

Justification as a Whole Process

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Forgiveness is a process involving two parties and two stages. First it must be offered by the wronged party as an act of mercy. This stage completes forgiveness by the wronged party and makes it available for the party that committed the offense. Second, forgiveness must be accepted by the party that committed the offense. Acceptance of forgiveness involves acknowledgment that the offense was wrong, trust in the goodwill of the forgiver, restoration of one's own goodwill toward that party, and commitment to refrain from further offenses in the future. With completion of this stage, the offending party enjoys the benefits of forgiveness.

A community context complicates forgiveness because other parties can ask: On what basis is it fair for the wronged party to offer forgiveness to one offender but not another? Furthermore, will mercy harm the community by allowing or even encouraging the offender or others to commit further offenses in the future? This is even more serious when the offender has not only wronged another party, but has violated a rule or law that has been established to protect the community by establishing known boundaries of conduct and equal penalties for violation of those boundaries. Adequately addressing these questions so that a forgiven offender can be accepted within the community requires that mercifully extending forgiveness be done in such a way that justice is maintained. The offender not only needs to be forgiven; this party needs to be justified.

Further complicating forgiveness is a situation in which the offending party consists of a group of people as a corporate entity. Therefore, forgiveness must be offered

to that group as a whole. But what if some within that group accept the forgiveness and others do not? Although the process of forgiveness is completed for some, who receive its benefits, others reject these benefits and thereby signify their continuing hostility that could lead to further offenses in the future. To accomplish lasting peace between the wronged party and the group, those who do not accept forgiveness must be identified and removed from the group.

For example, when a rebel group or offending nation is defeated in war, terms of peace can include corporate amnesty. But for individuals to enjoy the benefits of the amnesty, they must respond positively to the appeal to accept it and lay down their weapons. Otherwise their threat must be eliminated.

All of the dynamics just described apply to God's efforts to save human beings within the context of the Great Controversy. But the magnitude of the problem and the stakes involved are vastly greater than any other situation involving a need for forgiveness. All human inhabitants of Planet Earth have been in rebellion against God. All have sinned against Him and His eternal law of love that governs and safeguards the universe (Rom 3:23; cf. Matt 22:37-40). The penalty of that sin is eternal death (Rom 6:23) because intelligent beings with free choice whose lives are not controlled by love are destructive and follow Satan in challenging the sovereignty of the benevolent Creator, who alone gives and sustains life. To make matters worse, fallen humans are incapable of adequately keeping God's law even if they want to (Rom 7).

Because God's eternal moral character is love (1 Jn 4:8), and because love includes both justice and mercy, He cannot simply forgive without doing it in such a way that justice is maintained. To do otherwise would violate His nature, which sustains all

life, and jeopardize the safety of the universe. It is the death of Christ, who is Himself God (Col 1:19; 2:9), which makes it possible for God to justly justify sinners (Rom 3:26). As God, Christ is Creator (Jn 1:3; Heb 1:2) and therefore can represent everyone on Planet Earth. As the originator of human life, Christ is our ultimate Father (Isa 9:6; cf. Lk 3:38). Just as Abraham could represent any of his descendants (Heb 7:9-10), Christ has represented all humans in order to bear the penalty of our sin so that we might escape death and enjoy eternal life (Jn 3:16; 2 Cor 5:14, 21). Thus Christ's sacrifice is both representative and substitutionary.

Christ's sacrifice solves the problem of sin on Planet Earth by accomplishing seven things:

1. Restoration of Human Rule over Planet Earth

Jesus described the effect of His death: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out" (Jn 12:31; NRSV). Satan has been "the ruler of this world" because he usurped humanity's dominion over Planet Earth (Gen 1:26, 28) through deception resulting in human choice of him (Gen 3). But when the God-man Christ died, bearing the full effects of human sin as the representative of all humanity, He annulled Satan's right and reclaimed the lost dominion for the human race.

In other words, since the cross event, the whole world belongs to Christ not only as the Creator-God who was always over the world, whether its master was human or Satan (cf. Matt 4:8-10), but now also as the representative Human sub-regent who has succeeded where Adam failed (cf. Rom 5:12-17). Therefore He has the right to share the dominion with His faithful people as a gift to them (Dan 7:22, 27). The world and eternal life on it belongs to them, just as Canaan already belonged to the Israelites when they

reached its borders (Num 32:7; Deut 3:18), and they only need to appropriate what is already theirs in order to enter into their rest (Heb 4) in dwellings that God has already provided for them (Jn 14:2-3).

2. Corporate Amnesty

By winning back the dominion of Earth for humans through Christ's sacrifice, God "was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:19; NRSV). That is, having decapitated the rebellion by destroying the right of the alien "Al Qaeda" of the Devil and his angels to sub-regency over Earth, God has given corporate legal amnesty (not to be confused with evangelical forensic-only justification of individuals) to the indigenous "Taliban" of human beings who have rebelled against Him, who in this sense are forgiven as a group (Col 2:13-15; Rom 5:18).

Compare the way God corporately forgave the Israelite nation after the rebellion at Kadesh, which meant that He would allow it to continue rather than destroying it as a whole (Num 14:20). This corporate legal amnesty does not mean that everyone will be saved. Rather, it is conditional in the sense that God offers to a group terms that individuals must accept and keep on accepting in order to enjoy the benefits.

3. Mercy with Justice

By bearing the penalty of all human sin, Christ has demonstrated that God justly gives mercy to all humans (Rom 3:24-26; 5:15-18; cf. Ps 85:10). So the "gold" of Christ's justifying sacrifice is behind the "currency" of His merciful corporate forgiveness. In this sense, Christ's sacrifice legally justified the human race as a group, showing the universe that God is justified in allowing the race to continue. This gift of corporate justification is the first step in a process of justification. Completion of

justification, which is necessary for individual salvation, depends upon a second step at which people individually accept and thereby experientially appropriate the probationary justification that is already legally theirs, conditional on their acceptance.

The two steps of justification were typified at the Israelite sanctuary: Regular public sacrifices (Num 28-29) accomplished corporate justification that maintained God's life-giving Presence with them, but individuals needed to offer their expiatory sacrifices (Lev 4-5, etc.) in order to receive the covenant benefits by continuing as members of the covenant community (contrast Num 15:30-31).

At a further stage of justification, God vindicates His own decisions to forgive or not forgive individuals, depending on whether they have loyally accepted and continued to accept His gift of forgiveness (Lev 16; 23:26-32; Dan 7:9-14; 8:14). Those with regard to whose forgiveness God is vindicated are morally "clean" (Lev 16:30) in the sense that their sins can have no more relevance for the divine-human relationship (Jer 31:34—sin forgotten).

4. Continuation of the Human Race

The effect of Christ's provision for the human race to continue began at the Fall into sin, long before the cross. The penalty for rebelling against God, as signified by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was unequivocal death (Gen 2:17; cf. Rom 6:23), which God could have justly administered immediately to render the human race extinct. The only reason Adam and Eve could continue to live was because God provided for their redemption. This provision was the future sacrifice of Christ (Gen 3:15; 1 Pet 1:18-20; Rev 13:8; 17:8). By continuing to live on probation, humans could

have the opportunity to see through Satan's deception and have a fair choice between him and God.

5. Appeal to Individually Accept Mercy

By giving His Son to be born, live, and die to save us, God has definitively demonstrated His love and goodwill toward the whole human race (Lk 2:14; Jn 3:16; Rom 2:4; 5:6-8). So we can trust that the amnesty He offers us is genuine and not a trick. By being lifted up on the cross, Christ draws all people to Himself (Jn 12:32) so that they have the opportunity to individually make peace with God through justification that they receive by believing in His gift of amnesty (Rom 5:1; Eph 2:8; cf. Jn 3:16).

By carrying the Gospel of Christ's sacrifice to the world, Christians "are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20; NRSV). Notice that this verse immediately follows the good news of corporate amnesty, to which we are called to respond: God "was reconciling the world to himself..." (v. 19). The message is: Because you are already alive by virtue of corporate reconciliation to God, live accordingly (as individuals).

The same sequence appears in Romans 5:16-17, where "the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ" (NRSV).

6. Moral Restoration

Christ made Himself vulnerable to the temptations that assail all humanity by becoming a descendant of many generations of sinners (Matt 1), taking fallen human nature (including inherited but not morally culpable cultivated propensities to evil) on His sinless divine nature (Lk 1:30-31, 35). But He remained morally unblemished (Heb 4:15) and therefore qualified to be our representative sacrifice (cf. Lev 22). Having overcome where we have failed, He helps our inadequate willpower (Rom 7) to choose God and His way of love by serving as our Example (Philipp 2:5-8; 1 Pet 2:21), uniting our lives with His (Rom 8:1; Gal 2:20), and empowering our moral transformation through the gift of His Spirit (Jn 3; 16:8; Rom 5:5; 8:1-4; Titus 3:5-7). Since the cross event, He can freely distribute the influence of His Spirit in the world because the barrier of Satan's claim to rule and therefore control influence on humans has been shattered.

By keeping the faith of Jesus that He has so graciously given, we can keep God's commandments and remain steadfastly faithful (Rev 14:12). It is not enough to accept amnesty/justification at one time (cf. 1 Ki 1-2); salvation depends on an ongoing relationship with Christ that continues to loyally accept His gift by faith (Jn 8:11; Col 1:21-23; 1 Jn 5:12) and extend it to others (cf. Matt 10:8; 18:23-35).

7. Accountability

By making full, amazingly graceful provision for our eternal salvation, Christ's sacrifice removes any excuse to continue rebelling against God. Therefore God is perfectly justified in letting those who reject Him suffer the fate of eternal extinction (Rev 20) that would have been the fate of all humanity if Christ had not died. If they reject His corporate amnesty as applying to them, they are on their own and must bear

their own penalty for rebellion, along with the alien rebellious angels. Amnesty for all has the goal of making peace, so it can only benefit individuals within the group who accept and continue to accept peace on the Victor's terms.