

Chapter 11 – *Of Justification*

He also freely justifieth: ... accounting and accepting their persons as righteous ... for Christ's sake alone

WCF 11.1

11.1 THE MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

- Forensic not ontological
- Forensic: 'freely justifieth ... by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous.'
- In declaring the Protestant doctrine a heresy the Council of Trent, Canon 11, said If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins ... let him be anathema.
- 'Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man'.¹
- 'Justification *detaches man from sin* which contradicts the love of God, and purifies his heart of sin. Justification follows upon God's merciful initiative of offering forgiveness. It reconciles man with God. It frees from the enslavement to sin, and it heals'.²
- 'But Rome confuses justification and sanctification in her teaching set out as dogma in 1547 at the Council of Trent'.³
- Vital to understand UNION WITH CHRIST and the benefits of the gospel which flow from that union. The Confession uses various phrases to describe this union with Christ: 'effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ' (10.1), 'come unto Christ' (10.4), 'receiving and resting on him' (11.1), 'receiving and resting on Christ' (11.2), 'receiving and resting upon Christ alone' (14.2).
- The LC refers to 'communion in grace'.
- LC69 What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ? The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his

¹ The Council of Trent cited in paragraph 1989 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Second Edition (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 482.

² Paragraph 1990 of *Catholic Catechism*.

³ Rowland S. Ward, *The Confession of Faith – A Study Guide* (New Melbourne Press, 2004), 130. He continues 'She holds that justification means the forgiveness of sins and moral renovation, and she regards faith and the new ethical disposition as a ground of acceptance with God. Rather than the emphasis on righteousness of God in the gospel, the emphasis falls on the subjective experience of the individual, hence the impossibility of real assurance. Bound up with this is the understanding of faith as assent to the teachings of the church rather than trust in the person of Christ. Rome also sees divine grace as tied to the sacraments and to a mediating priesthood, so creating more confusion.'

mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.

- SC30 *How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?* The Spirit applieth to us the redemption, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.
- ‘The dominant motif and architectonic principle of the order of salvation should therefore be union with Christ in the Spirit.’⁴
- To be ‘in Christ’ means to share in all that Christ has accomplished. More specifically this means that those who are united to the risen Christ share in *his* justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification. Just as in the case of Christ these are all aspects of the single eschatological event of his resurrection and in him are simultaneous and inseparable, so with us. It follows that, in the case of believers, to be united to Christ by the Spirit means to share in his justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification. Of course, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification are distinct categories of the application of redemption and should not be confused. But they are not to be separate events; they are aspects or facets of the one events of our union with Christ in his risen glory, effected by the power of the Spirit.⁵

IMPUTATION

- Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts – in short, that *mystical union* – are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. *We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body – in short, because he deigns to make us one with him.*⁶
- What is *real* in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is legal; that is, it is something really in them, and between them, uniting them, that is the ground the suitability of their being accounted as one by the Judge.⁷
- At the heart of the idea of imputation is the reckoning of the sins or righteousness of one person to another. In justification by faith that means the reckoning or counting of the obedience of the Lord Jesus to those in union with him.

⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Inter Varsity Press, 1996), 100.

⁵ Ferguson, 106.

⁶ John Calvin, quoted in Richard B. Gaffin Jr, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 59. Italics added in citation.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 19: Sermons and Discourses 1734-1738* (Yale University Press, 2003), 158.

11.2 BY FAITH ALONE

- Faith is ‘the alone instrument of justification’.
- Faith does not justify as the basis of our acceptance, faith takes hold of the righteous Christ who is the ground of our justification.
- What then is faith? Faith is the soul ‘receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness’ (XI.II), ‘the principal acts of saving faith are, accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone’ (14.2).

We are justified by faith alone. Yet at the same time we should remember that faith is never alone in the person justified. Faith is a gift of grace and it is the sole gift by which we receive justification. Nonetheless, for those who are justified, faith is given plenty of company. This one saving grace is accompanied by all other saving graces. Other graces like patience and hope and love are no mere optional puddings or desserts that we can select from among the buffet of Christian virtues.⁸

- Canon 9. If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone ... let him be anathema. (Council of Trent)
- Not justification by faith, but union with the resurrected Christ by faith (of which to be sure, the justifying aspect stands out perhaps most prominently) is the central motif of Paul’s applied soteriology.⁹

11.3 THE SUBSTITUTIONARY LIFE AND DEATH OF JESUS

Neither are we to suppose that we can allocate certain phases or acts of our Lord’s life on earth to the active obedience and certain other phases and acts to the passive obedience. The distinction between the active and passive obedience is not a distinction of periods. It is our Lord’s whole work of obedience in every phase and period that is described as active and passive, and we must avoid the mistake of thinking that the active obedience applies to the obedience of his life and the passive to the obedience of this final sufferings and death.¹⁰

11.4 ETERNITY AND TIME

- Eternal Justification: Faith is not a mere sign or indication of justification already granted in eternity by the will of God. The work of the Spirit is absolutely necessary and the sinner must look to Christ for justification, not to faith as a sign that all is well.

⁸ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A reader’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, 2014), 164.

⁹ Gaffin, 129.

¹⁰ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Banner of Truth, 1961), 21. ‘The real use and purpose of this formula is to emphasize the two distinct aspects of our Lord’s vicarious obedience. The truth expressed rests upon the recognition that the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands.’

11.5 SIMUL IUSTUS ET PECCATOR

- Justification is received through union with Christ. It is the legal aspect and consequence of union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Yet the justified sinner remains the subject of a great spiritual battle: 'a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh' (13.2).

11.6 ABRAHAM AND DAVID: ROMANS 4

- There is only one way of justification, one covenant of grace.

CONCLUSION

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied: as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle saith, that we are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ. And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, **ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours, when we believe in him.** This is sufficient to cover our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves. And verily if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves, or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: O Lord, enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.¹¹

¹¹ The Belgic Confession, *Article 23*.