

## WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XI: 1-2

*(Reading: Romans 3:21-4:8; James 2:14-26)*

### What Justification Is About

We come now in the order of salvation the apostle outlined in Romans 8 verse 30 to “justification”. It follows “calling”.

So this comes after that stage in our salvation where we have embraced Christ, for through the work of God’s Spirit convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, Jesus Christ becomes real to us. We believe the gospel.

Because of this effectual calling a number of benefits come to us – a list which begins with “justification”. And what a benefit to start with! This is what Martin Luther called “the article by which the church stands or falls.”

How true! It is the major doctrinal issue which divided the church at the Reformation. And it has been what has caused much difference ever since!

Indeed, it was this doctrine the apostle Paul so strongly proclaimed. In his letter to the Galatian churches he especially homes in on this. Because they were brethren being drawn away by the teaching that it was what you did, in following the Old Testament law, which made you right with God. In chapter 1, the verses 6 and 7, he writes, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to another gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

So it shouldn’t surprise us that Article 1 deals with those deviations of the biblical doctrine. In our first aspect we will see what those differences are.

But before that let’s define this word: What is “justification” exactly? The Westminster Shorter Catechism Answer 33 spells it out well. It says that justification is “an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

The terrible thing is that we are wrong with God. As we read in Romans 3 verse 23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

So we need to be made right with God. But there’s no way you can do it. And so justification is God’s making us right with Himself, because of Christ’s doing and dying.

In this judgement by God, He does what no earthly judge can do, because He declares righteous those who are really ungodly. And yet God is not unrighteous in doing this. That’s because by imputation He is able to cause the sinner to legally possess a righteousness and to be freed from unrighteousness even while a sinner.

### Justification As God’s Acts of Grace Doesn’t Mean...

Having seen what “justification” means, let’s turn now to what it isn’t. So, in the first place, let’s consider what JUSTIFICATION AS GOD’S ACT OF GRACE DOESN’T MEAN. This itself Article 1 breaks up into three parts. Each part dealing with how this how been misunderstood.

### ...It Is Infused

So we turn to see that JUSTIFICATION AS GOD'S ACT OF GRACE DOESN'T MEAN ... IT IS INFUSED. This is the first error Article 1 covers. After beginning "Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justified" it says, "not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous."

The context to this at the time of the Reformation was quite obvious. Official Roman Catholic theology includes sanctification in the definition of justification. This means justification to them is a process rather than a single decisive event. While they say that faith contributes to our acceptance with God, our works of satisfaction and merit contribute too.

Their view of baptism is an example of this. Rome sees this sacrament not as a gracious sign and seal of God but as a channel of sanctifying grace. They say baptism is the primary cause of justification.

So the Romanists use justification in a vague and general sense. To them, it includes both the forgiveness of sins and the infusion of grace. That's why the priest has such importance among them. It's through him alone that this grace can be channelled.

Thus when the Confession declares that it's by the pardoning of sins, and by the accounting and accepting of believers as righteous, their error is exposed for what it is. This is the error of the Judaizers all over again!

### **...It Is Anything Done By Us**

Then Article 1 goes on to say that JUSTIFICATION AS GOD'S ACT OF GRACE DOESN'T MEAN ... IT IS ANYTHING DONE BY US. "Not for anything wrought in them" it says next. Immediately our thoughts are drawn to Rome again. They have what they call the sacrament of penance. Through that they believe they receive fresh grace. So believers can save themselves with the help of the grace that flows from Christ through the church's sacramental system.

But then in this life you can never be sure where you stand with God. If to any degree it is up to you, then you can have no sense of confidence in God's grace. How far from the apostle Paul that is!

Titus chapter 3 is clear about this. In verse 5 there he writes, God "saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy." And in Ephesians 1 verse 7 he says, "In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

And therefore the Confession of Faith is aimed at this also. For by stating that it's for Christ's sake alone, it takes away any credit in us.

But there is yet another error that the Confession tackles. An error which has become quite prominent in a lot of Protestant churches today.

### **...It Is An Act We're Given To Do**

So we also note that JUSTIFICATION AS GOD'S ACT OF GRACE DOESN'T MEAN ... IT IS AN ACT WE'RE GIVEN TO DO. This is what we read of with what the Confession next states. It says, "nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness."

You see, there were others in the 16th and 17th centuries who took this error of works righteousness even further. The Socinians, who don't believe in Christ's substitutionary death, see that justification is the same as sanctification. Thus what Jesus did was an inspiration to the

disciples to follow his example – but only if you persevered in obedience did you get raised from the dead.

The Socinians were named after an uncle and his nephew, Lelio and Faustus Socino. The Uncle had travelled widely and met with Calvin, Melancthon, and Bullinger. But later on what John Calvin had picked up as an excessive amount of open questioning in the older man became a serious deviation from the truth through the younger man in Poland and Hungary. A teaching that later grew in the 18th century with the whole enlightenment age, because then what man thought and did really did take up centre-stage!

How far this was from biblical doctrine, for what does Romans 5 verse 19 say but that, “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”

The story is told of a minister who had Arminian sentiments. His name was James Hervey. In that same parish there lived a ploughman. He travelled on Sunday to a neighbouring church where there was a Dr Doddridge, a Calvinist. Doddridge was a minister who preached the doctrines of grace.

Now Hervey was advised by his doctor to get some fresh air for his health. And, in particular, he was told to follow the plough in order to smell the fresh earth. So he would sometimes go out with that ploughman.

Knowing that the ploughman was a serious person, he said to him one morning, ‘What do you think is the hardest thing in religion?’ To which he replied, ‘I am a poor illiterate man, and you, sir, are a minister: I beg leave to return the question.’

‘Then,’ said Hervey, ‘I think the hardest thing is to deny sinful self.’ And he talked on and on for quite a while about how true this was. The ploughman replied, ‘Mr Hervey, you have forgot the greatest act of the grace of self-denial, which is to deny ourselves of a proud confidence in our own obedience for justification. You know I do not come to hear you, Sir, but I take my family every Sabbath to Northampton to hear Dr Doddridge. We rise early and have prayers and walk there and back. I enjoy it, but to this moment I find it very hard not to be proud of my Sabbath-keeping.’

In repeating this story to a friend, Hervey observed, ‘I then hated the righteousness of Christ; I looked at the man with astonishment and disdain, and thought him an old fool. I have since clearly seen who was the fool: not the wise old Christian, but the proud James Hervey.’

JUSTIFICATION AS GOD’S ACT OF GRACE DOESN’T MEAN IT IS AN ACT WE’RE GIVEN TO DO. We are but wretched men. We deserve nothing but God’s eternal condemnation.

### **Justification As God’s Act of Grace Does Mean...**

And so having seen justification from what it isn’t, let’s turn now to what it is. What does justification as God’s act of grace mean? Here we come to the last part of Article 1 and to Article 2. And as we do that we note, first of all, JUSTIFICATION AS GOD’S ACT OF GRACE DOES MEAN ... IT IS RECEIVED BY FAITH ALONE.

### **...It Is Received By faith Alone**

There is a key word in Article 2. This was the word Martin Luther added in his German Bible to the phrase “justified by faith” in Romans 3 verse 28. He was much criticised by his opponents for taking liberties with the text. But which single word could cause them to stamp up and down at this point in particular?

Have you spotted it yet? Ah, it's the word "alone". Those against Luther said it was absurd to suppose a man could be justified "by faith alone" or "mere faith". They thought that meant a man is justified simply by believing he is justified – that to them could only be "wishful thinking". They argued that a man can be justified only by a faith that's fully formed and developed by the performance of works of love.

So Article 2 begins by driving home the biblical conclusion of Article 1. Here it clearly states that the faith by which alone a man is justified is not some kind of auto-suggestion. It's not what someone mistakenly thinks they believe. In fact, it is nothing less than a receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness. It's the very act by which a man turns away from himself and completely trusts in Jesus Christ. As Rowland Ward writes, "Faith alone justifies because it looks away from itself and is centred in the person of Jesus Christ."

This is what we read put so eloquently by Paul in Philippians chapter 3. There in the verses 8 and 9 he says, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." Because we have no righteousness of our own, and since we must have perfect righteousness before God so that He can declare that we are, there can be no mixture of our own righteousness with that of Christ imputed to us. Saving faith is simply, as Article 2 says, "receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness". That's why it is "the alone instrument of justification." God requires nothing of us except complete reliance on the righteousness and satisfaction of Christ.

### **...It Is Shown With All Other Saving Graces**

So JUSTIFICATION AS GOD'S ACT OF GRACE DOES MEAN IT IS RECEIVED BY FAITH ALONE. And it's when this is done, when a man so receives Christ in living faith, that we see, in the second part to Article 2, that, JUSTIFICATION AS GOD'S ACT OF GRACE DOES MEAN ... IT IS SHOWN WITH ALL OTHER SAVING GRACES.

We are justified by faith alone, but when we are justified our faith will not remain alone. These two truths show the two complimentary emphases of Paul and James. For Paul says, in Romans 3 verse 28, "a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law", and James says, in James 2 verse 17, "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

This effectively deals with the cheap grace which we find in many churches today, for that is the grace which is easy-believism. Once you've made that decision for Christ, they say, you're home and hosed!

Theologically we call that 'antinomianism'. It does away with the law altogether. And that's one area Luther did err to some degree. He had very little time for the letter of James. He even called it an epistle of straw!

But James brings out the biblical balance. He proves what we confess. You can see we are Christians by our love!

I like what was told once about a citizen of Bristol in England in the 19th century. He was often urged by a friend to have his portrait painted – in the same way we would have our picture taken by a photographer today.

Finally he said he would have his picture painted. And as they would often put in your favourite outfit or possessions in such a painting, he was asked, "How would you like to be painted?"

“Sitting among books,” he replied. “Any book in particular?” “The Bible.” “Open at any part?” “At the fifth chapter of Romans, so that you can see the first verse, ‘Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ You could see it on him alright! As we give ourselves in faith to Jesus, Jesus gives us His gift of righteousness. It’s in this very act of ‘closing with Christ,’ as older Reformed teachers put it, that we receive divine pardon and acceptance which we wouldn’t otherwise have.  
How gracious of God! What a privilege! Where will you show it?”