

# The Relevance of the Doctrine of Justification for the Church in India\*

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JUSTIFICATION IN CHRISTIAN FAITH

The word 'Justification' is a very common word and sometimes used in such a common way that the deepest intentions of the word are hardly realized. It is a word that has gained the attention of generations from Biblical times. Strictly speaking it has been the centre of the Biblical message that God is Lord and we are the sheep of His pasture. It stands primarily for the relationship God bears to man and the meaning of this relationship for man's life and destiny. The central idea in this Biblical setting points undoubtedly to the very nature and understanding of God. God is not to be understood in terms of philosophical categories as the absolute being, neither is He to be understood in terms of absolute or naked majesty. The picture of God behind the doctrine of justification is that of one who is active and living in a relationship. God's love stands for an activity that is always channelled in His relationship with man. In other words, justification thinks not so much of God's nature in the abstract as His activity of love in the concrete.

To this Biblical message the Reformation brought deeper insights which gather relevance because of the different shades of clouds that passed over the understanding and presentation of the gospel. The psychological situations of the Reformers and the experiential development of their personalities played no insignificant role in their discovery and exposition of the doctrine of justification. Luther's psychological struggles in the midst of an acute sense of moral imperfection drove him to the realization that the answer to this situation is not to be found in moral excellence, but rather to be understood and appropriated in terms of

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the forgiving and condescending love of God. That is to say, the true answer to life's quest is not to be found in what happens to man, but rather what happens to God when He meets man as he is. God's heart moves and acts and in this dynamic action the holy and righteous God clothes sinful man with His own holiness and righteousness.

The doctrine of justification became important for another reason as well. The understanding of the gospel began to have a more determined influence in relating the gospel to proclamation and preaching as well. The interrelation and the interaction between these two refer to the core of justification. To think of the gospel without the obligation to proclaim the word of the gospel makes for a gospel that is not the good news, or to proclaim the gospel for the sake of human satisfaction or for any other reason without its reference to God's action is to make the gospel meaningless and ineffective. The two belong together and the right understanding of their relation will help towards a true understanding of the meaning of justification as God's spontaneous activity and victory over the lives of His creatures in this world.

It is, however, not an easy task to understand the true implications of the doctrine of justification in our modern times. The modern man has very different presuppositions which lie at the roots of his life and world views. In the light of the scientific and technological developments, he is inclined to seek more and more the strength for his life in self-reliance. The importance gained through all these advancements has been intensified by the increasing recognition of great potential powers man is able to wield. Such a self-reliance is evident in three important concerns of the modern man: (1) for existence, (2) for preservation and (3) for extinction. The one search is for security and man seems to seek in a very determined manner strongholds for his own existence. Such a resolute determination to strengthen the foundations of existence is strongest today. As a result there is an increasing preoccupation with categories that promote the security of life and all social, economic and even religious concerns are ultimately nothing other than a fundamental concern for human existence. Secondly, existence in itself is meaningless without the effort to preserve and perpetuate it. In this concern we observe in clear and unmistakable terms the vast competition and struggle in the various spheres of human activity—in industry and commerce, in medical discoveries, in technological achievements. Finally the preoccupation with human existence and its preservation does include an inevitable attitude to the end of life. In the midst of many attitudes what is most common to the modern man is an expectation of natural extinction of life. That life must end, must be counted upon and there is nothing more to be said about the same.

In the context of such preoccupations it is necessary to reconsider the meaning and relevance of the doctrine of justification. The soil in which the doctrine grew at the time of the Reformation

is not the same soil we find today. In the present-day context, when life moves under very different conditions, one can ask how far the Christian claim can be expressed in terms of justification. Humanly speaking in the secular world there seems to be no proper qualifications for an understanding of such a doctrine. Yet this does not exclude its meaning and relevance for today. Because justification stands for something quite the opposite of man's search and presuppositions, it has a missionary task to point to the centre outside of man's own sphere of activity and achievement. It is evident that the traditional language and phraseology in which this doctrine has been clothed and presented may not have a direct relevance today, but this very fact makes us seriously face the challenge to think of the new thought forms in which the abiding central truth of God's action in love is to be channelled. Such a task can be fruitfully and successfully performed only when the Christian gospel is able to be presented in the total conviction that God is Lord of the world and the Lordship of God in Christ means in a real and true sense a lordship over the whole humanity.

#### JUSTIFICATION IN CHURCH LIFE

In the previous section we have seen the central place the doctrine of justification occupies in Christian faith for a true understanding of God and man. It is important to let God be God and man be man. Only in this way can we understand the meaning of justification, its centre being rooted in God's relation to man. We have also to ask the question frankly: What does the doctrine of justification mean in practice for those who are within the walls of the Church, that is, as far as their life and witness are concerned? It must be stated at the outset that the traditional language and thought forms used to present this doctrine presents some difficulties and it is our task to steer clear in such a way that the message of salvation will not only be understood properly, but that its power also will be evidenced in the practical life of the believers. The historical situation in which Luther reacted to existing conditions of his times is not quite identical with the situation in the Younger Churches today, although this is not to deny that the central truths of the Reformation have an abiding relevance in one way or another. The impression is created in Lutheran and non-Lutheran circles that the excessive indulgence in the exclusive objective reality implied in justification in Luther's theology needs to be understood and used in quite a different way. The other side of the question, namely, an equal emphasis on the relation of this theocentric approach to the needs of man, in just his situation, needs to be supplemented. This may be an erroneous way of understanding and interpreting Luther, but yet we see the influence of Lutheranism, rather than Luther himself in somewhat misleading lines: To put it differently, we may say that for Christian life and witness in the Younger

Churches a simple and clear correlation of justification and sanctification would be of practical value. Failure to recognize this correlation between the reality of justification and its impact on a justified life leads to two different consequences. One is to belittle the demands that lie behind the Christian life in respect of a sanctified personal life, and the other is to develop an attitude of indifference to face the impact of justification on the concerns of human life—social, economic and political. The former attitude has serious repercussions for a Christian witness in a non-Christian world and the other has equally serious repercussions for the development of a healthy national life.

In the life of the Younger Churches there is a growing need for viewing the total life and witness of the Churches in terms of *Una Sancta*. The formation of the Church of South India in 1947 has laid the burden of Church Union heavily on the part of all Younger Churches. In the context of the Lutheran Churches in India, the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India has always taken the stand that this vital question of relations with non-Lutheran Churches is not a matter of individual concern of the Churches but it has rather wished to enter into conversations with the C.S.I. as a Lutheran unit in order to serve the cause in a more objective way and whatever way the negotiations may lead the Churches, there will be the consciousness that the Lutheran Churches have together faced the issue as a common task in obedience to the call of God in this new and challenging situation. For eight years there have been theological conversations between representatives of the C.S.I. and the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India. Papers presented and the subjects discussed have been numerous and these are available in print. As a result of these discussions Agreed Statements have been issued on *the Law and the Gospel, the Doctrine of Election, the Relation of Doctrinal and Confessional Statements to the Being of the Church, Baptism, the Lord's Supper* and on *the Church and the Ministry*. Although these Agreed Statements are only a few, they must be viewed in the total context of the several important issues carefully and thoroughly discussed and therefore these serve as not only important documents conveying the common ground gained in doctrinal matters, but they also serve as signs of the common task that has bound the two large sections in South India, much concern having been directed for reaching unity in faith. To quote from one of the Agreed Statements: 'Agreement regarding the basic doctrines which are of the essence of the Gospel is the prerequisite of union between Churches.' Nevertheless the basis for the unity of the Church is oneness in the Lord Himself. The responsibility for deciding in any particular case whether the necessary doctrinal agreement exists rests upon the living Church as led by the Holy Spirit (*Unity in Faith and Life*, C.L.S., 1955, p. 17). It is interesting to note the part played by the Lutheran section in determining the Agreed Statements. The C.S.I. has at every stage appreciated the central contribution

through the understanding of the justification by faith, although at very many points the Lutherans had to use not the traditional language, but new terms to describe the meanings and intentions that lie behind this theocentric aspect of God's revelation and its relation to man. The total outcome can be expressed in the firm affirmation that the centrality of the doctrine had not only been recognized but it permeates the common understanding of the Agreed Statements based on a serious confrontation with the Word of God.

It may be interesting to mention at this point what the two Churches say about the relation of doctrinal and confessional statements of the Being of the Church. The Agreed Statement begins: 'God has revealed Himself to us, and the centre of that revelation is His saving act in Jesus Christ. This revelation of Himself is the reality which the Church seeks to express in words in its creeds and confessions of faith' (*Ibid.*, p. 15). This is an important aspect as we have to bear in mind that the confessions have a place of significance only in so far as they point to the central reality of God's revelation and atonement in Christ. With regard to the purpose and nature of these confessional statements the Agreed Statement continues: 'As the Church seeks to confess what it believes and to safeguard it from misunderstanding or distortion, it must use human language, but must always remember that human language is necessarily inadequate to express the fullness of God's revelations.' 'The use of creeds and confessions to guide Christians into deeper experience and to preserve the essentials of the Christian message is, in principle, sound and scriptural.' 'All creeds and confessions are subordinate standards subject to the authority of the Word of God' (*Ibid.*).

The *Lutheran World* (Vol. V, No. 4) carries an article: Confessions and Churches—an Afro-Asian Symposium, edited by Dr. Arne Sovik. It compiles together the various answers received from African and Asian leaders to a questionnaire sent out to them. What interests us now is one of the questions regarding the place of the Lutheran Confessions in the faith of the Younger Churches. The question reads as follows: In your opinion are the present Lutheran Confessions adequate for your Church? If so, how can they be brought to bear upon the life and theology of your Church? What status do they have in your Church, officially and in actual fact? The answers reveal in general the scanty recognition given to the Lutheran Confessions in the life and theology of the Younger Churches. There may be various reasons for this. It is partly explainable on the grounds that the language and expression of these Confessions have their roots in their historical situations and no attempt has been made to relate them in an effective way for an understanding of truths in the various vernaculars used today. It may partly be due to the hesitation that in the context of efforts to come together in forming one united Church such denominational confessions tend to make

unity more difficult because of the particular angle of thought and interpretation dictated by certain specific historical conditions. Whatever may be the legitimate reason the general attitude at least in India could be stated in the words quoted in the article: 'The present Lutheran Confessions do provide an adequate basis for the preservation of the Christian faith . . . but this is not to say that every word and every formulation should be mechanically adhered to at the cost of the need to interpret the meaning and spirit of the confessions in the language and thought forms of our country. This would, however, become the growing need of every living and active Church' (p. 371).

What does Justification mean to the Lutheran Churches in India? The answer to this is found in the Doctrinal statement presenting the confessional basis of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1951, where the following points are made under the heading: Justification by Faith (p. 9).

1. Moved by compassion and willing man's redemption, God sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world.<sup>1</sup> By his incarnation Christ became our brother,<sup>2</sup> and identified Himself so completely with humanity<sup>3</sup> that He took upon Himself all the consequences of man's sin.<sup>4</sup> By His vicarious life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus atoned for all sin, won the victory over sin, death and the devil, and thereby achieved man's salvation.<sup>5</sup>
  - <sup>1</sup> Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 2:2.
  - <sup>2</sup> Heb. 2:11, 14-15.
  - <sup>3</sup> Heb. 4:15; Rom. 8:3.
  - <sup>4</sup> Gal. 4:4f.
  - <sup>5</sup> Eph. 1:3ff.; Rom. 5:19; Gal. 1:4.
2. Through and because of this work of Christ and His righteousness, God has removed the curse on man<sup>1</sup>; therefore He no longer imputes sin,<sup>2</sup> but offers His forgiveness to all men and is now ready and willing to receive sinners into His sonship.<sup>3</sup>
  - <sup>1</sup> Gal. 3:13.
  - <sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 5:19, 21; Rom. 5:18.
  - <sup>3</sup> Gal. 4:5.
3. When God offers this grace to man in His Gospel,<sup>1</sup> and the sinner accepts this grace in faith, God justifies him and restores him to full sonship.
  - <sup>1</sup> Rom. 1:17; 3:22 (F.C. Epit. 111, 5-6; Sol. Decl. 111, 22).
4. Faith is the trust of our hearts in God's grace and in the salvation wrought by Him through Christ.<sup>1</sup> It is the work of God's Holy Spirit in our heart through the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> In this complete work of God lies the sure foundation of our faith, and therefore we can have complete certainty of our salvation.<sup>3</sup>
  - <sup>1</sup> (F.C. Epit. 111, 6; Sol. Decl. 111, 11).
  - <sup>2</sup> (F.V. Sol. Decl. 111, 10).
  - <sup>3</sup> (F.C. Sol. Decl. 111, 30).

5. It follows that God, looking upon our faith, declares us righteous not because faith would constitute a merit or an act of co-operation on our part, but because that faith trusts solely in what God has done in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom. 3:24, 28; 5:1f.; 11:6.  
(F.B. Sol. Decl. 111, 13, 30-31).

The following points are made under the heading: Christian Life and Obedience, the Fruit of Faith, which is the part dealing with the sanctification as the sequel to justification.

1. The state of sonship is a present possession which we have and hold in its completeness as long as we continue in faith.

2. This faith is in itself a new life and power in our hearts,<sup>1</sup> and by its very nature brings forth a holy life and good works.<sup>2</sup> Faith is a busy, living, and powerful thing, continually active in deeds of love.<sup>3</sup> These fruits of faith, however, do not give to faith its saving power. We are not saved through good works, but to do good work.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 5:17.

<sup>2</sup> Gal. 5:6.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thess. 1:3.

<sup>4</sup> Eph. 2:8-10.

(F.C. Epit. IV. 11; Sol. Decl. IV. 10).

3. The Holy Spirit changes the heart of the believer<sup>1</sup> and continually leads him to struggle against sin<sup>2</sup> by daily contrition and repentance: his former manner of life will be changed. Faith enables him to overcome temptations, because it gives him a new will that is in conformity with God's will (sanctification).

<sup>1</sup> Gal. 5, 24f.

(Apol. Art. iii 2, 4).

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 6, 12ff.; 8, 13; Eph. 4:22; 2 Cor.

7:1; 1 John 3:3.

4. Sanctification grows naturally out of faith, and is necessary because it is in accordance with God's will.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Spirit has converted us for the purpose of living under Christ in true holiness.<sup>2</sup> Thus in the life of the believer all deeds which proceed from the proper motive, the love of Christ,<sup>3</sup> and conform to the holy will of God will be a service well-pleasing to God. Since these requirements are lacking in the unbeliever, he can do no works that are pleasing to God.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 3:8; Gal. 5:8.

<sup>2</sup> Titus 2:14; Matt. 5:16.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:19.

<sup>4</sup> Heb. 11:6.

5. The incentive to good works is Christ's love,<sup>1</sup> which dwells in us and constrains us to love Him and for His sake to love our neighbour and all men.<sup>2</sup>
6. The new life which the believer leads is a living sacrifice<sup>1</sup> of thanksgiving for mercies received.<sup>2</sup> It is by no means a sacrifice by which man atones for past transgressions.<sup>3</sup>
7. We are justified and thus living a life in sanctification, but according to our old nature we are still sinners.<sup>1</sup> Yet sin, having no place in our new life,<sup>2</sup> is combated and mortified in daily repentance and faith.
8. The life in Christ, if it is healthy,<sup>1</sup> is bound to grow in holiness<sup>2</sup> unto the full measure of the stature of Christ.<sup>3</sup>
- <sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 5:14.  
<sup>2</sup> 2 Rom. 13:10.
- <sup>1</sup> Rom. 12:1.  
<sup>2</sup> Heb. 13:15, 16.  
<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:10.  
(F.C. Epit. II, 12).
- <sup>1</sup> Isa. 64:6; Phil. 3:12; Rom. 7:14-24.  
<sup>2</sup> Rom. 6:14; 1 Cor. 9:21.  
<sup>3</sup> (F.C. Epit. IV. 10-11:VI. 2ff.).
- <sup>1</sup> Titus 1:13.  
<sup>2</sup> Gal. 5:16; 1 Thess. 4:1, 3; Heb. 12:14; 1 Peter 1, 15f.  
<sup>3</sup> Eph. 4:13-16.

What appears in both the above headings, namely, JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH and CHRISTIAN LOVE AND OBEDIENCE, THE FRUIT OF FAITH, in a very useful manner relates justification by faith to the fruits of justification in terms of the believer's life. This is useful to understand the right relationship between what God does for the believer and its consequence. There are valuable emphases in the aforesaid doctrinal statements. The following may be noted: (1) Simplicity in language and expression. Especially in the vernacular translations, this fact is borne out strikingly; (2) The assertion that salvation is God's act. It is God's good pleasure to save the people whom He has created. Redemption, therefore, is God's purposeful act for the sake of man. It is in this light that the Christian understanding of the incarnation can be best presented. What needs to be stressed in Incarnation as against the aims of vindicating dharma in Hindu thought is the redemptive plan of God for man which is achieved through the death and resurrection of Christ. (3) Salvation which restores fellowship with God takes place in the realm of man on the basis of forgiveness which means that God does not wait for man to be lifted up to the heights of divinity as in the Hindu ideal of self-realization but condescends to the human level, and meets man in his sinful situation. (4) The insistence that faith is a gift of God. It needs to be stated in very clear terms that faith is not a gradual climbing up through the effort of man for self-elevation. It is neither a merit nor a process of human co-operation. Faith is not a means to an end. God has revealed Himself and has made Himself active in His redemptive purpose.



With reference to what is said under Christian love and obedience, the fruit of faith, the following may be noted. Sanctification is the fruit of faith. This is a very apt way of expressing the real meaning of sanctification. To use Luther's familiar metaphor, the right relation between justification and sanctification is that of a good tree bearing good fruits. Such an explanation guards against ideas of legalism or moralism. (2) It is also important that under this section it is pointed out that we are saved not through good works but to do good works. This shows that no amount of self-effort and moral excellence lays any foundation for man's redemption, but, on the other hand, the fact that man is redeemed by God's spontaneous act commits him to his neighbour in terms of meaningful service. The centre of a sanctified life is to be seen in terms of service and sacrifice.

### JUSTIFICATION AND EVANGELISM

The task of interpreting the Christian gospel to a non-Christian world is indeed the concern of the Younger Churches and therefore the relevance of the doctrine of justification for evangelism must be seen in this context. Although the interest of comparative religion has to some extent kept this concern in the forefront, so far a real confrontation in the sense of meeting the needs of non-Christian religious experience and faith has not been made. The way whereby the religious aspirations of the non-Christian masses could be adequately and convincingly answered, keeping in view their own presuppositions and conditions, is yet to be made clear. The Christian Church in India is realizing in an increasing way the need to understand the depths of the Christian faith from the other-man's-faith point of view. The task of evangelism is not merely to proclaim the Christian dogma but to make it relevant to the religious need of the non-Christian.

There is a new demand made on the Christian Church because of this new situation caused by the resurgence of non-Christian faiths. Along with the national awakening there is at the same time a new sense of religious awakening and the religious foundations for national and cultural developments are dug deeper. Religion itself takes new forms accordingly. The Hindus are a tolerant people, but they expect the same tolerance from others too. The new challenge placed by Hinduism today is whether Christianity is a religion of tolerance or a life with a missionary task. Our concern in this situation is not to present Christianity as a religion with unique claims for itself, our concern rather is to present the Christian faith as a power unto salvation and this necessarily means helping the non-Christians to understand the Christian faith from the point of view of the Gospel and its obligation to proclaim to the world the Gospel. During pre-Independence days there was often the attitude that Christianity is a religion from the West, but in post-Independence times this is no serious difficulty. Today the non-Christian is willing to

accept Christianity as a religion as native to the soil as any other religion in India, but it is hard for him to understand why there should be propagation and conversion. The real answer to this lies in the need to show that the Gospel ceases to be the Gospel when it is not proclaimed. If the non-Christian can be helped to see this relation as at the root of the Christian faith we have gained much from the point of view of the relation of the doctrine of justification to evangelism.

The relevance of the doctrine of justification for preaching is understood when we see the centre of the gospel as God's initiative to seek the fallen man. The crux of the matter is that man, as he is, is not able to find any way of saving himself. He must cast himself on an agency outside himself. This part of the proclamation will be alien to Indian thought and Hindu thought in particular. Whatever particular school of thought we turn to, Hinduism in general has a different anthropological foundation for its doctrine of salvation. Fundamentally there is in the Vedantic line of thought the conception of man as one who has potential qualities of the divine. It exists as a spark only, but it is a potential spark. To reach the highest limits of religious experience it is necessary to fan the spark so that it may glow, it may become a flame and finally the consuming fire when the soul is lost in the ultimate reality. To think of an outside agency helping man in this process of release is impossible, yea scandalous. When we take the Bhakthi line of thought, there again bhakthi does not point to a reality outside man, but is in actuality a potency within man and the only idea of a divine movement is when it is acceptable to God as a means to an end. The Christian Gospel stands or falls as we understand justification as God-centred or man-centred.

#### CONCLUSION

With all this our intention has been to stress that what is central in the doctrine of justification is always what God is and does with His people and only in the light of this divine revelation and redeeming action will the doctrine of justification serve to help us to the centre of our faith who is Christ. This doctrine has relevance and will continue to have a relevance for all and in all places and in all seasons if we understand and interpret the Christian message as the saving act of God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. The Christian message then is centred around the life—the life of God *for us, in us and through us* to the world. Such is the message contained in the preaching of justification. In Paul's words: 'It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live"' (Rom. 1, 16ff.).