Justification by Faith

Romans 1:17; Romans 3:28; Romans 4:5; Romans 4:22-25; Romans 5:19; Romans 8:33; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 1 Corinthians 6:17; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 1:27
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The Reformation doctrine of justification by faith is, and has always been, the number one target of the enemy's attack. It provides the foundation of the bridge that reconciles God and man—without that key doctrine, Christianity falls. But the doctrine that the Reformers so painstakingly clarified, even spilled blood over, has become so muddled today that many Protestants barely recognize it. Sadly, there are some who react against a clear presentation of justification, calling it nothing more than useless hair-splitting.

The superficial interests of the seeker church have caused doctrinal issues to be downplayed and deemphasized—what "unchurched" person wants to come hear about theology? Under the influence of pragmatism, the seeker-sensitive movement has traded God-honoring doctrinal clarity and biblical purity for entertainment and motivational speeches.

Social and political concerns have brought evangelicals and Catholics together in recent years to unite against the forces of secularism. Under the influence of ecumenism, it's difficult for either group to remember what it was that divided them in the first place.

The pragmatists and ecumenicists are aided in their forgetfulness by new theological movements that redefine justification in more Catholic terms. Under the influence of liberalism and postmodernism, proponents of the New Perspective on Paul, the Emergent Church, and others have so confused and redefined the doctrine of justification that it has become shrouded in darkness once again.

The Christian church today is in danger of returning to the Dark Ages. The seeker movement has Christianity turning in its Bibles; the ecumenical movement urges Christians to use worldly means to accomplish temporal ends; and current theological movements look through the lens of philosophy—Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern subjectivism—rather than Scripture. The departure from *sola scriptura* has led to the departure from sola fide—justification by faith alone.

Back to the Beginning

In the 1500s a fastidious monk, who by his own testimony "hated God," was studying Paul's epistle to the Romans. He couldn't get past the first half of Romans 1:17: "[In the gospel] is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith" (KJV).

One simple, biblical truth changed that monk's life—and ignited the Protestant Reformation. It was the realization that God's righteousness could become the sinner's righteousness—and that could happen through the means of faith alone. Martin Luther found the truth in the same verse he had stumbled over, Romans 1:17: "Therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, *the just shall live by faith*" (KJV, emphasis added).

Luther had always seen "the righteousness of God" as an attribute of the sovereign Lord by which He judged sinners—not an attribute sinners could ever possess. He described the breakthrough that put an end to the theological dark ages:

I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.

Justification by faith was the great truth that dawned on Luther and dramatically altered the church. Because Christians are justified by faith alone, their standing before God is not in any way related to personal merit. Good works and practical holiness do not provide the grounds for acceptance with God. God receives as righteous those who believe, not because of any good thing He sees in them—not even because of His own sanctifying work in their lives—but solely on the basis of *Christ's* righteousness, which is reckoned to their account. "To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Romans 4:5). That is justification.

Declared Righteous: What Actually Changes?

In its theological sense, justification is a forensic, or purely legal, term. It describes what God *declares* about the believer, not what He *does to change* the believer. In fact, justification effects no actual change whatsoever in the sinner's nature or character. Justification is a divine judicial edict. It changes our status only, but it carries ramifications that guarantee other changes will follow. Forensic decrees like this are fairly common in everyday life.

When I was married, for example, Patricia and I stood before the minister (my father) and recited our vows. Near the end of the ceremony, my father declared, "By the authority vested in me by the state of California, I now pronounce you man and wife." Instantly we were legally husband and wife. Whereas seconds before we had been an engaged couple, now we were married. Nothing inside us actually changed when those words were spoken. But our status changed before God, the law, and our family and friends. The implications of that simple declaration have been lifelong and life-changing (for which I am grateful). But when my father spoke those words, it was a legal declaration only.

Similarly, when a jury foreman reads the verdict, the defendant is no longer "the accused." Legally and officially he instantly becomes either guilty or innocent—depending on the verdict. Nothing in his actual nature changes, but if he is found not guilty he will walk out of court a free person in the eyes of the law, fully justified.

In biblical terms, justification is a divine verdict of "not guilty—fully righteous." It is the reversal of God's attitude toward the sinner. Whereas He formerly condemned, He now vindicates. Although the sinner once lived under God's wrath, as a believer he or she is now under God's blessing.

Justification is more than simple pardon; pardon alone would still leave the sinner without merit before God. So when God justifies He imputes divine righteousness to the sinner (Romans 4:22-25). Christ's own infinite merit thus becomes the ground on which the believer stands before God (Romans 5:19; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9). So justification elevates the believer to a realm of full acceptance and divine privilege in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, because of justification, believers not only are perfectly free from any charge of guilt (Romans 8:33) but also have the full merit of Christ reckoned to their personal account (Romans 5:17). Here are the forensic realities that flow out of justification:

-We are adopted as sons and daughters (Romans 8:15)
-We become fellow-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17)
-We are united with Christ so that we become one with Him (1 Corinthians 6:17)
-We are henceforth "in Christ" (Galatians 3:27) and He in us (Colossians 1:27)

How Justification and Sanctification Differ

Justification is distinct from sanctification because in justification God does not *make* the sinner righteous; He *declares* that person righteous (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16). Notice how justification and sanctification are distinct from one another:

-Justification *imputes* Christ's righteousness to the sinner's account (Romans 4:11b); sanctification *imparts* righteousness to the sinner personally and practically (Romans 6:1-7; 8:11-14).
-Justification takes place outside sinners and changes their standing (Romans 5:1-2), sanctification is internal and changes the believer's state (Romans 6:19).
-Justification is an event, sanctification a process.

Those two must be distinguished but can never be separated. God does not justify whom He does not sanctify, and He does not sanctify whom He does not justify. Both are essential elements of salvation.

Why differentiate between them at all? If justification and sanctification are so closely related that you can't have one without the other, why bother to define them differently? That question was the central issue between Rome and the Reformers in the sixteenth century, and it remains the main front in renewed attacks against justification.

Justification in Roman Catholic Doctrine

Roman Catholicism blends its doctrines of sanctification and justification. Catholic theology views justification as an infusion of grace that *makes* the sinner righteous. In Catholic theology, then, the ground of justification is something made good within the sinner—not the imputed righteousness of Christ.

The Council of Trent, Rome's response to the Reformation, pronounced anathema on anyone who says "that the [sinner] is justified by faith alone—if this means that nothing else is required by way of

cooperation in the acquisition of the grace of justification." The Catholic council ruled "Justification . . . is not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just." So Catholic theology confuses the concepts of justification and sanctification and substitutes the righteousness of the believer for the righteousness of Christ.

What's the Big Deal?

The difference between Rome and the Reformers is no example of theological hair-splitting. The corruption of the doctrine of justification results in several other grievous theological errors.

If sanctification is included in justification, the justification is a process, not an event. That makes justification progressive, not complete. Our standing before God is then based on subjective experience, not secured by an objective declaration. Justification can therefore be experienced and then lost. Assurance of salvation in this life becomes practically impossible because security can't be guaranteed. The ground of justification ultimately is the sinner's own continuing present virtue, not Christ's perfect righteousness and His atoning work.

What's so important about the doctrine of justification by faith alone? It is the doctrine upon which the confessing church stands or falls. Without it there is no salvation, no sanctification, no glorification—nothing. You wouldn't know it to look at the state of Christianity today, but it really is that important.

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