

“Instantaneous” Justification

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I have read some from the UPCI who state that Paul received "instantaneous" justification when he "experienced" Acts 2:38.

This is another unique phrase used to caricature the biblical idea of justification. The word instantaneous is added to justification as if there were several kinds of justification.

The phrase “instantaneous justification” is redundant and misleading. One might be led to think there is one kind of justification that is “instantaneous” and another kind that is gradual or progressive. There is only one kind of justification in the Bible. The biblical justification is instantaneous, and does not need the unnecessary modifier. In the Bible, when a person believed God, they were justified at that moment. “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” (Rom. 4:3 ESV) The context of Romans 4 Paul is discussing the nature of justification as illustrated in the faith of Abraham. In Galatians, Paul teaches that NT believers are children of Abraham by faith. (Galatians 3: 6-14)

When was Abraham counted righteousness? When he believed God. He did not build or work his faith up to a sufficient point to where it was enough to justify him. The Scriptures are very clear: “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” This is the pattern throughout the Old and New Testaments.

In Acts 15:9 Peter explains to the Jerusalem council how God accepted the Gentiles in Caesarea. He tells them: “God . . . made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.” The Gentiles of Cornelius’ house were forgiven of their sins – justified – the moment they believed in Christ. This was verified for Peter when the Holy Spirit fell on them. This incident was not a pattern of how everyone must speak in tongues to receive the Spirit, but rather shows the inception of Gentiles being included by God into His Church. They received the Gospel, believed in Christ, and God cleansed their hearts and baptized them with His Spirit.

To confuse the matter more, some claim that Paul “experienced Acts 2:38” when he was “instantaneously justified.” The UPCI says that Acts 2:38 teaches we must be baptized by the formula “in the name of Jesus” only, in order for sin to be remitted. It also claims that Acts 2:38 teaches we must speak in tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism. Paul does not tell us anywhere in his epistles that he was baptized “in the name of Jesus” only. Never. Paul also never mentions or hints that he spoke with tongues as evidence that he received the Holy Spirit. It would seem that if Paul believed these were absolutely necessary for salvation, he would have devoted significant space in his writing to make that clear. But he never, one time, proposes or even alludes to the idea that speaking in tongues is the ‘initial evidence’ of Spirit baptism. Thus, there is no statement in the NT to support that Paul “experienced” Acts 2:38 as the UPCI teaches it.