

## Justification by Faith Alone?

*“That upon which the Reformation stands or falls.”*

Often referred to as “the material cause” of the Reformation, the doctrine of justification *sola fide* (by faith alone) was a key point of debate between the Protestant Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, and it has remained a point of discussion ever since. Martin Luther and his followers expressed the doctrine of justification by faith alone by teaching that it is “the article by which the church stands or falls.” Given the perspective of history, it is clear that doctrine possessed enough adherents and provided enough theological substance to the cries for reform that led not just to another schism within Catholicism in the West, but to a Christianity separate and apart from the Catholic West.

Often discussions and disagreements about justification begin without the more foundational discussion of original sin, free will and Baptism’s sacramental nature (*or lack thereof*). If you have not read the companion article *The Reformations - Original Sin and Baptism* it is strongly recommended that you first read the article to ensure a firm grounding in the underlying issues that formed the debate.

During the 16th century Reformation, the term “justification” held significant theological importance and underwent intense debates and disagreements among various reformers. The concept of justification revolves around the question of how a person is made righteous before God and attains salvation.

In the theological framework of the 16th-century Reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, the terms “justification” and “salvation” were often used interchangeably or closely linked to each other. Justification, in the Reformation context, refers to the act by which God declares a sinner to be righteous or just/justified in His sight. It is seen as a legal or forensic declaration where God credits the righteousness of Christ to the believer, thereby pardoning their sins and accepting them as righteous through faith. Justification is considered an essential part of the salvation process.

The broader concept of salvation includes other elements, such as regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. All of these are terms which describe the spiritual life after justification and are not formally part of justification. Regeneration refers to the spiritual rebirth or renewal of the believer, bringing them from spiritual death to life. Sanctification is the ongoing process of becoming more Christlike and growing in holiness. Glorification is the final state of the believer's complete transformation into the likeness of Christ in eternity.

### The Council of Trent on Justification

You can read the whole of the decree online [here](#). What is important to remember is the the Council is not attempting a fully developed catechism, but are essentially commenting on the whole spectrum of reformed thought from Luther to the radical reformers. Here are some key points:

- All humanity is affected by original sin which neither nature or the Law of Moses can affect.
- Justification foundation is in Christ alone:  
*“But though He died for all, yet all do not receive the benefit of His death, but those only to whom the merit of His passion is communicated...so if they were not born again in Christ, they would never be justified, since in that new birth there is bestowed upon them, through the merit of His passion, the grace by which they are made just.”*
- Prevenient grace from the Holy Spirit predisposes adults to faith and accepting the unmerited grace from Christ alone.

- The Council briefly defines:  
*“Justification of the sinner, as being a translation from that state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior. This translation however cannot, since promulgation of the Gospel, be effected except through the laver of regeneration or its desire,”*
- The means of Justification is the Sacrament of Baptism. Anything before that (e.g. good works) has no merit in justification.  
*“If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema”*
- Yet we are saved by faith stemming from God’s unmerited grace.
- Our free will has the ability to cooperate (or not) with God’s grace. We may with grace persevere in faith - or we may choose to lose justification.
- *Note: the Council reserved its specific comments on Baptism to the Session on the Sacraments.*

### **Justification: Martin Luther**

Luther's main concern was the issue of human sinfulness and the inability of humans to earn or merit their own salvation. Luther argued that justification was solely based on faith, emphasizing the primacy of God's grace. According to Luther, humans were justified by faith alone (*sola fide*). Good works were seen as a product of faith rather than having a role in justification/salvation. He believed that faith was a gift from God, and it was through faith that individuals received the righteousness of Christ, which covered their sins and made them right with God.

Luther's understanding of the free will of the individual was closely tied to his views on justification. He believed that as a consequence of human sinfulness, the free will of an individual was bound or enslaved to sin. In other words, he rejected the idea that human beings had the ability to choose good or cooperate with God's grace through their own natural willpower.

Luther argued that without the intervention of God's grace, human beings were trapped in their sinfulness and unable to choose or desire God. He described the human will as "captive," emphasizing the total dependence on God's grace for salvation. Luther believed that even the good works performed by individuals after justification were ultimately the work of God's grace within them, rather than a result of their own autonomous will.

Luther's teaching on the bondage of the will had profound implications for his understanding of salvation. It underscored the necessity of God's initiative in justifying and saving individuals, highlighting the complete reliance on God's grace and the utter inability of humans to contribute to their own salvation through their free will.

Luther's teaching is that justification is the salvific moment in a person's life and it was due to faith alone (*sola fide*). Given his understanding of human sinfulness and captive free will, it leaves the question of how one obtains/receives "faith." According to Luther, faith was a passive reception of God's grace. It was not an action or work performed by individuals but a trusting and relying on the promises of God. He described faith as a "receiving hand" or an empty vessel that God fills with His grace and righteousness. In this sense, faith was seen as a complete dependence on God and His work rather than a human achievement. Luther emphasized that faith was centered on Christ and His redemptive work. It was through faith that individuals were united with Christ, and His righteousness was imputed to them. He

taught that faith came from hearing and receiving the Word of God, particularly the Gospel message, which proclaimed God's grace and forgiveness in Christ.

This raises the question whether Luther taught the “irresistibility of grace” - that God's grace operates in a way that His grace cannot be resisted. Luther did not teach this. He recognized the reality of human resistance and the potential for individuals to reject or neglect the grace of God. He acknowledged the ongoing struggle with sin in the Christian life and the need for continual repentance and reliance on God's grace. He believed that through the hearing of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of individuals, opening their eyes to the truth and leading them to faith. Yet, Luther recognized that not all who hear the Gospel respond in faith, as some may harden their hearts or reject the message.

Could one's justification be lost? Luther strongly rejected the idea that justification could be lost or forfeited through subsequent sins or failures on the part of the believer. He believed that once a person has been justified, they are eternally secure in their salvation because it is based on the unchanging work of God and the merits of Christ, not on the believer's own performance. This view affirms Luther's idea that justification was a legal declaration from God unconnected to our will, virtue, choice, or later behavior.

Luther argued that even though believers continue to struggle with sin and experience spiritual battles, their justification remains secure. He emphasized the ongoing need for repentance and faith, acknowledging that believers may fall into sin and need to seek forgiveness and restoration through confession and renewed trust in God's grace. However, he maintained that these acts of repentance and faith do not undermine or nullify the believer's justified state before God. He encouraged believers to cling to the promises of God, trust in the sufficiency of Christ's work, and rely on the sure foundation of God's Word. He believed that the faith given by God is a living and active faith that perseveres through trials and tribulations, ultimately leading to the final consummation of salvation.

### **Justification: John Calvin**

John Calvin found a different ground upon which his reformation would stand. He built upon Luther's ideas while also introducing his own theological insights. Like Luther, Calvin stressed the sovereignty of God in the process of justification. Calvin's writings reveal he agreed with Luther's understanding of human sinfulness leaving the human will in bondage, captive to man's own depravity.

Calvin taught that salvation was entirely a work of God's grace from beginning to end. He emphasized that it was God who, by His sovereign will, elected individuals for salvation and initiated the process of their justification and sanctification. In this view, humans played no active role in their salvation - at any point in their life.

Calvin taught that the Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, effectively worked in the hearts of the elect, granting them faith and repentance. It was the Spirit's regenerating work that enabled the elect to respond to God's call and embrace the Gospel. Calvin stressed that even the faith by which the elect were justified was itself a gift of God's grace, not something generated by human effort or will.

On justification, Calvin and Luther had shared beliefs: total dependence on God's will and grace. However, the major difference was rooted in Calvin's use of the term "the elect," a central aspect of his theological framework. The concept of the elect refers to those whom God has chosen for salvation.

Calvin taught the doctrine of unconditional election, which stated that before the foundation of the world, God, by His sovereign will and without any foreseen merit or worthiness in individuals, elected certain individuals to receive His saving grace. These elect individuals were chosen purely out of God's gracious and sovereign choice, not based on any inherent qualities or actions of their own.

Calvin believed that God's election was an expression of His divine will and purpose. It was an act of God's free and unmerited grace, rooted solely in His good pleasure. The basis of election was not found in any human works or merits but resided solely in God's eternal plan and purpose.

According to Calvin, the elect were predestined by God for salvation. Predestination referred to God's foreordained plan for the eternal destiny of individuals. God, in His sovereign wisdom, determined the eternal fate of each person, either for salvation or for condemnation. The elect, who were chosen by God, were predestined to receive salvation through the work of Jesus Christ and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The "unelect" were predestined for perdition. Their desire, will and certainly any "good works" were not relevant.

Calvin emphasized that the purpose of election was to magnify the glory and mercy of God. He viewed election as a means to showcase God's sovereign power, His unmerited grace, and His unwavering commitment to bring about the salvation of His chosen people. Calvin taught that the ultimate purpose of election was the manifestation of God's glory, not the exclusion or condemnation of others.

It is important to note that Calvin did not believe that the identity of the elect would be known with certainty by human beings. While he acknowledged the importance of living a life of faith and holiness as evidence of election, he cautioned against attempts to discern the eternal fate of individuals based on outward signs or personal judgment.

Calvin argued that God's predestining grace determined who would be justified and saved - that is, the elect. This "election" was an act of God's free grace, whereby he imputed the righteousness of Christ to believers - this was Calvin's idea of justification. This imputed righteousness was received through faith, which was also seen as a gift of God. However, Calvin also emphasized the transformative aspect of justification, where the Holy Spirit worked within believers to produce a life of holiness and good works as evidence of their faith.

Given Calvin's idea of "the elect" what is faith since the elect are already justified?

In John Calvin's theological framework, faith held a crucial role even for the elect who are already justified. While the elect are chosen by God for salvation and justified by His grace, faith is the means through which individuals personally receive and appropriate the benefits of salvation.

Calvin taught that faith was a gift from God and an essential response of the elect to the Gospel message. Though God has chosen the elect and justified them apart from any human merit, it is through faith that individuals personally lay hold of the salvation already prepared for them. Faith, from Calvin's perspective, is not a work or achievement of the individual but a receptive instrument by which they embrace the promises of God.

For Calvin, faith involves knowledge, assent, and trust. It begins with knowledge, as individuals hear and understand the message of the Gospel. This intellectual understanding is followed by assent, where individuals acknowledge the truthfulness of the Gospel and the sufficiency of Christ's work for salvation. Finally, faith entails trust or reliance on Christ and His finished work as the only means of salvation.

While the elect are justified by God's grace alone, Calvin maintained that faith is necessary for salvation because it unites the individual to Christ. Through faith, believers are connected to Christ's righteousness, His atoning sacrifice, and His victorious resurrection. Faith is the means by which individuals personally appropriate the benefits of Christ's work and become participants in the salvation accomplished for them.

Furthermore, Calvin emphasized that faith is not a one-time event but an ongoing reality in the life of believers. He spoke of the persevering nature of faith, as individuals continue to trust in Christ and His

promises throughout their lives. Faith, sustained by the work of the Holy Spirit, produces ongoing reliance on Christ's work and leads to a life characterized by obedience, love, and gratitude.

This still leaves open the question: did Calvin teach the doctrine of irresistible grace as part of his theological system? According to Calvin, irresistible grace, also referred to as efficacious grace or invincible grace, is one of the distinct aspects of God's sovereign work in salvation. Calvin believed that God's grace, when applied to the elect, is irresistible in the sense that it unfailingly accomplishes its intended purpose of bringing individuals to faith and salvation. He taught that when God chooses to extend His grace to someone, He does so with such power and efficacy that the individual cannot ultimately resist or reject it.

Calvin believed that because of the fallen state of humanity and the bondage of the human will to sin, individuals are incapable of responding positively to the offer of salvation on their own. Therefore, God's grace must be effectively applied to overcome human resistance and bring about the conversion and regeneration of the elect.

Calvin taught that through the work of the Holy Spirit, God's grace works internally and irresistibly in the hearts of the elect. The Spirit effectively and irresistibly illuminates the mind, opens the heart, and grants faith to those whom God has chosen for salvation. This work of the Spirit is irresistible in the sense that it ensures the conversion and belief of the elect, overriding any human resistance or opposition.

*(Note: adherents of this theology offer that Calvin's concept of irresistible grace should not be understood as a denial of human responsibility or a negation of genuine human choices. They argue that Calvin affirmed that the human response to God's grace is genuine and meaningful. However, he taught that the ability to respond positively to God's grace is itself a gift of God's sovereign and irresistible grace. It is hard to reconcile irresistible grace and human free will as understood by Luther or Catholic thought)*

In summary, John Calvin taught

- that justification/salvation was entirely a work of God's grace from beginning to end.
- Double-predestination: by God's sovereign will, and that alone, some are predestined for salvation and some for perdition. The elect receive God's grace to that end. The unelect do not.
- The doctrine of irresistible grace, which works irresistibly in the hearts of the chosen, effectively bringing them to faith and salvation.
- That while the elect are already justified by God's grace alone, faith is the means through which they personally receive and appropriate the benefits of salvation. Faith is a gift from God and involves knowledge, assent, and trust. It unites believers to Christ and is an ongoing reality that leads to a life of obedience and gratitude.

### **Catholic Thought: Justification and Sanctification**

In the 16th century Catholic understanding of salvation was understood in terms of "justification" and "sanctification." Both were seen as essential aspects of the Christian life, but they were distinguished in terms of their nature and timing.

Justification, from a Catholic perspective, referred to the initial act of God's grace that cleansed a person from the guilt of original sin and made them declared righteous before God. It was considered a single, unrepeatably event that took place at Baptism. Through the sacrament of baptism, the person received sanctifying grace, which was believed to infuse the soul with God's life and enable the individual to participate in the divine nature. This grace was seen as a free gift from God and not something earned by human effort. Justification was seen as a free, unmerited gift from God and that central idea was shared

with the Reformers. But the fracture point was how the gift was received. Catholic teaching was that the Sacrament of Baptism was the instrumental means by which God justified people. One instantly recognizes that the role of an individual's acceptance of the faith is not in play in the tradition of infant baptism - although the faith of the parent's is. One can ask, on what basis did the Church hold this theological vision?

*Biblical Basis:* The Church believed that the practice of Baptism as a means of initiation into the Christian faith was rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament. The Church pointed to passages such as Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 2:38, where Baptism is presented as a necessary response to the Gospel message and as a means of receiving forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

*Early Church Tradition:* Catholics argued that the practice of Baptism as a sacrament of initiation and justification had been consistently upheld by the early Church Fathers. They looked to the writings of figures like Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose of Milan, and Cyril of Jerusalem, who affirmed the salvific efficacy of baptism and its role in the remission of sins and the reception of grace.

*Liturgical Practice:* The centrality of Baptism in Catholic liturgical practice and the administration of the sacraments also reinforced the understanding of Baptism as the means of justification. The liturgy of baptism, with its prayers, rituals, and the invocation of the Holy Trinity, emphasized the transformative nature of the sacrament and its role in initiating individuals into the life of grace. These liturgical practices and understandings reach back to the earliest records of the Church.

Catholic theology understood justification as a transformative process where the individual was declared righteous by God and adopted as His child. It involved the forgiveness of sins, the removal of guilt, and the infusion of divine grace. It was believed that the merits of Jesus Christ, earned through His sacrificial death on the cross, were applied to the believer, covering their sins and making them righteous in the eyes of God. (*Note: for an adult being baptized, "sins" means original sin and all sins up to that point in their life*)

Sanctification, on the other hand, was understood as the ongoing process of growth in holiness and conformity to the image of Christ. It was considered a cooperation between God's grace and the believer's free will choices. After justification, the person was called to live a life of obedience to God's commands, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Catholic theology taught that sanctification involved the on-going cultivation of Virtues and the avoidance of sin - in other words, through the mindful and intentional practice of "good" works fueled by belief in the person of Jesus and the admonitions and commands of Sacred Scripture. It was believed that these good works, performed in cooperation with God's grace, merited an increase in sanctifying grace and furthered the individual's progress towards holiness because of the promises of Christ. The sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, were seen as a sure and certain means of grace that sustained and nourished the believer on their journey of sanctification.

The key difference between justification and sanctification in the 16th century Catholic understanding lay in their timing and nature. Justification was seen as the initial act of God's grace at baptism, where the person was cleansed from original sin and made right with God. Sanctification, however, was viewed as an ongoing process of growth in holiness throughout the Christian life. In Catholic understanding the path of sanctification is rooted in Scripture, especially Mt 5:48, "Be perfect (*teleios*) as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word *teleios*, better translated as "whole, complete" always has a future dimension. Hence what is begun in the sanctifying grace of Baptism is continued in the actual grace of the Eucharist,

Confessions, prayer, and the mindful good works done in cooperation with that actual grace. An important point lost in discussion is that these good works are not a means to earn justification - which can never be earned, but is always freely given by God. Good works have no role in justification in Catholic understanding. Good works are always fruits of faith and the response to God's grace. Sanctification always involves free will and the cooperation of the individual with God's grace.

Overall, the Catholic understanding of justification and sanctification emphasized the transformative work of God's grace in the life of the believer of the whole course of life, both at the initial moment of justification and in the ongoing process of sanctification. The Catholic Church and its tradition had always taught the concept of salvation as a process. In 1 Corinthians 1:18: Paul writes, "*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*" Here, Paul distinguishes between those who are perishing (those who reject the message of the cross) and believers who are experiencing the power of God and are in the process of being saved.

In Philippians 2:12: Paul exhorts the Philippians, saying, "*So then, my beloved, obedient as you have always been, not only when I am present but all the more now when I am absent, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*" In this verse, Paul urges the Philippians to continue living out their salvation, implying that salvation is an ongoing process that involves active obedience and growth in faith.

In 2 Corinthians 2:15: Paul describes believers as a pleasing aroma of Christ to God, saying, "*For we are the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.*" This verse again presents the contrast between those who are perishing and those who are in the process of being saved.

It is important to note that Paul also speaks of salvation in a past tense, referring to the initial act of justification by faith. For example, in Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul writes, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast.*" Here, Paul emphasizes that believers have been saved through God's grace, highlighting the initial act of justification.

It should be noted that prior to the Reformations there was no consensus in Catholic theology regarding the nature and conditions of justification as regards to the question of whether it could be lost. Some theologians, such as Dominican theologian Francisco de Vitoria, held that justification could not be lost once received. Others, like Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina, argued that justification could be lost through the rejection of God's grace or persistent refusal to cooperate with it.

The later Council of Trent emphasized the possibility of losing justification through mortal sin. The Council also held that God's grace is always available for forgiveness and restoration through the sacraments.

#### **450 Years After Trent**

The **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification** is a document created and agreed to by the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999 as a result of Catholic–Lutheran dialogue. It states that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." To the parties involved, this essentially resolves the Reformation conflict over the nature of justification which was at the root of the Protestant Reformation. The World Methodist Council adopted the Declaration on 18 July 2006. The World Communion of Reformed Churches (representing the "80 million members of Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting, and Waldensian churches"), adopted the Declaration in 2017.

The “groundwork” for this remarkable agreement was preceded in 1986 when the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) produced a statement called "Salvation and the Church", which observed that the two Communion are agreed on the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation and on the Church's role within it. The Anglican Church welcomed and affirmed the substance of the Joint Declaration.

Does everyone agree, now?... Given the 200+ independent denominations and thousands of independent Christian churches (not affiliated with a denomination) in the United States and 45,000 denominations worldwide, most formed in the tradition of the radical reformers of the 16th century, there is only the beginning of an agreement.

The JDDJ declares a common understanding of the central teaching of justification, stating that it affirms "the basic truths of the doctrine of justification" and identifies areas of agreement between Catholics and Lutherans. It acknowledges that the mutual condemnations expressed during the Reformation no longer apply to their respective teachings.

The document affirms that justification is by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), and highlights the importance of God's grace in the process. It emphasizes that justification is not earned by human works but is solely based on the merits of Christ, received by faith.

Furthermore, the JDDJ acknowledges that both Catholics and Lutherans agree that salvation is a gift of God and that humans cannot earn their own justification. It emphasizes the role of baptism in initiating individuals into the community of faith and affirms that justified believers are called to a life of good works in response to God's grace.

While the JDDJ represents a significant step forward in ecumenical dialogue and the reconciliation of theological differences, it also recognizes that there are remaining issues to be addressed. The document acknowledges that further dialogue and study are necessary to resolve the remaining differences in the understanding of sacraments, the role of good works, and other related topics.