



On Relating Justification and Justice

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Twenty-nine theologians wrestled together for a week in Mexico City concerning the topic: "Justification and Justice." The following observation indicates the range of perspectives represented at the consultation:

There was agreement in the sense that no one has affirmed that the struggle for justice is unnecessary. Nor was it said that justification is totally irrelevant today. Much of the discussion revolved around how justification and justice should be related.

This statement was included within a report of a small work group at the end of the first day of discussion at the Lutheran Consultation on Justification and Justice in the Americas. A final joint statement (printed in this issue, pp. 78-80*) reflects this variety and its consequences: "Although the differences in interpretation were remarkable, the participants were able to learn from one another, to value the variety of contributions, and to discover a common commitment to the cause of justice."

The intense and at times extremely difficult discussions contributed to a creative learning experience for those present. Initial skepticism concerning the ultimate motives and intentions of those with different theological views were to a large extent overcome during the week as participants shared intense discussions and conversations. During the week they agreed that there was no possibility of developing a theological statement articulating the authentic relationship between justification and justice. Time and the variety of theological positions precluded this. However, the participants unanimously decided to issue a statement at the close of the consultation developed by the work group whose assignment was to reflect upon and summarize the dialog of the day. The statement centered in the following affirmation:

The participants were united in the conviction that God has given us the treasure of the gospel in Jesus Christ to be shared with the world. In this gift, we find our freedom as Christians. The God who justifies us in Christ calls us to do justice....Here it is impossible for Christians to be neutral. All who

*Page references in this essay are to subsequent pages in this issue.

proclaim the Word of God must also identify and challenge the forces of death

and destruction which defy the kingdom of God. (See full statement, pp. 78-80)

Persons not involved in the consultation and not aware of the content of the 13 presentations and 13 responses, as well as the hours of discussion, have asked why it was not possible to agree on a more comprehensive theological formulation. An attempt to delineate several major points of the debate may shed some light on the complexity of the debate and also on the continuing discussion concerning the relationship of justification and justice.

I. METHODOLOGICAL VARIATIONS

At the end of the first day's discussion, the work group reported: "There was a strong methodological discrepancy." The final statement of the consultation defined the discrepancy in the following way:

On the one hand, there were presentations and contributions which took a classical point of departure from the Scriptures and confessions, seeking to make a careful distinction between justification and justice. On the other hand, there was a strong emphasis on the concrete experiences of oppressed classes, races, and women and the actions to overcome their oppression as a point of departure for theological reflection, seeking to show the interdependence of justification and justice.

This methodological discrepancy became evident even before Dr. José Míguez Bonino's keynote lecture was given. As I welcomed the group and related something of the consultation's origin and purpose, Dr. Milton Schwantes, professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran seminary in São Leopoldo, Brazil, challenged the methodology of the whole conference. He noted that the presentations moved from the theoretical to the practical, literally from justification to justice, and then to pastoral dimensions of liberation. He charged that this approach could not possibly deal with the struggle for justice necessitated by the Latin American context.

The consultation, he claimed, should begin with an analysis of the socioeconomic situation within America (for Latin Americans, the one continent of America includes both South, Central, and North America). Only then could one begin to take seriously the absolutely vital relationship between justification and justice. There was no doubt that Dr. Schwantes did not think North American Lutherans took that relationship seriously. Dr. Victorio Araya from Costa Rica reiterated that theme as he said, "'the condemned of the earth' present to us in a radical and demanding way the question of the justice and justification of God." Later in the week Dr. Schwantes, in responding to an Old Testament paper prepared by Dr. Foster McCurley of the Lutheran Church in America, said: "To sum up, the roots of justice are in our people, in their historic destinies. Here justice grows by means of poor people—suffering, dying people. This path of justice which is being laid out is the theoretic master copy which should serve as a continual reference point for theology. In this regard, a theological revolt has already begun in Latin America."

Almost every presentation of the Latin American theologians had a major reference to the

historical context in which they lived, worked, and thought. Dr. Míguez Bonino, whose presentation does not reflect this methodology, said at the end of his address, “I can imagine several Latin Americans present in this session growing increasingly restless with a presentation which develops along rather classical lines. We could certainly begin this consultation otherwise where we Latin American Christians begin...where the Bible itself begins it: with a people oppressed and exploited” (p. 21).

The emphasis upon contextualization in the midst of oppression was deeply supported by the North American women and the one North American black, Bishop Nelson Trout. Bishop Trout lamented that Lutheran theology in North America tended to avoid political, economic issues in which the church is called to address sin in historic specificity. Dr. Elizabeth Bettenhausen’s article directly challenges North American Lutheran theology’s neglect of its historical social context in developing a theology rooted in justification. It was interesting to converse with the North American women and the Latin American men as they noted their surprising alliance develop during the week’s discussion.

In contrast to the emphasis upon historical contextualization reflected by those molded by the reality of oppression was an emphasis upon the necessity of theological clarity. The work group’s summary at the end of the second day states, “Theologians in the main stream of North American Lutheranism begin with conceptions drawn from Scripture and the Confessions and do not make explicit reference to the influence of contemporary experience in their interpretation of Scripture.” Furthermore, several of these theologians were rather skeptical of theologies which focused upon the context of oppression. Dr. James M. Childs, dean and professor of social ethics at Trinity Theological Seminary, in his response reflected upon this situation:

The dominant theology is so oblivious to its own particularity—has never had to face it—that it considers its own modes of thought and its own agenda to be universal. It therefore looks with jaundiced eye at the theologies shaped in the particularity of the experience of oppression.

It was a fact that many of the North American theologians did not focus on the context of their theology but focused upon making clear distinctions between justification and justice. It was also true that in the eyes of those articulating a theology for the oppressed, many of the North American men were not adequately aware of the historical context of theology. However, explicit reasons were given for this attempt to develop precise theological distinctions between justification and justice, and it had much to do with the North Americans’ perception of their own context.

In spite of the fact that there were no major references to the North American context by the various North American contributors, their perception of the North American context deeply influenced their theological thinking. Dr. Timothy Lull in the conclusion to his presentation, “Justification in the Americas,” summarized: “The doctrine of justification is vigorously presented in North America in Lutheran theology; however, it is ambiguously present in Lutheran church life...and it is scarcely mentioned in contemporary systematic theology outside of Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic church circles.”

(Reference was made by Lull to surveys indicating that Lutheran pastors preached 70 percent of their sermons on justification; however, only 50 percent of lay people indicated that they had little if any understanding of its meaning.)

Many of the North American Lutheran theologians were convinced that the message of justification has not yet been heard by most Lutherans, much less most Americans. Furthermore, they would argue that it is only after justification has become a reality within persons that the Holy Spirit can create new life which actually has the power to be deeply involved in God's struggle for justice.

Dr. Gerhard Forde, who spoke of his own context as being marked by the enlightenment and secularized forms of self-righteousness, writes, "Unless the gospel is preached [in North America] as the negation which puts the old self to death in order to call the new into being it will simply continue to be absorbed into the morass of 'affirmation' and decadent modernity. A word must be preached which 'puts the mighty from their seats'" (p. 28). For Dr. Forde, it is the reality of justification by faith which makes this movement from death to life possible.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JUSTIFICATION AND JUSTICE

Much of the consultation revolved around how justification and justice are related. Two basic approaches emerged. The work group reported that "for some, justification as a salvific act of God is the liberating precondition which empowers those who receive justification by faith to work for justice. For others, justification and justice are two faces of the same coin, emphasizing the will of God for life abundant, for humanity, and the human participation in the struggle for justice."

Discussion through the week revealed once again a basic tension between those primarily concerned with justice and those primarily concerned with justification. The former were convinced that the horror and tragedy of global oppression and poverty were the primary issues facing the church in the 20th century. Dr. Victorio Araya spoke movingly of "the scandal of the anti-life structural injustice of our world (the historical earthquakes)." He enumerated: 500 million hungry, one billion living in extreme poverty, 40 million deaths a year from hunger and malnutrition, 1.5 billion without access to medical care, 814 million illiterate, 2 billion without a stable water supply, etc.

Within that context Dr. Araya argued that the traditional Lutheran articulation of justification focused so exclusively upon individual and subjective salvation that the life of faith became abstracted from historical involvement, and good works took on an almost accidental role in life. He noted that the key question for Martin Luther was, "How to find a merciful God who receives the sinner." However, he noted that the key question today for us is, "How to find the liberating God that chooses the side of the poor and oppressed in order to establish justice and right to life."

In answering that question, Dr. Araya spoke of justice and justification as two sides of one coin. The justice of God is God's saving action. "It is God setting things right, bursting in with victorious force that overcomes death and recreates life." Dr. Míguez Bonino, Dr. Schwantes, Dr. McCurley, and several

others made reference to this biblical notion of justice as “God’s liberating action experienced within a situation of oppression” (see Míguez Bonino’s article). The justice of God is God’s saving action: in establishing covenant relationships and setting relationships right (Míguez Bonino), in restoring the totality of reality to God’s creative intention (McCurley), in bringing life out of historical chaos (Schwantes).

In the thinking of all these participants, the emphasis is upon justice as the active, saving action of God. In the midst of universal death in all of its forms (poverty, oppression, alienation, sin, guilt), God recreates life marked by both justice as righteousness and justification in the sense of forgiveness. This approach to the relationship of justification and justice is exemplified in Míguez Bonino’s keynote address. It is an approach that intends to unify as closely as possible all the dimensions of God’s saving will as God deals with the totality of sin and its consequences. In terms of two kingdom language, Míguez Bonino writes, “God does not have two uncoordinated hands.” It is also an approach that focuses upon the inseparable relationship between the human response of faith in the form of trust in God’s saving action and faith in the form of obedience within God’s saving action in history.

In contrast to those who viewed justification and justice as two sides of one coin were those who spoke of justification as a saving act of God which is “the liberating precondition which empowers those who receive justification by faith to work for justice” (work group). The majority of the participants articulated their theological position from this perspective, insisting that it was extremely important to make a careful distinction between justification and justice. Dr. David Tiede, in his response, argued that the “radically free act of justifying the ungodly” had to be specifically designated in order that it be powerfully presented and proclaimed. Dr. Tiede argued that the radicality of justification must be seen in the absurdity of forgiveness of the unrighteous; that the radicality of justification must be proclaimed when historical realities would indicate that God’s kingdom is “utopian speculation”; that the radicality of justification must be experienced in order that forgiven sinners might dare to participate in the Messiah’s mission to establish justice on the earth. This intense concern to preserve the absolute uniqueness of justifying grace is reflected in the essays by Dr. Gerhard Forde and Dr. Robert Hoferkamp which follow.

Dr. Forde, often designated *the* Lutheran theologian of justification by faith, is insistent that justification by faith cannot be related to justice in “any sort of positive or artificial synthesis” (p. 24). From his critics’ point of view, he emphasizes that point to the extent that his theological position endangers an integrated understanding of the relationship between faith and works. Dr. Mario Yutzis from Argentina, in reply to Forde, said, “It seems dangerous to insist exaggeratedly on God’s two way track (law and gospel, etc.)” Forde replied that it is the only way to clarify God’s justifying work. Only then does it become clear that *all* human endeavors, no matter how idealistic, stand under the judgment of God; only then is it clear that no human endeavor in any sense merits God’s grace or is needed to merit God’s grace; only then can there be a total negation of the old life in sin, making possible resurrection to the new life in the Spirit. It is, according to Forde, this new life of faith that makes possible an authentic struggle for justice in the world. Since one is justified by God, “one

is turned back into the world of the neighbor for the time being to care and to seek for justice.... There is nothing left to prove vis-à-vis God. There is only the world of the neighbor for the time being” (p. 26). When one discovers in faith the world of the neighbor, one has then identified the proper use of the law for political purposes. The law is to be used “for taking care of people here on earth in as good, loving and just a manner as can be managed” (p. 30).

Through the week there were several participants who viewed this proposal as exaggerated or inadequate. One of those who saw it as inadequate was Dr. Bettenhausen. She argues at the end of her paper that if one is to use the language of death and resurrection meaningfully for the human self in its relationship to God’s justification, then the concept of the self must be understood in socio-historical categories, which enables true justice and liberation within the contemporary context. Dr. Bettenhausen writes: “This is especially clear when oppressed groups in society take *kenosis* [death to self in the context of this discussion] as the theological enforcement of their ‘low estate.’ Then justification and justice are mutually exclusive” (p. 69).

There were various suggestions during the week as to how justification and justice could be clearly distinguished, yet inseparably related, and how one could affirm with Forde the radicality of justification without appearing to be endangering God’s radical call to struggle for justice. Dr. Childs spoke of life in justification by grace through faith as a state of being that begets a way of being. Dr. Duane Priebe of Wartburg Theological Seminary suggested that faith “hears and believes God’s promise in Jesus’ coming, death, and resurrection for all people and the whole creation.... In that faith they are called to speak and act out God’s love toward a world fallen under the sway of the destructive powers of sin and death in all their dimensions.” Dr. Walter Altmann of Brazil placed the life of faith within God’s struggle to overcome the demonic forces in the world. Dr. John Stumme argued that the integral relationship between justification and justice is rooted in the one God who is the ground of both creation and salvation. Dr. Vítor Westhelle of Brazil spoke of justification as the doxological language of faith and justice as a category within the ethical language of the Christian community. Both languages are rooted in the will and agency of God and “doxology stands to ethics as motivation to public engagement.” Dr. Westhelle writes, “Praise animates the struggle, in the confidence that from the perspective of God’s eschatological deliverance no deed of love and act of justice will ever be lost.”

On the evening of our departure from Mexico City, a number of participants shared final thoughts during a closing worship service. Dr. Eugenio Araya of Chile stepped forward. He was to return to one of the most oppressive countries in Latin America. He belongs to a small Lutheran church which was deserted by most of its members when Bishop Frenz, at the time of Allende’s overthrow in 1973, spoke on behalf of those who disappeared or were sent to concentration camps. Bishop Frenz was accused of getting involved in politics and not correctly understanding the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms. As Dr. Araya anticipated his return to this small church’s continuing struggle for justice, he left us with this benediction, “God has taken care of our justification. Let us be about God’s work of justice.”