



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 168

Justification – In the 16th century, the critical debate that arose in the Protestant Reformation was the debate about the doctrine of justification, that is, what is required for a person to be justified in the sight of God. Thus it is known as the material cause of the Protestant Reformation, resulting in the greatest and most serious rupture in the Christian Church.

The crucial question before us is, “How can sinful man be justified before God?” Or another way of putting this is, “How can God remain just and yet justify sinners?” But before we answer these questions we must define what Scripture means by the words justify or justification.

Justification is a declaration – There has been a great deal of confusion with respect to the doctrine of justification in church history. Some affirm that to justify means to make a person inwardly just. But the Hebrew and Greek words used in the Bible for justification express a contrary view. When God is said to justify a sinner it does not mean that He changes the person’s character and makes him morally and internally just or good; rather, it means that God declares or pronounces the sinner as just or righteous.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for “to justify” is “tsadaq,” which in most cases means to declare someone as just, having satisfied the demands of the law. It is a courtroom language (Exodus 23:7; Deuteronomy 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32; Job 9:20; 27:5; 32:2; 33:32; Psalm 51:4; Proverbs 17:15; Jeremiah 3:11). This is true especially given that justification is often contrasted with condemnation, where condemning the guilty means to declare them as guilty and not to actually make them guilty or evil.

In the New Testament the Greek word for “to justify” is “dikaioo,” which also in majority of cases means to declare someone as just, having satisfied the demands of the law (Luke 7:29; 18:9-14; Acts 13:39; Romans 3:24, 28; 4:5; 5:1, 9; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Galatians 2:16; 3:24; 1 Timothy 3:16; Titus 3:7). So it is evident, that the uniform and consistent use and meaning of justification in the Old and New Testaments has to do with an objective declaration or proclamation about a sinner, and not the subjective inward change or renewal of a sinner, as in regeneration, conversion, and sanctification.

Justification is a forensic act – Justification is a forensic act, meaning it is a legal declaration or proclamation. This judgment regarding the sinner is made by God not as King or Sovereign but as the Judge of the universe, in His divine courtroom (Genesis 18:25). Charles Hodge writes, “When a sovereign pardons a criminal, it is not an act of justice,” for the demands of the law are set aside. But justification is a judicial judgment, a pronouncement made by God as Judge, with respect to the sinner in relation to His law and justice, declaring that the demands of His law are fully met.

Many throughout church history have confused justification with regeneration or sanctification. Justification is a one-time act, a legal declarative act; whereas sanctification is a continuous and progressive work or process. Justification occurs outside the sinner, where God pronounces him as just, without any change in his inward character; whereas sanctification occurs in the interior man, where God inwardly changes the character of the sinner, making him personally and progressively just. Justification occurs at the beginning of the Christian life and is never repeated; whereas sanctification continues until the end of the Christian life. Also, though regeneration and justification are both one-time acts of God, regeneration is something which God does inside the sinner, giving him a new heart, soul and will; whereas justification is a judicial verdict of God about the sinner, outside of him.

The confusion of these distinctions has resulted in the distortion of the gospel of salvation. Hodge writes, “Low views of the evil of sin and of the justice of God lie at the foundation of all false views of this great doctrine.” So we return to our crucial question, “How can sinful man be justified before God?”