

Justification:
Emphasizing the Distinction Between
Protestant and Roman Catholic Thought

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Introduction

In this paper I will explain my understanding of justification, which falls in line with the orthodox Protestant view. I will present a brief definition of justification and then discuss some issues necessary for a proper understanding of this important doctrine. I will finish up by presenting the Roman Catholic view of justification and how this differs from the typical Protestant understanding.

Definition and Explanation

Justification is defined as the act of God by which he imputes the righteousness of Christ to a believer and declares that person to be forgiven of all sins, thus pronouncing the person righteous in his sight (Acts 13:38-39; Romans 4:5, 24). It is a declarative and judicial act of God (Romans 8:1; Colossians 1:22), based on the righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:23-25), rather than an infusion of holiness into a believer or a change in their character. It changes the position of a believer and puts them into a right standing with God, but is distinct from the dispositional change of that person's heart or the actual altering of their spiritual condition. It is apprehended by a believer's faith in Christ's effective work (Galatians 2:16), which he accomplished through living a sinless life and his subsequent death on the cross (Romans 5:8-11; Galatians 3:13).

A proper understanding of justification only comes out of an adequate understanding of sin and God's wrath against it (Romans 1:18). Knowing that the living God is a holy God, we know that his only response toward sin, uncleanness, and unholiness is one of repulsion (Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). In the just universe that he created, he cannot but condemn the whole human race, including each individual, who has sinned and continues to sin (Romans 3:23; 6:23). When we realize the serious consequences of sin, then we feel the need for justification.

Justification is best understood as seen in the context of a judicial court of law (Romans 8:33-34). Being sinners, we as humans are deserving of punishment and death. Justification means that God, as the universal judge, acquits us of our guilt and declares us as righteous (Romans 5:8). The very righteousness of Jesus Christ is transferred to our account and we are seen as if we had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if we had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for us (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:18-19).

From our human point of view, faith in the finished work of Christ is the only thing that is required for us to be declared righteous (Romans 3:28). We receive this gracious gift of God by faith alone (Romans 3:22; 4:4; Galatians 3:24-25); we do not merit it in any way by good works, reformed behavior, or resolutions to never sin again (Galatians 2:16). Even our faith is not an act that merits justification; it is by faith that we enter into union with Christ so that as a result his righteousness is declared to be our righteousness. Faith is the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30).

The effects of justification upon those of us who are justified are twofold. On the one hand, having been declared righteous, we are forgiven of our sins and liberated from the negative consequences and punishment thereof (Romans 5:1-2; 8:30, 33-34). On the other hand, the positive benefits of being justified include both a legal standing as children of God (John 1:12; Romans 8:15-17; Galatians 3:26; 4:4-7) and the right to inherit eternal life (John 3:16; Titus 3:7).

The Roman Catholic View of Justification

The Roman Catholic Church opposed the Protestant views of justification as they were defined and expounded by the two great reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin. The views developed and expressed by the Council of Trent (during the latter half of the year 1546 A.D.)

clearly communicate the beliefs of the Roman Church; the official views of the Church have not substantially changed since that time.

In Roman Catholic theology, justification is thought of primarily as an infusion of grace, which results in a change of a person's spiritual and moral nature. The Council of Trent described justification not merely as the remission of sins, but also as the sanctification and renewal of the inward man. The fundamental view of the Roman Church is that a person starts out as a sinner, vile and wicked, but God's grace infused into the person makes them one who is now pleasing to God. By this grace acting within the person, they become justified before God.

This is in stark contrast to the Protestant view, which states that justification is a declarative and forensic act in which God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the believer. The Protestant doctrine of justification does not address the matter of a person's spiritual or moral condition and does not believe that justification means an infusion into the believer at all. It is a declarative act, not God's act of imparting grace to the believer.

The Catholic view of justification seems to confuse the two Protestant doctrines of justification and sanctification, and thus fails to properly distinguish between God's declarative act of justifying the believer from the impartation of God's Spirit and grace into the believer, whereby the spiritual condition and outward behavior of the believer changes. Protestants would include remission of sins under justification and the renewal of the person under sanctification, but Catholic theology considers both forgiveness and renewal as aspects of justification. By failing to make this clear distinction, Catholic theology tends to obscure the judicial aspect of justification and ties a person's justification to good works and a change in behavior.

Although the doctrine of justification can never be separated from sanctification, they must be kept distinct. "Understanding justification as a declarative act of God safeguards the

precious teaching that we are saved by grace alone and not by works. But this understanding in no way excludes the renewing and transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people."¹ It must be understood that justification is only one facet of our salvation. The person who is justified is at the same time one who is being renewed by the Holy Spirit. This renewal will indeed result in a life evincing the fruit of the Spirit by good works and a godly character. But this morally improved life is understood as a person's faith producing good works, not justification issuing from good works. These good works in no way enable a person to merit God's gracious salvation (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16).

Based on the Roman Catholic view that justification is an infusion of grace that makes a person morally pleasing to God, the Council of Trent had to go on to state that this grace of justification can subsequently be lost by one who has received it. Trent made the point that if a believing person commits a mortal sin (a major sin done with full knowledge and deliberate intent) then the grace of justification is lost and that person has died as a child of God. This goes against the Protestant view that once a person is imputed with the righteousness of Christ and forensically declared righteous, they cannot lose the legal standing as a forgiven child of God (Romans 5:1-2; 8:30).

Moreover, since the Catholic view of justification is tied to a person's moral condition, the Roman Church believes that the righteousness received in justification can be increased or decreased. Trent states that faith cooperating with good works, namely following the commandments of God and of the Church, can increase their justification and cause them to be further justified. "It is plain that Trent conceives of the justice received in justification not as the imputation to us of the perfect righteousness of Christ, but as a subjective quality in us that can

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989) 169.

be increased or decreased.”² The Protestant view of justification, as a legal declarative act based on Christ’s righteousness, makes the thought of increasing in justification absurd. In God’s judicial court, a person is either declared blameless or declared guilty; it is impossible to increase in innocence or guilt.

Another major difference between the Catholic and Protestant view of justification is that faith does not have central significance in Catholic thought, but occupies a subordinate place. Trent admits that faith does play a role in the many steps along the way for a person to be justified, but final justification only occurs when a person receives the infused grace at their water baptism. Whereas the Protestant view is that the instrumental cause of justification is faith, the Catholic view is that baptism operates as the instrument of justification.

Conclusion

The main points of justification from the Protestant perspective are summed up well by the Heidelberg Catechism created in 1563. It emphasizes that justification is a gracious act of God by which he declares us righteous without any impartation of grace or change in moral disposition; God credits to us the very righteousness of Christ. It makes clear that from our human point of view, we receive our justification only by faith in Jesus Christ and his righteousness, not by performing any works to merit it. When the question is asked, “How are you right with God?” the Catechism answers:

Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God’s commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this give of God with a believing heart.

² Ibid., 165.