

Response to OPC Report on Justification

Peter J. Leithart, *April 18, 2006*

The following points are responses to the Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. I hope I will be excused for responding mainly to those portions of the recent OPC report on the Federal Vision and the New Perspective that pertain to my own work. This is not at all because I consider myself the central figure in these debates, but only because I expect others can speak for themselves better than I can.

1) Justification as metaphor. Citing my article "Judge Me, O God," the report states, "From the FV side, Peter Leithart also deals with the forensic aspect as a metaphor, in fact, as one metaphor among many that constitute the broader biblical doctrine of justification." The committee responds, "While the forensic nature of justification is indeed analogical (God's archetypal judicial action is not identical to human, ectypal judicial action), it is not metaphorical. Justification is a forensic act, not merely similar to a forensic act" (p. 1064).

I never wrote that justification is a metaphor, but in case my discussion was confusing let me state that I agree with the response: God is judge, and He judges sinners righteous in Christ. Justification is truly forensic/judicial, not just similar to it.

I suspect, though, that the Committee is operating with a different understanding of metaphor than I am; I make clear at the beginning of my paper (following the work of Lakoff and Johnson) that metaphor is not something added to thought, but the very medium of language and thought. When I say a statement is "metaphorical," that doesn't mean it's untrue. "My love is a red, red rose" is a metaphor; but there is literally something roseate in my love.

My point in the justification article, though, was to examine the settings in which justification language arises in the Bible, and to show that justification language arises in contexts that are not strictly judicial or forensic – military situations, for instance, or conflict with enemies that is not literal legal battle. My introduction of metaphor was intended to deal with these passages – where the language of the courtroom is used outside the courtroom, and it appears to me that it is perfectly legitimate to talk about "justify" as "metaphor" in these passages. In those contexts, the Bible pictures a situation as legal/judicial, and it is in fact legal/judicial in some sense; when David prays for God to deliver Him from His enemies in battle, he is appealing to the Ruler and Judge of history who passes verdicts and sentences on the battlefield.

Perhaps the discussion of "metaphor" was infelicitous, and if so I'm happy to withdraw it. My main point in the article was to demonstrate that the Bible uses the language of justification in a wider variety of ways than theologians do, and to explore what we should make of the uses of "justify" and related language in the Bible that occur in situations that are not literally forensic.

2) Systematic theology. In footnote 235, the committee writes: "Peter Leithart seems also reluctant to systematize, see his *Against Christianity* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2003), 43-68. Leithart, Schlissel, and others often note that that Scripture is a story and not a set of propositions. While that is quite true, it

does not mean that one may not extrapolate propositional truth from it (if it does, then we must jettison confessions altogether)."

I have been critical of certain ways of doing systematic theology, but not of systematic theology itself. Besides, as the Committee is aware, I have written and continue to write systematic theology: The article on justification cited above is a piece of biblical theology that attempts to draw systematic conclusions; my article on Trinitarian anthropology, also cited in the report, is pretty thoroughly an exercise in systematic theology.

I do think that story is an important form in Scripture, but I don't reduce everything to story. "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" is not a story (though it implies a story); it's a proposition.

The notion that one "extrapolates" from narrative to propositions may point to the Committee's understanding of the goal of theology, namely, that we extrapolate from narratives to formulate doctrinal propositions (statements?). If so (and I may be over-reading), then I would dispute that view of the purpose of theology. My aim is not to teach and write about propositional content that I can extract from Scripture; my aim is to teach and write about Scripture.

3) Van Til: The Report claims (p. 1663) that "Most, if not all, of the FV proponents would claim either to be followers of the apologetical methodology of Van Til or would otherwise not see themselves as contradicting him." They cite my article on Trinitarian Anthropology in support of this claim. The report goes on, "The FV does, in fact, misrepresent Van Til at several points and it is a mistake to assume the FV's misguided claim that their approach in regards to Scripture and Confession is properly Van Tilian. It is not Van Tilian simply to charge that classic federalists read the Scriptures through a theological grid as if anyone can read the Scriptures without a theological grid. Van Til believed that the Word should mold that grid and he believed that the Reformed faith had allowed the Word to do just that and had faithfully reflected that in the Reformed confessions."

The Committee does not specifically have my work in view in this statement, but allow me to respond. First, I agree that no one reads Scripture without a theological grid. Second, I agree that this grid must be molded and challenged by Scripture. That is what I have been attempting to do in all my theological work. Third, I don't want to dispute what Van Til would have said, but I certainly believe that (a) the Reformed faith has allowed the Word to form its theological grid, (b) that this grid is faithfully reflected in the Reformed confessions, and (c) there is still much more forming for the Word to do. If the Committee disputes (c), then I do have a fundamental disagreement with them. I cannot believe, however, that the Committee really believes that the Reformed Confessions have been formed for all ages and stand in no further need of reformation.

4) Righteousness and Justification. On page 1670, the Committee gives a paragraph to discussing my advocacy of "relational" or "covenantal" views of righteousness. They write, "Some FV proponents define righteousness differently from the Westminster Standards, as seen below. Righteousness, as it pertains to God, according to the FV, is not simply the satisfaction of his justice but rather is His covenantal faithfulness, his loyalty to His covenant people. Leithart approves of this shift in emphasis, noting, if the view that 'righteousness' (Heb. zedeq or zedaqah; Gk. dikaiosune) is a covenant term, describing loyalty within a covenanted relationship..., then 'righteousness' and 'justification' have a much wider scope of application than the strictly judicial, but pertain to a whole range of covenant-relational settings.' Leithart acknowledges that Mark A. Seifird has recently argued against this covenantal view,

rightly noting that God's covenantal faithfulness to Israel is 'only one manifestation of the saving righteousness which he exercises as ruler of all.' Siefird's work clearly does not convince Leithart, however, who insists on conceiving of righteousness as much in relational terms as forensically. It should be noted that Leithart does not deny the forensic aspect of justification but sees that aspect as one of many. Thus his position departs from that of the Westminster Standards, which views justification in exclusively forensic terms."

Let me start with the last claim, which suggests that I depart from the Westminster Standards. First, the term "forensic" appears in none of the Westminster documents. In fact, the Short Catechism (q. 33) defines justification without any explicit reference to God as judge: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." This is a terminological point, but perhaps not an insignificant one. I am not denying that the Westminster Standards teach what has been described as a "forensic" view of justification.

But I don't see that this entails a claim that the Bible always uses the term "justify" in the same way. Reformed theologians have long recognized that there are nuances of difference in the way the Bible uses the language (cf. Turretin, e.g.). So, there is nothing contrary to the Westminster Standards in saying "justify" in Isaiah 54 is not strictly forensic (that is, the context is not literally a legal context).

My article on justification, however, did not challenge the notion that justification is always forensic. Rather, I was exploring passages where the forensic language of justification is used in contexts other than literal courtrooms, in passages that were not final-judgment passages. Hence my rather labored use of terms like "deliverdict" (a verdict that delivers), "militarensic" (a military victory that embodies a verdict from the divine Judge), "forenstorational" (a divine verdict that takes the form of the restoration of Israel's fortunes). My article expands the notion of "forensic," but maintains the reality that in all situations – military, personal conflict, the final judgment – God is the judge of all the earth who will do right.

There is some confusion, I think, in the Committee's treatment of all this. The issue is not that "righteousness" is always a forensic term, as the Report claims; in fact, the Report confusingly slips from saying that "righteousness" is forensic to saying that the Westminster Standards teach that "justification" is forensic. Though "righteous" and "justify" come from the same word-group in both Hebrew and Greek, it is not the case that both are exclusively forensic. "Righteousness" can function perfectly well as a moral term, without any forensic connotation of judgment entering the picture. One can have a completely "covenantal" or "relational" view of righteousness, and still hold to a purely forensic view of justification. (Not even the confession uses the word "righteous" in a strictly "forensic" sense.)

Finally, I am interested in knowing how the Committee would respond to the biblical arguments presented in my article. I admit that the article uses justification language in ways that the Confession doesn't, but that is because I find these uses in Scripture. Citing Confessional language in response doesn't even address, much less answer, the questions I raise.

5) Righteousness and Justification again. Page 1671, the Committee says, "Given Leithart's definition of the righteousness of God as covenantal-relational loyalty and Lusk's definition of man's righteousness as 'covenant loyalty and trust, not sinless perfection,' many questions come to mind. Is righteousness an essential property of God so that He would still be righteous whether or not He determined to create and whether or not He determined to save some of those whom He created? While God's covenant

faithfulness to His people may, arguably, be a demonstration of His righteousness, is it the most basic component of righteousness, more so than moral, legal perfection? Why should the definition of righteousness be so limited? Is not God demonstrating righteousness in the condemnation of the reprobate and not simply in the salvation of the elect? To define righteousness as thinly as do some FV proponents—in relational terms—cannot be sustained by our Standards and leaves a host of important questions unanswered by the FV project that are answered within and by the Reformed tradition."

To the first question, the answer is pretty clear, and the answer has been public for some time in Ralph Smith's book on the Trinity and covenant. Of course, God is eternally righteous because He is eternally a trusting, loyal community of Father, Son and Spirit. It seems to me that the covenantal understanding of righteousness BETTER explains how God is eternally righteous than alternative definitions. If righteousness is moral/legal perfect, how was God eternally righteous?

Is righteousness both God's faithfulness to His people and His justice in condemning the wicked: Yes. This is implied in my article on justification; if God shows His righteousness in delivering David from his enemies, that means that the enemies get judged rather than David. How could God possibly show His faithfulness in a sinful world without condemning the reprobate?

It is odd to call a relational view of righteousness "thin," since it both includes the legal/moral aspect that the Committee wants to affirm AND other features of righteousness.

Again, it's disappointing that the Committee does not engage with the biblical arguments that have been offered in defense of this view.

6) Justification and sanctification. On page 1677, the Committee says that "Leithart is misguided when he writes, 'the Protestant doctrine has been too rigid separating justification and sanctification.' Classic Protestantism, especially the Reformed tradition, has not separated them, if by that one means rent them asunder so that one could be justified without subsequently being sanctified. But Protestantism has distinguished them and if there is anything for which Protestantism may be faulted, it is not its careful distinction of justification and sanctification. Rather, this is its genius and its glory (cf. WLC 77 on the distinctions between justification and sanctification)."

"Separating" is the wrong word here, and I cheerfully withdraw it. I understand that classic Protestantism distinguishes without separating justification and sanctification.

Let me attempt to clarify my point: In my article, I talk a bit about definitive sanctification – the act by which God delivers sinners from the power and dominion of sin – and I note that Paul uses forensic language (justify/condemn) to describe this action (Romans 6:7; 8:1-4). In these texts, justification and definitive sanctification are not even distinguishable. God's verdict of justification is an act of deliverance. By not working this aspect of justification into its doctrinal formulations, Protestant theology has used the language of justification more rigidly than Scripture does and has missed an important dimension of the act of justification.

I have much more to say about this, but it will have to await another forum.

<http://www.leithart.com/archives/print/002002.php>