## THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Belief **Topic: Justification** Spring 2024 Introduction The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This session is on the doctrine of justification. What's the Big Idea? Virtually every Christian tradition argues that justification is central to salvation, though there is widespread debate about the best way to understand justification. Protestants argue justification should be understood primarily as a legal category whereby God declares a shift in our status in respect to His law. Protestants further believe justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, a gift bestowed by God totally independent of our good works. When we are justified, God credits the righteousness of Jesus Christ to us and, because of our union with Him, treats us as though we are not sinners. Justification is at the heart of our spiritual union with Christ, it results in our adoption into God's spiritual family, and it is the ground of our spiritual maturity. What Does the Bible Say? Justification is a theme in the Old Testament, though it isn't developed in much detail. However, there is a clear sense that justification is tied to repentance and faith. Justification is seen to be a reality that is credited to believers that affects their standing with God. (Gen. 15:5-6; Hab. 2:4; Psa. 32:1-2; Isa. 53:11) Justification is a major theme in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline writings. Justification is by grace through faith. Good works, including attempts at keeping God's law, do not justify us in God's sight because our sin separates us from God. Justification is tied to the obedience and atonement of Jesus Christ on our behalf. (Rom. 1:16–17; 3:21–26; Gal. 2:15–16; 2 Cor. 5:21)



James argues against a view of faith that is limited to intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel. Even demons have that sort of "faith"! The kind of faith that justifies is

evidenced in good works that flow from that faith. The absence of good works is an indicator of the absence of faith. (James 2:18–26)

## What Has the Church Said?

Justification was arguably the core debate during the time of the Reformation when Lutherans and Calvinists challenged the dominant Catholic reading of justification. These debates continue to divide various Christian traditions to this day.

Officially, Roman Catholics argue justification comes through a combination of faith and the good works that flow from faith. They base this idea off a misunderstanding of James 2:18–26. The problem with this sort of view is that it confuses the **fruit** of salvation (good works) with the **root** of salvation (faith). In some cases, it can be so confusing that professing Christians actually trust in their own good works rather than the saving work of Jesus Christ. For this reason, Protestants have historically argued justification is by faith alone and that good works flow from faith, but do not contribute to our justification. This view remains the confessional understanding of justification among nearly all Protestants.

There are many sophisticated debates about justification among contemporary theologians, especially how it relates to biblical concepts of covenant, ethnic identity in the biblical era, and the last judgment in the future. Many of these debates center around the so-called New Perspective on Paul, which downplays the idea that justification is a legal metaphor that applies to an individual's status before God.

Some traditions, such as certain types of Anabaptists and Wesleyans, downplay justification and focus instead on sanctification. Eastern Orthodox Christians take a similar approach to this question, though they use the term deification to describe their view. Downplaying the importance of justification can lead to a legalistic outlook and, in extreme forms, can even miss the heart of the gospel completely.

On the other side are antinomians (Greek = "against the law"), who argue that justifying faith doesn't include repentance. Some go so far as to argue one can accept Jesus as Savior without also accepting him as Lord. There are two major versions of antinomianism. Hyper-Calvinist

antinomianism argues that the elect manifest themselves through faith in Christ, regardless of the character of their lives. Though this view was once widely held among British Baptists and Presbyterians, it is not common today.

More common today is "decisionist" antinomianism, which is common among some conservative Baptists and other evangelicals. This is a well-meaning attempt to protect justification by faith from legalism by arguing for simple belief in Jesus Christ. However, it ends up equating faith with mere intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel rather than the biblical view of faith as a humble, repentant, wholehearted trust in Jesus as King and Savior.

Perhaps the most common threat to justification in our day, which transcends traditions, is to affirm a right view of justification in theory, but never teach much on the doctrine. Evangelicals emphasize the importance of a conversion experience, but sometimes never fully explain what it is that happens in that conversion experience. The problem with this view is it leads to shallow Christians who aren't able to adequately communicate the good news to others.

## What Should We Believe?

Justification is by grace alone, though faith alone, in Christ alone. Good works do not contribute to our justification, but they are evidence we have been justified. Our justification is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our sins were imputed (credited) to Him upon the cross, while his righteousness is imputed to us when we believe in Him alone for our salvation. Justification relates to the present reality of our salvation, while other doctrines deal with the ongoing and future aspects of salvation.

## The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement

We believe that Christ, by his obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all those who are justified. By his sacrifice, he bore in our stead the punishment due us for our sins, making a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice on our behalf. By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God. Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our


own, freely and not for anything in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and the rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners. We believe that a zeal for personal and public obedience flows from this free justification.	
How Should We Then Live?	
As followers of Jesus Christ, we should trust in the perfect obedience of Christ rather than our own good works for our ongoing relationship with God.	
For Christians who are prone to struggle with assurance of salvation, justification by faith is a key doctrine that provides us with spiritual comfort.	
As we explain the gospel to others, whether in evangelism or discipleship, we need to make sure that justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is part of that good news.	
Recommended Resources	
J.V. Fesko, What is Justification by Faith Alone? (P&R, 2008).	
Thomas R. Schreiner, Justification: An Introduction Crossway, 2023).	
R. C. Sproul, Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification (Baker, 2017).	
Matthew Barrett, ed., The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective (Crossway, 2019).	
Martin Luther, <i>Three Treatises</i> (Fortress, 1990).	
John Calvin, <i>Justification by Faith</i> , ed. Nathan Pickowicz H&E Publishing, 2018).	