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J U S T I F I C A T I O N

by  
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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When we reflect on the greatness of God and on His holiness we cannot avoid a sense of our own unworthiness. This is the universal experience of mankind, shown by the fact that every religion makes provision for expiation and propitiation of sins. This is true of the heathen religions of to-day as well as the pagan religions of antiquity. A sense of sin and of coming short, as we reflect in God's presence, is universal amongst mankind. At the same time the desire to stand right in His sight is equally universal.

How can a man be accounted right in God's sight? That is the question. Job asked it centuries ago and it still remains the pressing problem. How can a man be right with God? The answer of the average man is that we should turn over a new leaf and try our best. But this answer rests on two errors: it takes too low a view of God's standards and too optimistic a view of

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our own abilities. If we are to stand right (i.e. to be judged righteous) in God's sight and be admitted to His fellowship in heaven, He must not see any flaw or sin in us which would evoke His condemnation. Heaven is a place of perfection and if we are to be admitted there we must stand perfect in His sight. Our situation would be hopeless had not God Himself taken it in hand. Left to ourselves we can never come near God's standard, for as St. Paul says, in Romans 3:23, we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. However the Christian Gospel is that God has Himself provided the way by which we may stand righteous in His sight, and be justified at His judgment bar.

This right standing which is so essential if we are to be approved (that is, justified) by Him, comes to us by way of gift. God gives us righteousness. Passages of the New Testament make this clear, for example, in Romans

5:17 where St. Paul speaks of the gift of righteousness and in the next verse where he says "the free gift came unto all men to justification". In Philippians 3:9 St. Paul contrasts the right standing or righteousness which comes by way of gift from God, through faith in Jesus Christ, with the righteousness or right standing which we achieve by our own efforts in keeping the moral law, and he points out that this righteousness of our own is quite inadequate. We must have the righteousness which comes from God by way of gift, through faith in Christ.

To the question, how can God judge a sinner to be in right standing with Him? the answer is that this is brought about through our relationship to Jesus Christ. St. Paul makes this quite clear in Romans 5. Jesus not only fulfilled God's will perfectly in a way that we all ought to but fail, but more significantly, He underwent the penalty for sin which we deserve, so that

by union with Him our life shares in that approval which God expressed towards Jesus, "Thou art my beloved Son in Thee I am well pleased". Christ died, not for Himself but for us. As St. Paul says in Galatians 3:13 "Christ has become a curse for us" to save us from the curse which God's law pronounces on all who disobey it, or again in 2 Corinthians 5:21 "Christ became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"; that is He bore our sin in His own body on the cross that we might share His right standing in God's sight. Through His death our sins are forgiven us; forgiven so completely that God sees nothing in us any more that calls out His condemnation. In this way we come into a right standing with Him; we are righteous in His sight; or, to put it another way, He justifies us at the judgment bar of eternity.

The Gospel is simply the

good news that God has provided for sinners a righteousness or right standing through forgiveness, in Christ. As St. Paul says in Romans 1:16,17 "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the instrument of God's power to bring salvation to everyone who believes. It reveals God's way of justifying us, faith first and last". Forgiveness and righteousness is offered as a free gift to all who acknowledge Jesus as the Lord Who has overcome sin and death for men, and opened up the way of reconciliation and fellowship with God. Righteousness, or right standing in God's sight, is through relationship to Jesus Christ. He is our righteousness; He is the ground of our acceptance with God. Nothing needs to be added to this ground of acceptance. If we try to add our own good works as well, we simply detract from the perfection of Christ's righteousness.

This righteousness of Christ

is offered to us by way of a free gift. God makes it ours when we respond by faith, that is when we acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Saviour. This doctrine is called justification by faith only. It is put clearly in No. 11 of the 39 Articles which reads: "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and not for our own works or deservings. . . we are justified by faith only."

This doctrine of justification by faith only was the crux of the Reformation and it still remains the dividing line between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. It is of utmost importance because it treats of the kernel of the Gospel, namely, how a sinner may be accepted by God. Roman Catholic teaching on this point has a two-fold error. Firstly, it teaches that our justification (or acceptance by God as in right standing with Him) depends partly on our own merits and good works.

In this respect it has absorbed the idea of the natural human heart as reflected in the view of the man in the street that we have to earn our way back into God's favour. But as I say, such a doctrine takes too low a view of God's standard of perfection, to which we can never attain on account of our wickedness and sinfulness. It also diverts attention from God's way of salvation in Jesus Christ and from its essential character of free grace, namely that God gives us in Jesus Christ what we could never achieve in our own efforts, a righteousness or right standing with Him.

The second error of the Roman Catholic teaching is that when it does speak of righteousness in Christ it teaches that this righteousness and forgiveness is channelled exclusively through the ordinances and rites and services of the organised visible church. That is, it imposes an intermediary between the sinner who needs forgiveness

and God the Author of forgiveness. Instead of following the New Testament which speaks of forgiveness as offered and given to all who through faith acknowledge Christ, it teaches that forgiveness can only be obtained through the sacraments of the church. Perhaps one illustration will suffice. The Roman Catechism under the chapter entitled "The Sacrament of Penance" and under the subheading "The Necessity of the Sacrament of Penance" states that "it is impossible to obtain or even to hope for remission of sins by any other means". But this concept of an intermediary church and priesthood is foreign to the New Testament. When Jesus said "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest (Mt. 11:28)", He did not suggest that they had to come to Him through the ordinances of a priestly church.

The New Testament promises forgiveness through believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. It

follows that all who believe on Jesus know that they have been forgiven, for God is true to His promise. But the Roman Church teaches that forgiveness comes only through using the Church sacraments. The desired effect of forgiveness is said to reside in the performance of the sacraments themselves. This makes the correct performance of these rites a matter of absolute importance, for if there is a vital defect here, no effect follows; and the person who uses the sacraments is still in his sins. Unfortunately it is never possible for a Roman Catholic to know whether the sacraments are correctly performed according to his church's teaching, and so it follows that it is never possible for him to know whether he has been forgiven by God. This is because one of the essential features of the sacraments according to Roman Catholics is that the minister performing them should have the right intention in his mind, for if this is absent

although outwardly he may go through the actions and the words perfectly no sacrament has been performed. This the Council of Trent declared in Canon 11 of Session 7. However the worshipper can never know the intention in the mind of the priest, he therefore can never know whether or not the sacrament is effective for his life. And since the Roman Catholics teach that the sacraments are the only means of forgiveness this is a vital defect. Yet this consequence is fully acknowledged by Roman Catholic theologians. Thus Cardinal Bellarmine, perhaps the greatest Roman Catholic theologian since the Reformation, says in Volume 1, p.488 of the 1721 edition of his works, "No-one can be certain with the certainty of faith that he has a true sacrament since the sacrament is not performed without the intention of the minister, and no-one can see the intention of another". That is to say on the Roman system of forgiveness through sacraments it is

impossible to know whether you have been forgiven. But the Scriptures make clear that it is God's purpose that His children should know, for example in I John 5:13 we read "These things have I written unto you, that you may know that you have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God." But the Roman Catholic teaching makes it impossible to know the state of your own soul with regard to God. This in itself is sufficient to prove that this teaching is contrary to the New Testament doctrine of forgiveness.

The New Testament teaches that God forgives all who acknowledge Jesus by faith. It knows nothing of any intermediary between the sinner and God. Faith is the instrument which takes hold of God's provision. If however we put outward actions such as the use of the church sacraments dispensed by a priest in the place of faith, as the instrument of taking hold of God's

provision, the correct administration of these sacraments (including the correctness of the priest's ordination and his intention) becomes a matter of vital importance, in a way quite unknown to the New Testament.

The question of how sinners may obtain the approval of God is a matter of crucial importance for all of us. The suggestion that we obtain it by making use of the intermediary of church ordinances has absolutely no support in Scripture. The New Testament is very clear that the basis of salvation has been provided completely in the death of Jesus Christ for sinners, and that all may now obtain the forgiveness of their sins and the consequent status of righteous in God's sight through coming into a relationship with Christ by acknowledging Him as Lord. As St. Paul told the jailer at Philippi in Acts 16 in reply to his question, "what must I do to be saved?"

"believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved".

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