

Justification: *Forensic or Moral?*

by Francis Turretin (1623-1687)

The following article has been extracted from Turretin's *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Question 16). The actual title of this section appears in the original as presented below, and Greek and Hebrew characters have been converted to their English counterparts. This e-text makes use of the unedited translation of George Musgrave Giger (professor of Latin at Princeton University, 1854-1865); it is now in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed. This material was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal for *Reformation Ink*.

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Is the word Justification always used in a forensic sense in this argument, or also in a moral and physical sense?

The former we affirm, the latter we deny, against the Romanists.

I. As in the chain of salvation, *justification* follows *vocation*, Rom. 8:30. It is presented everywhere as the primary effect of faith. The topic of *Vocation and Faith* spawns the topic of *Justification*, which must be handled with greater care and accuracy. This saving doctrine is of the greatest importance in religion. Luther calls it the article of a standing and falling church. Other Christians call it the characteristic and basis of Christianity, and not without reason. It is the principle rampart of the Christian religion, and if it is adulterated or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places. This is why Satan has endeavored to corrupt this doctrine in every way and in all ages, especially in the Papacy. For this reason, it is deservedly placed among the primary causes of our Secession from the Roman Church, and of the Reformation.

II. However, some of the more candid Romanists who have been conquered by the force of the truth, have expressed themselves more soundly than others concerning this doctrine. And there are some among our divines, influenced by a desire to lessen controversies, who think this is not so great matter for dispute, and that there a number of logomachies¹ involved. Still it is certain that, up to this time in this argument between us and the Romanists, there are controversies that are not verbal, but real. They are many and of great importance, as will be made manifest in what follows.

III. Because of a false and preposterous explanation of the Word, the truth of justification itself has been shockingly obscured in its genuine sense, and especially in this question of its nature. Thus, its sense must be unfolded, and being settled, we will more easily reach the nature of the thing itself.

Homonyms of the verb Justificare

IV. The [Hebrew] verb *tsadaq*, to which the Greek *dikaioun* corresponds, and the Latin *justificare*, is used in two ways in the Scriptures: properly and improperly.

Properly, the verb is forensic, applied to absolving anyone in a trial; or it means to consider and declare just, as opposed to the verb for condemn and accuse, Ex. 23:7, Deut. 25:1, Prov. 17:15, Luke 18:14, Rom. 3-5. Apart from a trial, it is used for to acknowledge and to praise someone as

¹ A dispute over words – word games.

just. That may be deservedly, as when God is the object. Thus, men are said to justify God when they celebrate him as just, Ps. 51:4. Wisdom is said to be justified by her children, Matt. 11:9, Luke 7:35. That is, wisdom is acknowledged and celebrated as such. Or else it is used presumptuously, as when the Pharisees are said to justify themselves, Luke 16:15.

Improperly, the verb is used either ministerially: to bring to righteousness, Dan. 12:3, while *tsadaq* (OT:6663) seems to be exegetical of *sakal* (OT:7919). This is because, by instructing and teaching believers, preachers of the gospel justify them ministerially in the same sense in which they are said to save them, 1Tim. 4:16. Or by way of synecdoche,² the antecedent being put for the consequent, for to free, Rom. 5:7, "He that is dead is justified from sin," that is, freed. Or comparatively, Ez. 16:51-52, where on account of a comparison between the sins of Israel and Samaria, Israel is said to justify Samaria, and, the sins of Judah increasing, Judah is said to have justified Israel, Jer. 3:11, because Israel was more just than Judah, that is, her sins were fewer than the sins of Judah.

State of the Question

V. Hence arises the Question of the Romanists, concerning the acceptation of this word, whether it is to be taken precisely in a forensic sense, in this affair; or, whether it ought also to be taken in a physical and moral sense for the infusion of righteousness and Justification, if it is allowable so to speak, either by the acquisition or the increase of it? For they do not deny, indeed, that the word Justification and the verb *justificare* are often taken in a forensic sense, and even in this affair, as Bellarmine, *De Justificatione*, chap. 1, Tirinus, *Theologiae elencticae*, cont. 15.1, Toletus *Ad Romanos*, anno 13, and many others. But they do not wish this to be the constant meaning but that it often signifies a true production, acquisition, or increase of righteousness, and this is especially the case, when employed about the justification of man before God. Whence they distinguish Justification into first and second. The first is that by which man who is unjust is made just, the second, by which a just man is made more just. Whence Bellarmine, lib. ii, chap. 2, "Justification undoubtedly is a certain movement from sin to righteousness, and takes its name from the terminus to which it leads, as all other similar motions, illumination, calefaction; that is true justification, where some righteousness is acquired beyond the remission of sin." Thomas, I-II, q. 113, "Justification taken passively implies a motion to making righteous, just as calefaction a motion to heat." Now although we do not deny that this word has more than one signification, and is taken in different ways in the Scriptures, now properly, then improperly, as we have already aid, still we maintain that it is never taken for an infusion of righteousness, but always as often as the Scriptures speak professedly concerning our justification, it must be explained as a forensic term.

The word Justification is forensic

VI. The reasons are: 1) Because the passages, which treat of Justification, admit no other than a forensic sense, Job 9:3. Ps. 143:2, Rom. 3:28 and 4:1-3, Acts 13:39, and elsewhere, where a judicial process is set forth, and mention is made of an accusing law, of accused persons, who are guilty, Rom. 3:19, of a handwriting contrary to us, Col. 2:14, of divine justice demanding punishment, Rom. 3:24, 26, of an advocate pleading the cause, 1 John 2:1, of satisfaction and imputed righteousness, Rom. 4 and 5; of a throne of grace before which we are absolved, Heb. 4:16, of a Judge pronouncing sentence, Rom. 3:20, and absolving sinners, Rom. 4:5.

VII. 2) Because justification is here opposed to condemnation; "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns?" Rom. 8:33. As therefore accusation and condemnation occur only in a trial; so also justification. Nor can it be

² *Synecdoche*. A figure of speech in which a more inclusive term is used for a less inclusive term, or the other way around. The word "bread" may refer to money, as in "Writing is my bread and butter."

conceived how God can be said to condemn or to justify, unless either by adjudging to punishment, or absolving us from it judicially, which Toletus is compelled to confess on this passage; "The word justification in this place is taken with that signification, which is opposed to its antithesis, namely, condemnation, so that it is the same in this place to justify as to pronounce just, as a Judge by his sentence absolves and pronounces innocent." Cornelius, a Lapide, who otherwise earnestly strives to obscure the truth still overcome by the force of the truth, acknowledges that God justifies, that is, absolves the threatened action of sin and the devil, and pronounces just.

VIII. 3) Because the equivalent phrases, by which our justification is described; such as not to come into judgment, John 5:24; not to be condemned, John 3:18; to remit sins, to impute righteousness, Rom. 4; to be reconciled, Rom. 5:10-11 2Cor. 5:19; and the like. 4) This word ought to be employed in the sense in which it was used by Paul in his dispute against the Jews. And yet it is certain that he did not speak there of an infusion of righteousness, viz.; whether from faith, or from the works of the law the habit of righteousness should be infused into man, but how the sinner could stand before the judgment seat of God, and obtain a right to life, whether by the works of the law, as the Jews imagined or by faith in Christ; and since the thought concerning Justification arose without doubt from a fear of divine judgment, and of the wrath to come, it cannot be used in any other than a forensic sense; as it was used in the origin of those questions, which were agitated in a former age upon the occasion of Indulgences, satisfactions and remission of sins. 5) Finally, unless this word is taken in a forensic sense, it would be confounded with sanctification, and that these are distinct, both the nature of the thing and the voice of Scripture frequently prove.

Sources of Explanation

IX. Although the word *Justification* in certain passages of scripture should recede from its proper signification, and be taken in another than a forensic sense, it would not follow that it is taken judicially by us falsely, because the proper sense is to be looked to in those passages in which is the seat of this doctrine. 2) Although perchance it should not be taken precisely in a forensic sense, for to pronounce just, and to absolve in a trial, still we maintain that it cannot be taken in a physical sense for the infusion of righteousness, as the Romanists hold, as is easily proved from the passages brought by Bellarmine himself.

X. For, in Is. 53:11, where it is said Christ by his knowledge shall justify many; it is manifest that reference is made to the meritorious and instrumental cause of our absolution with God, namely, Christ, and the knowledge or belief of him. For the knowledge of Christ here ought not to be taken subjectively, concerning the knowledge by which he knows what was agreed upon between himself and the Father, which has nothing to do with our satisfaction. But objectively, concerning that knowledge, by which he is known by his people unto salvation, which is nothing else than faith, to which justification is everywhere ascribed. The following words show that no other sense is to be sought, when it is added, for he shall bear their iniquities, to denote the satisfaction of Christ, which faith ought to embrace, in order that we may be justified.

XI. No more does the passage of Daniel, 12:3, press us. Because, as we have already said, justification is ascribed to the ministers of the gospel, as elsewhere the salvation of believers, 1 Tim. 4:16, 1Cor. 9:22. Not assuredly by an infusion of habitual righteousness, which does not come within their power; but by the instruction of believers, by which, as they open the way of life, so they teach the mode, by which sinners can obtain justification in Christ by faith. Whence the Vulgate does not translate it *justificantes*, but *erudientes ad justitiam*.

XII. The passage Rev. 22:11, he that is righteous, let him be righteous still, does not favor our opponents, so as to denote an infusion or increase of righteousness. Because thus it would be tautological with the following words, he that is holy, let him be holy still, for that justification

would not differ from sanctification. But it is best to refer it to the application and sense of justification, for although on the part of God justification does not take place successively, still on our part, it is apprehended by us by varied and repeated actions, while by new acts of faith we apply to ourselves from time to time the merit of Christ as a remedy for the daily sins into which we fall. Nay, although it should be granted that the exercise of righteousness is here meant, as in a manuscript we have *dikaiosynen poiesato*, that is may be opposed to the preceding words. He that is unjust, let him be more unjust, the opinion of the Romanists will not on that account be established.

XIII. The justification of the wicked, of which Paul speaks, Rom. 4:5, ought not to be referred to an infusion or increase of habitual righteousness, but belongs to the remission of sins, as it is explained by the Apostle from David. Nay, it would not be a justification of the wicked, if it were used in any other sense than for a judicial absolution at the throne of grace. I confess that God in declaring just, ought also for that very reason to make just, that his judgment may be according to truth. But man can be made just in two ways, either in himself, or in another, either from the law, or from the gospel. God therefore makes him just whom he justifies, not in himself as if from a sight of his inherent righteousness he declared him just, but from the view of the righteousness, imputed, of Christ. It is indeed an abomination to Jehovah to justify the wicked without a due satisfaction, but God in this sense justifies no wicked one, Christ having been given to us as a Surety, who received upon himself the punishment we deserved.

XIV. Although certain words of the same order with justification denote an effecting in the subject, there is not the same reason for this, which otherwise barbarous has been received into Latinity, to express the force of *htsdyq* and *dikaion*, neither of which admit a physical sense. Thus we magnify and justify God, not by making him great from small, or just from unjust, but only declaratively celebrating him as such.

<http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/ftjustification.htm>