I. Justification is a Legal Declaration by God
   a. What is Justification?
      i. When someone responds to God’s call in repentance and faith, God responds to that faith by thinking of that person’s sins as forgiven and by thinking of Christ’s righteousness as belonging to that person. At that very moment God also declares that person to be righteous in his sight. This act of God is called “justification.” Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and thinks of Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us and therefore (2) declares us to be “just” or morally righteous in his sight.1
   
   b. Why does God consider someone Justified?
      i. Paul is clear that this justification comes after we respond to the gospel call in faith and that justification is God’s response to our faith. In Romans 3:26, Paul writes that God is the “justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” and in Romans 5:1 that we are “justified by faith.” In Galatians 2:16 he writes, “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” These verses clearly show that justification is by faith.2
   
   c. Read Ephesians 2:8-9 and James 2:14-26 and then explain how would you reconcile Paul’s and James’ statements on being justified?
      i. (When James says a person is “justified by works” in James 2:21, 24, and 25, he is not contradicting Paul, but he is using “justified” in a different sense, not meaning “declared righteous by God,” but “shown to be righteous before other people,” as is clear from the context of James 2:18–26, where he talks about outward evidence that a person has faith.)3

II. A Declaration That We Are Righteous before God:
   a. Is there any situation or sin that a true believer might have to one day pay an eternal penalty for?
      i. If God has declared you righteous in his sight, you do not have to pay the penalty for your past, present, or future sins. As Paul writes in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Later, in Romans 8:33, Paul makes it clear that no one can bring a charge against or condemn God’s elect. Those whom God has justified have full forgiveness of their sins.4

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III. Justification by Faith Alone:
   a. If our Justification is based on our faith, do we somehow earn favor with God?
      i. Although justification comes about as God’s act in response to our faith, that does not mean our faith has any merit before God. It is not our faith that earns us favor with God. Scripture is clear: justification is based solely on the merits of Christ’s work (see Romans 3:24 above); it is never based on any merit in our faith. This really is wonderful news because it means we don’t have to create value or make payment of sins for ourselves. We can look to God, through Christ, to freely give us that which we know we can’t give ourselves.⁵

   b. Can you explain the difference between how the Protestants (that’s us) and the Roman Catholics view Justification?
      i. The doctrine of justification was the central difference between Protestants and Roman Catholics at the time of the Reformation, which began with Martin Luther in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. Luther and all other Protestants who followed him insisted that justification was by “faith alone,” while Roman Catholics responded that justification was by faith plus use of the “means of grace” found in the sacraments of the church (such as baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper as experienced in the mass, and penance). The Protestant doctrine of justification says that we are fully justified by God the instant we believe, for “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). The Roman Catholic doctrine says that we are not fully justified until our lives are completely cleansed from sin, which will not be until after we die and we have been purified in purgatory (Protestants say there is no purgatory). These differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics about justification have continued to this day.⁶

IV. Adoption: Membership in a New Family
   a. What does it mean to be Adopted by God?
      i. In addition to justification, there is another privilege given to those who look to God for their salvation: God makes us members of his family. This act of God is called adoption. ii. In John 1:12 we are told that to all who received Christ, to those “who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” This is not a privilege available for everyone: Paul says in Ephesians 2:2–3 that those who don’t believe in Christ are “sons of disobedience” and “children of wrath.”⁷

   b. What are some of the benefits of Adoption by God?
      i. As children of God, we have the privilege of an intimate relationship with God, whom we can call our Father (Rom. 8:15). We do not have to live a fearful life of slavish obedience; instead, we are free to experience the joy of living as heirs to all the blessings that God desires to lavish upon his children (Rom. 8:15, 17).⁸

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V. Questions for Review and Application:
   a. What does it mean to be justified?

   b. How are Christians justified? Do you really believe that you have been fully justified once for all time?

   c. If you are a Christian, how does it make you feel to be part of God’s family? Why does it make you feel this way? Can you name some of the specific blessings that come from adoption?
Appendix: The Biblical Doctrine of Justification  
Dr. LARRY PETTEGREW, TH.D.

I. Justification defined:

“Justification is that work of God’s grace whereby he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight because, having been united to Christ by faith, Christ’s righteousness has been imputed to us” (Cook, 422).

“We define justification as God’s gracious, legal verdict in respect of those who believe in Christ, forgiving their sins and declaring them righteous through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness” (Demarest, 367).

“You are justified only when God the Father, based upon the meritorious work of Jesus Christ in your place, declares you to be so upon the exercise of the gift of faith” (J.White, 73).

II. What biblical justification is not:

a. It is not just that believers are justified by grace through faith. It is through “faith” alone that they are justified. Roman Catholics could agree to the first, but not with faith alone!
   i. Classic Protestantism “maintains that sinners are justified before God by grace alone on account of the work of Christ alone, and that this free justification become ours by faith alone” (Cornelis P. Venema, The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ, 28-29).

b. It is not an infusing of righteousness.
   i. “Justification is a forensic act imputing the righteousness of Christ to the believer; it is not an actual infusing of holiness into the individual. It is a matter of declaring the person righteous, as a judge does in acquitting the accused” (Erickson, 969).

c. It is not an actual making righteous of a person
   i. “It is not a matter of making the person righteous or altering his or her actual spiritual condition” (Erickson, 969).

d. It is not God announcing that sinners are something that they are not. Catholics call this “legal fiction”
   i. The Bible does not teach that believer’s are inherently or experientially righteous when they are not. Instead, it teaches that Christ’s righteousness has been imputed or credited to the account of the believing sinner. Thus, the Roman Catholic charge that the Protestant view is a “legal fiction” does not stand.

e. It is not a process.
   i. Justification is a once-for-all event that takes place immediately at belief. It is not a process that is based on continual faith and works.

III. Justification according to Paul

a. Justification comes through faith alone, not through works (Romans 1:17; 3:28; 3:30; 4:5-8; 5:1; 10:6; Galatians 2:16; 3:11; 3:24: “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.”
   i. NOTE: Compare the above passages with what the Roman Catholic Council of Trent declared:
      1. CANON IX: “If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.”
2. CANON XII: “If any one shall say that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in the divine mercy pardoning sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is that confidence alone by which we are justified ... let him be accursed.”

3. CANON XXXIII: “If any one saith, that, by the Catholic doctrine touching Justification, by this holy Synod inset forth in this present decree, the glory of God, or the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ are in any way derogated from, and not rather that the truth of our faith, and the glory in fine of God and of Jesus Christ are rendered (more) illustrious; let him be anathema.”

b. Justification is a forensic (judicial) act. (Romans 8:33-34)
   i. Forensic derives from a root that refers to the law court—dealing with crime: Rom. 3:33-34—“justify” and “condemn” are parallel.
   ii. Thus to say that justification is a forensic act means that God pronounces in His court that sinners are guilty or not guilty.
   iii. Based on a standard: the Law of God (the nature of God set forth in requirements, which we don’t match up to, anyone)

c. Justification is based on the death of Christ (Romans 3:24-26; 5:9; 5:18-19)
   i. These Scriptures tell us on what basis God can righteously declare an unjust person just.

d. Justification is granted to the New Covenant believer by being “in Christ”. (Romans 8:1)
   i. Note the importance of Christians being “in Christ” in order to receive that righteousness (Rom. 8:1)
   ii. Spirit baptism into Christ enables us to participate in the righteousness of our Mediator, be justified, and receive all of the spiritual blessings of the new covenant.
   iii. Upon exercise of faith, a person is united to the Son by the Father so completely that He considers the Son’s death to be that of those who actually deserved it.
      1. Justification provides imputed righteousness (i.e. credited to our account)
      2. When God justifies believers in Christ, he does so, not by making them righteous, but by granting and imputing the righteousness of God to their account. (2 Cor. 5:21)
      3. “Believers, who are joined to Christ, are reputed to be righteous, not in themselves, but as those who are partakers of Christ’s righteousness” (Venema, 41).
   4. Calvin: “... ‘to justify’ means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed. Therefore, since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ” (Institutes, III, 11.3).

IV. The benefits of Justification
   b. Restoration of divine favor—Romans 5:18
   c. Peace with God—Psalm 5:5; 11:5; John 3:36; Romans 5:1
   d. The “righteousness of God”—Philippians 3:9
   e. Deliverance from Wrath—Romans 5:9
   f. Eternal life—Titus 3:7
   g. Eternal security—Romans 8:33-34