

Question: What occurs when God "justifies" a sinner?

One problem associated with man's effort to teach the Scripture is the tendency to emphasize one principle to the exclusion of other equally important principles. Advocates of salvation by "grace only" and "faith only" use the term "justification" almost exclusively when referring to the salvation of man's soul. They do this in order to place as little responsibility upon man as possible for his salvation. "Grace only" advocates say that God justified them before they acted in obedience to Him. "Faith only" advocates say that God justified them at the very moment they believed in Jesus. In reality, there are several scriptural terms that refer to man's "justification," and all of them entail some action on man's part. First, let us compare the following terms:

Justification is a legal term, referring to God releasing man from the guilt of sin (Ro 3:26).

Redemption depicts Christ as having paid the price for man's sin with His blood (Ep 1:7).

Forgiveness highlights the mercy of God toward sinners (Co 1:14).

Remission emphasizes the complete removal of accountability for past sins (Lk 24:46-47).

Adoption concerns the work of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling God's spiritual promises to Abraham (Ro 8:15-16).

Sanctification describes the separation of Christians from the world of sinful activity (1Co 6:11).

Man's salvation is not summed up by any of these terms alone, but together they explain what occurs when God justifies an alien sinner. In what way do these terms entail action on man's part to complete God's act of justifying the sinner?

1. Justification requires man's faith in Christ (Ro 3:26).
Jesus declared that man's belief is a work of God (Jn 6:29).
2. Redemption is in Christ and through His blood, said Paul to the Ephesians (Ep 1:7)
Yet, Paul commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Ac 19:5).
3. Forgiveness is offered to those who put "off the body of the sins...by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism...raised with Him through faith in the working of God..." (Co 2:11-13).
4. Remission of sins is promised to those who believe Christ, repent and are baptized (Ac 2:38).
5. Adoption into God's family as a descendent of Abraham requires faith and baptism into Christ (Ga 3:26-29).
6. Sanctification is accomplished through man's obedience to the word of God's grace (Ac 20:32).

We are not meaning to complicate the doctrine of salvation as taught in the Scripture, we are only trying to be thorough. Too many people are led to believe that they can be passive recipients of God's saving grace, when in fact the Bible teaches that our salvation is a matter of active obedient faith in the gospel of Christ (Ro 1:5 16:26).

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