

JUSTIFICATION: THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE

It is fitting that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) first sets forth a common understanding of key biblical passages on the subject, since these were a primary source of disagreements between the Church and the 16th Century Reformers.

The JDDJ notes that various Old Testament passages speak of human sinfulness and disobedience, as well as of God's righteousness and judgment. Among them:

Against ... you alone have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your eyes. – Ps. 51:6

From the time of our ancestors even to this day our guilt has been great, and for our wicked deeds we have been delivered ... to the sword, to captivity, to pillage, and to disgrace ... – Ezra 9:7

Thus says the Lord: ... my salvation is about to come, my justice, about to be revealed. – Is. 56:1

The Lord rules forever, has set up his throne for judgment. It is he who judges the world with justice, who judges the peoples with fairness. – Ps. 9:8-9

Although some New Testament writers used the term "righteousness" (Matthew, John, Hebrews and James), they did not treat the concept extensively. The JDDJ focuses on Paul's letters, which contain the longest passages on righteousness and justification and repeatedly stress the actions of God in setting humankind free from sin.

All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed ... – Rom. 3:23-25

(The gospel) is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes ... for in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith to faith. – Rom. 1:16-17

All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. – 2 Cor. 5:18-19

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. – 2 Cor. 5:20-21

By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast. – Eph. 2:8-9

Just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all. For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous. – Rom. 5:18-19

Paul's meaning is clear – God effects our salvation through the redemptive actions of Christ Jesus, who is “our righteousness” (1 Cor. 1:30). Justification is forgiveness of sins, liberation from the dominating power of sin and death and from the curse of the law, and acceptance into communion with God, beginning now and to be fulfilled in God's coming kingdom. We do not achieve any of this through our own acts, but only through our faith in Christ, whose actions have redeemed us.

Paul contrasts the effectiveness of faith in Christ with the failure of the Mosaic Law to achieve justification. He is reassuring Gentile Christians that they are justified through Christ and have no need of the Law, and at the same time rebuking Jewish Christians who might want to continue observing the Law or require it for the Gentile converts.

We, who are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles, [yet] who know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. – Gal. 2:15-16

I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. – Gal. 2:21

That no one is justified before God by the law is clear, for “the one who is righteous by faith will live.” But the law does not depend on faith; rather, “the one who does these things will live by them.” – Gal. 3:11-12

The justified live by faith that comes from the word of Christ and is active through love, the fruit of the Spirit:

Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. – Rom. 10:17

Through the Spirit, by faith, we await the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. – Gal. 5:5-6

If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit. – Gal. 5:25

Though the justified may lapse, they must confess their sins, share Christ's body and blood, and continue trying to live righteously, for, as St. Paul says, “God is the one who, for his good purpose, works in you” (Phil. 2:13). “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).