

## Digital Resources Theology

# Justification by Faith

W.J. Grier

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**About the author:** William James Grier (1902-1983) was born in Co. Donegal, Ireland. He attended Queen’s University Belfast and later Princeton Theological Seminary, where he studied theology under Gresham Machen and Geerhardus Vos. On his return to Ireland, Grier was among the founders of the Evangelical Bookshop in Belfast in 1926 and of what became the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 1927. For many years, he edited the Church’s magazine and pastored the Stranmillis congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

**Summary:** two presuppositions – sinful humanity – the word “justify” – **Justification in the Old Testament** – three OT features – B.B. Warfield’s comparison – Zechariah 3:1-10 – **Justification in the Gospels** – anticipated in Jesus’ teaching – **Justification in the Epistles** – Romans 1:16-18, 3:21-26, 5:1, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:30 – 2 Corinthians 5:18, 21; Philippians 3:8-9 – the righteousness Paul speaks of – **Luther in justification** – the 95 Theses – Luther not precise on imputation – relationship between faith and justification – **Calvin on Justification** – Calvin more precise – Ambrose’s illustration – clarifying Calvin’s position – **The Present-Day State of Opinion** – Christ’s passive and active obedience – Spurgeon on Christ’s active obedience – A telegram from Gresham Machen’s deathbed – this doctrine hated in parts of Protestantism – Rome’s new stance – we refuse it.

## Justification by Faith

The question before us is “*How can man be just with God?*” No question can be more important than this.

These are the two biblical presuppositions of the doctrine of justification by faith. First, the absolute holiness and perfection of God, and second, the sinfulness and lost estate of men.

We have these before us in Isaiah’s vision (Isaiah 6). In fact, they confront us throughout the Bible, from the third chapter of Genesis onwards. In the light of these truths, the question is: How can man, a lost sinner, become right with the infinitely holy God? He demands perfect righteousness, saying, “Be ye holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44, etc.).

We have no holiness to present to him. This is emphasised in both the Old and New Testaments. The psalmist says: “*Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you*” (Psalm 143:2), and the prophet Isaiah says, “*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*” (Isaiah 64:6). As for the New Testament witness, it is sufficient to mention the apostle Paul’s indictment of the whole world, both Gentiles and Jews, as all under the judgment of God – all condemned – “*for all had sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

In discussing the Bible’s teaching on justification, it is necessary to say a word or two about the meaning of the word “justify”. In an address at the Irish Baptist College a few years ago, Professor John Murray declared that it was one of the perversities of the

Reformation controversy that it should ever have turned on the meaning of the word “justify”. Roman Catholic authorities have taken it to mean a *process of making* righteous, whereas orthodox Protestant theologians take it as an act of God’s free grace, *declaring* or *pronouncing* the believing sinner righteous.

There should never have been the slightest doubt about the meaning of the word. The Arndt and Gingrich Lexicon states that the word “justify” is used by Paul “*almost exclusively of God’s judgment*” or God’s verdict. The situation is much the same with the Hebrew word for justify (tsadaq), especially in its Hiphil form.

I need not dwell on this point, except to say that Lutherans such as Arndt and Gingrich, a Calvinist such as John Murray, an Anglican such as Alfred Plummer, and a Roman Catholic such as Hans Kung all agree that in Paul the word means “*to declare to be righteous.*”

## **I. Justification in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, we are not looking for the full Pauline doctrine of justification, but we find it anticipated there. We find the following features:

1. The idea of a righteousness that is not of works – a righteousness which comes from God – appears. In Isaiah 45:25, we read, “In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.” In Isaiah 53:11, we find the idea of justification through atonement, “*by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities*” (KJV). In Jeremiah 33:16, the Lord says of Zion: “This is the name whereby she shall be called, The Lord our righteousness.”
2. The idea of the imputation of righteousness in a negative sense. That is, the Old Testament speaks of the non-imputation of sin, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes not iniquity” (Psalm 32:1-2, KJV).
3. There is also indirect evidence of justification in the Old Testament religion, which is one of faith. We are not to seek the full apostolic statement on justification. The real

question is whether the Old Testament teaches salvation by works or salvation by grace. There should be no doubt about the answer. Faith is the centre of the Old Testament religion.

We may note two Old Testament statements to which the New Testament appeals in this matter. The first is in Genesis 15:6, "*he (Abraham) believed in Jehovah, and he reckoned it to him for righteousness.*" Abraham renounced all hope in himself in response to a promise that could be fulfilled only by divine power. The other statement is found in Habakkuk 2:4, "*the righteous shall live by his faith.*" Here, in contrast to the pride and glorying of the Chaldeans, the prophet presents an active trust in a sovereign God in a situation that is humanly hopeless.

There is no doubt that the New Testament gives this statement a fullness of meaning that was not so plain to the saints of earlier times. We are reminded of B.B. Warfield's comparison of the Old Testament to a room richly furnished yet dimly lit. The fuller light of the New Testament reveals the riches already there.

Among Old Testament passages that speak of justification, we should not pass over Zechariah 3:1-10, where there is a scene like that in a law court. Joshua, the high priest (the representative of the people), is arraigned, as it were, before the tribunal of God – clothed in filthy garments indicative of guilt – and Satan stands at his right hand as his accuser. Yet Jehovah rebukes Satan and orders the removal of the filthy garments and the provision of rich apparel, while the angel of the Lord looks on approvingly. What a picture this is of the removal of sin and the provision of a wondrous change of raiment.

## **II. Justification in the Gospels**

Now we come to the Gospels. We must remember that with the Jews in our Lord's ministry, "the dead letter of the law had taken the place of the living God" (Geerhardus Vos). Their religion was self-centred – a religion of outward observance. So, their hearts had become a fertile soil for self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

We must also remember that, in the Gospels – as in the Old Testament – we are not to expect the full statement of the doctrine of justification. The death of Christ and its atoning

significance lie at the basis of the doctrine, and that death had not yet taken place.

So it is “historically unwarrantable” to read the doctrine of imputed righteousness into the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, where the publican “went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14). The same applies to the parable of the wedding feast and the wedding garment (Matthew 22:11-12). In the teaching of Jesus, there is no sharp distinction between imputed righteousness and the righteousness of inward life and conduct. Indeed, in the Gospels, righteousness generally refers to conformity of heart and life to the will of God.

While Jesus does not give us a clear theological teaching on Justification, Paul’s teaching was certainly anticipated in Jesus’ teaching in three respects:

1. Jesus emphasised that in the pursuit of righteousness, the satisfaction of God should be the chief concern. Carried to its logical conclusion, this idea would demand a righteousness provided by God.
2. Jesus affirmed that the righteousness demanded by God is far greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. He said this in the Sermon on the Mount. We also read of a rich young ruler who claimed to have fulfilled the commandments, yet his standard was far too low, for the true standard was the holiness of God.
3. Jesus affirmed that this righteousness is obtained by true disciples – those who hunger for it will be filled, he said. It is for disciples only and rests on acceptance with God, which is by faith in Christ.

### **III. Justification in the Epistles**

As we come to the teaching of the Epistles, particularly Paul’s, we should note the progressive nature of revelation. It is like the harvest – first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.

“Paul “uses the conception (of justification) so frequently’,” says Dr Leon Morris, “that we are compelled to think that with him it was a dominant idea” (*Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 224). In

Romans 1:16-18, Paul states the great theme of this Epistle. It is *“the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth . . . for therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith to faith . . . for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”* (KJV).

He speaks of it again in Romans 3:21-26, *“Now apart from the law a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all who believe . . . that he might be just and the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus . . .”* Again, in chapter 5:1, *“Being justified by faith, we have peace with God.”*

Later in the chapter, he adds, *“those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ . . . For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous”* (Romans 5:17, 19).

In 1 Corinthians 1:30, we read that Christ Jesus was made unto us wisdom from God and righteousness. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, where Paul speaks of the *“ministry of reconciliation,”* he gives us the heart of the message of this ministry in verse 21, *“he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

In Philippians 3:8-9, Paul counts everything else as loss so that *“I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God (ek theou) that depends on faith...”*

The righteousness Paul speaks of is emphatically a divine righteousness – “one characterised by the perfection belonging to all that God is and does” (John Murray). It is revealed to us – if God had not revealed it, we would know nothing of it. It is identified with the “obedience” of Christ and is credited to those who believe, so that by His perfect obedience they are constituted righteous in the sight of God.

#### **IV. Luther on Justification**

Four hundred and fifty years ago, Luther nailed his theses to the church door. There is no mention of justification by faith in the

theses, but we should not think that Luther knew nothing of this great truth. It is clear from his lectures on Romans during 1515-16 and on Galatians during 1516-17, as well as from his letters of that period, that he did.

Luther had not yet, of course, broken with Rome. This is apparent in the theses themselves – he had not cast off the Pope, belief in purgatory was still implied, and he declared himself, not so much against indulgences as against their abuse. When the theses were re-published in his Collected Works in 1545, he wrote in the preface, *“I allow them to stand that by them it may appear how weak I was and in what a fluctuating state of mind when I began this business.”*

We must acknowledge also that, unfortunately, Luther was not precise in his statement of the doctrine. Let me give a few quotations which illustrate this fact:

1. From his lectures on Galatians delivered in 1516 (published in 1519): *“You will not be a Christian unless you cast away your own righteousness and rely on faith alone”* (on 3:8), *“on the basis of faith, grace and the blessing of justification would be given to all who believe on Him”* (on 3:12).
2. From the lectures on Galatians of 1531 (published in 1535), on Galatians 3:6, he says, *“faith begins righteousness and imputation perfects it till the day of Christ” . . . “These two things make Christian righteousness perfect, the first is faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift...; the second is that God reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness for the sake of Christ, His Son.”*

Dealing with the forgiveness of sin, from the same verse, he says: *“This is accomplished by imputation on account of the faith by which I begin to take hold of Christ; and on His account God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin, even though it really is sin.”* He defines Christian righteousness as *“a divine imputation or reckoning as righteousness or to righteousness, for the sake of our faith in Christ or for the sake of Christ.”*

Luther makes a clearer statement in the lectures on Romans 15:15-16, where he writes that Christ takes away all our sins *“and in exchange His righteousness is ours”* (on Romans 3:30).

It is evident that Luther lacked clarity about the relationship between faith and justification. It is false to say, as he does at points, that we are justified *“on the basis of faith”*. We are no more justified on that basis than on the basis of our works. The New Testament never says that we are justified on account of our faith. The sole meritorious ground of our justification is Christ and His righteousness. Faith is the instrumental cause – it is like the hand of a beggar stretched out to receive alms. It has no merit, for it is a self-renouncing grace, renouncing all human merit.

### **V. Calvin on Justification**

Calvin is more precise. He says, *“We simply explain justification to be an acceptance, by which God receives us into His favour and esteems us as righteous persons; and we say that this consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ” . . . “If faith were to justify of itself, or by an intrinsic efficacy, . . . being always weak and imperfect, it never could effect this but in part; and thus it would be a defective justification, which would only confer on us a partial salvation”* (Institutes III. 11).

Calvin closes this same chapter by saying that *“we obtain justification before God solely by the intervention of the righteousness of Christ”* and adding a beautiful illustration from Ambrose of Milan. He says,

*“Ambrose appears to me to have most elegantly adverted to the blessing of Jacob as an illustration of this righteousness when he says, ‘that as he who did not merit the birthright in himself personated his brother, put on his garments which gave forth a most pleasant odour, and thus introduced himself to his father that he might receive a blessing to his advantage, though under the person of another, so we conceal ourselves under the precious purity of Christ, our firstborn brother, that we may obtain an attestation of righteousness from the presence of God’.”*

Calvin is much clearer on this point than Luther. It is true that he

often speaks as if justification consisted solely in pardon or remission of sin. However, as William Cunningham points out, he did so simply “to deny and exclude the popish doctrine of justification,” which makes it include not only remission but a change of character. But there is no doubt that he based both pardon and acceptance with God solely on the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith.

## **VI. The Present-Day State of Opinion**

Many believers in our day emphasise the penalty-paying aspect of Christ’s work (sometimes called His “passive obedience”) but fail to emphasise or even recognise the law-keeping aspect (sometimes called His “active obedience”). The Bible emphasises both aspects. Both are included in “the obedience of the One” through which many are made righteous (Romans 5:19) – the obedience which culminated in His bloodshedding on the cross.

It was to Christ’s “active obedience” that Spurgeon referred when he said: *“I know I cannot enter heaven unless I have a perfect righteousness; I am absolutely sure I shall never have one of my own, for I find sin every day; but then Christ had a perfect righteousness, and He said, ‘There, take my garment, put it on...”*

It was to this also that Gresham Machen referred when he sent his last message by telegram from his deathbed: *“I’m so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”*

There is, however, a much more serious departure than neglecting Christ’s active obedience. In a large section of Protestantism, this doctrine of justification, which Luther termed *“the doctrine of the standing or the falling of the Church,”* has been utterly abandoned. It is disliked and, in some quarters, even detested. Not long ago, when a leading Anglican was giving his assent to the Articles of his church, he took a swipe at the Articles dealing with justification.

Of course, someone will point us, for our consolation, to Rome’s new stance. Have you not heard, they say, of Professor Hans Kung, who in a recent volume defines “justify” as “pronounce righteous” and makes mention of “justification by faith alone”. Admittedly, Hans Kung uses some Protestant language in the article referred to, which appears in *Christianity Divided* (published by Sheed and

Ward). But we refuse to be comforted, and for three reasons:

1. Hans Kung has also written a book in which he argues that the Council of Trent was substantially in agreement with the Protestant Reformers! Four centuries have passed, and it has been left to Hans Kung to make this incredible discovery! In fact, however, he has attempted the same impossible feat as John Henry Newman in Tract 90, namely, reconciling the doctrines of the Reformation with those of the Counter-Reformation.
2. Even in the article referred to in *Christianity Divided*, while Hans Kung uses Protestant language, he also uses language inconsistent with the Protestant Reformed faith. He writes, *"By being cleansed in the same baptism we have been justified and sanctified."* And in spite of disclaiming at one point the confusion of justification and sanctification, at another point, he seems still guilty of that old Roman error when he says, *"when God declares a man just, he draws him into the righteousness of God and thus effects a transformation of man's very being."*
3. There has been no repudiation of the Canons of the Council of Trent by Hans Kung, but rather the opposite. The same could be said for the Second Vatican Council. The Canons of Trent are full of ambiguity on this vital doctrine of justification – and also full of anathemas which seem to be aimed at the Reformers and their doctrines.

So then, we are called in our day to do battle for this truth, to proclaim it and glory in it, as the Reformers did. It was for this very doctrine that the apostle Paul made such a stand in the Epistle to the Galatians. He *"\_to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you"* (Galatians 2:5). Yea, he pronounced the tremendous anathema of God upon those who were undermining it. He did this out of a passionate love for the truth and for the souls of men. May the same love mark us today!

If some reader is not yet arrayed in the spotless robe of the Redeemer's righteousness, let him come, like Bunyan's pilgrim, to the cross, to receive pardon of all his sins and a wondrous "change of raiment." Then he can go on his way with a song on

his lips and in the strength of the Lord over hills of difficulty and through valleys of shadow till at last he passes triumphant into the city of God.