

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE JUSTIFIED?”

“Those whom God effectually called, He also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness unto them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone...”
(Westminster Confession of Faith XI)

I. The Doctrine of Justification by Faith

The biblical teaching regarding how sinful men are justified before a holy God is the defining doctrine of Protestantism. It is perhaps the most fundamental doctrinal issue separating Roman Catholics and Protestants. Martin Luther, who is often acknowledged as the official initiator of the Reformation, said that justification by faith was such an important doctrine that the Church would “stand or fall” by it. For this reason, it is absolutely essential for believers to understand what it means and what it does not mean to be justified by faith in Christ.

Louis Hodges writes regarding justification:

“Justification...is a judicial act (or declarative act) of God whereby He declares that by virtue of the imputed (credited or reckoned) righteousness of Christ, all the demands of the Law upon a particular sinner are satisfied. By this act, the one joined with Christ has the full forgiveness of sin (past, present, future) and is judged not on the basis of his own life, but on the perfect life of Jesus Christ.”

A. Read the following scripture references and comment on what they tell us about justification.

Romans 4:1-3, 5

Abraham was not justified by his own works, but by faith.

Romans 4:21-22

Abraham was justified because He had faith in the promise of redemption given by God.

Romans 4:23-25

Abraham was saved by faith in the Messiah (Jesus) who *would come*, just as we are saved by the Messiah who *has come*. It is the good works of Jesus that are credited to believers. It is by believing in Jesus as He is offered to us in the gospel that we are saved. His resurrection assures us that we are forgiven.

Romans 5:1

Faith is the instrument by which God applies and grants justification and forgiveness. It is important to understand that the work of Christ — His righteousness and His sacrifice — are the basis of justification rather than faith in faith.

Romans 1:16-17

Here it is clearly stated that the gospel of Christ is the means by which salvation is accomplished, and it is faith in Christ’s gospel by which salvation is credited to us.

Galatians 3:11

No one — neither the Old Testament or New Testament believer — is justified by obeying God’s law. Only Christ has perfectly obeyed the law, and therefore only by faith in His good works can we be saved (justified).

Galatians 3:23-24

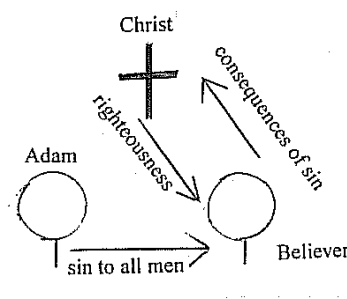
Trying to obey the law of God brings frustration to man since no man can do it. This frustration causes him to look for a remedy. Therefore, the law acts as a “tutor” or guide, leading us to Christ’s gospel. God grants the faith to us to believe the gospel and thus be declared righteous on the basis of Christ’s work alone.

B. Imputation

The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines the doctrine of imputation.

“To attribute or ascribe in the sense of reckoning. The concept relates to sin, guilt, or righteousness, as when Paul indicates that through Adam’s sin, death and guilt are imputed to all (Romans 5:12-14), while through Christ’s work, righteousness is ‘reckoned’ (imputed) to those who believe.” (Romans 4:22-24; 5:15-21)

In the act of justification, there is a three-way imputation. First, Adam’s sin is imputed to all men (hence, the need for justification). Second, the believer’s sin is imputed to Christ or, more specifically, the consequences of his sin, which is God’s judgment. Third, the righteousness of Christ is imputed (reckoned) to the believer. This is reflected below:



Read the following scripture references and comment on what they tell us regarding imputation.

Romans 5:12

Adam’s sin is imputed to all subsequent generations of men. Every man sinned in Adam.

2 Corinthians 5:21

The believer’s sin is imputed to Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 3:18

Christ received the sin or consequence of man’s sin through imputation. This is what it means to say *Christ died for our sin*.

Romans 5:18-19

Christ’s righteousness (perfect obedience) is imputed to the believer by faith.

C. Imputation — not Infusion

It is important to understand that Christ’s righteousness is not infused into us via some sort of divine hypodermic needle, but rather justification is a legal declaration by God that we are just in His sight. The term often used to describe the legal declaration is *forensic*. This is only important to us insofar as it helps distinguish the correct view of justification from one that confuses it with sanctification. The idea that righteousness is infused into us at conversion confuses justification with sanctification. The reality is that, though our legal standing before a just and holy God is perfected by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, our behavior will not reflect this perfectly. Luther said we become “simultaneously righteous and sinner.”

Read the following scripture references and comment on how they relate to imputation.

Acts 10:43

Forgiveness or justification is granted (imputed) based on faith in Christ.

Romans 4:5

Imputation of Christ's righteousness is by faith. The righteousness is credited or imputed, not infused.

Romans 4:6-7

The righteousness of Christ is credited or imputed, not infused.

D. Justification by Imputation Has an Objective Basis

If righteousness were infused, it would be subjective in nature rather than objective. Robert Reymond writes:

“...justification refers to God's *wholly* objective, *wholly* forensic judgment concerning the sinner's standing before the law, by which forensic judgment God declares that the sinner is righteous in his sight because of the imputation of his sin to Christ, on which ground he is pardoned, and the imputation of Christ's perfect obedience to him, on which ground he is constituted righteous before God.”

Another way to understand the objective nature of justification is that the righteousness of Christ that is imparted or bestowed on the believer is an “alien righteousness,” alien in that it does not originate in or proceed from the believer but from Christ alone.

This “alien righteousness” is the active and passive obedience of Jesus Christ. Read the two Scriptures below and identify which refers to Christ's active obedience and which refers to his passive obedience.

Hebrews 4:14-15

This is Christ's active obedience or his perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed to the moral law of God.

Philippians 2:6-8

This is Christ's' passive obedience. The word *passive* derives from the word *patior*, which means 'to suffer.'

In regard to the imputed righteousness of Christ, the believer receives the benefit of Christ's active *and* passive obedience. Thus our sin is atoned or paid for in Christ's passive obedience, and our position before a holy God is perfected as Christ's active obedience is credited (imputed) to us.

E. For Further Discussion:

1. What are some practical benefits to understanding how believers are justified?

We can only be saved as we grasp that we can add nothing to Christ's work of redemption. This is the most obvious, practical benefit. Further, we gain assurance of salvation as we recognize that, just as we did nothing to earn salvation, we can do nothing to lose it. Additionally, as we mature and grow in the faith, we are better able to serve God with more or less pure motives rather than be motivated to do good works to earn our salvation. (*Perfect love casts out fear — 1 John 4:18*)

2. Is there really a difference between the Roman Catholic understanding of how one is saved and that of the Protestant?

Yes. The traditional Roman Catholic view is Faith + Works = Justification. The historic Protestant view is Faith = Justification + Works. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants acknowledge that Christ's gospel is essential to salvation. However, Roman Catholics mix in the good works of the believer with faith. Thus they confuse justification with sanctification. It is Roman Catholics as well as other semi-Pelagian groups who understand righteousness as being infused rather than imputed.

3. Apart from a clear understanding of justification by faith, can a believer know with certainty that he will go to heaven at death?

No, because he will always wonder if he has been *good enough* to merit God's favor. Of course, only Christ has been *good enough* to merit God's favor! Understanding that justification is the result of the imputed righteousness of Christ brings certainty.

4. Is there another word, a synonym, which conveys the same meaning as the justification of a believer?

There are many words that correspond to and overlap with being justified, but most are pointing to a particular aspect of salvation — such as *reconciled, redeemed, saved, and converted*. Perhaps the word closest to *justified* is simply *forgiven*.