

Thought Paper: Is Justification an Act, a Process or Both?
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Having been asked to present a paper on justification by faith regarding whether justification is an act or a process, I found that many Protestant scholars and especially those in the Reformed tradition of Calvin are in agreement that justification is a single irreversible imputed act of God that accounts the elect with Christ's righteousness. They believe that it is a declarative act of imputation only and that it is never transformational and never a process.¹

There is an argument that Christ's righteousness is an alien righteousness and therefore can only be accounted to us. It is true that Christ's righteousness is an alien righteousness. However, an alien does dwell in a foreign country. He is not a mere account. Christ and His righteousness dwell in the believer by faith. Our nature is a foreign and desolate land. Nevertheless, this is precisely the place where Christ's alien righteousness abides.

There are a few students of Scripture who believe that God's declaration of justification makes a person righteous.² Although James Buchanan rejected this meaning, he admitted that "So far as etymology is concerned, the verb to 'justify' might possibly mean to make righteous inherently..."³ A main argument of his is that when we humans declare God to be righteous or just, our declaration never makes it so. While this is true, there is a difference between God's declaration and ours. When we speak we create nothing. But when God speaks He creates. And He creates out of nothing.

A Brief Review

¹ Ryrie, C. (2005). *Ryrie's Practical Guide to Communicating Bible Doctrine* (pp. 15–16). See also Norman Gully's *Systematic Theology: Creation, Christ, Salvation* (pp. 757–758). Also: Lange, J. P., Schaff, P., Fay, F. R., Hurst, J. F., & Riddle, M. B. (2008). *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Romans* (p. 135). And: Carson, D. A. (Ed.). (1992). *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the world*, p. 23.

² See for example: Forbes, J. (1868). *Analytical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Tracing the Train of Thought by the Aid of Parallelism, with Notes and Dissertations* (pp. 226–227).

³ Buchanan, J. (1867). *The Doctrine of Justification: an Outline of its History in the Church and of its Exposition from Scripture*. (p. 226).

In other thought papers we discussed that there is one justification, but with two aspects – the objective and the subjective. First of all, consider a brief statement regarding the objective aspect before delving into the subjective. The objective aspect of justification occurred at the cross in Christ’s death. This concept is plainly embodied in Rom 4:25 and in other express assertions from Paul such as in Rom 5:9 and 18. These are as follows:

Christ “was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom 4:25).

“[H]aving now been justified by (ἐν) His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (Rom 5:9).

“Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life” (Rom 5:18).

Is Justification Continuous?

God continues to administer and to superimpose His justifying righteousness upon us. It is His protective layer or covering of Christ’s righteousness that guards us from attack and covers our short comings as we grow in grace and sanctification. Justification by faith performs the major task of covering us not only when we sin but even when we pray and do good works. Justification by faith is a continuing process, but this is not a matter of advancing from one degree of justification to another higher degree. The babe in Jesus Christ stands in the same justification as the believer of fifty years. Not only is justification our standing before God, it purges us and prepares the way for our sanctification.

“Justification by faith is the article of our true standing in the sight of God.”⁴ “Justification means the saving of a soul from perdition, that he may obtain sanctification, and through sanctification, the life of heaven. Justification means that the conscience, purged from dead works, is placed where it can receive the blessings of sanctification.”⁵ “It means that the heart, purged from dead works, is prepared to receive the blessing of sanctification.”⁶ “[T]he subject of justification by faith is to be studied and put into practice.”⁷

There are those who attempt to separate justification by faith from the meaning *to make righteous or just*. There are two main arguments for this. One is the assertion that *to make*

⁴ White, Manuscript Release, vol. 13, p. 191.

⁵ White, MS 113, 1902, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p, 908.

⁶ White, “Signs of the Times,” Dec 17, 1902.

⁷ White, “The Youth Instructor,” Sept 14, 1893.

righteousness is the Catholic doctrine of the *infusion* of righteousness which makes the recipient inherently righteous in himself through the performance of the so-called sacramental graces, which is not Scriptural and therefore not true.

The second reason comes from those who oppose God's law. They believe it was done away with at the cross. These do not believe that the cross actually magnified the law and made it honorable. Contrary to this, God insists that the cross does exalt the law. He was "well pleased for His righteousness' sake" and as prophesied by Isaiah "He will [and did] exalt the law and make it honorable" (Isa 42:21).

God condemned sin, not the law, on Calvary. He did this in the flesh of Jesus in order that "the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled" in those who are justified by faith. (Rom 8:3-4). It is only by our being justified by faith that the law is established. Justification by faith never does away with God's law of righteousness. The cross exhausted the penalty of the law; not the law itself. "Do we then make void the law through faith?" Paul is crystal clear. "God forbid! On the contrary, we establish the law" (Rom 3:31).

Christ's work in behalf of man exhausted the penalty of the broken law. But His work is more than payment for a penalty. It includes bringing the believer into harmony with the law. Being justified by faith in Christ brings one into harmony with God's law – His benchmark of righteousness. To be justified by faith is to make a person a doer of the law as Waggoner wrote:

Now we may read Rom. 3:23-25, and find that it is not so very difficult: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of GOD; being justified [that is, made righteous, or doers of the law] freely by his grace through the redemption that is in CHRIST JESUS; whom GOD hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission [sending away] of sins that are past, through the forbearance of GOD."⁸ (Emphasis original)

It is justification that brings us into harmony with God's law. This is not the role of sanctification. Sanctification is growth in obedience to God's law. This comes after a person has been brought into harmony with that law, by justification, through faith in Christ alone.

Because of sin, our growth in sanctification must come under the umbrella of justification. Paul, near the end of his life, confessed that he was a sinner. "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief (1 Tim 1:15). This is not to say he was constantly sinning, but rather that he was still growing in

⁸ Waggoner, "Signs of the Times," April 10, 1893.

sanctification. He had not yet attained spiritual maturity, but was still reaching forward to God's high calling. He wrote, "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14).

Solomon, too, knowing the weaknesses of fallen nature, in his prayer confessed that "there is no one who does not sin" (1 Kings 8:46). In context, this part of his prayer was concerned with future defeat that would come to Israel's army because of her sins. Solomon asked God to forgive Israel and to restore her lost land when she confessed her sin (vv 33, 34). Solomon was not claiming a license to sin. He simply stated the fact of the matter.

Stating the fact of the matter Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jer17:9). We don't. This describes the condition not only of a non-believer's heart, but also that of the believer. Only God can know this.

Isaiah goes further. He says that "all our righteousnesses" – our righteous acts – fall short of where they should be (Isa 64:4). The good things we do are soiled with our fallen nature. This is the reason why believers need continuous justification. "The salvation of men depends upon a continual application to their hearts of the cleansing blood of Christ."⁹ As stated above we were "justified by [literally *in*] His blood" (Rom 5:9).

Our salvation depends upon this continual application of justification. It performs the major task of covering us not only when we sin, but also when we pray and do good works. God continues to administer and to superimpose His justifying righteousness upon us and within us. It is His protective layer of the covering of Christ's righteousness that shelters us in our short comings as we grow in grace and sanctification.

Our natural tendency is to regard justification as an abstract term denoting a certain standing before God sometime in the past. However, according to Scripture justification is God's continuing declaration of righteousness through Christ coming to us through continual believing the gospel declaration.

Consider Rom 3:24 – "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The term justified, here, is a present passive participle. The participle indicates a continuance of justification. While it is true that there are instances where both noun and verbal forms of justification have a past connotation such as in Rom 4:25; 5:9 and 18 as noted above,

⁹ White, "Signs of the Times," March 25, 1880.

but here in 3:24 the combined forms of adjective and verb, as a passive participle, it is in the present tense. And in the passive voice it means the believer is acted upon by an external agency. That agency is God. He is the one who justifies (Rom 8:33). This verse is a revelation of a process in which God's on-going activity of justification is working for the believer. And it would seem that this continuous reality of being justified is pivotal in the growth of sanctification.

In an important testimony written to those in Battle Creek, Ellen White wrote:

Are you in Christ? Not if you do not acknowledge yourselves erring, helpless, condemned sinners. Not if you are exalting and glorifying self. If there is any good in you, it is wholly attributable to the mercy of a compassionate Saviour. Your birth, your reputation, your wealth, your talents, your virtues, your piety, your philanthropy, or anything else in you or connected with you, will not form a bond of union between your soul and Christ. Your connection with the church, the manner in which your brethren regard you, will be of no avail unless you believe in Christ. It is not enough to believe *about* Him; you must believe *in* Him. You must rely wholly upon His saving grace.¹⁰ (Emphasis original).

Because of our fallen nature even the good we do needs to be purified by Christ's righteousness. In other words, our sanctification (the good we do) must be covered by God's justification continually. This is not to discourage us, but it will give us hope when we have not reached the place or the condition where we ought to be, or where we think we ought to be. Everything we do in sanctification must be purified. The following is how Mrs White expressed our need in our sanctified walk:

The religious services, the prayers, the praise, the penitent confession of sin ascend from true believers as incense to the heavenly sanctuary, but passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God. They ascend not in spotless purity, and unless the Intercessor, who is at God's right hand, presents and purifies all by His righteousness, it is not acceptable to God. All incense from earthly tabernacles must be moist with the cleansing drops of the blood of Christ. He holds before the Father the censer of His own merits, in which there is no taint of earthly corruption. He gathers into this censer the prayers, the praise, and the confessions of His people, and with these He puts His own spotless righteousness. Then, perfumed with the merits of Christ's propitiation, the incense comes up before God wholly and entirely acceptable. Then gracious answers are returned.¹¹

¹⁰ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 48, 49.

¹¹ *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 344.

God is for us even in our weaknesses.

Christ's merits alone will avail, and they have been placed at our disposal in rich fulness. Every moment we may draw upon Christ for help. As we turn to Him, He answers, "Here am I." Christ is our Intercessor. He places the incense of His righteousness in the golden censer, to offer up with the prayers of His disciples. The Father hears every prayer offered in contrition and sincerity. Our supplications blend with the supplications of our Intercessor, whose voice the Father always hears.¹²

That golden censer contains Christ's righteousness which is our justification. Our sanctified prayers are mingled with Christ's righteousness and because of this they are wholly acceptable.

Christ's righteousness transforms our heart, our mind, our character. His righteousness is embodied in His person. It cannot be separated from Him and it cannot be received apart from Him. He comes to dwell within the believer the instant the person accepts Him as Savior and Lord. When Christ comes to live in us He brings His everlasting righteousness. God thus *makes* a person righteous by His declaration of Christ Who is the Word, the Promise, and the Declaration of justification.

This is not to be confused with the Catholic doctrine of infused righteousness. Their teaching is that her members must receive the sacramental graces of the Church in order to be justified. This is especially true in her teachings concerning baptism, penance and the Eucharist, all of which are her means of justification mediated through her priesthood. Their doctrine of justification is that their sacramental grace makes the receiver inherently righteous by receiving and performing the sacraments.

This is not the Biblical teaching of justification by faith. Christ and His righteousness does not change our fallen nature until "this corruptible has put on incorruption" at His second coming (1 Cor 15:54). A change of character, yes; nature, never. Fallen nature must be and will be destroyed.

Justification by Faith and Being Made Righteous

In the 19th and early 20th century there were some who believed there is no ultimate distinction between "to justify" and "to make righteous." One such person, R. C. Moberly wrote, "The term Justification is too many-sided to be brought under any single

¹² White, "Signs of the Times," Feb 28, 1906.

category.... There is no ultimate distinction between to “justify” and to “make righteous”¹³

James Dunn asked, then answered the question regarding the term “to justify.”

Does it “mean ‘to *make* righteous’ or ‘to *count* righteous?’ This is the classic dispute between Catholic and Protestant exegesis.... Since the basic idea is of a *relationship* in which God acts even for the defective partner, an action whereby God sustains the weaker partner of his covenant relationship within the relationship, the answer...is really *both* ¹⁴

The righteousness of God is active. It is revealed in the gospel as the eternal and creative power of God and it is revealed also to those who live by faith (Rom 1:16, 17, 20). Regarding God, His righteousness is His very nature. Regarding the believer it means virtue, uprightness, purity of life and right thinking and feeling. It stands in opposition to sin and impurity (Rom 6:13, 16, 18, 20; 8:10; 2 Cor 6:7, 14; Eph 5:9; 6:14; Phil 1:11; James 3:18). His righteousness makes the initial change in our mind as it is believed. It is the active righteousness of God that comes to us “through the faith of Jesus” (Rom 3:21). We become “partakers of the divine nature” which is God’s righteousness.

God’s active righteousness is in Christ and justifies us. God demonstrates His righteousness so “that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:25, 26). The power of His righteousness is called δύνάμις (or dynamite) as seen in Rom 1:16, 17 as the power God. It has a powerful effect on those who believe in Christ for justification. As dynamite changes things when activated, so does God’s righteousness. It is life shattering and life changing.

In a letter to Dr. Maxon and his wife Mrs. White asked, “What is justification by faith? It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust, and doing for man that which it is not in his power to do for himself. When men see their own nothingness, they are prepared to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.”¹⁵

God creates out of nothing. He creates justification by the mighty power of His word.

Jones and Waggoner taught that the term “justified” meant “to make righteous.” Following are a couple of their remarks regarding this.

¹³ Moberly, R. C. (1907). *Atonement and Personality* (p. 335).

¹⁴ Dunn, J. D. G. (1998). *Romans 1–8* (Vol. 38A, pp. 41–42). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

¹⁵ White, Manuscript Release, vol. 20, p. 117

Jones: Now let us turn to the third chapter of Romans, and begin reading with the 20th verse. "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight." Justified is made righteous, so whenever we read it here, you can just put the words, "made righteous," there instead, and you have the same thing always.¹⁶

He then repeated the thought by asking the congregation:

"Being justified" (made righteous) how? [Congregation: "Freely."].... "Being made righteous freely by his grace."¹⁷

Waggoner also believed this was the right way to interpret justification. On at least one occasion he was criticized because he wrote that "to be justified" means "to be made righteous." He answered this objection as follows:

A friend has forwarded to me a severe condemnation of a statement made some time ago, to the effect that to justify means to make righteous. The criticism was based on the fact that "Grove's Greek Lexicon" does not so define the Greek word from which justify is translated. Opening Liddell and Scott's Greek Lexicon, I find the very first definition of the word in question is "to make righteous." But that is only by the way. Appeals to Greek Lexicons do not edify people. It was stated that "being justified" means "being made righteous," because that definition is patent from the reading of the English Bible.¹⁸

Four years later he still believed this, because he wrote, "The meaning of the word 'justified' is 'made righteous.' This is the exact term that appears in other languages, which are not composed of foreign terms."¹⁹

He also penned, "[T]here is no real righteousness except the righteousness of God, and that cannot be had apart from Him. We can have no perfect righteousness except as His presence gives it to us."²⁰

Mrs. White wrote along this same line. "The righteousness of God is embodied in Christ. We receive righteousness by receiving Him."²¹

The righteousness of God resides in Christ. It is impossible to separate it from Him. This righteousness is our justification when we believe the gospel. And justification abides within us as long as Christ dwells in us by faith.

¹⁶ Jones, *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, "The Third Angel's Message, February 23, 1893, p. 362.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Waggoner, "Present Truth," United Kingdom, April 23, 1896.

¹⁹ Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, (1900), p. 77.

²⁰ E. J. Waggoner, "Present Truth," United Kingdom, August 25, 1898.

²¹ Ellen White, *The Mount of Blessing*, p. 18.

Mrs. White likewise taught that the imputed righteousness of Christ justifies us and makes us righteous.

Having made us righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ, God pronounces us just, and treats us as just.... Christ works against the power of sin, and where sin abounded, grace much more abounds. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God' (Romans 5:1, 2)."²²

"They are justified alone through the imputed righteousness of Christ. The Father accepts the Son, and through the atoning sacrifice of His Son accepts the sinner."²³ Again: "By receiving His imputed righteousness, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we become like Him."²⁴

Justification is the imputation of Christ's righteousness. This cleanses those who believe and that believer then stands "clothed with the imputed righteousness of Christ. Oh, what a change of raiment is this!"²⁵

In Summary and Conclusion

We have considered the question: "Is justification an act, a process or both? It seems everyone accepts justification as an act. There is much discussion about it being a process. From the material studied I believe it to be both. We have considered that when we receive Christ into our hearts we are justified. He abides in us through His word. Justification is not superficial; it is actual when we become partakers of God's nature through faith in Christ alone. The power of God in justification is creative, and is, therefore, instantaneous in its action.

We need God's justification in our present lives. Our present good deeds in sanctification are imperfect and so we need the righteousness of Christ to justify us continually. Justification by faith brings us into harmony with God's law and enables us to keep His law. Those who are justified or made righteous, live righteously because they "live by faith."

I want to end this paper with part of a letter written by Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China that illustrates the need of understanding justification on a practical level. While in China

²² White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 394.

²³ *Selected Messages*, vol. 3 p. 194.

²⁴ Ellen White, MS 148, 1897 from *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1098.

²⁵ White, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p.1178.

working as a missionary He was covered with Christ's righteousness while striving for faith and peace and confidence, none of which he experienced for quite some time. In this letter written to his sister Amelia (Mrs. Broomhall), in England, he shared his experience:

"...I felt assured that there was in Christ all I needed, but the practical question was – how to get it out. He was rich truly, but I was poor; He was strong, but I weak. I knew full well that there was in the root, the stem, abundant fatness, but how to get it into my puny little branch was the question. As gradually light dawned, I saw that faith was the only requisite – was the hand to lay hold on His fulness and make it mine. *But I had not this faith....*

Unbelief was I felt the damning sin of the world; yet I indulged in it. I prayed for faith, but it came not. What was I to do? When my agony of soul was at its height, a sentence in a letter...was used to remove the scales from my eyes, and the Spirit of God revealed to me the truth of our *oneness with Jesus* as I had never known it before. (I quote from memory):

"But how to get faith strengthened? Not by striving after faith, but by resting on the Faithful One." As I read I saw it all! "If we believe not, he abideth faithful." I looked to Jesus and saw (and when I saw, oh, how joy flowed!) that He had said, "I will never leave thee."

"Ah, *there* is rest!" I thought. "I have striven in vain to rest in Him. I'll strive no more. For has not He promised to abide with me – never to leave *me*, never to fail me?" And...*He never will.*

As I thought of the Vine and the branches, what light the blessed Spirit poured direct into my soul! How great seemed my mistake in wishing to get the sap, the fulness *out* of Him! I saw not only that Jesus will never leave me, but that I am a member of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. The vine is not the root merely, but all—root, stem, branches, twigs, leaves, flowers, fruit. And Jesus is not only that: He is soil and sunshine, air and showers, and ten thousand times more than we have ever dreamed, wished for, or needed. Oh the joy of seeing this truth! I do pray that the eyes of your understanding too may be enlightened, that you may know and enjoy the riches freely given us in Christ. ²⁶ (Emphasis original)

²⁶ Taylor, Dr. and Mrs. Howard, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*. London: China Inland Mission. 1935. pp 114-116. (also: <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/biotaylor11.html>)

