Justification: Infused or Imputed Righteousness?
A Biblical Case for the Reformed View in Contrast to the Roman Catholic View

Introduction
Words carry with them meaning. Some words have the ability to carry with them a mass of significance and implications. That is why it is of great importance that we give due consideration to key words in the study of Scripture and theology. This is especially the case when it comes to fundamental doctrines regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ. One word, carrying with it great meaning, can be the difference between truth/life and error/death.

The two terms before us, on either side of the dividing line between Reformed/Evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics, are imputed and infused. Those who have little concern for truth would likely balk at the idea that debate would ensue over two little words; yet, these words carry with them great meaning, laying out two very different views regarding the doctrine of justification, a doctrine central to the gospel.

During the Reformation (October 31, 1517…) there were two principles at the center of the theological battle. There was and is the formal principle which refers to the foundation or authoritative source of any given theology, and there was and is the material principle which refers to the central teaching or doctrine of any given theology or debate. With regard to the formal principle, debate surrounded the authoritative status of Scripture and Tradition. With regard to the material principle, debate surrounded the nature and means of justification. It is the material principle that serves as my focus in this article, yet the formal principle can never truly be absent, for we must always operate with reference to some authoritative standard. As the Reformers maintained, “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience” (see 2nd LBCF 1689 1.1). In other words, the Scriptures are the ultimate or final authority of the Church in matters of faith and practice.

Now, the doctrine of justification is rightly understood to be at the very heart of the gospel (e.g. Rom. 1:16-17), because it speaks directly to one’s standing before the holy and just God. John Calvin expressed it this way in His Institutes:

Therefore we must now discuss these matters thoroughly. And we must so discuss them as to bear in mind that this is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it. For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship
to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation
on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.¹

If Calvin is correct, and I believe he is, the central reason as to why Roman Catholics and
Reformed/Evangelical Christians look so different in their theology and practice is because they
differ significantly on the matter of justification.

So, which foundation is the biblical foundation? Is it the view that justification consists of an
infused righteousness (Roman Catholicism), or the view that justification consists of an imputed
righteousness (Reformed/Evangelical)? Which is according to the inspired word of God? Further,
what do these terms even mean? This is what will be discussed throughout.

In the remainder of this article I will make a case for the Reformation perspective of justification.
However, first I will provide a detailed analysis of the Roman Catholic perspective, as fairness
demands it, and we may truly garner a fuller understanding of the biblical teaching of justification
by first giving thought to what it is not; that is, a negative definition clarifies and sharpens a positive
definition. While I believe the following analyses to be somewhat comprehensive and thorough,
they are not, by any means, exhaustive. I must focus on key teachings, points, and Scriptures.
Naturally, too, I give more focus to the Reformed view of justification, not only because I am
Reformed, but because thoroughly establishing the Reformed view from the text of Scripture will
in turn demonstrate the Roman Catholic view to be in grave error. With that being said, let us
now give detailed consideration to these two opposing views on justification.

I. The Roman Catholic View: “Infused Righteousness”

A. Doctrinal Statements

- “the instrumental cause [of justification] is the sacrament of baptism, which is the
  sacrament of faith, without which no man was ever justified; lastly, the alone formal cause
  is the justice of God, not that whereby he himself is just, but that whereby he maketh us
  just, that, to wit, with which we, being endowed by him, are renewed in the spirit of our
  mind [Eph. 4:23], and we are not only reputed, but are truly called, and are just, receiving
  justice within us, each one according to his own measure, which the Holy Ghost distributes
to every one as he wills [1 Cor. 12:2], and according to each one’s proper disposition and
  co-operation.”²

² The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent (1563), “Decree on Justification”. Ch. VII.
• “Justification is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.”³

• “Justification detaches man from sin which contradicts the love of God, and purifies his heart of sin. Justification follows upon God’s merciful initiative of offering forgiveness. It reconciles man with God. It frees from the enslavement to sin, and it heals.”⁴

• “Justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ who offered himself on the cross as a living victim, holy and pleasing to God, and whose blood has become the instrument of atonement for the sins of all men. Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy. Its purpose is the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life.”⁵

• “The Holy Spirit is the master of the interior life. By giving birth to the ‘inner man,’ justification entails the sanctification of his whole being.”⁶

• “Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as ‘the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace.’”⁷

• “Wherefore, when receiving true and Christian justice, they are bidden, immediately on being born again, to preserve it pure and spotless, as the first robe given them through Jesus Christ in lieu of that which Adam, by his disobedience, lost for himself and for us, that so they may bear it before the judgment-seat of our Lord Jesus Christ, and may have life eternal.”⁸

• “Thus, neither is our own justice established as our own as from ourselves; nor is the justice of God ignored or repudiated: for that justice which is called ours, because that we are

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⁴ Ibid. #1990. Emphasis is contained within the Catechism.
⁵ Ibid. #1992. Emphasis is contained within the Catechism.
⁶ Ibid. #1995. Emphasis is contained within the Catechism.
⁷ Ibid. #1446. Brackets are contained within the Catechism.
⁸ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent (1563), “Decree on Justification”. Ch. VII.
justified from its being inherent in us, that same is (the justice) of God, because that it is infused into us of God, through the merit of Christ.”9

B. Doctrinal Summary

There are three main points to be considered from the Roman Catholic view of justification.

First, justification is inward, and consists of sanctification. This is the fundamental point of consideration as differing from the Reformed perspective. By this is meant that justification consists of an infused righteousness. Accordingly, God “bestows on us the gift of His grace which renovates the soul interiorly and adheres to it as the soul’s own holiness.”10 By this, then, the righteousness that is appropriated is not merely God’s righteousness, but our righteousness as well. Further, justification is not an act of God that takes place at a single point in time, but rather is a process. Throughout this process one’s righteousness may increase and/or decrease. This also means that not all of the faithful (i.e. believers) are of the same measure or degree in their justification. One’s cooperation with the grace of God influences the measure of their righteousness.

Second, the primary instrumental cause11 of justification is the sacrament of baptism. Justification, according to the Roman Catholic perspective, comes through baptism. While Catholics affirm that the grace of justification is merited by Christ, this grace is distributed sacramentally. It is through baptism that original and actual sin is forgiven, as well as the guilt associated with sin, and the righteousness of God is infused within us.

Lastly, justification can be lost and regained again. In the previous point we saw that baptism is the primary means or instrumental cause of justification. However, if one falls from the grace of justification, they may recover the grace of justification by means of the sacrament of penance/reconciliation (e.g. prayer, fasting, offering, works of mercy, care for one’s neighbor). Although Catholics affirm the necessity of God’s grace in justification, this justification must be preserved by the faithful, and indeed it too may be increased.

Conclusion: The Roman Catholic view on justification clearly demonstrates a system of works righteousness. Catholics would respond that they do not believe in salvation by works, because they believe in the necessity of God’s grace, which is present and working (i.e. assisting) throughout. However, the question is not simply about the necessity and presence of God’s grace,

9 Ibid. Ch. XVI.
11 That is, the means by which justification is appropriated or possessed.
but about the sufficiency of God’s grace. Roman Catholics believe that justification, received at baptism, is initially all of God’s grace; but the progressive aspect of justification does require works of faith. By this, one’s justification may increase; or by the lack of works of faith it may decrease; and by mortal sin (e.g. murder; adultery) it may be lost.\(^\text{12}\) When one mingles man’s works or merits into the means by which justification may be maintained or regained (with regard to losing it and regaining it through the sacrament of penance), then salvation is, at least in part, by works. Yet, according to Scripture, salvation is not by works at all, but by grace through faith, good works being the inevitable outflow (the fruit) of a truly justified sinner (e.g. Eph. 2:8-10).\(^\text{13}\) It should be further noted that various expressions of penance are basically the summation of the Law – love God and love your neighbor; yet, penance is that secondary plank whereby the grace of justification may be regained if lost. Does this not lead us to conclude that the Roman Catholic system is a works-oriented system? Indeed, it does. In short, the Roman Catholic view grounds justification in the inherent righteousness of man, infused into the heart at regeneration, rather than grounding it completely in the grace and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

II. The Reformation View: “Imputed Righteousness”

A. Doctrinal Statements

- “On the contrary, 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.”\(^\text{14}\)

- “Q: What is justification? A: Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”\(^\text{15}\)

- “Those whom God effectually calls, he also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ’s active obedience unto the whole

\(^{12}\) See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. #1856.

\(^{13}\) See below for further discussion on this point.

\(^{14}\) Calvin, John. *Institutes*, Book III. Ch. XI. ii.

\(^{15}\) Question #33 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647).
law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.”

- “Justification may be defined as that legal act of God by which He declares the sinner righteous on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is not an act or process of renewal, such as regeneration, conversion, and sanctification, and does not affect the condition but the state of the sinner.”

B. Doctrinal Summary

In contrast to the Roman Catholic view there are likewise three main points to consider with regard to the Reformed/Evangelical view of justification.

First, justification is outward, and consists of a forensic or legal declaration. The justification that we have from God is not an infused righteousness, which must subsequently be increased and maintained, with the possibility of losing it; but it consists of a gracious forgiving of sin, and a positive pronouncement of righteousness. How can this be? It is by imputation; that is, where our sin and guilt was imputed or credited to Jesus Christ, thus bearing the punishment of those sins on the cross, in turn His perfect righteousness is imputed or credited to us. It is substitutionary, such as we find in Second Corinthians 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Christ, on that cross, did not have our sins infused into Him, in which case He would have become sinful and corrupt in nature; rather, our sins were credited to His account, He taking our place and punishment. Likewise, we in turn do not have the righteousness of God infused within us, but credited to our account. This legal concept of justification is clearly seen, for instance, in Romans 8:31-34:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”

The presence of accusers, signified by the terms “charge” and “condemns,” as well as the concept of a verdict, signified by “God is for us” and “God is the one who justifies,” clearly point to a law-
court scenario. It is clearly God’s court that we are in, Satan and His subjects are our accusers, and Christ is our representative. Paul here teaches that Christ’s death silences all accusations, and this is further validated by His resurrection, which is the demonstration that His sacrifice satisfied the just demands of God’s Law, Christ having provided a spotless sacrifice, and taking upon Himself the wrath of God due to our sins. We are, therefore, on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice, pronounced to be clear of all transgressions of the Law; we are justified!

Second, the sole instrumental cause of justification is faith. Over and over again we see that justification comes by faith (e.g. Rom. 1:16-17; 3:19-26; Gal. 2:16; 3:6-9ff). When a jailer asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved, their response was simple: “Believe in the Lord Jesus” (Acts 16:30-31). Jesus, in whom we are to place our trust, said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (Jn. 5:24; cf. 3:16-18, 36). Now, this does not mean that obedience or good works are optional in the Christian life. In fact, Jesus said the following:

John 14:15 “If you love Me, you will keep my commands.”

Matthew 7:21-23 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’” [This comes in the context of Jesus talking about the fruit that one bears as the evidence of one’s truthfulness and salvation.]

Matthew 12:37 “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” [Again, this is spoken in the context of Jesus teaching on outward evidences of the inward reality.]

So, if we find in the Scripture the very clear and explicit teaching that justification – God declaring sinners to be righteous in His sight on the basis of Christ’s perfect obedience and substitutionary sacrifice – is by faith, and we also see that good works/deeds are the evidences of a truly justified person, then how are we to understand James 2:24, which says, “You see that man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” This is, indeed, a verse often cited by Roman Catholics in support of their view and in rebuttal, so they think, to the Reformed view. While a thorough analysis of the surrounding context of this verse will not be undertaken at this time, I will supply a brief overview of the specific situation, and demonstrate that James does not argue against the Reformed view that justification is by faith alone. First, I think it’s worth noting that Catholics are
quick to assert that salvation is not by works; yet, if justification, which is central to salvation, is indeed by works, then we must conclude that works play a part in our salvation. Where’s the consistency here?

Now, it is absolutely important to understand the context of 2:24. A major theme of the book of James is that of obedience to the word of God (the gospel). This is evidenced, for example, in 1:21-27. And the immediate context in which 2:24 is found has to do with the evidences of genuine, saving faith. This is made explicit in vv. 14-17 of Chapter 2. Verse 17 says, “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” James is therefore arguing against a dead faith in favor of a living faith, which is the kind of faith that justifies. In verse 18 James specifically brings out this contrast: “‘But someone may well say, ‘You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’” This is the heart of James’ argument: true, genuine, saving faith will consist of outward evidences. This is exactly what we saw in the Scripture passages quoted above. So, whereas the apostle Paul focuses on right standing before God, James focuses on the nature of saving faith. Therefore, as Reformed/Evangelical believers say, “Justification is by faith alone, but it is not a faith that is alone.” The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith puts it this way:

Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.  

Finally, justification cannot be lost. Justification can neither increase nor decrease. Why? Because the righteousness that has been imputed to us is that perfect and indelible righteousness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Nor can justification be lost. Why? Because it is grounded in the perfect, finished, and effectual work of Jesus Christ. As to the biblical evidence for this final point, let us look again to Romans 8.

The two “bookends” of Chapter 8 consist of the comforting and glorious promises that “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1) and nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39b). The justification that we have (see again vv. 31-34) is a fixed reality, as sure as the word of the one who justified us – God Himself. If this is not enough to convince you, let us also give brief consideration to the “golden chain of redemption” in vv. 29-30. The text reads:

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He

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18 Chapter 11, paragraph 2.
predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

In other words, those whom God knew in a special, covenantal way from all eternity – the elect – He predestined to become conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. This decree of God is a sure thing, and it cannot be thwarted. Further, the ones that He predestined to this conformity to Christ, He did, in the space of time, effectually call (through the gospel; cf. 2 Thess. 2:13-14), and those whom He called He did justify (on the basis of Christ through faith, as we have already seen), and those whom He justified He did glorify (this rounds the discussion back to where it began – conformity to the Son of God). Now, why is the past tense of glorify used? Obviously, we have not yet been glorified, not until the return of Christ (e.g. Col. 3:4). The reason the past tense is used is because it is a sure or guaranteed thing for those who have been predestined. The glorification of God’s people is as sure as the glorification of Jesus Christ, for He is our representative, our forerunner, the author and perfector of our faith (Heb. 12:2; cf. Rom. 5:17; Col. 3:3-4; 1 Cor. 15:20-23; Eph. 1:13-14). If, therefore, our glorification is a sure thing, and these salvific blessings are linked together with an unbreakable bond, then justification cannot be lost. What is more, God is the one doing all these things. It is God who predestines, God who calls, God who justifies, and God who glorifies. We are passive recipients of this amazing grace. Therefore, to teach that justification is a thing that can be lost, is to contradict Paul’s argument and bring into question God’s power to accomplish that which He has purposed.

**Conclusion:** Justification, according to the Reformed perspective – indeed, according to the Bible – is a forensic pronouncement over the sinner as being righteous, not on the basis of anything he has done, but according to the free grace of God on the basis of Christ’s redeeming work on the cross, received through faith. Justification is a one-time act of God, whereas sanctification is progressive; the two must remain distinct from each other. The failure of the Roman Catholic Church to keep these two salvific realities distinct is what leads them to view justification as something that is inward, and a process that can be increased, decreased, and even lost. In short, it leads them to view justification as consisting not merely of the grace of God, but of the merits of man. Louis Berkhof supplies a helpful summary on the distinctions of justification and sanctification:

1. Justification removes the guilt of sin and restores the sinner to all the rights of a child of God, including an eternal inheritance. Sanctification removes the pollution of sin and renews the sinner in conformity with the image of God.
2. Justification takes place outside of the sinner in the tribunal of God, though it is appropriated by faith. Sanctification takes place in the inner life of man and gradually affects his whole being.
3. Justification takes place once for all: it is not repeated, nor is it a process; it is complete at once and for all time. Sanctification, on the other hand, is a continuous process which is not completed in the present life.

4. While both are fruits of the merits of Christ, the work of justification is ascribed more particularly to the Father, and that of sanctification to the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

Now, it is interesting that Catholics often accuse the Reformed view of justification as leading to, or at least allowing for, licentious/loose/immoral living. In other words, since we’re merely credited with Christ’s righteousness, rather than infused with righteousness, then we can live as we please, yet always maintaining that forensic righteousness. This, however, is a gross misrepresentation. First of all, this neglects to take into account that Reformed Christians most definitely believe in the regenerating work of the Spirit in the believer, and therefore a justified man is someone who has a heart and will that truly seeks to please God in holiness and righteousness. Further, this is the very objection that Paul (hypothetically) brings up in Romans 6, right after discussing the nature and means of justification (Chs. 3-5). Romans 6:1 says, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?” Is this not, in essence, what Roman Catholics think we are basically asserting with our doctrine of justification? Indeed, it is! Then does that not serve to further validate our perspective on justification? Indeed, it does! So why are we not to continue to live in sin? Because we have been united to Christ in His death and resurrection, which baptism signifies; and therefore we are to live as those who are dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (vv. 2-11).

Justification is an act of God’s grace, and it cannot be earned or aided by man in any way, lest we boast in ourselves. The Roman Catholic is like the Jew who seeks to establish a righteousness of his own. We say with Paul, therefore, “For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” The Reformed/Evangelical view of justification is the only view consistent with the very nature of salvation – all of God’s grace, man contributing nothing. It is consistent with God’s purpose to redeem His elect, and to do so perfectly and effectually.

Application: Let us briefly consider now a few points of application with regard to this doctrine of justification by faith alone. The biblical doctrine of justification...

1. Guards us against self-righteousness (Rom. 4:5; Gal. 6:14-15). Since justification is all of God’s grace, and appropriated simply by faith in the gospel, we need not strive to achieve

a righteousness of our own, a righteousness that would never come close to justifying us before the holy God.

2. Assures us that we possess eternal life now, awaiting only its final realization/culmination (Rom. 8:29-30; Tit. 3:7).

3. Brings great comfort to the believer when he/she sins, knowing that those who are in Christ, who have been justified, are never to come under the condemnation of God; for Christ has already borne it (Rom. 5:1, 8-10; 8:1); and nothing can ever separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:31-39).

4. Gives us a firm foundation and motivation for living a godly life; for those who have been set free from sin, and have the sure hope of glory, are empowered to live a holy and righteous life according to the gospel upon which they rest (Rom. 6:1-23; 1 Jn. 3:2-3).

5. Is a cause for rejoicing in God (Rom. 5:11).

*Soli Deo Gloria*