

# Justification as the Speech of the Spirit

*A Pneumatological and Trinitarian Approach  
to Forensic Justification*

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*Foreword by Peter Gräbe*

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## Foreword

**A**lthough I am familiar with Dr. Anderson's work, I was again deeply impressed as I reviewed the scope and depth of his research in this publication. He is indeed a scholar in the fullest sense of the word. In his preface, Dr. Anderson notes that a major stimulus for the writing of this book was his persuasion that the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification by faith is still valid today and does not need to be redefined from a pneumatological perspective as attempted by Dr. Frank Macchia. In this foreword, I want to point to the trinitarian scope of Paul's message of justification by faith. In Paul's letter to the Romans, the gospel, the power of God, and the concept of justification by faith are all intertwined and closely connected to the Holy Spirit. Luther discovered in Rom 1:16–17 the doctrine of justification by faith and recognized that it is the heart of the gospel message. This insight gave rise to the Protestant Reformation, one of the largest renewal movements in the history of the church!

### THE GOSPEL IS THE POWER OF GOD

In Rom 1:16–17, Paul formulates the theme of his letter. After a personal confession, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," he shares with us what the gospel is all about.<sup>1</sup> Like a master artist, a few strokes of the pen say everything. He is not ashamed of the gospel (ὃ γὰρ ἐταρχόμενα τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) "for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἔστιν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε καὶ Ἑλλήνι).

1. For a discussion of Paul's gospel, see Stanton, "Paul's Gospel."

The Old Testament from Genesis to Jeremiah portrays the creative and effective power of God's Word.<sup>2</sup> Let's review a few passages:

Genesis 1:3	And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
Psaln 147:15	He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.
Isaiah 40:8	The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.
Isaiah 55:10–11	As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
Jeremiah 23:29	"Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

The gospel is God's power. In Romans 1:1 Paul writes about the gospel of God (*εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ*). Power belongs to the essence of God ("Wesen Gottes"),<sup>3</sup> (Mark 14:62 describes God's name as ἡ δύναμις ("the Mighty One"). In the Old Testament, the power of Yahweh is often revealed as he acted in history to achieve salvation for his people. In early Christian thought, God's saving power referred in the first place to the resurrection of Jesus: "By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also" (1 Cor 6:14; see also 2 Cor 13:4 and Phil 3:10<sup>5</sup>). The creative power of God, who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were (Rom 4:17), was active in Paul's preaching. Paul, therefore, did not rely on his own rhetorical skills to persuade his hearers, but on the power of the Spirit:

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Cor 2:4–5)

*Δύναμις* (power) is a concept that refers to the Spirit—just look at the way in which the Spirit's power (*ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως*) and God's

2. Cranfield, *Commentary*, 87–88.
3. Wilckens, *Brief*, 82–83.
4. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power.
5. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection . . .

power (*ἀλλ' ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ*) are used synonymously in the passage quoted above. Paul also refers to the power of the Spirit in the following passages:

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the *power of signs and miracles*, through the *power of the Spirit*. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. (Rom 15:18–19)

Does God *give you his Spirit* and *work miracles among you* because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Gal 3:5)

## IN THE GOSPEL GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IS REVEALED

The flow of the argument in Romans 1: 15–17 can be summarized as follows:

Paul is eager to preach the gospel to those in Rome.

Why?

Because he is not embarrassed by the gospel.

Why?

Because the gospel is God's own power resulting in salvation for all.

Why?

Because in the gospel God's righteousness is revealed.<sup>6</sup>

In the gospel God's righteousness is revealed (*δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται*). This statement is contrasted in verse 18 with God's wrath which is revealed (*ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ*) from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings. In his contribution on the forensic metaphors in Romans, Andrie B. du Toit emphasizes the forensic dimension of *δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ* and points to its association with a court trial.<sup>7</sup> The phrase *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* can be rendered on a deep semantic level by the phrase "God's justification/acquittal (of sinners)." Contrary to the trials in Romans 1:18–32 and 2:1–16, a positive verdict is expected. No human being can earn a "not guilty" verdict; we can only appropriate it in faith.

A feature of modern languages is that they use prepositions where ancient languages used cases. In the original Greek, there is no preposition:

6. Matera, *Romans*, 34.
7. Du Toit, "Forensic Metaphors," 232.

justification (δικαιοσύνη) is simply followed by the genitive form of the word for God (θεοῦ). The genitive indicates a close relationship; the kind of relationship must be determined from the context.

The “righteousness of Yahweh” (יְהוָה צְדָקָה) in the Old Testament refers to his relationship with his people within the context of the covenant.<sup>8</sup> Kertelge emphasizes the importance of the covenant context also for the New Testament. Believers who have been justified by God have entered a new reality; they experience a new relationship with God, a relationship in which believers obey Jesus Christ as their Lord.<sup>9</sup> Justified-by-God human beings have not only been acquitted, they have also experienced the reality of the new creation.<sup>10</sup> Udo Schnelle formulates this idea beautifully: “Through faith in Jesus Christ, God grants participation in the new being. Human beings thus stand before God as undeserving recipients of a gift, as persons who are no longer compelled to find their own way in this world . . . . Rather, as those justified by faith and having their origin in God, they can do God’s will in the world.”<sup>11</sup> In his commentary on Romans (2010) Frank Matera, a prominent Catholic New Testament scholar, interprets δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as a subjective genitive (“God’s own righteousness”) and not as a genitive of origin (“the righteousness that comes from God”). He points out, however, that this righteousness should not be understood as God’s retributive justice, but as God’s saving justice and covenant loyalty. In the Psalms and in the book of Isaiah, God’s righteousness (δικαιοσύνη, LXX) is sometimes equated with his salvation (σωτηρία, LXX):

*My righteousness draws near swiftly,  
my salvation will go out, . . .  
But my righteousness will be forever,  
and my salvation for generations of generations.* (Isa 51:5, 8)

Righteousness is here not a static quality of a God who judges people, but the dynamic quality of a God granting salvation. Frank Matera summarizes his interpretation as follows:

This interpretation of the righteousness of God puts the emphasis where it ought to be (on God’s saving justice) without neglecting the righteousness that God grants as a free gift. For when the righteousness of God is revealed, those who respond

8. Kertelge, “δικαιοσύνη,” 790.

9. Kertelge, *Rechtfertigung*, 127.

10. Kertelge formulates: “Die Gerechtersprechung des Sünders hat nicht nur forensische, sondern als forensische auch ‘effektive’ Bedeutung” (*Rechtfertigung*, 123).

11. Schnelle, *Paul*, 471.

in faith receive the gift of God’s righteousness. . . . Everything begins and ends with faith. Thus Paul writes that God’s righteousness is revealed ‘from faith to faith.’<sup>12</sup>

I now want to turn to the most consequential interpretation of God’s righteousness in the history of the Church. In the preface to the complete edition of Martin Luther’s Latin writings of 1545, Luther mentions an event that changed his whole life. While he was meditating on Romans 1:16–17, it dawned on him that God’s righteousness (*iustitia dei*) does not refer to a justice that condemns but to the salvation that God freely grants to those who believe.<sup>13</sup> Luther writes:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the word of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.<sup>14</sup>

This insight into Scripture gave rise to the greatest renewal movement in church history, the Protestant Reformation. Luther was convinced that Paul’s message about the justification of the sinner by faith alone is the center of everything the Bible says about salvation.

Although these words were written in 1545, they are still as fresh and beautiful as the morning dew. They are still so inspiring because Luther formulated the gospel message in both its simplicity and its power. Believers

12. Matera, *Romans*, 36.

13. Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine*, 34.

14. Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 34:337.

can just stand in awe before a righteous and loving God. Luther's words are truly trinitarian: everything flows from God the Father; simultaneously everything circles around the gospel message of the crucified and risen Christ. Concepts associated with the Spirit permeate Luther's words: "faith," "to be born again," "power," and "love."

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ROMANS 5–8

Romans 5–8 is very important for our discussion. Andrie B. du Toit captured the significance of this passage with the heading: "As people who have been declared not guilty we have been made completely new!"<sup>15</sup> Frank Matera gives Romans 5:1–8:39 the title, "The experience of salvation in the light of God's righteousness."

In his commentary on Romans, C. E. B. Cranfield emphasizes the close relationship between Romans 1:16b–17 and the ensuing chapters. The theme of Romans is stated in Romans 1:16b–17. The revelation of the righteousness which is from God by faith alone—"He who is righteous by faith" is then expounded in 1:18–4:25 and the life promised for those who are righteous by faith (the phrase "shall live" in 1:17) is expounded in 5:1–8:39.<sup>16</sup>

Romans 8 is one of the finest passages in Paul's letters. In this chapter, Paul alludes to and develops key themes discussed in the previous three chapters (5–7). Douglas Moo points to a ring composition in which Romans 8:1–8–39 alludes to the themes of 5:1–11, and 8:1–17 recalls 5:12–21.<sup>17</sup>

In Romans 6:1, Paul refers to an objection raised against his law-free gospel: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Paul answers this objection by pointing out that believers have died to sin "by their baptismal participation in Christ's death"<sup>18</sup> and "just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Rom 6:3). The new life is the life of the Spirit of God who dwells in believers and enables them to live a life pleasing to God.

The theological themes of Romans 5–8 have the following structure:

- Eschatological hope grounded in justification and reconciliation (Rom 5)
- The ethical life of the justified (Rom 6)
- The plight of the unredeemed (Rom 7)

15. In the original Afrikaans: "As vyrgespreektes is ons splinternuwe mense."

16. Cranfield, *Commentary*, 748.

17. For a detailed discussion, see Moo, *Letter to the Romans*, 316–528.

18. Matera, *Romans*, 186.

Eschatological hope grounded in the Spirit (Rom 8)<sup>19</sup>

Is Paul's message of justification by faith apart from doing the works of the law an invitation to an immoral life? Romans 8 presents a clear answer: those who have been justified by faith experience the power of the Spirit, who enables them to live holy lives. Righteousness by faith has its counterpart in the life of faith enabled by the Spirit. Paul experienced the power of the Spirit both in his own life as well as in the communities who accepted his message of justification by faith alone. The written code of the law cannot enable people to obey its instructions. The Spirit, however, is a life-giving force—the presence of the living God in believers' lives. Let us listen to Romans 8:1–4:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8 is permeated by references to the Spirit and plays a pivotal role in Paul's argument. Prior to chapter 8, Paul refers only four times to the Spirit in 1:9, 2:29, 5:5, and 7:6. In chapter 8 there are nineteen references to the Spirit. The Spirit not only empowers those who have been justified by faith to live holy lives, but also assures believers of the final glory they will experience at the resurrection of the dead. Paul assures us in Romans 8:11: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you." In describing the role of the Spirit, Paul uses an agricultural term, *drapxyi*, the first of the harvest that was dedicated to God ensuring that the whole harvest will follow (8:23: "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit"). "For Paul, the Spirit is the 'firstfruits' of a harvest that believers will reap when their bodies are redeemed from death at the general resurrection of the dead (8:23)."<sup>20</sup>

Romans 8:18 formulates the theme of the last section of Romans 8: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Paul returns to the key theme of hope for

19. Matera, *Romans*, 188.

20. Matera, *Romans*, 210.

eschatological glory, a theme he introduced in 5:1-11 and took up again in 5:21: "so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." In Romans 5, Paul finds the reason for the hope for future glory in the believers' present experience of justification and reconciliation. In chapter 8, however, Paul writes about believers' final hope in the context of the experience of the Spirit, the firstfruits of salvation. Paul's theology reaches a climax in Romans 8 as he underscores the cosmic scope of salvation embracing not only the justified, but the whole of creation. In this way, Paul enhances and develops the message of hope introduced in chapter 5.<sup>21</sup>

## SAVED BY THE TRIUNE GOD: A FEW EXAMPLES OUTSIDE ROMANS

In the preceding analysis of the passages from Romans, we have seen the trinitarian scope of Paul's message of justification. In the remaining corpus Paulinum, the experience of salvation is also ascribed to the work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Look at the detailed description of salvation in Titus 3:4-7:

But when the kindness and love of *God our Savior* appeared,  
he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done,  
but because of *his mercy*. He saved us through the washing of  
rebirth and renewal by the *Holy Spirit*,  
whom he poured out on us generously through *Jesus Christ  
our Savior*,  
so that, *having been justified* by his grace, we might become  
heirs having the hope of eternal life.

This passage is part of a broader context in which Paul urges Titus to remind the believers to do what is good. He reminds his readers that they were also foolish and disobedient before "the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared." Salvation is founded on God and his mercy and not on any righteous deeds. Salvation is only possible because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ "our Savior." In this passage, Paul focuses, however, on the activity of the *Holy Spirit*. God "saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously." When Paul talks about the Holy Spirit, he creates an image of abundance. Believers have been made completely new; they have been put in right relation with God and now have the hope of eternal life. Just note all

the positive concepts in this passage: kindness, love, mercy, renewal, generosity, hope, eternal life. The gospel is indeed wonderful news.

Images from two Old Testament passages can be discerned in this passage. The image of "pouring out the Spirit" stems from Joel 2:28: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."

The other Old Testament passage that lies behind the language of this text is Ezekiel 36:25-28, where the Lord promises to wash his people with clean water and cleanse them from all impurities and from all their idols. This image of cleansing is then followed by the promise of sending the Spirit:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws . . . you will be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek 36:26-28)

This is new covenant language. God expected his people to follow the decrees of the covenant given on Mount Sinai. History proved, however, that Israel was unable to obey the Lord's commands. Despite Israel's disobedience, the holy God decided not to abandon his covenant people but promised a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). The Lord announced through his prophet Ezekiel that he would give his people a new heart and would put his Spirit in them, enabling them to keep his laws.<sup>22</sup>

I conclude with one more example of Paul's trinitarian view of salvation:

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:11)

These words conclude the passage starting in 1 Corinthians 6:1. It came to Paul's attention that members of the congregation pursued lawsuits against fellow believers. Paul reminded his readers that "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God." He named some of those wicked people—the sexually immoral, idolaters, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers—and pointed out that some members of the congregation belonged to the sinners he had just mentioned. Then follows the passage we are considering: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified . . ." The passive form of the verbs is called the "divine passive." Out of respect for the divine, God is not named but implied: "God has effected the salvation expressed by these rich metaphors 'in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by his Spirit.'"<sup>23</sup> The

21. Matena, *Romans*, 186.

22. Gräbe, *Power of God*, 56-57.

23. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 129.

salvation of sinners is brought about by the triune God: "God the Father saves, through the work of Christ, effected experientially by the Spirit."<sup>24</sup>

The believers were no longer thieves or drunkards or slanderers because they were washed. They were sanctified and justified by God. This was made possible by the death and resurrection of *Jesus Christ*. It is, however, the *Spirit* who made sanctification and justification a reality in their lives. Gordon Fee describes the work of the Spirit in Paul's soteriology so well:

The Spirit appropriates God's salvation in the life of the believer in such a way that new life and behavior are the expected result, and without the latter, the effective work of the Spirit in the believer's life, there has been no true salvation—in any meaningful sense for Paul.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION: THE TRINITARIAN SCOPE OF PAUL'S MESSAGE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

The "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church states:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. *Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father.* Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.<sup>26</sup>

The gospel message of justification by faith is profoundly *theocentric*. It is rooted in the Old Testament covenant and the belief in the just and faithful and caring God. The familiar words of John 3:16 say it so well: "For God so loved the world . . ."

This well-known statement does not end here. "For God so loved the world *that he gave his only Son*." The message of justification by faith is the message of the crucified and risen Christ. Because of the sacrifice of

Jesus every person who puts his/her trust in him can hear the verdict: "Not guilty!" Or better still, "righteous."

In Romans 1:16–17, the wonder of the gospel is portrayed with just a few words. We read about the righteousness of God freely given to those who believe, and Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." In a deeply personal way Paul shares with his readers that he is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the *power of God*. The gospel message is not a mere theoretical statement. When the gospel message is preached, the power of the Holy Spirit is at work.<sup>27</sup>

As Luther comprehended the gospel, he felt that he "was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates." John Wesley encountered the power of the gospel in a similar way. He wrote in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.<sup>28</sup>

*The Spirit is God's gift to those who have been justified* ("God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" Rom 5:5).<sup>29</sup> In a masterful way, Paul unfolds his statement in Romans 1:16–17 in the ensuing chapters, reaching a climax in Romans 8, the chapter of the Spirit. The Spirit makes justification a present reality in the lives of believers and enables them to live holy lives. Justification and sanctification find a unity in the *activity of the Spirit*.<sup>30</sup> Sanctification shows that justification is a reality in the life of a believer.

The work of the Spirit reaches beyond this life. Paul assures us that because we have the "firstfruits of the Spirit," we can eagerly await sharing in the glory of God when our bodies are raised from the dead (Rom 8:23). The

27. For more information on the connection between the concept of power (δύναμις) and the Holy Spirit see Gräbe, *Power of God*, 245–55.

28. Wesley, "I Felt My Heart."

29. See also Gal 3:2, "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" and Gal 5:5, "But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope."

30. Kertelge, *Rechtfertigung*, 278.

24. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 128.

25. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 132.

26. LWF and RCC, *Joint Declaration*, §15; italics in the original.



Spirit is a present reality in believers' lives as he enables them to address God in the intimate way that Jesus did: "Abba, Father" (Rom 8:15).

Let us continue to teach and preach the gospel message of justification by faith with a new sense of urgency. Let us not be ashamed of the gospel, because it is *the power of God*. Viewed from the perspective of the triune God, this is still the message that brings about the experience of the new birth and allows believers (in the words of Martin Luther) to enter paradise itself through open gates.

## Preface

Over the last couple decades, an increasing number of voices have noted the absence of an overt pneumatology in the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. I first became aware of this theological void in the summer of 2005 while taking a PhD course on contemporary theologies from Frank Macchia. Among the required readings was an essay Frank wrote for *Theology Today*, in which he laid out his attempt to fill the gap and redefine justification, giving it a robust pneumatological basis. It was a common practice to have students write a short response to the various readings—usually something around five hundred words long. I submitted a nine thousand-word rebuttal. Frank, in turn, responded graciously (but firmly) to my comments that though he welcomed disagreements, he was concerned that I had not actually engaged his argument, I had talked past him. He was right. All I had done was dismiss his proposal out-of-hand and restate the classic forensic view of justification.

Looking back, I still think I was right, and that Frank's conclusions were in error, but I have come to genuinely appreciate the concerns he raised. The following work is a significantly condensed version of my attempt to respond to those concerns and the questions raised by Frank and others. However, as will become clear, I still affirm the traditional Protestant view of the Father's legal declaration about the believer, based on the work of the Son. While it is true the Protestant Reformers did not offer a fully trinitarian statement on justification, we should recall that a pneumatology of justification was *not* the among the central issues of dispute. The Reformers were embattled on multiple fronts, so their efforts were devoted to addressing the issues that were pressed upon them. Thus, they did not attempt to articulate