

Justification by Faith

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In the Westminster Confession the chapter on effectual calling is followed by a chapter on justification. This is a natural and logical development, one that is perfectly consistent with the order of salvation as the Lord has revealed it in Holy Scripture. Paul tells us that “whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified” (Rom. 8:30). The teaching of justification lies at the heart of the Gospel and is therefore one of the most important elements of the Church’s message. It was one of the greatest themes in the writings of Paul. After Luther’s experience of this doctrine, it became the foundation of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Today, it is still a most precious truth to all who know what it means to be saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Sadly, however, some circles are talking as if our fathers got it all wrong, as if they misunderstood what Paul was really getting at, and—if one listens to these most recent voices of speculation—one gets the impression that they would like to reinvent the wheel. Almost every aspect of Christian theology is directly affected by one’s consideration of justification, and thus the interpretation of it is of the utmost importance. I believe that the Westminster Confession offers a thoroughly biblical interpretation, and that every Christian would do well to study it carefully in the full light of the Word of God.

But what do we mean by “justification”? The verb “to justify” as it is popularly used means little more than to give a superficial vindication, i.e. to defend the cause of someone, or to make excuses for him. This verb as it was used in Scripture and understood by the Westminster divines had no such meaning, however, and was regarded as a legal term, i.e. a forensic rather than popular term. Certainly, God does not justify the sinner by attempting to defend his innocence and moral character. Such an interpretation is to make either one of two impossible assumptions: that man is really innocent after all (c.f. Ps. 14:2,3, Rom. 3:23), or that God Himself is unholly and an unjust Judge (c.f. Exod. 34:7, Rom. 3:24-26).

Rather, the biblical meaning of the verb “to justify”—and therefore the meaning we must adopt if we would understand Paul—is simply “to declare righteous” (c.f. Rom. 3:24-26). In justification, God changes the sinner’s legal status, declares him to be righteous, and removes from over him the cloud of His eternal wrath (c.f. John 3:36). Louis Berkhof writes, “Justification is a judicial act of God, in which He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that all the claims of the law are satisfied with respect to the sinner” (Systematic Theology, p. 513). This definition will serve us well, and, with this introduction to the subject, I would like to offer a brief commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XI: “Of Justification.”

1. The first section of the Confession deals with the two essential elements of justification, namely the imputation of the sinner’s sin to Christ (also known as “remission” or “pardon”) and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the sinner (neither of these is alone; the two belong together). Job once asked, “But how can a man be righteous before God?” (Job 9:2). This question really means: How shall a sinner be accounted just before God? If men were free from the power and curse of sin, that would be one thing. But because all men are sinners by nature, this proves to be the most perplexing question of all time.

We hear a great deal in our day about God’s love; it is widely declared that the Lord is quick to pardon the penitent. Let us pray that the love and mercy of God will continue to be joyfully proclaimed. But by itself, that is a distorted view of God; the Lord is also just and holy. Regrettably, a balanced presentation of the attributes of God is rarely to be heard. It is at this point, however, that the perplexity of Job’s question appears: if God is merciful, He will forgive everyone; if He is just, He will not forgive anyone!

Justification is not, therefore, simply pardon. Indeed, there cannot even be any pardon without the fulfillment of God's basic requirement, which is perfect righteousness (c.f. Ps. 15, Jas 2:10). And so, we ask the question with Job: How shall a sinner be accounted righteous before God? Man's only hope of being found righteous before God would be for God Himself to become a man, to live a life of perfect obedience, to die—offering Himself as the full atonement for man's sin—and then to reckon to the sinner's account His own righteousness. This is the only hope of a fallen and lost race. Thanks be to God that this is precisely what He has accomplished for His people in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ! (Read carefully Rom. 3, 4, and 5.)

This righteousness of Christ (i.e. His obedience, His having fulfilled all righteousness for a clear standing before God) is, as I say, reckoned to the sinner's account. This, and this alone, is the ground of justification. Our righteousness is in what Christ has done, not who we are or what we have done. Herein is the New Testament answer to Job's question: Both the mercy and justice of God are accomplished in Christ's work of redemption on the cross! And because Christ Jesus rose from the dead, all who believe in Him are given a "living hope" of the same resurrection and eternal glory.

Justification speaks of a change in the sinner's legal status before God but says nothing about an essential change in his lifestyle. The righteousness of Christ is reckoned to the sinner's account—that is, imputed to him. This righteousness is not infused into him, which is the Roman Catholic view. On the other hand, it is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed. It is not faith itself—or any other "evangelical obedience"—that is imputed to the sinner as his righteousness, as is the Arminian view.

At this point we must be very careful. Jesus died for sinners; He gave His life a ransom for many. But this does not mean that in the end all sinners will be saved. He died for His elect, for all who were given to Him by the Father from before the foundation of the world. We can even say He died for all classes and conditions of men, but not for all men without exception. The Bible knows nothing of universal atonement. Although faith itself is not imputed, it is by faith that the righteousness of Christ is imputed (c.f. Gal. 2:16, Phil. 3:8,9). Sinners receive Christ (i.e. they place their trust in Him and rest on what He has accomplished for them) by faith, and by faith alone. Without faith in Christ, sinners are destined to eternal condemnation, being without hope and without God in the world. But just as the believer's righteousness is not of himself, neither is his faith; it is a gift of God (c.f. Eph. 2:8,9). One does not decide independently to believe in Jesus, as though men were in themselves capable of such commitment. Rather, the sinner comes to believe only as he is drawn irresistibly by the grace of God and is given the faith.

2. The second section describes this faith, both what it is and what it is like. Faith in Christ is the only "instrument" of justification. Many evangelicals are confused on this point, however. The sinner is not justified on account of his faith, for that is to turn faith into a good work and to make it the source of one's righteousness and the ground of his justification. That, as we have seen, cannot be. Rather, the sinner is justified by means of his faith. Faith is the means by which someone is declared righteous before God; only the righteousness of Christ can be the cause or ground of this declaration.

At the same time, however, this faith can never be alone! A true saving faith cannot be separated from good works, nor can it continue to exist without such good works. John Murray writes, "Faith alone justifies but a justified person with faith alone would be a monstrosity which never exists in the kingdom of grace. Faith works itself out through love (c.f. Gal. 5:6). And faith without works is dead (c.f. Jas 2:17-20)." (Redemption: Accomplished and Applied, p. 131). A failure to understand this lies behind so much of the confusion we hear today. Faith is the only instrument of justification, and, while faith without works is dead, works are the end of salvation (i.e. what one is saved unto), and serve no role as another instrument of justification.

3. The third section deals with the nature of the atonement, and two important facts should be emphasized here. First, Jesus Christ lived a life of perfect obedience—even unto death on the cross—and so His death was

efficient to atone for the sins of all the elect of God. He “did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to His Father’s justice” in their place (read carefully Heb. 9 and 10). Second, because the Lord Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin, and because this sacrifice was accepted as full payment for the penalty, the justification of sinners is only of God’s free grace.

4. The fourth section deals with the actual time of justification. It has already been observed that the obedience and satisfaction of Christ is the only ground of justification. Many might think, then, if this is so, that the elect have been justified from the moment Christ was offered up on the cross. This is not true, however, for faith in Christ is the necessary instrument of one’s justification. Someone is justified because of what Christ has done in his place, but he is justified personally when the Holy Spirit applies Christ and His work unto him by faith.

5. In the fifth section justification is considered in terms of its relationship with sanctification. This is important, especially today, in that some writers (following the Council of Trent) do not always distinguish these doctrines, the one from the other, carefully enough. All the sins of a true believer (a justified sinner) are forgiven—past, present, and future (c.f. Eph. 5:25-27). He has an eternal security, and so his justification cannot be lost. This does not mean, however, that Christians are unable to fall grievously into the most serious offences, nor does it mean that God will never again reveal His displeasure toward them. In fact, it is because the Lord loves His children that He mercifully chastens them (c.f. Heb. 12:6-8). But when such chastisement is revealed it is quickly removed when by faith and repentance believers confess their sins and seek the forgiveness of the Lord (c.f. 1 John 1:9).

6. Finally, the sixth section shows that justification was essentially the same in both Testaments. It is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to all the saints of every age, and this imputation has always been by means of faith. This does not mean, of course, that the Old Testament saints were all perfectly clear in their understanding of everything, but they believed the promises of God—like Abraham, they ‘rejoiced to see Christ’s day; and they saw it and were glad’ (c.f. John 8:56)—and so Christ’s righteousness was imputed also unto them (c.f. Rom. 4:20-25).

Let me conclude with a word from John Calvin. He writes, “A man will be justified by faith when, excluded from the righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and, clothed in it, appears in the sight of God, not as a sinner, but as righteousness” (Institutes, Book 3, Chapter XI, Section 2). Oh, that Christians would not neglect this great doctrine, particularly today when it is under heavy attack again and made subject to every kind of abuse!