

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XI: 3-6

(Reading: Galatians 3:1-14; Psalm 32)

Where Justification Comes From, When It Comes & What It Does

A week ago we looked at the first two Articles in this 11th Chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. There we considered 'What Justification Is About'. And we did that through seeing what justification as God's act of grace doesn't mean and does mean! So there justification was clearly defined for us. But now in Articles 3 till 6 we will dig into where justification is from, when it does come and who it is going to, because nothing happens in a vacuum. It hasn't simply come out of thin air! In fact, its knowing how it's come about and what it means for us right now that brings this precious doctrine truly alive!

Where Justification Is From

So we see, in the first place, WHERE JUSTIFICATION IS FROM. This is what Article 3 is about.

Article 3 begins, though, with recapping where we are at so far. It says, "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."

This is what we have already confessed in Chapter 8, Article 5, and Articles 1 and 2 of this Chapter. It's about how Christ provided the basis for our justification by His active and passive obedience.

This was completely voluntary on Christ's part. As He says in John 10, verses 17 and 18, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life - only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

The price of justification has been fully met by Christ, but now we turn to see that the justification of the elect remains an act of free grace since all that was required God Himself provided at His cost.

It's like a party someone may have. That celebration is because it's something special in their life. And yet he's the one who pays for it.

I've always found that strange about many parties. Shouldn't it be others that are paying for it? I mean, they have the pleasure of being invited to it!

Perhaps here we have the origin of such a practice? Whatever the case for our earthly parties, though, out of the Father's love comes our atonement. He makes us at one with Him through what Christ has done. Christ legally fixes it up for us. As the apostle Paul says in Romans 5 verse 19, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [Christ] many will be made righteous."

And despite what people may have said about this doctrine, this doesn't ruin God's character, or take away from it, it actually vindicates Him. This proves He is who He is. As Article 3 concludes, "that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners."

When Justification Does Come

So we have seen WHERE JUSTIFICATION IS FROM. It's God's love through Christ by free grace. Thus now we come, in Article 4, to the when. In the words of a second aspect to our sermon, this is WHEN JUSTIFICATION DOES COME.

You see, we can easily become confused over this. As those who have come to see the precious truth of God's sovereign love, we would think that the elect are justified from eternity. Aren't we those Revelation 13 verse 8 says have had their names written in "the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the beginning of the world"?

But dear believer, when you receive this precious gift of free grace from Him then you know about it! That's when you know it's His party - for then you get the present!

So while God has been planning this out for right through-out all time, and while this was why Christ, in the right time, died for our sins, it's then we realise it was all for us! It's like that party and the present you get then – the present that someone spent a lot of time getting ready for you, because he knew the date for your birthday.

So for a quite a while they've been looking around for what they knew you would really like. It's on that certain day you see exactly what they've done for you all along!

This is what we read of in Galatians 3 verse 8. There Paul says that "The Scriptures foresaw that God would justify the Gentile by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'"

And it's how another apostle, Peter, greets the churches in his first letter. In chapter 1 verse 2 we read his acknowledging that they "have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."

Article 4 is here showing us the scriptural difference between the plan of God and the execution of that plan. So whenever the Bible speaks about God's foreordaining the justification of the elect it doesn't say that God has already justified them. This is what we see further on in Peter's first letter. In chapter 1 verse 20, he says that Christ "was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake."

This shows how much the Lord thinks of us. Quite different to the fatalism that many think our religion is, as though we are just cogs in some human machine, this shows that none of all that Christ has done or that God planned to do has any effect until the Spirit brings it out in us! You have to believe!

Until then you are just like everyone else. As Paul says in Ephesians 2 verse 3, "we were by nature objects of wrath." But now - man - you ought to see what God has done! As Paul continues in Ephesians 2, the verses 4 till 6, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even while we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."

It's the most favoured position! And you don't lose it!

What Justification Has Now Done

That's where Article 5 comes into the picture. From seeing where justification is from and when it happens we have to also realise, thirdly, WHAT JUSTIFICATION HAS NOW DONE.

You see, what Article 5 spells out is the difference between justification and sanctification. For believers still sin. They feel that sin. And they pray for forgiveness every day.

That doesn't change our legal status before God, however. Justification, being God's act apart from anything in them, cannot be destroyed. Jesus said in John 10 verse 28, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."

But our sins are deservedly and even severely punished by the loving heavenly Father. David wrote of this in Psalm 32. In the verses 3 till 5 there he says, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' - and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Its here there was a major error in the church before the Reformation. For Roman Catholicism confuses justification and sanctification – it mixes up our legal and our inherent righteousness.

They do this by teaching that at certain times a person is "just". This would be usually after baptism or having received another of the sacraments. And what they mean is that the person is then actually made internally holy and not just legally righteous before God.

This holiness they say can be partially or even completely lost through sin. A person could stop being just. So, guess what? Ah, he must be again be justified through sacramental grace.

On and on and on and on and on it goes in this constant cycle. And in the process you really don't know where you are. It's a doctrine that gives you no peace with God. Forget Romans 5 verse 1 when it says that "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

But think about it. If sacramental grace produced inward holiness why would that person ever sin again? If justification meant perfect inward holiness, then there could be no further sin for, in the word of Jesus in Matthew 7 verse 17, "every good tree bears good fruit".

This view is patently wrong. But it is a view which is becoming increasingly seen in the evangelical world today. There is a new perspective on Paul which says that the reformers misunderstood him on this point. Clark Pinnock says he's open to "the possibility of a doctrine of purgatory". Alister McGrath thinks the Council of Trent's definition of justification is "brilliant". And then there are the various agreements being made between Roman Catholic and Protestants which bypasses justification altogether.

You'd almost wonder whether there should have been a Reformation at all! Well - be glad there was one! As Peter Hastie writes, "The good news of the Reformation lies in the rediscovery that the gospel lies entirely outside of ourselves. Our hope before God lies in the doing and dying of Jesus: it is his righteousness that saves us, not our own. We must resist the temptation to ground the verdict of God's acceptance of us within ourselves. Only the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness will give us hope to face God."

And it ties in with Article 5 like a hand in a glove. As John Calvin said: "'Justification' is the main hinge on which religion turns ... for unless you first of all grasp what your relationship with God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you will have neither a foundation on which to build your salvation nor one on which to build your piety towards God."

This why Article 5 can say the believer will never fall from the state of justification even though he may sin and even be under the influence of an ungodly lifestyle for a while. And that won't be abused, because you are only really justified if you have true faith. And true faith has to do good works, as James 2 verse 17 says.

It's also in this area of justification that there's another difference with many Protestants. This is what Article 6 tells us. Because there are Christians who believe that in the Old Testament the believers were saved by works and not by grace. They say that before Jesus came the law had to be obeyed to be right with God.

Well, again Paul is quite clear about that. In Romans 4 verse 22, he says about Abraham, "This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' And Paul goes on, "The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

The case of Abraham is decisive. Indeed, it's to God's covenant with Abraham that every spiritual blessing Christians enjoy may be traced.

So the souls of the Old Testament believers were not hanging around in some kind of spiritual holding cell before Jesus came and set them free. You won't find that anywhere in the Bible. But what you do find in the Bible is the same justification by faith we enjoy right now! Those saints of old were made right with God because of what Jesus would do just as much as are made with God because of what He has done.

That's why we're looking to Christ. We can be certain that we are right with God because of what He has done – once and for all time!

If you are distressed by your spiritual condition look to Him! **He** is the only object of faith. **He** is the Saviour. **He** is the One bringing us to God!