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General Justification

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Translated by Otto F. Stahlke

Genuine Lutheran theology counts the doctrine of general justification among the statements and treasures of its faith. Lutherans teach and confess that through Christ's death the entire world of sinners was justified and that through Christ's resurrection the justification of the sinful world was festively proclaimed. This doctrine of general justification is the guarantee and warranty that the central article of justification by faith is being kept pure. Whoever holds firmly that God was reconciled to the world in Christ, and that to sinners in general their sin was forgiven, to him the justification which comes from faith remains a pure act of the grace of God. Whoever denies general justification is justly under suspicion that he is mixing his own work and merit into the grace of God.

The more recent theologians, and especially those who call themselves and are counted as Lutheran, want to know nothing about the general justification of the sinful world through Christ. There is no room for it in their system of doctrine, which they spin out from their own believing consciousness. If they accept this doctrine, then it seems that things do not fall into the right place. When they treat of justification they lay down approximately the following sequence of thought: God through Christ has reconciled the sinful world with himself through the sacrificial death of Christ. That salvation and reconciliation which is effected through Christ Jesus, Christ's obedience, suffering, and death, must be definitely distinguished from the actual forgiveness of sins. Through this reconciliation God has only made it possible for Himself to impart to sinful man further demonstrations of His grace. He has so far suppressed His wrath that He further concerns Himself with the sinners of the world. Reconciliation has opened the way for the possibility of the forgiveness of sins, of justification. As a consequence of reconciliation God pursues sinners further, calls them through the Gospel, and seeks to effect their conversion. And when a sinner is converted and believes on Jesus Christ, then that possibility becomes a reality; only then, as far as God is concerned, does it develop into justification, forgiveness of sins. One may look into the textbooks of Thomasius, Kahnis, Martensen, Luthardt, Frank, Philippi, and everywhere one will become aware of the structure of doctrine which has been briefly sketched here.

It is not difficult to recognize how the most questionable consequences arise from this theory. It is, then, the faith of the sinner which brings about justification as a reality, which also determines and moves God to speak a gracious judgment concerning him. Faith is, according to this concept, the adequate and moving cause of justification. The theologians named describe faith, to be sure, as a means which takes hold of the grace of God in Christ, and they speak of the receptive character and nature of faith. But Christ for Himself alone, Christ's redemption in contrast to the forgiveness of sins, is to them the object of faith. They deny unanimously that justifying faith takes hold of the justification which is valid before God, namely, the forgiveness of sins. The latter is, then, only the result and product of the believing attitude. Thus faith is not only a means, not only a hand which accepts the gift of God, but this very accepting and grasping of the merit of Christ is an action of man which effects something, which brings into being something that was not there before, namely, the forgiveness of sins. It is, then, basically a successful performance. In accordance with the Biblical concept of merit, it is a meritorious work. And precisely thereby the comfort of this justification is built upon sand. When a sinful man wants to become certain of this - that God counts him as righteous, that He forgives him his sins-then it does not help him if he looks to Christ and to the Gospel. For in Christ, in the Gospel of Christ he finds only the possibility of forgiveness of sins or of justification. Man must then look into his heart to see whether there he finds that behavior which translates possibility into reality. And if he is then anguished and tortured by his sins under a feeling of the wrath of God and he does not find that critical point within his inner consciousness, when that faith escapes from his feeling and his awareness, then woe, then the lifeline escapes and is torn from his hands, then he despairs and goes to ruin in spite of all possibilities of salvation.

It is evident how diligent the devil is to cheat Lutheran Christians out of the palladium of their confession, the true doctrine of justification, with Lutheran-sounding formulas and flowery phrases. We must be well on our guard that we do not lose what we possess. The article of justification remains pure, firm, and unshaken if we keep in mind the statement of doctrine and faith concerning general justification, if we hold firmly that the entire world of sinners has already been justified through Christ, through that which Christ did and suffered. This is a clear, certain doctrine of Holy Scripture. The *locus classicus* for this doctrine is the second half of the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. What St. Paul has taught from Romans 1:16 on concerning justification he sums up in chapter 5, verses 12-21, as in a recapitulation. And the sum of this

section is again given in the two verses, 18 and 19. There we read: "Therefore, as by the offense of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so, by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." Two men, Adam and Christ, are here held in juxtaposition. Of the one man, Adam, it is said - we translate literally: "Through the transgression of one man damnation has come about for all men." "Through the disobedience of one man the many have been set forth as sinners." Adam has sinned, has transgressed the divine commandment, has been disobedient. And thereby, by this act, the many who descend from Adam have all been set forth as sinners, transgressors before God. The transgression, the disobedience of the one has already been accounted to the many, to all people. All men are now accounted before God as transgressors, as disobedient. They have all sinned in and with Adam, verse 12. And in consequence of the disobedience of the one, which is now the disobedience of all, the many - that is all men - are subject to damnation, to death. Christ is the counterpart of Adam. Of Him St. Paul says: "Through the righteousness of one man it has come to the righteousness of life for all men." "Through the obedience of the one man the many are set forth as righteous." The future *katastathésontai* is the so-called logical future and announces that in the same manner - as certainly as the first thing is the case, that the many through the deed of one man (Adam) have been set forth as sinners - it is equally certain that the other thing takes place, that through the deed of the one (Christ) the many are set forth as righteous. And the latter, just as the former, belongs to the past. The apostle is explaining what in the case of the one, in the act of the one, has happened to the many. Thus Christ, the one, has fulfilled all righteousness, has rendered obedience. His entire life, suffering, and death was the fulfillment of righteousness (*dikaiooma*), was a great act of obedience. And precisely through this act the many, those who through Adam's sin had become condemned sinners, have all been presented as righteous before God. The righteousness, the obedience of the one has been accounted to the many, to all people. All men are now accounted before God as righteous, obedient. They all have a share in justification. And this righteousness is, indeed, "the righteousness of life," through which eternal life is accounted to them instead of death. The Scripture text before us is a clear passage, as clear as sunlight. Paul testifies clearly and plainly here that all men who were condemned through Adam's sin have been justified through Christ and that precisely because Christ fulfilled all righteousness and rendered obedience all men are actually

justified, not only potentially. It is a wretched gloss when the more recent interpreters comment that the many, "all men," are only believers, because St. Paul otherwise ascribes justification to believers only. But this idea goes counter to the Scripture in both text and context.

Other statements of Scripture are in harmony with the passage just interpreted. Through the obedience of Christ which he demonstrated even in death reconciliation, the reconciliation of the world, has been effected. The reconciliation is general. Christ is the reconciliation for the sin of the entire world (1 John 2:2). But now St. Paul the Apostle uses the concepts "reconciliation" and "justification" interchangeably. He writes in Romans 5:8-9: "But God commendeth his love toward us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him." This sentence Paul explains through the parallel sentence verse 10: "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." Upon the certain fact of the past, the death of Christ, the apostle here founds the certainty of future bliss, the final salvation from wrath. The benefit which we have from the death of Christ he expresses both as being "reconciled through the death" of God's Son and as being "justified through His blood." Reconciliation and justification here mean one and the same thing to Paul. Thus, if the entire world of sinners has been reconciled to God through Christ's death and blood, then we may also say that the sinful world has been justified through Christ's death and blood. Justification is nothing other than the forgiveness of sins. In 2 Corinthians 5:19 St. Paul testifies, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," and explains the statement further through the addition, "Not imputing their sins unto them." When God through Christ, Christ's death, reconciled the world to Himself, He forgave the sins of the world, of all who belong to the world. Thus, it is true of all men that their sins are not imputed to them. All sins were actually forgiven to the world, the whole world, when Christ died for sinners. It is a wretched gloss of the interpreters, when they transform the forgiveness of sins, then transacted, into the potential of a later forgiveness of sins.

Nor does Paul in Romans 5 leave unexplained how that which he teaches concerning general justification harmonizes with what he says elsewhere—for example, in the Epistle to the Romans from chapter 1, verse 16, on—concerning justification by faith. It is precisely in this way that faith retains its special concept and character, according to which all work and merit of man himself is excluded. Romans 5:17 says: "For if by one

man's offense death reigned by one; much more they which receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ." Through the obedience of one all men are justified, have received the justification unto life. But it is not said that now all, although they all are justified, will actually inherit, enjoy, reign in eternal life. Only those who accept, receive (*lambanontes*) the fullness of grace, the gift of righteousness, will reign in eternal life through the one, Jesus Christ. This accepting, this receiving, of which the apostle has spoken before ("By whom we have now received the atonement", verse 11) is nothing other than faith. Faith receives, accepts. Faith appears throughout as a means, only a means, by which we accept and make our own everything that belongs to justification—the fullness of grace, the obedience of Christ, and the justification itself. Faith does not come under consideration from any angle as a work of man, by which something is brought into existence that was not there before. It is not our faith and accepting which determines the judgment of God, which turns the judgment unto damnation into the opposite, which first creates the relation, in which God now stands through Christ to sinners. No, it is God's abundant grace alone and the obedience of Christ, of this one man, which directs and moves God to declare us free of sin and damnation—indeed, has long ago directed God to justify sinners and the entire sinful world. This judgment of God has been established long ago. This new relation of God to sinners has been brought about through the obedience of Christ. God's grace, Christ's obedience, the gift of righteousness is ready and prepared before our faith and acceptance and is offered and presented for acceptance, as St. Paul teaches, in the Word, in the Gospel, to all men who perceive the Gospel. And through faith, when we believe the Gospel, we now appropriate the reconciliation, the justification, the righteousness, which have been promised to all sinners, for our person. Through our faith, then, we for our person step within this justifying judgment of God which God has already declared over all sinners in general, into this new relation of grace founded through Christ, and are thus accounted righteous before God and can declare with joy: Now we have become righteous through faith. Thus through faith the general justification becomes a special justification. We draw and guide the justifying judgment of God directly upon our head, upon our person. Those who do not believe reject Christ and the Gospel, though they also have been justified through Christ's obedience.

They place themselves outside of that relation of God to sinners which has been established and has validity only in Christ and which is declared to sinful men only in the Gospel. He who believes does not first make reality of something that

God had only made possible, but recognizes and confirms what, on the side of God, was long truth and reality. He who does not believe renders impotent and invalid what was already reality. In a picture to which St. Paul once directed we can see the matter more vividly. In Christ salutary grace, God's friendship and love for all men, has appeared. Since then the brilliant sun shines over the entire sinful world. This light has dispelled all darkness. God has forgotten the former sins. To be sure, the eyes of all men are not yet opened. Before the Gospel comes, in which the sun of righteousness shines, man is blind and dark. But when he recognizes Christ and the Gospel, when he comes to faith, then he sees the sun standing in the heavens and becomes enlightened and joyful in its light. Through his seeing and recognition he does not create the sunlight but receives and accepts the light and its beneficent warmth into himself. He now lives and walks in the light.

Of course, this picture is only a weak comparison. With our small reason we cannot bring light and clarity into everything. Man, wherever he is born, finds himself in the guilt and condemnation of Adam. Nevertheless, in Christ the righteousness of life has already come for all men. Through the obedience of the one man we are already justified and in grace. And yet we rejoice when we are converted and come to faith: Once I was not in grace, but now I am in grace. This matter we cannot solve according to reason. We refrain therefore from systematizing justification. What Scripture says concerning justification, that we accept, that we hold fast and allow not one word of it to be apocoped or distorted. And we know that all, also what is said concerning general justification, was written for our comfort and serves our salvation. And when the last encounter comes, in that critical moment, when the soul hovers between death and life, between heaven and hell, when we feel the complete wretchedness of lost, condemned mankind, then we take refuge in this universal grace, then we take comfort in the justification of all men, of all sinners, and draw the conclusion that what was done for all men, must certainly be valid also for us and is intended for me personally. Thus we still our heart before God.

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