

## The Baptist Confession of Faith (24): Of Justification

Chapter 11 affirms six things about justification: its nature (1); its instrument (2); its source (3); its timing (4); its clarification (5); its universal blessing.

### I. Of Justification

1. *The nature of justification* (1). Paragraph 1 underscores the legal and judicial nature of justification. "Justification is a legal or forensic term, and is used in Scripture to denote the acceptance of any one as righteous in the sight of God" (Buchanan).<sup>1</sup> It's the declaration, in the courtroom of heaven, that man is righteous before the Law. "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" (Berkhof).<sup>2</sup> "Justification is simply a declaration or pronouncement respecting the relation of the person to the law" (Murray).<sup>3</sup> Thus, justification is the opposite of condemnation. "He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD" (Prov.17:15).

(1) Justification is not the infusing of righteousness. "Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them." We are infused with righteousness, but this has to do with regeneration and sanctification and not justification. Justification does nothing to our hearts but only changes our standing or status. "Justification is a declaratory act. It does not do anything to us; it says something about us. It has no reference to my actual state or condition inside; it has reference to my standing, to my position, to my appearing in the presence of God" (MLJ).<sup>4</sup> The change is positional not personal.

Justification is not an infusion of righteousness into persons; to justify, is not to make men holy and righteous, who were unholy and unrighteous, by producing any physical or real change in them; for this is to confound justification and sanctification together, which are very manifestly distinct; the one being a work of grace *in us*; the other an act of grace *towards us*; the one is imperfect, the other perfect; the one is progressive, and carried on by degrees; the other is complete and finished at once.<sup>5</sup>

The 16<sup>th</sup> century debate with Rome concerned both the nature of justification as well as the nature of saving faith (we'll address the first here and the second under paragraph 2). Concerning the nature of justification, Rome teaches justification is given at baptism, "when a person is transitioned to the state of grace and of adoption as children of God" (CT).<sup>6</sup> "Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy" (CCC).<sup>7</sup> Thus, for Rome, justification refers to the inward transformation of the soul. The infusion of righteousness. The believing sinner isn't merely *declared* righteous but is *made* righteous. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man" (CT).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, 226

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2:513

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 119

<sup>4</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 3:169

<sup>5</sup> John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 4:180

<sup>6</sup> Council of Trent, *Session 6, Chapter 4*

<sup>7</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992

<sup>8</sup> Council of Trent, *Session 6, Chapter 7*

For Rome the righteousness of Christ is not imputed to the believer, but infused into the believer. When the believer cooperates with this infused righteousness, the believer then possesses an inherent righteousness, which then becomes the ground of justification.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Rome teaches our justification is increased by works of faith and love. "Having, therefore, been thus justified, they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith co-operating with good works, increase in that justice which they have received through the grace of Christ, and are still further justified."<sup>10</sup> This is in contrast to the Reformed who believe our justification is a perfect completed act. "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom.5:1). While our sense and awareness of justification can increase, our justification can never increase. For Rome, though justification begins by faith (even in the infant as faith is given through baptism), it must be perfected or completed by works. Thus, our justification can be lost due to a lack of co-operation on our part.

As regards those who, by sin, have fallen from the received grace of Justification, they may be again justified, when, God exciting them, through the sacrament of Penance they shall have attained to the recovery, by the merit of Christ, of the grace lost: for this manner of Justification is of the fallen the reparation.<sup>11</sup>

If anyone saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema.<sup>12</sup>

(2) Justification is the imputation of righteousness. "He freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous...by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in His death for their whole and sole righteousness." "Righteousness shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom.4:24). Imputation is a legal term that refers to the transfer of funds. Thus, to impute (or reckon) is to accredit the righteousness of Christ to the spiritual account of a believing sinner. "His righteousness becomes mine only by forensic imputation. It is a righteousness that counts for me and is reckoned to my account, but it was neither achieved nor wrought by me" (Sproul).<sup>13</sup>

Justification has two sides: *forgiveness* and *acceptance*. "Justification is a legal change from a state of guilt and condemnation to a state of forgiveness and acceptance" (Pink).<sup>14</sup> "David describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works (acceptance): blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin (forgiveness)" (Rom.4:6-8). First, forgiveness. Non-imputation and forgiveness are the same thing. "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin" (Rom.4:7-8). Forgiveness refers to the legal guilt of sin (and says nothing about its inward filth). "The pardon granted in justification applies to all sins, past, present, and future, and thus involves the removal of all guilt and of every penalty" (Berkhof).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 108

<sup>10</sup> Council of Trent, *Session 6, Chapter 10*

<sup>11</sup> Council of Trent, *Session 6, Chapter 14*

<sup>12</sup> Council of Trent, *Session 6, Canon 24*

<sup>13</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 107

<sup>14</sup> A.W. Pink, *Election and Justification*, 191

<sup>15</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 2:514

Second, acceptance. Justification not only entails pardon of sin's guilt, but the positive right to life in Christ. "Pardon takes away the filthy garments, but justification provides a change of raiment (Zech.3:4). Pardon frees from death, but righteousness imputed is called *justification of life* (Rom.5:18)" (Pink).<sup>16</sup> Because we are declared righteous in Christ, the life He earned is freely given to us. "Those who receive the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ" (Rom.5:17). "The justified person has a right to all the immunities and rewards which in the covenant of life (works) are suspended upon perfect conformity to the demands of law" (Hodge).<sup>17</sup> "In our justification our sins are pardoned, our persons accepted with God, and a right is given to us unto the heavenly inheritance" (Owen).<sup>18</sup>

When God justifies a sinner, He does not merely absolve him from guilt or a liability to eternal death, but He pronounces him righteous, and as such, entitled to eternal life. He accepts him as righteous, and considers him as legally entitled to eternal life. Hence it is called the justification of life.<sup>19</sup>

Our Confession connects our forgiveness and acceptance with imputation. The reason we are forgiven and accepted is because "Christ's active and passive obedience are imputed as our whole and sole righteousness by faith." By "active obedience" is meant His life, and by "passive obedience" is meant His death. Paul combines these two into a single obedience: "by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom.5:19). Everything Christ did as the GodMan in His life and death is reckoned to our account. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to our account. Not His essential righteousness as God, but "the righteousness wrought by Him in human nature, the righteousness of His obedience" (Murray).<sup>20</sup>

2. *The instrument of justification* (2). Paragraph two affirms three things about saving and justifying faith. (1) It receives and rests on Christ and His righteousness. "Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness." Faith doesn't merely receive righteousness, but the person of Christ (in whom He have righteousness). "In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: The LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer.23:6). Faith receives and rests on Christ, who is made unto us, "wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" (1Cor.1:30). This brief definition of faith points to a common distinction made by the Reformers between *passive* and *active* faith. Faith can be passive (and thus receiving) or active (and thus working). Faith is passive in our justification and active in our sanctification. With regards to our justification, faith merely receives from Christ, but with regards to our sanctification it works for Christ. "Faith receives Christ our righteousness and attributes everything to the grace of God in Christ" (2HC).<sup>21</sup> "Justifying faith is emphatically passive in that it is receptive and attributes everything to grace" (Waldron).<sup>22</sup>

(2) It is the alone instrument of justification. Thus, Paul spoke of the "righteousness of faith (Rom.4:13)" or "the righteousness that comes by faith (NIV)." Faith is the means whereby we receive Christ and His righteousness is imputed to our account. "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom.4:5). In contrast to historical Arminianism, this does not mean faith is actually our righteousness. God does not accept our

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<sup>16</sup> A.W. Pink, *Election and Justification*, 196

<sup>17</sup> A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary*, 181

<sup>18</sup> John Owen, *Works*, 5:223

<sup>19</sup> John Colquhoun, *Sermons on Important Doctrines*, 166

<sup>20</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 127-128

<sup>21</sup> *The Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter 15

<sup>22</sup> Sam Waldron, *Faith, Obedience, and Justification*, 89

faith in place of our obedience. He does not reckon our faith as righteousness but faith is reckoned *for* righteousness. Put more plainly, faith is the means whereby righteousness is reckoned to our account. "A sinner is not said to be justified *for* faith, but only *by* faith. A sinner is justified before God not by the act of receiving, but by the righteousness received" (Colquhoun).<sup>23</sup> Thus, Scripture clearly distinguishes faith from righteousness. It's "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ," "righteousness which is according to faith" and "righteousness from God by faith" (Rom.3:22; Heb.11:7; Phil.3:8-9).

(3) It is not alone in the person justified. "Yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces and is no dead faith, but works by love." While faith must be distinguished from works, it can never be divorced from works. Man is justified by faith alone, but that faith is never alone. And yet, we must stay clear of Rome who mixes love with faith. This allows them to affirm justification by faith, but not faith alone (as the work of love is conflated with faith). In contrast, the Reformed distinguished between faith and love, while maintaining the one always gave way to the other. "By faith alone is apprehended remission of sins and because the Spirit is received by faith, our hearts are renewed, and so put on new affections, so that we are able to bring forth good works" (AC).<sup>24</sup>

But after that man is justified by faith, then that true and living faith, and good works always follow justifying faith, and are most certainly found together with it, provided only it be a true and living faith. For true faith is never alone, but has always charity and hope in its train.<sup>25</sup>

Without doubt, the greatest weapon of Rome was James 2:24: "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." In response, the Reformed distinguished between *actual* justification (by faith) and *declarative* justification (by works). First, actual justification (by faith). This refers to man's actual justification in the courtroom of heaven by faith alone. "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom.3:28). "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal.2:16).

Second, declarative justification (by works). This refers to a relative justification in the courtroom of men by works. James uses two illustrations to clarify his statement in 2:24: Abraham (2:21-23) and Rahab (2:25). While Abraham was actually justified before God by faith (Gen.15), 30 years later, he was justified before men by works (Gen.22). Thus, Paul denies that Abraham was justified before God by works. "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God" (Rom.4:2). "Though it is by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, apprehended by faith alone, that the sinner's person is justified in the sight of God, yet it is by a holy practice that his character can be justified before men" (Colquhoun).<sup>26</sup> "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt.12:37).

Justification before God is very different from justification before men. To be justified in the sight of God is to be judicially acquitted and declared righteous at His tribunal. But to be justified before men is to have our pretensions to true religion justified by a holy and consistent deportment. A man is justified before God solely for a perfect righteousness imputed, before men, by an imperfect righteousness inherent.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John Colquhoun, *Sermons on Important Doctrines*, 162

<sup>24</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article XX

<sup>25</sup> The Formula of Concord, Article III

<sup>26</sup> John Colquhoun, *Sermons on Important Doctrines*, 151

<sup>27</sup> John Colquhoun, *Sermons on Important Doctrines*, 151