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JUSTIFICATION AND JUSTICE

A Brief Response

George O. Evenson

I admire the courage of the essayist, for he challenges Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, and seems to ignore the better known works on New Testament theology. I am sorry that my comments are in the main critical, for he does express valid concerns in the introduction and conclusion of his paper. I am pleased that he has responded to some of the criticisms made when his paper was discussed at the Division meeting. However, I am still in sharp disagreement with the theological rationale he offers. My comments will be *seriatim*.

In contrast to this paper, which argues that the Lutheran Confessions unduly restrict political involvement by Lutherans, the Australian theologian F. Hebart in his laudatory study of the *Formula of Concord* (published in serial form in *The Shepherd*) declares:

We know today that international poverty cannot be relieved permanently by direct aid, as vital as this continues to be. We also need to implement long-range schemes which change the system causing poverty. (*The Shepherd*, May 1978, p. 31).

It seems almost a caricature of the Lutheran Confessions to argue that in them "God's created order was handed over to the non-redemptive forces of life...Instead of a powerful Gospel, one has invincible evil holding the field..."

What is the corporate and earthy character of justification by grace alone in Paul? What is "the context of familial relationship" in Romans 4? In Romans 4 Paul is discussing the justification of Abraham by faith, and the promise to him that he would be the father of many nations. Paul affirms that people become heirs of the promise to Abraham not by circumcision but by faith--a very individual act.

I would challenge the claim that justification and justice are "parallel words used in Scripture to portray the holistic character of God's salvific

efforts in healing the human heart, feeding the hungry, shattering bondages and establishing conditions for a humane life." This is in contrast to statements made by scholars representing a rather broad theological spectrum:

But before we proceed further to clarify the contrast between the Pauline and the Jewish conception it must be clearly recognized that there is complete agreement between them as to the formal meaning of *dikaiosyne*: It is a forensic-eschatological term.

-- R. Bultmann, "Theology of the N. T." I, 273.

Justification is God's objective act of conferring upon us a new status, metaphorically described by the forensic metaphor of justification.

-- Alan Richardson, "An Introduction to the Theology of the N.T." 236

The *dikaiosyne theou* includes justification. Righteousness is forensically ascribed to the believer. It is imparted to him as a new quality before God. The judgment of God achieves the *dikaiosyne* of believers by remission.

--G. Schrenk in "Theological Dictionary of the N.T." II, 204.

Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3, 4).

-- Augsburg Confession IV, Tappert translation.

Is it true that "the Hebrew mind could never conceive of a heart made right with God outside of the context of food for the hungry, a happy family and liberation from bondage"? A rather different picture is given in Habakkuk 3:17-18:

Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Numerous other Old Testament passages could be quoted in the same vein.

In what sense was justification "primarily a corporate experience of an entire people bound by a covenant loyalty akin to marriage"? Most of the prophets were "loners." Were they not justified? In no way does this description fit the Jews who constituted the first disciples of Jesus.

Instead of being the entire people so bound together, they were a minute portion of the Jewish people.

The paper quotes from Hosea 2, Isaiah 2 and Isaiah 11. But these are promises of what will some day be--not descriptions of what things are.

Even while things fall far short of the fulfilment of the promises there is justification by faith (2 Cor. 5:7).

The paper asserts that “for Jesus justification was indeed justice, and justice was justification.” Was it justice that those who labored in the vineyard one hour received the same wages as those who worked all day (Matt. 20:1-16)? Wouldn’t we agree that the elder brother was right in arguing that it wasn’t fair that his younger brother was treated so royally on his return home (Luke 15)? What was the justice that led Jesus to declare to the penitent thief, “Today you will be with me in Paradise”?

What is the evidence that “Scriptural salvation includes both justification and justice within every facet of life”? For evidence otherwise look at Romans 8:35f., Hebrews 11:37-40, and 1 Peter 4:12-16.

Perplexing is the statement that “Advocacy of justice in Native land claims and prophetic challenging of corporate investment *is* also preaching the Gospel.” In our day these actions may well be the *fruit* of the Gospel, in the sense that people whose lives have been transformed by what God has done for them in Christ become genuinely concerned about the plight of the helpless and powerless. But these actions are not the Gospel; the Gospel is the good news of what God has done, especially in Christ (Isaiah 53:6; John 3:16; Romans 1:16f.; 1 Corinthians 2:2; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Nor are these actions preaching the Gospel, unless the word “preaching” here is meant broadly in the sense of acting in accordance with the Gospel. If this is the meaning, then it is a fruit of the Gospel.

Permit me a theological comment: Jesus stated that a tree is known by its fruits. But the fruit isn’t the tree. A fruit of justification is love for one’s neighbor - love which certainly includes a concern for justice for all people. But the fruit isn’t the tree.

With the essayist I look for the day proclaimed in the Scripture quotation with which he concludes his essay. But I note that Scripture explicitly declares that this glorious day becomes a reality after the ushering in of the new heavens and the new earth by the return of Christ in glory - not before. Until that day those who are justified by grace through faith should be concerned, however imperfectly, about justice for all.