

## **Initial Justification**

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### **Does God declare us righteous “initially” but not later?**

I have found some in the UPCI (et. al.) using the word “initial” to qualify the meaning of the biblical word justification.

What is at issue is the whole meaning of justification. Roman Catholicism teaches that justification is the process by which God *makes* one righteous. “It involves the infusion of supernatural grace that blots out sin, regenerates the soul and makes it worthy of the creator who fashioned it.” [Van Harvey, A Handbook of Theological Terms, p. 136.] In this view, justification is the same as sanctification, i.e., one is right with God on the basis of their own righteousness as aided by the Holy Spirit or infused grace. This is practically the same definition of justification held by the UPCI. That is why I say that the UPCI theology of salvation is foundationally Roman Catholic.

On the other hand, the apostle Paul teaches that justification involves God “counting” (imputing) one righteous on the basis of faith in Jesus and his work on the Cross. Rather than “infuse” the believer with “actual grace,” which enables him to become worthy of forgiveness, the Scriptures teach that unworthy believers are forgiven as a divine act of grace through their faith in the sacrifice of Christ. The believer is not justified on the basis of his or her own righteousness. Rather, she or he is justified – accepted by God – on the basis of *Christ’s righteousness* for them. The difference between these two definitions of justification is huge and profoundly impacts every other belief and practice one maintains.

First of all, just like “re-justification” and “instantaneous” justification the idea of “initial” justification is unwarranted. All of these qualifiers change the biblical meaning of justification by faith as it is taught in Scripture. As I have stated, justification is *not* a process, the equal of sanctification. It is a once-for-all-time work of God. The fundamental reason it is not a process is this: the righteousness by which one is justified is Christ’s righteousness and not one’s own. Let me clarify. In the view that justification is a process by which God helps you become righteous enough to be accepted, it is the believer’s own righteousness that justifies. In contrast, the Bible teaches that we are justified by Christ’s righteousness. This means it is a finished work at the Cross and resurrection of Jesus. We receive that benefit of this righteousness when we trust in Christ alone for our righteousness. Therefore, it cannot be a process worked out in us because it is already finished in Christ.

As Paul states in Roman 10:9, 10 “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” We are justified when we confess and believe in Jesus. Notice that Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,” (Rom. 1:1 ESV). The salvation the Gospel brings is to the one who

“believes.” This is present tense: Now. Not over a period of years as we become more sanctified and build up our own righteousness.

Whenever you read or hear someone using language such as “initial” or “instantaneous” in speaking about justification, a red flag should pop up. It indicates a totally unbiblical view of justification that is based on the believer’s righteousness, rather than the righteousness of Christ alone. Accept no substitutes. Don’t fall for the misleading phrases that take the power of the Cross out of salvation. Biblical justification must not be qualified by any depreciating term such as “instantaneous” or “initial.” There is only one saving justification for sinners; it is the righteousness of Christ that comes by faith in Christ alone.