

On October 31st, 1517 AD, following a time of disorder and distraction in the Catholic Church, the most extraordinary ordinary event occurred. A thirty-three-year-old theology professor nailed a paper consisting of ninety-five theses (or concise statements) on the wooden door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This nailing was utterly ordinary, completely commonplace, and extremely unradical. The church door served as a community bulletin board, a premodern “City Website,” providing a convenient public place to advertise an academic debate. However, God, who chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, providentially infused this menial act with explosive power to ignite a Reformation.

In these theses, Luther vigorously protested the abuse of indulgences, certificates sold by the Roman Church to the laypeople that guaranteed the buyer (or another beneficiary) remission of their sins and a reduced sentence in purgatory. With a church-sanctioned ‘marketing message,’ clerics embellished these paid indulgences with power equal to the Cross of Christ.

Luther eventually came to understand that he did not, on his own, possess righteousness to the degree or of the quality acceptable to God. Neither do any children of Adam, for we all stand before God as sinners. For that reason, we desperately need righteousness, but all we have to offer God is our sin. What is the solution to our problem? **God gives us the very righteousness that He demands, and we receive His gift of righteousness by faith alone.** The Reformation did not invent this truth but revived and restored its prominence in the life of the church. **The Church stands or falls on the Doctrine of Justification.**

What is Justification? The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith addresses justification in **chapter eleven**. It states,

Those God effectually calls he also freely justifies (Romans 3:24; 8:30). He does this, not by infusing righteousness into them but by pardoning their sins and accounting and

accepting them as righteous (Romans 4:5–8; Ephesians 1:7)... [God] imputes Christ's active obedience to the whole law and passive obedience in his death as their whole and only righteousness by faith (Philippians 3:8, 9; Ephesians 2:8–10). This faith is not self-generated; it is the gift of God (John 1:12; Romans 5:17).

More simply, *Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he declares us righteous in his sight and considers (1) our sins forgiven and (2) Christ's righteousness as belonging to us.*¹ It comes to us entirely by God's Grace and through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Our outline will break down this definition.

1st. Justification is an Instantaneous Legal Act of God.

The traditional Roman Catholic position is that God '*makes*' us righteous. God puts moral righteousness into us that changes our moral nature, *like a surgeon removing cancer or replacing an organ* (how we think about Regeneration and Sanctification). Our 'justification' can increase (through faith and sacraments) or decrease (sin/less partaking of sacraments) over our lifespan. God supplies the 'justification' we lack after death by the purifying suffering of purgatory.

In the New Testament, the verb '*justify*' mainly means "*to declare righteous;*" not 'make' righteous. For example, we read, "*When they heard this, all the people and the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John*" (Luke 7:29). Of course, these people did not "*make*" God to be righteous or "*transform*" his righteousness. *Instead, they recognized and declared him to be righteous.*

¹ This definition is a slightly edited version of Wayne Grudem's definition in Systematic Theology, Chapter thirty-six.

Likewise, we read in Romans 4:5: “*And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.*” God does not change what it means to be righteous, i.e., he doesn’t suddenly ‘make’ ungodliness right. Nor did he suddenly ‘make’ the initially ungodly person morally perfect. God *declares* the ungodly to be righteous in his sight, not based on their works (for their works were ungodly), but as a response to the one who trusts in him. God reckons one’s faith as righteousness.

Or consider Romans 8:33-34: *Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?”* To “condemn” someone is to know and declare a person as guilty. The opposite of condemnation is God’s justification. Juxtaposed with “condemn,” “justifies” must mean to know and declare someone as not guilty. Proverbs 17:5: “*He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord.*”

In this sense of “justify,” God issues a ‘legal declaration’ about us. Historically, theologians have said that justification is *forensic*. The adjective **forensic** comes from the Latin, meaning “*in open court*” or “*public*.” It has to do with the courts or legal system. Justification is not a moral transformation but a public and legal declaration from God that guilty sinners are now ‘*not guilty*,’ or ‘*right*,’ in his sight. In this sense, to ‘declare one to ***be righteous***’ is to ‘declare them to ***be not guilty***.’

It is important to emphasize that this legal declaration does not change our inner nature or character. John Murray makes an essential distinction between regeneration and justification:

Regeneration is an act of God ***in*** us; justification is a judgment of God ***with respect to*** us. The ***distinction*** is like that of the distinction between the ***act of a surgeon*** and the ***act of a***

judge. The surgeon, when he removes an inward cancer, does something in us. That is not what a judge does—he gives a verdict regarding our judicial status. If we are innocent, he declares accordingly...

Justification brings us to the courtroom, not the operating room. Regeneration bring us into the operating room; Justification into the courtroom; and Sanctification to the Physical Therapist for ongoing recovery. So, Justification is an Instantaneous Legal Act of God...

2nd. God Declares us to be Righteous in His Sight.²

What does ‘Righteous’ mean? It means two related things, like two sides of the same coin. First, God declaring us righteous means that all of our past, present, and future sins are forgiven. Let’s back up for a minute: If God does not change his moral standard, how can he forgive sins without compromising his character? The Gospel reveals how God is righteous in

² Most early church fathers used the term "justification" to describe the entire salvation process (forgiveness through the washing of regeneration, the Divine declaration of righteousness, transforming righteousness of sanctification, and Theosis, or the deepening union with God). Still, they believed it began only as a consequence of faith in God, a faith initiated by God's grace. Justification by faith alone, not by the works of the law or philosophical knowledge, secured a right relationship with God and distinguished the Christian community from its Jewish origins and Gentile surroundings. The fourth-century Western thinkers affirmed that believers "are justified only on account of placing their trust in God" (McGrath, *Justitia Dei*; 41). Augustine didn't seem to distinguish between the declaration of righteousness and the process of sanctification. He treated them both as part of the same, single "healing process" called "justification" (48). Augustine taught that Faith is never absent from love. Like Him, his theological heirs of Medieval times (Aquinas) held no distinction between God's external announcement and the process of inner renewal and reordering of the human intellect. Justification possessed a dual nature, beginning with God's infusion of grace and continuing with the submission of man's lower nature to his higher. Early Medieval theologians held no distinction between God's declarative announcement of justification and the sanctifying process of inner renewal inaugurated at regeneration. Even in Medieval times, justifying faith was universally understood as God's initial and gracious gift (118). However, the theology of *Pactum* developed and expanded in the Medieval ages. *Pactum* meant that God gives individuals grace to act meritoriously, to "do what lies within you," which God then accepts based on His promise (145). Additionally, the development of sacramental theology (particularly of Baptism, Penance, and the Eucharist) complemented the development of the doctrine of justification. McGrath noted, "Justification is understood to begin in baptism and to be continued in penance" (172). Like the early church fathers, medieval theologians deployed the term "justification" synecdochally. Theologians joined the doctrines of regeneration, declarative justification, sanctification, and divinization within the concept of "justification" and "[held] them together in a coherent theological framework" (67).

forgiving sin. Romans 3:25 “*God put forward [His Son] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness...so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*”

In Jesus Christ, God’s demands for both our perfection and punishment are fully satisfied. God did not withhold His just anger against our sin like a dam halts a rushing river. No, He directed and unleashed it fully upon Jesus. His sinless Son stood in place of judgment for sinners, enduring the righteous wrath of God against the unrighteousness of men.

I like to sit close to the ocean when I visit the beach during my summer vacations. High tide makes this problematic in the afternoons because giant waves rush swiftly over my spot, soaking everything. Undeterred, I dig a deep moat in the sand right in front of my beach chairs and pile the sand behind the trench as a protective barrier. When the larger waves come, most of their water plummets into my moat and crashes against my blockade. The sandy wall and moat absorb the force of water until it dissipates, keeping me wholly dry. My moat and wall prove more robust than the wave.

The cross of Christ averts the tsunami of God’s wrath coming inevitably upon all men. Christ, our Divine substitute, absorbed that just wrath against us until it dissipated. Jesus stood in our place and withstood the righteous judgment due to us as fair compensation. Christ’s righteousness is, however, greater than all our sin. In Christ, God satisfies His own demands and suffers our just punishment. The gospel is truly the power of God to forgive sinners righteously.

Romans 8:1 says, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” Romans 4:6-7, “*just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts*

righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” Psalm 103:12, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”

Christian, not one drop of God’s wrath remains for you. All your sins are forgiven! The very righteousness that once choked you with fear and terror of God’s insatiable wrath now fills you with inexpressible relief and wonder. The tidal wave of almighty wrath driven by perfect justice is coming and remains a frightening reality for unbelievers but not for believers.

Secondly, this means that Christ’s righteousness belongs to us. God not only endured our punishment but also provided us with the very righteousness that He demanded from us. The gospel does not simply manifest the attribute of God’s righteousness alone. It also reveals the redemptive righteousness that He graciously gives to undeserving sinners.

Righteousness is a right standing, or a right relationship with God, and it is given only by God. Romans 3:21: *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.* The right standing with God that we cannot provide for ourselves, God generously gives to us as His gift. The gospel reveals God’s gift (gift of righteousness; right and reconciled relationship) and makes it our very own.

The Reformers called this the “*great and marvelous exchange*.” Christ bore our sin and its penalty on the cross. In exchange, we receive the perfect, spotless record of Christ. In Christ, he freely gave us the perfection He once demanded from us; God sees the perfect sinless record of Christ when He looks at us!

He does this by imputation, not infusion. ‘*Infusion*’ is a Roman Catholic doctrine that understands justification as the whole process of healing from sin (They seem to conflate regeneration, justification, and sanctification into one and the same act without delineating what makes each of those doctrines unique).³ God forgives you (Sacrament of Baptism), but that only brings you out of sin debt. One increases or decreases over time based on their works and participation in the church sacraments. You can think about this like using a tea bag and water to make a cup of tea—most varieties of tea call for steeping the leaves in hot water. The tea bag is like justification. The water is faith AND works, resulting in the incremental infusion and increase of ‘justification’ throughout one’s life. It is the slow increase of transformative righteousness by the sacraments and good works (what we Protestants call progressive sanctification).

In contrast, the Protestant doctrine is ‘*imputation*.’ God counts you completely righteous based on the finished work and complete merit of Christ. The judge declares you “*not guilty*,” wiping out your sin debt, **AND** orders the government to fill your file with the record of the ideal citizen, filling your account full with Christ’s righteousness. A believer is justified instantaneously by faith and then is progressively sanctified by the Spirit. Our works result from our new nature (regeneration) and new standing (justification), like a newly planted tree that bears fruit over time. Your justification, however, cannot increase or decrease because your account is forever filled to overflowing with Christ’s perfect and unchanging righteousness.

³ From our perspective and experience, the redemptive blessings of faith, regeneration, justification, positional sanctification, and union come at same time, like fire and its light. But regeneration logically comes first by necessity of consequence, not necessarily by temporal consequence. Regeneration, then faith, then justification, then positional sanctification, then union, and then etc.

Romans 5:19, *“For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made (“cause[d] to be”) sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made (“cause[d] to be”) righteous.”* Adam acted as humanity’s representative, and God **regarded** the human race as guilty sinners. Adam’s guilt was imputed to everyone such that God regarded Adam’s guilt as belonging to the whole race of Adam. **Through the obedience of the one man, many were made righteous (19b). God regards Christ’s whole righteous life of perfect obedience, including his death and resurrection, as belonging to all in Christ.**

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3rd. It Comes to Us Entirely By God’s Grace and Through Faith in Jesus Christ Alone.

Romans 1:17 *“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”* Paul quotes the prophet Habakkuk, where God threatened to punish sinful Judah for failing to keep God’s Law. But He also promised a future judgment of Babylon and a future new exodus for Israel. **The people must choose whether they will believe God or depend on themselves: 1:4 “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”** In contrast to the ‘proud one’ who relies upon his wealth and earthly goods, Habakkuk speaks about the one who lives by the ‘faith’ in the vision of the coming salvation of God (i.e., relies upon God). **Paul declares that the vision of salvation has come to fulfillment in Christ, and he resounds the same prophetic call to faith in God’s revelation.**

Faith in the gospel, as the very word of the living God, results in everlasting life.

“*The righteous shall live by faith,*” believers receive Christ’s righteousness by faith. Those who believe will ‘live because of faith’ and, by that faith, experience eternal life.

We are Saved by Faith Alone, from faith, for faith. We receive the power promised in the gospel by faith from the beginning, and we rest in that faith until the very end. Thus, faith is the exclusive means of receiving God’s power for salvation. The faith that God requires excludes any dependence on our ‘works’ for justification. God’s justifying deed in Christ has no deficiency. It accepts no replacement and needs no supplement. Where boasting in works is present, biblical faith is absent.⁴

In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus told this parable to illustrate trusting God’s mercy alone for righteousness. “*Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other...*”

⁴ About James 2, Grudem says, “When James says, “Was not Abraham our father *justified by works* when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?” (v. 21) he is referring to something later in Abraham’s life, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, which occurred in Genesis 22. This is long after the time recorded in Genesis 15:6 where Abraham believed God ‘and he reckoned it to him as righteousness...’ At that point Abraham was “shown to be righteous” by his works, and in that sense James says that Abraham was “justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar” (James 2:21)... “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith” (James 2:18). “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26). James is simply saying here that “faith” that has no results or “works” is not real faith at all; it is “dead” faith.” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 731-732).

Faith does not put prideful works forward for salvation but humbly receives the One God put forward as our acceptable sacrifice. If you haven't already, receive God's righteousness in Christ for the forgiveness of your sin and eternal life. Believer, your confidence is that God saves us based on the generous gift of His own righteousness and none of ours. Meditate on His righteousness as your own, and you will see how powerfully it comforts and sustains you.

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