

Faith Pulpit

The Importance of Justification

“How is a person justified before God?” That was the question that ignited the Reformation. Beyond that foundational question, theologians have debated additional questions, such as “What is the importance of justification in relation to the other benefits of salvation?” and “Where does justification fit logically in relation to saving faith?” In this article Dr. Myron Houghton, senior professor and chair of the Systematic Theology Department at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, guides us in an in-depth consideration of these significant questions.

To answer these questions about justification, we must first explore the exact nature of justification. Theologians have held two main positions: infusion and imputation.

Roman Catholic Position—Infusion

At the time of the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants differed greatly in their understanding of justification and grace. The Catholic position defined justification to include all of the benefits of salvation, making it a process. Grace was understood as a God-given ability to do good works which was infused into the person. This Catholic view is sometimes described by the words, “Christ IN us.”

The Council of Trent, the Catholic council that dealt with Reformation issues, stated in its canons on justification:

Canon 9: “If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.”[1](#)

Canon 11: “If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favour of God; let him be anathema.”

Canon 24: “If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema.”

The Catholic teaching on justification has not changed. The 1994 edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Article 2–“Grace and Justification”) states: “The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us ‘the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ’ and through Baptism” (#1987).² “The Holy Spirit is the master of the interior life. By giving birth to the ‘inner man,’ justification entails the sanctification of his whole being” (#1995). “The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. This latter is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith, and in sanctification through charity. God brings to completion in us what he has begun, ‘since he who completes his work by cooperating with our will began by working so that we might will it’” (#2001).

Lutheran and Reformed Position—Imputation

In contrast to the Catholic view, the Lutheran position (Augsburg Confession, Article IV: “Of Justification”) states, “Also they [the Lutherans] teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.”³

Notice in the Lutheran view that righteousness is imputed, or credited, to one’s account. This position is also true in the Reformed view. The Heidelberg Catechism (a Reformed catechism published in 1563) states in Question and Answer 60, “How are thou righteous before God? Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me [emphasis added], the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.”⁴ This Protestant view is sometimes described by the words, “Christ FOR us,” because a righteousness not our own, an “alien” righteousness, is credited to our account.

Biblical Teaching

What does the Bible teach? Justification is a change in God's records in which all our sins are forgiven and the righteousness of Christ is credited to us. Romans 4:4–8 declares, "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.'"

Verse 8 explains one aspect of justification: God no longer imputes, or credits, our sin in His records—they are blotted out and forgiven. Verse 6 explains the other aspect: God credits, or imputes, righteousness, apart from works, to our account. Since this righteousness is apart from works, it is not our own righteousness that is credited to us but rather the righteousness of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul stated, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Forgiveness of sins is not based on Christ IN us but upon Christ's work FOR us on the cross. The Biblical truth is imputation, not infusion.

The Primary Benefit of Salvation

Justification is one of the benefits of salvation, but is it the primary benefit of salvation? I believe it is. Furthermore, I believe the other benefits of salvation flow from it.

Justification and reconciliation. Romans 5:9 and 10 tell us that we are justified by Christ's blood and reconciled to God by Christ's death. These verses point out two distinct benefits of salvation: justification and reconciliation. Both occur when we trust Christ as Savior. Romans 5:1, however, says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Justification, therefore, logically comes before reconciliation.

Justification and regeneration. Is this order true of regeneration as well? Some think regeneration comes before faith and is the cause of faith. After all, we are dead in our sins and need to be enabled to trust Christ. Also, one of the verses of that great gospel song, I Know Whom I Have Believed, seems to convey this idea. "I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin, revealing Jesus through the Word, creating faith in Him."

Scripture, however, seems to teach that although both justification and regeneration occur when we trust Christ as Savior, justification logically precedes regeneration. Notice how Paul described these two benefits of salvation in Colossians 2:13. "And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses." Being made alive is regeneration and is dependent upon having forgiveness, which is

justification.

In this discussion of justification and regeneration, we recognize the special work of God that precedes faith and is the cause of faith. That work has often been described as the “effectual calling” and is what enables us to trust Christ. The GARBC Articles of Faith state: “that the new creation is brought about by our sovereign God in a manner above our comprehension, solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in connection with divine truth, so as to secure our voluntary obedience to the gospel; that its proper evidence appears in the holy fruits of repentance, faith and newness of life”⁵ Some have thought this statement means regeneration precedes faith and is the cause of faith. In Scripture, however, God’s effectual calling precedes faith and is its cause. The “holy fruits of repentance, faith and newness of life” are the first evidences of spiritual life within a person.

Justification and calling. Another reason for the priority of justification is the logical order in God’s purpose, or plan, as described in Romans 8:29 and 30. “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

In terms of time God foreknew and predestined us before creation (Eph. 1:4, 5) while He called and justified us during our lifetime (1 Cor. 1:9; Rom. 5:1). This calling always results in our voluntary acceptance of the gospel because those whom He called, He also justified, and God does not justify people when they reject His offer of salvation.

Justification and glorification. Our glorification, which is actually future, is spoken of in the past tense because foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification describe God’s purpose or plan. Our glorification will occur when Christ comes for us (Phil. 3:20, 21), so glorification also flows out of justification.

Some may ask, “How can I be certain that I am one of those whom God has foreknown, predestined, and called?” No verse in the Bible can directly answer that question. But if I ask whether or not I can know that I have been justified, the answer is a resounding YES! Romans 5:8–10 states, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”

And if I know I am justified, I also know I have been foreknown, predestined, and called. Furthermore, I also know I am eternally secure because, “whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). The key to knowing that we are included in God’s plan is justification. Therefore, justification is the primary benefit of salvation which ties forgiveness of sins and Christ’s imputed righteousness to the

cross of Christ and to our security in Him.

A Modern Dilemma

When confronted with the Catholic view of justification and grace, the Reformed faith clearly sides with the Biblical view. But when some of the Reformed leaders insist that regeneration precedes faith and is the cause of faith, they come dangerously close to agreeing with the Catholic view that grace is a God-given ability to do good works which is infused in a believer! Isn't that what regeneration is? Romans 8:13, for example, states, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." And just a few verses earlier Paul said, "But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Rom. 8:9).

Regeneration is one of the benefits of salvation but it is not the primary benefit or the basis of our salvation. Christ FOR us, i.e., Christ's death and resurrection for us, is the basis of our salvation.

Works Cited

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3. <http://bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php#article4> (accessed June 28, 2012).
4. <http://www.crivoice.org/creedheidelberg.html> (accessed June 28, 2012).
5. http://www.garbc.org/?page_id=31 (accessed June 28, 2012).

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.