

Judge (*crites*)

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We are removed in thought, but not in experience, from the New Testament concept of what a judge is and does. We judge as much today as people did in biblical times. Teachers grade papers. Umpires call balls and strikes. Everyone answers questionnaires: *on a scale from one to ten*. . . .

New Testament Term

The New Testament uses the term judge (*crites*) to indicate persons who make decisions. This applies on three levels:

1. *The Personal Level.* James sees some people as self-ordained critics. "That makes you bad judges" (2:4). "... if you criticize the law, you are not an actor of the law but a critic" (4:11).

Jesus, too, used the term to mean a purely personal function: "your sons shall be your judges" (Matthew 12:27, Luke 11:19).

2. *A Communal Level.* Most daily decisions affecting New Testament lives were made on the local level not covered by Roman law. Decisions were made according to social custom. The unjust judge (Luke 18:2-6) was probably what we would call an executor. Matthew 5:25 and Luke 12:58 refers to a person who both decides how debts are to be collected and who is to be turned over to the collector.

3. *The Imperial Level.* Roman law concerned itself with military security, trade, order, and protecting the rights of Roman citizens. Subject people governed themselves by their own laws and customs—so long as these did not interfere with Roman interests. When Gallio said, "I refuse to be a judge of these things," he was acting in line with Roman policy (Acts 18:15). When Paul said to Felix, "for many years you have been judge over this nation," he was

indicating that the governor's policy was unusual (Acts 24:10) and the author of Acts said that it was also profitable (24:26).

Judge as a Title for God

When God acts as judge, it is on the first, or personal, level. God does not act on the authority of a duly constituted body but in his own person. God's decisions are critical rather than judicial.

In the entire New Testament, God is called judge (*crites*) only three times: Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:8; and Hebrews 12:23—yet never in the Gospels, Romans, or Galatians (Luther scholars, note). In the New Testament, God's judgment (*crisis* or *crimen*) is not the verdict of an official of the court, but a decision made by one who decides righteously. The verb judge (*crino*) also does not imply deciding according to law but deciding by God's own nature (even in Romans 3:6 where Paul contrasts human ideas of judging with the divine activity of judging).

Modern Concept

When Gratian produced his *Decretum* in the 12th century, he gave formal structure to the concept that the church is a justicial organization through which God regulates and governs humanity. It made evident the fact that God as organizer, legislator, and jurist had eclipsed God as creator, savior, and helper in Western Christian thought. God as jurist had become one who imposed penalties and handed down sentences rather than one who corrected and enlightened his people. The judgments of God were to be avoided rather than sought.

We have inherited from the Middle Ages a concept of God as one who looks at a set of laws and passes judgment strictly according to one's measuring up to them. We are almost unable

to think of God as making ad hoc decisions. We demand that every decision of God be eternal and unchangeable. When we say "As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be," we think of stability, even rigidity. It never occurs to many of us that, in the beginning, now, and forever, there may be change, growth, creation. To see God as a judge who is restricted by a legal code is to fail to trust God to make decisions on his own. To assume that the divine past actions and decisions accumulate to force God to follow specific lines of will and action is to think of God as a pedant, not as a decider. We imagine that God has no whims. Why not? Because a whimsical judge would be unjust. But God is also creator, and not *only* a judge.

We have given the term "judge" a titular bind. Decisions made by one with the title of judge are viewed as having an authority, a fixity, an irrevocability which other decisions do not have. As a result, our references to God as judge are conditioned more by our authoritarian attitudes than they are informed by our biblical data. We are culturally uncomfortable with God's amenability to Abraham's pleading (Genesis 18:23-33) or to Moses' arguments (Exodus 32:11-14).

The three New Testament references to God as judge are significant. When Acts 10:42 speaks of Jesus Christ as judge of the living and the dead, it is part of the good news of the forgiveness of sins! When 2 Timothy 4:8 speaks of God as the righteous judge, it is of one who will give us a crown of righteousness. And when Hebrews 12:23 speaks of God as judge, it is of one who is the glorious goal of Christian life in contrast to the darkness and gloom, the voice of terror—the Law.

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