

WCF 11: OF JUSTIFICATION

Justification refers to the divine pronouncement of a person as legally righteous and therefore not liable for condemnation. The doctrine of Justification holds a most important place in the Christian Church. During the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther declared it the *articulus standis vel cadentis ecclesiae*—the article on which the Church stands or fall. It was the prominent issue that led to the Reformation.

Today, a proper understanding of the subject is crucial not only to guard against erroneous conceptions concerning our salvation and state before the Lord, but to give us comfort and assurance in the face of the real struggles that confront anyone who would seek honestly to walk with the Lord.

It is to this end that this chapter presents us with the classic Protestant or Reformed understanding of the subject.

On the Nature of Justification

11.1 Those whom God effectually calleth He also freely justifieth;¹ not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them,² they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith: which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.³

¹Rom 8:30; 3:24; ²Rom 4:5–8; 2 Cor 5:19, 21; Rom 3:22, 24–25, 27–28; Tit 3:5, 7; Eph 1:7; Jer 23:6; 1 Cor 1:30–31; Rom 5:17–19; ³Acts 10:44; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9; Acts 13:38–39; Eph 2:7–8.

From here we learn the following 4 verities:

- a. Justification is entirely gratuitous, it “is only of free grace” of God: “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph 1:7). Even faith itself, the instrument of justification is a gracious gift of God: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24). This means that we are justified not by our own works or righteousness, “otherwise grace is no more grace” (Rom 11:6). Thus the Reformation watchword: *Sola Gratia*.
- b. The *scope* of justification: Only those whom God effectually calls, i.e., the elect are justified. This is obvious: “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” (Rom 8:30).
- c. The *nature* of justification: It is a judicial act of God, and is not a change of nature, but a change of the sinner’s state in relation to the Law. In other words, it is forensic, involving a judicial declaration. This is obvious from the fact that justification is frequently, in the Scripture, set in opposition to condemnation,—a declaration of guilt, e.g.: “And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification” (Rom 5:16; cf. Rom 8:33–34). Thus the Confession declares that justification is “not by infusing righteousness into them.” Thus Luther was wont to say that a Christian is *simul justus et peccator*—simultaneously just and sinner. Thus Paul declares that God “justifieth the ungodly” (Rom 4:5).
- d. The *ground* of justification: Justification is not by infusing or imparting righteousness nor “for any thing wrought in them, or done by them,” but by “imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ.” The righteousness of Jesus Christ is the sole ground of a sinner’s justification before God. No man can be justified before God, in whole or in part, on the ground of personal righteousness of any kind. The fundamental error of the church of Rome is to confuse the *imparted* (or infused or inherent) righteousness of the regenerate with the *imputed* righteousness of the Redeemer. In other words, she confused sanctification with justification. The merits of Christ, according to Rome, was for the procuring of regenerating grace by which we are made righteous. For them, God’s righteousness in Christ is not the sole and all-sufficient ground for our justification. The suffering and obedience on the part of the believer is necessary for justification. But this runs contrary to Scripture, which declares that the righteousness by which we are justified is not our own: “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 by faith” (Phil 3:9). Moreover, this doctrine ultimately implies that it is how one lives that determines whether he is justified or not, which of course contradicts the Scripture, which teaches us that our justification is “Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:9).

11.2 Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification;¹ yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.²

¹Jn 1:12; Rom 3:28; 5:1; ²Jas 2:17, 22, 26; Gal 5:6.

We see from here that:

- a. The *means* or instrumental cause of justification is faith. The battle cry of the Protestant doctrine of justification vis-à-vis the Romish doctrine is *Sola Fides*—Faith is the alone instrument of a sinner’s justification. When the Scripture speaks of the elect being “justified by faith” (Rom 3:28; 5:1) or “the just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17; Hab 2:4), it does not mean that faith is the *meritorious* cause of justification. The meritorious cause or the ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ. Believers are justified by faith and through faith but never on account of faith. This must be carefully understood as it is one of the most common errors even among Christians who claim to be Calvinistic today. Robert Haldane is surely right when he says, “Nothing, then, can be a greater corruption of the truth than to represent faith itself as accepted instead of righteousness, or to be the righteousness that saves the sinner. Faith is not righteousness. Righteousness is fulfilling of the law” (*Commentary on Romans*, BOT, 163). The Confession is careful to add the qualifier *alone*: justification is “received by faith alone” (WSC 33), faith is “the *alone* instrument of justification.” This refutes the Romish doctrine that we are justified by faith and works together. When James says that “by works a man is justified and not by faith only” (Jas 2:24), he is not speaking of “justified” in the technical sense of the word, but in the sense of “proved to be true” (cf. Lk 7:35). James is saying that good works proves that a Christian is for real. Thus ...
- b. The *accompaniment* of justification: Faith is “not alone in the person justified.” It is “ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.” *Sola fides justificat, sed fides non est sola*—justification is by faith alone, but the faith is not alone. “Faith, if it hath not work, is dead, being alone” (Jas 2:17), says James. This of course does not mean that justification is by faith plus works. Luther has well said: “Works are not taken into consideration when the question respects justification. But true faith will no more fail to produce them, than the sun can cease to give light.” To put it in another way: a justified person will also receive sanctification in which righteousness is formed within him. Justification not accompanied by sanctification cannot be true. Justification and sanctification must be distinguished but not separated (cf. 1 Cor 6:11). There is a modern heresy known as dispensational antinomianism, which in its classical form, teaches that a person can have Christ as Saviour but not as Lord. They teach that once a person prays to receive Christ, he will be saved even if he shows no evidence of conversion or sanctification. This is what our Confession was guarding against.

We may summarise:

Roman Catholic:	faith + works = justification
Dispensational (Antinomian):	faith = justification – works
Reformed:	faith = justification + works

11.3 Christ, by His obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to His Father’s justice in their behalf.¹ Yet, in as much as He was given by the Father for them,² and His obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead,³ and both, freely, not for any thing in them, their justification is only of free grace;⁴ that both the exact justice, and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.⁵

¹Rom 5:8–10, 19; 1 Tim 2:5–6; Heb 10:10, 14; Dan 9:24, 26; Isa 53:4–6, 10–12; ²Rom 8:32; ³2 Cor 5:21; Mt 3:17; Eph 5:2; ⁴Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7; ⁵Rom 3:26; Eph 2:7.

Herein we learn of the benefits and goals of justification.

- a. The *benefits* of justification: This comprises two parts—pardon and acceptance. The *WSC* 33 teaches: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” The Confession has it as “accounting and accepting their persons as righteous.” The pardoning of our sins was accomplished by Christ’s propitiatory atonement, i.e., His taking the punishment due us on Himself: “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa 53:11); “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21; cf. Gal 3:13; Col 2:14). Christ bore our sins and “did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to His Father’s justice in [our] behalf.” This is sometimes known as Christ’s *passive* obedience. Our being accepted as righteous is not only because our sins have been atoned for, but also because the righteousness of Christ—in His perfect keeping of the Law throughout His earthly ministry, is imputed to us, He being our covenantal representative (Rom 5:17–19). This is sometimes known as Christ’s *active* obedience. We may say that Christ is the *meritorious* cause or ground of justification; and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness by grace is the *formal* cause of justification.
- b. The *goal* of justification: That God may be glorified. “To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). “That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7).

On the Timing of Justification

11.4 God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect;¹ and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification:² nevertheless they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.³

¹Gal 3:8; 1 Pet 1:2, 19–20; Rom 8:30; ²Gal 4:4; 1 Tim 2:6; Rom 4:25; ³Col 1:21–22; Gal 2:16; Tit 3:4–7.

- What this section indicates is that there is a sense in which justification happens in eternity—with the immutable and sovereign decree of God to redeem the elect; and there is a sense in which it happens in time in the objective history of redemption when Christ died on the cross to pay for sins of His elect; and there is also a sense in which it happens in the life of an individual child of God when the Holy Spirit applies to him the redemption purchased by Christ. It must be noted that in this chapter, it is the third or the subjective aspect of justification that is given emphasis. This is clearly the case since the elect are deemed “not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them” (*WCF* 11.4). We may say that the elect were virtually justified from eternity, which is the basis for the love of God for the elect, but they are not actually and formally justified until they are vitally united to Christ by faith.
- However, it is important that we understand the threefold economic division in the work of redemption of the Triune God. An overemphasis on the decretive work of the Father leads to a one-sided doctrine of eternal justification that denies that there is a sense in which the elect are under the wrath of God prior to the organic application of redemption (see Eph 2:3). An overemphasis on the redemptive work of Christ in time and a failure to see that justification was already planned—sovereignly, irrevocably and immutably, and is therefore certain and in a sense actual from all eternity, will draw a sharp discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments and give rise to a doctrine of salvation by works for Old Testament saints. On the other hand, an overemphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit’s work in justification without a realisation that the elect are beloved of God from eternity, and that Christ has satisfied divine justice on behalf of all His elect when He died on the cross, will give rise to an Arminian emphasis on faith and good works as the cause of justification,—which usually also give rise to the doctrine of resistible grace.
- James Buchanan puts it well:
The one is the error of the Antinomians, who have spoken of Justification as being antecedent to, and independent of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and have identified it sometimes with God’s eternal election,—at other times with the redeeming work of Christ,—as if there were no difference between an

eternal purpose to save, and the execution of that purpose in time, or between the procuring of redemption, and the actual application of it to the souls of men. The other is the error of Popish writers, and some of their followers in the Protestant Church, who have spoken of Justification as dependent, not on the finished work of Christ alone, but on our personal obedience.... But such difficulties will be found to resolve themselves into a more general and profound question; and can only be effectually removed, by falling back on God's eternal purpose of mercy towards sinners, which includes equally their redemption by Christ, and their regeneration by the Holy Spirit" (*Doctrine of Justification*, BOT, 402–3).

On Justification and Forgiveness

11.5 God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified:¹ and, although they can never fall from the state of justification,² yet they may by their sins fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.³

¹Mt 6:12; 1 Jn 1:7, 9; 2:1–2; ²Lk 22:32; Jn 10:28; Heb 10:14; ³Ps 89:31–33; 51:7–12; 32:5; Mt 26:75; 1 Cor 11:30, 32; Lk 1:20.

This section essentially teaches that justification remove guilt of the sinner with respect to all his sins—past, present and future. The justified man has *judicial* forgiveness. However, the Scripture teaches us that we can incur God's fatherly displeasure, and so we are taught to seek God *Fatherly* forgiveness by confession and repentance.

Robert Shaw explains well:

As justification is an act completed at once, so those who are justified cannot come into condemnation: "There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). The sins which they afterwards commit cannot revoke the pardon which God has graciously given them; but they may subject them to His fatherly displeasure, and to temporary chastisements (Psalm 89:30–33). Here we must advert to the well-known distinction between *judicial* and *fatherly* forgiveness. Though God, in the capacity of a judge, pardons all the sins of believers, in the most free and unconditional manner, in the day of their justification, yet that forgiveness which, as a Father, He bestows upon His justified and adopted children, is not, in general, vouchsafed without suitable preparation on their part for receiving and improving the privilege. They ought, therefore, to humble themselves before God, make ingenuous confession of their offences, renew their faith and repentance, and earnestly supplicate the removal of His fatherly displeasure, and the restoration of His paternal smiles.

On Justification in the Old Testament

11.6 The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.¹

¹Gal 3:9, 13–14; Rom 4:22–24; Heb 13:8.

We have already treated this subject in our commentary on *WCF* 7.4–6. It is also clearly taught in the book of Hebrews which seeks to prove that the Old Testament sacrifices were all shadows and types which point to Christ: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb 13:8).

Believers under the Old Testament were not justified by offering sacrifice or by faith in God but not in the Lord Jesus Christ as some claim. They were justified in exactly the same way as New Testament believer, by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their propitiatory sacrifice and mediator. The only difference between the saints of the Old Covenant and the saints of the Old Testament was that the former believed in the Messiah who was coming, whereas the saints of the New Testament believed in the one and the same Messiah who has come.