JUSTIFIED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

DOCTRINE FOR TODAY

SERIES: THE ARMY’S ELEVEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

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 local church and through that connection my father was invited to come to Parnsworps Corps, Canada.

Dad had gone to church as a child and had read his Bible. He knew what it meant. It was appointed unto men once to die, but after this judgment (Hebrews 9:27). 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’s what 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 (Reed 2002).

As our eighth article of faith puts it, my father could see that Captain Haliburton had the witness in [himself]. But what exactly is it that her life was giving witness to? Our doctrine uses language that feels dated or awkwardly 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 it makes 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. ‘Justified 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 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 one specific 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 dikaiosynai-rooted words (words translated as English ‘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 Pharisee 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 Pharisee 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. Thus, the life of the righteous is the divine antidote for disgrace.

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 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 or trust that one trusts?’ 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?

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?

FOR FURTHER READING:

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