

Cults and the Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith—Part Two

By Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

The previous article covered:

- 1.) Justification is an undeserved free gift of God's mercy;
 - 2.) Justification is entirely accomplished by God, once for all.
- We now continue with point 3.

3. Justification involves an imputed righteousness entirely apart from works: the righteousness of God Himself has been given to the believer. It has nothing to do with a person's own righteousness (Rom. 4:5,6,17-25). As we stated in *Protestants and Catholics: Do They Now Agree*:

Both the Old and New Testaments teach the Protestant view of legal (forensic) justification. Consider the following evidence for the Old Testament view of justification: "Concerning the Old Testament word *hitsdiq*, usually rendered 'justified,' more often than not it is '...used in a forensic or legal sense, as meaning, not "to make just or righteous," but "to declare judicially that one is in harmony with the law."...In the Old Testament, the concept of righteousness frequently appears in a forensic or juridical context. A righteous man is one who has been declared by a judge to be free from guilt."

In his book *Justification*, Catholic theologian Hans Kung argues for this view when he says, "According to the original biblical usage of the term, 'justification' must be defined as a declaring just by court order." Other Catholic theologians have agreed with Kung.

The New Testament Scriptures agree with the Old, clearly showing that justification is 1) a crediting of righteousness on the basis of a person's faith, 2) a completed act of God, and 3) something that occurs wholly apart from personal merit or good works:

1. "...to the man who...trusts God who justifies the wicked, *his faith is credited* as righteousness....[How blessed is] the man to whom God *credits righteousness* apart from works" (Rom. 4:5, 6, emphasis added).
2. "Therefore, *having been* justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1 NASB, emphasis added).
3. "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith *apart from works of the Law*" (Rom. 3:28 NASB, emphasis added).

Please also read Luke 18:1-14; Acts 13:38,39; Gal. 2:16.

The weight of these Scriptures is formidable; it is indeed impossible to deny the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone. For someone to say that the Bible teaches that sinners "are justified by Christ and by good works" is simply wrong.^{8a}

It is not merely that God overlooks our sin and guilt, but that full and entire holiness is credited to our account. Bruce Milne describes the transaction this way:

Our justification is not simply a matter of God's overlooking our guilt; our need can be met only if righteousness, full and entire holiness of character, is credited to us. This is the amazing gift of grace. Christ's law-keeping and perfect righteousness are made ours by faith in Him (1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9). It is not simply that our abysmal failure in life's moral examination is overlooked; we pass with 100%, First Class Honours! Well may Athanasius speak of "the amazing exchange" whereby, as Calvin

puts it, “the Son of God though spotlessly pure took upon Himself the ignominy and shame of our sin and in return clothes us with His purity.”⁹

Righteousness is imputed because the believer actually is united to Christ. In other words, because the believer is “in Christ,” the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him. Justification is the subsequent legal recognition of that fact. We are declared (past tense) righteous. We *now* have perfect righteousness before God (not personally, but legally).

“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

In his important book *God’s Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes*, J.I. Packer discusses the meaning of justification and contrasts it with the Catholic and Mormon view:

To “justify” in the Bible means to “declare righteous”: to declare, that is, of a man on trial, that he is not liable to any penalty, but is entitled to all the privileges due to those who have kept the law....The Church of Rome has always maintained that God’s act of justifying is primarily, if not wholly, one of making righteous, by inner spiritual renewal, but there is no biblical or linguistic ground for this view, though it goes back at least as far as Augustine. Paul’s synonyms for “justify” are “reckon (impute) righteousness,” “forgive (more correctly, remit) sins,” “not reckon sin” (see Rom. 4:5-8)—all phrases which express the idea, not of inner transformation, but of conferring a legal status and canceling a legal liability. Justification is a judgment passed on man, not a work wrought within man; God’s gift of a status and a relationship to himself, not of a new heart. Certainly, God does regenerate those whom he justifies, but the two things are not the same.¹⁰

Thus, as *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* points out, every believer in Christ is now treated by God as if they are righteous (on the basis of their imputed righteousness), not as if they are sinners:

“The righteousness of God” [i.e., righteousness from God: see Phil. 3:9] is bestowed on them as a free gift (Rom. 1:17, 3:21 ff.; 5:17, cf. 9:30; 10:3-10): that is to say, they receive the right to be treated and the promise that they shall be treated, no longer as sinners, but as righteous, by the divine Judge. Thus they become “the righteousness of God” in and through Him who “knew no sin” personally but was representatively “made sin” (treated as a sinner, and punished) in their stead (1 Cor. 5:21). This is the thought expressed in classical Protestant theology by the phrase “the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,” namely, that believers are righteous (Rom. 5:19) and have righteousness (Phil. 3:9) before God for no other reason than that Christ their Head was righteous before God, and they are one with Him, sharers of His status and acceptance. God justifies them by passing on them, for Christ’s sake, the verdict which Christ’s obedience merited. God declares them to be righteous, because He reckons them to be righteous; and He reckons righteousness to them, 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). For Paul, union with Christ is not fantasy, but fact—the basic fact indeed in Christianity; and the doctrine of imputed righteousness is simply Paul’s exposition of the forensic aspect of it (see Rom. 5:12 ff.).¹¹

4. Justification is accomplished in harmony with God’s justice. It displays His holiness; it does not deny it. The only way for the sinner’s justification to be truly just in God’s eyes is for two requirements to be absolutely satisfied. The first is that every requirement of the law must be satisfied. The second is that the infinitely holy character of God

must be satisfied. J.I. Packer again comments:

The only way in which justification can be just is for the law to be satisfied so far as the justified are concerned. But the law makes a double demand on sinners: it requires both their full obedience to its precepts, as God's creatures, and their full endurance of its penalty, as transgressors. How could they conceivably meet this double demand? The answer is that it has been met already by the Lord Jesus Christ, acting in their name. The eternal Son of God was "born under the law" (Gal. 4:4) in order that he might yield double submission to the law in his people's stead. Both aspects of his submission are indicated in Paul's words: "he...became obedient—unto death" (Phil. 2:8). His life of righteousness culminated in his dying the death of unrighteous according to the will of God: he bore the penal curse of the law in man's place (Gal. 3:13) to make propitiation for man's sins (Rom. 3:25). And thus, "through one act of righteousness"—the life and death of the sinless Christ—"there resulted justification of life to all men" (Rom. 5:18 NASB)."¹²

He concludes:

Paul's thesis is that God justifies sinners on a just ground, namely, that the claims of God's law upon them have been fully satisfied. The law has not been altered, or suspended, or flouted for their justification, but fulfilled by Jesus Christ, acting in their name. By perfectly serving God, Christ perfectly kept the law (cf. Matt. 3:15). His obedience culminated in death (Phil. 2:8); He bore the penalty of the law in men's place (Gal. 3:13), to make propitiation for their sins (Rom. 3:25). On the grounds of Christ's obedience, God does not impute sin, but imputes righteousness, to sinners who believe (Rom. 4:2-8; 5:19).¹³

This is exactly what Scripture teaches—that God can be *both* just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Jesus:

For 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; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:23-26).

FOOTNOTES

- 8a. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Protestants and Catholics: Do They Now Agree?*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 55-56
9. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), 155.
10. J. I. Packer, *God's Words*, 141-42.
11. J. I. Packer in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 306.
12. J. I. Packer, *God's Words*, 141-42.
13. J. I. Packer in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 306.