

Present Truth

The *Bible alone* as the only rule of faith and practice; *faith alone* as the only means of acceptance with God; and *Christ alone* as the only mediator between God and men.

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Divine Acceptance

According to:

Catholicism

Protestantism

The Bible

Present Truth is a magazine dedicated to the restoration of New Testament Christianity in this generation. It is especially committed to upholding the truth of justification by faith in this time when it is being threatened by humanism, emotionalism, and ecumenism. Our publication is based on the principle of sola Scriptura – the Bible and the Bible only as a rule of faith and practice (2 Tim. 3:15-17). We desire to give the gospel trumpet a certain sound (1 Cor. 14:7-9), that through words easy to be understood (Hab. 2:2) people may “be established in the present truth” (2 Pet. 1:12) and like Noah be proclaimers of the righteousness of Christ (2 Pet. 2:5).

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Introduction: The Quiz

We are living in a time when the real distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism means very little to most people. Since the split nearly 500 years ago the lines have become blurred and we wonder why conflicts like Northern Ireland continue today. Did the church divide over sentiment and prejudice, or is there a fundamental difference between Roman and Reformation doctrine?

Many point to external forms as the reason for separation. But one must look deeper than symbols and icons. The heart of distinction lies in how a person is accepted by God. Must I be changed in order for God to accept me? Or, does God accept people in order to then change them? The question of divine acceptance reveals the deeper issues that divide Christianity. And the answer has eternal consequences.

Before considering this subject we invite you to answer four questions that will help focus your thinking. Mark (A) or (B) according as you think best. After reading the first article check your answers with the key page 8.

1. What work gives me acceptance with God?

- A. the work that Christ did when He lived on this earth
- B. the work the Holy Spirit does in my life

2. How do we receive divine acceptance?

- A. by means of our faith and love
- B. by means of faith alone

3. Where does justification (divine acceptance) take place?

- A. in the experience of the believer on earth
- B. in the courts of God in heaven

4. What does the verb “to justify” mean?

- A. “to justify” means: to declare righteous
- B. “to justify” means: to make righteous

Christians hold two basic positions. While they differ from each other, both use similar words to explain their views. Let's examine together this issue that separates the Christian church. First we will present the Catholic teaching and then the Protestant belief. After looking at the differences we will compare them with the Bible.



Divine Acceptance According to Catholicism

Many poorly informed Protestants think that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that a person finds acceptance with God through their good works. This idea has confused millions when trying to understand the real difference between Rome and the Reformation.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Catholic Church teaches that God accepts a person by grace alone. No human work forms the basis of divine acceptance but only the gracious work of God. Note the words of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

“Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is *favor*, the *free and undeserved help* that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Doubleday, New York, 1997, paragraph 1996, p. 538.

Ever since its conflict with the Protestant Reformers the Roman Church has maintained that salvation is by grace. In 1547 it stated this position in the *Canons of the Council of Trent*:

“If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be anathema.” Sixth Session, Canon 1.

The same emphasis on the grace of God in contrast to human merit also appears in modern catholic authors. In his book titled *The Theology of Grace* Catholic theologian, Jean Daujat writes:

“Of ourselves, we have not, and cannot have, merit, virtue, or holiness. It is Jesus Christ, living in us, substituting his life of grace for our natural, sinful life, who is our merit and our sanctity.” *The Theology of Grace*, (London, Burns and Gates, 1959), p. 145.

Scholar, P. Gregory Stevens OSB, takes the same position when he opposes the idea that justification is “something to be accomplished by a person through his own good works.” He concludes that “justification is a work of God bestowed on faithful men as a free divine gift.” *Life of Grace*, (The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1963) p. 32.

In his *Doctrinal Catechism*, Stephen Keenan makes this startling presentation:

“Q. *What is justification?*

A. It is a grace which makes us friends of God.

Q. *Can a sinner merit this justifying grace?*

A. No, he cannot; because all the good works which the sinner performs whilst he is in a state of mortal sin, are dead works, which have no merit sufficient to justify...

Q. *Why then do Protestants charge us with believing that the sinner can merit the remission of his sins?*

A. Their ignorance of the Catholic doctrine is the cause of this, as well as many other false charges.” pp 143, 144.

The Catholic Concept of Justification

The Church does not teach that justification is anything else than God’s gracious act. Those who imagine that Catholic theologians teach righteousness by man’s own works, do not understand the Catholic teaching.

In brief, Catholicism teaches that justification is God’s renovating act **within** man. Without this new birth, or regenerating act of the Holy Spirit, the Church declares that sinners can never be accepted by God. According to Rome the Holy Spirit’s renewal enables one to have love which produces faith. So justification is by means of **faith and love**. This divine acceptance is not just a change in God’s attitude in heaven but is an **experience** in the life of the believer on earth. For the Roman Catholic the verb “to justify” means “to **make** righteous”.

These four points may be summarized as follows:

1. The work that the Holy Spirit does in me is what gives me acceptance with God.

2. We receive divine acceptance by means of faith motivated by our love.

3. Justification (divine acceptance) takes place in the experience of the believer on earth.

4. The verb “to justify” means to make righteous.

Many proofs for these points exist but here it is sufficient to include just a few to demonstrate that the teaching of the Catholic Church has always been the same.

1. The work that gives me acceptance with God

God only accepts as children those who have been born again. Unless the Holy Spirit enters a person’s life and transforms him he cannot be accepted by God. This is the official position of Rome. The Council of Trent in Chapter III declared:

“...if they [men] 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.”

Or to paraphrase the words of Jean Daujat: “Sinful man cannot be pleasing to God without first being transformed internally. God must first cleanse and sanctify him so that he can be accepted by his Creator.” *Op. Cit.* p. 14.

The new catechism is clear:

“Sanctifying grace makes us ‘pleasing to God’.”

“Sanctifying grace is the gratuitous gift of his life that God makes to us: it is infused by the Holy Spirit into the soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Paragraphs 2024 & 2023, p. 544.

2. How to receive divine acceptance

Faith alone is not sufficient to bring justification. Unless it is accompanied by love and baptism, divine acceptance is not granted: “For faith, unless hope and charity be added to it, neither unites man

perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of His body.”
Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Chap. VII.

P. Gregory Stevens includes “an initial love,” “sorrow for evil done,” “baptism,” and the desire to begin a new life as part of man’s cooperation in *coming to justification* (Stevens, *Op. Cit.* p. 58).

“Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith.”
Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 1992, p. 536.

3. Where justification takes place

For Rome justification occurs in the experience of the believer on earth. It is an infusion of virtue, a transformation of the individual.

The editors of the Roman Catholic Douay Version make this footnote comment on Romans 3 and 4: “The justification of which St. Paul here speaks is the infusion of sanctifying grace.”

The new catechism says:

“Justification includes the remission of sins, sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man.” Paragraph 2019, p. 544.

The Council of Trent pronounces a curse on anyone who says that men are justified solely by imputation or solely by the forgiveness of sins. It adds that if anyone says “that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.” Sixth Session, Can. 11.

And P. Gregory Stevens writes the following:

“...justification is a real and profound transformation of man, a genuine gift of sanctification to him. It can in no way be reduced to something purely external...” *Op. Cit.*, p. 56.

“In a clear, religiously profound statement the Council [of Trent, Sixth Session, Chap. VII] defines the inner nature and structure of justification. It does so in direct opposition to the extrinsecist position of the Reformation.” *Ibid.*, p. 58.

4. The meaning of the verb “to justify”

The church of Rome teaches that “to justify” means: to make one righteous and not only, to declare one righteous. For her the verb means to transform or change:

“... justification... is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just...” *Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Chap. VII.*

A clarifying question is asked by the Catholic scholar Stevens: Is justification “merely like a statement of God declaring the sinner just? Or is it a divine act by which the sinner is internally transformed?” Then he answers: “Catholic thought has always been that the justice bestowed on man is... a true justice which actually transforms man into a person pleasing to God.” *Op. Cit.*, p. 33.

“Justification ... conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just...” *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Para. 1992*, p. 536.

Summary and Conclusion

The Catholic doctrine of justification may be accurately summarized as follows:

1. God accepts only those who have received an infusion of grace. They are justified because of what the Holy Spirit has done in them.
2. God accepts a person who's faith flows from a heart of love and is manifest in baptism.
3. Justification (divine acceptance) takes place in the experience of the believer on earth for it is an internal renovation and renewal.
4. Justification means that people are made just – made pleasing to God in their own persons.

According to the Catholic Church personal transformation is both the basis and the means of acceptance by God. A devout Catholic may say: “Righteousness by faith means that I cannot save myself, but by faith I can receive God's transforming grace. His grace can change my heart, and by his grace in my heart I can be acceptable in his sight.”

In the light of this article reconsider your responses to the questionnaire above: Check your answers: – The Catholic answers are: B A A B. – The Protestant answers are: A B B A



Divine Acceptance According to Protestantism

The Protestant Reformation also teaches that God accepts a person by grace alone. But it understands that this grace is an attitude of God – not a bestowal of God. For the Reformation the grace that justifies is found in the heart of God and not in the life of the believer. Martin Luther used the words “grace” and “gift” to make this distinction:

“The words GRACE and GIFT differ inasmuch as the true meaning of grace is the kindness or favor which God bears towards us of His own choice, and through which He is willing to give us Christ ... grace is sufficient to enable us to be accounted entirely and completely righteous in God’s sight, because His grace does not come in portions and pieces, separately, like so many gifts; rather, it takes us up completely into His embrace for the sake of Christ our mediator and intercessor, and in order that the gifts may take root in us.” “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans” *Martin Luther—Selections From His Writings* (Doubleday, New York), pp. 22-23.

Protestants believe that God embraces all that come to him trusting in what Christ has done and suffered. They understand that the grace that saves us provided a Substitute for sinners and that everyone who believes in Christ is accepted because of the perfect life and death of the Substitute. For them the basis of divine acceptance is solely the gracious work of God done in Christ 2000 years ago.

In 1539 Martin Luther wrote: "Our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law... sent His Son into the world and laid upon Him all the sins of all men, saying: ...see therefore that thou pay and satisfy for them." Then Luther sees the law exact of Christ the death that all these sins deserve. And he concludes that by this means God can accept those that believe. "Commentary on Galatians", *Ibid*, p. 138.

The Reformers understood that God's grace provided a perfect righteousness **in Christ** to those that believe. Their opponents laughed, because they imagined "righteousness to be a certain quality that is poured into the soul and then spread into all the parts of man." Luther responded that "this unspeakable gift excels all reason: God accounts and acknowledges him as righteous without any works who apprehends His Son by faith alone." – *What Luther Says*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass, vol. 3, pp 1229, 1230. And John Calvin wrote: "...to be justified means something different from being made new creatures." – John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XX). Bk III, Chap. XI, No. 6.

For the Reformation the gift of the Holy Spirit that regenerates us is the fruit and not the root of our acceptance.

The Protestant Concept of Justification

The Protestant Reformation teaches that justification is a heavenly declaration. A person is pronounced a child of God when he accepts the life and death of Christ as his only hope of glory. This declaration is an act of grace that occurs **outside** the individual. According to Protestants when a message about Christ is preached, faith is given and the person that believes is accepted by means of **faith alone**. This acceptance is a **change in God's attitude** toward the one who believes. And although this results in an experience in the life of the believer, the acceptance is not the same as the result. For the Reformation "to justify" means: **to count** one righteous.

These four points may be listed as follows:

1. The work that Christ did on this earth is what gives me acceptance with God.
2. We receive divine acceptance by means of faith alone.
3. Justification (divine acceptance) takes place in heaven.
4. The verb "to justify" means: to declare righteous.

In the writings of the Reformers and their followers these four points are clearly seen. Here are a few references to show the teaching of the Protestant Reformation.

1. The work that gives me acceptance with God

The Reformation teaches that God doesn't change his standard in order to accept a sinner. Unless a person has perfect obedience to the will of God and a complete atonement for his sins he cannot be accepted by God. Nevertheless, God accepts as children the ungodly who believe because their faith takes hold of Christ who is deserving of divine acceptance.

"God certainly desires to save us not through our own righteousness, but through the righteousness and wisdom of someone else ..." – Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids), p. 28.

"Believers are not under the Law, but under grace, because they have fulfilled it through faith in Christ, whose fulfillment of the Law and righteousness is ours." *Ibid.*, p. 105.

"... if we ask how we have been justified, Paul answers, 'By Christ's obedience' [Rom. 5:19 p.]. But did he obey in any other way than in taking the form of a servant [Phil. 2:7]? [No] From this we conclude that in his flesh, righteousness has been manifested to us..." – John Calvin, *Op. Cit.*, Bk III, Chap, XI No. 9.

"It was imperative that Jesus live a perfect life, that he fulfill every just demand of God... Why? So that this perfect life could be imputed to you... When you put your faith in Jesus Christ the perfect life of Christ is imputed to you. It is as if you had lived it. On the cross God treated Jesus as if he had committed your sins, even though he hadn't, so that he could treat you as if you had lived His perfect life, although you haven't." – John MacArthur, Sermon on John 17:4, Cassette GC 90-159.

2. How to receive divine acceptance

Faith alone is sufficient to bring justification:

"... true righteousness, which is perfect, everlasting... we may obtain only through faith in Christ." – Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 69.

“... we say that man is justified by faith alone [Rom. 3:28].” – John Calvin, *Op. Cit.*, Bk III, Chap, XI No.19.

John Wesley follows the Reformers’ lead when he asks “on what terms the ungodly are justified.” His answer: “On one alone; which is faith... Faith, therefore, is the *necessary* condition of justification. Yea, and the only *necessary* condition thereof.” – *Sermons*, Sermon V, pp. 49-51 (Beacon Hill Press: Kansas City, MO)

“... we are justified, not by faith furnished with charity, but by faith only and alone.” “Commentary on Galatians”, *Martin Luther – Selections...*, p. 116.

“Justification comes to us neither on *account* of our love nor our faith, but solely on account of Christ; and yet it comes *through* (by means of) faith. Faith does not justify as a work of goodness, but simply as a receiver of promised mercy... Faith is but the organ, the instrument, the medium; Christ alone is the satisfaction and the merit. – Brentius, Correspondence with Philip Melanthon, 1531, quoted in *God’s Way of Holiness*, (Evangelical Press, Hertfordshire), p. 21

“... in the matter of our justification before God, faith in Christ is the only thing needful. All that simply believe are justified. Righteousness is imputed ‘to him that worketh not but believeth.’ (Rom. iv:5) It is thoroughly Scriptural and right to say ‘faith alone justifies’.” – John Charles Ryle, *Holiness*, (Associated Pub. & Authors, Grand Rapids, MI), p. iv.

3. Where justification takes place

According to Protestants justification occurs in heaven. It is a statement of pardon and acceptance made by God and written in the records that he keeps there.

“Christian righteousness ... is the imputation of God for righteousness ... for Christ’s sake... God doth account and acknowledge him for righteous without any works, which embraceth his Son by faith alone, who was sent into the world, was born, suffered, and was crucified, &c. for us.

“... righteousness is not essentially in us ... but without us in the grace of God only and in his imputation.”– Luther, *Op. Cit.*, p. 131.

“... Paul ... includes the whole of righteousness in free remission, declaring that man blessed whose sins are covered, whose iniquities God

has forgiven, and whose transgressions God does not charge to his account. Thence, he judges and reckons his happiness because in this way he is righteous, not intrinsically but by imputation.” – John Calvin, *Op. Cit.*, Bk. III, Chap. XI, No. 11.

John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, says that the righteousness that justifies us “still resides in and with the person of Christ, even then when we stand just before God thereby... for... we are said... to be justified ‘in him’. Isa.45:24, 25; 1 Cor. 1:30.” Then Bunyan gives this illustration:

“Mark, the righteousness is still ‘in him,’ not ‘in us’; even then when we are made partakers of the benefit of it, even as the wing and feathers still abide in the hen when the chickens are covered, kept, and warmed thereby....

“Indeed this is one of the greatest mysteries in the world – namely, that a righteousness that resides with a person in heaven should justify me, a sinner, on earth.” – John Bunyan, *Justification by an Imputed Righteousness* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications. 1967), pp. 5-6.

4. The meaning of the verb “to justify”

The Protestant position is that “to justify” means to declare righteous. The word does not mean to transform or to change but to vindicate:

“[God] justifies us through faith in His Word. Through such faith He justifies us, that is, He declares us as righteous.” – Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 68.



“...justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.

“Therefore we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness...”– John Calvin, *Op. Cit.*, Bk. III, Chap. XI, No. 2.

“What is justification? ... it is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is sanctification: which is indeed, in some degree the immediate fruit of justification; but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature. The one implies, what God “does for us” through his Son; the other, what he “works in us” by his Spirit.” – John Wesley, *Op. Cit.* p. 46-47.

Summary and Conclusion

How Protestants understand divine acceptance may be summarized as follows:

1. God accepts only those who have perfect obedience to his law. In order to fulfill this requirement a person must have the life of Christ counted as their own.
2. All that Christ is, is counted ours when we believe. So faith alone is the means of being accepted by God.
3. This acceptance (justification) takes place in heaven where God pronounces righteous the sinner who believes in his Son.
4. To justify means to declare one to be righteous – to consider them obedient.

According to Protestants, divine acceptance is based on the work that Christ did while he lived in this world. This righteousness is **credited** to everyone who believes in him. A devout Protestant may say: “Righteousness by faith means Christ’s perfect life is counted as mine when I believe. God accepts me on the basis of a righteousness that is in Christ in heaven. By faith in this righteousness I can be included in God’s favor and his acceptance results in my transformation.”



The difference between Catholics and Protestants

The difference between Catholics and Protestants is illustrated by a simple question: Does God first accept people as his children in order to then change them in character? Or, does God first change people internally in order to then accept them as his children? Rome says that God only accepts those who are first transformed. The Reformation says that God first accepts people in order to then transform them.

Here is the parting of the ways between Rome and the Reformation: Rome teaches that a person is accepted because of what grace has done in his heart in this life, while the Reformation maintains that a person is accepted because of what grace has done in Jesus Christ in the first century. The difference is tremendous! For Catholics their hope of eternal life is found within themselves on earth. For Protestants their hope of eternal life is found in the person of Jesus Christ who is in heaven.

CATHOLICS	PROTESTANTS
God accepts us on the basis of the work of grace that the Holy Spirit does in us .	God accepts us on the basis of the work of grace that was done in Christ .

For the Reformation the grace that justifies is the merciful attitude of God while for Rome it is a gift from God. Catholicism recognizes only one kind of grace – the gift from God. Protestantism recognizes two – the merciful attitude of God and the sanctifying gift from God. This is how both can claim “justification by grace alone” and yet teach opposing systems. The grace by which God accepts us is something different for Rome than it is for the Reformation. Observe:

The Catholic position: “Grace is not something external to us but something within us...” – Daujat, *Op. Cit.*, p. 124. “The whole Catholic theology of grace as a created reality, distinct from God himself, and bestowed upon man as something personal to him is here stated by the Council [of Trent].” – Stevens, *Op. Cit.* p. 59. “The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1999, p. 538. “If anyone says... that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.” *Council of Trent*, 6th Session, Can. 11

The Protestant position: “The word ‘grace’ in Scripture often means favor, good will, or mercy; sometimes, indeed, it also means the gifts which are conferred from good will... Paul, in Romans 5, clearly distinguishes between ‘grace’ and the ‘gift of grace’... Both are indeed the gift of the Son of God, the Mediator. However, when Paul says that we are justified and saved by grace, he understands that grace which the Scriptures distinguish from the gift of grace, that is, he understands not our newness but the mercy of God, or the gratuitous acceptance. – Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, Art. V, No. 1, (Concordia Pub House, St. Louis, MO). John Calvin likewise speaks of “two kinds of grace” *Op. Cit.* Bk. III, Chap. XI, No. 6).

Is divine acceptance based on our newness of life or on something that was done in Christ 2000 years ago?

What is the Bible’s position?



Divine Acceptance According to the Bible

The Bible is clear that God accepts people because of grace alone. Paul, the Apostle, writes: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Rom. 3:24. The grace that justifies us is God’s attitude of kindness that was manifest in giving us his Son:

“God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us... made us alive together with Christ... in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Eph. 2:4-7 NASB.

Notice that justifying grace is manifest *in Christ Jesus* – not in ourselves. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3:16. In Christ, God showed his grace towards us (Acts 20:24). This attitude was in the mind of God “before the world began, but is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ... through the gospel.” 2 Tim. 1:9, 10. This grace is not a gift in us implanted by God’s Spirit but rather it is God’s unmerited favor shown through the

outstretched arms of Jesus. It is not some injection into our experience but rather the kindly attitude “which was given us in Christ Jesus.”

This does not mean that the Bible does not recognize a grace that is an infusion or outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. In fact from Holy Scripture it is possible to speak of two kinds of grace: the grace of God which is the divine attitude revealed in Christ (outside of us) and the grace that is the divine gift revealed in us by the Holy Spirit. To the first manifestation of divine grace is attributed our acceptance; to the second our purification.

The Bible Idea of Justification

The Bible teaches that God receives as children only those who have perfect **conformity to his law**. Jesus Christ is the only man who had this conformity throughout his life. His conformity to the law is attributed to those who accept him by **faith alone**. God **from his throne** accepts as his child every person that has this conformity to the law in Christ. In the Bible “to justify” means “**to count one righteous**”.

These four points may be listed in the following way:

1. The work that Jesus did while living on this earth is what gives me acceptance with God.
2. This perfect obedience we receive by faith alone.
3. It is in heaven that God counts as righteous those who accept his Son.
4. In the Bible the verb “to justify” means “to declare one righteous”.

Note the Bible passages that prove these four points:

1. The work that gives me acceptance with God

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible says that God accepts those who obey him. The Creator told Cain: “if thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? Gen. 4:7. Moses exhorted the people of Israel: “...if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth.” Deut. 28:1. And the Psalmist repeats the same

standard for divine acceptance when he asks: "Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness..." Psa. 15:1, 2.

The standard does not change in the New Testament: "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified." Rom. 2:13.

When the Apostle Peter began to speak in the house of Cornelius he said: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." Acts 10:34, 35.

In light of this high standard Peter presents the only hope for acceptance with God: the gospel of peace by Jesus Christ (ver. 36). The work that Christ did on this earth gives me acceptance with God:

"That word, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil: for God was with him. And we are his witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead." Acts 10:37-41.

The Apostle Peter outlines the righteous life of Christ, his death, and his resurrection as the fulfillment of all righteousness. The perfect obedience required to please God was fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus Christ and to those who believe in him this righteousness is credited in the place of the guilt of their sins.

The Apostle Paul confirms that a righteousness sufficient to give us God's acceptance is found only in Christ: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." Rom. 10:4 (see also Matt. 5:17).

Isaiah, the prophet, spoke of Christ when he wrote:

"... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all... When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities." Isa. 53:5-11.



It is by his knowledge, his experience of living and dying in this world, that Jesus justifies. Our experience is one of going astray and sinning. Even in our experience of Christian growth we still all offend in many things (James 3:2) and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). That's why the Scripture establishes the truth that "by the obedience of one [Christ] shall many be made righteous (Rom. 5:19)."

What work gives me acceptance with God? The work that Jesus did when he lived and died in this world! Rather than being justified by what God does in us, we are justified on the basis of what God did completely outside of us.

2. How to receive divine acceptance

If the work that Jesus did when he lived on this earth is what gives acceptance with God, how does that work become ours? The Bible does not teach that everyone in the world is saved because of what Christ did, but only those that believe in him. The perfect obedience of Christ is accessible by faith alone.

In his sermon at Cornelius' house Peter said: "every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins." Acts 10:43 RSV.

Nothing more is needed; nothing less can put to our account the obedience that God requires. Faith is the hand that receives the blessing but it is not the hand that performs the obedience.

In the third chapter of Romans Paul establishes that faith is the only condition for receiving divine acceptance:

“... by faith of Jesus Christ...” Ver. 22.

“... through faith in his blood...” Ver. 25.

“... the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus.” Ver. 26.

“... by faith ... through faith.” Ver. 30.

“... justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” Ver. 28.

The phrase “deeds of the law” includes every action or personal conformity to the will of God. The deeds of the law are good things (Tit.3:5). And every good thing done by us (Rom. 3), to us (Rom. 4), or in us (Rom. 5) Paul excludes as a means of receiving divine acceptance. In contrast he establishes that it is faith plus nothing that unites us to the grace of God that is in Christ Jesus. If divine acceptance is only by grace, “then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace.” Rom. 11:6. “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” Rom. 4:5.

God justifies the ungodly, the uncircumcised, and the heathen by faith, and faith alone (Rom. 3:22; 4:10; Gál. 3:8). The new heart follows divine acceptance. (Rom. 4:9-11; Deut. 30:6; Col. 2:11-13). The new life is not the cause of, nor the necessary condition for, justification. The new life is the sign and the proof that one has received the blessing of divine acceptance by faith alone.

3. Where justification takes place

Divine acceptance is a legal change, not a moral change. It takes place in the courts of heaven while the person being accepted is on earth. We “receive the adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:5). The adoption of a child is a legal transaction that takes place before a judge in court and not in the child’s bedroom. That’s why Scripture attaches phrases like “in thy sight (Ps. 143:2),” “in his sight (Rom.3:20),” “before God (Rom. 4:2),” and “in the sight of God (Gal. 3:11)” to the word “justified.” Justification before God is acceptance into his family.

At the beginning of his letter to the Ephesian church Paul points to the location of divine acceptance: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." Eph. 1:3. Jesus said: "rejoice, because your names are written in heaven." Luke 10:20.

On his throne God counts as perfect those who believe in his Son. He forgives their iniquities and covers the record of their sins in the books of heaven.

"Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin." Rom. 4:6-8.

In the book of Hebrews we are permitted to see some of the pages of the heavenly records. On them the sins of God's people are covered. Only their good deeds appear:

"By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible." Heb. 11:24-27.

In this heavenly record forgiven sins do not appear. The murder that Moses committed in Egypt is covered. He is "without spot before the throne of God" (Rev. 14:5). He is sinless before God because he is justified in heaven while before men his sins are visible.

When Scripture speaks of acceptance with God it is speaking about being "justified *in his sight*". Rom. 3:20.

4. The meaning of the verb "to justify"

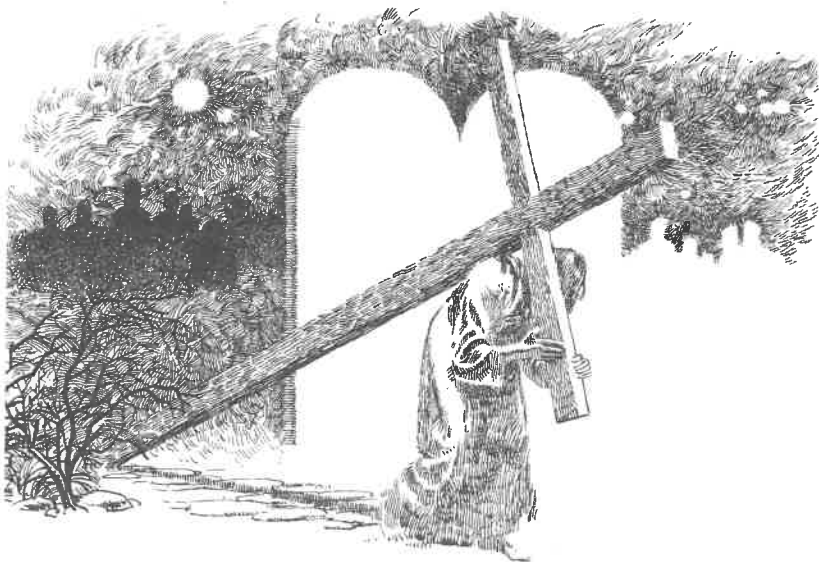
In the Bible the verb "to justify" means to be judged or reckoned as righteous (Rom 3:4; Ps. 51:4). In Luke 7:29 it says that the publicans "justified God". They didn't make God righteous. They judged Him to be righteous. The fourth chapter of Romans contains synonyms of *justify*. They are: "to count," "to impute,"

and “to reckon”. These expressions show that the one justifying is making a decision and declaring it. He is counting or reckoning another to be acceptable.

The opposite of “to justify” is “to condemn”(1 Ki. 8:32; Matt. 12:36, 37). Just as “to condemn” does not mean to corrupt so “to justify” does not mean to heal or to make righteous (See Prov. 17:15; Isa. 5:23). *To condemn* means to declare guilty and *to justify* means to declare innocent. Both words are legal terms that relate to a verdict in judgment. They are not moral terms that have to do with a change in one’s lifestyle.

Justification is God’s verdict that the one who believes in Jesus is accepted. He declares that person to be his child who does not yet act like a child of God. He accepts as perfect the man or woman who is not perfect. God justifies the ungodly, calling “those things which be not as though they were” (Rom. 4:5, 17).

He does not do this without considering the high demands of his law! But rather he justifies the ungodly on the basis that the high demands of his law have been met in the person of his Son. He can declare righteous all that find in Jesus their righteousness.



When dishonest Jacob appeared before his father Isaac asking for the blessing of the first born, he received it – not because he was the first born. He received it because he came in the name of the firstborn son, Esau, and covered with the clothes of his elder brother. Although God is not blind like Isaac was, yet he is pleased to bless everyone who comes to him hidden under the name and under the righteousness of his beloved Son. We are “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6), counted righteous.

Conclusion

According to the Bible God receives those sinners who believe the gospel. The gospel is the unrepeatable history that Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again in our place. To every sinner that hears the call faith is given by which to enter into this history. The fact that we are sinners is what gives us the right to come to Christ (Mark 2:17).

A paralytic was carried to Jesus by four friends. His physical condition was hopeless. Sins’ results had weakened him to the point of not being able to walk. Because the doorway was blocked by the crowds his friends carried him to the roof, “and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.” Mark 2:5

There were certain of the scribes sitting there who said to themselves, “Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?”

Jesus knew what they were thinking and he said to them, “... that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (He saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house. And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion.” Vers. 10-12.

When were the paralytic’s sins forgiven? When Jesus told him “thy sins be forgiven thee”? When he said “Arise”? Or when the paralytic got up? Forgiveness of sins is a divine act – it is the declaration of God. When Christ said to him “thy sins be forgiven thee” they were forgiven. Having forgiven, Christ could command and the paralytic could obey. **Forgiveness always inspires action.**

From Start to Finish

People are accepted by God the moment they believe. God receives as his children those who put their faith in Jesus. This acceptance brings a tremendous change in their lives (Luke 7:47). Being perfectly forgiven they are now free (Rom. 6:17-18). They are no longer guilty (Rom. 8:1). They have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). What they used to love they now hate (Rom. 7:15). They now want to serve the Lord who before was not their master (Rom. 6:22). The Holy Spirit lives in them (Rom. 8:10, 11). As children of God they have an entirely new outlook on life (2 Cor. 5:17).

But all this does not mean that they are perfect in themselves. The transformation that began in the new birth continues in the lives of the converted. The Holy Spirit's work is progressive. In this life the purification of the children of God advances (1 John 3:1-3; 2 Cor. 7:1).

Does this holy living now become a part of one's ongoing acceptance with God? Certainly not! The standard of divine acceptance does not change when one becomes a believer in Jesus. It has always been, and will always be: perfect obedience to the law. If you look to your own life to fulfill that standard you are under a curse: "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse... But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith." Gal. 3:10, 11.

Those that are already children of God continue to be accepted in the same way as they began the Christian life – by faith alone (Rom. 1:17; Col. 2:6-7). God continues to accept those who are **not acceptable in themselves**. They continue to be accepted because of their Substitute. It matters not how pure the life of a believer may be, this does not form a part of his acceptance with God (1 Cor. 4:4). Our ongoing justification is based on Christ's merits – the life he lived 2000 years ago.

For all who believe in him Jesus presents his sinless life before divine justice. This continual ministry ensures their

continual acceptance by God. Justification is not just the gateway to Christianity. It is also like the white curtain that continually surrounded those who trusted in the sacrificial lamb. God accepts as faultless all who trust in the purity and blood of Jesus and does not count their sins against them (Jude 24; Rom. 4:6-8).

The Forgiveness of Sins

It is evident that "there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." Eccl. 7:20. "In many things we offend all." James 3:2. But God does not cast off his own who fail to reach in their lives the perfection of their Substitute. Certainly not! He knows that they are weak and sinful. He justifies that he might cleanse. "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? ... It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." Rom. 8:32-34.

God justifies persons and he forgives sins. Justification is a work for our persons. Forgiveness is a work for our sins. Part of Christ's present work in heaven is to forgive sins. Writing to the children of God, the Apostle John says: "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." 1 John 2:1. Believers pray to God saying: "Forgive us our debts." Mat. 6:12. And "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9.

Just as the perfect life of Christ is the basis of our justification so his atoning death is the basis of the forgiveness of our sins. For without shedding of blood there is no remission of sins (Heb. 9:22). In the time of Moses if any of God's people sinned they should go to the temple court with an innocent animal. Confessing their sin upon the head of the animal they would then take its life. This was the only way to escape the condemnation of the law. The priest by means of the blood figuratively carried the guilt of the sinner into the sanctuary where it remained until removed by blood on the day of final atonement.

So today when we ask for forgiveness, Christ as our high priest in the heavenly sanctuary presents his precious blood as a substitute for our life blood (1 John 1:7). Our sins which deserve death are forgiven and in Christ we retain eternal life. The blood

that was shed on the cross only has personal benefit if it is applied to our account in the sanctuary.

Since his ascension Jesus has been ministering in the true tabernacle in heaven. There he justifies those who put their faith in him. There he forgives sins that are confessed to God. And there he purifies the offerings of praise and worship that ascend from true believers.

These are ongoing blessings, not just something for starting the Christian life. For this reason Christ anointed the heavenly sanctuary. All that come unto God by him have a sure hope, "seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Heb.6:18-20; 7:19-25). It is our privilege to continually depend on something we do not see except by the eye of faith (Rom. 3:26).



At the End of the Race

The application of these truths reaches its apex at the end of the Christian race. In God's final judgment by what means do we receive the right to eternal life? In that day will we be accepted by means of faith and works or by faith alone? At the beginning of the journey it was by faith alone, along the way it is by faith alone, and at the end it will be exactly the same – by faith alone. Not because faith has merit in itself but because it takes hold of Christ, who is our righteousness (Jer. 23:6).

At the start the new birth did not precede justification. Neither does glorification precede the blotting out of sins at the end. The divine rule is always: "**first in heaven, then on earth**". When we were accepted God sent us his Spirit as the former rain and when in his final intercession he declares us eternally perfect then he will send us his Spirit as the latter rain (Acts 2:38; 3:19; James 5:7; Joel 2:21-32). At the beginning our transformation of character was the result of a heavenly act of acceptance; so also at the end of the Christian race our glorification will be the result of God's ultimate heavenly verdict.

As it is necessary to distinguish between justification and transformation at the beginning it is also necessary at the end to

distinguish between the blotting out of sins (an act in heaven) and the complete purification of God's people (an act on earth).

In the final judgment God accepts nothing less than perfect obedience to his law (Rom. 2:12-13, James 2:10-13). This obedience is found only in Christ Jesus. Everyone who is in him will pass this judgement victoriously (1 John 5:11-12).

How can we enter into Christ? Only by faith. How do we remain in him? Only by faith. And whoever remains in him until the end will be saved (Heb. 3:14).

But, you may say, "Scripture says that we will be judged according to our works (Eccl. 12:14; Matt. 12:36-37; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 20:13)". You're right. That is so because all true faith produces works that give glory to God. These works in the lives of God's children are the evidence that they believe in Jesus. Our works give witness that we are believers.

"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he have faith, and have not works? Can faith save him? ...faith, if it have not works, is dead, being alone." James 2:14-17.

The evidence (works) and the means (faith) of acceptance are not the same. On the final judgment day the heavenly books are opened (Heb. 12:22-24). There is the evidence of faith. "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Matt. 12:37. Where there is no evidence, there is no faith. And where there is no faith there is no Substitute. And where there is no Substitute, there is no divine acceptance.

Conclusion

1. The work that gives me acceptance with God in the final judgment is the work that Christ did while he lived on this earth. It is not the work that the Holy Spirit has done in my life.

2. The means of receiving acceptance on the last day is faith alone. My loving obedience is not part of the hand that receives the verdict of the judgment.

3. It is in the courts of heaven that the final decision of divine acceptance occurs and not in the experience of the believer on earth.

4. The term "blotting out of sins" like "forgiveness of sins" refers to a heavenly declaration and not to an act of cleansing on earth.



Do you believe this?

When the good news about Jesus Christ is proclaimed the Holy Spirit is present to give repentance and faith. The person that hears and believes the gospel is accepted as a child of God. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” Eph. 2:8. God gives us faith when we hear the gospel. If we do not reject it, but rather place our confidence in Christ, we are counted righteous by faith.

“... the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (That is, to bring Christ down from above;) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (That is to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach.” Rom. 10:6-8.

Faith comes by hearing the gospel. Those who exercise the gift of faith receive righteousness – not by bringing it down from heaven nor by raising it from the tomb – they receive it in their account in heaven. God counts them as righteous in his presence. This is righteousness by faith.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved...

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Rom. 10:8-13.

This is true because the Son of God became man and took our place. In the story of his life "the righteousness of God is revealed". What Jesus did on earth "is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." Rom. 1:17, 16.

When God gave us his Son he gave us a new father, a new representative. In Adam, our first father, we are all lost; but Jesus Christ came and did all that the law demands of a human being in order to save us. Do you believe this?

"That word... ye know, which was published throughout all Judea and Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. And we are his witnesses of all these things which he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree; Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly... And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins." Acts 10:37-43.

Faith is simple in its operation but powerful in its results. When poisonous snakes were biting many of the children of Israel God told Moses to place a snake made of bronze on a pole. All who looked at it in faith were healed of the deadly



poison. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so Jesus was lifted up to be our Savior. "That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:15. **There is life in a look!**

Anyone may look to Jesus from just where they are. From heaven he attentively listens for the sinner's cry. He still ministers divine acceptance, the forgiveness of sins, and the purification of praise and worship. From there Jesus pours out his regenerating Spirit on those who enter into his presence by faith (Acts 10:44; Rom. 8:9). He transforms all whom he accepts. Our simple faith brings powerful results.

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. Heb. 4:16.

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Questions

1. Why so much talk about faith when holy living is what is lacking? Faith is the only way to become a child of God (John 1:12). The Holy Spirit is given to indwell those who believe (John 14:16-17; Gal. 3:1-2). Without him holy living is impossible (2 Thess. 2:13). Continual growth in grace flows from continual acceptance by God. God's pardoning love motivates our loving obedience (Luke 7:47). A person will live out all the faith they have. What we need is more faith!

2. Do you believe in internal righteousness? Yes. God develops righteousness in everyone to whom he imputes righteousness (Rom. 8:1-4; Phil. 1:6). This internal righteousness is the fruit of our acceptance with God and not its root. In this life it is progressive but not perfect. For this reason it cannot be the basis of our acceptance.

3. Of what value, then, are our good works? To give honor and glory to God (Matt. 5:16), to show his grace to others (Tito 3:8), and to give evidence of true faith (Matt. 7:20; Jam. 2:18).

4. Does divine acceptance gives one hope of eternal life? Yes. Being justified by faith we have peace with God and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1, 2). Whoever believes on the Son of God has eternal life in Jesus (1 John 5:10-12).

5. How do people receive faith and repentance if the Holy Spirit has not yet changed their lives? The Holy Spirit is given to indwell believers only (Rom. 8:9-17; Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13,14; Acts 2:38). But apart from this internal work he continually pleads with the hearts of all people using as an instrument the Word of God (John 6:63; 16:8-11; Eph. 6:17). To those who respond to his wooing the Holy Spirit gives faith and repentance (Rom. 10:17; Acts 5:31-32). This convicting work of the Spirit should not be confused with the indwelling gift of the Spirit that changes the life. The Holy Spirit woos some in order to dwell in them, while in others he already dwells changing their lives.

6. Isn't obedience part of faith? No. The Bible continually contrasts faith with works (Rom. 3:28; 4:1-5; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8, 9). Faith is a gift from God (Rom. 12:3; Eph. 2:8). Although it be ever so small if it believes in Jesus it is big enough to have all Christ's right living counted as its own. It is like the eye that sees or the ear that hears – it only receives. Works give; but faith receives.