

Forgiveness: Corporate and Personal

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The Bible teaches two phases of justification. They have been referred to by some proponents of the 1888 message as legal justification and justification by faith. These are two phases of one justification. The first phase was accomplished at the cross for all mankind. The second phase is a response to the realization and acceptance of the first phase. The first phase, legal justification, is corporate and universal. It applies to all men. At the cross the whole human race was legally justified. Some texts which present this aspect of justification include Romans 3:23 – 24, 4:5, 4:25, 5:1, 5:9 and 5:18. While legal justification is universal, justification by faith is individual. It occurs as a result of our personal acceptance of the facts of the gospel. Texts which present justification by faith include Gal. 2:16, Romans 4:3, 4:5, 4:9-11.

The same truth may be understood from an analysis of the Biblical term “forgiveness”. The Bible teaches two aspects of forgiveness. At the cross the whole human race was granted a judicial pardon. However, there is also an experiential aspect of forgiveness. David understood both aspects. After his sin, involving Bathsheba and Uriah, he confessed his sin and sought forgiveness with the words:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions (Psalms 51:1-3).

This is David’s plea for forgiveness. “Have mercy . . . blot out my transgressions”. However David is not satisfied to simply have the record of his sin blotted out and not counted against him although this is part of the judicial aspect of forgiveness. David wants both judicial and experiential forgiveness therefore he continues to pray.

Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . .

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me (Psalms 51:2 - 10).

These two concepts represent complete forgiveness. It includes having the legal condemnation reversed and having our sins blotted from God's record books. But it also includes having it removed from our hearts and lives. Thus the biblical definition of forgiveness includes both a corporate and a personal phase, corporate legal acquittal and personal spiritual cleansing.

The two phases of justification which correspond to the two aspects of forgiveness can also be seen in the reconciliation analogy used in 2nd Corinthians:

And all things *are* of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech *you* by us: we pray *you* in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-20 KJV)

The legal aspect of the reconciliation which was accomplished at the cross is presents first: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them". This phase of the reconciliation corresponds to legal justification. The sins which should have been charged against us were charged against Christ. The condemnation which we deserved is cancelled and our trespasses are not counted against us. The passage then proceeds to highlight the experiential aspect of the process: "We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20 NKJV). The first half of the passage indicates that God has already been reconciled us to God at the cross. However that is a legal reconciliation. It demonstrates the justice of God in relation to sin and at the same vindicates the mercy of God in treating us as though we had not sinned. As wonderful as that may be, until we respond to what God has done, we still have a "heart problem" which needs to be addressed. Thus the second

half of this passage highlights the invitation to respond to what God has done. The response involves an experiential reconciliation, a change of heart and peace with God.

These two phases of justification, which correspond to the two phases of reconciliation and the two meanings of forgiveness, find support in the original text of the New Testament.

There are actually two different Greek words translated by the English word “forgive”:

charizomai and aphiemi. In Colossians chapter two we find an important example of the use of charizomai:

In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:

¹² Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with *him* through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; ¹⁴ Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross (Col 2:11-14, KJV).

As we study the meaning of this passage it is very important to recognize that the apostle Paul is speaking to the Colossian believers about corporate events, not personal individual experiences. Support for this understanding can be found in several expressions used in the passage. First, notice that he says “ye are circumcised”. It is clear that he is *not* speaking of their individual physical circumcision nor is he speaking of their personal spiritual circumcision. He says “ye are circumcised . . . by the circumcision of Christ”. Evidently the apostle has in mind a corporate event. All believers and unbelievers were circumcised when Christ was “cut off” in fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. (See Daniel 9:26) Next Paul speaks of “baptism”. But this is not the personal baptism of the believer that is referred. It is the corporate baptism of the human race. This seems to be supported by how Paul describes the rising from the watery grave. He says you are “risen with Him”. When did they rise? When the pastor raised them from the water? No. They were raised when God raised Christ from the dead. Next the passage

speaks of the “quickenings”. Again a key point seems to be timing. When and how were they quickened? They were “quickened together with Him”. When Jesus was quickened they were quickened. Again we see this is a corporate and not an individual event being spoken of by the passage. Finally Paul puts all of these events in the context of the “blotting out” of “the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us”. When was the “handwriting” “blotted out”? When the Colossians believed the gospel? No. It was a corporate event which took place when Christ nailed “it to His cross”.

Thus we conclude that Paul is speaking of corporate realities and not personal experiences. He is speaking of events which took place once for all mankind. An examination of the original text seems to strengthen this interpretation. The verbs are in the aorist tense. These events took place at the cross.

Now that we understand the context we need to see a wonderful event connected with the events of this passage in verse thirteen:

¹³And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

Here the Bible clearly says that God has “forgiven” the subjects of the passage “all trespasses”. When did it occur? It occurred before they were “quickened together with Him”. When Christ was quickened (at the resurrection) the sins were all already “forgiven”. To whom does this apply? It was spoken to the Colossian believers. But does it only apply to them? The timing is the key to understanding to whom the forgiveness applies. The statement is right in the midst of a passage which we argue is speaking of corporate realities. Corporate realities apply to the whole human race unless Calvin’s concept of limited atonement is correct. These corporate realities cannot apply to a select group. When God blotted out the “handwriting” He did not

simply blot it out for believers. He blotted it out for all mankind. Thus when He granted the forgiveness of sins, at the cross, it was not merely the sins of believers which were forgiven. It was a corporate event, effective for all mankind. Thus we conclude that passage teaches the forgiveness of all sins (except of course the unpardonable sin) for all sinners, believers and unbelievers alike. An important question is: How does this passage relate to 1 John 1:9?

We have already observed that the Greek word in Colossians 2:13 which is translated “forgiven” is the word *charizomai*. But the word translated “forgive” in 1 John 1:9 is a very different word. It is the word “*aphiemi*”. The prefix (for lack of a better term) of the word *charizomai* comes from the word *charis* which means grace. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* provides this insight into the meaning of *charizomai*. "The most common meaning peculiar to the New Testament is to pardon, to graciously remit a person's sin" (The Complete Word Study Dictionary, pg. 1468, Spiros Zodhiates Th. D.) But the word translated “forgive” in 1 John 1:9 (*aphiemi*) does not mean “pardon”. It comes from two root words “*apo*” and “*hiemi*”. *Apo* means “from” and *hiemi* means “send forth” or “send away”. Thus *aphiemi* has the meaning of sending forth from or sending away from. It conveys the idea of two entities being separated. An example of its use is found in Matthew 13:36. “Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house”. The word “sent” is translated from *aphiemi*. In 1 Corinthians 7:11 Paul says “let not the husband put away his wife”. The words “put away” are translated from *aphiemi*. With this background we can see that what 1 John 1:9 actually says is “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to “put away” or “separate us from” our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness”.

Therefore we conclude that the original language of the New Testament clearly supports two aspects of forgiveness a corporate aspect which applies to all mankind and a personal aspect

which applies only to believers. These two aspects of forgiveness correspond to the two phases of justification and the two phases of reconciliation. The corporate aspect involves the judicial pardon of all sins for all mankind while the personal aspect of forgiveness involves the personal cleansing of the hearts and lives of those who believe the gospel and confess their sins.