

Justification and the Condemnation of the Lost

There have been rumblings out and about among Lutherans concerning the chief article (and material principle) of the Christian faith: the biblical teaching we call "justification."

While we never complete the process of sanctification in this life, justification is what computer programmers might call an "atomic operation." That is, it begins and ends in an unmeasured instant, being completely received to the benefit of a penitent sinner when he believes that for Christ's sake, his sins are forgiven.

Notice also that sanctification is done with human cooperation, but justification is entirely a divine gift, without any human cooperation. If there *were* any human cooperation, then not only was the entire Lutheran Reformation woefully and tragically misguided, but we also are left without the certainty that we are actually justified before God.

So say the scriptures. So says the Augsburg Confession. So say we all. The somewhat insular controversy, however, centers upon another aspect of justification. It may be framed in several ways. Here's how I choose to frame it, at the moment.

What is the condemnation of the lost? In other words, what does God say actually condemns those who are finally damned? Let's look at John 3, verse 18, following close on the heels of the more well-known 3:16 and 17.

It refers to the Son of God.

He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

There are two things to notice here. First, faith in the Son of God is required to be saved. Second, the condemnation for those who do not believe is their lack of faith, not the guilt of their accumulated sinfulness. This should be surprising for some. What happened to all that guilt? Why doesn't it condemn them? Answer: because someone else was destined to be condemned for it (and now has been), who paid the full propitiation. The proof of that payment was His resurrection.

Someone may ask if this is the only passage of scripture that teaches that the condemnation of the lost is precisely their lack of faith. First, I answer: who cares? There is no doubt that *this* passage teaches it, because it's such a clear passage. To teach otherwise would contradict *this* clear passage of scripture.

But yes, there are other passages that teach the same thing. One of them also appears in the historic lectionary: John 16:8-11. There, Jesus refers to the promised Holy Spirit.

And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

This passage is a bit more obscure than the last, because of Jesus' unusual use of the word "convict." We

usually apply it only to those whose evil deeds have resulted in the public proclamation of their guilt. However, it is possible to have other forensic or legal proclamations, as Jesus says here. Of interest to us are the first two.

Jesus says first that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin. Why is that? Not because of the guilt of their accumulated sinfulness, but "because they do not believe in Me [i.e. Jesus]." Surprised? You shouldn't be, because it's the same thing Jesus said in John 3:18. The condemnation of the lost is precisely their lack of faith. (The evidence of that is their lack of genuine good works, as we see in Matthew 25.)

Jesus also says that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of righteousness. It's an unusual way of speaking, but it means simply that the Holy Spirit will make the forensic or legal declaration that someone is righteous. Why is that? Jesus surprises us again. This declaration does not come because someone believes in the Son of God, but "because I go to the Father and you see Me no more." That does not omit the necessity of faith, but it does show that there is a different reason for the announcement of justification.

Some time when I was working on this as a sermon text, I think I was reading some of Luther's sermons. This sermon had the best explanation I could find of the words "because I go to the Father." It's a way of saying "because My assigned task on earth as the Lamb of God will be completed, so the proper thing will be to ascend to heaven." If you want to know what the task of the Lamb of God is, just ask John the Baptizer: to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). So the reason the Holy Spirit convicts the world of righteousness (i.e. proclaims justification) is because the Lamb of God has made complete atonement for the sins of the world.

It shouldn't surprise us, but those two points harmonize and reinforce each other rather well:

The lost are condemned not because of the guilt of their accumulated sin, but because they do not believe in Christ.

The Holy Spirit proclaims righteousness upon the world because the Lamb of God has made atonement for all of its guilt.

Someone may object to this terminology for some reason, but at this point I see no problem with calling the unlimited atonement made by Christ "objective justification," especially because His resurrection proves that it was accepted by the Father.

As always, I am open to criticism, though God's Word really isn't.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine at 22:17