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Valerie Pors

Liberty University, vpors@liberty.edu

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THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

Valerie Pors

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Introduction

The doctrine of justification is a single component of the doctrine of soteriology but a fundamentally vital one. Indeed, Wayne Grudem stated that “a true view of justification is the dividing line between the biblical gospel of salvation alone and all false gospels of salvation based on good works.”¹ This paper seeks to define and describe the doctrine of justification, and to track the historical origin of the doctrine’s present evangelical understanding. The present-day evangelical understanding of the doctrine of justification is quite complex—integrating many scriptural topics such as righteousness, imputation, faith, grace, forgiveness, works and the Law—an understanding which originated with and developed since Luther’s departure from the traditional Roman Catholic view of justification.

The Attributes of Justification

Overview

Before delving into the specifics of the doctrine of justification, it is worthwhile to note that justification’s definition varies between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Erickson observed that justification in the Old Testament focused on a judicial pronouncement of true guilt or innocence according to a person’s character or actions as measured by the law. However, in the New Testament, justification is “God’s declarative act by which, *on the basis of the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning death*, he pronounces believers to have fulfilled all of the requirements of the law that pertain to them,” according to Grudem.² In the New Testament, God does not violate His truthful character by judging sinners to be righteous when they are not (as

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 722.

2. *Ibid.*, 969.

would be the case if God declared a person righteous in the Old Testament sense, based upon their own works), since He now bases his pronouncement upon Christ's righteousness.³

Approaching the doctrine of justification from a modern-day evangelical standpoint, Erickson defined justification as "God's action pronouncing sinners righteous in his sight."⁴ According to this definition, the concept of righteousness is integral to justification. Wayne Grudem defined justification in more detail, stating that "justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight."⁵ From this definition, one may observe elements of forgiveness, righteousness, and declaration. Indeed, all these elements, and more, intimately interact to form the evangelical doctrine of justification.

Erickson classified justification as an objective aspect of salvation.⁶ It is an unchangeable act of God, and takes place as an event, rather than an ongoing process. According to *The International Bible Encyclopedia*, justification is "forensic," or declarative, in a legal sense. As such, justification is a status rather than a condition.⁷ However, *ISBE* states that even though justification is a declaration, it carries power beyond mere words since God is the one who declares, and God's word will surely come to pass. In this sense, justification is not *purely* forensic.⁸ Additionally, justification is an imputation (a declaration about or a covering of a

³ Ibid., 969.

⁴ Erickson, 968.

⁵ Grudem, 723.

⁶ Erickson, 960.

⁷ Faulkner, J. A., J. Murray, and G. W. Bromiley, "Justification," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 1168.

⁸ Ibid., 1173.

person) rather than an infusion (an internal change to a person), according to Erickson.⁹ Finally, justification is a gift—freely given to an undeserving party.¹⁰ The result of the gift of justification is revealed in Romans 5:1-2: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.”¹¹ Essential elements of justification include the above-mentioned imputed righteousness, its forensic declaration, faith, grace, forgiveness, and its interaction with works and the Law. Each of these elements will be examined according to scripture.

Imputation of Righteousness

Grudem described imputation as God regarding Christ’s righteousness as belonging to man.¹² The imputation of righteousness is a concept which appears in the Old Testament. Isaiah 61:10 says, “For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness . . .” Grudem noted that this passage does not describe God *making* Isaiah righteous, but rather *covering* him with righteousness.¹³ In Romans 4:6 Paul said, “. . . David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works,” indicating in this New Testament setting that God credits righteousness to mankind. Grudem explained that after the fall, Adam’s sin was imputed to mankind, which necessities both the

⁹ Erickson, 969; 971.

¹⁰ Ibid., 972.

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New American Standard Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

¹² Grudem, 726.

¹³ Ibid., 726.

imputation Christ's righteousness to mankind and the imputation of its guilt to Christ.¹⁴ He also observed that justification involves not simply a nullification of guilt, which would lead to neutrality, but rather an addition of a positive relationship with God. This is because Christ's positive relationship toward God through His perfect righteousness is imputed to human beings.¹⁵

The process of applying righteousness to the sinner involves not an internal change, but rather a declaration. Grudem defended this position through scripture. First, he noted that the Greek word for justification—*dikaioō*—means “to declare righteous.”¹⁶ Scriptural support for this definition includes Proverbs 17:9 which reads, “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord.” Grudem observed that this passage does not declare someone to be an abomination who *makes* the wicked righteous, but rather one who incorrectly calls the wicked righteous.¹⁷ Therefore when passages such as Romans 8:30¹⁸ speak of justification, they refer to God's declaration of righteousness rather than a substantial action of change. Grudem also cited support in the parallelism between the words “justify” and “condemn.” Romans 8:33-34 states: “Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?”¹⁹ Grudem observed how this verse compares the verbal act of “condemning” with “justification,” implying that it

¹⁴ Ibid., 726.

¹⁵ Ibid., 725-26.

¹⁶ Ibid., 723.

¹⁷ Ibid., 724.

¹⁸ “and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

¹⁹ Grudem, 724.

also is verbal in nature. On the basis of these two observations supported by many scriptural cases,²⁰ one may conclude that the application of righteousness to a person is declarative in nature. Apart from specific scriptural support, the forensic view of justification is crucial because *imparted* righteousness cannot be secure. Grudem observed:

If justification changed us internally and then declared us to be righteous based on how good we actually were, then (1) we could never be declared perfectly righteous in this life, because there is always sin that remains in our lives, and (2) there would be no provision for forgiveness of past sins (committed before we were changed internally), and therefore we could never have confidence that we are right before God.²¹

Thus, even if one still received Christ's righteousness, if it were imparted rather than imputed, he could not be considered fully justified.²²

Faith

The truth that justification occurs by means of faith in Christ permeates Romans.²³ Romans 3:26 teaches that Jesus is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Similarly, Romans 3:28 states: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law." Furthermore, Grudem observed that according to Galatians 2:16, "even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ," faith precedes justification.²⁴ Erickson explained that faith is not the cause, but rather the means of receiving salvation.²⁵ If faith were the cause of salvation, faith would become a work in itself, implying

²⁰ Scriptures in reference to the declarative usage of "justify" (Rom 3:20,26, 28; 5:1, 8:30; 10:4,10; Gal 2:16; 3:24). Scriptures in reference to the juxtaposition of "justify" and "condemn" (Deut. 25:1; Job 27:5; Prov. 17:15; Isa. 5:23).

²¹ Grudem 727.

²² Further scriptural support for imputation includes Gal. 3:6; Ps. 32:1-2.

²³ The entire focus of Romans 4 is on justification by faith, and it is additionally highlighted in the surrounding chapters.

²⁴ Grudem, 730.

²⁵ Erickson, 972.

that a person could somehow earn salvation. Grudem explained why faith is the vehicle for justification by observing that “faith is the one attitude of the heart that is the exact opposite of depending on ourselves.”²⁶ Since justification relies entirely on Christ’s perfect righteousness, the attitude of faith is appropriately suited.

Grace

The Bible quite clearly teaches that justification is given to mankind by God’s grace, without any deserving merit on their part. Romans 3:23-24 declares that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” This passage teaches that justification is a gift by grace, based on Christ’s merit²⁷ since no man possesses any merit of his own. Supporting this teaching in Romans, Titus 3:7 also says that we are “justified by His grace.”²⁸

Forgiveness

Justification also involves the forgiveness of sins. Paul tied forgiveness into justification by quoting David in Romans 4:6-8: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”²⁹ Grudem concluded that God’s declaration of justification, then, involves God’s declaration that “we have no penalty to pay for sin, including past, present, and future sins,”³⁰ partially on the basis of Romans 8:33-34, which states “Who will bring a charge against God’s

²⁶ Grudem, 730.

²⁷ Further support for justification on the basis of Christ is in Romans 5:9.

²⁸ Additional passages which could describe justification as a “free gift” include Romans 5:16; 6:23.

²⁹ Other scriptural support includes Psalm 32:1-2; Acts 13:38-39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 725.

elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?” The verse implies that after justification a person cannot be condemned for anything, regardless of its chronology.

Works and the Law

Works and the Law relate to justification precisely because they do not relate at all. Paul adamantly taught that justification comes through faith and not through the Law. Galatians 2:16 could not be more clear in its teaching: “nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”³¹ However, according to Erickson, works do relate to justification in that the true faith by which the believer receives justification will surely *result* in good works. This, Erickson explained, is due to the believer’s unification with Christ.³²

Many believe that James and Paul fundamentally disagree on whether justification results from works or faith. For example, Paul stated in Romans 4:5 “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,” but James 2:24 states “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Grudem reconciled the two apparently contradictory teachings by observing that *dikaioō* can also mean “demonstrate or show to be righteous.”³³ Based on this interpretation, one could restate the passage in James to read “a man is shown to have been justified by works and not by faith alone.” Grudem founded this interpretation of the Greek verb on various other similar New Testament usages of the

³¹ Other scriptural support includes Rom. 3:11; 4:1-12.

³² Erickson, 973.

³³ Grudem, 731.

word.³⁴ Additionally, Grudem observed that this interpretation is theologically consistent, because when James referenced Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 saying, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?", at that point God had already reckoned Abraham's *faith* to him as righteousness in Genesis 15:6.³⁵ This biblically supported view of justification with reference to faith and works upholds both Paul's and James' teachings simultaneously with no conflict between the two. In the end, it seems that true faith allows for the justification, which good works then testify to.

History of the Doctrine of Justification

The doctrine of justification has morphed and changed over the centuries, dipping in and out of heresy. As such, it has sparked intense conflict within the traditional, historical church. Several figures, such as Pelagius, Augustine, and Luther proved key in influencing the historical understanding of justification.

Pelagius and Augustine

According to McGrath, Pelagius was a British theologian and moral reformer from the late fourth and early fifth centuries.³⁶ Pelagius concluded that humans are capable of fulfilling all of God's commands. He reasoned that God, having created human beings and knowing their capabilities, would not have given commands which they were unable to keep.³⁷ He also

³⁴ Luke 16:15; 10:28-29.

³⁵ Grudem, 731.

³⁶ McGrath, Alister E. (Ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed., (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 575.

³⁷ Pelagius, *Letter to Demetrias*, in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 355.

believed that humans are created with the ability to do both good and evil,³⁸ are capable of willing to do good works, and can exist without sin.³⁹ His heretical views essentially denied justification, because if humans were capable of attaining righteousness on their own, Christ's imputed righteousness would no longer be necessary. Augustine recognized Pelagius' error and opposed it. Augustine upheld the necessity for justification. According to McGrath, Augustine set out the idea of justification as "to be made righteous."⁴⁰ But even though Augustine avoided the Pelagian error, he still taught that justification included sanctification. This view turns justification from an entirely one-time event to a combination of an event and an ongoing process.⁴¹ Augustine's understanding of justification significantly shaped the Catholic Church's view of justification.

Catholicism

The Council of Trent elaborated upon Augustine's concept of justification, using it as the basis for their accepted doctrine of justification. According to Grudem, the Council upheld the idea that justification is a substantial change in the nature of a person, rather than a forensic declaration.⁴² Additionally, the Council claimed that depending on God's desire and the individual's cooperation, God administers varying levels of justification to individuals.⁴³ This dependence on the cooperation of the individual introduces a dangerous aspect of conditionality

³⁸ Pelagius, *pro libero arbitrio*, in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 357.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁴⁰ McGrath, 377.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁴² Grudem, 728.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 728.

to justification. Dr. Simut, a Romanian theologian, explained how Catholicism also integrated works into justification by blurring the line between justification and sanctification.⁴⁴ According to Simut, the Catholic Church affirms justification by faith; however, their definition of “faith” includes an element of works. He explained that “Faith” is comprised of *fides informas*, which is the intellectual, reasoning aspect of faith, and *fides formata*, which is the loving, charitable aspect of faith. Since *fides formata* includes an aspect of good works, the Catholic term “faith” as a whole involves works.⁴⁵ Therefore by extension, the Catholic idea of justification by faith involves works. Evangelical Christianity places the works aspect of salvation after justification within the category of sanctification, but Catholicism blends the two in their definition of faith.⁴⁶ Grudem observed that Catholicism supports their interpretation of justification by merging scriptures on justification, regeneration and sanctification under the same label.⁴⁷ He noted that this viewpoint destroys the very heart of the Gospel.

Martin Luther

According to McGrath, the Catholic view of justification prevailed until the year 1500.⁴⁸ Martin Luther eventually reacted against the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding works as part of justification, and sparked the beginning of the reformed view of justification. Luther’s view stemmed from his revolutionary interpretation of Romans 1:17, which states that the gospel

⁴⁴ Simut, Corneliu C., “Justification,” Class lecture, (Theology Survey II from Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, October 20, 2015.)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Grudem, 729.

⁴⁸ McGrath, 377.

reveals “the righteousness of God.”⁴⁹ Luther stopped viewing the phrase “the righteousness of God” as describing *God’s righteousness*, and instead viewed it as *the righteousness from God* for sinners.⁵⁰ Based on this understanding, Luther came to the opinion that righteousness cannot lie within mankind, and justification therefore cannot be initiated, earned, or willed by mankind in its sinful state. Therefore, any righteousness that man can obtain must come from without, and, Luther insisted, must come from Christ alone.⁵¹ Additionally, Luther asserted that God gives mankind the faith by which to receive salvation, so that even faith cannot be construed as a human work.⁵² Upon this basis, Luther rejected the Catholic Churches viewpoint, claiming that it committed the Pelagian error.⁵³

Even though Luther fought against the Catholic involvement of works based upon human merit in justification, he nevertheless upheld the idea of justification as an ongoing process, blending justification and sanctification together, just as the Catholic Church did.⁵⁴ There appear to be several problems with this idea. Firstly, if justification is not a one-time event, by logical extension a believer cannot be fully justified until he is fully sanctified. Secondly, if sanctification (which does involve works) is blended into justification, then works must necessarily be involved in justification. In this way, Luther’s reasoning is somewhat inconsistent:

⁴⁹ Luther, Martin. “Preface to the Latin Works (1516),” in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 370.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵¹ *Simut.*

⁵² McGrath, Alister E, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, vol. II, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

on the one hand he rebelled against the idea of works involved in justification, but he nevertheless upheld justification as an ongoing process. Theologians following Luther recognized the need for a forensic view of justification, and ultimately the Formula of Concord agreed upon the view of righteousness as forensically imputed.⁵⁵ Subsequent figures such as John Calvin further developed the doctrine; however, the heart of the modern Reformed Evangelical understanding of justification formed quickly in the generations after Luther.

Conclusion

The doctrine of justification in all its complexities has undergone a long and transformational journey as Luther and his followers sought to reunite mankind with the doctrine's proper biblical depiction. Scripture reveals justification as the righteousness of Christ bestowed upon man; a free gift unmerited by works, received by faith, and which results in the complete forgiveness of sins and peace with God. It marks the beginning of the believer's life unto God; it is a sure and immovable change. Its wonderful revelation in the Bible inspires assurance and hope for mankind. Praise God for His gracious and secure justification in salvation!

⁵⁵ Ibid., 30.

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