



DR JAMES E. READ
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE SALVATION ARMY
ETHICS CENTRE IN WINNIPEG
CANADA AND BERMUDA TERRITORY

JUSTIFIED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

DOCTRINE FOR TODAY

SERIES: THE ARMY'S ELEVEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

[Doctrine 8]

We believe that we are justified by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and that he that believeth hath the witness in himself.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Harris, Ray - *Convictions Matter: The Function of Salvation Army Doctrines* (2014)
Lutheran World Federation, Catholic Church - *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, 1999 (<http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>)

Read, Edward - *In the Hands of Another: Memoirs of Edward Read* (2002)

Wright, N.T. - *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (2009)

I GREW up hearing my Dad tell stories of his first days in The Salvation Army. When he was just a teenager his mother died, and shortly after that he moved to a nearby town to live with an older brother and his wife. She belonged to the home league and through that connection my father was invited to come to Parrsboro Corps, Canada.

Dad had gone to church as a child and had read his Bible. He knew Hebrews said: 'It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment' (Hebrews 9:27 *KJV*). So he was surprised and curious when he went to the Army and heard people testifying that they were saved and going to Heaven. 'How could they know that?' my father wondered. Especially when he observed that their lives were anything but morally perfect. But he didn't scoff and he didn't leave – largely because of Captain Jessie Haliburton, the young corps officer. As Dad wrote in his memoirs: 'I knew I did not have what the captain had. There was radiance, and joy, and something more; the gospel looked wonderfully attractive, dressed in that flesh-and-blood embodiment of it' (Read 2002).

As our eighth article of faith puts it, my father could see that Captain Haliburton had 'the witness in [herself]'. But what exactly is it that her life was giving witness to? Our

doctrine uses language that feels dated or awfully technical to many – justification, grace, faith.

I think it is hard to see, in this day and age, why people would go to war over such words. But that is what happened. In the 16th century, the 'doctrine of justification' split the Western European church apart. Martin Luther and fellow Protestants condemned Catholicism in general; the Roman Catholic Church reciprocated in equal terms. Lutherans produced popular literature that portrayed the Pope as the Antichrist; Catholics cartooned Luther as the devil. The vitriol makes it all the more remarkable that some 400 years later, in 1999, Roman Catholics and Lutherans signed a 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification' (Lutheran World Federation; Catholic Church 1999).

At its heart, I think the fight was over a deep paradox – to say someone is 'justified by grace' verges on a contradiction.

'Justify' and 'justification' are not terms of theology alone. In everyday life it's not unusual for people to want a justification for what they think or what they do. 'She was *justified* in being outraged,' one person says. 'He attacked her.' The speaker means to say that the alleged victim had morally good and sufficient reason for her reaction. Afterwards, when the

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- * DESCRIBE A MOMENT OF GRACE IN YOUR LIFE WHERE YOU KNEW BEYOND ANY DOUBT THAT PUTTING YOUR TRUST IN JESUS WAS THE RIGHT DECISION.
- * WHAT KEEPS PEOPLE FROM HAVING DEEP FAITH IN JESUS TODAY?
- * IN 2006 THE WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL OFFICIALLY ADOPTED THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION. IS THIS A DECLARATION THE SALVATION ARMY COULD ALSO AGREE WITH?

court does not convict the alleged attacker, the speaker says: 'The judge was *justified* in her ruling; there wasn't enough evidence.' Philosophy says inferences are justified only if certain principles of logic are followed. In other words, 'justification' doesn't have only one context of usage. Morality, law and logic use the same word but appeal to different criteria because different things count as good reasons.

If we go to the Greek of the New Testament we find that *dikaiois*-rooted words (words translated as English 'just/justification') similarly carry the implication that a good reason is supplied or needed. Often a context of judges and standards of legal reasoning is in mind as in Luke 18:1-8 (the Parable of the Persistent Widow), but not always, as in the famous story in Luke 10:25-37 (the Parable of the Good Samaritan). Luke's Gospel says that the Torah expert who asked Jesus for a definition of 'neighbour' was trying to *justify* himself (v 29). He had come initially hoping to embarrass Jesus or somehow show him to disadvantage, but instead had been thrown off by Jesus' first answer, and so the Torah expert was left scrambling to find a face-saving follow-up.

When your behaviour is justified you can hold your head high because you acted with good reason; acting without justification should leave you feeling guilty or ashamed.

Now, how about 'grace' (Greek New Testament *charis*)? 'Grace' signifies a pure gift. One person gives another

something without anything about the recipient that necessitates the gift. When my employer gives me my pay, it's not an act of grace; I have earned what I get. But when I give my grandchild a toy car, there's nothing he has done to earn it or deserve it. He couldn't claim to be wronged if I don't give it to him. It's because I love him and think he will enjoy it that I grace him with the toy.

No wonder that crushing these two concepts together as 'justification by grace' provokes puzzlement. The human mind thinks, either I am justified or I am granted a grace. The biblically shaped mind knows that, paradoxical as it is, this is God's way with humanity.

Jesus' parable of the father receiving his prodigal son is the most easily accessible expression of the idea. The son starts towards home, knowing that he has no justification for his earlier waywardness and no claim to be welcomed back. He decides he will bargain for a big favour – to be hired as a farmhand. But the father will have none of it. He cuts his son off mid-speech and says: 'Welcome home. You're my son. I don't want you to grovel or feel ashamed.' It's a pure gift – grace – that re-establishes a relationship in which the son is not to feel defensive or in the wrong. Grace is the divine antidote for disgrace.

For the apostle Paul, justification *through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ* – the remaining element in our eighth doctrine – was as important as justification *by grace*.

God graciously makes a welcome home possible for sinful humanity, but God does not *force* anyone home, Salvation Army teaching says. People need to receive God's offer in faith.

The 'faith' in question is a matter both of the head and the heart, of cognition and a disposition to behave. On the one hand, faith is a synonym for trust – the Christian is one who readily lives as a *dependent* creature rather than pretending he or she could be self-sufficient. But that's not the whole of the story. It's a big mistake to teach that human self-confidence and scepticism needs simply to be replaced with a more trusting attitude. The Christian says it matters very much, indeed it matters eternally, who the object of one's trust is. People should ask: 'Is the person or organisation or philosophy I trust one that warrants my trust?' The Christian life is a life grounded in informed trust in a very specific person – Jesus. To know him is to realise that, if anyone deserves our trust, he does. In fact, he alone deserves our allegiance as Lord.

Back to my father. He converted because this is what he saw: a young officer whose very self gave witness to the truth that by trusting Jesus one could live confidently, assured of God's gracious acceptance.

Justification, grace, faith: all embodied in one human witness. Wouldn't it be wonderful if everybody lived like that?