

A Rebuttal to George M. Ella's "John Gill and Justification from Eternity"

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On this site, I have posted a talk by George M. Ella titled "John Gill and Justification from Eternity" (<http://wordofhisgrace.org/audio/ellagill.mp3>). The talk is of historical interest in showing the position of John Gill on this subject. I want to be clear, however, that I do not agree that justification from eternity as taught by John Gill and defended by Dr. Ella is taught in the Bible. Another defender of this theory is Peter L. Meney, who has written an article called "Ten Arguments for Justification from Eternity" (December/January 2007 *New Focus*, also available here: <http://www.go-newfocus.co.uk/pages.php?section=21&subsection=1&artID=176>). The present article also serves as a rebuttal to Mr. Meney, whose article I will occasionally reference, although most references to John Gill's and George Ella's arguments also apply to Mr. Meney's. I also want to make clear here that, in rebutting justification from eternity as taught by Gill and explained by Ella, I am not necessarily defending the people Dr. Ella argues against, such as John Murray and Andrew Fuller. Neither am I condemning Dr. Ella or Mr. Meney. I am, instead, trying to defend what the Scripture teaches. But before discussing Scripture, I want to have a brief philosophical discussion. I hope the reason for this will become apparent.

A Philosophical Discussion of Time and Eternity

Dr. Ella, following John Gill, wants us to believe that we have been justified from eternity. Peter Meney also seems to be following Gill's arguments, although he does not state this. I hope to prove in this article that what Gill, Ella, and Meney teach concerning justification from eternity contradicts what Scripture teaches about our justification. But, is there ANY way in which we can speak of justification in eternity that does not contradict Scripture? Well, perhaps. I am certainly not going to be dogmatic about the philosophical part of this discussion, but I don't believe it disagrees with Scripture.

What is eternity?

First, we must try to understand eternity. We often read or hear people say something like, Back in eternity, or, We are elect from eternity, or, We are justified from eternity. But this, I believe, is misleading. Eternity is not, as we often hear, eternity past. We also

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sometimes hear the phrase, eternity future. But these terms contradict the meaning of eternity.

Eternity is not the distant past before the Creation or the distant future when the universe will be changed. Time is not a parenthesis in eternity. Eternity is timeless. God is in eternity, and eternity is outside of time. It is better to talk of *in* eternity, elect *in* eternity, justified *in* eternity.

What is time?

Next, we must understand time. Time is a creation. God created time. Being in eternity, God is not at all limited by time. Time being His creation, God can see all of time while He remains in eternity. A very rough analogy would be a DVD. The movie on the DVD might take 90 minutes to play. But I can hold the DVD in my hand and see the DVD all at once. Only with God, He would see the actual movie, not just the disk, all at once. Not only that, but He created the movie. In other words, God created time and everything that takes place in it. He determined every bit of it from the movement of the least particle of an atom to the courses of the galaxies. He has created it all to work logically to an end, as you might reach a goal by first setting your goal and planning your steps back to get there.

In God's creation of time, if you are a Christian, God has determined that you will be glorified. To be glorified, He has determined that you will be saved. To be saved, He has determined that you will be justified. To be justified, He has determined to give you faith in the death and resurrection of His Son for your sins. He has determined that you will be regenerated, that you will be a sinner, and He has determined that you will be physically born. Naturally, He has also determined that His Son must die for your sins and be resurrected, and He has determined His incarnation. He has also determined that Adam and Eve will sin and that their offspring will inherit that sin and sinfulness. And so on, and including much more detail in between. It is God's determination of you as one of those who will be glorified that makes you elect.

As He has determined all of time, it is all in His mind. As a creation, He can see it all. Therefore, you are justified in eternity. But in eternity, you are also regenerated; in eternity, you are still in your sins; in eternity, you are not yet born; in eternity, you are dead. In eternity, all is present.

So, are you justified in eternity (not *from* eternity)? Yes. But why speak of it this way? It is one of countless events in time that God has determined, has in His mind, and sees in eternity. Why single out this one? All time is present in God's mind as a creation in eternity. Since everything is similarly in eternity, it has no real meaning for us, except for us to rest assured that God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10) and is working all things for our good (Romans 8:28).

*Speaking of justification from eternity
distorts our understanding of justification*

In fact, to speak of justification from eternity, as some theologians have and do, can distort our understanding of justification. It makes us think of justification as something peculiarly in eternity in a way that other things in time are not. Although, in eternity, God decrees and sees our justification, what He sees and decrees is an event in time that takes place when we exercise the gift of faith. The doctrine of justification from eternity causes us to see our justification as taking place in eternity so that we might assume we are justified prior in time to our exercising faith. But this simply is not so and is a gross distortion of the Gospel message and the *ordo salutis*, or logical sequence of events in salvation. For this reason, the Bible never speaks of our justification as from eternity.

Some objections

Some objections to my arguments: *Dr. Ella makes the point that just as God decreed "let there be light: and there was light," so God's decree to justify is justification. God's decree to do something is its doing.* The problem with this reasoning is that God's decree to justify is a decree to justify upon the exercising of the gift of saving faith in time. So, yes, God decreed, Let John Jones be justified. And, in time, John Jones is justified. In fact, God's decree that there would be light is the same. His decree is in eternity, but He spoke it in time, and in time there was light.

Another objection concerns election. Ephesians 1:4 says, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." Does this not show election as a prior event to the Creation? My answer is that this verse shows election as logically prior to the Creation. In God's mind, God decreed that John Jones would be glorified. For John Jones to be glorified, God had to decree the entire Creation and all events in it. So, John Jones' election is logically prior to the foundation of the world. Election is rightly spoken of this way, as opposed to justification, because election is God's determination to save. God's decree to

glorify John Jones is John Jones election. Election is not an event in time. But justification is one of the means by which God accomplishes John Jones' glorification, and is an event in time. Therefore, we should not speak of justification from eternity.

Another objection is that Revelation 13:8 says, "And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Isn't Jesus' death an event in time, so why is it spoken of as from the foundation of the world? Well, Revelation 13:8 more probably says, "And all dwelling on the earth will worship it, those whose names have not been written from the foundation of the world in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain." This is actually the preferable translation of the Greek and its use of "Lamb slain" perfectly agrees with the use of that term in Revelation 5:6 and 12, where there is no mention of Him being slain from the foundation of the world. Being written in the book of life from the foundation of the world is another way of speaking of election, which, as I explain above, is rightly spoken of this way. The Lamb, Christ, was slain at a particular point in time. As Jesus said, "The hour [time] has come that the Son of Man should be glorified."

Now let's take a more detailed look at Dr. Ella's talk and examine the pertinent Scriptures.

The Debate as Based on Scripture

A list of supporters, maybe

Scripture alone can establish a doctrine. Nevertheless, apparently to show that he and Gill are not alone, Dr. Ella mentions, besides John Gill, several noted theologians of the past as believing justification from eternity: James Hervey (whom Ella says held a *similar* position), Augustus Toplady, John Brine, John Ryland, William Romaine, Robert Trail, Martin Bucer, and Benjamin Keach. This is correct of John Brine. It may also be true of Toplady and Ryland, although I cannot find that they made statements that directly support the doctrine. I have doubts that any of the others should be on the list, and Benjamin Keach, for sure, should not be included as believing justification from eternity.

In 1683, in the allegorical book, *The Travels of True Godliness* (pages 125-127, second edition, 1831), Keach includes the following dialogue between the main character, Godliness, and someone called Antinomian:

Godliness. I am afraid you are not sound. Pray, friend, what do you believe about justification?

Antinomian. I believe all the elect are personally and actually justified from eternity, and beloved by the Lord with a love of complacency, before they believe, even as they are after being called and sanctified.

Godli. You certainly are very corrupt in your judgment, and hold a doctrine Jesus Christ abhors. Besides, you talk as if you understand not common sense; can any be actually and personally justified before they actually and personally exist?

Anti. I believe the elect were all actually justified in eternity.

Godli. What, actually and personally justified, and yet actually and personally condemned, at one and the same time! This is strange. Adam, for his first sin, fell under wrath and condemnation, and being a public person, all partake of his corrupt nature; and thus are children of wrath, as well as by their own actual transgressions, and so abide until they are transplanted out of that dead root, and are implanted into Jesus Christ, and partake of a vital union with him, John iii. 18, 36. Can righteousness be imputed, and sin charged, upon a person at the same time? Or are unbelievers, justified persons? To justify or acquit a sinner, implies he was before guilty and condemned; and thus it was with all believers, before they were united to Christ, as the word of God testifieth, and so doth the Holy Ghost also, by conviction, when it first works upon the hearts and consciences of sinners; therefore your notion charges the Holy Ghost with being a liar.

The conversation continues, but this is enough to tell us that, quite obviously, rather than believing in justification from eternity, Keach believed that those who hold to justification from eternity were corrupt in judgment, "hold a doctrine Jesus Christ abhors," talk as if they understand not common sense, and charge "the Holy Ghost with being a liar." Dr. Ella should not have put Benjamin Keach on his list of those who believe in justification from eternity.

In another historical error, Ella tries to place the blame for the rejection of justification from eternity at the Academy of Geneva on Francis Turretin's son. But, in fact, Francis Turretin himself wrote, "The decree of justification is one thing; justification itself another—as the will to save and sanctify is one thing; salvation and sanctification itself

another. The will or decree to justify certain persons is indeed eternal and precedes faith itself, but actual justification takes place in time and follows faith" *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:683. So it was not just Francis Turretin's son, but Francis Turretin himself who disagreed with justification from eternity.

Ella also says that most of the Reformers accepted justification from eternity. He gives no evidence to support this claim. But if it were true that most Reformers agreed with justification from eternity, why does it not appear in major confessions? The Westminster Confession specifically denies justification from eternity in Chapter XI, Article IV: "God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them." So, the Westminster Confession declares that God *decreed* to justify His elect from eternity, but that He *actually justifies* them *in time*. The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 says the same thing in the same place (Chapter XI, Article IV). Now, let's look at the Bible to see if this is really so.

Some preliminary Scriptures

Before continuing with Ella's and Gill's arguments, I want to establish that the Bible says that the justification of the sinner takes place in time after he exercises the gift of faith.

Galatians 3:8 says, "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed." The King James Version is not accurate in its tenses here. The Greek does not say, "God would justify the heathen." It says, "God does justify the heathen." But this does not weaken the argument against eternal justification. This verse clearly speaks of a time, the time of Abraham, when the heathen were not yet justified. What is more, it says that God justifies the heathen through faith. Although this Scripture implies God's decree to justify, it would be very difficult, in fact, impossible to get eternal justification as taught by John Gill out of this Scripture.

Colossians 1:21-22: Here Paul writes, "And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprieveable in his sight." The obvious implication of this verse is that the Colossian saints to whom Paul was writing (and us too) would have remained alienated and enemies

because of their thoughts and wicked works, and they could not have been presented holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in God's sight if they had not been reconciled by the death of Jesus Christ. "Sometime" and "now" indicate a change occurring in time. There is no hint of eternal justification here.

Titus 3:4-7 is similar: "But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." This attributes our salvation to God's mercy, the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Spirit shed on us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Again, "after" indicates a time frame.

Romans 3:21-22: "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference." If the elect were actually justified in eternity, so that they had the righteousness of God before they were born, why does this Scripture say the righteousness of God is given to those who believe?

Romans 3:26 unmistakably says that God is "the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." Belief precedes justification in time.

Romans 3:28 says, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (see also verse 30). And so we must also conclude that a man is justified by faith. Yes, it is faith that is a gift of God and not a work of man, but it is an event that takes place in time.

Romans 5:1: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Does this say that we are justified from eternity and, therefore, have always had peace with God? No. It clearly is saying that we have peace with God because we have been justified by faith.

Romans 5:6: "For when we were yet" already standing strong in justification from eternity? No, "without strength, in" eternity? No again, "in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Going on to verse 10, notice that it says so such thing as that we have always been justified from eternity and therefore have always been in good standing with

God. Rather, it says, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." We could not have been enemies at any time if we were already justified from eternity.

Galatians 2:16 teaches, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." Yes, we "have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ." Without belief, there would be no justification.

In *Philippians 3:9*, Paul writes, "And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God." Does this say that our righteousness is from eternity? No. Most certainly, God predestinated from eternity that His elect would have faith, in fact, that He would give them saving faith. Nevertheless, their having faith, and, therefore, their being justified, is an act in time.

John Gill's blunder #1

Much of John Gill's argument for eternal justification rests upon a logical blunder. He states this blunder here: "Now, as before observed, as God's will to elect, is the election of his people, so his will to justify them, is the justification of them; as it is an immanent act in God, it is an act of his grace towards them, is wholly without them, entirely resides in the divine mind, and lies in his estimating, accounting, and constituting them righteous, through the righteousness of his Son; and, as such, did not first commence in time, but from eternity."

Gill here says, "As God's will to elect, is the election of his people, so his will to justify them, is the justification of them." We can readily see the invalidity of this statement by talking about a man and a woman and love and marriage. So, we will say this: "As a man's will to love a woman is the loving of her, so his will to marry her is the marrying of her." Obviously, there is a problem here. It may be true that a man's will to love a woman is the loving of her, but it is certainly not true that his will to marry her is the marrying of her. Why? Because marriage is an act that must take place in time.

It is true, of course, that, unlike man, God's will to do something guarantees that it will be done. Nevertheless, His will is not always the actual doing of it.

Scriptures cited by Dr. Ella

Dr. Ella refers to Romans 8:29-33 as if it supports his position. This passage says: "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth."

It is absolutely unwarranted to assume that Romans 8:29-33 applies to God's elect before they are born. Simply because they are foreknown and predestinated before birth does not mean that they are called, justified, and glorified before birth. These verses simply speak of the infallible connection between God's foreknowing and predestinating in eternity the elect to be conformed to the image of His Son, His calling and justifying them in time, and His future glorifying of them.

Another Scripture cited by Ella to supposedly support his position is Romans 4:5: "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." How this verse can be seen as evidence for eternal justification is a wonder to me. It says that to the person who doesn't work (who doesn't try to earn righteousness by works) but instead believes (the Greek here is simply the verb form of the word often translated "faith") on Him who justifies (or "makes righteous") the ungodly, his faith (or belief) is counted for righteousness. Does this verse say that God justifies the ungodly by justifying them from eternity? Absolutely not! God justifies the ungodly by counting their faith for righteousness. The faith, of course, is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8), and its object is Jesus Christ our Savior.

Both Ella and Meney make the error of saying that the above verse (Ella also includes Romans 5:6, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly") means that "the elect are justified whilst ungodly, which means before belief." Do these men really believe that "God justifieth the ungodly" means God justified us in eternity before we, or even Adam, sinned and became ungodly? To justify the ungodly, God must work in time, taking an

elect sinner, giving him faith, and justifying him. One may most certainly still be ungodly before he exercises his God-given faith, but he cannot be called ungodly after being justified. Romans 5:6 is simply saying that, *in due time*—not in eternity—Christ died on the Cross for the ungodly. But many more Scriptures further explain that His death is not applied until we exercise God’s free gift of faith. God causes us to exercise His free gift of faith at some point in time in our lifetime. After that, we are no longer ungodly. Apparently, if I told Dr. Ella that I washed a dirty car, he would think the car remained dirty after I washed it because I called it a dirty car. But, of course, I wouldn’t say that I washed a *clean* car, would I? Christ came to save sinners, not the righteous.

Also, Ella fails to continue quoting Romans 5. Verses 7-9 clear the matter entirely: “For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.” This is a rescue; we are saved from wrath. Why would we need to be saved from wrath if we are already justified? But wait, NOW are we justified by His blood and, therefore, we are saved from the wrath that would otherwise await us. When are we justified? From eternity? No, we are justified now, in time. The Greek is clear. “Being now” is translated from the Greek word *nun*, which means now, not eternity. So we see that these verses say quite the opposite of the meaning Ella imposes on them.

Ella cites Romans 8:33-34 as evidence on his behalf: “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.” His point, while not completely clear, seems to be that the elect can never be charged because they are justified from eternity. But these verses are full of events in time. If I believe that Christ died, rose again, is now at the right hand of God, and now makes intercession for me, then God has justified me. If He has justified me, no one can condemn me. These are the reasons God’s elect cannot be charged and condemned. If Ella is trying to suggest that justification from eternity is why the elect cannot be charged and condemned, then I must ask why any of the listed events in time had to occur?

Another Scripture Ella uses is Ephesians 1:4: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be

holy and without blame before him in love." Certainly, He has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world. Ella says, "Full salvation was established in God then before time was, in eternity." Yes, our salvation was assured from eternity because of God's choosing us. But this is not the same as saying, as Ella seems to be implying, that our salvation was completed in eternity. This verse does not say that God justified us before the foundation of the world.

John Gill's blunder #2

Ella then cites Gill as saying, "If there is an eternal election of persons in Christ, there must be an eternal acceptance and justification of them in Him. Since, as He always was the Beloved Son of His Father, in whom He is ever well pleased, so He has always graciously accepted of and is well pleased with all His elect in Him." This statement presents a serious problem. Gill is here dogmatic about a conclusion he has drawn, but that is never stated in Scripture. He might be entitled to be dogmatic if the conclusion were inescapable or, at least, nearly so. But it is not. Essentially, Gill says that our being eternally elected in Christ must mean that we are eternally accepted and justified in Him. Gill states as his first premise what we know to be true: There is an eternal election of persons in Christ. He then asserts without proof or necessary consequence that there must be an eternal acceptance and justification of them in Him.

To test the validity of this argument, let's put it into a syllogism, with the unproven statement in the first premise:

Premise x: If there is an eternal acceptance and justification of persons, it is because there is an eternal election of these persons in Christ.

Premise y: There is an eternal election of persons in Christ (stated in Scripture, so this is true).

Therefore there must be an eternal acceptance and justification of the elect.

This is a classic case of what is called asserting the consequent. It is a logical fallacy. It might be easier to see if we put it in more ordinary terms.

Premise x: If I have dogs in my house, it is because I have given them to my son.

Premise y: I have given dogs to my son.

Therefore, I must have dogs in my house.

Do you see how this is invalid? I may have given dogs to my son to be kept outside.

But, you say, God's elect are not intended to be "kept outside." They are intended to be justified and accepted. Yes, that is true. But intentions are not end results. I may choose (or elect) dogs for my son, but say that they cannot come into the house until he cleans them up, treats them for fleas and ticks, and trains them. The dogs are elect from the time I choose them, but they cannot come into the house until my son completes these events in time. Likewise, God's elect are elect from eternity. But they are not justified until His Son completes His work and God gives them faith in the completed work of His Son. Gill's assertion is fallacious.

The justification of the Old Testament patriarchs

Someone may ask, But is not the justification of the patriarchs before the atonement of Christ proof of justification before the Cross and, therefore, evidence of justification from eternity? In fact, Peter Meney writes, "Christ's sin-bearing was in the eye of God from eternity. The patriarchs were justified during their lives but before the time of Christ's death by being declared righteous on account of the future shed blood of their Redeemer (Job 19:25). Since God has Christ's atoning work ever before His eyes it is clear that those atoned are also always before God's eyes. The elect are justified from eternity."

Oddly enough, Meney's sentence, "The patriarchs were justified during their lives but before the time of Christ's death by being declared righteous on account of the future shed blood of their Redeemer (Job 19:25)," answers why the patriarchs were justified and has no necessary connection to Meney's conclusion, "The elect are justified from eternity." The patriarchs were saved by their faith in God's promises of a future Messiah, who, as Job expresses in the verse Meney cites, would be their Redeemer.

Let's use Abraham as an example of an Old Testament patriarch. Romans 4:3 and 9 tell us "that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness." One would indeed have to be blinded to the meaning of Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to not see that God promised to Abraham that the coming Messiah would be born in his line of descent and that Abraham's faith in this coming Messiah was "accounted to him for righteousness" (Galatians 3:6). Galatians 3:8 is perfectly clear: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed." And notice Romans 4:19-25: "And being not

weak in faith, he [Abraham] considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it [belief or faith] was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." Abraham was justified in the same way we are justified: through faith. Where is justification from eternity in these Scriptures? It is not to be found. It is a perverse doctrine that is totally foreign to these or any Scriptures!

Infants

Peter Meney also brings up another argument for justification from eternity that must be addressed. He says, "Justification does not require the instrument of faith: the elect who die in infancy have not exercised faith or fulfilled the act of believing, yet they are justified." A proper response to this statement really requires a full article on the death of infants. I realize that this is an emotional issue for many people. It is often difficult to get people to focus on what the Scripture actually says when the issue is emotional. Nevertheless, I will try to state my answer succinctly.

I, and I hope everyone who reads this, trust that God knows what He is doing. I also trust that God has revealed His plan of salvation in Scripture, and I see nowhere in Scripture the idea that anyone can be saved apart from exercising faith. I also see nothing in Scripture of the death of elect infants. What I do see in Scripture is a God who is in complete control of the universe. God will bring all of His elect to salvation, and He has given abundant witness of the means in Scripture.

Why, then, does anyone think that an infant who dies in infancy is an exception? The Bible does not say so. The teaching may have its historical roots in the Catholic doctrine of the baptismal regeneration of sprinkled infants that results in their becoming children of God. But the reason this unscriptural teaching continues to flourish, even among Baptists, must be the consolation of the parents. Instead of consoling the parents by bolstering their faith in God's sovereignty, many ministers have inexcusably led the parents to believe that the child was (or, at least, may have been) elect, and, if elect, then saved

merely by election (or, in the case of some ministers, with the addition of the fabricated idea of justification from eternity).

Anyone who points out that the entire weight of Scripture is against this belief is immediately labeled as cruel and unfeeling. But isn't it a greater cruelty to cause parents to believe such a fairy tale fib? The truth is that the Scriptures tell us that God is patient and waiting for all the elect to come to repentance and belief: "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any [of us, that is, the elect] should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Truly, God is not willing that any of the elect perish. But how are they to not perish? They will come to repentance—the Greek word is *metanoia*, a change of mind. One way this change of mind displays itself is in faith. The Scripture gives us no loopholes: "by grace are ye saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8).

So, what about infants who die infancy? The Scripture leaves us with no other answer than that they must not be elect. Certainly, this is sad. But is it any sadder than for parents who, over many years of loving parenting, have raised their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord only to have the son or daughter in adulthood reject it all, live the life of a reprobate, and perhaps even die an early death as a result, thus removing all hope? I venture that these parents have an even tougher trial. But all can take comfort in God's sovereignty.

Peter Meney's argument for justification from eternity based on the supposed case of elect infants dying before they can exercise faith must be rejected because the Word of God says nothing of the possibility of such a thing.

More Scriptures cited by Dr. Ella

About 45 minutes into his talk, Dr. Ella rearranges Ephesians 1:3-4 to support his cause. This is what he says: "Ephesians 1:3 tells us, however, that we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ, and surely justification is a spiritual blessing, before the foundation of the world." But this is what Ephesians 1:3 actually says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." Ella has tagged "before the foundation of the world" onto Ephesians 1:3 where it does not belong. Of course, Ephesians 1:4 says, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." The blessings are not

before the foundation of the world, the choosing is. Election is logically prior to the foundation of the world. His giving and our receiving of these blessings, including justification, take place in time.

Dr. Ella then correctly cites 2 Timothy 1:9, but, I propose, misinterprets its meaning. Notice God's Word: "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." Notice that the Scripture says that God's purpose and grace to call and save us were given us *in Christ Jesus* before the world began. Is this saying that we were called and saved before the world began? No. We were called and saved in time according to God's *purpose and grace* given us *in Christ Jesus* before the world began. The purpose of the verse is to emphasize that God determined our salvation before our works, before our birth, even before the world began by gifting His purpose to save and His grace to us, who did not yet exist, as in Christ Jesus. If we had an actual existence in eternity that coincided with this gifting, so that we could receive it then—so that we were actually justified then—it a) might have been according to our works and thus be contrary to the primary theme of the verse, and b) there would then be no need for justification to occur in time except to make real to our consciences what had already taken place in eternity. But if this were true, then Christ's death and resurrection would also be unnecessary except that, once it becomes the object of our faith, it might inform our consciences of the justification that really took place in eternity. Thus we see that this teaching drains the Cross of Christ of any real effect except as a symbol to bring something to our minds and is only a hop, skip, and a jump from Peter Abelard's idea that Christ simply set us a good example!

Even Gill does not dare use this verse the way Ella does. Gill sees it as referring to God giving grace to Christ as the covenant head of the elect, not to God giving grace to the elect directly in eternity, because they "did not then personally exist, yet Christ did, and he existed as a covenant head and representative of his people; and they were in him, as members of him, as represented by him, being united to him; and this grace was given to him for them, and to them in him; in whom they were chosen, and in whom they were blessed with all spiritual blessings." What Gill writes does not have to be seen in the context of justification from eternity. It agrees with the biblical understanding that we have already seen that these gifts of grace do not become our possession until we exercise the gift of faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Making hash

It is certainly true, as Dr. Ella points out from Calvin's *Institutes*, that faith is not the cause of our justification. Faith is the instrument by which we receive justification. But if we are justified before we use this instrument to receive it, how then are we justified? How do we receive justification? Justification from eternity makes a hash of the logical sequence of the means God uses in our salvation. It also does away with faith, without which we might as well be brain dead and remain so after our salvation and through eternity. Ella has cooked up a justification by decree only; one that we may have without even being aware of it.

Ella addresses the argument that the unconverted elect are under condemnation and, therefore, cannot be justified; we cannot be condemned and justified at the same time; we cannot be under guilt and under grace at the same time. Ella, attributing his answer to Gill, responds to these objections by saying that the solution is that "we are all in Adam, and in Adam we are all condemned." "We Christians," he continues, "are not merely in Adam. We are in Christ, and we are new creatures in Him. And, for those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation. And so, we can actually be condemned on the one hand as being sinners in Adam, and we can be justified because of our standing in Christ. Christ justifies condemned sinners. And the wages of sin are upon us physically speaking until we die, and not until death overtakes us by God's grace will the old man of sin, who is condemned be entirely taken away from us. And then we shall stand in our new nature completely, physically and spiritually, before Christ, as fully innocent of any sin because Christ has put away sin for us." What we have here is Dr. Ella saying that justification from eternity means no real justification at all until after death! In his efforts to somehow explain how we can be justified from eternity while also being under God's wrath during our lifetimes, Dr. Ella has so contradicted the Bible that I hardly know where to begin.

Dr. Ella's response in the above paragraph is, at best, a muddle of contradictions. Essentially, what Dr. Ella is saying is that for those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation; yet, being in Adam, they continue condemned and under God's wrath. Those in Christ are new creatures in Him, but remain old creatures in Adam. This is true for the elect both before faith and after faith; there is no real difference. The elect are not only justified from eternity, they are also under condemnation all of their mortal lives.

Earlier in his talk, Ella accused those who believe in justification by faith alone as believing in a justification that is not real. But here Ella has let slip the truth that it is the believers in justification from eternity who are the believers in an unreal justification. When Ella says Christ justifies condemned sinners, he means they stay condemned even though they are "justified." This line of reasoning is unbiblical, illogical, absurd, contradictory nonsense. I might as well say that my white wall is black.

But what does the Bible say? As Ella alluded, Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Surely, no condemnation means no condemnation. Read verses 33-34 of the same chapter: "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." Unmistakably, this says that those who are justified cannot have a charge laid against them. Because Christ has died, risen again, and makes intercession for us, no one can condemn us.

Dr. Ella says that our old man lives on until we are physically dead. But the apostle Paul says otherwise: "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin" (Romans 6:6-7). We are already dead because we died with Christ, and we are, therefore, freed from sin. Notice verses 11-23:

Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then

made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Notice also Ephesians 4:22: "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts." We are to put off, concerning our old way of life, the old man. This says nothing of retaining him until we are physically dead. Another pertinent Scripture is Colossians 3:9: "Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds." This says nothing of the old man living on. The Greek, in fact, is even clearer. The word for "seeing that ye have put off" is one word, *apekdusamenoī*. This means more than just "have put off." It means "having completely put off" or "having wholly put off" or, as A. T. Robertson puts it in his comments on this verse in his *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, "having stripped clean off." Robertson goes on to say, "The old man (*ton palaion anthrōpon*). Here Paul brings in another metaphor (mixes his metaphors as he often does), that of the old life of sin regarded as 'the ancient man' of sin already crucified (Rom_6:6) and dropped now once and for all as a mode of life (aorist tense)."

The apostle John has much to say about this. He says that we sin: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10). But he never says that we, the children of God, are under condemnation. In fact, looking at it from that point of view, he says that we cannot sin, meaning that sin is not our way of life and our sins do not count against us to condemn us: "And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.... Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin;

for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:5-6, 9). And 1 John 5:18 is similar: "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not." In other words, it is impossible for God's justified elect to be under condemnation. As Jesus Himself said in John 3:18, "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." What does He say distinguishes those not condemned from those condemned? Belief (or faith).

But what does the Bible say about the elect *before* they are justified by faith? In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul explains, "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." Before justification, the elect were "dead in trespasses and sins" and "the children of wrath, even as others." Again, in Colossians 2:13, he writes, "And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses." Those who are now justified were previously dead in their sins. In summary, Dr. Ella says that the elect are justified from eternity, yet under condemnation and God's wrath until their physical death. The Bible says that the elect are under condemnation and God's wrath *until* they are justified by faith, *after which they are not, and never again can be, condemned and under God's wrath.*

Here is a list of some of the Scriptures that tell us that we are justified by faith: Romans 1:17; 3:22-24, 26, 28, 30; 4:5, 24-25; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24; Hebrews 10:38. How many Scriptures tell us we are justified from eternity? Zero.

Misinterpreting John Murray

Something that must be addressed in this article is the fact that Dr. Ella in his talk most obviously misinterprets John Murray. I don't want to be misunderstood here as either defending John Murray or of accusing Dr. Ella of purposefully misrepresenting John Murray's position. Nevertheless, Ella quotes Murray in a quote taken from the *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, 202-203, and makes observations about what Murray says that misconstrue the plain meaning of Murray's words.

Dr. Ella states: "Murray says in his work on justification, 'Justification is not the eternal decree of God with respect to us,' so God in eternity has nothing to do with our justification." Notice that Murray says that justification is not the eternal decree of God, but Ella interprets this to mean that Murray is saying that God in eternity has nothing to do with our justification. This is a serious misrepresentation. It is as if I said that a baseball is not a homerun, and someone then claimed that I said that a baseball has nothing to do with a homerun. Or, to use similar terms to those I used earlier, it is as if I said that loving a woman is not actually marrying her; and then someone came along and misrepresented me as saying that loving a woman has nothing to do with marrying her. I trust you see the difference.

Continuing with Ella's quote of Murray: "'nor is it the finished work of Christ for us, when once-for-all he reconciled us to God by his death,' so," interprets Ella, "it is not the finished work of Christ that justifies us," and then going back to the quote of Murray, "'nor is it the regenerative work of God in us, nor is it any activity on our part in response to and embrace of the gospel, but it is an act of God, accomplished in time wherein God passes judgment with respect to us as individuals.'" Ella then interprets Murray: "So, God has not decreed our justification in eternity, He has not justified us through the saving work of Christ, He has only justified us when He finds that we happen to believe and because of that belief we gain or earn our justification."

Notice: Ella claims that Murray is teaching that God has not decreed our justification in eternity, when, in fact, Murray says no such thing. Next, Ella avers that Murray teaches that God has not justified us through the saving work of Christ, when, in fact, Murray says Christ's finished work is not justification. Then Ella alleges that Murray teaches that God justifies us when He finds that we "happen to believe" and because of that belief we "gain or earn" our justification, when, in fact, Murray says that justification is not "any activity on our part in response to and embrace of the gospel, but it is an act of God, accomplished in time wherein God passes judgment with respect to us as individuals." This does not at all say what Ella interprets it to say. Murray makes no mention of "happen to believe," and he says nothing of "gain or earn." This is serious misrepresentation. I will not belabor the point, but will mention that Ella goes on in his talk to make further allegations about Murray's position that he does not substantiate from Murray's own words.

I do not know why Dr. Ella implies that justification by faith alone (as opposed to justification from eternity) is incompatible with the imputation of real righteousness in Christ. Why cannot one believe in justification by faith alone while also believing in the imputation of real righteousness in Christ? Our righteousness or justification is real because it is His righteousness, and we are in Him. Again, when we are declared "not guilty" and "righteous," it is real because of the imputation of Christ's passive and active obedience to us. Ella gives no necessary reason why our actual justification must be from. Why must we be justified from eternity for Christ's atonement to truly remove our guilt? Why must we be justified from eternity for Christ's fulfillment of the law to be our fulfillment of the law? In fact, Christ's death has caused us to be dead to the law so that we can never be guilty again (Romans 7:4). But Dr. Ella fails to show what any of this has to do with his assertion that justification must be from eternity.

Dr. Ella says that justification is antecedent to faith, and that we do not believe in order that we are given the right to be justified. Naturally, to say the latter would make faith a work that earns justification. But Dr. Ella seems to fail to see that, if both faith and justification were gracious gifts of God (as they are), then the exercising of the one (faith) would not be the earning of the other (justification). We have no right to either, but faith is merely the antecedent gift to the gift of justification. Ella states: "Effects follow causes, therefore, justification must be before faith." But this is founded on the assumption, not found in the Bible, that justification is the cause of faith.

Gill, like Ella and Meney, also says that faith "is the effect of justification." Yet, as we have seen, Scripture clearly reverses this order, so there is no reason to believe it. Notice that Galatians 2:16 says, "...we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ..." It does not say that we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we could become conscious of the faith we already have. Nor does it say that we have believed in Jesus Christ because the justification we have had from eternity has caused us to believe. Wherever we turn, we find that this doctrine of justification from eternity is contradicted by Scripture.

Questions for the Advocates of Justification from Eternity

How can someone who is already justified from eternity incur sin that can be imputed to Jesus Christ? In other words, what sins are there to be imputed to Jesus Christ if we are justified from eternity?

If God's elect are justified from eternity, and must therefore have never had sin, for whose sin did Jesus die?

On the other hand, if we are both justified from eternity and condemned under sin at the same time, as Dr. Ella says, what kind of justification is this? Surely, it would be at best a phantom justification.

If the only difference our faith makes is in making manifest God's eternal justification in our consciences, why does the Bible time and again say that we *are justified*, not just experience justification in our consciences, by faith?

To say, as does John Gill, that justification "is an immanent act in God" that "entirely resides in the divine mind" sounds like something more worthy of Mary Baker Eddy than John Gill. Peter Meney follows Gill in this error. He states: "Justification is an act which begins and ends in God and takes place outside of time. It is an immanent, internal act, initiated in the eternal will of God, acceptable to His grace and justice, consistent with His love, conducive to His glory. All this God 'purposed in himself' (Ephesians 1:9)." But everything is an immanent act in God's mind. That doesn't mean that it doesn't have to take place in time for us mortals. My death is an immanent act in God's mind, but I'm not dead yet. Why, then, should a sinner's justification as an immanent act in God's mind mean that he is justified before he believes? Ephesians 1:9 says, "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself." This in no way supports the idea that "Justification is an act which begins and ends in God and takes place outside of time."

Summary

Justification from eternity as taught by John Gill, George Ella, and Peter Meney is based on the false assumption that God's will in eternity to justify is justification. Scripture proves this false time and again. Justification from eternity is also logically invalid. Justification from eternity confuses the *ordo salutis*, makes the gift of faith in Christ's death instrumental in receiving only an awareness of a justification we already had, is internally inconsistent in saying that we are both justified and under condemnation at the same time, and, in the end makes justification to be nothing more than a phantom. Justification from eternity is a Christ-dishonoring doctrine that lowers the purpose of His atonement to the procuring for us of only the

knowledge of a justification God has already given us by decree from eternity. Thus, justification from eternity misrepresents God's plan of salvation. It can only mislead and confuse God's people. For this reason, it is my prayer that the purveyors of this deceptive teaching will see that it is contrary to Scripture, repent, and cease teaching the human fabricated notion that God's decree to elect in eternity is the actual justification of the elect from eternity.

Further Reading on the Web

For justification from eternity:

"Justification as an Eternal and Immanent Act of God" by John Gill
(<http://www.pristinegrace.org/media.php?id=354>)

"The Doctrine of Justification by the Righteousness of Christ, Stated and Maintained" by John Gill
(http://www.pbministries.org/books/gill/Sermons&Tracts/sermon_37.htm)

A Defense of the Doctrine of Eternal Justification by John Brine
(<http://www.mountzionpbc.org/Index/index03.htm>)

Against justification from eternity:

"The Doctrine of Eternal Justification: A Critique" by Fred G. Zaspel
(<http://www.biblicalstudies.com/bstudy/soteriology/etjustif.htm>)

The Doctrine of Justification, 7. Its Objects by A. W. Pink
(<http://biblestudy.churches.net/CCEL/P/PINK/JUSTIFIC/JUSTIFI8.HTM>)

"Eternal Justification" by Louis Berkhof (http://www.the-highway.com/eternal-justification_Berkhof.html)