

# JUSTIFICATION: A NEW COVENANT BLESSING<sup>1</sup>

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In a previous article, it was shown that the prophecy in Jeremiah 31 about the New Covenant involved a promise of *regeneration*.<sup>2</sup> This article will consider the question of whether it also entailed a guarantee of *justification*. After all, as seen in the previous article, Paul considered himself a minister of the New Covenant. Again, I quote his words in 2 Cor 3:5-6:

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Of course, the doctrine of justification by faith was a crucial part of the Pauline gospel. The question being raised is this: Did Paul think of justification by faith as a benefit included in the promises made in the New Covenant?

The solution to this question is not quite as obvious as the issue discussed in the previous article. It is plain that the New Covenant anticipated regeneration, but did it also anticipate justification?

## II. FORGIVENESS UNDER THE NEW COVENANT

There is no question that forgiveness is one of the New Covenant benefits. For this we have the authority of the book of Hebrews. Let me quote the words of Heb 10:15-18:

And the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, "This is the covenant that I will make

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<sup>1</sup>This article appeared in the Autumn 2006 issue of *JOTGES*.

<sup>2</sup>See the preceding article in this journal.

with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,” then He adds, “Their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more.” Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.

The last words of this quotation are not from Jeremiah but are the words of the writer of Hebrews. Notice his comment, “Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.” The word *remission* here, of course, is the Greek noun *aphesis* which is the standard NT noun for forgiveness.

Clearly the author of Hebrews understands the New Covenant words, “their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more,” as guaranteeing the forgiveness of sins.

### III. FORGIVENESS AND JUSTIFICATION COMPARED

For anyone who sees no distinction between justification and the forgiveness of sins, then the problem being discussed is already solved. If they are interchangeable terms, then when one is promised so is the other.

However, there is a critical difficulty with this approach. The identification of forgiveness with justification is invalid. I do not believe that the NT offers any evidence that they should be equated, as though they were interchangeable terms. In fact, in Acts 13, they seem to be distinguished.

In that chapter, in Paul’s speech in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia, Paul speaks these words in vv 38-39:

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; *and* by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.

Notice the word *and*. Paul clearly appears to distinguish the two benefits. To paraphrase his words, He seems to be saying: “I am preaching forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, *and* every believer in Him is also justified.” There is no suggestion of equivalence here.

To forestall a question, I am aware that the *and* is not found in the critical editions of the Greek NT. Of course, it *is* found in the

Majority Text. But the absence of the *and* in no way invalidates my argument. Instead it results in two separate sentences. This is illustrated by the NIV translation of these verses as follows:

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

Even under this translation, we have no real grounds for equating these two benefits of faith in Christ. As a matter of fact, the conclusion that they are distinct is strengthened by the fact that Paul and Peter are paralleled in the narrative of the book of Acts. As far as I know, this Lucan technique was first noticed as far back as the work of R. B. Rackham in the early 1900s. In the Lucan parallels observed by Rackham, Peter's premier speech in Acts 2:14-39 has its counterpart in Paul's premier speech in Acts 13:16-41. Close study of the two speeches reveals both similarities and differences.

Both speeches have in common an offer of the forgiveness of sins (2:38 and 13:38). But only the Pauline speech contains a reference to justification by faith. (If anyone thinks this is accidental, I have a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to sell you.) Obviously, Luke was well aware of Paul's deep interest in this doctrine, whereas Peter never mentions it in Acts or in his two epistles. Thus, in the book of Acts, the only reference to justification is right here (13:39), and it is on the lips of Paul. That is both historically and psychologically accurate.

Of course, this is not to say that Peter did not know the doctrine. That would be absurd. Rather, Luke's assignment of this doctrine to Paul's mouth, but not Peter's, reinforces the inference that has already been made. Luke knew that this doctrine was profoundly important for Paul, and Luke knew it was not identical with the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins.

What then is the difference between these doctrines? This can be stated very simply. Forgiveness is an interpersonal issue. In ordinary life it deals with relationships between people. In religious matters, it deals with man's personal relationship with God. By contrast, justification in Pauline thought is a judicial issue. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary* there are

four fundamental definitions for the word “judicial,” plus a theological definition.

1. Of, pertaining to, or proper to courts of law or the administration of justice.
2. Decreed by or proceeding from a court of justice.
3. Belonging or appropriate to the office of a judge.
4. Characterized by, or expressing judgment.
5. *Theol.* Proceeding from a divine judgment.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that the Pauline concept of justification is judicial in all of these senses. For Paul it is basically a term related to the courtroom, and the act of justifying someone is the function of a Judge (that is, of God) and expresses a divine pronouncement, or judgment, about the believer in Jesus Christ. That judgment is that the Judge recognizes no charge at all against the believer.

This conception appears very clearly in Rom 8:33-34a: “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns?” In justification, therefore, God pronounces the believer perfectly righteous and, as a consequence, he is beyond any and every charge before God’s Judgment Seat.

To summarize, forgiveness removes the personal barrier of sin between God and the believer. Justification frees the believer from all accountability in the final judgment.

As we all know, there is a myth abroad that holds that every human being will stand before God in the final judgment. It is a myth that still appears in commentaries. But it is a fiction since it contradicts the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here are His words in a more accurate form than what we find in our English Bibles:

John 5:24: Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and does not come into judgment, but is passed from death into life.

John 3:17-18: For God did not send His Son into the world *to judge* the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him *is not judged*; but he who does not believe *has already been judged*, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

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<sup>3</sup> *Dell; 4th edition* (June 26, 2001).

From these statements it is clear that final judgment pertains only to the unregenerate. From Revelation we learn that the regenerate have already been raised and glorified a thousand years before the final judgment at the Great White Throne.

Someone may say, however: “But the saved are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ.” In a sense, yes. However, it is interesting that Paul never uses the Greek word *krisis* for that event. The term translated “judgment seat” is the Greek word *bema*. Its general sense was that of “a dais or platform that required steps to ascend” and from which a magistrate might address an assembly or hear cases.<sup>4</sup> It could be translated “judicial bench” in the places where Paul uses it of the final accounting given by Christians to their Lord (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10).

The ethos of this word for Paul is far less formal than a full-fledged courtroom scene would be. Contrast with this the terrifying scene envisaged in Rev 20:11, where John writes: “Then I saw a Great White Throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away.”

I am not trying to play down the solemnity of our day of accounting to the Lord. But it would be a mistake to confuse this accounting with the far more serious event of final judgment. It was to that event that Jesus referred in the passages I have quoted from the Gospel of John. In fact, in John’s Gospel, when the term *saved* is used of our final destiny, it means to be “saved” from the final judgment altogether. Justification, therefore, is a term Paul uses with reference to our being “saved” from appearing *at all* in the last judgment.

#### IV. PAUL, HEBREWS AND THE NEW COVENANT

It has been pointed out more than once, that the writer of Hebrews never uses the word *justified*. Instead, for him its close approximation is the word *sanctified*. All believers are completely sanctified according to this writer. In Heb 10:10, for example, he says: “By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Also, in Heb 10:14 he

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<sup>4</sup>A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 175.

says, “By one offering He has perfected forever those who are sanctified.”

The writer is thinking here against the background of the Old Covenant. He is thinking of the merely external purification that people in the OT could get through the process of animal sacrifices and ceremonial washings. Under the New Covenant, however, the believer possesses the definitive reality to which these ceremonies pointed. He is totally clean, and he has been sanctified, or made holy, before the sight of God.

Just as a priest was sanctified for his priestly ministry, so now the believer is sanctified and is able to enter boldly into the Holiest of all, that is, into the very presence of God (Heb 10:19). In that sense, therefore, God no longer remembers “their sins and their lawless deeds.” That is to say, they are perfectly clean and holy in God’s sight. But if that is true, then clearly, the sanctified are also *forgiven*. Forgiveness is a necessary deduction from the New Covenant promise about not remembering sin.

But note something very important here. The New Covenant prophecy does not say explicitly: “their sins and lawless deeds I *will forgive*.” Instead it says, “their sins and lawless deeds I *will remember no more*.”

Suppose we ask this question: How would a *Judge* not remember sins and lawless deeds? What would be the effective *judicial* equivalent of regarding people as totally free from sin? Paul’s answer, I submit, would have been this: “a judicial pronouncement of justification”!

Of course Paul found biblical support for such a pronouncement in passages like Gen 15:6, Ps 32:2, and Hab 2:4. But the fact remains that he could have easily seen this as the judicial side of the New Covenant promise that “their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

In my judgment that is exactly what he did. Thus I believe he would have regarded justification as a New Covenant blessing. Naturally, so do I.

## V. CONCLUSION

More than one thing happens to people at the moment when they believe Christ for eternal life. At that moment we are: (1) regenerated, that is, born again; (2) washed from sin, that is, forgiven; (3) sanctified, that is, made holy and fit for the presence of God; and (4) justified, that is, declared righteous. This list is not complete for us today, since we receive the Holy Spirit as well. But the gift of the Spirit is not promised in the New Covenant, so my brief list will suffice for us just now.

Please note in this connection a Pauline statement in 1 Cor 6:11. After listing a catalogue of sinful people in vv 9-10, he writes: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”

Note those words: *washed—sanctified—justified*. All of them denote New Covenant blessings that are implicit in the marvelous words of Jer 31:34: “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

By grace, therefore, God sees us as perfectly clean from sin, as holy people belonging to Him, and as completely free of any and every charge of sin. God’s grace under the New Covenant is rich and marvelous!