



**The Salvation Equation: {Grace > Atonement} Man can now respond: + Repentance + Faith → (and God answers) Conversion + Regeneration + Justification + Adoption → Sanctification**  
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3/17 Grace  
 3/24 Atonement  
 3/31 Repentance  
 4/7 Pr. Robin's Testimony

4/14 Faith  
 4/21 Conversion  
 4/28 Regeneration

5/5 Justification  
 5/12 Adoption  
 5/19 Sanctification

PROMO:

*Have you ever wondered if God really sees you?  
 Have you ever wondered if God really can love you?  
 Have you ever wondered if God could really forgive your horrible past?  
 Have you ever felt worthless even though you love Jesus?  
 If we ever have, then we do not understand what happened when we met Jesus at Salvation.  
 Come, find out what Jesus' love really does:  
 Soteriology – a.k.a. The Salvation Principle  
 Beginning March 17<sup>th</sup>, Pr. Orleen and the Wednesday Night Crew as we unpack the meaning of our SALVATION.*

**Soteriology** is the branch of theology dealing with the study of salvation. The term comes from the Greek soterion, "salvation," and is also related to soter, "savior." **Soteriology** relates to several other branches of theology in that it asks who is saved, by whom, from what, and by what means.

- How I met Jesus:
- Biggest hurdle Jesus and I have walked over:
- Jesus surprised me with/when:
- Jesus shows His love to me when:

"Eternal life was the life which Jesus Christ exhibited on the human plane, and it is the same life, not a copy of it, which is manifested in our mortal flesh when we are born of God. Eternal life is not a gift from God, eternal life is the gift of God. The energy and the power which was manifested in Jesus will be manifested in us by the sheer sovereign grace of God when once we have made the moral decision about sin...The life that was in Jesus is made ours by means of His cross when once we make the decision to be identified with Him. If it is difficult to get right with God, it is because we will not decide definitely about sin. Immediately we do decide, the full life of God comes in. Jesus came to give us endless supplies of life: "that you may be fill with all the fullness of God"...The weakest saint can experience the power of the deity of the Son of God once he is willing to "let go". Any strand of our own energy will blur the life of Jesus. We have to keep letting go, and slowly and surely the great full life of God will invade us in every part, and men will take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus." Oswald Chambers

***On forgiveness***

I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says "Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology, I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before." But excusing says "I see that you couldn't help it or didn't mean it, you weren't really to blame." . . .

Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.

From *The Weight of Glory*  
 Compiled in *Words to Live By*



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**“Eternal life is not a gift *from* God, eternal life is the gift *of* God.” Oswald Chambers**

*“And I will give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”*

**John 10:28** (NKJV)

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- What happens when we pray the prayer of Salvation?
- Are we scrubbed clean? Or???
- Do you ever feel like you are not really saved?
- Do you question how much God has forgiven...if there are some things that He has not?
- Do you ever feel like your sins are just too big for God to forgive?
- Is there something you can do to lose your salvation?

**Hebrews 10:7** HCSB

*Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the actual form of those realities, it can never perfect the worshipers by the same sacrifices they continually offer year after year. <sup>2</sup> Otherwise, wouldn't they have stopped being offered, since the worshipers, once purified, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? <sup>3</sup> But in the sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. <sup>4</sup> **For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.***

<sup>5</sup> *Therefore, as He was coming into the world, He said:*

*You did not want sacrifice and offering, but You prepared a body for Me.*

<sup>6</sup> *You did not delight in whole burnt offerings and sin offerings.*

<sup>7</sup> *Then I said, “See— it is written about Me in the volume of the scroll—*

***I have come to do Your will, God!*”**

<sup>8</sup> *After He says above, You did not want or delight in sacrifices and offerings, whole burnt offerings and sin offerings (which are offered according to the law), <sup>9</sup> He then says, See, I have come to do Your will. **He takes away the first to establish the second. <sup>10</sup> By this will of God, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.***

**Luke 24:25**

*Then He opened their mind to understand the Scriptures.*

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## **JUSTIFICATION**

**The Salvation Equation: {Grace > Atonement} (Man can now respond) + Repentance + Faith (and God answers) → Conversion + Regeneration + Justification**

- 1.) What is Justification:** Reasonable, LEGAL grounds for an action.  
**The process by which sinful human beings are made acceptable to a Holy God**

**DO:** Go hit someone. Have them hit me back. Tell mom. You were justified in your actions because I hit you first.

Start with Justified:

1. To demonstrate or prove to be just, right, or valid: *justified each budgetary expense as necessary; anger that is justified by the circumstances.*
2. To declare free of blame; absolve.
3. To free (a human) of the guilt and penalty attached to grievous sin. Used of God.
4. *Law* a. To demonstrate sufficient legal reason for (an action taken).

### **Websters 1828 Dictionary:**

- In theology, remission of sin and absolution from guilt and punishment; or an act of free grace by which God pardons the sinner and accepts him as righteous, on account of the atonement of Christ.
- The act of declaring or making righteous in the sight of God.

**Justification is the act that justifies us.**

- 2.) So how can we, sinful humans, stand legally just, right, or valid before a Holy God?**  
(Like we have a RIGHT to be there?)(Question of all mankind)

**Job 9:2**

*“Indeed, I know that this is true. But how can mere mortals prove their innocence before God?”*

Wrong thinking – Wrong conclusion

- Accepted Fallacies (complicate our understanding of Justification):  
My good works will grant me access to a righteous God.  
Sincere belief will grant me access before a righteous God.  
Family belief system will grant me access before a righteous God.  
God’s common grace is enough, there is nothing else needed and moral law does not apply to me any longer. (Antinomianism)

We get off right here

Truth – to correct our wrong thinking!

- a.) **Begins with God being righteous and Him being infallibly consistent in His own nature.**

**James 1:17**

*<sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (No variation or shifting shadow. No shadow of turning.)*

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**Malachi 3:6**

*6 “I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.*

**Deuteronomy 32:4**

*4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.*

NASB

*4 “The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.*

GOD’S!

b.) This righteousness both judges and saves.

His righteousness shines and illuminates every piece of unrighteousness just due to the nature of righteousness.

**Romans 3:23**

*23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

And due to this righteousness in His being, He has provided a way for us, the condemned, to be declared:

**NOT GUILTY OF SIN. JUST.**

Expiatory – has the power to atone for!

Salvation = Christ’s work is expiatory...in that it covers our sin so it is no more.  
AND

Propitiatory - appeases

Old Testament – lambs – temporary covering  
New Testament – Jesus – permanent – once for all

Christ’s work is propitiatory...it shields us from God’s wrath towards sin. (I believe this is a spiritual law. God’s presence cannot be near sin or sinful as it would ‘incinerate’ the vessel.)

This shielding is where Justification comes in. We have earned incineration.

**Romans 3:21-26**

*21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the*

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*sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

## **2 Corinthians 5:21**

*<sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

This is Justification...to make righteous.

c.) It satisfies a legal spiritual law. It meets an eternal requirement. (Forensic Justification.)

## **Galatians 3:24-25**

*<sup>24</sup> So the law was put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.*

(The Law cannot remove sin only illuminate it. It is a measuring tool. It cannot show any mercy. Therefore, if we think our good behavior can by good favor w/God we are mistaken. It is like asking a measuring tape to be kind to us.)

JUSTIFICATION: It is an objective word. This takes place outside of us.

JUSTIFICATION: Instantaneous.

JUSTIFICATION: Simultaneous with Regeneration.

JUSTIFICATION: Is complete. Once and for all.

Through Salvation in Christ we are found to be *in conformity with the requirements of the Law.*

Like = pretend
Sin-free = not bound by it!

God does not look at us **like** we have never sinned. He looks at us as sin-free.

We can not only *declare* we are forgiven, we can *live* like we are sin free.

## **Romans 3:21-26**

*<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in<sup>14</sup> Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,<sup>14</sup> through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

## **1 Corinthians 1:26-30**

*<sup>26</sup> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the*

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*strong. <sup>28</sup> God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*

### **3.) What is our response?**

Justification by Faith alone removes two erroneous stumbling blocks of Faith:

A.) Pride in our own self righteousness and self effort.

#### **Galatians 2:21**

*<sup>21</sup> I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*

#### **Galatians 3:1-3**

*<sup>1</sup> You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. <sup>2</sup> I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? <sup>3</sup> Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort?*

#### **Galatians 5:4**

*<sup>4</sup> You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*

B.) Fear we are too weak and sinful to bring salvation to completion.

#### **Romans 5:1**

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we<sup>we</sup> have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,*      **Footnotes: a. [Romans 5:1](#)** Many manuscripts *let us*

#### **Romans 5:10**

*<sup>10</sup> For if, **while** we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

This verse presents an argument that is A FORTIORI.

Pronunciation: A FOR-TEA-ARE-I

A Fortiori:

All the more certainly; with greater reason; marked by a certainty inferred from and taken to be even more conclusive than another reasoned conclusion or recognized fact.

Which means all the more certain.

If the greater truth is true, how much more so is the lesser.

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A.) Pride in our own self righteousness and self effort.  
Oh, I need to be a better person before I can ask Christ for salvation.  
I can't let others know the real me or they will think less of me.  
I can't let others know the real me or they will walk away from me.

B.) Fear we are too weak and sinful to bring salvation to completion.  
God cannot forgive me of everything I have ever done, there's too much.  
God does not want to bless me because I have such a dark past.  
I don't belong here.

Removal of **guilt**.

Removal of **condemnation**.

Removal of **separation**.

Credited to ME!

Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. Attributed to us.  
Our sins are charged to Him. The consequences of our sin is imputed to Him.

To lay the responsibility or blame on someone

Imputed:

**1.** To relate to a particular cause or source; **attribute the fault or responsibility to impute** v. 1) to attach to a person responsibility (and therefore financial liability) for acts or injuries to another, because of a particular relationship, such as mother to child, guardian to ward, employer to employee, or business associates. Example: a 16-year-old boy drives his father's car without a license and runs someone down. The child's negligence may be imputed to the parent, or, in the reverse, a mother drives her car and collides with a truck driven over the speed limit, and her baby in the front seat of the car is badly injured, in part due to not being put in a safety seat with a seat belt. The mother's negligence can be imputed to the child in any claim on behalf of the child against the truck driver. 2) to attribute knowledge and/or notice to a person only because of his/her relationship to the one actually possessing the information. Example: if a partner in a business is informed of something, that knowledge is imputed to his/her partner, and the partner is expected to have the information also

Because of Justification these sins are declared no more. **When you wonder if you can be saved, or if you are good enough, or if.....you are picking these back up.**

**Justification means:**

Acts 13:39	Freedom from the law.
Romans 5:1	Peace with God.
Romans 5:9	Salvation from wrath.
Romans 5:10-11	Reconciliation with God.
Romans 8:30	Assurance of glorification.
Romans 8:33-34	Freedom from condemnation.
Titus 3:7	Becoming heirs of God.

The Holy Spirit's role in ....: (use what wording? Use where?)

Seal	Ephesians 1:13
Pledge of more to come.	Ephesians 1:14
Sanctifier	1 Peter 1:2
Giver of Gifts	1 Corinthians 12:4-11
Producer of Fruits	Galatians 5:22-23

## LOGOS NOTES:

**JUSTIFICATION**—the process by which sinful human beings are made acceptable to a holy God.

*Justification by Grace.* Christianity is unique because of its teaching of justification by grace (Rom. 3:24). Justification is God's declaration that the demands of His Law have been fulfilled in the righteousness of His Son. The basis for this justification is the death of Christ. Second Corinthians 5:19 says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them." This reconciliation covers all sin: "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). Justification, then, is based on the work of Christ, accomplished through His blood (Rom. 5:9) and brought to His people through His resurrection (Rom. 4:25).

When God justifies, He charges the sin of man to Christ and credits the righteousness of Christ to the believer (2 Cor. 5:21). Thus, "through one Man's righteous act, the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life" (Rom. 5:18). Because this righteousness is "the righteousness of God" which is "apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21), it is thorough; a believer is "justified from all things" (Acts 13:39). God is "just" because His holy standard of perfect righteousness has remained unlowered, but has been entirely fulfilled in Christ. Further, He is the "justifier," because this righteousness is freely given to the believer (Rom. 3:26; 5:16).

*Justification by faith.* Although the Lord Jesus has paid the price for our justification, it is through our faith that He is received and His righteousness is experienced and enjoyed (Rom. 3:25-30). Faith is considered righteousness (Rom. 4:3, 9), not as the work of man (Rom. 4:5), but as the gift and work of God (John 6:28-29; Phil. 1:29).

The New Testament sometimes seems to speak of justification by works. For example, Jesus spoke of justification (and condemnation) "by your words" (Matt. 12:37). Paul said, "the doers of the law will be justified" (Rom. 2:13). And James concluded that "a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:24).

These statements seem to conflict with such warnings as "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20), and that the attempt to be justified through law is equivalent to being "estranged from Christ" and "fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4).

The solution to this apparent conflict lies in the distinction between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25). Not only is Christ's righteousness legally accounted to the believer, but Christ also dwells in the believer through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:10), creating works of faith (Eph. 2:10). Certainly God's works may be declared righteous (Is. 26:12). Thus,

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the order of events in justification is grace, faith, and works or, in other words, by grace, through faith, resulting in works (Eph. 2:8-10).

*The results of justification.* The negative result of justification is what we are saved from: “Having now been justified...we shall be saved from wrath” (Rom. 5:9). The positive result is what we are saved to: “Whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Rom. 8:30).

Paul also notes “peace with God” (Rom. 5:1) and access to God’s grace (Rom. 5:2) as positive benefits. The believer in Christ may look forward to the redemption of his body (Rom. 8:23) and an eternal inheritance (Rom. 8:17; 1 Pet. 1:4).

**JUSTIFIED.** (Matt. 12:37) *dikaioo* (dik-ah-yah-oh); *Strong’s #1344*: A legal term signifying to acquit, declare righteous, show to be righteous. In this passage Jesus refers to the day of judgment as the day of His determining condemnation or justification, based on our hearts’ response to the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

**JUSTIFICATION** (δικαιῶω, *dikaioō*, δικαίως, *dikaiōs*). A Christian doctrine concerning how believers are declared to be in the right with God through their faith in Jesus Christ.

## Introduction

Justification is the biblical teaching about how believers are declared to be right before God even though they are not actually righteous in themselves. Given that Greek language does not strictly differentiate “righteousness” and “justice” as in English, the translation of the Greek words *dikaioō* and *dikaiōsis* into English creates an interpretive problem. Some have suggested using the Anglo-Saxon word “rightwise” (K. Grobel’s translation of Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:253), the neologism “to righteous” (Sanders *Paul, the Law*, 6; *Paul*, 54–55), terms like “rectify” and “rectification” (Martyn *Galatians*, 249–75; Moore, *Rectification*; de Boer, “Paul’s Use”), or even the barbarism “dikaiosify” (Westerholm, *Perspectives*, 262–63). However, it is probably better to retain the customary translation of “justify” and “justification” and to explain their meaning with reference to usage in the New Testament and articulation in Christian doctrine.

## Justification and the New Testament

### *Lexical Data*

In Greek usage the verb *dikaioō*, usually translated as “to justify” in the New Testament, commonly has a judicial sense of “to show justice, do justice,” though in other instances it can designate a forensic declaration along the lines of “to acquit, to vindicate” or “to recognize/declare as right” (*BDAG*, 249). The LXX most often renders  $\tau\delta\gamma$  (*tsdq*) with *dikaioō* in

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<sup>1</sup> Hayford, J. W., Thomas Nelson Publishers. (1995). [Hayford’s Bible handbook](#). Nashville, TN; Atlanta, GA; London; Vancouver: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

a forensic sense, as in Gen 38:26, where Judah declares that Tamar is “justified rather than I,” and in Deut 25:1 where judges must “judge and justify the righteous one and condemn the impious.” The forensic usage of *dikaioō* continues in subsequent Jewish writings (Sirach 7:5; 10:29; 13:22; 42:2; Psalms of Solomon 2:15; 3:3, 5; 8:7, 23, 26; 9:2), and this certainly influences usage in the New Testament as well (Rom 2:13; 3:20, 24, 28, 4:2; 5:1, etc.). At the same time, the judicial usage of *dikaioō* as “to do justice,” common in Greek literature, also appears in the LXX, as in Psa 82:3 with “Give justice to the orphan and poor; of lowly and needy maintain the right,” and Isa 1:17 with “defend the orphan and do justice to the widow,” which is analogous to the usage of *ekdikeō* in Luke 18:3, 5 for “grant justice.” The noun *dikaiōsis* comes close to “justification” or “vindication” and occurs only in Rom 4:25; 5:18, where it signifies the status of one declared to be righteous.

### *Luke-Acts*

Outside Paul, references to *dikaioō* are most common in Luke-Acts. A forensic sense of the term is evident in Luke 7:29, where the crowd affirms Jesus’ pronouncement about John the Baptist: “all the people ... even the tax collectors—affirmed the righteousness of God, because they had been baptized with the baptism of John.” Justifying God was a common Jewish theme (e.g., Psalms of Solomon 8:7; Rom 3:4, 26). According to Luke 10:29, a scribe tested Jesus with the question “Who is my neighbor?” because the scribe wanted “to justify himself,” in the sense of trying to make a good case for himself in public. The same sense of public recognition of right occurs in Luke 16:15, where Jesus censures the Pharisees: “You are the ones who justify themselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts.” Again, in this passage there is a close parallel to Jewish usage of justifying oneself before others or before God (e.g., Gen 44:16; Job 32:2).

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Luke informs readers that the tax collector, rather than the self-righteous Pharisee, was “justified” because of his confession of his sin and plea for mercy. The declarative sense is clear here, with connotations of forgiveness and righteous status, and is plainly analogous to Pauline discourse about justification. However, as a pre-Easter event, the tax collector’s justification probably means “vindicated as a faithful covenant member” rather justified by faith like a Christ-believer.

Luke reflects Pauline usage in his account of Paul’s preaching in Pisidian Antioch as he records Paul’s sermon in the synagogue: “Therefore let it be known to you, men and brothers, that through this one forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and from all the things from which you were not able to be justified by the law of Moses, by this one everyone who believes is justified” (Acts 13:38–39). This passage seems to envisage more than a mere verdict. Instead it denotes a restorative and transformative event whereby believers are forgiven from sin and freed from sin. A parallel usage can be found in Rom 6:7, where Paul says that believers are “justified from sin.”

### *Paul*

Most of the references to justification in the New Testament appear in the Pauline letters. On the one hand, “justification by faith” was part of a common tradition in Jewish Christianity to which Paul and the other apostles subscribed (see Gal 2:15; 1 Cor 15:11). On the other hand,

Paul's teaching on this area was contested by Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentiles should be circumcised and forced to obey the law as part of their salvation and as a basis for fellowship (see Acts 15:1–5; Gal 2:1–14). For Paul, justification by faith was his primary argument for God's acceptance of Gentiles as Gentiles, without having to first convert to Judaism and take on law observances. Viewed sociologically, Paul was dissolving the differences between a "God-fearer" (i.e., a Gentile sympathizer to Jewish ways) and a "proselyte" (i.e., a Gentile convert to Judaism) by insisting on the sufficiency of faith. Paul was arguing that God accepts as righteous those who have faith/trust/loyalty rather than those who possess or perform the law. The upshot is that one does not have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, and that kinship is established by faith rather than by ethnicity. Viewed theologically, Paul was asserting that the law is not a means of justification because

1. the law can only point out sin but never set people free from sin (see Rom 3:20; Gal 2:21; 3:21); and
2. justification by works of the law would mean that God has limited His grace to only one people (Rom 3:30).

In summary, Pauline teaching on justification by faith has several discernible characteristics:

1. Justification is eschatological. According to many Jewish sources, God would preside in judgment over both the wicked and the righteous at the end of history, when He would vindicate the righteous and condemn the wicked. By comparison, Paul believed that those who have faith in Jesus have received a verdict of acquittal and been declared righteous in advance of the final judgment. While Paul can still maintain the future dimension of justification, where the verdict will be enacted at the final judgment (e.g., Rom 2:13; 3:30; 5:19; 10:10), he stresses the present side of the declaration, where believers are already right with God and right before God (e.g., Gal 2:15–17; Rom 3:21–26; 5:1, 18; 8:1; 8:30).
2. Justification is forensic. Justification is fundamentally a divine declaration that a believer is in the right with God and righteous before God. It refers to a person's status before God apart from their moral status. God justifies the ungodly and makes them righteous (Rom 4:5). The forensic sense is attributed not merely to the lexical meaning of *dikaioō*, which largely means "declare to be just" in the LXX, but also to the context of Paul's discourse about justification by faith alone. Justification is the opposite of condemnation (Rom 5:16; 8:1, 34; 2 Cor 3:9) and is based on the "gift of righteousness" (Rom 5:17), which comes not from the self but from God (1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9). This is not a legal fiction, as if God pretends that believers are righteous; rather, God acts to satisfy His justice (Rom 3:25–26) and to prove His faithfulness to His promises (Gal 3:21; Rom 15:8). Justification describes how God establishes a right relationship with believers, and because the relationship is real, so too is their righteous status.
3. Justification is covenantal. While justification is vertical/forensic and pertains to a believer's status before God, justification is also horizontal/covenantal and pertains to the legitimate place of Gentiles in the church. Paul shows in Romans that Christian Gentiles have experienced the great covenantal renewal that Israel was waiting for and that they are thereby "reckoned" as circumcised, that is, as members of the covenant (Rom 2:25–29).

Paul tells the Galatians that Christ was cursed on the cross not only for redemption, but also “in order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13). Similarly, Paul appeals to the story of Abraham, citing Gen 15:6 in Rom 4 and Gal 3, to prove that God can and does justify Gentiles by faith. According to Paul, God’s promise and plan all along was to create a multiethnic family of faith for Abraham. In other words, justification by faith entails fellowship by faith, and Jewish Christians cannot exclude those whom God has justified. This means that what counts is grace, not race, and neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, only the new creation (Gal 6:15). Justification is not simply about “What must I do to be saved?” but “Who are the people of God?” Justification by faith is about God’s verdict to save and define a people for Himself.

4. Justification is transformative. Justification (declared to be right) and sanctification (living right) are linked logically rather than conceptually. The basis for being justified is not being sanctified, otherwise justification would not be by grace and through faith (see Rom 3:24). And yet we must remember that Paul teaches that those united with Christ have both the status of righteousness and must thereafter live as slaves of righteousness (see Rom 6:1–23). The Holy Spirit works in the life of believers in order to conform them to the image of God’s Son so that at the final judgment they will be proven to have lived a life in accordance with the grace given to them in Christ (see 1 Cor 6:11; Rom 8:4). No believer is saved by works, but neither is any believer saved without them.

Taking into account these four themes in Paul, we might propose the following definition of justification by faith: Justification is the act whereby God creates a new people, with a new status, in a new covenant, as a foretaste of the new age.

### *James*

The remarks about justification in Jas 2:14–26 have caused consternation to many commentators because James *appears* to deny justification by faith alone and to insist on justification by a combination of faith and works. While some have wondered whether James offers a deliberate repudiation of Pauline teaching, it is more likely that James is dealing with a distortion of Paul’s teaching on justification, namely, that it could lead to antinomianism, a charge that Paul was aware of and clearly rejected himself (see Rom 3:8; 6:1). It is important to keep in mind that Paul and James do not use the words “faith” and “works” univocally, but differently. When Paul denies that justification is by works, he means that a right standing before God does not come by adopting the Jewish way of life as codified in the Torah. For James, works are loving demonstrations of faith, a view that Paul’s letters agree with (see Gal 5:6). When James denies that justification is by faith alone, he means “faith” by way of mere assent without faithfulness or obedience. Paul also stresses the importance of the “obedience of faith” (see Rom 1:5; 16:26). James and Paul both agree that believers are saved by hearing the “word” (Rom 10:17; Jas 1:21) and good works demonstrate the integrity of the faith that believers profess (Eph 2:10; Jas 2:14–17).

## **The Christian Doctrine of Justification**

In the domain of systematic theology, justification by faith has been the subject of several controversies.

1. The primary debate between Protestants and Catholics is whether justification is a forensic declaration based on the imputation of Jesus' righteousness to believers, or based on the infusion of righteousness into the believer through the sacraments, enabling them to do works of charity by which they might be justified. Recent studies like that by Hans Küng, who compared Karl Barth and Roman Catholicism, and the Joint Lutheran-Catholic Statement on justification, have attempted to show the similarities between the two positions. While fresh new ecumenical ground has been broken, thus far no consensus has been reached. The Catholic Catechism remains firmly committed to the teachings of the Council of Trent, which remains a barrier to any consensus emerging.
2. The New Perspective on Paul has promoted an intense scholarly debate about the context and content of Paul's doctrine of justification. Many scholars have argued that Judaism was not a legalistic religion devoid of grace and, consequently, that Paul's problem with Judaism was not its legalism but its ethnocentrism, that is, its exclusion of Gentiles from salvation. This has led to the New Perspective's description of God's righteousness in terms of God's covenant faithfulness and justification as covenant status rather than one's standing before God. According to New Perspective advocates, Jewish writings show that authors never forgot the grace and mercy of God as the source of salvation (see 1QS 11.11–15; 4 Ezra 8:20–36; Philo, *On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel* 54–57). They also tend to emphasize that Paul is concerned with legitimizing the status of Gentiles within ethnically mixed assemblies (Rom 3:27–31; Gal 2:15–3:28). At the same time, legalistic aspects of justification probably should not be dismissed since legalistic tendencies often emerge:
  - in heightened eschatological contexts when there is a concern with what must be done to enter the future age;
  - in sectarian contexts where there is a concern over whose interpretation of the law avails for righteousness; and
  - in the context of discussions of the criteria for the admission of outsiders into a group. Similarly, Paul's remarks on justification cannot be reduced to a social epiphenomena, and the acceptance of Gentiles in the church cannot be affirmed apart from God's acceptance of them by uniting them with Christ by faith.
1. A Finnish interpretation of Martin Luther has attempted to present a new portrait of the German Reformer by placing his theology of justification in coordination to a theology of *theosis* or deification (e.g., Mannermaa, *Christ Present*). The comparisons of Luther with Eastern Orthodox themes on participation in the life of God are genuinely illuminating and stimulating where points of contact can be demonstrated. Even so, most of the proposed similarities seem strained and driven more by the ecumenical context of eastern Scandinavia, where the Lutheran and Orthodox churches exist side by side, rather than formed by a faithful rendering of Luther.

**Selected Resources for Further Study**

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## Why Is Justification by Faith Such an Important Doctrine?

The teaching of justification by faith is what separates biblical Christianity from all other belief systems. In every religion, and in some branches of what is called "Christianity," man is working his way to God. Only in true, biblical Christianity is man saved as a result of grace through faith. Only when we get back to the Bible do we see that justification is by faith, apart from works.

The word *justified* means "pronounced or treated as righteous." For a Christian, justification is the act of God not only forgiving the believer's sins but imputing to him the righteousness of Christ. The Bible states in several places that justification only comes through faith alone (e.g., Romans 5:1; Galatians 3:24). Justification is not earned through our own works; rather, we are covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8; Titus 3:5). The Christian, being declared righteous, is thus freed from the guilt of sin.

Justification is a completed work of God, and it is instantaneous, as opposed to sanctification, which is an ongoing process of growth by which we become more Christlike (the act of "being saved," cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:23). Sanctification occurs after justification.

Understanding the doctrine of justification is important for a Christian. First, it is the very knowledge of justification and of grace that motivates good works and spiritual growth; thus, justification leads to sanctification. Also, the fact that justification is a finished work of God means that Christians have assurance of their salvation. In God's eyes, believers have the righteousness necessary to gain eternal life.

Once a person is justified, there is nothing else he needs in order to gain entrance into heaven. Since justification comes by faith in Christ, based on *His* work on our behalf, our own works are disqualified as a means of salvation (Romans 3:28). There exist vast religious systems with

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<sup>2</sup> Bird, M. F. (2016). [Justification](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

complex theologies that teach the false doctrine of justification by works. But they are teaching “a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6–7).

Without an understanding of justification by faith alone, we cannot truly perceive the glorious gift of grace—God’s “unmerited favor” becomes “merited” in our minds, and we begin to think we deserve salvation. The doctrine of justification by faith helps us maintain “pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). Holding to justification by faith keeps us from falling for the lie that we can earn heaven. There is no ritual, no sacrament, no deed that can make us worthy of the righteousness of Christ. It is only by His grace, in response to our faith, that God has credited to us the holiness of His Son. Both Old and New Testaments say, “The just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).<sup>3</sup>

**JUSTIFICATION, BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF.** The term *justify* (Greek, *dikaioō*), as the New Testament authors employ it, means simply “declare righteous.” One reads, accordingly, of human beings justifying God (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:29, 35; Rom. 3:4), the Spirit justifying Christ (1 Tim. 3:16), and self-righteous persons justifying themselves (Luke 10:29; 16:15). One also reads, more importantly, of God justifying human beings in three distinct ways. First, God justifies human beings, or declares them righteous, by imputing, or crediting, the righteousness of Christ to them. This first kind of justification occurs when God unites a sinner to Christ by faith and effects his reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:1). Second, God would justify persons by declaring them flawless if they merited eternal life by rendering God lifelong perfect obedience. Mere human beings cannot attain this second kind of justification because inherited corruption renders them naturally incapable of pleasing God (8:7–8). Third, God justifies all persons to whom he has imputed Christ’s righteousness when he acknowledges that these persons manifest the sincerity of their faith by good works (2:7–10, 13).

Paul writes of God’s justifying human beings primarily in the first and second of these manners. Over against those who claim that fallen human beings can merit God’s favor by obeying him, Paul insists that “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20; all quotations in this entry are NASB). Human sin, according to Paul, thus eliminates the possibility that a human being might receive the second kind of justification. Justification of the first kind, Paul asserts, is nonetheless possible. For “now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe” (3:21–22).

That God imputes this righteousness to those who believe in Jesus is seen in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “He [God] made Him who knew no sin [Christ] *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Christ, who became like other human beings in every

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<sup>3</sup> Got Questions Ministries. (2002–2013). [Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered](#). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

respect except sin (Heb. 4:15), naturally, does not become substantially sin; and Christians manifestly do not become substantially the righteousness of God. Rather, when God unites the Christian to Jesus by faith so that the Christian becomes a member of Christ's body (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:13, 27), God imputes the Christian's sins to Christ so that Christ might suffer the penalty for those sins. Likewise, just as God imputes Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension to the Christian (Rom. 6:6–8; Eph. 2:5–6; Col. 2:12–13), so God imputes the righteousness of the God-man, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30), to the Christian so that the Christian might be accounted righteous notwithstanding his or her ungodliness (Rom. 4:5).

Moses refers to this imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, Paul explains, when he writes, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6). Abraham received this divine imputation of righteousness, Paul insists, not through performing righteous works but through faith. "To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). God imputes Christ's righteousness to human beings through faith without any consideration of works, Paul asserts, in order to preserve the gracious character of this imputation; "*it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace" (4:16). Those who gain divine favor by faith, Paul apparently reasons, unlike those who earn divine favor by works, do not rely on meritorious actions of their own but look away from themselves to another on whom they rely entirely for their salvation. By teaching that "man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (3:28), accordingly, Paul exalts the grace of God and removes all ground of boasting from human beings (3:27).

By thus teaching, however, Paul by no means denies that God also justifies persons in the third manner indicated above—namely, by acknowledging that persons justified by faith manifest the sincerity of their faith through good works. Everyone who savingly believes in Jesus, Paul maintains, is a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17), "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10). Paul holds, accordingly, that those to whom God imputes the alien righteousness of Christ will ultimately excel the unsaved in inherent righteousness, which manifests itself in good works. In his words, "God ... WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation" (Rom. 2:6–8). For, explains Paul, "*it is* not the hearers of the Law *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified" (2:13). In other words, Paul holds that, notwithstanding the impotence of human works for procuring God's favor, those who are justified by faith and thereby saved will receive, in addition to this paramount blessing, God's declaration that, relative to the ungodly, they are inherently righteous.

It is of this species of justification, the third type enumerated above, that James appears to write when he asserts that Abraham and Rahab were justified by works (James 2:21, 24–25). Admittedly, James declares faith without works dead (2:17, 26) and useless (2:14, 20). He describes Abraham and Rahab as justified by works (2:21, 25), moreover, and asserts that "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (2:24). Nevertheless, James declares only a fruitless faith useless, not the "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6) preached by Paul. He also acknowledges the orthodoxy of the gospel Paul preaches during the latter's visit to Jerusalem recorded in Galatians 2:1–10 (see especially vv. 6–9). It seems highly improbable, therefore, that James denies Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone.

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D. W. Jowers<sup>4</sup>

## CHAPTER

### NINE

## “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS”

JEREMIAH 23:6

### THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

#### I. INTRODUCTORY CONCERNS

Ages ago in a speech before Job, Bildad posed the crucial question of human destiny: “How then can a man be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure” (Job 25:4). The biblical doctrine of justification deals with the fundamental issue of how guilty sinners can be acquitted and restored to favor with an infinitely righteous and just God. As absolutely righteous, God is the perfect standard of what is right. As absolutely just, God consistently rewards moral good and punishes moral evil. Because he is “the righteous Judge” (2 Tim 4:8), the Lord cannot by simple fiat absolve the guilty (Exod 23:7), either by altering his inviolable word or by overlooking appalling sin. Thus the question arises, how can a perfectly righteous, just, and holy God acquit guilty and condemned sinners? On what basis can God reckon as righteous those who are wholly unrighteous? Furthermore, how does God accomplish this great justifying work? By what means does God absolve the sin and guilt of rebels against the divine Lawgiver and Judge of the universe?

Justification is related to other important theological concepts such as forgiveness of sins, restoration to fellowship, adoption into the family of God, and the gift of eternal life. Reformation Protestantism regards the doctrine of justification by faith as a crucial article of the Christian religion, upon which the Gospel absolutely stands or falls. One leading authority correctly describes the doctrine of justification as “the chief doctrine of Christianity and the chief point of

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<sup>4</sup> Jowers, D. W. (2018). [Justification, Biblical Doctrine Of](#). In H. W. House (Ed.), *The Evangelical Dictionary of World Religions* (pp. 282–284). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group.

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difference separating Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.” Not a few modern theologians, however, regard justification as a doctrine encrusted with hoary Jewish legalism and thus of little bearing for modern people. For example, the late Southern Baptist theologian Dale Moody drew attention to the Reformation doctrine of forensic justification and described it as “this Latin legalism.” Is the doctrine of justification by faith an indispensable part of the Good News about Christ, or is it a dispensable relic from a previous age?

The doctrine of justification by faith proves to be the focal point of other salvific doctrines. The *backdrop* against which justification is set is humanity in its fallen condition—guilty, condemned, and alienated from God. The *ground* of justification is the death of Christ on the cross as he took the sinner’s place, bore his guilt, and suffered the just penalty for sins. The *implementation* of justification focuses on the application of Christ’s atoning provisions to chosen and specially loved sinners. The *outcome* of justification is the sanctification and final preservation of those God has made right with himself. And the *completion* of justification will occur when the just of all ages are raised in transformed bodies to experience heaven’s eternal joys.

A number of problems cluster around the biblical doctrine of justification. Fundamentally, is justification an instantaneous event that happens to sinners, or is it an ongoing process in the lives of professing Christians? If the latter, is justification merely another name for sanctification or moral improvement? If the former, is justification a matter of restoring a person to fellowship with God without regard to legal categories? A crucial issue is whether justification is the event by which God objectively *declares* a person righteous or by which he subjectively *makes* a person righteous. If the former view be true, does God reckon a person righteous simply on the basis of personal acceptance of Christ’s work on the cross or on the ground of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness received by faith? If this last view be accepted as biblically certified, is the notion that God pronounces a sinner to be what he actually is not—i.e., perfectly righteous—a legal fiction? Does the legal or forensic view of justification encourage a life of moral laxity or license (antinomianism)? Furthermore, what is the meaning of the phrase, so essential to a correct understanding of justification, “the righteousness of God” (Rom 3:21–22, AV)? Is it a description of how God acts in saving sinners, or is it a quality in God that may be attributed to sinners?

In addition, can a person contribute to their own justification, as Roman Catholics traditionally affirm? What about the so-called surplus of merits allegedly possessed by Mary and exceptional saints? Can an alleged overflow of merit be shared with those who are less holy in order to facilitate their salvation? Moreover, what are the far-ranging benefits that justification imparts to believing sinners? Concerning the subject of personal reconciliation, who is reconciled to whom? Do the obstacles to reconciliation reside on God’s side, on the human side, or both? A further issue concerns assurance of present and future justification. Can believers in Christ be confident of permanent forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God? These and other important issues will occupy our attention in the sections that follow.

## II. HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF JUSTIFICATION

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Several divergent views of justification and reconciliation appear in the history of the church's theological reflection. We now turn to consider the most important of these interpretations.

### **A. The Process of Moral Improvement (Pelagians and Liberals)**

This religious tradition displays a naive, theological optimism. It alleges that God is a God of love, not wrath, and that the souls of non-Christians are inherently upright. Moreover, God's relation to people is not that of stern lawgiver and judge who exacts the demands of penal law, but of a loving father who seeks the rehabilitation of his prodigal children. The tradition denies as impossible or absurd the legal imputation of Christ's alien righteousness to sinners. It is said that God regards as just and worthy of fellowship those who, inspired by Jesus' example, improve themselves morally. The liberal tradition thus replaces the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith with an agenda of justification by personal virtue.

The British monk Pelagius (d. 419) regarded men and women as morally free agents unimpaired by Adam's fall. Grace, defined as enlightenment afforded by the law of Moses and Christ's teachings and example, enables people to discern God's will and empowers them to perform it. People could live morally and please God without grace, only with greater difficulty. Baptism in adults signifies a break with the past and actually remits past sins. Thereafter, assisted by grace, people attain righteousness and merit eternal life by doing worthy moral deeds. Justification, according to Pelagius, involves persons overcoming sinful habits, pursuing noble ethical goals, and fulfilling God's law. Pelagius claimed that people are capable of realizing their own justification, and many, in fact, do so.

The sixteenth-century Socinians, forerunners of modern Unitarianism, held a view of justification similar to that of Pelagius. The Socinians strenuously denied that Christ's death was a satisfaction rendered to the divine justice. "That Christ by his death has *merited* salvation for us and has *made satisfaction* freely for our sins ... is fallacious and erroneous and wholly pernicious." The Socinians appealed to the following arguments in pressing their case against the satisfaction theory. (1) Righteousness is not a quality in God; it is a description of how God acts. (2) Since wrath is antithetic to goodness, there is no anger in God that needs to be appeased. (3) Moral qualities such as guilt and righteousness are non-transferrable; hence each person must make amends for himself. And (4) since humans can forgive wrongdoing by a simple determination, so also can God. The Socinians viewed justification as the human process of moral self-improvement. God forgives and raises to immortality all who repent, who follow the precepts and example of Christ (a human prophet whose death was the supreme display of obedience), and who strive to live virtuously.

Albrecht Ritschl (d. 1889), the German father of modern liberal theology, in a major work on the subject, regarded justification and reconciliation as the fundamental datum of Christianity. The context for justification is not God's holiness or wrath but his love. "The conception of love is the only adequate conception of God." God as loving Father stands ready to forgive all persons unconditionally and to restore them to fellowship with himself. But people in a state of sin (defined as ignorance and weakness) construct a false picture of God as unapproachable holiness and wrath and form a false attitude toward God involving fear and mistrust. To correct these erroneous conceptions, God made himself known in Jesus Christ. As human founder of the

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kingdom of God, Jesus experienced loving fellowship with God, revealed God as a gracious Father eager to forgive, and through word and deed inspired persons to return to God. Ritschl described as “altogether false”<sup>6</sup> the view that justification is the judicial act whereby God imputes Christ’s righteousness to sinners. Interpreted morally, justification involves forgiveness of sins, eradication of *consciousness* of guilt, and removal of mistrust of God. In spite of residual sin and guilt, reconciliation effects the restoration of a harmonious relation with the Father and adoption into his family. Ritschl concluded that persons who experience justification and reconciliation will replicate the ethical life of Jesus and so collectively will hasten the coming of God’s kingdom.

The Congregationalist pastor Lyman Abbott (d. 1922) insisted that all people by birth are God’s children. The crucial question is, how can men and women who have wandered from the Father return to him? Abbott claimed that justification means not remission of some penalty charged to us, but forgiveness of sin and renovation of character through the wooing of the Divine Lover. Justification thus is not a declaration of God with respect to us, but a change that comes about in us. Abbott wrote:

Justification by faith no longer means to me that Christ has suffered the penalties of my sins and therefore if I accept his sacrifice God will treat me as though I were innocent although I am guilty; it means that Jesus Christ offers himself to me as my divine companion and if I accept his companionship I can be made virtuous although I have been guilty.

Shailer Mathews (d. 1941) rejected the imputational view of justification because he alleged it appeals to ancient analogies rather than to contemporary images. Modern man’s

fundamental conception of the universe makes it difficult for him to respond to the forensic conception of God as a monarch who establishes days of trial and passes individual sentences upon millions of lives. His idea of law makes it hard for him to think of a remitted penalty in a moral world, where relations are genetic and only figuratively to be conceived of in terms of the law court and a king.

Mathews reasoned that the loving God who conceived the plan of salvation has no need to be placated or appeased. Salvation represents the triumph, via social evolution, of the higher spirit of Jesus over lower, vestigial, animal impulses. As humans emulate the ideals of Jesus (the revealer of God’s purposes and character), they attain a higher level of moral and spiritual development, are reconciled to God and to one another, and forge a true human brotherhood in a renewed social order. Mathews concluded, “To be saved is to be so transformed by new relations with spiritual forces both human and divine that past mistakes and sins have their effects offset by new life.”

Process theology judges that the Reformational doctrine of justification by faith is irrelevant to the modern, scientific vision of reality. According to Pittenger, the classical formulation of justification “seems to make little or no sense to our contemporaries.” We cannot accept as literally true Paul’s teaching of a forensic imputation of Christ’s righteousness. According to the Canadian theologian, the seed-bed of justification is not the offended justice of the heavenly Lawgiver and Judge but the spurning of divine love. Pittenger assimilates justification into sanctification and redefines it consistent with the Whiteheadian conceptuality. Thus justification is the divine approval of positive human responses to the divine lure—optimally displayed in

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Jesus—that leads to the vanquishing of lovelessness, the overcoming of estrangement, and personal transformation.

### ***B. The Infusion of Righteousness (Roman Catholics)***

Viewing justification as a process, Catholicism speaks both of the inception and the increase of justification. Concerning the inception of justification, God through Christ's merits and via the sacrament of baptism remits past sins and infuses into the soul new habits of grace. Although this first stage of justification makes persons inherently righteous via the impartation of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), "concupiscence" (desire that is the seed-bed of sin but not itself sin) remains in Christians. Catholic authorities judge it inconceivable that the holy God would accept into his family those who remain contaminated by sin. Moreover, they insist that imputed righteousness would seriously undermine moral effort. Concerning the increase of justification, the baptized work for eternal life by means of love-inspired virtues that are the fruit of the grace infused into the soul. Rome upholds the "merit of worthiness" (*meritum de condigno*)—i.e., the merit wrought by free moral acts performed in this state of grace. Justification is not a once-for-all event; righteousness increases or decreases proportional to the person's faith and works. Traditional Roman Catholics, in other words, trust in God's infusion of a new nature and plead the worth of their God-enabled works. Justification in Catholic theology is a comprehensive term that includes, among other things, what Protestants understand by regeneration and sanctification. For Rome, justification is not divine-wise an objective *pronouncement* of righteousness but is human-wise a lifelong *process* of becoming righteous.

The church traditionally has taught that surplus merits earned by Christ and exceptional saints can be transferred to ordinary wayfarers. Mary, in particular, contributes to the justification of the faithful in several ways. (1) By her holy life and good works on earth, Mary earned excess merit that can be credited to others. (2) Mary shared in the pain and sufferings of her Son on the cross, and so possesses additional merit that can bless those with a deficit. And (3) Mary, as "Mother of God," effectively pleads with the Father in heaven. According to one Catholic source, Mary contributes "her share to the justification of the human race, beginning with herself and extending to everyone ever justified." Catholics believe that assurance of final justification normally is not possible. Justifying grace, defined as the infusion of righteousness to the soul, can be forfeited by mortal sin but may be restored by the sacrament of penance (involving confession, satisfaction, and absolution). If the process of justification (i.e., the attainment of righteousness or transformation) is not completed in this life, the individual must endure the purifying sufferings of purgatory. According to Rome, the duration of the soul's stay in purgatory can be shortened by prayers, masses, and the superabundant merits of the saints.

Augustine (d. 430), the first post-biblical theologian to explore in depth the concept of justification, helped to shape the Roman view. Augustine stressed that God infuses the principle of righteousness into the soul at baptism. Thus at the baptismal font "We are justified, but righteousness itself grows as we go forward." Not well versed in the Greek, the bishop interpreted *dikaioo* as to "make righteous," rather than to "pronounce righteous." "What else does the phrase 'being justified' signify than 'being made righteous.'" Justification for Augustine is that gracious work whereby God makes baptized Christians righteous by renewing their inner

beings and infusing their hearts with love for him (*amor Dei*). Justification progresses as the Spirit gradually supplants the concupiscence (or evil desire) that remains in the baptized with love. As a result of this infusion of divine grace and love, believers can avoid sinning, work righteousness, and fulfill the law. The bishop added that God views the righteous deeds of Christians as meritorious. Yet he insisted (against Pelagius) that since the inspiration for the good will and work comes from God, the merit derives entirely from grace.<sup>16</sup> Augustine concluded that if Christian love is perfected in this life, the believer will go directly to heaven. If not, then justification will be completed after death by the purifying sufferings of purgatory (1 Cor 3:13–15).

Augustine subsumed under justification what Protestants understand by regeneration and sanctification. Since Augustine concisely represented the *ordo salutis* as predestination, calling, justification, and glorification, he viewed justification broadly as the entire movement of salvation from regeneration through sanctification. This is supported by the fact that he employed as synonyms for justification the Latin terms *regeneratio*, *vivificatio*, *renovatio*, and *sanctificatio*. When describing salvation, Augustine regularly used these terms rather than the word justification. In sum, whereas Protestants have followed Augustine in his doctrines of sin and grace, Roman Catholic theology expanded upon his notion that justification is the process that actually makes a person righteous. The Augustinian view of justification dominated Roman thought through the medieval era, the Council of Trent (1545–63), and beyond.

The canons and decrees of the Council of Trent represent the authoritative statement of the Counter-Reformation. Session six of the Council (1546–47) stated that justification occurs in three stages. (1) The *preparation* for justification. Blessed by prevenient grace and addressed by the call of God, the individual “is able by his own free will ... to move himself to justice in His sight” (chap. 5). In adults this preparation includes faith, repentance, and the intention to accept baptism. (2) The *beginning* of justification. Through the Spirit’s regenerating work, God infuses grace, hope, and love into the soul at baptism, thereby remitting past sins and making the person righteous. Thus justification “is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just” (chap. 7). (3) The *increase* of justification. Because Trent defined justification as the process of becoming righteous, justification must be augmented if the *viator* would attain heavenly glory. Thus, “through the observance of the commandments of God and the church, faith cooperating with good works,” believers “increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified” (chap. 10). Justification can be forfeited by mortal sin, but also can be recovered by the sacrament of penance (chap. 14). Since justification can be lost, the pilgrim possesses no certainty of present and future pardon. “No one can know with the certitude of faith, which cannot admit of any error, that he has obtained God’s grace” (chap. 9). The realistic attitude of the pious person is hope mixed with “fear and apprehension” (chap. 9). Agreeable with tradition, Trent maintained that God regards the good works individuals perform (Matt 10:42; 16:27; Heb 6:10) as meritorious. Such God-enabled human efforts increase righteousness and facilitate the attainment of eternal life (chap. 16).

In the Canons that follow, Trent repudiated the Reformation tenet of justification by faith alone. “If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification ... let him be anathema” (canon 9). The Council, moreover, placed the ban on Protestant Reformers who insisted that justification

is not increased by good works. “If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema” (canon 24). Canon 32 added an anathema against the Reformers who denied that a person’s good works merit eternal life. In sum, according to Trent, justification is more a matter of spiritual and moral renewal than the judicial absolution of guilt and the forgiveness of sins.

From a panentheistic perspective, some post-Vatican II Catholic theology affirms the universality of justifying or divinizing grace. Richard P. McBrien, for example, denies that Christ died to bear sins and expiate offenses against the divine majesty. The notion of Christ as “a curse,” he argues, is strictly metaphorical. Christ’s blood shed on the cross was not a literal payment for sins; rather it was a peace offering that unites God and sinners. “It was not that God was so enraged by the world’s sin that a price was to be exacted (the prevalent idea of God among the pagans), but that God ‘so loved the world that he gave his only Son.’” McBrien acknowledges the traditional Catholic definition of justification as “The event by which God, acting in Jesus Christ, makes us holy (just) in the divine sight.” The “event” McBrien envisages actually is a continuous process. By virtue of the universality of revelation and grace (as argued also by K. Rahner and H. Küng), justification (or divinization) extends to all people everywhere. Thus, “Every human person, by reason of birth and of God’s universal offer of grace, is already called to be a child of God and an heir of heaven.”

### ***C. Restoration of the Moral Order of the Universe (Remonstrants and Many Arminians)***

Consistent with the governmental theory of the Atonement, the seventeenth-century Remonstrants and many Arminians explained justification as forgiveness of sins that enhances God’s wise governance of the universe. Many Arminian authorities deny that justification involves the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Thus the Calvinist view, whereby God reckons the obedience of Christ to believers and accepts said obedience as if it were their own, “is fictional.” The claim that God regards persons as holy when they are not empirically so encourages antinomianism and careless living. More conservative Arminians, such as John Wesley (d. 1791), held that justification signifies (1) God’s acceptance of believers as free from sin and guilt and (2) the renovation of their moral character. The practically-minded Wesley could not resist assimilating justification into sanctification—the latter being his preeminent and enduring interest. The Lutheran notion that the believer is “*simul justus et peccator*” (at once both righteous and a sinner) Wesley firmly rejected. Many Arminians further assert that faith is not merely the *instrument* of justification but the *ground* on which justification rests. Thus Wesley wrote that “any righteousness created by the act of justification is real because of the ethical or moral dimension of faith.” Arminians generally believe that obstacles to reconciliation reside on the side of sinners rather than on the side of God. The latter always is disposed to restore fellowship with sinners. Most Arminian authorities, furthermore, hold that justification can be forfeited by willful sin; thus certainty of final justification is impossible.

Richard Watson (d. 1833), the first Wesleyan systematic theologian, defined justification as the sentence of pardon and the exemption from sin’s penalty. He denied as “fictitious” both the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to those

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who believe. “For this notion, that the righteousness of Christ is so imputed as to be accounted as our own, there is no warrant in the Word of God.” Watson perceived in the Reformational view great danger of antinomianism; that is, belief in the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness would discourage believers from pursuing holiness in daily life. The only imputation Watson allowed is God’s act of reckoning the human act of faith as righteousness. In the final analysis, Watson followed the Remonstrant jurist, Grotius, in setting justification within the context of God’s moral governance of the universe. “The fruit of the death and intercession of Christ,” he argued, “renders it consistent with a righteous government [for God] to forgive sin.”

Charles Finney (d. 1875) also viewed justification (i.e., pardon of sins and acceptance by God) from a governmental rather than a judicial perspective. To uphold the moral order of the universe, God substituted Christ’s death for the punishment required by the law. “The Godhead desired to save sinners, but could not safely do so without danger to the universe, unless something was done to satisfy public, not retributive justice.” Denying (1) the imputation of Adam’s sin to the race, (2) the imputation of the sins of the elect to Christ, and (3) perpetual justification by imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers, Finney argued that God pardons and accepts into favor sinners who reform their lives in accordance with the moral order of the universe. Since Jesus, like any other man, owed full obedience to the law, he possessed no surplus of obedience that could be applied to others. Thus, “For sinners to be forensically pronounced just, is impossible or absurd.”<sup>30</sup> Finney held that the one *ground* or *procuring cause* of justification is the benevolence of the Godhead in the interests of moral government. The several *conditions* of justification he identified as Christ’s sacrifice, personal repentance, faith in Christ, present sanctification (or entire consecration to God), and perseverance to the end (manifested in complete obedience to the moral law). In other words, Finney believed that God declares righteous persons who actually *are so*. He continued that justification can be forfeited by forsaking “full-hearted consecration” and perfect obedience to the law. When this occurs, the wayward soul becomes condemned and must seek a fresh experience of God’s justifying work. Clearly Finney predicated justification on sanctification and perseverance, not the reverse.

#### ***D. Political and Social Emancipation (Liberation Theologians)***

In the main, liberation theology views salvation (1) corporately rather than individually, (2) structurally rather than spiritually, and (3) this-worldly (horizontally) rather than other-worldly (vertically). The tradition makes political and social liberation in history the focus of salvation and spiritual and eternal concerns subservient thereto. Liberationists generally define faith as practical commitment to the revolutionary struggle, and justification as the implementation of justice across the social arena via political action, confrontation, and struggle. Liberation theologians often link the doctrines of justification and sanctification under the rubric of “discipleship.”

Against what he perceives to be Trent’s individualistic, ontological, and a-historical view of justification, Leonardo Boff insists that we must define justification of the sinner in concrete, process-oriented terms. The theological term *justification* is equivalent to the praxeological term *liberation*. Thus for Boff justification or liberation is the work of God who helps “human beings

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to make the liberating transition from their situation as enemies of God, offenders against their fellows, and alienated beings in the world.” The outcome of justification, which is realized only at the end of the historical process, is the attainment of a “utopia” marked by fraternal love and social justice. Inherent in the utopia is “the divine filiation of humanity,” whereby people become sharers in the divine nature. Boff makes clear that although God motivates the aforementioned human efforts, justification nevertheless is a human activity freely effected by human beings who are offended by social, political, and economic injustices.

Clodovis Boff rejects the classical *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* doctrine of the Catholic church. The Brazilian priest posits a salvation antecedent to and outside the traditional, sectarian values of revelation, explicit faith, church membership, sacraments, theology, etc.. From a panentheistic perspective, Boff boldly states that “every human being enjoys a de facto relationship to Jesus Christ.” But salvation is anterior to the personal consciousness thereof. Boff writes that “it is in and by concrete, definitive practice, unified in a basic project, that salvation ... comes to the human being, and to every human being.”<sup>35</sup> Salvation is consciously realized in personal experience through the exercise of love in the social contexts in which people live. The doctrine of justification by faith, he argues, amounts to an interpretation by religious people of what actually happens through the social, political, and economic liberation of oppressed men and women via agapic practice. In this regard, good works are not an expression of grace; “Rather it is the works themselves that concretely constitute this essence: grace.”

From the perspective of black liberation theology, James Cone, of New York’s Union Theological Seminary, agonizes over the fact that persons are oppressed simply because they are black. Cone calls for a theological revolution that prescribes courses of action to liberate the oppressed black community from their bondage. Cone argues that traditional theological talk must be restated for the present realities of the black experience. Thus he views sin as denial of God’s liberating activity in Jesus Christ that expresses itself in the oppression and exploitation of non-white people. Moreover, he perceives salvation as a this-worldly, social reality that fulfills black hopes and aspirations. Cone judges that “God’s act of reconciliation is not mystical communion with the divine; nor is it a pietistic state of inwardness bestowed upon the believer.” On the contrary, justification is God’s righteous deliverance of the oppressed from socio-political bondage. Moreover, justification involves the participation of the liberated in the human struggle for social and political justice. Cone argues that the Reformation view of justification by faith misses the mark by virtue of Luther and Calvin’s view of the state as the servant of God, even while the state was torturing the oppressed.

### ***E. God’s Eternal Verdict on Mankind (Neoorthodox Theologians)***

Karl Barth’s (d. 1968) objectivist view of justification is rooted in God’s eternal election of humanity in Christ. This gracious election is identical to God’s eternal covenant with the race. Mankind, however, broke the covenant through sin. But God has bound himself to his image-bearers as Creator and Lord and hence cannot countenance disruption of the covenant. God must be just (Rom 3:26); he must act consistently with his nature and will to overcome the impediment to fellowship caused by sin. Therefore, “He does not renounce the grace of election and the covenant.” For Barth, justification represents God’s “affirmation and consummation of the

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institution of the covenant between Himself and man which took place in and with the creation.” Justification is that decision of God regarding humankind made before the world but given historical expression through the experience of Jesus Christ. In order to reveal God’s eternal, justifying decision and restore the covenant relation broken by sin, Christ became a man, died on the cross, and rose from the grave. Through Christ’s death God said No! to himself, and through Christ’s resurrection God said Yes! to humanity—thereby putting an end to sin and condemnation. For Barth, justification is not a subjective reality that can be experienced (as in Schleiermacher and most liberals), but God’s eternal verdict enacted in time by Christ that forgives sins, accepts sinners into sonship, and grants eternal life. Barth clearly insisted that persons are justified in Christ before they exercise faith. Küng, in his definitive study of Barth, affirms that for the latter “justification [is] the accomplishment and revelation of God’s verdict upon man.”

Since God’s covenant with humankind is universal in scope (cf. the covenant with Noah), Christ, our representative, became a man, died, and was resurrected for the justification of all. “Jesus Christ died totally for the reconciliation of every man as such.” God’s eternal verdict objectively (*de jure*) has justified the entire human family. It is impossible for humankind not to be elected, restored to the covenant, and justified. Even stubborn, human unbelief cannot thwart God’s gracious covenant purpose. Barth boldly stated, “there has to be a reconciling of the world, and this has already taken place.” Subjectively (*de facto*), however, many people have not yet personally experienced justification by faith and reception of the Spirit.

In explaining the doctrine of justification, Barth focused on Christ repairing the broken relation between God and humans rather than on God imputing Christ’s righteousness to believers. The core of Barth’s doctrine of justification is the loving God achieving his sovereign right as Creator by reestablishing the broken covenant relation with humans. Moreover, in Barth’s scheme persons do not respond to the Gospel in order to be justified. Rather, having been justified by the divine verdict in eternity past, individuals respond to the Good News in time, thereby making justification for them an existential reality.

Gustaf Aulén (d. 1977), the Swedish, Lutheran neoorthodox, minimized wrath and retributive justice in God in deference to the divine *agape*. God’s attitude toward persons is not governed by legal categories. According to Aulén, Christ did not bear sinners’ punishment, and God does not impute Christ’s righteousness to those who believe. “The Christian conception of atonement is obscured if it is interpreted ... as a compensation to divine righteousness rendered by Christ as Man.” Aulén added that the hostile powers of sin, death, the Devil, and the tyrannical powers of the law and divine wrath have created a separation between God and humankind. But on the cross divine love triumphed over the enslaving forces of evil that held sinners in alienation from God (the ‘classic’ theory of the Atonement). “The sole purpose of God’s loving will is to realize the dominion of love.” Justification, which is grounded entirely in the divine *agape*, involves forgiveness of sin, the reestablishment of fellowship between God and sinners, and the gift of eternal life. Aulén observed that justification is not only an event that marks the beginning of the Christian life, it is also a process that continues throughout the entire journey of faith. Thus, “forgiveness [or justification] is both the essential foundation of the Christian life and its continually active power.” Aulén was uncertain whether all or only some persons are justified,

although he repeatedly referred to the reconciliation God effects between himself and the world.<sup>47</sup>

#### ***F. God's Legal Declaration of Righteousness (Reformers and Many Evangelicals)***

The early church fathers, occupied with pressing Christological and Trinitarian controversies, failed to explore in depth the doctrine of justification by faith. Their discussions of salvation focused on forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. The first serious engagement with justification was undertaken by Augustine in his fourth-century dispute with the Pelagians. Not until the personal discovery of Martin Luther was the forensic interpretation of justification developed in detail.

Claiming to recapture the NT emphasis, the Reformation interpreted justification as God's judicial declaration whereby, for the sake of Christ, he freely pardons sins and reckons believers as righteous and worthy of eternal life. Justification, distinct from sanctification, involves a change in the believer's *standing* before God rather than a change of *nature*. Justification, moreover, is an instantaneous event rather than a lifelong process of moral and spiritual renewal. According to Reformation theology, the *ground* of justification is Christ's righteousness imputed to the believer. The *means* or *instrument* of justification is God-given faith in the Redeemer. Most authorities held that obstacles to reconciliation exist on the side of God and sinners. With respect to God, righteous enmity against sin must be assuaged. And with respect to sinners, fear of God's just judgment must be overcome. Moreover, persons who trust in Christ's finished work can be assured that they have passed from a state of condemnation to life and favor.

Martin Luther (d. 1546) was a pious Augustinian monk who sought peace with God through good works and monastic disciplines. In spite of earnest striving, his troubled soul found no repose. In pursuit of the question, "How can I find a gracious God?" Luther turned to the letters of St. Paul. Formerly he had understood the phrase "the righteousness of God" in Rom 1:17. AV actively as that quality in God that punishes unrighteous sinners (i.e., punitive justice). After considerable prayer and reflection, Luther understood "the righteousness of God" passively as the great gift God imputes to sinners through faith in the crucified Christ. It "is the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us."<sup>48</sup> As a mother hen covers her chicks with her wings, so God covers sinners with the perfect righteousness of the Savior. The noble intentions and 'good works' of sinners are of no value in God's eyes. A figure derived from the law courts, justification means to "*declare* righteous or blameless." It connotes that God imputes Christ's alien righteousness to those who trust in the Savior's atoning death. Indeed, justification is that imputation, whereby for the sake of Christ "God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin, even though it really is sin." Christ's righteousness imputed to believers is "alien" because it comes from another and because no sinners could possibly merit it. Justified by faith, believers receive forgiveness of sins, union with Christ, and eternal life.

Essential to Luther's forensic view is his contention that the justified believer is "righteous and a sinner at the same time (*simul iustus et peccator*"). In principle believers are righteous, but in practice they are sinful—although the remnants of sin are not charged to their account. "The righteous are not wholly perfect in themselves, but God accounts them righteous and forgives them because of their faith in his Son Jesus Christ."<sup>51</sup> Against Rome Luther held that,

notwithstanding spiritual struggles, believers possess assurance of their new standing in Christ. “We must by all means believe for a certainty ... that we are pleasing to God for the sake of Christ.” Although good works contribute nothing to justification, they serve as a litmus test as to whether people truly have been justified by faith. “True faith is not idle. We can, therefore, ascertain and recognize those who have true faith from the effect or from what follows.” Luther differentiated between the “inward righteousness” before God that is born of justification and the “outward righteousness” before others that takes form through faith and love.

Philip Melancthon (d. 1560), the systematizer of the Lutheran wing of the Reformation, challenged the prevailing Roman view by claiming that justification is not a making righteous but a legal declaration of righteousness: “All of our righteousness is a gracious imputation of God.” Justification signifies that God clothes believers with the alien righteousness of Christ so that sins are forgiven, we are made pleasing to God, and his wrath is averted. Although God views believers as righteous in Christ, the passions of the sinful nature remain a force to be reckoned with. Thus Melancthon endorsed Luther’s formula that the believer is *simul iustus et peccator*. The *ground* of justification is the righteousness of Christ, acquired by his total obedience in life and death. The *means* of justification is the believer’s faith. Following Luther, Melancthon distinguished between the instantaneous event of justification and the ensuing process of sanctification. Melancthon summed up his understanding of justification as follows: “the Mediator’s entire obedience, from his incarnation until the resurrection, is the true justification which is pleasing to God, and is the merit for us. God forgives us our sins, and accepts us, in that he imputes righteousness to us for the sake of the Son, although we are still weak and fearful. We must, however, accept this imputed righteousness with faith.”

John Calvin (d. 1564) regarded justification as “the principle of the whole doctrine of salvation and the foundation of all religion.” Against Rome’s infusion view of justification, he developed at length a forensic interpretation: God justifies guilty sinners by freely imputing to them the righteousness of Christ. The *material* cause of justification is the entire obedience of Christ in his life and death, whereas the *instrumental* cause is faith apart from all works or personal merit. “Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.” As God imputes or reckons Christ’s righteousness, believers receive forgiveness of sins past, present, and future, removal of guilt and condemnation, reconciliation with God, and the gift of eternal life. For Calvin, the obstacles to reconciliation chiefly reside on God’s side. Sin turns “God’s face away from the sinner; and ... it is foreign to his righteousness to have any dealings with sin. For this reason ... man is God’s enemy until he is restored to grace through Christ.”<sup>58</sup>

Countering Roman doctrine, Calvin held that believers should possess a basic assurance of present and future salvation. This is so *objectively*, as faith lays hold of the biblical promises concerning the Father’s elective purpose and the Son’s atoning work. And it is true *subjectively* through the Spirit’s ministry in the inner life. Assurance, like faith, admits of degrees. Thus believers may not always sense *full* assurance of final salvation. Calvin wrote, “Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand... we deny that, that in whatever way they are afflicted, believers fall away and depart from the certain

assurance received from God's mercy." Those who lack significant assurance of salvation, according to Calvin, are not true believers.

More carefully than Luther, Calvin distinguished between the initial, external event of justification and the subsequent, internal process of sanctification. "To be justified means something different from being made righteous." Yet sensitive to the Roman charge that the Reformation view of justification denigrated good works, Calvin held together the operations of justification and sanctification. The latter is related to the former as rays of light to the sun. From 1 Cor 1:30—Jesus Christ is "our righteousness, holiness and redemption"—Calvin reasoned that "you cannot possess Christ without being made partaker in his sanctification." In the same section he observed that "in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness." Worthy of mention is what some Calvin scholars call his doctrine of "double justification." God justifies the sinner; but he also justifies the works of the justified. Because Christians remain sinners by nature, their works are defiled. God, however, adorns Christians' works with Christ's righteousness, covering any unrighteousness in them, so that both they *and* their works are pleasing and acceptable to him. "As we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account." This insight of Calvin undergirds his understanding of the place of works in the Christian life. No sinner is justified by works; but God justifies believers' works—which works demonstrate obedience to God and accumulate rewards in heaven.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) posed the question, "How are you right with God?" (Lord's Day 23, Q. 60). The answer follows that in spite of gross sin and disobedience "without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart." The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) in response to Q. 33, "What is Justification?" replied: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone." The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) states that God freely justifies "not by infusing righteousness into them [i.e., the effectually called], but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone ... but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith" (Chapter 11.1). The Confession added that although assurance of justification can be dulled by sin, believers in Christ "may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed" (Chapter 18.1).

J.I. Packer offers a concise summary of the Reformation-evangelical view of justification. The Hebrew (*šādēq*) and Greek (*dikaioō*) verbs bear the forensic meaning to "pronounce," "accept," or "treat as righteous." God's act of justification means, negatively, that sinners are freed from the penalty of the law and, positively, that they are reinstated into divine favor and privilege. The former involves remission of all sins, removal of guilt, and the end of divine enmity and wrath.

The latter includes bestowal of a righteous status, fellowship with God, and the gift of eternal life. The problem posed by justification is how the immutably just Lawgiver and Judge can remain righteous in himself and acquit sinners (Rom 3:21–26). The Gospel communicates that “the claims of God’s law upon them have been fully satisfied. The law has not been abated, or suspended, or flouted for their justification, but fulfilled—by Jesus Christ, acting in their name.” On behalf of sinners, Christ in his life perfectly obeyed the law and in his death bore its just penalty. Thus on the ground of Christ’s perfect satisfaction of the law, God does not impute sin; rather, he imputes righteousness to all who believe. God righteousness to them [i.e., sinners], not because he accounts them to have kept his law personally (which would be a false judgment), but because he accounts them to be united to the one who kept it representatively (and that is a true judgment).<sup>64</sup> Faith is the instrumental means whereby Christ and his righteousness are appropriated; it is “the outstretched empty hand which receives righteousness by receiving Christ.”

This last interpretation of justification by faith best accords with the manifold biblical evidence on the subject, as the following section will demonstrate.

### III. EXPOSITION OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

#### A. *The Problem Defined*

We now seek to answer the question posed in the introduction to this chapter, concerning how fallen and alienated persons can be made right with God. The obstacles to God acquitting and restoring guilty rebels to a harmonious relationship with himself chiefly are three in number. The first is *humanity’s sinful condition*. We examined in chap. 2 humanity’s sinfulness in relation to the need for grace. It will suffice here to reaffirm that pre-Christians possess a radically sinful nature inherited from Adam (Rom 8:4–5; Gal 5:13, 16–17, 19, 24). As such, the unsaved are holistically depraved (Rom 1:28–29; 2 Tim 3:8; 2 Pet 2:19), hostile to God (Rom 5:10; 8:7; Col 1:21) as children of the Devil (John 8:44), alienated from Christ (Eph 2:12–13, 19), and guilty and condemned before the just Judge of the universe (Rom 3:8; 5:16, 18). Locked in a vicious cycle of sin and guilt, pre-Christians cannot justify themselves, however diligently they attempt to do so (Luke 16:14–15; Rom 10:3).

The second obstacle is the *holy and righteous character of God*. Scripture depicts God as perfectly *holy*, in the sense that he is separated from all evil and he abhors all sin and uncleanness (Hab 1:12–13). Moreover, God is absolutely *righteous*, in that he embodies the perfect standard of the true, the good, and the right (Isa 45:21). Furthermore, he is wholly *just*, in the sense that he gives persons what they deserve. The upright God faithfully rewards the righteous, and he unerringly punishes the perverse (Ps 62:12; Rom 2:6–8). Finally, God is *unchanging* in that he consistently acts in accordance with his being, character, and promises (Ps 119:89; Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17). God will not deviate from who he is, what he is like, and what he has said in his word. The divine perfections ensure that “if we disown him, he will also disown us” (2 Tim 2:12b).

The third obstacle is the *intransigent moral law*, written on the human heart (Rom 2:14–15) and contained in the Scriptures (Acts 7:53; Rom 2:12). The immutable God cannot bend nor rescind the moral law to suit our sinful condition. Jesus fulfilled the law of ceremonies and sacrifices by his perfect life and obedient death (Heb 10:9–14); but under the new covenant he firmly upheld the moral law (Heb 8:10; 10:16). As “spiritual” (Rom 7:14), the moral law has its origin in God. As “holy, righteous and good” (*agathē*, Rom. 7:12), the law is the revelation of God’s perfect character. As “good” (*kalos*, Rom 7:16), the law is a system characterized by moral beauty and perfection. Given all these qualities, God’s moral law is the inviolable standard against which all human conduct is measured (Rom 3:31; 13:8–10). Believers order their lives by the Spirit’s enablement according to the law’s righteous requirements (Rom 8:4). Sinners, however, find little consolation in the durability of God’s moral law against which all of their actions are measured.

In sum, humanity’s sinful condition, God’s perfectly righteous character, and the law’s inviolable demands pose powerful obstacles to the justification of sinners. Luther sensed the gravity of the situation when he said on one occasion, “Here is a problem which needs God to solve it.”

### ***B. The Doctrinal Seed-Bed of Justification***

Two major OT texts present the skeleton of the doctrine of justification. The first, Gen 15:6, taken from the life of Israel’s great patriarch, states that “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” The NT quotes or paraphrases Gen 15:6 five times—Rom 4:3, 9, 22; Gal 3:6; and Jas 2:23—as the foundation of its doctrine of justification by faith. The Hiphil form of the verb *·āman* (“believed”) in the Genesis text means to “hold fast,” “believe firmly,” or “trust” (cf. Gen 45:26; Exod 4:8; Ps 116:10). The verb *ḥāšab* (“credited”) here means to “count” or “impute” (Lev 7:18; 17:4; Num 18:27, 30; Ps 32:2). The latter verb occurs in Ps 106:31, where it is recorded that Phinehas’ priestly zeal for the Lord “was credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come.” The noun *ṣēdāqāh* (“righteousness”) implies conformity to the nature and will of God (Deut 6:25; Ps 5:8; Isa 32:17). Gen 15:6 thus states that Abram gave God firm confidence in the covenant promise (Gen 15:4–5), whereupon God credited to Abram righteousness or right standing with himself. God justified Abram in the sense that he accepted Abram’s faith in the covenant promise as righteousness, even though the latter was experientially sinful.

The second text is Ps 32:1–2, which Paul expounded in Rom 4:6–8. Three thousand years ago King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and suffered the agonizing consequences of this sin. After being forgiven, David composed Psalm 32 to teach us how God justifies repentant sinners. We focus on David’s words, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him” (Ps 32:1–2). Justification, according to David, involves three movements on God’s part. Sinners are afflicted with transgression (*peša·*), which signifies rebellion against the authority and laws of God (cf. 2 Kgs 3:7; 8:20). Such spiritual rebellion against the Law-giver of the universe God (1) forgives—the verb *nāšā·* denoting to “lift up,” “bear,” or “carry away” (cf. Lev 16:22; Isa 53:4). Justification means that in response to sincere faith God forgives, i.e., bears and carries the crushing burden

of our sinful rebellion against him. Moreover, the unrighteous are laden with sin (*ḥaṭṭ-āh*), which connotes a missing of the mark (cf. Judg 20:16) or a failure to measure up to the standards of the holy and righteous God. Such falling short God (2) covers or conceals—the verb *kāsāh* connoting that God blankets our failures such that they are never seen again (Neh 4:5; Ps 32:5). In addition, the sinner is afflicted with iniquity (*·āwôn*), a comprehensive term indicating perverse behavior (Gen 15:16), the resultant guilt or blameworthiness (1 Sam 25:24; Ps 51:2), and the inevitable divine punishment (Jer 51:6). This iniquity God (3) “does not count against him” (*lō-ḥāšab*)—the same verb encountered in Gen 15:6 and Ps 106:31. Justification means that through God’s gracious action the debt of iniquity is no longer reckoned to the sinner’s account. Rather, in the act of justification God lays the guilt and punishment of the world on his Son, and so pronounces believers innocent and righteous in his sight. This gracious justifying work of God is contingent upon sinners honestly acknowledging and confessing their sins (Ps 32:5).

### C. The Language and Meaning of Justification

Here we examine more closely the biblical language used to describe God’s justifying activity. In the OT the Qal form of the verb *šādaq* means to “be just” or “be righteous” (Gen 38:26; Job 9:15; Ezek 16:52). The Hiphil form of the verb in legal contexts means to “vindicate,” “acquit,” or “declare to be in the right.” This sense prevails in Exod 23:7, where in a judicial setting involving both a guilty and an innocent party Yahweh said, “I will not acquit [*·ašdīq*] the guilty.” Similar is Deut 25:1, which reads, “When men have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty.” In this verse the Hiphil of *šādaq* is parallel to the Hiphil of *rāšā·* (to “condemn,” “declare guilty”), thus establishing the legal sense of the primary OT verb to “justify” (so also Prov 17:15). Moreover, in Isa 50:8 the Servant of the Lord declared, “He who vindicates [Hiphil participle of *šādaq*] me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!” Similarly, Isaiah in a legal context pronounced a woe on judges “who acquit [Hiphil participle of *šādaq*] the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent” (Isa 5:23). The verb *šādaq* has the same forensic meaning of “declare innocent” or “acquit” in 1 Kgs 8:32 and Job 32:2. It is clear that in justification God does not *make* a sinner righteous, any more than a judge in a court of law makes a defendant innocent or guilty. By his own actions the defendant is innocent or guilty; and on the weight of the evidence the judge declares him or her to be so. Note that although acquitted by God, the devout Hebrew was conscious of sin in his or her disposition and thought-life and was conscious of deeds of omission and commission (Job 31:33; Ps 51:1–9; 130:3; Prov 20:9).

The Greek verb corresponding to the Hebrew *šādaq* is the word *dikaioō*, to “acquit,” “declare righteous,” or “justify.” *Dikaioō* occurs forty times in the NT, whereas the adjective *dikaios* (“upright,” “righteous,” “in a right relationship with God”) occurs eighty times, and the nouns *dikaiosynē* (“righteousness,” “uprightness,” “[God’s] putting [man] in a right relationship [with himself]”), *dikaiōma* (“righteous deed,” “acquittal”), and *dikaiōsis* (“putting in a right relationship [with God],” “acquittal”) occur ninety, ten, and two times respectively.

A precursor to Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith occurs in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisee boasted of his own righteousness, sought by

punctilious observance of the law (vv. 11–12). All his religious endeavors, however, failed to make him acceptable to God. The tax-collector, in striking contrast, acknowledged his inability to make himself right with God with the honest plea, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (v. 13). The aorist verb *hilaskomai* (“be merciful”) suggests that the idea of propitiation lies in the background of justification. Jesus concluded the story by saying, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified [*dedikaiōmenos*] before God” (v. 14). The perfect passive participle of *dikaioō* is an intensive perfect, indicating the existing state of being declared in the right. The tax-collector pled no works of his own but cried out to Jesus for salvation. By virtue of his honest and humble trust, God forgave the man’s sins and set him in a right relationship with himself.

Several non-theological uses of *dikaioō* in the Gospels confirm the forensic and declarative sense of the verb, the meaning of which is to “declare righteous, to recognize as righteous, proved to be in the right and accepted by God.” Jesus’ saying that “wisdom is proved right [aorist passive of *dikaioō*] by her actions” (Matt 11:19) means that God’s wise and saving purpose was vindicated by Jesus’ miracles. Luke’s report that “all the people and the tax-collectors justified [aorist of *dikaioō*] God” (Luke 7:29, RSV), signifies that they acknowledged God to be in the right. Luke’s observation that the lawyer “wanted to justify [aorist infinitive of *dikaioō*] himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ ” (Luke 10:29) indicates that *dikaioō* here means to “acquit.” Jesus’ words to the Pharisees, “You are the ones who justify [present participle of *dikaioō*] yourselves in the eyes of men” (Luke 16:15a) likewise confirm that the verb means to “acquit” or “vindicate.” Finally, Jesus’ saying to the Pharisees—“by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12:37)—demonstrates that *dikaioō* (used in parallel with “condemn”) bears a legal or forensic meaning.

Paul understood justification to mean God’s sovereign act of declaring a sinner to be in the right. This theological sense appears in Rom 2:13: “it is not those who hear the law who are righteous [*dikaioi*] in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous” (*dikaiōthēsontai*, future indicative passive of *dikaioō*). In the context of a judicial trial and verdict, Rom 3:20 reads, “no one will be declared righteous [*dikaiōthēsetai*] in his sight by observing the law.” In Rom 8:33–34a “justify” and “condemn” are parallel verbs representing two opposite legal verdicts: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies [*ho dikaiōn*]. Who is he that condemns? [*ho katakrinōn*].”

Other uses of *dikaioō* in Paul further support the declarative sense of the word. Of the incarnate Christ Paul wrote in an early Christian hymn, “he ... was vindicated [*edikaiōthē*] by the Spirit” (1 Tim 3:16). The meaning may be that the Holy Spirit vindicated the scorned and rejected Christ by means of his resurrection from the dead. Whatever the precise meaning of the line, all the main interpretations assert that the aorist passive of *dikaioō* means to “declare righteous.” In addition, we read in Rom 3:4, “Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, ‘So that you may be justified [*dikaiōthēs*] in your words, and prevail in your judging’ ” (NRSV). God cannot be made just; but his punishment of the sin of unbelief publicly declares and demonstrates his just character.

In the light of the biblical language and its use in context, we define justification as God’s gracious, legal verdict in respect of those who believe in Christ, forgiving their sins and declaring them righteous through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Leon Morris some years ago established from his major study of *dikaioō* and related words that “the verb is essentially a

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(and God answers) **Conversion + Regeneration + Justification + Adoption → Sanctification**  
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forensic one in its biblical usage, and it denotes basically a sentence of acquittal.” This interpretation does not, as some allege, involve a legal fiction. Surely the Judge of the universe on appropriate grounds has the right and the ability to forgive sins, cancel all charges against sinners, declare believers to be in the right, and clothe them with righteousness. This divine verdict of pardon occurs at the moment of conversion but logically follows the person’s conscious decision to believe the Gospel, turn from sin, and trust Christ as Savior and Lord.

The preceding study leads to the conclusion that justification is a once-for-all, completed decision and not an ongoing process in believers’ lives. Contrary to traditional Roman theology, justification does not describe God’s act of infusing righteousness in Christians. Neither, against some Arminians, does it signify being made experientially holy, in the sense of progressive freedom from indwelling sin. Indeed, Scripture depicts great saints of God as beset with weakness and uncleanness. Thus Noah became drunk, Abraham lied, Moses killed a man, David committed adultery, Jonah disobeyed God’s call, and Peter disowned Jesus. The judicial understanding of justification we have reaffirmed does not deny that God works to make disciples experientially holy. The latter, subjective process in the Reformation tradition rightly describe as the believer’s sanctification. In truth, an organic connection exists between justification and sanctification. God legally declares sinners to be in the right to the end that they may become holy in lived experience. Although progressive sanctification follows upon and is continually rooted in justification, the two are not identical, nor ought one be subsumed under the other.

#### ***D. The Ground and Means of Justification***

On what basis, or through what provision, does God see fit to acquit guilty sinners and pronounce them righteous? Consider the following evidence drawn from relevant Scripture passages.

NOT ON THE BASIS OF PERSONAL WORTH. Scripture is quite clear (1) that God does not justify pre-Christians on the basis of personal *character or worth*. As the psalmist wrote, “no one living is righteous before you” (Ps 143:2; cf. Rom 3:10). Again, “All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps 14:3). Consequently, “if you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” (Ps 130:3). Moreover, (2) no sinner could possibly merit favor with God on the basis of personal *pedigree or privileges*. Paul, reflecting on his pre-Christian life in Judaism, wrote, “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:4b–5). This highly credentialed Jew soberly judged that his personal qualifications were worthless as the basis for acceptance with God. And (3) God does not justify on the basis of *works of the law*. The former rabbi noted that only perfect compliance with God’s law warrants the attribution of righteousness: “it is not those who hear the law who are righteous [*dikaioi*] in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous” (*dikaiōthēsontai*, Rom 2:13; cf. 10:5; Gal 3:12). Since no one keeps the law in its entirety (Rom 10:5, 10–18), no human can be justified on the basis of works required by the law. Paul learned the hard way by personal experience that “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom 3:20;

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cf. Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; 3:11). The apostle's bottom line was that "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse" (*katara*, Gal 3:10).

**BUT ON THE BASIS OF CHRIST'S MERITS.** Paul affirmed that sinners are justified on the basis of the satisfaction rendered to God's moral law through Jesus Christ. The biblical ground of justification is thoroughly Christological rather than anthropological. Peter simply stated that "the good news of peace [comes through] Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:36; cf. 1 Cor 6:11). The basis of right standing with God is not the sinner's character, privileges, works, or even faith; it is all on account of Jesus Christ. The ground of justification, in the first place, is Christ's *virtuous life*. The Lord Jesus perfectly fulfilled God's will, thereby satisfying the Father's righteous and holy demands (Matt 3:15). Prophets of old predicted the perfect righteousness of the coming Messiah (Isa 11:5; 53:11; Jer 23:5; 33:15), who in word and in deed would satisfy God's law (Isa 53:9b). John pointed to Christ's perfect righteousness, when he wrote that the Son always strove to please the Father (John 5:30), sought to do the Father's will and work (John 4:34; 6:38; 17:4), and was entirely obedient to the Father's commands (John 14:31; 15:10). Because of his complete fulfillment of God's law and wholehearted dedication to his service, Jesus is "the Holy and Righteous One" (Acts 3:14; cf. 7:52; 22:14; 1 John 2:1; 3:7). Heb 5:7–9 speaks of Jesus' "reverent submission," his perfect obedience at every stage of his life (cf. Heb 10:7), and his "being made perfect" (aorist passive participle of *teleioō*, to "perfect," "complete"). Consequently, the anonymous writer described Jesus as "one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners" (Heb 7:26). As Jesus said to his disciples concerning himself, the Son of Man, "On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (John 6:27).

The biblical ground of justification, in the second place, is Christ's *obedient death* on the cross. In 2 Cor 5:21 Paul linked the imputation of righteousness to sinners with Christ's substitutionary sacrifice on Calvary. As the apostle stated in Rom 5:9, "we have now been justified by his blood." Paul reaffirmed this point in Rom 5:18–19: "just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." The "one act of righteousness" (v. 18, cf. "the obedience of the one man," v. 19) identifies the ground of justification as Christ's obedient submission to death that crowned his entire life of fidelity to the Father. Moreover, 1 John 2:2 states that on the basis of Christ's atoning sacrifice God is propitiated and those who believe are reconciled to him. Peter affirmed that Christ's death makes believers acceptable to God and establishes a right relationship between the Creator and the creature. "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous [*dikaios*] for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet 3:18). The preceding Scriptures assert that the Messiah, who had no need to offer any sacrifice for himself (Heb 7:27), could and did die once for the sins of the people. The exclusive ground for acceptance with the holy God is the atoning sacrifice of the sinless Christ.

"THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD." This and the following section will show that what God reckons to believing sinners is "the righteousness of God." Many mediating scholars (Dodd, äsemann, etc.) interpret "the righteousness of God" in terms of a subjective genitive, namely, as an attribute of God by which he acts to save his people. Admittedly, OT texts such as Isa 45:8, 46:13,

51:5–8, 56:1, and 62:1 juxtapose “righteousness” with “salvation.” But the OT does not restrict *ṣedek* and *ṣ̣ēdāqāh* to the narrow meaning of salvation or victory. Rather, God manifested his righteousness in salvation in the sense that those without any righteousness of their own become clothed with his righteousness. This great truth is hinted at by the phrase “the Lord our righteousness” (Jer 23:6; 33:16). Moreover, the prophet Isaiah exclaimed, “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness” (*ṣ̣ēdāqāh*, Isa 61:10). Hear Isaiah again: “in the Lord all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult” (Isa 45:25; cf. Job 27:6; Ps 132:9). E.J. Young argued that one should not interpret “righteousness” as a synonym for God’s conquering action on behalf of his people. “Quite possibly the prophet anticipates Paul, and the righteousness of which he speaks originates with God and comes to man from Him, and in it man may stand before him.”

This concept shines with clearer light in the NT. Amidst universal human unrighteousness and guilt, Paul in Rom 1:17, 3:21–22, and 10:3 advanced the notion of a righteousness that comes from God, the revelation of which constitutes the Gospel. “For in the gospel a righteousness from God [*dikaioynē theou*] is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’ ” (Rom 1:17). The righteousness of which Paul spoke has its origin in God, satisfies the demand of divine justice, and accomplishes the justification of the unrighteous. Elsewhere, with an eye to the Savior’s work, Paul wrote that Christ “has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness [*dikaioynē*], holiness and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). Moreover, Paul expressed the longing that he might “be found in him [i.e., Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Phil 3:9). Through the obedience of his life and death Christ acquired righteousness that the Father would credit to sinners who believe in him. Thus the righteousness believers possess is not their own accomplishment. It is the right standing of another—even Jesus Christ—that is credited to their account as a free gift.

THE LEGAL RECKONING OF CHRIST. Here we develop more fully God’s act of imputing the righteousness earned by Christ, mentioned above. Yahweh said to the rebellious nation of Israel, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (Isa 1:18). The penitent (v. 19) come to God with a sin-stained soul but depart pure and blameless in his sight. Young believed that “The doctrine of a forensic justification is found in these words.” Consider also the imagery in Zech 3:1–5, where Joshua the high priest, as representative of the people, stood before the judging angel of the Lord. The “filthy clothes” Joshua wore (v. 3) symbolize the iniquity of the people. The command of the angel to remove the defiled garments connotes the pardoning of iniquity (cf. v. 9; 13:1), whereas the order to put on white, festive garments suggests the clothing of sinners with divine righteousness. The ground of Joshua’s and the people’s acceptance clearly was no righteousness of their own, but the perfect righteousness of another attributed to them. Isaiah upheld imputed justification in Isa 53:11, which reads, “by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify [Hiphil of *ṣ̣ādaq*] many, and he will bear their iniquities.” Young observed that “If the verb is not taken as forensic and if it is held that it refers to *iustitia infusa*, it would follow that the servant, in bearing the iniquities

of the many, is himself infused with these iniquities and himself becomes sinful.” This, of course, cannot be.

In Romans 4 Paul expounded the meaning of justification by appealing to the examples of Abraham (vv. 1–3, 9–24) and David (vv. 6–8). The apostle used the verb *logizomai* (a word meaning to enter into a ledger, hence to “reckon to one’s account,” “credit”) eleven times in this chapter (vv. 3–6, 8–11, 22–24). Paul’s purpose was to show that believers are justified not by works but as God credits righteousness to their account. By appeal to Gen 15:6 (vv. 3, 9, 22), Paul again (cf. Gal 3:6) argued that God reckoned Abraham’s faith in the divine promise as righteousness (*dikaiosynē*). “The words, ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (vv. 23–24). Likewise, from the history of David, Paul concluded that justification involves, negatively, the non-imputation of sin and guilt: “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him” (*ou mē logisētai*, v. 8). And, positively, justification involves the imputation to the believer of divine righteousness: “David ... speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness [*theos logizetai dikaiosynēn*] apart from works” (v. 6). On the other side of Calvary, faithful believers legally were set in right relation to God.

Rom 5:19, cited above, also attests the imputational sense of justification. “For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made [aorist passive of *kathistēmi*] sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man many will be made [future passive of *kathistēmi*] righteous.” The verb *kathistemi* means to “constitute” or “establish.” Thus just as God imputed the first sin of Adam to the human race, and just as he imputed the guilt of the race to the Lamb on the cross, so he imputes Christ’s righteousness to all who believe. On the ground of Christ’s virtues, God places believers in the category of righteous persons. The foregoing simply means that God has the right to bestow unearned and unmerited grace to whom he will. With justice satisfied and the penalty paid through Christ’s sacrifice, God is free graciously to pardon and attribute innocence to unworthy sinners.

**THE MEANS OF JUSTIFICATION: FAITH.** Whereas the ground or basis of justification is Christ’s virtuous life and obedient death, the means of appropriating righteousness is faith enabled by the Spirit. We read in Hab 2:4, “the righteous will live by their faith” (*ʿmûnāh*, NRSV, cf. AV). Other versions translate *ʿmûnāh* as “faithfulness,” the sense being that the righteous will live by the faithfulness or steadfastness that springs from faith. Paul (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11) and the author of Hebrews (Heb 10:38) linked justification with the individual’s faith. It appears that both Habakkuk and the NT writers understood that persons are judged righteous and live in the spiritual realm by means of their faith relationship with the Lord. F.F. Bruce commented that *ʿmûnāh* (LXX, *pistis*) “means ‘steadfastness’ or ‘fidelity’ based on a firm belief in God and his Word, and it is this firm belief that Paul understands by the term.”

In the final moments of his life the repentant thief on the cross was justified before God (Luke 23:40–43). A true sense of his own sinfulness and Jesus’ ability to save led to his cry of faith: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42). The Lord’s reply—“today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43)—indicates that at that very moment the criminal was reckoned right with God and restored to fellowship with the Father in heaven. In John 6:29 Jesus

said to his disciples, “The work [*to ergon*] of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” The disciples undoubtedly thought of many works of the law they must do to please God (v. 28). But Jesus stated in no uncertain terms that there is but one work, or one moral act, they must perform—namely, to exercise faith in himself as the one sent by the Father.

The apostle Paul, rehearsing his conversion and call to ministry before King Agrippa, testified that Christ commanded him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles so that they “may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18). The perfect passive participle of *hagiazō*, to “sanctify,” connotes the state or condition of being positionally sanctified or justified (cf. 1 Cor 6:11). The means of achieving this status clearly is faith in Christ. In his sermon at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:39), Paul proclaimed the doctrine of justification by faith alone. “Through him everyone who believes is justified [*dikaioutai*] from everything you could not be justified [*dikaiōthēnai*] from by the law of Moses.” The apostle insisted that people are justified solely by faith and not by the futile efforts of law-keeping.

Paul reaffirmed in his letters that the means of appropriating righteousness from God is faith. He frequently wrote that justification is mediated “by” or “through faith:” viz., *pistei* (instrumental dative; Rom 3:28), *ek pisteōs* (Rom 3:30; 5:1; 10:6; Gal 2:16; 3:24), *dia pisteōs* (Rom 3:30; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9), and *epi tē pistei* (Phil 3:9). In his discussion of God’s act of crediting righteousness to Abraham and David (Rom 4:1–25), Paul used the noun “faith” (*pistis*) ten times and the verb “believe” (*pisteuō*) six times. Abraham and David trusted God and believed the promises, whereupon God gave them righteous standing with himself. Paul also wrote these words to the church at Philippi: “that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Phil 3:8b–9). Paul conceded that he never could generate sufficient righteousness on his own to please God. Instead, by an act of faith in Christ he freely received righteousness from God as a gift.

Heb 11:7 links righteousness with faith in a manner reminiscent of Paul, when it says of Noah, “By his faith [*pistei*] he ... became heir of the righteousness [*dikaiosynē*] that comes by faith [*kata pistin*].” Faith is the means by which righteousness came to obedient Noah. The cumulative biblical data confirm that pre-Christians are justified through the instrumentality of faith. On the basis of Christ’s work and through the sinner’s desperate cry for forgiveness, God faithfully justifies or bestows perfect standing with himself.

A KEY TEXT ON JUSTIFICATION. An important Pauline text, Rom 3:21–26, recapitulates the main points established thus far. In vv. 5–18 (cf. v. 23) of Romans 3 Paul demonstrated that both Jews and Gentiles are unrighteous and guilty before God. In vv. 21–26 Paul expounded God’s gracious solution to this fatal, human problem, as follows. (1) The *announcement* of justification through the Gospel disclosed a way, other than the futile venture of law-keeping, whereby sinners are made acceptable to God. The key to the problem of the justification of sinners is found in the phrase “the righteousness from God.” *Dikaiosynē theou*, as in Rom 1:17, signifies a righteousness from God that provides right-standing with him. (2) The *instrument* by which God justifies sinners is faith directed toward Jesus Christ. “This righteousness from God comes through faith [*dia pisteōs*] in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (v. 22). To make this point absolutely clear, Paul reiterated in vv. 25b–28, 30 the instrumental function of faith in justification. The preposition *dia*

with the genitive often signifies means or instrument—not only in vv. 22, 25, 27 of the present text, but also in Scriptures such as 2 Cor 5:10, Gal 3:19, and 2 Pet 1:3. Note that Paul never stated that justification is *dia pistin* (“on account of faith”; cf. Rom 8:11; Rev 12:11)—which construction would posit faith as the basis or ground of justification. Indeed, (3) the *ground* of God’s gracious acts of justification is the propitiatory sacrifice (*hilastērion*) of Christ, who bore the just punishment for our sins and so averted the divine wrath. We “are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood” (vv. 24–25a). Finally, (4) Paul referred to the *demonstration* of justification in vv. 25c–26. By virtue of Christ’s penal sacrifice, God vindicated his own character not only by remaining *dikaios* in punishing his Son, but also by finding a just way to acquit guilty sinners and set them in right relation with himself.

### ***E. The Results of Justification***

God’s justifying act imparts several, significant spiritual outcomes, beginning with (1) the *forgiveness of all sins*. At Pisidian Antioch, Paul spoke of God’s justifying work (Acts 13:39) and announced to his hearers that “through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:38; cf. 2:38; 10:43). Rehearsing his conversion and call to ministry before Agrippa, Paul testified that Christ commanded him to preach the Gospel so that his hearers “may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me [Christ]” (Acts 26:18). The perfect passive participle of *hagiazō* affirms the state or condition of being positionally sanctified or justified (cf. 1 Cor 6:11). Comparing the superiority of Christ’s shed blood to the blood of animals, Hebrews states, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ ... cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death” (Heb 9:14). This first outcome means that God no longer counts sins against justified believers (2 Cor 5:19) but regards them as clothed with the perfect righteousness of his Son (1 Cor. 1:30; Phil 3:9).

We have shown that under the old covenant God graciously forgave sins (Exod 34:6–7; Num 14:18; Ps 32:1–2, 5; 51:1–2). But with the completion of Christ’s atoning work the new covenant brings full and final forgiveness of sin and guilt, even the complete obliteration of iniquities. In addition to Heb 9:14, quoted above, v. 26 is relevant: “Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). Under the new covenant inaugurated by Christ’s blood, no further action need be taken against sin. No necessity exists for temple, priests, or blood sacrifices. Sin is so obliterated in the justified that God remembers it no more, as Jeremiah (31:34), Isaiah (43:25), and Micah (7:19), anticipating Messiah’s work, confidently proclaimed.

Because pardoned of all sins, (2) the *sentence of condemnation is annulled*. This is true of saints under both covenants. Jesus said, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who has sent me ... will not be condemned” (John 5:24; cf. 3:18). Paul similarly wrote, “there is now no condemnation [*katakrima*] for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). By virtue of the divine sentence of acquittal, all legal charges of guiltworthiness past, present, and future have been dropped by the Judge of the universe (v. 33). No one can bring any condemning judgment against God’s elect (v. 34). Justified saints, in other words, possess perfect, legal standing in Christ.

A further outcome of justification is (3) the *gift of eternal life*. Jesus' saying to the repentant thief on the cross—"today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43)—attests the immediate gift of eternal life to the justified criminal prior to Jesus' death. Subsequent to Christ's death, Paul encouraged Titus by writing, "having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Tit 3:7). Paul likewise described eternal life as the outcome of justification in Rom 5:18 and 21.

Furthermore, God's justifying action results in (4) *spiritual peace*, or the cessation of hostilities between God and repentant sinners. Addressing Gentiles at the house of Cornelius, Peter proclaimed "the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). Paul wrote that "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). Because of the atoning work of Christ, the peacemaker, the justified are no longer at war with the Father; on the contrary, they draw close to him in a new relation of peace (cf. Luke 2:14). Once we were his enemies; but now as believers we are his beloved friends.

Justification amounts to (5) *positional sanctification*. As Paul wrote, "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). The justified are positionally sanctified in that their standing before God is perfect as a result of Christ's imputed righteousness. But at justification the old, corrupt nature is not eliminated; this must await our glorification, when we see Christ. When God sets us in right relation with himself, we are not freed from sin's influence in our lives or its corrupting power on our beings. Our life-experience as believers thus does not match our legal position. Positional sanctification, however, means that we who are united with Christ and set in a right relation with him are rid of sin's dominion over our natures. Justified saints are delivered from the slavery and bondage to sin that characterized the unconverted state. As Paul wrote in Rom 6:14, "sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (cf. v. 16). In other words, the positionally sanctified need not allow sin to reign over their mortal bodies (v. 12). The justified need not necessarily sin, although they regretfully do commit sins.

### ***F. Legal Adoption***

A significant concomitant of justification is legal adoption into God's family. In a court of law a person may be acquitted by the judge of all charges against him; but this acquittal does not make the person a member of the judge's family! Adoption is that act of grace, logically following conversion and justification, by which God confers on forgiven sinners the status of sonship. Adoption thus is a soteriological decision not to be confused with mankind's natural sonship given by creation. The NT word for adoption is *huiothesia*, which literally means "placing as a son." The word occurs five times in the NT, once in the corporate sense of Israel's adoption as the chosen people (Rom 9:4), once in the sense of the redemption of the believer's body at the *Parousia* (Rom 8:23), and three times in the sense of God's declaration of sonship. So Paul stated that the Father "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:5). Moreover, God sent his Son into the world "to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (Gal 4:5, NRSV; cf. v. 7). Paul further wrote in Rom 8:15

(NRSV), “you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption” (cf. v. 17).

Employing the language of sonship, Scripture explains several outcomes of legal adoption for believers. By virtue of adoption into God’s family, (1) we now bear a new name and a new identity as “children of God” (1 John 3:1). As adopted children (2) we experience the intimate indwelling of God’s Spirit. “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘*Abba, Father*’ ” (Gal 4:6; cf. Rom 8:14). Adoption into the family of God (3) assures us that we are the objects of his special love (1 John 4:9–11). As beloved children (4) believers receive special care and provision from the heavenly Father (Luke 11:11–13). As members of God’s family (5) we have the right and privilege of bold access into the father’s presence (Heb 4:14–16; cf. 2:10–13). This new, adopted status means (6) that God lovingly disciplines and chastens believers as a human father would his own children (Heb 12:7–8). Finally, adoption into the family of God means (7) that we are heirs of the Father’s eternal kingdom and glory (Rom 8:17).

### **G. Personal Reconciliation**

Scripture indicates that prior to legal acquittal pre-Christians are alienated and estranged from the Lord of the universe. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, sinners compulsively hide from their loving Creator. Paul wrote that in the unconverted state we were “separate from Christ” (Eph 2:12; cf. v. 13), “foreigners and aliens” (Eph 2:19), “hostile to God” (Rom 8:7), and “God’s enemies” (Rom 5:10; cf. Col 1:21). Indeed, sinners are “separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (Eph 4:18). Psychologically and spiritually a seemingly intractable breach of enmity exists between God and rebellious sinners.

As long as the verdict of condemnation prevails, sinners lack loving fellowship with the triune God. But since on the ground of Christ’s perfect sacrifice believers are declared free from sin and guilt, enmity is abolished and restoration to communion with the God of love becomes a new reality. The reconciliation in view involves both the initial restoration of relationship and its continued maintenance. Jesus’ parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–24) teaches this grand truth. The younger son who took his inheritance and left home to engage in riotous living in a distant country (vv. 12–13) symbolizes the alienation and estrangement of the unconverted. The son’s return to his father’s embrace and joyous celebration (vv. 20–24) signifies reconciliation with God and restoration to favor. The wayward son petitioned his father to treat him as a hired hand (v. 19), but the father in grace dealt with him as a beloved son.

Paul indicated that the initiative in healing the breach between the Creator and the creature comes from God himself. He wrote, “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:10–11; cf. 2 Cor 5:18–19; Col 1:20, 22). Paul established the logical relation between legal justification and personal reconciliation in the following pairs of Scripture texts: “justified by his blood” (Rom 5:9) and “reconciled to him [God]” (v. 10); “not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Cor 5:19b) and “God was reconciling

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the world to himself in Christ” (v. 19a; cf. v. 18); “the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13b) and “you who once were far away have been brought near” (v. 13a); and lastly, “making peace through his blood” (Col 1:20b) and “to reconcile to himself all things” (v. 20a). Peter also wrote, “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Pet 3:18). By virtue of a person’s faith response to Christ’s sufficient work and the Father’s verdict of acquittal, enmity is transformed into friendship (Rom 5:10), hostility into peace (Rom 5:1; Eph 2:17), and estrangement into fellowship (Col 1:21–22).

On which side, God or humans, does the obstacle to personal reconciliation reside? The biblical perspective seems to be, on *both* the divine and the human sides. God can have no fellowship with guilty sinners, and sinners are distrustful of God. So Ralph Martin astutely observes, “To Paul estrangement which the Christian reconciliation has to overcome is indubitably two-sided; there is something in God as well as something in man which has to be dealt with before there can be peace.... It is God’s earnest dealing with the obstacle on His own side to peace which prevails on man to believe in the seriousness of His love, and to lay aside distrust. It is God’s earnest dealing with the obstacle on His own side which constitutes the reconciliation.”

#### **IV. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION**

The implications of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith for Christian citizenship and living are manifold. Some of these outcomes are addressed in the discussion that follows.

##### **A. Possess Assurance of Justification**

Believers in Christ should possess reasonable assurance of their acceptance by God and new standing in the family of the redeemed. In the words of the apostle John, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). Assurance of justification and salvation is possible at several levels. (1) *Doctrinally*, believers can be assured of justification and eternal life on the basis of Christ’s deity, atoning death, and victorious resurrection from the dead as attested by the Scriptures (John 4:14; 5:24). Paul, for example, wrote that Christ “was raised to life for our justification” (*dikaiosis*, Rom 4:25). Because of who Christ is and what he has done, believers may know that they belong to him forever. John makes this crystal-clear by his eightfold use of “we know” in 1 John 5. (2) *Morally*, Christians gain assurance of being united with Christ in a saving relationship forever as they obey God’s commands (1 John 2:3, 5; 3:24). (3) *Relationally*, the saints gain assurance as they spontaneously perform loving deeds toward others. John wrote, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence” (1 John 3:18–19; cf. 4:7). And (4) *experientially*, believers gain assurance of salvation through the presence and power of the Spirit in the heart. In the words of Paul, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:16; cf. v. 15; Gal 4:6). Hear John’s plain affirmation, “We know that we live in

him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13). Add to the foregoing the subjective experience of the peace and hope God grants to justified believers (Rom 5:1–2) and assurance can be a glorious, experiential reality.

It appears clear, then, that the normal Christian experience in an age of spiritual confusion is assurance of final salvation. To this end the author of Hebrews wrote, “We want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end” (Heb 6:11, NRSV; cf. 1 Pet 1:3–4). Unlike justification and adoption, assurance of salvation admits of degrees and thus may fluctuate in strength and intensity. Since much of the evidence (moral, relational, and experiential) is subjective, assurance can be expected to vacillate with our circumstances and feelings. Believers ought not be shaken by the presence of honest doubts in their lives. They should be encouraged, however, that assurance of justification and salvation can be strong and vital, as the writer of Hebrews suggested to sorely harassed Jewish-Christians: “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb 10:22). Assured of acceptance with God forever, Christians can live and serve courageously with hearts filled with peace and confidence.

### ***B. Be Delivered from Feelings of Guilt***

Guilt is associated with actual violations of God’s law (objective guilt) and with “the emotion that follows judging oneself in violation of a standard” (subjective guilt). Many Christians labor to varying degrees under the burden of guilt feelings and accusing consciences. The causes of guilt feelings in genuine Christians appear to be several.

(1) Believers may be *inordinately severe on themselves*. Some Christians live in the legacy of a stern and legalistic upbringing, in the home or in the church, that has imposed on them a stringent code of ethics with accompanying taboos. Unfortunately, certain Christian churches have been legalistic, more negative than positive, stressing personal wretchedness rather than God’s grace in Christ. Other believers may have had imposed upon them the unrealistic burden of sinless perfection, which insists that God accepts them only on the condition that they be perfect. The solution to this unreasonable sense of guilt is to recall that the omniscient Lawgiver and Judge declares believers “not guilty!” and, indeed, clothes them with the righteousness of Christ. Christians need to remind themselves that they are God’s forgiven, justified, and adopted children. The righteous God has pardoned, cleansed, and freed true believers from the burden of sin and guilt. Overly scrupulous Christians need to celebrate this glorious reality.

(2) Other subjective guilt may be explained as a *heightened sense of unworthiness due to an unusually close relationship with God*. Isaiah was one of the most godly men of Israel in his day. While in the temple seeking the Lord during a time of national crisis, the prophet saw in a vision the Holy One of Israel high and exalted and adored by heavenly seraphim. The response of the man of God to this awesome vision was the self-abasing retort, “Woe to me!... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isa 6:5). The closer a Spirit-filled Christian draws to the heart of the holy God, the more unworthy he or she may feel. A well-known Christian leader lamented to the church his sense of personal unworthiness before the Lord. A perceptive brother replied that, far from being worthless, the leader lived so close to the Lord that he sensed his spiritual needs more

acutely than the rest of us. Paul Tournier acknowledged the validity of this phenomenon: “The nearer we get to God the more we experience His grace, and the more we experience His grace, the more too we discover faults in ourselves which we did not discern before, and the more we suffer from them.”

(3) Feelings of guilt may arise from *unconfessed sins of omission or commission* in the believer’s life. S. B. Narramore has argued that believers ought not experience guilt in a punitive sense but as constructive sorrow for sins. Consider Peter’s sorrow following his threefold denial of the Lord. We read that following his denial Peter “went outside and wept bitterly” (Matt 26:75). This third type is objective guilt, which “appears as guilt towards God, a breakdown in the order of man’s dependency towards God.” Christ’s atoning provisions provide the basis for the Christian’s continued forgiveness, but this forgiveness must be repeatedly sought and received from God. Christians with unconfessed sin in their lives must not engage in the inauthentic responses of rationalization, self-justification, or repression of conscience. Rather, believers must be honest before their heavenly Father by faithfully acknowledging sins, truthfully confessing them to God, and accepting his forgiveness and peace. John’s exhortation leads us to the path of freedom and joy: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). If the Christian deals with sins in this constructive manner, guilt will serve as a positive, internal alarm system to our behavior in relation to God’s righteous law.

The final form of guilt (4) is *neurotic guilt* or a “guilt complex,” where the individual is consumed with a deep sense of having committed some mortal sacrilege, such as the unpardonable sin (Mark 3:29). Here the subject accuses and often flagellates himself as punishment for perceived sins. This inauthentic response only results in humiliation, shame, and depression. The attempt to comfort such a one by suggesting that he suffers from “false guilt” produces little relief. Neurotic guilt warrants intervention by a wise and sensitive Christian counselor.

### **C. Cast Off the Burden of Perfectionism**

Psychologists inform us that perfectionism (the attitude and behavior pattern that seeks complete attainment of the ideal) is perhaps the most common emotional problem among evangelical Christians. God in his wisdom has endowed human image-bearers with an internalized concept of the ideal or the perfect. However, this is an *ideal*, not an *achievable reality* in this life for finite human beings. Even great saints of God such as Abraham and David—lauded in Scripture as examples of those justified by faith (Romans 4)—were fallible and sinful. Because of residual sin within, we *will* to do the good, but we often fail to *realize* our moral and spiritual aspirations (Rom 7:15–20). Consequently, those who expect perfection of other people and institutions more often than not end up discouraged and disillusioned. And those who expect perfection of themselves wind up despairing and depressed.

The fact is that moral and religious perfectionism is not a precondition for pardon and reconciliation with God. Neither is perfectionism a precondition for an ongoing relationship of intimacy with God. We have seen that no works and no virtue that we can manufacture merit acceptance with God. St. Paul’s rigorous polemic against the works of the law applies to those

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who seek right standing with God as well as those who seek the maintenance of that relation. We begin the new life and we continue the new life by faith in Christ, not by any effort of our own. We should understand, however, that regeneration, justification, and reconciliation inaugurate the process of Christian maturity, holiness, and sanctification (see chap. 10). The attainable goal of the new life is *growth* into Christian perfection, not the unattainable standard of *perfectionism*. Christians strive for the goal of Christlike maturity, knowing that we will never attain the ideal this side of glory.

For Christians, the antidote to perfectionism lies in the following considerations. (1) God regards the imperfect character and works of true believers as perfectly acceptable to him in Christ. Although in their *character* believers fall short of God's absolute standard, the Lord has clothed them with the righteousness of his Son so that they are now pleasing to him. Calvin simply stated, "the lives of believers, framed to holiness and righteousness, are pleasing to him." The good news is that in Christ the Father now regards believers as perfect when measured against the ideal. Moreover, (2) believers' *works and service* in practice fall short of God's standard of perfection. Nevertheless, God views the deeds of his blood-bought people framed in the perfection of his Son. Peter recognized this when he wrote that the saints "[offer] spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5). In this regard, Calvin commented as follows:

[A]s we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteousness and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified.

Scholars designate the preceding as Calvin's doctrine of "double justification." The point is that Christians should not engage in the impossible pursuit of perfectionism, because God views both our persons and our labors as pleasing and acceptable to him through the merits of his Son.

Perfectionist believers give every labor, every service their very "best shot." But realistically they understand that their *de fact* progress toward Christlikeness will not be completed in this life. In the present the saints are, as Luther insisted, "both righteous and a sinner." Perfect conformity to Christ will be realized at the resurrection and in the life to come (1 Cor 13:10).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Demarest, B. A. (1997). [\*The cross and salvation: the doctrine of salvation\*](#) (pp. 345–382). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.