

## What's in a Name

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says to her lover: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." True enough. Yet whether we like it or not, the English word referring to that particular flower is "rose" and not "compost" or "prickly pear." Presumably even Juliet would have been surprised and offended if, having asked for a rose, she was given a prickly pear.

Human communication is possible because words have a definite meaning. Words are not plasticine and we're not free to shape them as we please. Otherwise communication breaks down and comprehension is distorted.

This is especially true in biblical studies. If we really desire to know what God is saying, we need to study the meaning of biblical words *as used in the Bible itself*. To attribute the wrong meaning to the scriptural words is a sure guarantee to miss and distort God's message.

The important doctrine of justification has been the victim of much confusion precisely because we cannot agree on the definition of the word. I often talk and correspond with Catholics about this subject, and it is as if we're speaking in different languages because we understand something altogether different by 'justification'.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares: "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the *sanctification* and *renewal* of the interior man." Roman theology defines justification as *making* someone just (paragraphs 1989,1992). In contrast to this, Protestants understand justification as *declaring* someone just. Thus, Catholics think of justification as a moral transformation beginning at baptism and continuing until death, whereas Protestants think of justification as a legal judgement by God about the believer, declaring him righteous.

Well, what is the *biblical* meaning of justification? To answer this question, one needs to study the use of the word justification, and related words, in the Bible. Here, we take a sample of passages.

1. If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked (Deuteronomy 25:1).
2. He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just; even they both are abomination to the LORD (Proverbs 17:15).
3. Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? (Romans 8:33,34).

It is helpful to note that 'to justify' is contrasted with 'to condemn.' Justification is the very opposite of condemnation. To condemn means to declare someone unjust and guilty; to justify means to declare someone just and righteous.

The concept of "making just" simply doesn't fit. If, for the sake of argument we assume that justification has the Catholic meaning, why should God abhor the person who justifies the wicked? Would it not be a charitable thing to do, if the wicked is made righteous?

The judge's role is to declare just the righteous and to declare unjust the wicked. That is, to justify the former and condemn the latter. The judge does not make the person unjust when he condemns him. He

simply declares him as such. Similarly, in justification the judge does not make the person righteous. He simply declares him just and acquits him from any accusation.

Very simply, justification is a judicial act and not a moral transformation. The implications of this basic mistake in Catholic theology are tragic. Catholics are urged to perform good works and participate in the sacraments to become and remain good enough to be accepted by God. Since we remain sinners as long as we are on earth, their relationship with God must always remain uncertain and distant.

Evangelical Christians on the other hand, are assured that “being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). God declares us just who believe in His Son. Though morally imperfect and sin remains in us, yet we are already justified! God has declared us righteous. For we are not relying on our personal works and achievements, but “by faith” we rest on the infinite merits of our Saviour. The legal charges against us have been cleared and therefore we are at peace with God. All thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ.

What does God think of you? Are you justified or condemned? All depends on whether you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or not.