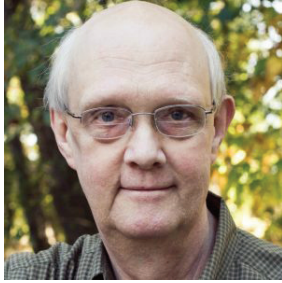


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JUSTIFICATION





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The Most Important Question One Can Ask!

“Of Justification”^{1 2}

There are many important questions that should be asked concerning the possible paths one’s life should take. These questions must be considered, especially in the light of “characteristic ... key events ... which compose the essential[s] of human existence, such as birth, growth, emotionality, aspiration, conflict, ... morality”³ and even death. No one single question is more important than: How can a sinful person be in right standing with a Holy God? This “must ever be a question of intense interest.”⁴ It is fundamental to any contemplative and sober-minded person—especially one concerned with their soul’s ultimate destination. It can be asked in theological parlance; “How can [a righteous] God justly account an ungodly [hu]man righteous[?]”⁵ It is profoundly, pointedly personal; “How can I be right with or just before God?”⁶ *The Baptist Catechism* simply asks: “What is justification.”⁷ This article will seek to shed light on this Bible truth from *The Baptist Confession of Faith*,⁸ and hopefully, the reader can acquire a satisfactory answer.

Infusion or Imputation?

The chapter “Of Justification” begins: “Those whom God effectually calls, he also freely justifies, *not by infusing righteousness into them*, but by pardoning their sins and by *accounting and accepting* their person’s as righteous”⁹ (italics added). Straightaway the *Confession* declares what justification is not. This is the one great concept that brought

about the rift with the Roman Church—and Luther’s evangelical salvation. In addition, the doctrine of effectual calling is connected paving the way for the integrative involvement of these doctrines and for the discussion of the distinct quality of the faith through which we are justified.

When the Reformation is considered, invariably it focuses on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. On this teaching, “the entire Reformation and the protest the Reformers launched against the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) would well be summed up in this one word: *imputation*.”¹⁰ This “teaches that our sin, which cuts us off and alienates us from a holy God, gets imputed to Christ” for He “paid the penalty for our sin, and so our sins are forgiven.”¹¹ This is foreign, however, to Roman Catholicism’s teaching of *infused* righteousness.

Church Historian Timothy George argues, “Luther considered justification by faith ‘the summary of all Christian doctrine’ and ‘the article by which the church stands or falls.’”¹² It was the medieval theological understanding of justification ... that a person gradually receives divine grace, eventually healing wounds caused by sin.¹³ “But in his mature doctrine ... [Luther] abandoned the ... [concept] of *impartation* [or infusion] for the legal language of *imputation*.”¹⁴ Theologian Charles Hodge sums up the position of Rome:

For Christ’s sake, and only through his merits, as a matter of grace, this new life is imparted to the soul in regeneration (i.e., as Romanists teach, in baptism)... Works done after regeneration have real merit ... and are the ground of the second justification; the first justification consisting in making the soul inherently just by the *infusion of righteousness*. According to this view, we are justified by works done before regeneration, but we are not justified for gracious works, i.e., for works which spring in principle of divine life *infused into the heart*. The whole ground of our acceptance with God is thus made to be what we are *and* what we do¹⁵ (italics added).

As a contrast, and a necessary corrective, imputation involves a “pardoning [of] their sins,” and an “accounting¹⁶ and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone.”¹⁷ “In classical Reformed theology ... justification is the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer.”¹⁸ James White contrasts infusion with imputation well: “It should be noted that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is taken in the same sense as it is in the New Testament—as a legal imputation, not a subjective one.”¹⁹ Justification “means to declare or pronounce to be righteous.”²⁰ Hodge wants it clear that imputation goes beyond the mere pardon of sins, is not to be identified with sanctification, but involves a positive imputation, a forensic declaration, of righteousness.²¹

George Eldon Ladd, clearly harmonious with Hodge, observes how, “Justification is the pronouncement of a righteous judge that the person in Christ is righteous; but this righteousness is a matter of relationship and not of ethical character.”²² It denotes the idea of a forensic or a new legal status. “Forensic means that God is conceived as the ruler, lawgiver, and judge, and justification is the [legal] declaration of the judge that the person is righteous.”²³ Reformation scholars have long “recognize[d] ... the basic idea in justification ... [to be] forensic.”²⁴ Hence, “By justification God in Christ ‘does for us what we cannot do for ourselves and thus creates in us a righteous mind for which we can claim no credit.’”²⁵ A homespun analogy,²⁶ showing the difference between the Catholic *infusion* and Reformation *imputation*, will serve well here. The physician does something *in the patient* for him; touches, examines, prescribes, operates, et al. This is infusion. Please consider the contrast with that of the judge; who issues a forensic judgment, a binding legally pronouncement based on the court’s justice accounting the malefactor not guilty. This is done *outside the condemned* but on their behalf. This is imputation.

What Then is the Basis of This Imputation?

How are the guilty declared righteous? How can God demand the condemnation due all, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God[;]”²⁷ and at the same time declare the guilty pardoned? And much more than pardoned²⁸ —righteous before the bar of Heavenly justice! The *Second London Confession* declares the essence of imputation; “by [God’s] imputing Christ’s active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on Him and his righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves: it is the gift of God.”²⁹ ³⁰ Paul confesses, “To declare, I say, at this time his [Christ’s] righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.”³¹

Christ’s death and resurrection were to take away our condemnation so we could go to Heaven—which is true. But this falls short in itself! The teaching of both an *active* and *passive* obedience³² of Christ is required for our salvation. He died to take our punishment. This speaks of His passive obedience to His Father as he took our just condemnation. He also lived perfectly fulfilling all the Law. This speaks of His perfect righteous obedience to His Father’s will. So Jesus death, burial, and resurrection alone were not enough to gain us entrance into Glory. We must also have perfectly keep the whole law and not offend in one point—in deed or precept. Jesus provided both. This double obedience of Christ is what is imputed to us. Our lawlessness is accounted to Him in His death on the Cross. This is referred to by theologians as double imputation.³³

Then What Part Does Faith Play?

Faith has always been the empty hand that receives the imputed declaration of righteousness,³⁴ the essence of the Gospel. Hebrews 4:2 declares, “unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them” in the Old Testament. Father Abraham believed this Gospel: “[H]e believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him³⁵ for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6, KJV). King David rejoiced in this Gospel: “Blessed is *he whose* transgression is forgiven, *whose sin is covered*. Blessed *is* the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity³⁶ and in whose spirit *there is* no guile” (Psalm 32, KJV, italics in original).³⁷

[Ed. The fact that the New Testament illustrates the doctrine of justification and argues for its nature in terms of Old Testament saints clearly indicates that justification is the same in both cases. Paragraph six of the confessions states, “The justification of believers under the Old Testament was in all these respects one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.” David rejoiced in the non-imputation of sin in Psalm 32. He used language clearly evocative of forgiveness because of covering. “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity” (Psalm 32:1, 2 NKJV). Paul used David’s confidence expressed here to defend the doctrine of imputation in Romans 4. If non-imputation releases from sin, then imputation confers righteousness. He cited that passage in defense of this fundamental proposition, “David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputed righteousness apart from works” (Romans 4:6). After a finely-tuned theological discussion of Abraham’s faith demonstrated while he was uncircumcised and before the formal giving of the Law to Israel, he reiterates that forgiveness comes to those who have faith, whether circumcised or uncircumcised. Paul speaks of the uncircumcised, based on the example of Abraham, as “those who believe ... that righteousness might be imputed to them also” (Romans 4:11).

Abraham’s belief of the promise of a child was accounted to him for righteousness. Paul sees all of this in the context of Abraham’s and Sarah’s deadness giving way to life through the invincible promise of God. He concludes the discussion with the locus classicus affirming justification through the dying and rising of Christ, not only for Abraham, but for all those of the faith of Abraham: “Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification” (Romans 4:23–25 NKJV).

The writer of Hebrews looks to the types and symbols of the Old Testament to tease out a full theology of substitutionary atonement and salvation apart from works. Noah by faith was an “heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7). The faith of the Old Testament believers was of a piece with that of New Testament believers. He wrote to those who would look by faith unwavering to Christ who died for the forgiveness of sinners, and has been perfected forever that He might intercede effectually for them that they would receive an eternal inheritance though their works are dead (Hebrews 4:15; 5:9; 7:25, 28; 9:11–15).]

Faith Alone, but Not Alone

Paragraph 2 of the confession continues: “Faith receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.”³⁸ Faith is but the *instrument* and not the *basis* of justification.³⁹ “We are not justified because we believe, but we are justified *through* faith, faith being the ‘appropriating organ’ by which justification comes.”⁴⁰ Even the faith with which we believe is a grace gift from God.⁴¹ “Why is it faith [then] and not some other grace which God has selected as the instrumental means of justification?”⁴²

[B]ecause faith exemplifies the fact that justification is solely by grace on the basis of someone else’s righteousness. God justifies us by faith so that we will know that salvation is for his glory alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone.⁴³ ... It is taking, receiving, looking [unto Christ]. Faith justifies, therefore, because it concentrates all the attention on Christ and looks away from itself to Christ.⁴⁴

[Ed. Why is faith “ever accompanied with all other saving graces?” If justification is by faith alone, why does it work “by love?” The very nature of faith calls for a high evaluation of the righteous demands of the law and a love for its excellence. Exegetically we would find this asserted as a matter of divine revelation in a text like 2 Peter 1:5–8. Faith has embedded in it all the virtues set forth by Peter so that our knowledge does not “turn from the holy commandment” (2:21), but flourishes, being “neither barren nor unfruitful” (1:8). Faith does not make us righteous or constitute an acceptable righteousness, but arises from the graces brought to us by the “righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (1:1). His righteousness not only clothes us, but brings the gift of the Spirit by whom we are brought to saving faith—the divine power that has given us all that pertains to life and godliness (1:3). James famously insists that the kind of faith that saves is the

kind of faith that works (James 1:21, 22; 2:19–22). In his first letter John gives several indicators by which we might know that our belief is a true and trustful acceptance of Christ as He is presented in the gospel (1 John 1:6,7; 2:9, 10, 17, 22–23, 29; 3:5, 6, 14; 4:7, 8; 5:1, 18). Confessing our sin, avoiding sin, loving the brothers, believing the Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh, and loving God all indicate that we have truly believed.

Theologically as we distinguish saving belief from the dead faith of devils' belief, we find that having faith is dependent on the prior operation of the Spirit in the heart. He only shows us our sin to the point of our being willing to confess it by showing us the height and beauty of the law. Whereas in the unregenerate condition, we are not subject to the law in that our heart of flesh is of itself enmity against that law (Romans 8:7, 8). In that state we cannot please God and cannot understand savingly the gifts of God (Romans 8:8; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

The Holy Spirit opens our minds to understand by opening our hearts to see and taste the beauty and goodness of God's law. We see that we have broken it and can have no righteousness of our own; we approve God's condemnation of us because of our status as lawbreakers; we approve His gospel way of receiving sinners only through Christ's having taken our condemnation and achieved our righteousness. Based, therefore, on the love that has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we flee to Christ desiring acceptance before God only through Him and find the hope of eternal life that does not disappoint (Romans 5:1–5).

Faith works by love, for without the affection of our hearts being changed none of the requisite conclusions of faith could ever be drawn. That is why the confession introduces this entire discussion with the emphasis, "Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth." Paul can write with confidence on that basis that we who are justified by grace through a faith that is not of ourselves, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Thus, faith is "ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love."]

A Final Important Question

So how do we answer our proposed question, "*How can a sinful person be in right standing with a Holy God?*" Answer: "Believe [have faith in; trust] on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31, KJV). That is, "[R]epentance toward God, and faith

toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21, KJV). Dear reader, do you solely trust Christ’s righteousness for God’s glory alone—instead of any personal righteousness in which you may be trusting?

NOTES:

¹ Special thanks to Rev. Carlston “Red” Berry retired pastor and friend who lives in Oklahoma City, OK. He has served as mentor, Bible teacher, confidant, and one of my “fathers in the ministry” for many years. He contributed as editor and theological sounding board for this article. He is greatly loved and appreciated.

² Please read the entire article “Of Justification” in *The Baptist Confession of Faith and The Baptist Catechism* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books & Carlisle, PA: Reformed Baptist Publications, 2010), 26–28. Scriptural passages are referenced for each of the doctrinal statements.

³ Wikipedia, “Human Condition,” Retrieved 8 September 2017 https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&q=define+human+condition&oq=define+human+condition&gs_l=psy-ab.3..0l2j0i22i30k1l2.1141.6584.0.7505.22.22.0.0.0.147.2030.17j5.22.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..0.22.2018...0i131k1.JYQt6OdIGU0

⁴ James Madison Pendleton, *Christian Doctrines: A Compendium of Theology* (American Baptist Publication Society, 1878, 1906; reprint, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1980), 274 (page numbers are to the reprint edition).

⁵ John Leadley Dagg, *Manual of Theology and Church Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Gano Books / Sprinkle Publications; reprint 1982), 267 (page numbers are to the reprint edition). The author employed literary license here and formed a question from Dagg’s assertion.

⁶ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press/Printed in Great Britain by Bath Press,, Second Printing 1995), 156.

⁷ *The Baptist Confession of Faith and The Baptist Catechism* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books & Carlisle, PA: Reformed Baptist Publications, 2010), 102. Note from copyright page: “This is a joint venture with Solid Ground Christian Books ... and ... Reformed Baptist Publications of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America.”

⁸ “Chapter 11, Of Justification,” *The Baptist Confession of Faith and The Baptist Catechism*. This will be the basis of the article’s discussion.

⁹ *The Baptist Confession of Faith and The Baptist Catechism*, 26.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Nichols, “A Time for Confidence,” *Tabletalk* (August 2017): 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Timothy George, "Dr. Luther's Theology," ([*Christian History* originally published this article in *Christian History* Issue 34 in 1992]) Retrieved 11 September 2017 from <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/dr-luthers-theology/>

¹³ George, "Dr. Luther's Theology."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Charles Hodge, "Justification," *Systematic Theology* Volume III, Part 3, Chapter XVII (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; reprint 1982), 136. (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁶ Reader's Note: The idea of "accounting" and "imputing" are basically synonymous. "Accounting" is defined as "a system of recording, and summarizing business and transactions and analyzing, verifying, and reporting the results." "Impute" is defined as "to lay the responsibility or blame" [on someone] or "to credit a person or a cause." *Merriam-Webster* on line dictionary, retrieved 12 September 2017 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accounting> and <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imputing> respectively.

¹⁷ *The Baptist Confession*, 26.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* II, xvi, 6; quoted in George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, rev. ed., 1993), 491.

¹⁹ James R. White, *A Comprehensive Study—The God Who Justifies: The Doctrine of Justification* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 66 footnote.

²⁰ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 122.

²¹ Hodge, "Justification," 122.

²² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993 rev. ed.), 484.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ V. Taylor, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (MacMillan), 57, 58, 59, 60; quoted in George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993 rev. ed.), 485.

²⁶ This analogy of the physician who does something in the patient illustrates infused righteousness of the Roman Catholic Church and the legal court scene illustrates the judge's pronouncement of a judgment on behalf of the condemned that is outside of him. This example/analogy came up in several venues when the writer was researching for this article.

²⁷ Romans 3:23, KJV.

²⁸ Note: For a fuller discussion of the differences between Justification and Pardon see: Charles Hodge, “Justification: A Forensic Act,” *Systematic Theology* Volume III, Part 3, Chapter XVII (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; reprint 1982), 125. (page citations are to the reprint edition).

²⁹ *The Baptist Confession*, 26.

³⁰ See: Ephesians 2:8–10.

³¹ Romans 3:36, KJV.

³² Please consult “Of Justification,” Paragraph 1 of *The Baptist Confession of Faith and The Baptist Catechism*, 26.

³³ See: R. C. Sproul, “Double Imputation,” Monergism, retrieved 13 September 2017 from <https://www.monergism.com/double-imputation-r-c-sproul>

Dr. Sproul observes, “Of course, Protestantism ... teaches a double imputation. Our sin is imputed to Jesus and his righteousness is imputed to us. In this twofold transaction, we see that God does not compromise his integrity in providing salvation for his people. Rather, he punishes sin fully after it has been imputed to Jesus. This is why he is able to be both ‘just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus’ as Paul writes in Romans 3:26. So my sin goes to Jesus and his righteousness comes to me.”

³⁴ Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession*, 160–161.

³⁵ Note the imputation language.

³⁶ Again note the imputation language.

³⁷ The reader is invited to consult *The Baptist Confession*, p. 28, where the text of Paragraph 6 states, “The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.” Then the confession cites Biblical proof from Galatians 3:9 and Romans 4:22–24.

³⁸ *The Baptist Confession*, 26. Note: The confession employs Roman 3:28 as proof for the first part of the paragraph that says, “Faith receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification;” and Galatians 5:6, James 2:17, 22, 26 as proofs for “yet is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.”

³⁹ James White, *A Comprehensive Study*, 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ The idea of faith being a gift may be foreign to some. Please consider the Scriptural references: 2 Peter 1:1 “From Simeon Peter, a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, have been *granted a faith* just as precious as ours” (NET); Philippians 1:29 “For it has been *granted* to you not only *to believe* in Christ but also to suffer for him (NET); and Ephesians

2:8 “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; *it is the gift of God:*” 9 “Not of works, lest any man should boast.” 10 “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (KJV).

⁴² Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession*, 160–161.

⁴³ Please note the “Solas” of the Reformation.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

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