



Calvin and Justification

At the outset of his treatment of justification in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin emphasized the fundamental importance of this doctrine.

The doctrine of Justification is now to be fully discussed, and discussed under the conviction, that as it is the principal ground on which religion must be supported, so it requires greater care and attention. For unless you understand first of all what your position is before God, and what the judgment which he passes upon you, you have no foundation on which your salvation can be laid, or on which piety towards God can be reared.

Institutes, 3.11.1

In the following section, he again elaborates on the importance of the doctrine:

A man is said to be justified in the sight of God when in the judgment of God he is deemed righteous, and is accepted on account of his righteousness; for as iniquity is abominable to God, so neither can the sinner find grace in his sight, so far as he is and so long as he is regarded as a sinner. Hence, wherever sin is, there also are the wrath and vengeance of God. He, on the other hand, is justified who is regarded not as a sinner, but as righteous, and as such stands acquitted at the judgment-seat of God, where all sinners are condemned ... A man will be justified by faith when, excluded from the righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and clothed in it appears in the sight of God not as a sinner, but as righteous. Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

Institutes, 3.11.2

Thus Calvin writes of the doctrine of justification, affirming as he does so its central and fundamental position as a distinguishing doctrine of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, describing it later in the *Institutes* as “*the main hinge on which religion turns*” (3.2.16). Luther, before him, declared this doctrine to be the article of the standing or falling church and contended that “*nothing can be yielded or surrendered* (nor can anything be granted or permitted contrary to the same), *even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin*” (*Articles of Smalcald*, Art. 1). Indeed, a comparison of the Augsburg, Belgic, and Westminster Confessions shows no significant difference among the Reformers as to their essential understanding of this doctrine.

The Reformers developed their understanding of the doctrine of justification in opposition to its formulation espoused by the Church of Rome. The Reformers charged the Church of Rome with fundamental error. She proclaimed accurately who Christ was and (more or less) what He had accomplished with respect to the salvation of sinners; nonetheless, she perverted the gospel of the grace of God, maintaining erroneous and unscriptural views of the *grounds* on which, and the *process through* which, the blessings that Christ had procured on the cross were conveyed to sinners. At issue was whether justification was wholly attributable to the grace of God and to the work of Jesus Christ — whether it was proper to ascribe to men and to their powers an active and contributory part in their salvation.

Rome’s position with respect to justification had been crafted throughout the Middle Ages, with care being taken to maintain consistency with its underlying semi-Pelagian thinking providing for

supposed freedom of man's will. However, official sanction of Rome's teaching on justification did not come until the Council of Trent (1543-1563), and even then its pronouncements of Trent on justification were characterized by vagueness, perhaps designedly so.

Trent's treatment of justification centered initially on the meaning of the term "justify." It defined justification as being "*a translation, from that state wherein man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace, and of the adoption of the sons of God, through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior*" (Council of Trent, Chapter IV). As the definition suggests, Rome viewed justification as incorporating the whole process of change that takes place in a man as regards his salvation, including his deliverance from guilt and depravity. That position is made even plainer in chapter VII, where Trent defined justification to be "*not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts.*" The result was a confounding of justification and sanctification, with justification comprehending not only the remission of sin and deliverance from the guilt of sin, but also the sanctification or renovation of a man's moral nature.

According to Rome, the ground of justification lay, at least in part, in the inherent righteousness of the sinner and his good works, the requisite grace being *infused* into the sinner. Therefore, inherent personal righteousness was the cause of justification and baptism was the instrument by which it was communicated to the sinner. "*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*" (Council of Trent, Chapter XVI, Canon XXIV). For Rome, justification was a cooperative effort involving both God and man.

Accordingly, Rome denied that sinners were justified by faith alone, faith being defined as "*the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and the root of all justification.*" By this Rome meant that faith justified in the sense that it was the chief means for producing that personal righteousness which was the true cause or ground of justification.

If anyone 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.

Council of Trent, Chapter XVI, Canon IX

Rome's confounding of justification and sanctification also naturally led to the conclusion that justification was not an instantaneous act, but that it involved a gradual process that may not even be completed in this life.

A soul-destroying error

It might seem unnecessary to resurrect Rome's teaching on justification today, on the assumption that whatever may have been true of the past has all changed since Vatican II. The *Catholic Catechism* (1997) asserts, "*Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy ... Justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom...*" (Part 3, Section 1, Article 2 "Grace and Justification").

There was and is no comfort in Rome's view of justification, no assurance of salvation, no confirmation that a sinner is in a right standing with God. It is no wonder that Luther despaired when, in keeping with Rome's dogma, he mistakenly concluded that "*the righteousness of God*" in Romans 1:17 referred to God's righteous anger against sin. Luther's protracted attempts at self-flagellation to earn his acceptance with God could provide no solace to him. His works, no matter how great or zealously performed, could never satisfy the requirements of the law of God, and he knew it.

Luther was able to find solace only when he came to understand that “*the righteousness of God*” in Romans 1:17 did not refer to the attribute of God’s righteousness, but rather to the righteousness that God graciously and freely credits to a sinner’s account on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done in the sinner’s place. Expressing his sense of relief, Luther wrote, “*Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me*” (Luther’s preface to the complete edition of his Latin writings, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 34 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960], pp. 336-37).

Calvin’s view

Like Luther, Calvin recognized the comfortless nature of Rome’s doctrine of justification. Speaking of Rome’s confusion of justification with sanctification and its consequential destruction of a believer’s comfort, Calvin wrote:

But as it is too well known by experience, that the remains of sin always exist in the righteous, it is necessary that justification should be something very different from reformation to newness of life. This latter God begins in his elect, and carries on during the whole course of life, gradually and sometimes slowly, so that if placed at his judgment-seat they would always deserve sentence of death. He justifies not partially, but freely, so that they can appear in the heavens as if clothed with the purity of Christ. No portion of righteousness could pacify the conscience. It must be decided that we are pleasing to God, as being without exception righteous in his sight. Hence it follows that the doctrine of justification is perverted and completely overthrown whenever doubt is instilled into the mind, confidence in salvation is shaken, and free and intrepid prayer is retarded; yea, whenever rest and tranquility with spiritual joy are not established.

Institutes, III.11.11

The vagueness that characterized Trent’s position on justification and the comfortless nature of its pronouncements stood in sharp contrast to the clarity, simplicity, and warmth of the writings of Calvin and the other Reformers on this subject.

Calvin’s view of justification can be summarized by the following three propositions:

First, justification is an act of God’s free grace. As a forensic or legal act, it does not change the inner nature of a man but only the judicial relationship in which he stands before God — God accepting him as righteous in His sight.

Second, the ground for justification is not found in the inherent righteousness of the believer, but only in the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, which a sinner appropriates by faith — faith being itself a gift of God whereby the believer is united to Jesus Christ and becomes partaker of all His benefits, including having His righteousness put to his account.

Third, justification is not a progressive work of God (like sanctification); rather it is a single, instantaneous act whereby the sinner is declared to be without guilt, and therefore in a position to entertain an assurance that his state before God is no longer one of wrath and condemnation, but one of favor and acceptance.

Calvin identified justification as a legal or forensic concept, distinct from sanctification. As such, Calvin viewed justification as the changing of a man’s legal state before God, but not his condition. Justification resulted in the declaration by God that a sinner was without guilt, in light of his having been clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

For if those whom the Lord has reconciled to himself are estimated by works, they will still prove to be in reality sinners, while they ought to be pure and free from sin. It is evident therefore, that the only way in which those whom God embraces are made righteous, is by having their pollutions wiped away by the remission of sins, so that this justification may be termed in one word the remission of sins.

Calvin maintained a clear and sharp distinction between justification and sanctification. However, he acknowledged that a radical change of character invariably accompanied justification.

We dream not of a faith which is devoid of good works, nor of a justification which can exist without them: the only difference is, that while we acknowledge that faith and works are necessarily connected, we, however, place justification in faith, not in works. How this is done is easily explained, if we turn to Christ only, to whom our faith is directed and from whom it derives all its power. Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we apprehend the righteousness of Christ, which alone reconciles us to God. This faith, however, you cannot apprehend without at the same time apprehending sanctification; ... Christ, therefore, justifies no man without also sanctifying him. These blessings are conjoined by a perpetual and inseparable tie.

Calvin's careful treatment of the doctrine of justification warrants gratitude on our part for its biblical and gracious character. As Atlas is said to have carried the entire world on his shoulders, so on the shoulders of the doctrine of justification rests the entirety of our salvation.

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