

Creeds of the Kehillah ~ Part 32

The Nicene Creed ~ Part 18

In our last post, we continued to explore the **Nicene Creed**. In this post, we continue to dig into the third article of faith in the **Nicene Creed**.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, **the giver of life**,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son, He is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

THE GIVER OF LIFE ~ *In Justification*

As we learned in our last post, **Repentance** precedes **Justification** in the sense that it prepares the heart to receive **God's** gracious gift of forgiveness by tearing down any notion of self-justification. Through **Repentance**, the **Ruach** humbles the heart to recognize its sinful state and its need to receive **God's** mercy of forgiveness without any merit or worthiness. Such a person is declared innocent from the guilt and punishment that sin would otherwise demand. He or she is declared **justified** before **God**. **Justification** is not defined here as making someone ethically righteous or changing behavior, although this may and should result from **Justification**. **Justification** is defined as a declaration of innocence, similar to when a judge pronounces a person not guilty - sometimes referred to as forensic **Justification** because of the courtroom metaphor.

The question, historically speaking, is whether this forensic **Justification** is what the ancient **Messianic** writers understood. Some assert that the forensic understanding of **Justification** was a product of the sixteenth century and that the ancient **Messianic** writers understood **Justification** as a process of transformation. It is clear that the Fathers use the word *justify* in several senses and not always consistently - which is not so much a critique as a reflection of the fact that they were not writing treatises on this particular doctrine.

At best, the teaching of **Justification** is scattered throughout the patristic period, permeating letters, sermons, patristic exegesis,¹ and doctrinal controversies. For instance, one of the earliest post-apostolic writers, **Clement of Rome**, wrote a letter to the **Corinthians** that has within it a clear enunciation of the doctrine of **Justification**. But this was not the primary reason for him writing the letter, the composition of which was primarily to call for unity among a divided church. In general, the first centuries of the postapostolic church are characterized by episodic discussions of **Salvation**, **Justification**, and the role of the will in response to the **Gnostic** and **Manichean** dualism that pitted the **Tanach** against the new in heretics such as **Marcion**. These heretics also made **God** the author of evil. Patristic writers such as **Irenaeus** and **Origen** sought to defend **God** against such accusations, placing the blame squarely on human beings for the fall into sin and the subsequent actions resulting from the Fall. Thus, sometimes we see what might appear to be an overly optimistic view of the capability of the will in light of the later **Augustinian** discussion on the fallen will that is captive to sin. However, read in the light of the polemics of their day, such an emphasis on human responsibility is understandable and might even be deemed necessary.

¹ Exegesis is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially a religious text. Traditionally the term was used primarily for work with the Bible.

In the **Messianic East**, the doctrine of **Justification** is present in all the major writers and is not foreign to their thinking, as some assume. It is true that the first real controversy that helped begin to clarify the doctrine of **Justification** was the controversy with **Pelagius** in the late fourth century and following with **Augustine, Jerome**, and others. Its focus was more directly on the role of the will in human conversion - an issue very much related to the doctrine of **Justification** but not identical with it. And so, it is difficult to say here that **Augustine** clarified the doctrine of **Justification** per se, although he did help clarify many aspects of it. Perhaps the closest we come to a discussion of the doctrine are the commentaries on the **Pauline** letters by some of the writers of this period, such as **Marius Victorinus, Ambrosiaster**, and even **Pelagius**. Even though these are not meant to be systematic treatises, many of these commentaries show a profound understanding of **Sha'ul's** teaching on **Justification** that would be reflected in later interpretations of the reformation period.

Thus, when the Reformers of the sixteenth century expounded their doctrine of **Justification**, they appealed to church fathers from the West, such as **Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose** or **Ambrosiaster**, but also from the East, citing **Basil, Chrysostom**, and **Gregory of Nyssa**, among others, to show that this doctrine on which they believed the church stood or fell was nothing new. It had always been taught throughout the church's history. Just as other doctrines such as the divinity of **Yeshua** or the **Ruach** were further clarified in the face of controversy, so too was this doctrine further clarified, albeit in the sixteenth century.

The ancient **Messianic** writers looked at the whole of **Scripture** when dealing with **Justification**. They identified the failure of **Justification** under the law but also knew of the triumph of **Grace** under the **Gospel** in **Yeshua**, who is our righteousness. He brings us forgiveness and restores us to **God's** favor, uniting us with **Yeshua**. We receive this gift of favor in the forgiveness of sins through faith in **Yeshua** - a faith that they understood as the consent of the mind, the trust of the heart, and a decision of the will moved by the **Ruach**. The **Ruach** then continues to work in the heart of faith to elicit a response of good works that operate through faith, hope, and love.²

In my next post, we continue to dig into the third article of the **Nicene Creed: We Believe in The Holy Spirit**.

² Elowsky, J. C., & Oden, T. C. (Eds.). (2009). **We Believe in the Holy Spirit** (Vol. 4, pp. 37–38).