



The Distinctive Doctrine of Justification in Paul's Epistle to the Romans

Ranto

Universitas Pelita Harapan Surabaya

E-mail: rasmaredja@gmail.com

Digital Object Identifier (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.33856/kerugma.v8i2.553>

Article history

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
19 January 2024	21 September 2025	15 October 2025	20 November 2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines the doctrine of justification as articulated by the Apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, particularly in chapters 3 through 5, as the core of New Testament soteriology. The background of this study arises from the universal reality of human sinfulness and the impossibility of attaining righteousness through the Law. Paul affirms that justification is not the result of human effort but a judicial act of God, who declares the sinner righteous through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross and His resurrection. The study employs a biblical-theological, etymological, and textual-analytical approach by examining key Greek terms such as *dikaioō*, *dikaiosunē*, and *dikaiōsis*, along with their Hebrew counterparts *tsadaq* and *tsedeq*. The findings reveal that justification in the Book of Romans possesses a forensic dimension (a legitimate judicial act of God), a relational dimension (the restoration of relationship with God), and a universal scope (applicable to both Jews and Gentiles). Paul also emphasizes its present essence (the believer's new status in the here and now), its eschatological dimension (the ultimate fulfillment in the final judgment), and its Christocentric nature (rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ). This article affirms that faith serves as the divine means by which humanity is united with Christ, so that Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers. Consequently, justification is entirely the gift of God's grace, not the result of adherence to the Law, and it simultaneously establishes a firm and inclusive theological foundation for the Christian understanding of salvation.

Keywords: Justification; Epistle to the Romans; Paul; Grace; Faith.

Citation Style (APA): Ranto, R. (2025). The Distinctive Doctrine of Justification in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. *Theological Journal Kerugma*, 8(2), 246–257. <https://doi.org/10.33856/kerugma.v8i2.553>

INTRODUCTION

The concept of justification in the Epistle to the Romans primarily relates to the perspective that views the sinner powerless and under God's wrath as now receiving a new relationship and status as one who is righteous before God. This new relationship is identified as the restoration of humanity's fellowship with God, in which God places human beings before Himself as righteous. Concerning this process, the Epistle to the Romans clearly affirms that it occurs solely through the gracious act of God revealed in Christ. Consequently, justification functions as both a noun and a verb passive on the part of humanity yet active on the part of God as it represents God's act and gift. This reality is further emphasized in Romans, where it is declared that justification comes through faith (Rom. 3:21–31) and not through the works of the Law: "For no one will be justified in His sight by the works of the Law" (Rom. 3:20). In other words, the righteous status is not achieved as the result or product of human effort.

In terms of the structure of thought, the preceding context presented by Paul before his discussion of justification by faith is quite clear. Among these are the themes of righteousness that proceeds from faith (1:17); then, in Romans 1:18–3:20, Paul elaborates extensively on human sinfulness, the wrath and judgment of God upon all people without exception, and the impossibility of attaining justification before God through the works of the Law. The subsequent phase of Paul's argument, found in Romans 3:21–5:21, specifically concerns righteousness and justification through faith. This section logically serves as the central answer to the preceding problem of universal sin and explains how a person may be justified before God.

One significant and compelling aspect in the discussion of justification in the Epistle to the Romans, particularly in chapters 3:21–5:21, is that Paul extends the essence of justification by faith back to the Old Testament through the representation of Abraham. It becomes evident here that Romans seeks to affirm the essential relationship between justification in Christ and the broader history of salvation and the covenant of redemption as revealed since the Old Testament. At the same time, this emphasis logically conveys the universal implication of justification in Christ embracing both Jews (who sought justification through the Law) and Gentiles (who were without the Law). Moreover, the concept of justification in Romans unfolds the profound theological meaning of this doctrine through a forensic perspective. This forensic emphasis is distinctive in Paul's thought, especially in Romans, and is not found to the same extent in other New Testament writers.

The doctrine of justification in the Epistle to the Romans stands as one of the most fundamental theological themes in the New Testament, and likewise remains a major subject of discussion within systematic theology to this day. Since the twentieth century, the debate over *forensic justification* versus *covenantal participation* has become a point of convergence between systematic theology and exegetical studies. Over the past five years, there has been a growing scholarly interest in synthesizing the forensic, covenantal, and *unio cum Christo* approaches by employing linguistic analysis and the socio-historical context of the Roman world to interpret the meaning of justification in Paul's letter to the Romans.

Historically, the doctrine of justification has been understood as the forensic act of God declaring sinners to be righteous on the basis of Christ's redemptive work (Murray, 1955; Berkhof, 1997). This perspective remains relevant in contemporary literature. Schreiner (2015) emphasizes that in Romans 3:21–26, Paul employs the term *dikaïosynē theou* in a legal, rather than ethical or moral, sense. This declaration does not directly transform human moral nature, but rather changes one's status before God through the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Recent studies have strengthened the traditional understanding of justification by employing linguistic and contextual approaches. Luke (2025), in *Religions*, argues that the verb *dikaiōthentes* in Romans 5:1, expressed in the aorist passive form, indicates a divine act that is definitive and completed, rather than a continuous process. Likewise, Taeger (2024) emphasizes that Paul's concept of justification should be understood as God's judicial verdict within the framework of ancient Roman law, in which a judge declares a person "not guilty" based on Christ's substitutionary act. Meanwhile, research influenced by the *New Perspective on Paul* (NPP) continues to make a significant contribution to understanding the covenantal dimension of Pauline theology. Oropeza (2021) interprets the phrase *pistis Christou* in Romans 3:22 and 26 as "the faithfulness of Christ" rather than merely "faith in Christ." Accordingly, justification is not solely rooted in the subjective response of human faith but in Christ's representative obedience as the mediator of the covenant people.

The article "*An Exegetical Study of Romans 3:21–26*" (2023) demonstrates that the aorist form of *dikaiōthentes* denotes a past completed action with enduring results, namely, a divine act that has already occurred

in salvation history yet continues to affect the believer's standing before God. Thus, the grammatical form is not merely narrative but theological it signifies the certainty of salvation as a legal and final reality.

Moreover, this linguistic approach opens a dialogical space between forensic and ethical perspectives. Luke (2025) observes that Paul's verbal choices often indicate continuity between judicial declaration (forensic) and existential transformation that occurs through union with Christ. In other words, the status of being *declared righteous* is inseparable from the process of *being made righteous*.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects a sharp dichotomy between justification as a legal declaration and justification as a relational reality. Horton (2011) and Vos (2014), within the Reformed tradition, affirm that all benefits of salvation flow from *union with Christ*. Within this framework, justification is understood as a forensic act that takes place within the believer's union with Christ. The study published in *Affirmation & Critique* (2024) reinforces this trajectory by stating that "*the forensic declaration is covenantally located in the believer's participation in Christ's faithfulness.*" This perspective affirms that faith functions as the *instrumentum* that unites humanity with Christ; it is not the basis of justification itself but the means by which the gift of justification is received. Accordingly, the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is no longer viewed as an abstract juridical transfer but as the logical consequence of a real and vital union with Christ. This also explains why Paul consistently connects justification with the expression "*in Christ*" (*en Christō Iēsou*), as seen in Romans 8:1. Through an interdisciplinary approach exegetical, linguistic, and theological modern studies affirm that justification in the Epistle to the Romans represents both a legal and relational reality, grounded in the work of Christ, received through faith, and confirmed within the context of covenantal fellowship.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative exegetical method using contextual, structural, grammatical, literary, lexical, historical, textual, theological, and exegetical analyses based on the approach of John D. Grassmick. The contextual analysis is used to understand the relationship between the text and its immediate and broader context; the structural analysis maps the interconnections among the textual units; the grammatical analysis examines the function of words and Greek syntax; the literary analysis identifies the genre and characteristics of the text; the lexical analysis explores the meaning of key terms; the historical analysis investigates the background of authorship and the socio-cultural setting; the textual analysis determines the most accurate reading among textual variants; the theological analysis integrates the meaning of the passage into the overall framework of biblical doctrine; and the exegetical analysis serves as the final stage, formulating doctrinal insights based on the results of the preceding analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bibliological Observation of "Justification" in the Epistle to the Romans

Romans 3:21

The phrase *Nyni dè* ("But now") serves as an introduction to a pericope that logically marks a new redemptive era following humanity's total sinfulness and the failure of all human attempts at justification, which reach their climax in Romans 3:9–20. This phrase signals a transition from the Law, which is unable to save, to the new era in Christ, as expressed in the statement, "But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested..." (Rom 3:21).

The expression “*apart from the Law*” refers to the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament and, in Paul’s usage throughout Romans, almost certainly denotes the Law in its entirety. Thus, Paul’s emphasis in this passage is clear: righteousness and justification cannot be attained or produced by human effort (such as obedience to the Law), but are gifts of God in Christ. Paul’s expression “*the righteousness of God*” (*dikaiosynē theou*) in Romans 3:21 refers primarily to the righteousness granted to humanity by God that is, the status of being declared righteous rather than to God’s own moral attribute. This is evident from Paul’s parallel use of *dikaiosynē theou* (“the righteousness of God”) and *chōris nomou* (“apart from the Law”), which clearly indicates the justification of sinners in Christ apart from the works of the Law.

The term “*has been manifested*” (“the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law”) is crucial in relation to the human pursuit of justification within the context of the Mosaic Law. As previously mentioned, *the Law* in this passage encompasses not only the Mosaic legislation but also the entire Old Testament corpus—“the Law and the Prophets.” Within the framework of salvation history and the covenant of redemption, that period served as a preparatory stage pointing toward its fulfillment in Christ. In Him, the entire shadow of justification anticipated in the Law finds its full realization and completion through His incarnation, death, and resurrection. Thus, in simple terms, God has now made manifest the righteousness that was once foreshadowed in the Law and the Old Testament, bringing it to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:22–24

“...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 3:22–24)

What becomes evident in verses 22 and 23 is the strong affirmation of the essence of justification. Justification, in its very essence, refers to the righteousness of God Himself. Faith in this context is imputative it is through faith that believers are united and identified with the death and resurrection of Christ. Consequently, the sinner experiences the righteousness of God manifested in Jesus Christ through this union or participation with Him.

In this divine act, God re-identifies sinners through a new perspective, viewing them in light of their union with Christ rather than in their former condition. The concluding phrase of verse 22 “for all who believe” serves as a clear theological boundary for the operation of God’s justifying work: justification is graciously applied to all who believe.

The righteousness of God in this context is revealed equally to all who believe whether they are Jews or Gentiles. As has been previously stated and reaffirmed in verse 23, all human beings have essentially sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. This assertion is theologically significant, for it emphasizes that all people share the same essence and equality in their sinful condition. Consequently, salvation and justification are, in their very nature, equally available and operative for all who believe in Christ. This universality underscores the impartiality of God’s redemptive act: justification is not limited by ethnic, cultural, or covenantal distinctions, but extends to all who exercise faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, the phrase “there is no distinction” functions as a theological declaration of equality both in humanity’s common participation in sin and in the universal scope of God’s justifying grace. Whether Jew or Gentile, all stand equally in need of redemption, and all are equally justified through faith in Christ.

Verse 24 encapsulates God's justifying act toward sinners in Jesus Christ an act of redemption that is, in its essence, an expression of divine grace, a gratuitous gift. Three key terms play a crucial role in this passage: *δικαιούμενοι* (*dikaioumenoi*), *δωρεάν* (*dorean*), and *ἀπολυτρόσεως* (*apolutrōseōs*).

The participle *δικαιούμενοι* conveys the idea of a forensic declaration a judicial verdict by which one is declared "righteous" within the context of a legal pronouncement. This signifies that God does not *make* a person inherently righteous in moral transformation, but rather *declares* the sinner to be righteous in a forensic sense. In their guilt and sinfulness, standing under divine judgment, believers are *declared righteous* through their union with Christ and are thereby freed from condemnation released from every accusation and legal demand.

The term *δωρεάν* (*dorean*) denotes a gift that is given *freely*, without any condition of merit or obligation to give. In this sense, God's act of justification toward sinners is portrayed as a *gracious bestowal* upon those who are utterly unworthy to receive it. This divine gift does not arise as the consequence of any transactional exchange in which the sinner might claim entitlement based on works or moral effort. Rather, it is granted solely by the free and sovereign grace of God, entirely independent of human merit, worthiness, or condition. The term *ἀπολυτρόσεως* (*apolytrōseōs*), translated *redemption*, fundamentally conveys the idea of "liberation through the payment of a ransom." This signifies that God Himself fulfilled the full requirement of His own justice on behalf of sinners, paying the price necessary to deliver humanity from the power of sin and the penalty it incurs. The ransom price was none other than the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. It becomes evident, therefore, that this act of "paying the ransom" originates entirely from God's initiative accomplished through the substitutionary death of Christ. The verse thus underscores that the salvation and justification of sinners are granted freely as a gift of divine grace, precisely because God has Himself satisfied the demands of justice and borne the cost of redemption in Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:25–26

"Christ Jesus, whom God presented as a propitiation through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance He had passed over the sins previously committed. He did it to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:25–26, ESV)

This passage describes the redemptive work of Christ on the cross as the very foundation upon which the righteousness of God is applied to sinners that is, to those who believe. It is on this basis, and through the fulfillment of the law's demands for the manifestation of divine righteousness, that believers are justified by God. In its relational dimension, this section also highlights the aspect of reconciliation, which inaugurates a new era of relationship between humanity and God through justification. In Christ's atoning work, the righteous demands of God's justice upon sinners are fully satisfied; thus, His redemptive act becomes the legal and theological ground for the justification of all who are in Christ.

The juridical reality of the believer's new status having been declared righteous in Christ reveals the profound truth that there is now no longer any condemnation for them. In the words of the Apostle John, they are no longer "under judgment," for the penalty has been borne and the justice of God has been fulfilled in Christ.

Romans 3:27–31

This section presents the logical consequence of justification, which is grounded in and directed toward the objective redemptive work of Christ applied equally to both Jews and Gentiles, to the circumcised and the

uncircumcised alike. In essence, justification is now understood in a new light: its basis lies entirely in the objective work of Christ and is applied universally to all through faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus, at the same time, the demands of the Law are fulfilled. The righteousness revealed in Christ neither abolishes the Law nor stands in opposition to it; rather, it accomplishes its true intent by establishing the principle of faith as the means by which God justifies both Jew and Gentile alike. The demands of the Mosaic Law are, in essence, twofold. First, it requires perfect obedience as the expression of God's righteousness and holiness a standard that no sinner is capable of fulfilling. This demand was completely satisfied by Jesus Christ through His *active obedience*, in which He perfectly and faultlessly fulfilled every requirement of the Law.

Second, the Law demands judgment and carries a curse upon those who fail to meet its standards, thereby placing them under divine condemnation. This aspect, too, was fulfilled in Christ through His *passive obedience*, as He bore the penalty of sin in His substitutionary death on behalf of sinners. Both aspects of Christ's obedience active and passive are imputed to believers who are united with Him (Murray, 1955; Calvin, 1960; Schreiner, 2015). Through this substitutionary work, Jesus Christ died in the place of sinners, and His righteousness is credited to them, forming the legal and redemptive foundation of their justification before God.

Etymological Overview

The doctrine of justification as discussed by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans is profoundly rooted in the Old Testament. Ladd (2022) emphasizes that Paul's doctrine of justification can only be properly understood against the background of Old Testament theology. In Greek thought, righteousness (*dikaiosynē*) was generally viewed as an inherent moral quality within a person. Plato, for instance, identified *dikaiosynē* as one of the four cardinal virtues alongside wisdom, temperance, and courage. This conception was particularly upheld by the Stoics. However, as Ladd (2022) notes, such a Hellenistic understanding of righteousness occasionally infiltrated strands of Hellenistic Judaism.

By contrast, the Old Testament presents a markedly different concept of righteousness and justification. The Hebrew terms *tsadaq*, *tsadiq*, *tsedaqah*, and their variations often translated as "righteousness," "justice," or "to be righteous" carry a fundamentally theological and relational sense. They consistently describe conduct or status within the covenantal relationship between God and His people. Thus, the doctrine of justification is deeply and intrinsically connected to the Old Testament, even finding its foundational background therein. Righteousness (*tsedeq*, *tsedaqah*) in the Old Testament does not primarily refer to an ethical quality though that dimension is not absent. Rather, as Snaith (2002) observes, its most fundamental meaning points to "conformity or genuine obedience to the standard or norm that serves as a measure." Accordingly, a *righteous person* (*tsadiq*) is one who lives in accordance with the established rule or divine standard. The corresponding verb, "to be righteous," thus carries the sense of *to conform to the norm* or, in certain contexts, *to declare righteous* or *to justify* (Ladd, 2002).

When this conceptual framework is compared with Paul's exposition of justification in the Book of Romans, the continuity becomes evident. Paul's doctrine clearly echoes the Old Testament understanding especially in his discussion concerning the futility of seeking justification through adherence to the Law. It is precisely against this backdrop that Paul proclaims the fulfillment of true justification in and through Christ, the One who embodies and completes the righteousness of God.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that *righteousness* in this context is fundamentally a relational concept, rather than merely an ethical or moral condition of a person. The idea is rooted in the fulfillment

of requirements established as the divine standard and is expressed through faithfulness within a covenantal relationship.

Within the framework of the Law, righteousness thus denotes conformity to the demands of the Torah as the representation of one's standing before God in covenant relationship with Him. The theological value of justification, therefore, is found in this relational dimension when a person is seen as meeting God's righteous standard within the parameters of that relationship.

This understanding later became codified within Judaism, where righteousness was generally defined as obedience to the Torah (Ladd, 2002). However, Paul emphatically asserts in the Epistle to the Romans that "no one will be justified by the works of the Law." In doing so, he redefines righteousness not as human achievement through Torah observance but as a divine gift granted through faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek term for "to justify" is *dikaioō*, while its nominal form *dikaioōsunē* is translated as "righteousness." The adjectival form *dikaios* can be rendered as "just" or "righteous," and the noun *dikaiōsis* means "justification." In this theological context, justification is primarily understood as pertaining to a relational reality rather than to an ethical quality, although it may at times also carry moral or ethical connotations.

According to Paul's exposition in the Epistle to the Romans, justification clearly refers to the establishment of a new relationship between the sinner and God. Chamblin (2002) emphasizes that in the act of divine justification, God demonstrates His own righteousness by justifying human beings granting them righteousness as a gracious gift. The legitimate basis for the manifestation of this divine righteousness is found in the cross of Christ, where the full demands of righteousness required for the justification of sinners were completely fulfilled. Through the cross, God's righteousness is both revealed and actualized, making it possible for humanity to enter into a restored and justified relationship with Him.

In this relational context, the term *dikaioō* is generally translated as "to declare someone righteous" or "to pronounce someone to be in the right." Within Paul's conceptual framework in the Epistle to the Romans, justification in this sense is consistently understood in a soteriological context meaning that it signifies a legal declaration that the requirements of the law necessary for life have been fully satisfied on behalf of that person (cf. Rom. 5:1, 9; 8:30–33). The forensic or juridical nuance of this term is often set in antithesis to condemnation (Rom. 8:33–34) (Berkhof, 1997).

Meanwhile, the noun *dikaiōsis* ("justification") is a particularly distinctive term, as it occurs only twice in the New Testament both in Paul's discussion in the Epistle to the Romans (Rom. 4:25; 5:18). This term specifically refers to the act of God by which He declares human beings free from guilt and acceptable before Him. The state or result that follows from this divine act of justification is expressed by the term *dikaioōsunē* (Berkhof, 1997).

The Essence of Justification in the Epistle to the Romans

The Meaning of Justification

Louis Berkhof (1997) defines justification as "that judicial act of God whereby He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that all the demands of the law have been satisfied on behalf of the sinner." In other words, justification is a legal declaration of God by which human beings are declared righteous—not on the basis of their own moral worth or intrinsic righteousness, but rather because they are reckoned righteous through union with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. In this divine act, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner, so that the sinner is viewed and accounted as righteous in Christ (Sproul, 1995; Horton, 2011).

Thus, justification is fundamentally a gift of God's grace rather than an achievement resulting from human effort or merit. In its essential meaning, justification is not an ethical or moral transformation of the sinner into a righteous person, but rather a forensic declaration of righteousness grounded entirely in the redemptive work of Christ. The primary implication to be emphasized from this understanding of justification does not concern ethical transformation, but rather the forensic and relational dimensions of a person's standing before God. Justification primarily addresses one's legal position and relationship with God, rather than one's moral condition. Through the divine act of justification, the individual is no longer regarded as a sinner under condemnation, but, in terms of legal status, is declared righteous and, in positional reality, set free from the penalty of judgment.

The Characteristics of Justification

Justification, as presented in the Epistle to the Romans, possesses several distinctive characteristics in the essence of its theological meaning.

The Present Essence of Justification

Romans 5:9 states, "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." What becomes evident from this statement is that, on the one hand, justification has already taken place on God's part for the believer. This carries the implication that, from a legal and positional standpoint, the reality of being justified is a present fact. Yet, on the other hand, the full realization of justification within the eschatological judgment has not yet occurred.

This is further affirmed in Romans 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The declaration in this verse points to a present reality namely, the new relational state in which believers now live in peace and restored fellowship with God. This reality is further reinforced by the use of the aorist tense in the verb "have been justified" found in both of these verses. At least three significant implications arise from the aorist form of the verb. First, it emphasizes ontological certainty the completeness of the action as a culminated reality at the moment of its declaration. Second, it highlights the *momentary aspect*, affirming that the act of justification occurred as a single, decisive event in the past. Third, it underscores the *resultative or consummative aspect*, signifying that the work of justification has been fully accomplished and brought to completion. (Porter, 1989; Schreiner, 1998; Wallace, 1996).

Thus, through faith in Christ on the basis of His redemptive work on the cross and His resurrection the believer has been justified, having already entered into the position and status of being righteous. The believer has been set free from sin and from the demands of judgment resulting from sin, and therefore no longer stands under condemnation. In this sense, it becomes evident that the eschatological judgment of the future, though still an event to come, has already become a present reality in its verdict and implications for those who believe. (Ladd, 2002)

The Eschatological Essence of Justification

Paul's statement in Romans 5:9, "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God," reflects, on one hand, the eschatological dimension of justification, as it points to the future divine judgment. A strong affirmation of the eschatological nature of justification is also found in Romans 8:33-34: "Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who

condemns? Christ Jesus, who died more than that, who was raised to life is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

Many scholars generally understand this passage as depicting the final judgment scene, wherein God’s verdict to acquit believers from sin and condemnation stands irrevocable no accusation can be brought against them that could overturn His decision. Here, it also becomes evident that the actual realization of that judicial verdict whether in the form of punishment or, conversely, acquittal has not yet taken place in its consummated form. (Ladd, 2002). As a point of reference, in *Galatians 5:5* Paul expresses the eschatological aspect of justification by stating, “For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” This statement does not imply that believers have not yet attained the status of being justified in the present. Rather, it emphasizes that those who have already been justified, through faith, are anticipating the full and comprehensive realization of that justification namely, their ultimate deliverance from judgment and entrance into eternal life, as the antithesis of eternal condemnation at the final judgment.

The judicial verdict of justification for believers has already been decisively rendered and proclaimed, while simultaneously containing within it the future dimension of its complete and consummated application (Ridderbos, 2010). Nevertheless, it remains clear that the justification of believers is a definitive and unchangeable reality (Berkhof, 1997).

The Forensic Essence of Justification

Justification, as articulated in the Epistle to the Romans, also conveys a distinctly *forensic* essence namely, one that pertains to a legal or judicial context (*forensis*, meaning “of or pertaining to the court of law”) (Moo, 1996). In this framework, righteousness is understood juridically as a legal declaration rendered in a courtroom setting, pronouncing a person to be righteous. From this forensic perspective, justification is a legitimate and binding judicial verdict in which God, as the divine Judge, proclaims that an individual is justified and released from all legal charges or condemnation (Ladd, 2002).

Romans 8:33–34 provides a particularly vivid depiction of this forensic dimension of divine justification within the context of a courtroom scene. The passage underscores the strength and finality of God’s justifying verdict one that is unassailable and irrevocable, standing beyond the reach of any accusation or appeal. The forensic meaning of justification affirms the certainty of the believer’s status before God as one who has been declared righteous. This declaration rests upon God’s judicial decision to grant righteousness, a verdict that is grounded in the believer’s union with the redemptive work of Christ on the cross.

The Essence of Justification: In Christ

Referring to Romans 3:21–31, particularly verses 24 and 26–28: “*and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By one of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.*” (Romans 3:24, 26–28, ESV)

The foundation of justification, in this context, is the death of Christ. God appointed Christ as the means of atonement through His death, thereby manifesting His divine justice in that sacrificial act. All of this reveals that God displays the power of His righteousness *in Christ*, and it is through the believer’s union with Christ in His death

that justification is realized. For in this union with Christ on the cross, all the demands of God's justice upon the believer who, by nature, is a sinner are fully satisfied. Consequently, the believer is liberated from every legal demand. Faith is the means by which the believer is united with Christ in His redemptive work on the cross. Thus, the very essence of justification is found *in Christ* that is, in union with Him through faith.

Paul's statement indicates that the divine verdict concerning the sin of the world has already been rendered in the death of Christ. What is to be consummated in the eschatological future namely, the final judgment has already been decisively manifested and inaugurated in Jesus Christ. In this way, *in Christ*, God has revealed Himself to be righteous before the world, demonstrating that His justice is neither arbitrary nor partial, but fully consistent with His redemptive purpose. At the same time, this divine act unveils the very righteousness that is required for believers to stand before the judgment of God as those who are declared righteous. Thus, the cross becomes both the revelation of God's own righteousness and the means by which human beings, through faith in Jesus Christ, are justified and granted a new standing before Him (Ridderbos, 2010).

The Essence of Justification: Through Faith

In Romans 3:25, 28, and 30, Paul declares that believers are justified "*dia pisteōs*," "*pistei*" (dative), and "*ek pisteōs*." The preposition *dia* emphasizes the fact that faith is the means *through which* believers are united with Christ becoming one with Him in His death and resurrection and thereby partake in His righteousness. The preposition *ek* indicates that faith, in a logical sense, precedes justification in a person's experiential reality; thus, in the context of the application of Christ's redemptive work to human life, justification proceeds *from* and begins *with* faith. Meanwhile, the dative form *pistei* functions instrumentally ("instrumental dative"), signifying faith as the *divine instrument* through which the believer is united with Christ and His righteousness. (Berkhof, 1997; Bavinck, 2006; Turretin, 1992).

Theologically, the foregoing exposition affirms the intrinsic relationship between justification and faith, while also clarifying the specific role of faith in the justification of believers before God. It becomes evident from this discussion that the power of justification does not reside in faith itself; faith is not the source from which justification originates. Consequently, faith cannot be regarded as the *basis* of one's justification. The foundation of divine justification lies entirely in God's own decision, grounded in the redemptive work of Christ. If faith were to be considered the basis of justification, the logical implication would be that justification involves an element of human merit or dependency, thereby undermining its nature as an act of divine grace. (Vos, 2014).

Paul likewise emphasizes that the foundation of justification is not the Law or obedience to the Law, but the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. The death of Christ represents the fulfillment of God's demands of love and justice toward sinners, and simultaneously serves as the very basis of justification itself. As Paul declares, "Much more then, since we have now been justified by His blood" (Romans 5:9). The shedding of Christ's blood His sacrificial death constitutes the means of atonement, and upon this basis, liberation from all guilt, or justification, is graciously granted to humankind. Faith functions as the divine instrument that unites believers with Christ, His redemptive work, and His righteousness (Ladd, 2002). Therefore, the foundation of justification is the atoning death of Christ, while the means by which, and through which, this justification becomes effectively applied to each individual is faith.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing discussion of justification, it can be concluded that the Epistle to the Romans clearly and emphatically asserts the universal reality of human sinfulness a condition shared equally and without exception by all people. As a result of this universal sin, every human being, without distinction, stands under the wrath and judgment of God. Paul's argument in Romans demonstrates that the Law, while revealing the standard of divine righteousness, is entirely incapable of granting righteousness to humanity. The Law exposes sin but cannot remove its guilt or consequence. Thus, no one can attain righteousness or justification through adherence to the Law, since sinful humanity possesses neither the ability nor the merit to establish its own righteousness before God. Paul's declaration in Romans 3:21 marks the inauguration of a new redemptive era the fulfillment of justification as a divine gift and act of grace. In essence, justification is the gracious initiative of God whereby sinful humanity is declared righteous, not on the basis of its own moral virtue or merit, but solely upon the righteousness of Christ, who has fully satisfied the righteous demands of God through His redemptive work on the cross. On this foundation, believers are liberated from the guilt and power of sin, as well as from the demands of divine judgment, and are thereby granted a new standing of righteousness before God.

Faith is the divine means by which the sinner is united with Christ in His death and resurrection, thereby receiving Christ Himself and His righteousness. Through this union, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer, becoming the very basis upon which God's act of justification is declared. It is through faith, therefore, that the believer participates in the redemptive reality accomplished by Christ and stands before God clothed in His righteousness.

REFERENCES

- Affirmation & Critique. (2024). *Justification by faith: Affirmation & critique (special issue)*. Living Stream Ministry.
- Bavinck, H. (2006). *Reformed dogmatics: Volume 4 – Holy Spirit, church, and new creation* (J. Bolt, Ed.; J. Vriend, Trans.). Michigan: Baker Academic.
- Berkhof, L. (1997). *Teologi sistematika: Doktrin keselamatan*. Surabaya: Penerbit Momentum.
- Calvin, J. (1960). *Institutes of the Christian religion* (J. T. McNeill, Ed.; F. L. Battles, Trans.; Vols. 1–2). Westminster: John Knox Press.
- Chamblin, J. K. (2002). *Paulus dan diri: Ajaran rasuli bagi keutuhan pribadi*. Surabaya: Penerbit Momentum.
- Horton, M. (2011). *The Christian faith: A systematic theology for pilgrims on the way*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Ito, A. (2003). Nomos (tōn) ergōn and nomos pisteōs: The Pauline rhetoric and the theology of *nomos*. *Novum Testamentum*, 45(1), 1–20.
- Ladd, G. E. (2002). *Teologi Perjanjian Baru* (Jilid 2). Bandung: Yayasan Kalam Hidup.
- Luke, S. E. (2025). Christ the matter and form of justification: A new solution to the dilemma of Paul's δικαίωσις. *Religions*, 16(2), 182–197. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020182>
- Moo, D. J. (1996). *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the New Testament). Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Murray, J. (1955). *Redemption accomplished and applied*. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Oropeza, B. J. (2021). Justification by faith in Christ or faithfulness of Christ? *Journal for the Study of the New*

Testament, 72(1), 102–121.

- Porter, S. E. (1989). *Verbal aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with reference to tense and mood*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Räsänen, H. (1992). *Jesus, Paul and the Torah: Collected essays* (D. E. Orton, Trans.). Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Ridderbos, H. (2010). *Paulus: Pemikiran utama teologinya*. Surabaya: Penerbit Momentum.
- Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament). Baker Academic.
- Schreiner, T. R. (2015). *Faith alone: The doctrine of justification—What the Reformers taught and why it still matters*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Snaith, N. (1994). *Distinctive ideas of the Old Testament*. London: Epworth Press.
- Sproul, R. C. (1995). *Faith alone: The evangelical doctrine of justification*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books.
- Stuhlmacher, P. (1994). *Revisiting Paul's doctrine of justification: A challenge to the new perspective*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.
- Taeger, S. (2024). Declared guiltless: Justification by faith in latter-day contexts. *Religious Educator*, 25(1), 45–62.
- Turretin, F. (1992). *Institutes of elenctic theology* (Vol. 2; G. M. Giger, Trans.; J. T. Dennison, Ed.). Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing.
- Vos, G. (2014). *Reformed dogmatics: Volume 4 – Soteriology*. Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press.
- Wallace, D. B. (1996). *Greek grammar beyond the basics: An exegetical syntax of the New Testament*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.