

**The Council of Trent (1545-1563)**  
**The Decree on Justification**

This decree, the single largest arising from the council, runs to 6,000 words in English.  
It was promulgated in 1547.

**[1] HUMAN CAPACITY**

TRENT. Sinners cannot, of themselves, cross the chasm between themselves and God, but they can “draw nigh to” the chasm; i.e., dispose themselves for justification, through co-operating with the initial help of divine grace.

I.e., with the help of grace we can re-orient ourselves to God so that

- [a] we are “facing” God rather than facing away from him
- [b] we are “ready” (prepared) to receive sufficient grace for salvation
- [c] this is possible because while the Fall has devastated the “likeness of God” (“supernatural communion” with God and original righteousness”) it hasn’t devastated the “image of God.”

Note the presuppositions here:

- [a] a freedom to turn to God
- [b] a sense of God’s moral law that orients us towards God (i.e., our sense of the *moral law* has *spiritual* force)
- [c] there is a predisposition to religion that God graces.

REFORMERS. The foregoing is semi-Pelagianism. Justification is utterly gratuitous (i.e., a gift): we do not co-operate in any way. Calvin: “What can a dead man do to attain life?” (Nothing) We are not sick but dead *coram Deo*.

Question: If justification is sheer gift, what’s the point of giving a gift to a corpse?

Answer: (Reformers) The gift, pressed upon the spiritually inert, gives them the *capacity* to respond and the *desire* to respond.

Problems:

- a] Reformers appeal to a doctrine of election.
  - i] This doctrine strikes critics as selection, sheer arbitrariness on God’s part. The Reformers indicate they are aware of a problem here (cf. Calvin’s moving Predestination from Bk I [Inst.], “The Knowledge of God the Creator,” to Bk III, “The Way We Receive the Grace of Christ”).
  - ii] In repudiating all notions of co-operation as synergism and therefore as semi-Pelagianism, did the Reformers also deny the dimension to faith that renders faith (in one respect) a human activity, a human affirmation? See the discussion of *gratia operans/gratia co-operans*. Believers are humans graced, not objects manipulated. Fallen hk. remains human, and never descends to animal or devil.
  - iii] If the Reformers deny faith to be a human activity/event, then the believer isn’t a human agent, and God has no *human* dialogical “other.” Recall: God loves the animals, but speaks only to humans, thereby making them response-able/ible.
  - iv] we must find a way of articulating two truths:
    - [a] fallen hk. is dead *coram Deo*
    - [b] fallen hk. is still human, not a stick or stone; i.e., spiritually dead yet not non-human.

b] Does Trent have an insufficiently rigorous view of *fallen* human nature? Doesn’t justification *have* to be utterly gratuitous if in fact we are dead *coram Deo*? Is fallen human kind (totally) depraved or merely deprived?

Note the ramifications of “depravity” *versus* “deprivation.”

[i] we can’t love God at all, never mind above all, even though we can be religious. Because our will is *in se curvatus* we can will only our ongoing depravity.

[ii] reason can’t guide the will to affirm God, since reason is perverted w.r.t. knowledge of God. As reason approaches (attempted) knowledge of the P(p)erson, it becomes increasingly rationalization.

[iii] the morally good act is neither a sign of grace nor a step toward grace.

[iv] the root human problem isn’t ignorance (of God and his will) but perverseness. We will to make ourselves our own Lord.

[v] fallen hk. doesn’t seek God but rather flees him.

Trent said the believer is *partim peccator, partim iustus*; the Reformers insisted on *simul totus iustus, simul totus peccator*. What is each trying to preserve and each concerned to deny?

REFORMERS. If *partim...partim*, then which part is sinful, and which justified?

TRENT. If *simul...simul*, then is there no growth in sanctity?

## [2] SANCTIFICATION

TRENT. Justification includes not only remission of sins, but sanctification as well (renewal); i.e., justification includes not only transaction but also transformation.

REFORMERS. Justification **is** remission, a new status, acquittal, non-imputation of sin. However, since Christ can’t be divided, Christ’s benefits are conferred as Christ himself is. Therefore all Christians are both justified and sanctified. While justification and sanctification can never be separated, they must always be distinguished. Moreover, neither one grounds the other.

The point: Jesus Christ gives *himself* to us, his two benefits being pardon (just’n) and recovery of the defaced image of God (sanct’n.)

Problems:

a) When the Ref’rs speak of the “imputation of Christ’s righteousness” they mean that believers are given a standing (in Christ) outside themselves. Are they hereby suggesting something mechanical? (in 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed scholasticism it *did* become mechanical.) Is it no more than an empty pronouncement because separated from the living person of Jesus Christ? Does it leave believers in their irreducible humanity unaltered? Is it *something* done “over their head” or “behind their back?” (If we are going to say “imputed” we should say “imparted” in the very next breath.) It appears that “imputation” should be complemented by other metaphors that don’t suggest the mechanical, the abstract, the impersonal or the subhuman.

b) When Trent maintains that sanctification grounds *final* justification, what scriptural warrant does Trent have? What scriptural warrant is there for regarding justification as God’s final pronouncement on the quality of our sanctification? (REFORMERS: “none”) Still, Trent sought to preserve the truth that even Christians await a judgement.)

When Trent speaks of “beatification” and “canonization” is it quantifying sanctity? Is sanctification measurable or (ultimately) noticeable? (Calvin: When the Christian looks in on herself she sees *no* evidence of sanctification; rather, “sanctification consists more in aspiration than in achievement.”) Still, there are people in whom the sanctifying work of Christ shines forth resplendently. (Peter’s shadow.)

[3] JUSTIFICATION TRENT. Justification is **not** by faith alone.

REFORMERS. Justification is **necessarily** by faith alone.

Here the two groups may reflect Paul and James on faith: what one denied the other never affirmed.

Trent thought that by “faith alone” the Ref’rs were devaluing the obedience of the Christian life, reducing

the *life* of faith to “beliefism.” Trent feared that “faith alone” meant “assent to the (correct) doctrine of justification.” Faith would then be tantamount to ideation, a “head trip”, rationalism. (This tendency certainly appeared in 17<sup>th</sup> cent. Prot. scholasticism.)

Ref’rs thought that Trent was devaluing faith as God’s gift, and suggesting that standing with God could be earned or merited.

RCc theology spoke of “unformed faith”; i.e., faith that needs love to give it substance.

RCc theology spoke of “implicit faith”; i.e., believing what the church teaches on the church’s authority, even if the believer doesn’t understand what he “believes.”

Ref’rs said neither of the above is properly faith.

With respect to “unformed”, faith needs no supplementation since faith is our inclusion in JC.

Faith is always active in love, but love doesn’t remedy defect or deficiency in faith as such.

With respect to “implicit”, such so-called faith is nothing more than (i) “empty notions flitting in the brain” (Calvin), (ii) a “blind faith” that is idolatry.

But note even Calvin’s “implicit” faith in [1] the apostles before the Resurrection

[2] *Comm.* John 20: the women “were possessed of a faith they didn’t know they had.”

Ref’rs insisted that faith included *notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia* (understanding, assent, trust.) But only at the level of trust can we properly speak of faith, since the truth we understand with our mind and the assent to it we render with our will are aspects of the trust whereby we entrust our person to *the* Person. While only with respect to *fiducia* can we speak of faith, here faith **is** sufficient for justification. (Rome tended to predicate faith of *assensus*, thereby imparting an intellectualist cast to faith. Melancthon had this tendency too. Much Protestantism still has.

Trent always suspected “faith alone” as a cheap evasion of rigorous discipleship, sacrifice, crossbearing, etc. Ref’rs insisted that only “faith alone” obviated self-justification; Trent insisted that “faith alone” obviated sacrificial discipleship. (How much of Trent’s objection was fuelled by what RCs saw in Reformed communities, especially in view of the fact that “cheap grace”, “cheap discipleship”, was one of the charges the Anabaptists levelled against Reformed Christians?)

Trent correctly spotted a shortcoming in the Ref’d understanding of faith: the Ref’rs spoke of faith as a gift only, rather than as a gift *exercised*; either someone had it or she hadn’t been given it. Plainly the Ref’rs had undervalued the dominical/apostolic injunctions concerning “little” faith, weak faith, the strengthening of faith, the safeguarding of faith, the need to plead for the increasing of faith, etc.

Trust (*fiducia*) is evidently a *human* activity, or else faith, so-called, is unrelated to the human being. In the matter of faith as a gift that must be humanly exercised, affirmed, endorsed, etc., the Reformers were better than what they wrote. (e.g., Calvin stated and more often implied that faith is a human engagement with the person of Jesus Christ.) Still, when pressed in polemical debate, he stated what is finally indefensible. The debate had to do with what was written.

There is a subset to this question. Trent asked, “Is the human will passive with respect to justification or does it actively concur with grace?”

Trent said it actively concurs with grace or else justification is no more than a pronouncement read over us that is utterly unrelated to us as human agents. Reformers regarded any notion of concurrence as synergistic self-salvation.

Ref’rs said (i) the will is enslaved and therefore can’t concur in any act of God, (ii) “concurrence” opens the back door to “co-operation,” (iii) the renewed will (renewed purely gratuitously) *then* wills the good, the justifying activity of God (and cannot will anything but this; i.e., cannot not will it.)

There appears to be a problem for both Trent and the Ref'rs. While scripture insists that no one of herself can will the righteousness of God; i.e., no one can will herself into right relationship with God, there is still a human willing that “co-operates” (cf. Augustine’s distinction between *gratia operans* and *gratia co-operans*) without being synergistic; i.e., without maintaining that righteousness is partially human-wrought and therefore partially meritorious. It appears that mystery surrounds the coming-to-faith of someone who is not sick but dead *coram Deo*. Different traditions attempt to articulate this issue in different ways; e.g., **Ref’d tradition:** election invariably effects faith in those whom God has inscrutably foreordained to faith; **RCc tradition:** baptism quickens the will to the point that the person can decide for or against faith; **Wesleyan tradition:** prevenient grace “graces” everyone to the point that, on account of grace, everyone can respond to the earliest work of grace and begin an ongoing life in God wherein each step of obedience finds one immersed in greater grace, with understanding enlarged and greater discernment of God’s will and greater opportunity for service.

None of these approaches, however, demystifies the mystery: Why is it when **all alike** are dead *coram Deo* and the gospel is announced to all, **only some** come to faith?

**[4] ASSURANCE:** The Relation of Assurance to Faith (This remains a huge *pastoral* problem.)

TRENT maintains that an inner certainty arises from a special, supernatural illumination (i.e., private revelation) – *or* – for those not so favoured, supernatural grace enters the human entity *via* the sacraments and permeates us essentially concerning our being, not (merely) concerning psychological states. Normally we are to trust the efficacy of the sacrament, since the sacrament never fails to convey grace. Accordingly, we can be confident of our justification inasmuch as we “put no obstacle” in the way of grace (e.g., willful sin or an improper attitude.) Trent thought the Ref’rs encouraged an unhelpful, even self-destructive or morbid introspection: people keep looking in upon themselves to ascertain their standing in Christ, only to conclude, on the basis of what they “see” inside them, that they have no standing in Christ.

REF’RS maintain that (i) “faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension” (Calvin.) Indeed, assurance is an aspect of faith: where there is no assurance, there is no faith *whatsoever*. This understanding would appear to drive believers to search “inwardly” in order to ascertain the fact and nature of their assurance. (ii) However, the Ref’rs maintain that believers are not to introspect but rather are to *look away from themselves to Jesus Christ, the author and object of faith, for to see Christ “rightly” is to always to see ourselves included in Christ.* (Calvin) In other words, if when “gazing” upon Christ we can see ourselves not included in him, then it isn’t Christ we are gazing upon! And since Christ “mirrors” election to us (never reprobation), Calvin is fond of saying, “Christ is more than a thousand testimonies to me.” He means that rightly to understand ourselves included in Christ brings greater (i.e., more trustworthy) assurance than ransacking my heart for evidence of the Spirit’s authentication of my standing in Christ.

Problems: (i) When Trent speaks of “special, supernatural illumination”, is it referring to something that is not only not found in scripture but whose logic contradicts the logic of faith *with respect to justification* everywhere in scripture? (Admittedly, there are private revelations vouchsafed to individuals in scripture; e.g., Paul’s “abundance of revelations.” Elsewhere what Paul does “by revelation” isn’t given to every Christian to do.) Ref’rs insist rather that assurance *concerning justification* is a *witness of the Holy Spirit*, not a conclusion based on intrapsychic introspection wherein one looks for or claims special illumination.

(ii) When Ref’rs speak of Christ as imparting assurance through mirroring (only) the decree of election, what assurance can “believers” have in this manner when *behind* Christ there exists another decree (reprobation) concerning which (and concerning us) Christ can inform us of nothing? No gazing upon Christ, however ardent, protracted, or hopeful, can inform us of where we are with respect to that decree (reprobation) which is authored by God, implemented by the Holy Spirit, but has nothing to do with Jesus Christ.