

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

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“Justification” is the act of God whereby He forgives the sins of believers and declares them righteous by imputing the obedience and righteousness of Christ to them through faith. (See Luke 18:9-14)

In previous articles, we discussed the Jehovah’s Witnesses view that justification was merely a “present” justification that forgave one’s past sins. One’s justified status could be forfeited by sin. This is the view of some Christians, most cults incorporating the subject and also close to the theology of Roman Catholicism and certain other religions, thus occasioning this discussion which will attempt to set the record straight on this issue.

The doctrine of justification is arguably the single most important doctrine in the Bible. It is without question a doctrine that is rejected and opposed by all cults and indeed, because they emphasize salvation by works, all religions outside of biblical Christianity. In his book *Know Your Christian Life: A Theological Introduction*, theologian Sinclair Ferguson discusses its vital importance, not only for the church but also for the Christian:

Martin Luther, whose grasp of the gospel was better than most, once said that the doctrine of Justification was the article by which the Church stands or falls. “This article,” he said, “is the head and cornerstone of the Church, which alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves and protects the Church; without it the Church of God cannot subsist one hour.” Luther was right. Although for our understanding of the general shape and direction of the Christian life we have suggested the doctrine of regeneration is important, the doctrine of justification is central. Not only is it the article of the standing or falling Church, but also of the standing or falling Christian. Probably more trouble is caused in the Christian life by an inadequate or mistaken view of this doctrine than any other. When the child of God loses his sense of peace with God, finds his concern for others dried up, or generally finds his sense of the sheer goodness and grace of God diminished, it is from this fountain that he has ceased to drink. Conversely, if we can gain a solid grounding here, we have the foundation for a life of peace and joy.¹

He then explains why this doctrine is difficult for so many to accept:

The practical importance of this cannot be exaggerated. The glory of the gospel is that God has declared Christians to be rightly related to him in spite of their sin. But our greatest temptation and mistake is to try to smuggle character into his work of grace. How easily we fall into the trap of assuming that we only remain justified so long as there are grounds in our character for that justification. But Paul’s teaching is that nothing we do ever contributes to our justification. So powerful was his emphasis on this that men accused him of teaching that it did not matter how they lived if God justified them. If God justifies us as we are, what is the point of holiness? There is still a sense in which this is a test of whether we offer the world the grace of God in the Gospel. Does it make me say: “You are offering grace that is so free it doesn’t make any difference how you live”? This was precisely the objection the Pharisees had to Jesus’ teaching!²

Below we shall list some of the characteristics that distinguish biblical justification.

What Justification is not:

1. It is not a *reward* for anything good we have done.
2. It is not something in which we cooperate with God. (It is not sanctification.)
3. It is not infused righteousness which results in good works which become the basis of justification (the Mormon and Catholic concept of justification).
4. It is not accomplished apart from the satisfaction of God's justice, i.e., it is not unjust.
5. It is not subject to degrees—one cannot be more or less justified; one can only be fully justified or fully unjustified.

What Justification is:

1. Justification is an undeserved free gift of God's mercy (Romans 3:24; Titus 3:7).
2. Justification is entirely accomplished by *God*, *once* for all. (It is not a process like personal sanctification—but knowledge of it does help produce sanctification.)

One of the leading theologians of our time, Dr. James Packer, explains its unique character:

This justification, though individually located at the point of time at which a man believes (Rom. 4:3; 5:1), is an eschatological once-for-all divine act, the final judgment brought into the present. The justifying sentence, once passed, is irrevocable. "The Wrath" (Rom. 5:9) will not touch the justified. Those accepted now are secure forever. Inquisition before Christ's judgment seat (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10) may deprive them of certain rewards (1Cor. 3:15) but never of their justified status. Christ will not call into question God's justifying verdict, only declare, endorse and implement it.³

In other words, if God the Father *justified* us at the point of belief, is it possible the Son would ever repudiate His Father's legal declaration?

(The next article will pick up with point 3.)

1. Sinclair Ferguson, *Know Your Christian Life: A Theological Introduction* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 71.
2. Ibid., 73.
3. James Packer in Everett F. Harrison et. al., eds., *Baker Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), 305.