truth. . . ."

The most important fact about the Old Testament sacrificial system was that it was a God-given (and not a man invented) means of reconciliation with God. There were some sins outside the scope of atonement provided by sacrifice. In those cases there was no other way for the penitent but to cast himself on to the same mercy of God that had provided the way of sacrifice. The story of David's repentance is an example. When by means of Nathan's parable he was convicted and confessed "I have sinned", the prophet was able to reply, "the Lord also hath put away thy sin".

So too Elijah told Ahab that the king's repentance had averted the judgment in his days.

It is in the writings of the prophets and in the psalms that this free justification through the graciousness of God is emphasized. Nothing could be plainer than Isaiah 1. 18. "Come now and let us reason together saith the Lord, though your sins be scarlet, they shall be white as snow."[1] Psalm li especially reflects the humility of penitence, and confidence of God's merciful forgiveness, both of which flow from a knowledge of God's unchangeable graciousness: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness, according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions".

God is no tyrant in the Old Testament, but a gracious, albeit a just, God. The God of the priests of Baal who cut themselves with knives is not the God of the Christians. The Curé d'Ars, flagellating himself till he swooned, was mistaken about God's character. Salvation is free. This is clear in both Testaments. Forgiveness is free to us, but as the homily of the Salvation of Mankind reminds us, it is not free to God.

[1] Cf. Hosea 6. 1, Jer. 31. 33, Ez. 36. 25.

This insight is present in the Old Testament. The sacrificial system was a standing witness to the need of propitiation. In Is. liii the servant of the Lord suffers for others. God has laid on Him our iniquity and with His stripes we are healed.

In the New Testament the doctrine of justification remains unchanged. The Gospel proclaims that God graciously forgives repentant sinners. " Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Our Lord's parables of the prodigal son and of the pharisee and publican illustrate the truth of this. Both the prodigal and the publican simply confess, with a truly contrite heart, like David, " I have sinned ", and they receive immediate and free forgiveness.

But as is natural, the ground of forgiveness, i.e., the propitiating death of Christ, is more prominent in the New Testament than in the Old. Instead of being secondary in thought it has become primary. The simplest faith in Christ saves, e.g., the penitent thief, the paralytic borne of four, and the woman with the issue of blood. In Acts the same salvation through the name of Christ is preached. " In none other is there salvation ; for neither is there any other name under heaven given among men, wherein we must be saved " (Acts iv. 12). Paul preached in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia, " Be it known unto you therefore brethren that through this man is proclaimed unto you remission of sins and by him everyone that believeth is justified from all things from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses " (Acts 13. 34, 39).

The New Testament makes quite clear that the ground of this offer is Christ's death and resurrection. " Christ died for our sins." " He was delivered up on account of our sins and raised on account of our justification." As a result of Christ's work, forgiveness, justification, reconciliation is offered to all men. There is nothing that men can do but accept. God's merciful character and overflowing love is revealed in the gratuitousness of salvation. It is the essence of Christianity. The Church of England homilies declare that a man who denies the doctrine of justification by faith only is not a Christian. St. Paul said the same thing. Those who added any work of theirs to that of Christ " are severed from Christ " (Gal. 5. 4).

God offers justification or complete acceptance in Christ to all who will receive this offer. Those who respond share in the benefits of Christ's death. Their sins are blotted out, their natures are remade, they are born again of the Spirit. They put on Christ and through Him, and only through Him and His righteousness, enter God's presence. All this is the work of God. Any little patch with which we might wish to patch up our own sinfulness is otiose and does despite to Christ's blood by denying the completeness of the redemption He has wrought. Our salvation is God's work from beginning to end and is offered to all, and made effective to all who believe, for unless God works His gracious work in the soul, that soul is lost. The wrath of God abides on him.

We are justified, i.e., accepted by God as sinless, on account of the merits of Christ. Justified by the merits of Christ only and justified by faith only are identical in meaning. Both formulae were used by Cranmer.

Faith is trust, and is directed to God's promises rather than to dogmas. Hence its essence is personal, and is the highest worship that we can offer God. Note, for example, the personal emphasis in the fourfold " given for thee " in the words of distribution in the Communion Service. God offers us salvation which Christ has won. It becomes ours through faith. For faith is not only an attitude but also an action. Christ says, " Come unto me ". The coming is faith. Christ says, " I stand at the door and knock. If any man open the door, I will come in ". The opening of the door is faith.

Faith is said to justify because faith is the only faculty of the soul which perceives and accepts God's offer and promises of salvation in Christ. Faith justifies not because faith is a virtue so pleasing to God that He rewards it with salvation ; but that by faith, and by faith only, we cleave to Christ. None of our virtues is rewarded with salvation, for from beginning to end Salvation is a free gift.

The New Testament often speaks of baptism as justifying. This is because baptism is essentially an act of faith in God's promises of forgiveness. This service depicts by its actions God's inward washing and the uniting of the believer with Christ. The coming to the service and the undergoing of its imagery bodies forth the recipients' faith in those promises of God which the service dramatizes. This faith ensures the fulfilment of those promises. Thus baptism justifies all those who receive it in faith. For baptism is dramatized faith.

Let us turn our attention to the case of infants. If any infant enters heaven it must be because God has forgiven it its sinful nature, and moreover changed that nature by the new birth. For except a man be born again he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

I suppose no one will stay to argue that God cannot regenerate an infant. But the question is, does He regenerate all infants who, e.g., die in infancy? Are all " born again " by virtue of their tender years?

I believe that God normally forgives the sins and regenerates in baptism only those infants for whom prayer is made, that is to say, children of Christian parents who by virtue of birth are members of the covenant and are God's already (1 Cor. 7. 14). The prayers and faith of the parents of such infants is not disregarded. There is no difference between infants and adults. All are justified by faith and by faith alone. And if infants are justified by faith, then it is entirely appropriate that they should receive baptism, the sacrament of faith, and that the faith which justifies them should be expressed in the service which Christ instituted for this purpose.