

The Means of Justification

To ensure that we hold true doctrine it is vital that we fully examine all the Biblical passages that pertain to a given subject and balance them. It is by exaggerating one verse, and ignoring other controlling scriptures, that false teachers develop heretical doctrines. Most faulty theological systems demonstrate a failure to properly examine (or often completely ignore) all the related texts.

This is an especially important principle when dealing with the crucial doctrine of justification. It is by fixing on one verse that false teachers go astray. For example, the Bible does say that justification is by works (Jm 2:25) – but that statement has to be balanced with the wealth of teaching, and very clear statements, explaining that justification is not by meritorious human works at all. Clearly James means something else, as we will see in due course.

The Bible actually tells us that justification is established by a number of things, and all these must be examined, explained and collated into a cohesive, sane unit of theology. It will not do to ignore any of them.

Since justification by faith alone is being assailed from every corner these days, it is helpful to look at these scriptures. But first we must make some introductory statements to help those who may not have considered this matter fully.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENTS

What is justification?

As regards salvation of men,¹ justification is the establishing of a person as righteous in the eyes of God and his moral law. It is a legal term signifying that a person has fully satisfied God's righteous demands. God sees a justified person as being without sin. In the Gospel it is a judicial act of God that declares a man to be righteous. Justification is the opposite of condemnation and means that a man is acquitted from legal wrongdoing. It is not just pardon and forgiveness of sins, but also establishing in a new legal state of righteousness.

What is the position of God in justification?

In justification God does not act as a king in an arbitrary and sovereign manner. He does not set aside the law in order to pardon those he has chosen. In justification God acts as a judge; he makes a declaration of acquittal on the basis of the law being satisfied and sin's penalty being suffered by Christ. Justification is not the arbitrary forgiveness of a person with no righteousness, but the declaration that a man is indeed righteous in Christ.

What is involved in this declaration of righteousness?

1. Pardon from all sins.
2. Satisfaction of the law's demands.
3. Reconciliation with God.
4. A new legal, righteous standing before God.
5. Peace with God.

¹ The word *justification* has various senses in scripture, such as the justification of a man's word to be true (vindication - Isa 43:9), validation of behaviour (Ezek 16:51; Matt 11:19), the justification of God (proclaiming his righteousness - Lk 7:29) and so on. The underlying theme is the declaration or proof of what is right.

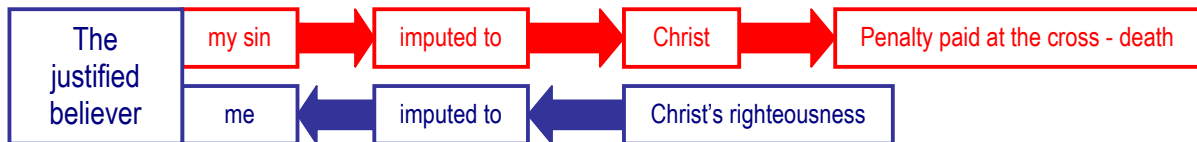
What is immediately connected with justification?

1. Regeneration – new life in Christ. This precedes justification.
2. Adoption as a legal heir of God with Christ. This follows justification.
3. Fellowship with the Holy Spirit. This follows justification.
4. Assurance of salvation and God’s fatherly providence. This follows justification.

In human experience there is no discernible time lapse in all these logical processes.

How is justification established? What is the ground or basis of justification?

It is established by the imputation (accounting, crediting) of a man’s sins to Christ, whereby they are paid for by the death of Christ; and then through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer so that he stands in the value of that righteousness. The only ground of a believer’s justification is the righteousness of Christ. Christ’s righteousness is the result of his active obedience (actively fulfilling the law) and passive obedience (submitting to death on the cross) - as a man.



Human faith and obedience to the Gospel command are not the ground or cause of justification. The Bible never says that justification is *on account of* our faith. Our actions do not procure pardon from sin.

The righteousness by which a believer ever stands before God is thus a gift. It is not an inherent or infused righteousness but the value of the obedience of Christ given freely. The merit of Christ’s lifelong obedience to the law is given to those with Gospel faith. Good works performed after conversion add nothing to our righteous standing before God. Our sins committed after conversion take nothing away from our righteousness. The sole basis of our standing before God, as legally justified, is the righteousness of Christ.

What is the means (instrumental cause) of justification?

Divine faith! This faith is not a human power, but a gift from God given to the elect in time. However, once given to a man through God’s grace, it is exercised by that man as an act of the regenerated spirit. While faith is not the cause of justification, it is a necessity of it. There is no merit in faith, but there is a need for it which cannot be minimised. This faith is focused on Christ as man’s sacrifice and involves trust in Christ’s shed blood to forgive sins. It is a looking away from the self and trusting in God for pardon. Faith apprehends Christ’s righteousness. Faith is the instrument God gives to the elect to gain Christ. The free gift of Christ’s righteousness imputed to the believer has to be personally received by faith. The Holy Spirit uses faith to bring people into Christ.

Faith justifies not because it merits justification for us by its own worth, but because it is an instrument by which we freely obtain the righteousness of Christ.

Faith does not proceed from ourselves, but is the fruit of spiritual regeneration.

John Calvin, *Inst.* Book 3:18.p931; *John* 1:p43.

Justification is not sanctification or regeneration

Papists, and sadly some Baptists, teach that justification changes a person’s state, that a person is made inherently righteous by it. They say that man’s moral nature is renovated

by the act of justification;² but this is to confuse justification with regeneration and sanctification. Justification does not change a person's moral character, but declares him 'not guilty' on the basis of another's righteousness. It is a legal declaration of forgiveness and acceptance, not a change of moral nature. It is objective and forensic (related to open law courts), not subjective and hidden.

God and the Lord Jesus are both said to be justified (Lk 7:29; 1 Tim 3:16) but clearly no moral change is indicated, rather it refers to a public declaration of righteousness. Notice also that justification is the opposite of condemnation. Since condemnation does not mean making a good man bad but is the legal sentence of punishment by a judge, neither does justification mean the process of making a bad man good; it is the formal sentence of acquittal by a judge. Confusing these doctrines leads to a host of problems.

Justification is a judicial change from guilt to pardon; not an experiential change from sin to holiness. We can tabulate some differences from regeneration – but we must remember that these two operations are closely connected, indeed are inseparable, in experience.

Regeneration ³	Justification
Regeneration proceeds justification	Justification follows regeneration.
An act of God as Father.	An act of God as Judge.
Changes my nature.	Changes my legal standing.
An internal change of constitution.	An external change of status.
Impartation of divine life.	Imputation of Christ's righteousness.
Gives believers a place in God's family.	Establishes believers' place before God's throne.
Symbolised by the change of heart of the prodigal son and desire to repent.	Symbolised by the placing of the best robe on the prodigal and being brought to the father.

Neither is justification to be confused with sanctification. Sanctification is moral and experiential while justification is judicial; but again the two are closely connected. There is no sanctification without justification.

Justification ⁴	Practical Sanctification
Operates on the Christian externally (a declaration from heaven that is received in the heart).	Occurs within the Christian (a real change in the heart).
Relates to man in Christ.	Relates to Christ in man.
Occurs once and instantaneously.	Continues over the lifetime.
Wrought for us by Christ.	Wrought in us by the Spirit.
Is the beginning of sanctification.	Is the end of justification.
Affects all believers the same way.	Differs according to the variety of the Spirit's gifts.
Involves moral status.	Involves a new creation.
A judicial act of declaring righteous.	An act of making believers holy.
Effected by a righteousness outside us.	Is a righteousness wrought in us.
The law satisfied by another.	The law worked into the heart.
Regards the penalty of sin.	Regards the dominion of sin.
Is a forensic (legal) action.	Is actual and real.
Sin removed as regards liability & punishment.	Sin is gradually removed in real experience.
An external righteousness applied and imputed.	An inward righteousness worked in, imparted.
Based upon Christ's sacrificial death and merit.	Christ produces holy works in the believer's life by the Spirit.
Man passive in regards of grace.	Man co-operates actively with grace.

² Jesuit John Bligh states that 'justification is more than forgiveness, it is forgiveness plus transformation'. (*Galatians*; St Paul Pub. 1969, p42). Sadly, there are Baptists that teach exactly this Romanist doctrine.

³ Suggested and adapted from AW Pink; *Justification*, p195.

⁴ Taken from Paul Fahy; *Sanctification*.

THE BIBLICAL MEANS OR INSTRUMENTS OF JUSTIFICATION

Now we have stated that the means, or instrument, of justification is only faith – justification is *by* or *through* faith alone. However, scripture shows us that several other things are also stated to be instrumental of justification. How do we relate these items to each other?

The following verses state what justification is *by* -

Justified by grace

- He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that having been justified by His grace [*charis*] we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Titus 3:5-7
- Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness. Rm 3:24-25
- For the judgment *which came from one offence resulted* in condemnation, but the free gift [*charisma*] which *came from many offences resulted* in justification. Rm 5:16
- Through one Man's righteous act *the free gift came* to all men, resulting in justification of life. Rm 5:18

When Paul teaches that justification is by grace, he is explaining the source of our salvation. The absolute foundation of pardon for sins and reconciliation with God is the free gift of Christ's righteousness; salvation is by grace alone. There is nothing man can do to attain this state of righteousness, neither can he purchase it with any offering, it can only be received since it is a gift. However, as Paul (and scripture generally) explains in many places, this gift is not offered to all, but only to the elect, chosen in Christ in eternity.

Justified by Christ

Justified by Christ. Gal 2:17

In God's good pleasure, the way salvation is achieved for man is through the work of Christ as atoner, Saviour and Redeemer. Salvation cost God. God sent his Son to suffer and die in order for the sins of the elect to be blotted out. Thus justification is by Christ and none other. There is no other means whereby man's sin can be remitted, only through Christ's work.

Justified by Christ's blood

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. Rm 5:9

The work of Christ encompassed his whole human life. He earned righteousness through his total obedience to God's law while on earth and became the perfect man, the pattern for God's sons. At the cross he suffered and died, paying the full price of the law for all the sins of the elect. The scope of this suffering is unimaginable. On the cross the work of atonement was finished and in his human life the Lord Jesus drank the full cup of God's wrath against sin to the very dregs. All the fury of God's hatred against sin was poured on his own Son in order to make payment for the sins of the chosen. Thus justification is achieved by Christ's blood. We are justified by Christ's blood, justified as a result of his life given up to death on our behalf, as our substitute.

Justified by Christ's resurrection

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 offences, and was raised because of [*dia* = for] our justification. Rm 4:24-25

The Lord was then raised from death by the glory of God and this showed that the sacrifice of Christ's life was accepted by the Father. Thus Jesus ascended in honour to the right hand of the Father's glory, becoming the firstborn of many brethren. If Jesus had not been raised there would have been no validity in his death and no certainty of our salvation. His resurrection is utterly crucial in affirming the success of Christ's work. Thus justification is ratified by the resurrection.

But it also established a new life, the life that Christians share when they are placed in Christ. Jesus' resurrected life brings us into a relationship of righteousness with God. His blood cleanses us from sin, and then he gives us a new, resurrection life (the new nature) which is the life of Christ himself. We are now in Christ, united with his life. Jesus' death paid for our sins, his resurrection means that he is working for us in a new life (Rm 5:10). We now receive grace through sharing the life of Christ which enables us to reign in life (Rm 5:15-17). Without the resurrection, there could be no regeneration. Without regeneration there could be no faith. Without faith there could be no justification.

Justified by faith

- A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Rm 3:28
- Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Rm 5:1
- A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. Gal 2:16
- Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. Gal 3:24

The way salvation is appropriated by men is through faith and by no other means or instrumentality. We will examine this further shortly.

Justified by the Spirit

But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Cor 6:11

The way the merits of Christ's atonement are transmitted to the elect is through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit draws, calls, washes, regenerates and sanctifies. He gives the elect faith to believe and repentance to obey Christ and follow him as master. Without the work of the Spirit there would be no experience of justification.

Justified by works

You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Jm 2:25

What James is saying here is more of an exhortation; there is no validity in claiming to be a Christian, and thus trusting that one is justified, if there is no commensurate evidence of Christ-likeness in one's life. True justification will result in following Christ and growing holiness of character. James is not teaching that man receives pardon for sins by meritorious works, but that good works follow those who have been justified and thus proves the experience is genuine.

Right at the beginning of his letter he speaks of the testing of faith (1:3, 12) and not being deceived (1:16, 22); he even says that some people's religion is 'useless' (1:26 without power, devoid of truth, of no purpose). He also states that the 'faith' of some is just superficial (2:14), these people merely 'say' they have faith but have no solidity. It is in this context that James affirms that faith without works is dead (2:20); i.e. it is false human belief, not divine faith. Thus justification is truly manifested in lives that have been

inwardly changed and empowered, lives that do good works by God's grace. Justification is thus evidenced by good works.

This is entirely in accord with the teaching of other apostles:

He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. 1 Jn 2:4-5

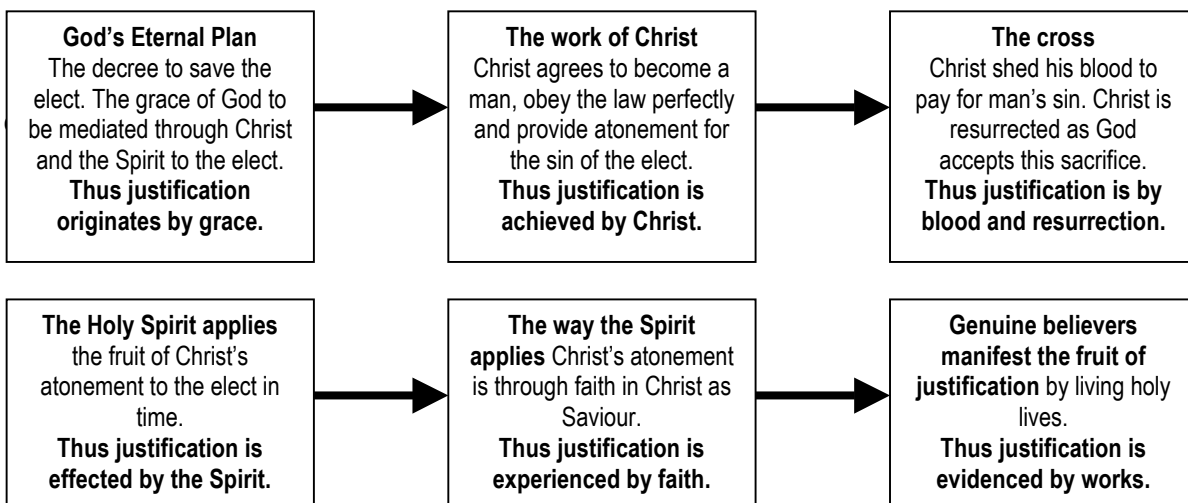
They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him. Titus 1:16

While genuine faith is a working faith, in that the true Christian evidences his faith by the subsequent works in his life, justifying faith is not a working faith [a faith that works]. This faith is an act, but not a work. Justifying faith is an action that rests and trusts in Christ alone. It is the reaching out of an empty hand to receive God's grace. There are no human works included in the faith that justifies – such as love to God or repentance. Scripture is very clear on this; justification is by faith alone and not by any work of man. Therefore, the faith that believes unto justification is not mixed with any human works of any kind. The belief is not a human work. However, after conversion, faith works through love (Gal 5:6) and faith itself is a work of the new man (Rev 2:19). Only a justified, regenerated, sanctified man can do works pleasing to God, not a sinner seeking salvation (Eph 2:8). Good works are only done by virtue of union with Christ (Eph 2:10; Phil 2:13) and thus prove the presence of eternal life.

To him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. Rm 4:5

Alignment of the items involved

We need to understand these items in a sequence flowing down from the eternal plan and decree of God regarding man's salvation. There is no confusion, just additional information. It can be simply tabulated as follows:



Thus justification is initiated by the free grace of God; accomplished by Christ through His obedience and shed blood; applied by the Holy Spirit, experienced by faith in the regenerated believer and evidenced in good works.

This echoes the Reformation slogans that subsisted in the *solas* (Latin for 'alone'). Justification is by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*per solam fidem*), in Christ alone (*solus Christus*).

The work of Christ in the gracious plan of God, applied by the Spirit, is the formal cause (basis) whereby God can justify sinners. However, the gift of faith exercised by the elect is the instrumental cause (means) of justification.

For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2

Cor 5:21

... being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Rm 3:24-26

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Due to the vital importance of this subject in our experience, we need to give an additional explanation of this particular aspect of God's plan. Getting this matter right is the difference between orthodoxy and outright heresy. Many sects claim to teach justification by faith and yet deny the true Biblical doctrine.

Some, like the Romanists, claim to believe in justification by faith in Christ, but do not teach that justification is by faith *alone*. They add things to faith, such as various works, penance, masses, confessions and so on, claiming that these proceed from faith, love and grace. Other groups make faith itself the ground or cause of justification, so they 'believe' by their own power and do not hold Christ as Lord and Saviour (Socinians). Yet others have flawed views of faith as being something intrinsically human, or human with an added divine edge (Arminians).

This matter is truly a defining issue of orthodoxy and must be properly considered. Denial of the word 'only' in connection with faith is a key mark of heresy. Why? Because a denial of 'only' means the inclusion of 'and'; if justification is not by faith alone, then it is by faith and certain works. This completely dishonours the work of Christ and the plan of God in salvation, as well as denying extremely clear scriptures.

Explanation of the key propositions used in connection with the instrumentality of faith

For

Faith is accounted for righteousness. Rm 4:5, 9, 22

'For' is the Greek primary preposition εἰς *eis* (Strong's 1519) meaning: into, unto, to, towards, for, among. 'For' does not imply (as some charge) that the act of believing is itself imputed for righteousness instead of Christ's righteousness. *Eis* does not signify 'in the place of' but rather 'with a view to', or 'unto'. Faith looks to Christ and lays hold of the promise of the Gospel based on Christ's shed blood.

Faith relies on the Gospel promise and is the means of obtaining it. Faith is not the ground, foundation or cause of justification. There is no human merit involved either before or after the exercise of faith. The merit is only in Christ.

By

This word has two expressions in the Greek NT:

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Rm 3:28

'By faith' – πίστει *pistei* (dative case of the noun *pisteos*).

Rm 5:1

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Rm 5:1
 'By faith' - ἐκ πίστεως *ek pisteos* (*ek* = out from, out of, by).

This clearly demonstrates the instrumentality of faith in procuring justification.

Through

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God. Eph 2:8

διὰ *dia* - a primary preposition denoting the channel of an act (Strong's 1223), meaning: through, by the means of, on account of. *Dia* with the accusative case would mean 'on account of', and if attached to *pisteos* in this way would teach that faith was the ground of merit of justification instead of Christ. However this prepositional form of *pisteos* (*dia ten pistin*) never occurs in the Greek New Testament. Faith is the means or instrument of justification but not the cause or ground.⁵

Thus all the prepositions used in scripture to explain the means of justification definitively state that faith is not the cause, ground or meritorious reason for justification. The terms point to the fact that the cause of justification is something else – explained in context as the work and righteousness of Christ.

We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our souls open to seek Christ's grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ.
 John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.7.

Faith is emptiness filled with Christ's fulness; impotency lying down upon Christ's strength.
 JL Girardeau, *Calvinism & Evangelical Arminianism*, Sprinkle (1984).

Justification is by faith alone

Although there is no scripture that uses this actual phrase, the Bible teaches with utmost clarity that this is the case. If justification is not by faith alone then it is by works, or a mixture of faith with works. Yet the Bible strongly affirms in many places that justification is not by human deeds of any kind, but it is only by faith. We will mention only a few verses just from one book:

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight. Rm 3:20

He [God] might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Rm 3:26

A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Rm 3:28

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. Rm 4:5

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Rm 5:1

⁵ Historic Arminianism is just one of the heresies which teaches that man's faith is the ground or basis of justification. Thus the act of a sinner's believing becomes his own righteousness. Something has to merit righteousness, and since Arminianism, Fullerism, Socinianism, Grotianism (Governmental Theory) and others, deny that Christ's substitutionary death procures justification, they teach it is man's faith that warrants it. Some modern 'evangelical' teachers are also deliberately perverting the doctrine of justification and deny substitutionary, penal atonement in order to enable a compromise with Rome. NT Wright and Steve Chalke are but two of these. Other movements, like Federal Vision, are adding human works to faith. The examination of the words used in scripture, and very clear texts, show that these ideas are completely without Biblical foundation.

Believers are justified as a result of receiving the free gift of divine faith and exercising this faith to apprehend the forgiveness and righteousness that is freely ours in Christ. The only means, or channel, to obtain justification is the faith that God gives to the elect alone. Thus there is no meritorious cause in man to be justified; neither is there any means other than faith.

Conclusion

Scripture explains that justification is 'by' several things: God's sovereign grace, Christ's work, death and resurrection (active and passive obedience), the Spirit's application of Christ's work and divine faith given to the elect. The effect of justification is seen in the good works evidenced in the elect. As regards the experience of believers in this life, justification is by faith alone, and this faith is the gift of God (Eph 2:8).

It is crucial that believers understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Firstly, this doctrine is highlighted by Paul, especially in the book of Romans, as being of the utmost importance; therefore it must be carefully considered. Secondly, if we understand it properly, and do not confuse it with regeneration or sanctification, then we will avoid a number of erroneous doctrines spread abroad amongst evangelicals today. Thirdly, justification itself is being besieged by a number of assaults from supposedly Reformed quarters; so much so that a growing number are teaching that justification is by faith and works mixed together. Never was there such an important time when this doctrine needed clarification and Biblical exposition.

Justification is founded only upon the work of Christ and the gift of his righteousness. It is experienced in time through the gift of divine faith given to the elect alone. Through it the elect are declared legally righteous, are forgiven their sin and granted a place in heaven's throne room. They stand before God in a legally sanctioned place of honour, being considered not only as without any sin at all, but also clothed in the righteousness of God's own Son.

May God be glorified for his grace.

Therefore *it is* of faith that *it might be* according to grace. Rm 4:16a

Acknowledgements

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- | | |
|------------------|--|
| Joel R Beeke | Article: 'The Relation of Faith to Justification', in <i>Justification by Faith Alone</i> ; Soli Deo Gloria, (1995). |
| David J Engelsma | Email forum on <i>Justification by Faith Alone</i> , to subscribers. |
| John H Gerstner, | Article: 'The Nature of Justifying Faith', in <i>Justification by Faith Alone</i> ; Soli Deo Gloria, (1995). |
| AA Hodge | <i>Outlines of Theology</i> , Thomas Nelson & Sons, (1883). |
| AW Pink | <i>The Doctrines of Election & Justification</i> , Baker (1974). |

Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version*

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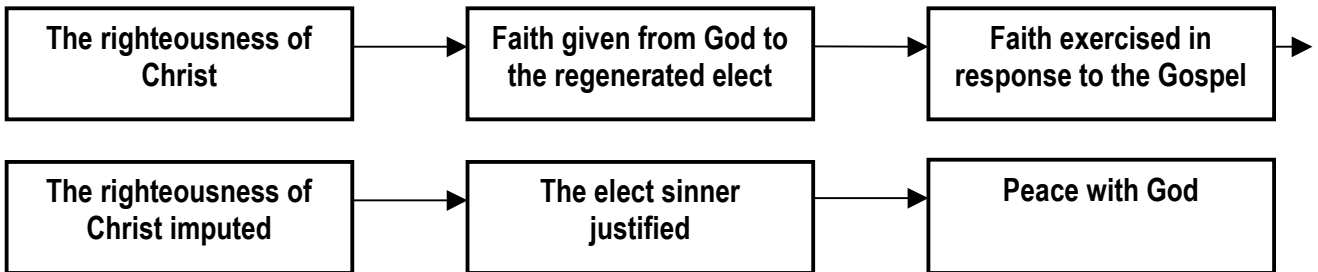
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Appendix One

ERRONEOUS VIEWS ON FAITH AND JUSTIFICATION

Faith over-emphasised	When viewed as a condition of justification; a human act based on grace. Example: Arminianism.			
Faith under-emphasised	When viewed as merely a fruit of an eternal justification; a reception of the Spirit's witness. Example: Antinomianism.			
Denial that faith is exercised by the believer at all.	Claim that the faith is Christ's own faith and that the cross alone justifies. Example: radical Reformed ideas.			
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Faith</td> <td><i>mixed with</i></td> <td>Works</td> </tr> </table>	Faith	<i>mixed with</i>	Works	Justification is achieved by faith added to human works. Example: Romanism, Federal Vision.
Faith	<i>mixed with</i>	Works		
Faith as a human work	Justification is achieved by human faith, or a working faith. Example: Socinianism, Fullerism.			

The Biblical view



Biblical summary:

1. All the world [is] guilty before God. Rm 3:19
2. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Rm 3:23
3. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight. Rm 3:20
4. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed ... the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. Rm 3:21-22
5. Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as a* propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness. Rm 3:24-25
6. He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Rm 3:26
7. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Rm 3:28

Faith is the sole instrument by which the sinner receives the righteousness of Christ (by imputation) ... the obedience of Christ in the stead of the elect sinner is the sole righteousness of the justified sinner. ... All the works of the sinner are excluded in justification, whether [as the] instrument by which the sinner is justified or as part of the sinner's righteousness with God.

David J Engelsma, *Justification Forum*; Instalment 22.

Appendix Two

A SUMMARY OF SOME ERRONEOUS 'EVANGELICAL' POSITIONS

We can only skim the surface of these false doctrines. References will be made for further reading.

Faith under-emphasised – the notion of eternal justification

In this position justification becomes merely an awareness of the Spirit's witness to an existing justification that occurred in eternity. Some Antinomians, particularly certain Baptists, teach that all the benefits and results of justification took place in eternity and the elect are never depraved men in the way that the reprobate are. Arthur Pink says,

What is the relation of faith to justification? Antinomians and hyper-Calvinists answer, Merely that of comfort or assurance. Their theory is that the elect were actually justified by God before the foundation of the world, and all that faith does now is to make this manifest in their conscience. This error was advocated by such men as W. Gadsby, J. Irons, James Wells, J.C. Philpot. That it originated not with these men is clear from the fact that the Puritans refuted it in their day.

AW Pink, *The Doctrines of Election & Justification*, Baker, (1974) p.237.

For instance, a certain modern Baptist preacher⁶ states that:

- *We were sanctified, set apart ... and made holy by the eternal decree of God.* But how can we be made holy without the cross?
- *We were justified in Christ then, in God's eternal decree. All who were called were, at the same time, by the same decree, justified freely by the grace of God.* But how can the grace of God be applied without the Holy Spirit applying the benefits of redemption? He confuses the decree of election with justification.
- *We were declared just with God, absolved of all sin and guilt, forgiven of all iniquity, made righteous by divine imputation and accepted as perfectly righteous in the beloved, in Christ our Surety before God spoke the world into being.* God cannot lie; how can he state that we are perfectly righteous and then later state that we are dead in trespasses and sins, enemies of God? How can we be forgiven all iniquity, absolved of all sin and at the same time be said by Paul to be sinners: *There is none righteous, no, not one* (Rm 3:10). As Calvin says, 'Faith justifies ... as it introduces us into a participation of the righteousness of Christ.'
- *He justified us in His eternal decree ... our sins were cancelled before they were committed. Our debt was paid before it was incurred... We were justified in Christ before we were fallen in Adam... From everlasting ... He looked upon us as justified.* In Rm 5:1-2 Paul says that we have access to justification and grace by faith. If we had no access to it before, then we did not have the benefits of it. Justification follows faith.
- *From everlasting ... we were considered righteous ... the righteousness of Christ was imputed to us.* Paul says that Christ died for the ungodly, when we had no spiritual strength or capability (Rm 5:6). How can Christ see us as ungodly yet God view us as redeemed and righteous at the same time?
- *He called us His sons ... in His eternal decree, looking on us as his dear Son ... We were accepted in Christ before we were banished in Adam.* Yet scripture states

⁶ Don Fortner published in *New Focus*, Vol. 9.4, Dec/Jan 2005, p8-9.

unequivocally that, by nature, we were children of wrath before our conversion (Eph 2:3).

- *The whole package of salvation was given to us in Christ ... before the foundation of the world.* If this were true then we would already have new, glorified spiritual bodies, a crucial aspect of eternal salvation. We would also have no actual sin today.

It seems almost incredible that this idea, that a real justification by faith in time does not exist for believers, can be accepted by anyone – yet it is strenuously taught in some circles. In a nutshell:

1. It denies clear scriptures: such as Rm 4:6-8 which teaches that imputation of Christ's righteousness is in time not eternity.
2. It denies that the elect are enemies of God (Rm 5:10; Col 1:21) and children of wrath (Eph 2:3) just like other men until they are justified by faith in time. Indeed Paul emphasises that we were 'just as the others'.
3. Reconciliation with God is by the death of Jesus, and this death occurred in time (Rm 5:10-11; Eph 2:16; Col 1:20).
4. Justification is stated to be by faith, and this faith is only given to the elect in time after the cross. The elect are unable to believe before they were born and regenerated.
5. If faith is not really a necessity, since the elect are already justified from eternity, and if all the benefits of grace are theirs from before they were born, then all the elements of salvation seem hardly worth bothering about – faith, repentance, good works, fighting the enemy, resisting temptation, growing in grace etc. Also assurance is very flaky since the personal foundation of the believer's peace with God is a mystical event they did not actually experience. Indeed, many people following this teaching lack real assurance of faith.
6. Faith cannot be exercised for justification without regeneration, but regeneration cannot occur until a person has been born as a human being.
7. It confuses justification with election. We were chosen in Christ in eternity, but we are actually called, regenerated, justified, sanctified, preserved and glorified in time.

Justification of the elect is decreed by the Father in eternity but is made possible in time by the cross and work of Christ and is applied to the elect in their lifetime by the Spirit.⁷

For further information see my paper, *The Controversy Over The Doctrine of Eternal Justification*.

⁷ Note on Rev 13:8, *All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.* This verse is sometimes used, by those who teach eternal justification, as meaning that the value of the atonement was actually applied to believers before they were born. The cross and all the benefits of the cross applied to people who were not yet created. In fact, the most natural reading of the Greek is that it is the names of the elect that were written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. *From the foundation of the world* could technically relate to 'the Lamb slain' but this is far more artificial rendering. Thus it should read, 'Written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the slain Lamb.' This concurs with Rev 17:8, *And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world.* Even John Gill admits this interpretation is valid and comments on it. NB 1 Pt 1:20, *He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you;* Jesus was decreed to die in eternity but was only manifested in time. He could not be slain before he assumed human nature. Christ is appointed to die from eternity but the benefits of atonement are only applied in time by faith. These benefits can be received by those before the cross who applied true faith (OT saints) and those who live after the cross. But the actual benefits of atonement are not given to men who are not even created. The fruit of salvation does not hover as a package in heaven in eternity; it applies to those who exercise faith in God's deliverer. One can adopt the alternate interpretation of the verse if by it one means that Christ is appointed to die from eternity – this is true. What cannot be done is to teach that the actual benefits of the cross existed in some mystical, way and were applied to the elect, before man even created.

Human faith denied altogether – a radical & unsupported Reformed view

Some extremists, who call themselves Reformed, have stated that the faith which is exercised for justification is not their own expression of faith, but is the personal faith of Christ. They deny the instrumentality of our faith to receive justification, which is said to be, effectively, God paying us for our faith. They state that justification occurred at the cross and has nothing to do with an individual's faith. Faith thus becomes a manifestation that we were justified at the cross. The reason for this is to avoid any form of works in justification. Some claim that Gal 2:16 teaches this.

Like the previous example, it teaches that the actual justification of the elect occurred in the past (only not quite so far back) and does not need any human interference. However, the real problem with this is that it also denies the scriptures and becomes as dangerous a heresy as meritorious works.

The simple facts are:

1. The ground of justification is not Christ's faith but his righteousness. We are not justified because Christ believed for us, but because he suffered for our sins as our substitute and then gave us his own righteousness.
2. Scripture teaches that justification is received by faith, it is not a mere manifestation of Christ's faith and a past justification at the cross. **Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.** (Rm 3:28). **Since *there is* one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.** (Rm 3:30) The regenerated elect are justified by their faith; something they actually do in time. Justification follows this act of faith. It is personal to the believing man, [God is] **the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus** (Rm 3:26).
3. This act is compared to Abraham who believed and was reckoned (credited, imputed) as righteous. Abraham was justified because he believed in the righteousness provided by God; he exercised faith. Abraham understood the Gospel in Christ (Gal 3:8; Jn 8:56) and believed in it.
4. Justification is often distinguished from the cross in scripture, though they are closely connected. In Romans 3:24 Paul says that we are **justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**. Note this, justification is through the cross but is not the cross. The cross is not justification but the ground of it, the basis for it. Then Paul immediately in context explains that justification is by faith (v22, 25, 26).
5. Justification is by faith as the instrument, but is not on account of faith as if it were the basis. There is no human work involved.
6. The faith that justifies is a divine gift, a gift that continues and enables us to believe on Christ. In fact, we believe *into* Christ. No man can boast about this faith as a human work. Justification by the gift of faith proves that justification is by grace, not works. There is no sense of God being indebted to our faith by which he pays us off with justification. This is ridiculous.
7. Justification is by receiving the gift of righteous that Christ merited by a perfect work; the faith that receives this is a gift of divine grace. There is no sense in scripture that justification is earned in any way.
8. This teaching denies the work of God in the human consciousness. This is a serious matter. By seeking to defend God from the suggestion of human works, it denies God's work in man. It is the error of Uzzah seeking to support the ark (2 Sam 6), when God is quite capable of supporting his own work. God works justification in the elect by means of a divinely given faith, which the person actively exercises. This is according to his eternal plan of salvation. Justification is not something forever outside of our experience. It is a sin to deny this work of God in man.

9. If we are not justified by a gracious faith exercised in our own consciousness, then we are not justified at all. The divine verdict of ‘not-guilty’ must be sounded in our own heart, not just at the cross.
10. Gal 2:16 does not teach that we are justified by the faith of Jesus as opposed to faith in Jesus. It is not Christ’s faith that justifies us. Firstly, faith is not the ground or basis of justification anyway, as we have seen earlier. The basis of justification is Christ’s righteousness. Secondly, the Greek text is ‘the faith of Jesus Christ’. The grammatical case here is the objective genitive, or Christ as the object of faith. The meaning is therefore, our faith in Christ. This is confirmed since Paul immediately adds, ‘even we have believed in Jesus Christ’. Paul’s point is that faith, looking to and trusting in Christ, is the instrument of justification.

We are justified by believing, actively, with a faith that is persuaded of the truth of the promise. Justification is an act, a verdict, of God the judge in our own consciousness by means of our believing for forgiveness and righteousness on His Son Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

David J Engelsma⁸

Meritorious works added to faith – Federal Vision, New Perspective on Paul

The modern heresy, more common in the UK, subsumed in the umbrella teachings of the New Perspective on Paul initiated a threat to overturn the Biblical understanding of justification. Being a new way of understanding scripture, especially the book of Romans, it proposed that justification had nothing to do with being saved, but was about covenantal inclusion, or something that shows a believer is in relationship with God. Justification merely recognises those who will be God’s people at the end. Righteousness thus becomes a declaration of belief in Christ and imputation is strenuously denied. Though the language becomes confusing, justification becomes based on works; indeed many writers openly admit this, especially with a view to the final judgment.

Federal Vision, more common in the US, is another form of modern works-righteousness heresy. This is based on the idea of a conditional covenant within Presbyterian churches that results in justification with God being partly established by Christ’s work and partly by the believer’s legal obedience. Good works mixed with faith become part of a man’s justification in a very similar way to Romanism. Indeed, many Federal Vision advocates have eventually apostatised and joined the Roman church. Using certain interpretations from the New Perspective on Paul, some Federal Vision teachers have said that the law is observable; the denials of legal merit by Paul being dismissed as applicable to ceremonial laws only. Like the New Perspective, it affirms that justification is not a legal declaration of imputed righteousness but is combined with sanctification.

Like Arminianism and Fullerism the corollary teaching is forced upon them that election is merely a decision by God based upon someone believing in time and remaining faithful; a sort of rubber stamp founded upon man’s performance. Thus election is conditional on man’s faith; it can be resisted and lost. Consequently, like all semi-Pelagian systems, Christ’s atonement is universal.

The foundation of these systems is that works undergird justification.⁹

⁸ I am indebted to David J Engelsma for some of the ideas in this section.

⁹ For further information on these and the other heresies see my paper, *The End-Time Erosion of Justification by Faith*. Some parts of this are adapted from that paper.

Faith over-emphasised - Arminianism

A key distinctive of Arminianism is that it makes believing the work of man. Atonement, Arminianism teaches, is made for all men by the work of Christ because God loves everyone. However, since not all men believe, then the fault must lie with man. Thus only those who exercise faith in this universal atonement are justified. Note that this means that Christ does not actually secure anyone; the whole weight of salvation rests upon those who chose to believe by an act of their own will. Needless to say this is completely unbiblical; but we cannot delve into all the details of this error here.

The crux of the matter, for this paper, is that the teaching of Arminianism on justification is false. Not only does Arminian theology contradict the Bible in the matter of the five points of Calvinism, but it also teaches an erroneous means of justification. For the Arminian, God accepts the faith of the sinner as the basis of justification; the sinner's faith becomes his righteousness with God. The sinner's work of faith is regarded as a substitute for perfect obedience to the law and is worthy of eternal life. The standard has been reduced from the perfect obedience of Christ to the obedience of human believing.

Now some Arminians defend their position by saying that this faith is not a human inspired work but is a work based upon prior grace. Evangelical Arminians (following Wesley) teach a prior or prevenient grace (a resistible, universal, sufficient grace as part of the Gospel) available to all but only utilised by some (Rome has a similar view). It is this use of grace that enables them to believe, and thus be justified. But this is all sophistry. Such universal prevenient grace is unbiblical – grace is only obtained by the elect and emanates from the cross. There is no grace to reprobates. But, even so, this idea still makes believing a work of man. Some men believe by their own volition, aided by a mystical grace, some men do not believe. The difference is a work of man. For Arminians, the act of believing is a human good work, no matter how it is dressed up, and it is the work of a person who is not totally depraved, someone who can do spiritual good. Repentance and faith thus precede regeneration, contrary to scripture.

The Bible explains that the ground of salvation is the work of Christ and faith is the instrumental means, given by God in regeneration, to secure justification by God. Man has nothing to contribute and can do no work to secure this justification. Arminianism, however, teaches that man is not only fundamental in justification – it relies completely upon his own faith. While the power of salvation is in the atoning merits of Christ, the real foundation of salvation rests upon man's own faith.

Arminianism not only over-emphasises faith, but it declares that man's will and man's work procure justification.

Underneath this error lies others, such as a conditional election, a refutation of total depravity, resistible grace and so on, but also a denial of the death of Christ as a penal substitute for a limited number chosen by God. The Biblical belief that Christ fully satisfied God's wrath on the cross must result in Christians believing that all those for whom he died are definitely saved. This is denied by Arminianism.

Faith as a work – examples: Finneyism, Fullerism, Grotianism, New Divinity

Some Arminians, Amyraldians¹⁰ and Semi-Pelagians¹¹ took the Arminian over-emphasis on faith to extremes that verge on outright Pelagianism¹² and Socinianism.¹³ They all deny the value of Christ's penal and substitutionary work on the cross in justification.

The extreme errors of revivalist CG Finney verge on Pelagianism. The confused system of the Baptist Andrew Fuller is close to Socinianism. Feeding both of these was the Moral Government theory of the atonement developed by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), spread via New Divinity¹⁴ in America. This denied Christ's substitutionary atonement and put in its place the theory that the cross was merely illustrative and a moral impetus. It proposed that Christ did not die as a substitute for man's sin, but suffered as a perfect example of a man who honoured the law. This death is then arbitrarily accepted by God to satisfy the law that sin demands death. Also included was an emphasis upon natural moral law as the normal governing feature of human actions known to the conscience, not as the rule of God's revealed will. God controls the world by moral influence rather than predestination. Men are encouraged to obey moral law by natural means; a denial that God decrees the salvation of particular sinners.

Andrew Fuller taught an unbiblical view of law and atonement. He elevated the powers of man, denying the effects of the Fall, total depravity, imputation (of Adam's sin and Christ's righteousness) and even denied the penal, substitutionary death of Christ. Consequently, he denied unconditional election, justification by faith and effectual calling. For Fuller, justification is by human righteousness obeying natural (un-revealed, universal) moral

¹⁰ Or Hypothetical Universalism. In a nutshell, this is the attempt to compromise Calvinism by teaching a universal atonement, but wedded to an acceptance that divine election is still required since people do not naturally believe. Thus God loves everyone, but in the end chooses who will be saved. The universalism is merely hypothetical and the system utterly confused and self-contradictory. Yet it is the position of many modern titular Calvinists.

¹¹ Semi-Pelagianism was a 5th century attempt to reconcile Augustinianism (the doctrines of grace, denial of human ability) with Pelagianism, becoming the basis for many future compromises on free grace. It taught that man, though fallen, was not spiritually dead and has some power to do good, but needs grace as well. Man co-operates with the Spirit in regeneration and initiates it by free will. Man's decision is supreme and election is denied. This synergistic system (where man co-operates equally with God, the basis of Arminianism) forms the essence of all future synergistic errors which deny election, total depravity, limited atonement and justification by faith alone.

¹² Pelagianism was a 5th century system of works righteousness that was developed by the British Celtic monk Pelagius and vigorously confronted by Augustine of Hippo. This denied the total depravity of man, the imputation of Adam's sin to all men, election, the need of redemption and essentially asserted that man could achieve his own righteousness. It elevated man's free will and claimed that man could obey the law sufficiently unto salvation, aided by Christ's example. It was the strongest teaching that contended against the sovereignty of God in salvation.

¹³ The heretical teachings of Leilo & Faustus Socinus (or Sozzini, 1539-1604). It denies the doctrine of the trinity and taught that Christ was just a man who became God's viceroy after his sinless life and resurrection. Denial of the atonement, teaching a form of governmental theory - Christ's death was merely an example of faith and obedience. There is no punishment for sin; men repent from their own power. Faustus also denied the person of the Holy Spirit, predestination, original sin, total depravity and hell. In a way, he was the first liberal theologian.

¹⁴ *New Divinity* arose out of the ideas of Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), and Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) who introduced the governmental view of the atonement (Grotianism). Further deterioration continued under Timothy Dwight. The power of reason and human will became prominent thus diminishing man's depravity, alongside a new emphasis on law-work. Nathaniel Taylor (1786-1858) took the rationalistic erosion further and initiated what became known as *New Haven Theology*. This taught that man has the power of free-will and self-determination. Total depravity and the imputation of Adam's sin was abandoned. Then a universalistic system of atonement and rejection of penal substitution was taught alongside a complete denial of God's predestination. Man was seen as an innocent, free, moral agent with the power to sin or to save himself. Within a hundred years of Jonathan Edward's death in 1758, the strong Calvinism that had permeated New England had fallen into a theology of works-righteousness.

law; man repents from his own volition on seeing the cross as merely a good example (shades of Grotius). Even sanctification is by human endeavour without any involvement of the Holy Spirit. Fuller's theology is just about the worst type of works-righteousness that can be imagined coming from someone who called himself a Calvinist.

Fuller taught that justification comes about through understanding the nature, reason and fitness of things, being aware of God by nature, by obeying the moral law and accepting any revelation from God interpreted by reason.¹⁵ Justification is thus divorced from Christ's redemption. As natural, human repentance follows hearing the Gospel, a man is declared righteous by God - justification thus follows fleshly belief & repentance. The atonement is objectively for all but subjectively and conditionally only for those who have a mind for it; thus man chooses to get right with God unaided by grace.¹⁶ Effectively, a man's own righteousness saves him. It is a modern warning that many famous Calvinist preachers (especially in the US) are now promoting Andrew Fuller vigorously.¹⁷

All these systems go further than the Arminian emphasis upon human faith and will. They teach that justification is a virtual (or even an entire) act of man, either as a natural ability to obey law (Fuller, Grotius), or follow the example of Christ (Grotius), repent by human power (Socinus) or even by self-regeneration (Finney).

Note that with a variety of modern errors, such as: the widespread adoption of Arminianism amongst evangelicals, the popularity of Fullerism amongst Reformed Baptists, the continuing impact of Federal Vision in US Presbyterianism, the growth of the New Perspective on Paul in academia and the ongoing collusion with Rome everywhere, the modern evangelical church is beset with teachings about works righteousness. This is in full accord with God's warnings about the end times where man becomes the centre of his religion. The culmination of this will be in a global religious system that opposes and persecutes true Christianity. This current focus on man and works-righteousness is the breeding ground for the final apostasy.

¹⁵ Fuller, *Works*, Vol. 2, p349; Vol. 3, p781.

¹⁶ Fuller, *Works*, Vol. 2, p709.

¹⁷ For more information on Fuller see my booklet, *The Problem of Fullerism*,

Appendix Three

EXAMPLES OF THE ROMAN PERVERSION OF JUSTIFICATION

Note that some of these points are also manifested in other heresies, such as Federal Vision.

Justification confused with sanctification

This is the fundamental issue that results in numerous errors. Romanists define justification as, 'to make righteous', and thus insist that it follows an inner sanctifying change in the sinner's nature. The beginning of justification is righteousness infused in the believer and it is continued as the believer grows in righteousness. The Westminster Confession of Faith explains the Biblical position as opposed to this error in 11.1-2.

Justification is by faith

But by this Roman Catholics mean faith and works arising from faith that works. Faith justifies as it is energised by the operations of love. Thus human 'love-works' contribute to salvation.

Faith enables a person to gradually become righteous so that justification is a process lasting longer than life. Rome utterly denies justification by faith alone in the merits of Christ alone. Justification is not the remission of sins, but is united with sanctification and inward renovation (renewal) through receiving the grace and gifts operating in the Roman church (baptism, penance, confession, mass etc). The instrumental cause of justification is not faith but baptism.

For Rome, faith is 'informed by love' as the internal basis of legalistic human works. This faith is infused into a person at baptism, deleting past and original sin, then renewed by confession and absolution. Justification is thus initiated by the infusion of sanctifying grace. Sanctification and renovation of the inner man enable the believer to exercise faith and then works. Sin is only purged from a believer by gradual performance of works beginning with baptism and ending with Purgatory. Justification is only completed when all sin is purged away by works, and then the believer becomes fully righteous.

In essence, justification is obtained only after a person is baptised, exercises faith working through love, produces good works and finishes this off in Purgatory. However, specific quotes from Roman sources (such as The Council of Trent) have been worded to sound evangelical when taken as stand alone statements. However, it exposes its true colours when it curses the man that says, 'a sinful man is justified by faith alone, meaning that no other co-operation is required to obtain the grace of justification.'¹⁸ It also curses those who rely on Christ alone for justification, for those who teach the imputation of Christ's righteousness and those who claim that good works are merely the fruit of justification. These decrees still stand as authoritative for Roman Catholicism today.

Justification is by grace alone through Christ's righteousness

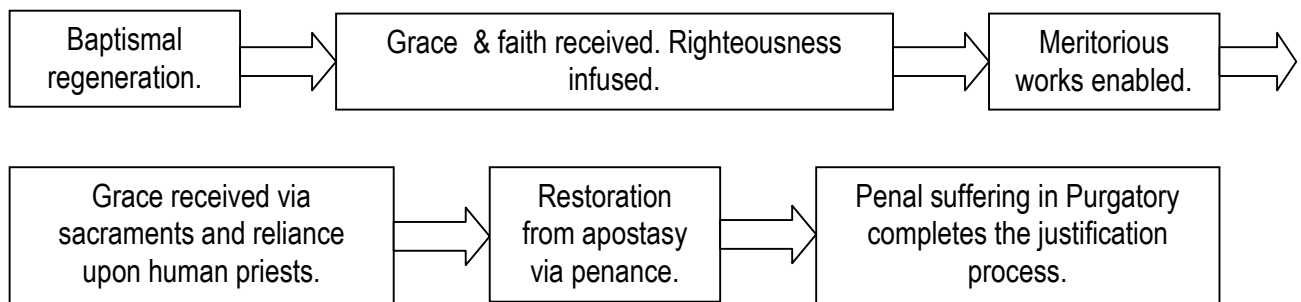
However, by this they do not mean Christ's own righteousness gained by his perfect obedience to the law imputed or credited to believers. They mean a righteousness that Christ infuses or works into a believer through the believer's own effort and behaviour – the sinner's personal righteousness performed by grace. The achievement is not Christ's but the believer's. It is based on an infused righteousness. For the Romanist, the merits of

¹⁸ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 'On Justification', 9:12.

Christ procured grace to make a sinner righteous leading the sinner to perform acts of righteousness – and these works become the ground, or basis, of justification. Thus at best the Roman doctrine is a mixture of Christ’s and the believer’s righteousness.

In addition, grace arises, for the Roman Catholic, through the believer’s works in the Roman church. Grace comes directly (*ex opere operato*)¹⁹ from the seven Roman sacraments (baptism, confirmation, communion, marriage, penance, ordination, extreme unction or ‘last rites’) and by using the many sacramentals with faith and devotion (*ex opere operantis*)²⁰ i.e. - holy oil, holy water, relics, blessed ashes, candles, palms, crucifixes, statues etc.

Summary of the Roman position



What is the key difference between Romanism and true evangelicalism?

The essential difference is this: the evangelical trusts in Christ to save him; the Roman Catholic trusts Christ to help him save himself.

¹⁹ ‘By the work performed’ – i.e. proper performance of the sacrament ensures that grace is automatically bestowed.

²⁰ ‘By the work of the worker’ – i.e. grace bestowed if the work is performed with sufficient faith and devotion.