

## *The Four Aspects of Justification*

In the New Testament, we find statements about justification which, at first glance, may appear difficult to reconcile.<sup>1</sup> For instance: ‘Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God’ (Rom. 5:1). Justification by faith. And yet, a few verses later the apostle declares: ‘Having now been justified by [Christ’s] blood’ (Rom. 5:9). Justification by the blood of Christ. Yet again, in the closing verse of the previous chapter, the apostle states that Christ ‘was raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4:25). Justification in the resurrection of Christ. And, going back to Romans 5:9, what Paul goes on to say is: ‘Much more then, having now been justified by [Christ’s] blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him’ (Rom. 5:9). Believers are ‘eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm [them] to the end, that [they] may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:7-8); that is, justification at the final judgment. And, of course, at the root of it all, we have God’s eternal decree to justify his elect through Christ:

Whom [God] foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he predestined, these he also called; whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified (Rom. 8:29-30).

Now, how can a sinner be justified in eternity past, justified in the death and resurrection of Christ, justified by faith, and yet be justified in eternity to come? We must not dismiss this question as trying to be clever with words. Whenever we come across a difficulty in Scripture, there is always a gem underneath. In this case, the stronger our grip on this fourfold view of justification, the greater will be our

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a lightly edited version of the chapter ‘The Four Aspects of Justification?’ in my *Eternal* pp31-38.

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appreciation of its richness. Moreover, a biblical stance on the four aspects of justification will keep us from the error of ‘eternal justification’.<sup>2</sup> No mean benefits!

Before I develop the point, let me digress for a moment or two. Taking this element of ‘seeming contradiction’ about these statements concerning justification, I want to latch onto the notion of ‘contradiction’. Let me say just a few words on it.

### ***The seeming contradiction***

I include the definite article because, here, once again, we meet our old friend ‘the seeming contradiction’, ‘the paradox’, ‘the antinomy’ of the gospel. That venerable gentleman keeps turning up, does he not? Of course he does! Like the poor, he is ever with us. As long as we are in this fallen world, we shall never be able fully to understand all God’s revelation, let alone explain it all and in all its ramifications. Yes, it is our duty and privilege to try to grasp as much of God’s truth as we can, and to explore it with all the zeal, care and grace God gives us, to ‘enquire and search carefully’ (see 1 Pet. 1:10), but we shall always end up where we cannot fully comprehend, cannot answer every question, cannot take it any further; that is, we shall meet with one ‘seeming contradiction’ after another. It is inevitable.

Well, how should we greet our old friend? I have fully gone into this matter elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> so I will not repeat myself here, except to say that the right way to treat any biblical paradox – formed by two seemingly contradictory statements drawn from Scripture – is to hold both in tension. Just like railway lines,<sup>4</sup> we must let them stay parallel. We must not, whatever we do, try by human ingenuity to fuse them into one. Above all, we must not get round the seeming contradiction by getting rid of one aspect of the paradox to leave the other to stand alone in all its pristine glory.

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<sup>2</sup> See my *Eternal*.

<sup>3</sup> See my *Offer; Amyraut*.

<sup>4</sup> I am talking of traditional railways, of course.

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Continuing with the railway illustration – we would be mad to get rid of one of the rails! Such a railway might be remarkably logical, but it would be singularly fatal to travel on. Yet, scoring a blue pencil through one aspect of the paradox is the very thing many do in order to preserve their all-encompassing demand for logical consistency.

Such well-intentioned people are misguided. Logic is not the idol to which every argument must bow the knee and conform. God does not demand it of us. I am not aware of any command: ‘Above all things, never be illogical!’ We are not to try to be wiser than God. Whatever God has revealed in his word, we must maintain – even at the cost of human logic. We must not devise schemes which warp God’s revelation in order to preserve our logical purity, or to fend off accusations of Arminianism or antinomianism or whatever. The fact is, if we do leave ourselves open to the sort of abuse the apostle faced (Rom. 3:4-8; 6:1-2), it is an indication that we are maintaining Scripture in its proper balance! The right course in all these things is to declare what Scripture says, and leave God to look after his truth. Just as God did not need Uzza’s hand to steady the ark (1 Chron. 13:9-10), neither does he need us to protect his gospel from the accusation of logical inconsistency. Peter’s dogmatic endorsement of Paul, and his categorical dismissal of those who, in his day, tried their ‘adjustments’ on his fellow-apostle’s writings, bears repeating. At this juncture, it is most apposite: ‘Our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his letters... in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures’ (2 Pet. 3:15-16). We must not do it!

One final illustration from the railway: On a long straight stretch of track, the rails do meet – in the infinite distance. All seeming contradictions will be resolved in eternity!

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There it is. Getting back to the main theme, however: the New Testament speaks of justification in four aspects.<sup>5</sup> God, because of his grace, on the basis of his grace, justifies, declares righteous, all those sinners who trust the merits, the person and the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Such sinners are one with Christ. He bore all their sin. They bear all his righteousness. God in Christ decreed it all in eternity, accomplished it on the cross and in the resurrection, and by his Spirit applies it to the elect sinner at the point of faith. And, finally, it can be properly said that all the elect will be ultimately justified when Christ returns. No passage, perhaps, captures all this better than the first chapter of Ephesians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the

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<sup>5</sup> References, other than the ones I have given, could include Rom. 3:21-31; 4:1-25; 8:18; 1 Cor. 1:18; Eph. 2:5,8; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 2:11-14; 3:5; Heb. 10:39; 1 Pet. 1:5,9; 2:24; 4:13; 5:1.

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redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14).

All of it was purposed in eternity past. All of it was accomplished by Christ. All of it is experienced in time, here and now. But all of it will come to final and complete fulfilment – 'be put into effect' – in eternity to come. All four statements are true and consistent with each other. In terms of human logic, they may seem inconsistent. Yet, in terms of biblical revelation, it all makes perfect sense – as long as we allow each statement to bear the weight God has given it in Scripture, and do not warp any aspect of any statement to make it all fit together with our pre-conceived ideas of logical consistency, in order to preserve our theological system.

Gathering this together, we may say that justification is to be considered in four respects. Although we have to be careful when introducing adjectives, let me set it out as simply as I can. First, we have *decreed* or *determined* justification. Secondly, we have *accomplished* justification. Thirdly, we have *applied* or *actual* justification. And fourthly, we have *absolute* or *final* justification. Let me explain.

By *decreed* or *determined* justification, I mean that God the Father, in eternity past, decreed or determined to justify his elect through union with his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection.

By *accomplished* justification, I mean that Christ, when he died and rose again, accomplished the justification of all for whom he died, all the elect in him.

By *applied* or *actual* justification, I mean that when the elect are brought to faith by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit, they come into the actual experience and benefit of their justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ.

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By *absolute* or *final* justification, I mean that, at the last judgment, God will totally vindicate his elect, and they will for, all eternity, be entirely free from sin in all its aspects.<sup>6</sup>

Do not miss the trinitarian nature of all this. Do not miss that it is all ‘in Christ’. God justifies sinners by virtue of the union between Christ and his elect. The elect are justified in eternity past – decreed justification. They are justified at the cross and in Christ’s resurrection – accomplished justification. And they are justified in their experience – applied, actual or experimental justification at regeneration and faith; that is, conversion. And they will be finally and absolutely justified in eternity to come. And all is ‘in Christ’.

In particular, the sinner is *actually* justified as the Holy Spirit regenerates him, convicts him, and brings him to faith and repentance and so joins him to Christ, unites him to Christ (Gal. 3:26-27; Eph. 1:13).<sup>7</sup> For it is as he believes, and only as he believes, that the sinner is actually ‘in Christ’, and Christ is in the sinner. And it is then that he is actually justified.

Let me stress this. In justification by faith, *actual* justification by faith, God, because of his grace, on the basis of his grace, declares or accounts righteous all those sinners who trust the merits, the person and the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Such sinners are one with Christ. He bore all their sin. They bear all his righteousness. God the Father decreed it all in eternity; in Christ, he accomplished it on the cross and in the resurrection; in eternity to come, God will vindicate his elect as justified. But – and this is the essence of the quarrel with ‘eternal justification’, and my reason for writing my *Eternal* – God only actually justifies his elect when by his Spirit he applies the work of Christ to them at

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<sup>6</sup> One of my mss. readers told me a story by way of illustration. A man was asked: ‘Are you saved?’ ‘Do you mean’, said he, ‘have I been saved, am I being saved, or shall I be saved?’ He could have opened with: ‘Was I saved in God’s decree?’

<sup>7</sup> Gal. 3:26-27 does *not* refer to water baptism, but regeneration – which leads to faith.

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the point of faith. Leaving aside the final justification, we may say that while the elect sinner is eternally justified in God's decree, and justified by union with Christ in his death and resurrection, *he is not **actually** justified until he comes to saving faith in Christ.*

As the Westminster documents put it:

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification; nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.<sup>8</sup>

This is worth repeating: The elect 'are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does... actually apply Christ unto them'; that is, until they exercise saving faith. This is what the Scriptures clearly assert: 'Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand' (Rom. 5:1-2). Until the elect are regenerated and come to faith, they are not actually justified, they are not at peace with God.

I must stress this yet again. An undoubted truth it is, that before they come to faith – indeed, before they are even born into this world – the elect *are* justified in God's decree in eternity. Yes. Furthermore, before they come to faith – indeed, before they are even born into this world – the elect *were (are)* representatively justified in union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Yes. *But before they come to faith, the elect **are not actually** justified. They are only **actually** justified as and when they believe.*<sup>9</sup>

I emphasise this because it is precisely where hyper-Calvinists go astray. How? They place the word 'actual' not

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<sup>8</sup> The Westminster documents in *The Confession of Faith, The Larger and Shorter Catechisms...*, The Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, p59.

<sup>9</sup> The elect who lived before Christ were justified by anticipatory faith in him.

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where it belongs biblically, at the point of faith, but in eternity with the decree of God; hence ‘eternal justification’. In short, they argue that the elect are actually justified in eternity.

At first glance, I admit, this may seem a spat about words, but it certainly is far more than that! The consequences of the word-order here are massive, as I make clear in my *Eternal*. But the issue at this stage in the debate is this: instead of doing what Scripture does, and placing the word ‘actual’ at the point of faith, hyper-Calvinists place it at the point of God’s decree in eternity.

Why do they do it? Why do they shift the word ‘actual’? Fundamentally, they do it because of the priority (to them) of their theological system, and their consequent obsession with fitting every passage of Scripture into that system, leaving no loose ends, no unresolved paradoxes. More immediately, they do it because, in justification, they want to protect God’s sovereignty, the freeness of his grace to the exclusion of the sinner’s works, and the certainty of accomplishment of Christ’s redemptive work. They further wish to give assurance to those who doubt their justification. These ‘more immediate’ motives are excellent, motives for which I have nothing but praise, but... whatever the motive, however good the motive, it is always – always – wrong to tinker with Scripture. In this case: motive, excellent; method, bad.

Besides, they have no need to worry. God can protect his doctrine without our interference. Moreover, such interference always leads to error. It does here. The upshot is that hyper-Calvinists end up *opposing* the biblical doctrine of ‘justification by faith’.<sup>10</sup> They also ruin the preaching of the gospel to unbelievers. This is how serious it is.

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<sup>10</sup> I am not being pejorative. I am well aware that hyper-Calvinists use the phrase – except, significantly, in the Gospel Standard Articles – but in my *Eternal* I give my reasons for asserting that what they understand by ‘justification by faith’ is very different to the biblical meaning. Moreover, it leads directly to the subtitle of that volume: ‘Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism’.

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The conclusion? We must always bear in mind the four aspects of justification, but in our addresses to sinners the weight must fall on actual justification at the point of faith in Christ. We must be constantly calling sinners to trust the Saviour. Until they do, they are not justified by faith.