

Justification

God's justification of sinful men and women is at the very heart of the gospel. This paper outlines the biblical doctrine of justification with particular reference to imputation and regeneration – two areas on which Protestants have sometimes been in disagreement.

Firstly, what is justification? Justification is the process by which God acquits guilty people from sin and considers them righteous before him. This happens as they are united to Christ by faith. Milne puts it like this:

‘Justification is that work of God’s grace whereby the sinner through his faith-union with Christ is accounted righteous before God on the grounds of Christ’s obedience and death.’¹

Although the idea is found throughout the New Testament, the ‘justification’ word group is particularly prominent in Romans 3–5 and Galatians 2:15–3:9. Justification is an objective judgment and almost always legal or forensic in nature (e.g. Deut 25:1; Mat 12:37).

The wonder of the gospel is that God somehow ‘justifies the wicked’ (Rom 4:5). This is surprising because the Bible says that the right thing for a judge to do is to *condemn* the wicked and instead justify the *just* (Exod 23:7; Deut 25:1; Prov 17:15, 23; Isa 5:23). But God does this very thing without committing an injustice himself.

The biblical explanation for this unique event is that an exchange between Christ and sinners occurs at the cross and when we are united to Christ by faith. At the cross, Jesus took our sin upon himself (1 Cor 5:21) and received the condemnation that we deserved (Rom 8:3). The legal verdict of guilty was given to him. In the language of the OT sacrificial system he became a *propitiation*. When we put our faith in him we receive the benefits of his sacrifice (Rom 3:25).

This in itself is enough to bring about our acquittal from sin and our forgiveness. God can rightly declare us to be ‘not guilty’. Yet the gospel goes further. In justification, we also receive the righteousness of Christ and are considered by God to be not only innocent, but also righteous and just. This happens by faith and is explained carefully by Paul in Romans 4 and 5. Just as Abraham’s faith was counted to him as righteousness, our faith is counted to us as righteousness (Rom 4:2-5), righteousness itself is counted to us (Rom 4:11), and we can even be said to be ‘made’ or ‘constituted righteous’ (Rom 5:19). This does not refer to the final perfection that awaits our physical reunion with Christ, but means that we are genuinely *legally* righteous before God. Justification is therefore no ‘legal fiction’. Luther called this righteousness ‘external’ or ‘alien’ in an effort to make clear that it did not arise from within us in any way.²

¹ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Leicester: IVP, 1982), 188.

² Martin Luther, ‘Two Kinds of Righteousness’ in *Classics of the Reformation* (ed. Kirsten Birkett; Kingsford: Matthias, 2000), 49-59.

The process whereby the righteousness of Christ is counted or given to us by faith is known theologically as the *imputation* of Christ's righteousness. Other verses which support this doctrine (though perhaps without *explicitly* stating it) are Romans 10:3, 1 Corinthians 1:30, 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Philippians 3:8-10. In the end, justification is entirely by grace (Rom 3:24) and God does indeed justify the *wicked*. Yet because Christ willingly took upon himself our sin and gave to us his righteousness God is entirely just when he justifies us (Rom 3:26).

An excerpt from the Westminster Confession provides a helpful summary:

Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.³

At least two pastoral benefits emerge from the Reformed doctrine of justification. Firstly, knowing that we are justified by faith alone and imputed with Christ's righteousness gives us great assurance that God's favourable verdict will be certain at the day of judgment. The lyrics from a common hymn express this well:

When the last trumpet voice shall sound,
O may we then in him be found,
Robed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.⁴

Secondly, justification by faith alone reminds us to be humble regarding our own moral worthiness. It is not our righteousness that secured our justification! This humility should lead us to regularly confess our sins and work at repentance.

One issue that sometimes arises is the relationship between regeneration and justification. Regeneration is another key doctrine relating to the process of salvation and refers to the work of the Spirit in a person that causes them to be 'born again' and to put their faith in Jesus.

Within Protestantism there is consensus that regeneration is simultaneous with justification in time. In terms of logical order though, it is generally recognised that since

³ Westminster Confession of Faith XI/i (this can be found online at <http://www.reformed.org>).

⁴ 'My hope is built on nothing less' (Music by Nicky Chiswell 1998, words by E. Mote 1834).

faith is necessary for justification to be received, and faith is the result of regeneration, regeneration would come logically *before* justification in the ‘order of salvation’⁵

However, it is important to appreciate that while regeneration is a great blessing – we are able to ‘see’ and ‘enter’ God’s kingdom (Jn 3:3, 5), we are made alive (Col 2:13), and we can be considered ‘new creations’ (2 Cor 5:17) – regeneration is distinct from justification. The spirit does not transform us into legally righteous people whom God, when he justifies, ‘recognises’ as just. For God justifies ‘the wicked’ not the holy (Rom 4:5) and justification is by grace (Rom 3:24) not obligation. Regeneration is rather the beginning of God’s work *in us* as opposed to justification which is God’s work *for us*. If we can keep these two doctrines distinct we will better preserve God’s grace and Christian humility and reliance on Christ.

To conclude, justification is the wonderful blessing of the Christian gospel, whereby sinners are considered righteous by faith in Christ, who takes their sin and guilt and imputes to them his righteousness.

HBC Elders
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Bibliography:

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Reymond, Robert. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. Second Edition. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998.

For Further Reading:

Packer, James. ‘Justification’ in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Walter Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.

⁵ See 1 John 5:1 or Eph 2:1–4. A good discussion of the ‘order of salvation’ or *ordo salutis* can be found in Robert Reymond *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd Ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 703–711.