

A Historical View of the Theological Term “Justification”

At Easter, we celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ, the Son of God who was born as a man. He came primarily for the purpose of dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, so that God the Father could satisfy his sense of justice and still offer saving grace to sinful people. Christ provided “atonement,” which means reconciliation with God. One aspect of that atonement – and thus of our salvation – is “justification,” which means that God declares us to be righteous in his sight by accounting to us the righteousness of Christ. Examples of this justification in scripture are found in Romans 3.21-26 and Philippians 3.9.

In the fourth century, arguing against the views of Pelagius, Augustine brilliantly defended the scriptural understanding of man’s sinful state and need of grace. Augustine explained that to be saved each person needed God to extend grace that would cause the person to understand and accept the significance of Christ’s sacrifice for him- or herself. To Augustine, salvation was entirely an act of God extending grace, with the human response being faith in that grace. In the year 431, bishops from churches all over the world gathered for the council of Ephesus, and they chose Augustine’s views over those of Pelagius: they declared that salvation was by grace through faith, not by works.

At about the same time, the church was shifting from Greek to Latin as its official scholarly language. The Greek term for “to be justified” meant “to be *declared* righteous.” Thus “justification” in the Bible was a *declaration* of righteousness, it was God *declaring* a sinful person to be righteous in God’s sight by accounting to that person the righteousness of Christ, on the basis of the atoning [reconciling] sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In Latin, however, the term used for “to be justified” meant “to *be* righteous,” so “justification” developed a new meaning in the church of “to *become* righteous.”

As the Roman Church came to dominate the western churches over the next couple of centuries, Latin became more entrenched as the official language of the church, and this new concept of justification became accepted throughout the church’s teachings. Instead of seeing justification as a one-time declaration of righteousness by God at the time of a person’s acceptance of Christ in faith, the church came to see it as a life-time transformation of the person into righteousness. This Roman position combined two Greek biblical concepts, that of justification [to be declared righteous] and that of progressive sanctification [to be made more experientially righteous over time].

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, there was a revival in the study of Greek and thus in the study of the Greek scriptures and early church writings. These studies led to the Reformed view of returning to the original understanding of justification: that God *declares* a sinful person to be righteous in God’s sight by accounting to that person the righteousness of Christ, on the basis of the atoning [reconciling] sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This shift in understanding was one of the major reasons for groups breaking away from the Roman church and becoming known as “Protestants.” While not all Protestant groups agree, this understanding of justification as a declaration of righteousness is the view today of Evangelicals in all denominations.

The difference between the Roman Catholic view and the Evangelical view has important theological implications. In the Evangelical view, justification is a distinct though integrated part of the salvation process, complete at the time of conversion [acceptance of Christ in faith]. In the Roman Catholic view, justification involves even more than the entire conversion process, including sanctification too, the entirety of what is seen as an impartation of righteousness into the believer. As a result of this difference, Evangelicals believe they have assurance of their salvation because this declaration has been made by God and is based on the righteousness of Christ, while Roman Catholics are ever concerned over whether they have received enough righteousness from God to be saved, and thus their idea of salvation becomes grace-inspired faith-plus-works instead of grace-inspired faith alone. Thus, ironically, the Roman Catholic position as it developed over time went against the position of Augustine and the Council of Ephesus.

In 1999, the Roman Catholic Church and the Worldwide Lutheran Federation signed the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” While the two sides did not fully agree on all aspects of the doctrine, they did agree that justification is by grace through faith, not by works, thus agreeing with the ideas of Augustine and the Council of Ephesus. The Roman Catholic Church thus officially moved away from the stance it had taken at the time of the Reformation, at the Council of Trent, which was that one could never have assurance of justification, because righteousness was based on a change in the believer and works increased that righteousness. The Roman Catholic Church also apparently is departing from its 1994 Catechism, which states that justification is the remission of sins plus ongoing sanctification and renewal of the inner person.

However, there is dissension in the Roman Catholic Church over this issue. Edward Cardinal Cassidy, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, criticized the declaration because he believed the Roman Catholic Church had moved too far off of its centuries-old tradition. He said eternal life [or salvation] is “grace and the reward given by God for good works and merit,” and that through the “sacrament of penance” a person can be “justified anew.” Cassidy apparently has no qualms about being in opposition to the views of Augustine and the Council of Ephesus.

Philippians 3 shows a distinction between God’s declaration of accounting [imputing] Christ’s righteousness to the believer [“justification” or “positional sanctification”] and the command to begin to live up to that righteousness in a process of ongoing sanctifying grace. What is important – regardless of what church you attend – is to understand the scriptural teaching that we are saved based on the righteousness of Christ, not based on our own righteousness. None of us could ever be righteous enough to be worthy, so we can take comfort and have assurance that our justification before God is based on God, in his saving grace, choosing to account to us the righteousness of Christ, even when we are new to faith and not yet much changed by his sanctifying grace. This is the great hope that Christ brought to the Earth that first Easter. This is the great gift of grace Augustine and the Council of Ephesus cherished.

Two Views of Justification

Imputation View

God declares a believer to be righteous [“justified”] in his sight by accounting [imputing] to the believer the righteousness of Christ.

This justification is totally an act of grace, a gift by God based on Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross.

This correlates with the views of Augustine and the Council of Ephesus that salvation was by grace through faith, not by works. That view is taught in numerous places in scripture.

Because justification is complete at the time of conversion to faith in Christ, and because it is totally based on the righteousness of Christ, the believer can have assurance of salvation at the time of conversion and forever.

This view is based on the oldest copies of the New Testament, which were written in Greek, and is supported by the Greek writings of the early church.

This view is held by Evangelicals of all denominations today.

Impartation View

God causes a believer to be more righteous by imparting righteousness to him.

This justification is partially an act of grace based on Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, but increases as the believer does specific good works, such as the sacraments.

This is salvation by grace through faith and works, thus in contradiction of the views of Augustine and the Council of Ephesus, and in contradiction of the teachings of scripture.

Because justification is ongoing and based in part on the works of the believer, the believer can never know if he is truly saved, if he has received enough righteousness to be saved.

This view is based on the Latin Vulgate, which changed the definition of justification because of differences in terminology in the Latin language compared to biblical Greek.

This view is largely held within the Roman Catholic Church, though the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” suggests the church might be moving toward reconsidering its official stance.