

## F. The Time of Justification.

Some theologians separate active and passive justification temporally. The active justification is then said to have taken place in eternity or in the resurrection of Christ, while passive justification takes place by faith and therefore, it is said, follows the other in a temporal sense. We shall consider successively justification from eternity, justification in the resurrection of Christ, and justification by faith.

1. JUSTIFICATION FROM ETERNITY. The Antinomians held that the justification of the sinner took place in eternity, or in the resurrection of Christ. They either confounded it with the eternal decree of election, or with the objective justification of Christ when He was raised from the dead. They did not properly distinguish between the divine purpose in eternity and its execution in time, nor between the work of Christ in procuring, and that of the Holy Spirit in applying the blessings of redemption. According to this position we are justified even before we believe, though we are unconscious of it, and faith simply conveys to us the declaration of this fact. Moreover, the fact that our sins were imputed to Christ made Him personally a sinner, and the imputation of His righteousness to us makes us personally righteous, so that God can see no sin in believers at all. Some Reformed theologians also speak of justification from eternity, but at the same time refuse to subscribe to the Antinomian construction of this doctrine. The grounds on which they believe in justification from eternity deserve brief consideration.

### *a. Grounds for the doctrine of justification from eternity.*

(1) Scripture speaks of a grace or mercy of God which is from ever-lasting, Ps. 25:6; 103:17. Now all grace or mercy that is from eternity must have as its judicial or legal basis a justification that is from eternity. But in answer to this it may be said that there are eternal mercies and lovingkindnesses of God which are not based on any justification of the sinner, as, for instance, His plan of redemption, the gift of His Son, and the willing suretyship of Christ in the *pactum salutis*.

(2) In the *pactum salutis* the guilt of the sins of the elect was transferred to Christ, and the righteousness of Christ was imputed to them. This means that the burden of sin was lifted from their shoulders and that they were justified. Now there is no doubt about it that there was a certain imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the sinner in the counsel of redemption, but not all imputation can be called justification in the Scriptural sense of the term. We must distinguish between what was merely ideal in the counsel of God and what is realized in the course of history.

(3) The sinner receives the initial grace of regeneration on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Consequently, the merits of Christ must have been imputed to him before his regeneration. But while this consideration leads to the conclusion that justification logically precedes regeneration, it does not prove the priority of justification in a temporal sense. The sinner can receive the grace of regeneration on the basis of a justification, ideally existing in the counsel of God and certain to be realized in the life of the sinner.

(4) Children also need justification, in order to be saved, and yet it is quite impossible that they should experience justification by faith. But though it is perfectly true that children, who have not yet come to maturity, cannot experience passive justification, they can be actively justified in the tribunal of God and thus be in possession of that which is absolutely essential.

(5) Justification is an immanent act of God, and as such must be from eternity. It is hardly correct, however, to speak of justification as an *actus immanens* in God; it is rather an *actus transiens*, just as creation, incarnation, and so on. The advocates of justification from eternity feel the weight of this consideration, and therefore hasten to give us the assurance that they do not mean to teach that the elect are justified from eternity *actualiter*, but only in the intention of God, in the divine decree. This leads us back to the usual distinction between the counsel of God and its execution. If this justification in the intention of God warrants our speaking of a justification from eternity, then there is absolutely no reason why we should not speak of a creation from eternity as well.

b. *Objections against the doctrine of justification from eternity.*

The Bible teaches uniformly that justification takes place by faith or out of faith. This, of course, applies to passive or subjective justification, which, however, cannot be separated temporally from active or objective justification except in the case of children. But if justification takes place by faith, it certainly does not precede faith in a temporal sense. Now it is true that the advocates of a justification from eternity also speak of a justification by faith. But in their representation this can only mean that man by faith becomes conscious of what God has done in eternity.

In Rom. 8:29,30, where we find some of the *scalae* of the *ordo salutis*, justification stands between two acts of God in time, namely, calling and glorification, which begins in time but is completed in a future eternity. And these three together are the result of two others which are explicitly indicated as eternal. Dr. Kuyper is not warranted in saying that Rom. 8:30 refers to what took place with the regenerated before they were born, as even Dr. De Moor, who also believes in a justification from eternity, is quite willing to admit.<sup>1</sup>

In teaching justification from eternity, the decree of God respecting the justification of the sinner, which is an *actus immanens*, is identified with justification itself, which is an *actus transiens*. This only leads to confusion. What took place in the *pactum salutis* cannot be identified with what results from it. All imputation is not yet justification. Justification is one of the fruits of Christ's redemptive work, applied to believers by the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit did not and could not apply this or any other fruit of the work of Christ from eternity.

2. JUSTIFICATION IN THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST. The idea that sinners are in some sense of the word justified in the resurrection of Christ was stressed by some Antinomians, is taught by those Reformed theologians who believe in a justification from eternity, and is also held by some other Reformed scholars. This view is based on the following grounds:

a. By His atoning work Christ satisfied all the demands of the law for His people. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead the Father publicly declared that all the requirements of the law were met for all the elect and thereby justified them. But here too careful distinction is required. Even though it be true that there was an objective justification of Christ and of the whole body of Christ in His resurrection, this should not be confounded with the justification of the sinner of which Scripture speaks. It is not true that, when Christ rendered full satisfaction to the Father for all His people, their guilt naturally terminated. A penal debt is not like a pecuniary debt in this respect. Even after the payment of a ransom, the removal of guilt may depend on certain conditions, and does not follow as a matter of course. The elect are not personally justified in the Scriptural sense until they accept Christ by faith and thus appropriate His merits.

b. In Rom. 4:25 we read that Christ was “raised up for (*dia*, causal, on account of) our justification,” that is, to effect our justification. Now it is undoubtedly true that *dia* with the accusative is causal here. At the same time it need not be retrospective, but can also be prospective and therefore mean “with a view to our justification,” which is equivalent to saying, “in order that we may be justified.” The retrospective interpretation would be in conflict with the immediately following context, which clearly shows (1) that Paul is not thinking of the objective justification of the whole body of Christ, but of the personal justification of sinners; and (2) that he conceives of this as taking place through faith.

c. In II Cor. 5:19 we read: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses.” From this passage the inference is drawn that the objective reconciliation of the world in Christ involves the non-imputation of sin to the sinner. But this interpretation is not correct. The evident meaning of the apostle is: God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, as appears from the fact that He does not impute to men their sins, and that He has entrusted to His servants the word of reconciliation. Notice that *me logizomenos* (present tense) refers to what is constantly going on. This cannot be conceived as a part of the objective reconciliation, for then the following clause, “and having committed to us the word of reconciliation,” would also have to be so interpreted, and this is quite impossible.

In connection with this matter it may be said that we can speak of a justification of the body of Christ as a whole in His resurrection, but this is purely objective and should not be confounded with the personal justification of the sinner.

1. Cf. his *De Rechtvaardigmaking Van Eeuwigheid*, p. 20.

(Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1972, pp. 517-520)