

"THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GOD'S FREE, GRACIOUS JUSTIFICATION OF SINNERS"

(Romans 3:21-26)

(Frank Theilman)

Paul also emphasizes the socially unifying nature of God's righteousness. It comes to all who believe without distinction. Since all without distinction have sinned, God in his righteousness has made justification freely available to all without distinction as well (3:22-24c, 27-30). This free, gracious justification of every human being who believes has both anthropological and social implications.

On the anthropological side, it means that no one can boast in his or her "works." Justification is given to those who rely on God to provide release from punishment and reconciliation as a free gift, not to those who work for it by means of obedience to the law. Paul has shown that justification by means of obedience to the law's requirements is impossible, whether the Mosaic law for Jews or the law written on the heart for gentiles (2:15; 3:20, 22).

In practical terms, this means that human beings cannot be in a proper relationship with God if they are trying to manipulate God into giving them eternal life. Membership in a particular social group, whether an ethnic group, a nation, a political party, or a particular religious group, including the visible church, does not convince God to give them eternal life. God is not persuaded to bless people when they take particular theological, social, or political positions. A human being stands in a right relationship with God (is "justified") when he or she relies upon God's promise to reconcile himself to human beings through the death of Christ Jesus. As Paul will explain later and as he hints in his comment on not canceling the law in 3:31, the good that believers do flows from a relationship with the triune God that begins with this trust in the gospel, but obedience to the law does not generate the relationship and therefore it provides no ground for boasting.

On the social side, justification by faith alone means that God's people will come from all ethnic groups and all walks of life. Within the church, any discrimination among people on the basis of their social status, their economic resources, or their ethnic origins, for example, emerges from a serious misunderstanding of the gospel. This was the problem in the Corinthian church, which was caught up in a competition of social one-upmanship based on the skills and knowledge of the Christian leaders that various groups claimed as their own (1 Cor. 1:10-4:21). Although Paul's reply to the Corinthians is complex, it is summarized in 4:7, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" The only boasting that was appropriate for them was boasting in the Lord, who had given them everything that really mattered in life (1 Cor. 1:30-31). To the extent that churches today have become exclusive clubs for people of a certain income bracket, social group, or political persuasion they are not bearing faithful witness to Paul's teaching on justification by faith alone.

Paul also reminds believers in this passage that if they are boasting in their social group, they are failing to bear witness to the unity and sovereignty of God (3:29-30; cf. Deut. 6:4). The implication of living as if one particular group has some ground for boasting before God is that God is the god only of that group, not the one God who created all the peoples of the earth and who looks forward to that day when many nations shall join themselves to the LORD... and shall be my people" (Zech. 2:11).

Churches today need to make sure that they make it easy for people of various economic brackets and ethnic groups to worship and work together. Cultivating an atmosphere within the church that welcomes social diversity is often complex and difficult, but it is also a necessary part of the church's witness to the gospel.

