

WAS ELLEN WHITE CONFUSED ABOUT JUSTIFICATION?

**How do we make sense of
sometimes seemingly contradictory quotations
cited from the Spirit of Prophecy?**

Since the Reformation, the customary position of Protestantism has been that justification is by faith alone, plus nothing. Thus, one prominent Adventist author wrote, approvingly, “Reformers taught that justification was something that God does for us not in us—a crucial distinction.”¹ Many Seventh-day Adventists stand on this platform. Is justification, then, only legal, declarative, forensic? Is there no experiential element?

Many would answer, no, there is not.

On a number of occasions Ellen White said, yes, there is.

Before some throw up their hands in bafflement and exclaim, “But this is Roman Catholic teaching,” let us explore the matter, hopefully with an open, receptive mind.

In fact, Ellen White’s statements on this subject have caused some

**Thomas A. Davis served at the Review and Herald Publishing Association for 17 years in various editorial capacities and for 10 years of editorial service in the Philippines and India.*

puzzlement. They appear to be at variance with the dominant Protestant position. Some might say they vary even from much that she herself has written on the subject. It has even been suggested that when she wrote them she was somewhat mixed up in her understanding of justification and sanctification and did not get her concepts straightened out until she hit on an insight, found in *Messages to Young People*, that she penned in 1895: “Righteousness within is testified to by righteousness without. . . . The righteousness by which we are justified is imputed; the righteousness by which we are sanctified is imparted. The first is our title to heaven, the second is our fitness for heaven.”²

The implication is, then, that when she penned those words she had begun to think of *imputation* as exclusively legal, and *impartation* as referring to the changed life of the individual subsequent to justification. Some hold that she did not confuse the roles of justification and sanctification in her writings from that time on. But did she really confuse them before this?

Manifestly, Ellen White did refine and more plainly express her ideas as time went on, but she did not change them fundamentally in any way.

In his book, *Messenger of the Lord*, Herbert Douglass posits that as a first rule of interpretation, one

must embrace the wider context and, “include all that the prophet has said on the subject under discussion before coming to a conclusion.”³ Agreeing with this rule, we must therefore include, in our understanding of Ellen White’s view of justification, the quotations under consideration.

This being so, it would seem she uses the term *justification* in two senses. The first usage may be understood in the generally accepted sense of the sinner being declared right, objectively regarded by God as being righteous through Christ’s righteousness credited to him.

“The grace of Christ is freely to justify the sinner without merit or claim on his part. Justification is a full, complete pardon of sin. The moment a sinner accepts Christ by faith, that moment he is pardoned. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to him, and he is no more to doubt God’s forgiving grace.”⁴

With this understanding virtually all Christians are in accord. It is in connection with Ellen White’s second usage of justification that problems arise, for here she uses it subjectively, in a way that is not merely attributive but is also experiential.

“[I]f you pray in sincerity, surrendering yourself, soul, body, and spirit, unto God, you put on the whole armor of God, and open the soul to the righteousness of Christ; and this alone,—Christ’s *imputed*

righteousness,—makes you able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”⁵

This represents a number of similar statements that merit consideration.

As noted, much of Protestantism has insisted that justification is an outside-of-you legal arrangement that does nothing for one experientially. But there are some, a growing number, who believe that the nature of the Reformation controversy with Catholicism forced an emphasis that was actually an imbalance of the true meaning of that term. Furthermore, Luther himself did not insist on the exclusively legal aspects of justification, as some have held he did.

That biblical justification is legal, forensic, no Bible student will deny. In fact, it has to be. To quote Phillips’ paraphrase of Romans 3:20: “‘No man can justify himself before God’ by a perfect performance of the Law’s demands—indeed it is the straightedge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are.”

So there is no other way to be justified, except through Christ’s perfection accounted to us. We are justified freely by grace through the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:24; 5:9, 16). Whatever is ours by grace is always absolutely unearned and undeserved.

As observed earlier, some have suggested that Ellen White was somewhat mixed up in her under-

standing of justification and sanctification at the time she penned the quotations under discussion. If justification is always only judicial, and if the experiential is found only in sanctification, and if imputation always connotes only a legal declaration, that Ellen White continued to be confused for some time after she wrote the statement found in *Messages to Young People*. For example, she wrote, in 1896, the Savior “testifies that through His *imputed* righteousness the believing soul shall obey the commandments of God.”⁶ And in May of the same year she wrote, “Let perfect obedience be rendered to God through the imputed righteousness of Christ.”⁷ So she hadn’t “caught on” a year later, it appears.

But another problem arises with that argument. If Ellen White were herself unclear or naive in that area, the question arises that is often asked under similar conditions: Could she be mistaken in others? At this point all we do is testify to our belief in the inspiration and dependability of the Spirit of Prophecy as manifested in Ellen White’s writings.

In that same year, 1896, her important book *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* was published: “God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness *for* sin, but reclaiming *from* sin. It is the outflow of redeem-

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ing love that transforms the heart.”⁸

She here uses the term *forgiveness*, but this must subsume justification, because she wrote, “To be pardoned in the way that Christ pardons, is not only to be forgiven [justified], but to be renewed in the spirit of our mind.”⁹ This insight that pardon and justification are synonymous is not unique with Ellen White.¹⁰

In fact, the notion that justification is always only a legal pronouncement is not in tune with some recent theological thought. The evangelical author John R. W. Stott insists that the teaching that we are justified in Christ, “makes it impossible for us to think of justification as a purely external transaction.”¹¹ And the theologian Joachim Jeremias wrote, “God’s acquittal [justification] is not only forensic, it is not an ‘as if’, . . . It is the beginning of a new life, a new existence, a new creation through the gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹²

Returning to Ellen White’s understanding of justification, she affirms that if we surrender our lives to Christ, taking Him as our Savior, no matter how sinful we may have been, His character is accepted in place of ours and God sees us as though we had committed no sin. This is forensic justification. But immediately she merges the subjective seamlessly with the forensic: “More than this, Christ changes the heart. He abides in your heart by faith. You are to maintain this connection with Christ by faith and the constant surrender of your will to Him; and so long as you do this, He will work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure.”¹³

It will generally be agreed that transformation, sanctification, begins simultaneously with justification. But that this transformation is connected with justification is the difficulty. For, as observed, by many it seems to be settled that the Bible

When the thrust of the more than two dozen Spirit of Prophecy quotations is examined, an interesting common concept emerges. In each of them the explicit or implicit idea is empowerment. “His imputed grace and power He gives to all who receive Him by faith.” “Without me, ye can do nothing;’ but in him, and through his righteousness imputed unto us, we may do all things.”

teaches that justification is only accounted to the person.

But is this so? Does the Bible clearly and consistently show that the terms translated by justification or related words are always forensic?

In important respects, the answer is theological, not linguistic. And often one’s theology depends on one’s educational bias, philosophy, preconceptions, and spiritual experience.

So if asked, “What does the Greek say?” linguistics does not always solve the problem. The answer frequently depends on the person interpreting the Greek. To no small degree the meaning one accepts often depends on one’s theological leanings. This is so in the case of the words associated with justification in the Bible.

The key term in resolving the difficulty with justification is *dikaio-sune*. This word actually has a very wide range of meaning, which tells us its interpretation in a particular

text often depends not only on linguistics and context, which do not always resolve the problem, but also, sometimes determinably, on theological bent.

The Greek lexicographers Thayer and Arndt-Gingrich and others inform us that in Paul’s writings *dikaio-sune* refers to character. “In Paul,” says Thayer, it is “the state acceptable to God which becomes a sinner’s possession through the faith by which he embraces the grace of God offered him in the expiatory death of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ One of its meanings is described as “denoting the characteristics of the *dikaio-s*: righteousness, uprightness,” “the characteristics required of men by God.”¹⁵ The Presbyterian theologian A. A. Hodge observes, in connection with Romans 8:3 and 4, that *dikaio-sune*, righteousness, “is the character of the *dikaio-s* [the righteous one], that in him which satisfies the law.”¹⁶ The context supports this.

He who becomes *dikaio-s* (right-

eous) by faith, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* explains, receives by faith God’s *dikaio-sune* (“the righteousness bestowed by God”)¹⁷ into his life as the “power and salvation of God.”¹⁸ *Dikaio-sune*, then, refers to the righteous qualities the believer receives with justification.

A word in the two preceding quotations is the key to the resolution of the problem: *power*.

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As in Creation, God “spoke, and it was” (Ps. 33:9, NKJV), so when God pronounces a person justified, it is not only declarative, but dynamic.

“The creative energy that called the worlds into existence is in the word of God. This word imparts power; it begets life. Every command is a promise; accepted by the will, received into the soul, it brings with it the life of the Infinite One. It transforms the nature, and re-creates the soul in the image of God.”²¹

Ellen White does not place the

concept of “empowering” exclusively with sanctification, for sanctification is possible only as a result of the empowering. She couples empowering with justification because the power accompanies justification. It coexists with it; it makes it the dynamic, “effective word.” As light emanates from the Sun, that power emanates from justification. Thus, when God declares a person right, it is not simply a legal pronouncement to be recorded in some celestial book that registers a change in status. The declaration, because the Word of God is powerful, produces a change in state. As a result of God’s empowering imputed righteousness, sanctification, as a process, begins immediately. It is initiated by justification. So Ellen White could write, “Justification means that the conscience, purged from dead works, is placed where it can receive the blessings of sanctification.”²²

Ivan Blazen’s definitive study on “Salvation” in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, reads, “Justification is a far more powerful reality than a mere legal adjustment in the books of heaven. It is a dethroning of the illegitimate authority that prevents a sanctified life, and the establishment of that divine authority that enables it.”²³

Thus, on the basis of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy, whether in the immediate context Ellen White refers to imputed righteous-

ness (justification or pardon) as judicial or subjective, the other meaning may be understood as intrinsic.

It is indeed by faith alone through grace that God sees us, declares us, accepts us, as righteous. But the result of that declaration is not, cannot be, simply a legal position. Because God's Word is always dynamic, justification carries with it a galvanic spiritual energy that transforms those justified by faith.

Justification is not only forensic, judicial, and legal, but also subjective and experiential. But this fact need not be seen as in some way diminishing the forensic aspect.

The Bible makes it clear—and this is abundantly supported by Ellen White—that Christians rejoice not only in God's forgiveness for past sins, but also in the promise of power to live His new life. Living the Christian life acceptable to God is as impossible for Christians on their own as is erasing the records of their sins from the books of heaven. Both are possible only by the grace of God.

“*Be holy, for I am holy*” (1 Peter 1:16, NKJV). “Pursue . . . holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14, NKJV). These are not forensic statements. Whatever definition Christians may have of holiness, it must deal with life and living. It is experiential. And to be compatible with Scripture, it must surely include a rectitude of charac-

ter beyond the scope of human beings on their own. In the words of Ellen White, “The holiness that God's word declares [man] must have before he can be saved is the result of the working of divine grace as he bows in submission to the discipline and restraining influences of the Spirit of truth.”²⁴

“Holiness is the gift of God through Christ [just as acquittal is the gift of God through Christ] . . . [Those who are born again] become conformed to His likeness, changed by His Spirit from glory to glory. From cherishing supreme love for self, they come to cherish supreme love for God and for Christ.”²⁵

“Our own strength is weakness, but that which God gives is mighty and will make everyone who obtains it more than conqueror.”²⁶

And here is abundant cause for greater praise of our God. For not only does He forgive, justify, which from the human perspective, at least, might seem the simpler act, but He takes hostile, rebellious, selfish, willful, unlovely, often hateful human beings—“and such were some of you” (1 Cor. 6:11, KJV)—and, transforming them, polishes them to reflect His own likeness. So justification is a marvel. So, too, is sanctification.

This change in attitude and lifestyle is as fully the work of God as is forgiveness and acquittal. As one is dependent on Him for forgiveness, so the other is as fully dependent on

Justification through faith, in any context, can be the Christian's only in the way that the light bulb can continue to be illuminated as long as the electrical flow continues. So Christians maintain their justification and continue in the sanctification process only as the Holy Spirit is continuously in their lives. It does not, in the words of the Council of Trent, “adhere to [the soul] as the soul's own holiness.”

Him for overcoming. As one is impossible without the immediate intervention of God, so is the other. All is of grace. And both the forensic acquittal and the empowerment for overcoming, says Ellen White, come through justification.

It is necessary now to clarify the concept of the subjective elements of imputed righteousness, as referred to by Ellen White. Earlier this article highlighted the notion of a subjective aspect in justification, as though it were strictly Roman Catholic, with no Protestant support. But while both Ellen White and Roman Catholicism—as well as many Protestant theologians—maintain that justification has its experiential as well as legal aspects, this is far from implying that they and Catholics are saying the same thing. In fact, about the only similarity is that both teach that imputed righteousness is more than a legal transaction. So what is the difference between Ellen White's view of justification and the Roman

Catholic position? A few differences are pertinent.

- In Ellen White's, Adventist, and most Protestant teaching, justification never means that it becomes inherent, in the sense that when received it is then intrinsic, infused, and so is the Christian's own. Justification is a gift of grace, whether justification in the sense that Ellen White sometimes referred to it, which is subjective, or whether it is what is termed legal or objective. It is always, continuously, and completely only of God.

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Ellen White explicitly denies that it does. She writes, “[I]n order for man to retain justification, there must be continual obedience, through active, living faith that works by love and purifies the soul.”²⁸ It is ours only in the sense of “Christ within us, whether subjective or objective.”

• In Roman Catholicism, justification is by faith and a holy life through the sacrament, baptism—”Justification is conferred in baptism, the sacrament of faith.”²⁹ In Ellen White, justification “can come alone through faith in Christ.”³⁰ She does not use the term, “faith alone.” This is understandable, and shows her theological precision, because those words are sometimes used without qualification, when, in actuality justification depends on repentance and confession (1 John 1:9), regeneration and renewal.

• In Catholicism, sanctification is part of justification. Ellen White defines them as complementary, but different and distinct in a statement quoted previously from *Messages to Young People*.³¹

• In Catholicism, sanctification being part of justification, justification “means both the event by which the Christian life is initiated and the process by which the believer is regenerated.”³² And as a process it was described at the Council of Trent. But biblically (Rom. 5:1), and in the writing of Ellen White, justification

is not a process but an immediate, punctiliar transaction. “The moment true faith in the merits of the costly atoning sacrifice is exercised, claiming Christ as a personal Saviour, that moment the sinner is justified before God because he is pardoned.”³³

In summary, there are two aspects to justification: the legal (by virtue of which we may be declared righteous) and the subjective. This is confirmed not only by Ellen White, but also by contemporary biblical scholarship. The subjective has perhaps been underemphasized in view of the strong Reformation emphasis on the legal. It is sometimes felt that to admit anything but the declarative in justification is to weaken it mortally.

But the subjective does not weaken the objective any more than the law weakens grace when rightly understood. The forensic “alien righteousness” aspect of Luther’s justification maintains its place, which is graciously, freely to credit Christ’s merits to the account of the penitent sinner. Here is the heart of justification. The simultaneous subjective aspect of justification, which the Bible and Ellen White affirm, is God’s response of power to the sinners’ call to enable them to strive toward holiness of life. And, again, the second as well as the first is beyond the range of the sinner himself or herself. □

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