

—A Study of the Westminster Confession of Faith— *Justification & Adoption, WCF 11 & 12*

- It is the glory of the Christian gospel that it reveals the method according to which a sinner may obtain peace with God and rise to the possession of eternal life. It resolves the important question, how a man may regain God's favor and be counted just in His sight.
- An error on this matter regaining God's favor is fundamental; for, as there is only one way to heaven, if we miss it and take another, it is certain that we will not arrive there. If we entertain right views of the doctrine of justification with God, we cannot go far wrong with respect to any other essential truth of Christianity; but a mistake here will affect the whole system and give rise to false conceptions of the character of God, of the mediation of Christ, of the law, of the gospel, of grace, and of works.
- The doctrine of justification by faith therefore holds a principal place in the Christian system. According to Luther, it is the article of a standing or falling church, because according to the views which are adopted in any church with respect to the means of regaining the favor of God, true piety and holiness will flourish or decline in it.
- **Ferguson**, "When the assembly first met, its original task was revising the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England; and it was while they were discussing justification that they expanded their task to a new exposition of the Reformed faith that would bring closer uniformity to the church of England and bring it closer to the reformed church of Europe."

Of Justification

- I. What is justification? §§ 1-2
 - A. The Author of justification
 1. The Author of justification is God, Rom 8.33
 2. The recipients of justification are all those sinners whom God effectually calls, Rom 4.5; 8.30
 - a) He is considered as one who has violated the law of God and the very design of the sentence of justification is to set him free from the consequences of his transgression. If he were not a sinner, he would already be justified—on his own account.
 - B. What it is and what it is not
 1. Justification is a forensic term referring to a judicial act of God which signifies, not a change in the person's nature, but a change in the person's state in relation to the law of God.
 - a) When The Church of Rome represents justification as a physical act involving the infusion of righteousness into the souls of men, making them internally and personally just, they confuse justification with sanctification.
 - b) Justification does not make a man righteous by the infusion of righteousness into him; it pronounces him righteous on acceptable grounds. Thus justification is a forensic term, a legal term. It is opposed to condemnation (Dt 25.1; Rom 5.16; 8.33-34), which is not the infusing of wickedness, but the pronouncing of a man to be wicked (cf. Prov 27.15; Isa 50.8).
 - c) Thus justification is the act of a judge completed at once. It is not a process, but is accomplished in an instant.
 - d) Justification is therefore not a change of a man's nature, but a change of his stated with regard to the law of God.
 2. Justification includes both pardon and accounting and accepting as righteous
 - a) Although justification is a single act, yet it consists of two parts. Two things are necessarily involved in the sentence of justification:
 - (1) The sinner is pardoned of all his sins. The guilt of his sins is removed so that he is no longer obligated to bear the punishment of a transgressed law, which is death (Rom 6.23; 8.1).

- (a) Moreover, we must understand that this sentence extends to all his sins and all their aggravations, Jer 33.8. All the sins of the believer are at once pardoned in his justification. His past sins are forgiven and his future sins will not be imputed to him, so that he cannot come into condemnation (Ps 32.1-2; Jn 5.24; Rom 8.1-3; Heb 8.12).
- (b) **Dick**, To pardon a sinner is to declare that “although he has violated the law, it shall not have its course upon him; that he shall be exempted from the fatal effects of his transgressions and be treated as if he were innocent. Remission places him in the same relation to the law as if he had not sinned. He is no more under a sentence of condemnation than Adam was before his fall. God will not enter into judgment with him, nor listen to any of the charges which the law or his conscience may advance, because his justice has received full satisfaction [in Christ] for all his acts of disobedience. The guilt of a pardoned sinner is completely cancelled and those who are forgiven are secured against every penal evil, Isa 44.22; 43.25; 38.17; Mic 7.19; Ps 32.2; Jer 50.20.” Nothing is left for the pardoned sinner but to praise God, Isa 12.1
- (c) Thus, for the pardoned sinner, the influence of sin is pernicious and he should guard against it with the utmost carefulness, because it will pollute his soul, disturb his peace, and displease his heavenly Father; but although it may subject him to chastisements, it will never expose him to His avenging wrath, for there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, Rom 8.1
- (d) It should be clear, then, that the pardon of sin granted in justification is irrevocable—it cannot but be since it takes in *all* the sins and *all* the guilt of the sinner, both past, present, and future. In justification a foundation is laid for the *permanent* exercise of God’s mercy and good-will towards believers in the never-failing efficacy of the atonement of His Son. His blood answers every charge, enforces every plea, and itself pleads with irresistible eloquence on behalf of those for whom it was shed.
 - i) God can no more unjustify us than Jesus can cease to be righteous before God.
- (2) But the forgiveness of sins isn’t the only blessing granted in justification. If it were, the sinner would be innocent but still not righteous and therefore without a title to heaven.
 - (a) Therefore in justification the sinner is also accounted perfectly righteous before God and accepted as if he had perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law of God.
 - (b) The justified sinner is not only no longer liable to punishment but also has a right to all the immunities and rewards which are suspended upon perfect conformity to the law of God, Rom 5.1; Acts 26.18
 - (c) **Dick**, “Those who are forgiven are made heirs according to the hope of eternal life and a righteousness is imparted to them which is the foundation of their claim to it.” “Pardon frees the sinner from the pains of hell, but gives him no right to the happiness of heaven. He must somehow be possessed of a complete righteousness which shall answer all the demands of the law, that he may be accepted by his Maker and obtain the eternal inheritance.”

C. The grounds of justification

1. There are two ways in which a man may become righteous.
 - a) First, he may become righteous by his personal obedience. In this way Adam would have been righteous if he had faithfully obeyed the covenant. In this way the angels are righteous who resisted the temptation to follow Satan.
 - b) Second, a man may become righteous by *imputation*. A man may take his place, come under his obligations, fulfill them in his name, and the obedience of this surety may be placed to his account. *According to the Scriptures, believers are justified in this way. The perfect

righteousness of Jesus Christ, who became their Surety and undertook all their obligations, is imputed or credited to them by God, WLC 70.

- (1) No man can be justified before God by an inherent, personal righteousness, 1Kgs 8.46; Rom 3.20, 28; Gal 2.16; 3.10
 - (2) Rather, God justifies the ungodly (Rom 4.5), by a righteousness not their own (Phil 3.9), by grace alone (Rom 3.24; Eph 2.8), so that no man may boast (Rom 3.27; Eph 2.8-9).
 - (3) In imputation God does not reckon that the sinner has performed the law himself, for that would not be a judgment according to truth; rather, He *accounts* or *credits* the righteousness of Christ to them for their justification—without works. He treats the sinner as if he were righteous because the righteousness of Christ has been credited to him.
- c) *We should note that though we speak of the pardon of sin and the possession of a justifying righteousness as if they were distinct, they cannot be separated. The imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner is the foundation of both his pardon and his restoration to the favor of God.
- (1) The righteousness of Christ has both an active and a passive dimension, *active* in His obedience to the precepts of the law and *passive* in His obedience to the penalties of the law and it's this whole and complete righteous that is imputed to the sinner in justification. This imputed righteousness therefore at once secures *both* his pardon (because the penalty has been fully paid by Christ as his Surety) *and* his acceptance (because all the precepts were fully obeyed by Christ as his Surety). Receiving by imputation the *whole* righteousness of Christ he justly receives both pardon and acceptance along with an irrevocable title to eternal life, Tit 3.5-7
 - (2) Thus the righteousness in which we stand before God as justified is never our own personal righteousness; it remains Christ's perfect and inviolable righteousness. Instead, it is irrevocably imputed to us by God so that we are ever treated judicially *both* as if we had never sinned and as if we had perfectly kept all the demands of God's holy law.

D. The righteousness that saves

1. Traditional Arminianism held that the demands of the law of God were graciously lowered in the NT and that faith and sincere obedience are accepted by God in the place of perfect righteousness for justification.
 - a) The Confession opposes this because the Scriptures are clear that justification is in no way grounded upon man's work and what would such faith and sincere obedience be but the work of man, Gal 2.16; Rom 4.4-8; 11.6. Rather, the ground of our justification is Christ's perfect obedience, Rom 5.17-19; 1Cor 1.30; Phil 3.9; and if it is grounded upon His obedience, how can it ever be grounded on ours without an outright denial of His (Tit 3.5)?
 - b) Moreover, the Scriptures are clear that all a believer's good works are the *fruit* of justification, Rom 6.14; 7.6, and whatever is the fruit can never in any way also be the *root*, Eph 2.8-10; Tit 2.14
 - c) **Shaw**, "The gospel was never designed to teach sinners that God will now accept a *sincere* instead of a *perfect* obedience, but to direct them to Jesus Christ as "the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom 10.4)."

E. The faith that justifies

1. The faith by which a sinner is justified is a faith that rests on Christ and His righteousness in order to be justified by His works because he knows full well that he cannot be justified by his own. Thus it's a purposed looking outside of oneself and unto Christ. Justifying faith is a conscious self-abandoning for any ground of righteousness before God and a Christ-receiving as the whole ground of righteousness before God.
2. Faith is therefore said to be the sole instrument by which a sinner receives Christ; and receiving and resting upon Him, the sinner freely receives His righteousness for justification. Faith is not, then, the act of righteousness by which a sinner is saved, but only the instrument of receiving

Christ and His righteousness. Faith is a going out of oneself to rest on another; faith therefore presupposes the absence of that which is needed in the person who acts in faith.

3. Moreover, the faith by which a sinner receives Christ is not something he suddenly musters within himself, but is the free gift of God given to all those whom He effectually calls, Phil 1.29; Eph 2.8; Acts 14.27. It is part of the saving work begun in God's sovereign election (Eph 1.4; Acts 13.48) and completed in our glorification (Rom 8.30). Thus faith is not man's work, but God's, though it may be said to be man's doing (Phil 2.13).
 - a) **Dick**, "As if it were not enough to exclude works of any kind and to appoint faith to be the means of obtaining an interest in Christ, lest we should boast of faith itself...it is declared to be a gift (Eph 2.8), to the acquisition of which we contribute nothing, in the communication of which to us we are passive, and in exercising which we do not exert our own strength, but act in consequence of being acted upon by supernatural power. The glory of our salvation is thus appropriated to God without any deduction. It is his province to give all and ours to receive all."
4. Finally, we're to understand that while faith is the sole instrument of justification (Jn 1.12; Rom 3.28; 5.1) it is not alone in the person justified but is accompanied by *all* saving graces, a fact manifest in the good works which follow upon a person believing on Christ unto salvation, Js 2.17, 22, 26; Gal 5.6
 - a) Luther, "Works are not taken into consideration when the question respects justification (Gal 2.16); but true faith will no more fail to produce them than the sun can cease to give light" (Eph 2.8-10; Js 2.17; Tit 2.14; 3.8).

II. The role of Christ in justification § 3

- A. What's been said so far about justification may seem to be unbelievable and incredible. Does God really pardon *all* our sins and credit a *perfect* righteousness to us? *Can* He do that and still be just and holy? Yes He can and yes He does. This section teaches that the justification we have in Christ from God is both just and gracious.
- B. First of all, it's perfectly just to justify sinners who rest upon Christ because by His obedience and death Christ has fully paid the debt of those who are justified. Justified persons do not get off scot-free; and neither is God's justice impeached; for a proper, real, and full satisfaction to the Father's justice has been rendered by Christ, Isa 53.11; Rom 5.8-10; 2Cor 5.21; Gal 3.13; Eph 5.2.
 1. This is why in order for faith to be saving it must be placed in Christ and in His work. Saving faith is not saving because it is "faith," but only because it is a resting in and upon the work of the Saviour.
- C. Secondly, we need to understand that God's justification of sinners isn't a quid pro quo for something done by the sinner. Rather, it's a matter of free grace.
 1. To be sure, Christ has fully and perfectly met all the demands of the divine law (both its precepts and its penalties) on behalf of His justified people and has in fact merited all the benefits and privileges which His people subsequently enjoy upon their justification. But with regard to the sinner himself, nothing should be sought in him to justify or warrant the justification he has received because his justification is a matter of free and sovereign grace.
 2. In the salvation of sinners by the cross of Christ, God's justice and grace meet and kiss each other. The cross upon which the Saviour, imputed with *our* guilt, suffered the full extent of the divine wrath, is simultaneously the highest reach of justice and the highest reach of grace. Justice spared not His own Son while grace spared His elect for His Son's sake.
 3. **Haldane**, "The glory of the gospel is that grace reigns through righteousness. Salvation is of grace; but this grace comes to us in a way of righteousness. It is grace to us; but it was brought about in such a way that all our debt was paid. This exhibits God as just as well as merciful. Just, in requiring full compensation to justice; and merciful, because it was He, and not the sinner, who provided the ransom."

III. The timing of justification § 4

- A. It has been objected by Antinomians (and by some Arminians) that since Christ paid the debt of our sins on Calvary, that the elect have been justified since the cross. Others have gone so far as to say that since God eternally decreed to justify the elect by the work of Christ that the elect have been justified from eternity. Neither of these stands the test of Scripture and both reflect a misunderstanding of the triune nature of our justification.
1. Since nothing happens in this world that wasn't decreed by God from eternity, there is necessarily an *eternal* dimension to our justification. The Father did indeed eternally decree to justify His elect in and by the work of Christ their appointed Mediator and Surety, 1Pet 1.19-20; Rom 8.30.
 2. But this eternal decree required that the *ground* for the justification of the elect (the active and passive righteousness of Christ) be accomplished and provided in time upon the coming of Christ into the world as their Surety and in fulfillment of the Covenant of Redemption made in eternity with the Father on behalf of the elect. There is therefore necessarily an *historical* dimension to our justification, Rom 3.25; 4.25; 5.9.
 3. And yet, this historical purchase of our justification by the full satisfaction of divine justice on our behalf does not actually become ours experientially and really until we appropriate it by faith and are vitally and spiritually united to Christ in salvation, Rom 3.28; 5.1; Gal 2.16. There is therefore necessarily a *temporal* dimension to our justification as well.
 4. Thus we see, that along with all the other benefits of the covenant of grace which Christ purchased for us, justification may be seen from a three-fold perspective relative to the three Persons of the Trinity: from the perspective of eternity in which the Father decreed it, from the perspective of history in which Christ accomplished and purchased it, and from the perspective of personal experience in which the Holy Spirit sovereignly applied it to our lives.
 - a) It remains true, then, that until they are effectually called by the Spirit and the benefits of Christ's work are applied to them, the elect are in a state of wrath and condemnation, Eph 2.3; Jn 3.18; 1Cor 6.11; Eph 5.8

IV. The experience of justification § 5

- A. Since justification is an act of God's grace completed at once, so those who are justified cannot come into condemnation, Rom 8.1. As explained above, all their future sins were fully pardoned by God in the act of justification and therefore can in no way threaten or annul their sentence of justification at God's tribunal.
1. God knew all the sins they would yet commit in their lives when He justified them and if any of them were such as God would be unwilling to forgive, then He would never have justified them.
 2. This means that justified persons enjoy God's gracious forgiveness of all future sins and the security against falling out of grace, Mt 6.12; 1Jn 1.7, 9; 2.1; Lk 22.32; Jn 10.28; Heb 10.14
- B. However, their future sins may very well subject them to His fatherly displeasure and discipline, Pss 32.3-4; 89.30-33, and they may lose the light of His countenance and the sense of His favor until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance, Pss 32.5, 10; 51.7-12.
1. Thus, on the one hand the elect are to rest in a judicial and full forgiveness of all their sins granted to them at the point of their justification by faith in Christ when God adopted them as His children. This forgiveness can never be revoked and they can never be anything less than the children of God just as He can never be anything less than their Father.
 2. On the other hand the elect must understand that their daily sins break their fellowship with God as their Father and really and truly and experientially incur His anger, displeasure, and discipline (Ps 6.1-3). And until this fellowship is restored upon their confession and repentance, they will be miserable and dwell in dark places, Ps 32.3-5.
 3. Before our justification we are treated by God as the sinners that we are and the wrath of God hangs over us, threatening us, Eph 2.3. After justification we are treated by God, who becomes our loving Father, as children, who sometimes need discipline and correction.

- a) Thus God's people are driven by a desire for and love of the Father's pleasing countenance to live lives of increasing faith and immediate repentance. The first notion we have of the Father's displeasure should drive us to confession in order that His pardon and favor may be sensibly renewed unto us.

V. The manner of justification is the same in both Testaments § 6

- A. Against those who maintain that the OT saints were justified by some other method than laid down above, this section affirms that their justification by God was *in all respects one and the same* with that enjoyed by NT saints.
- B. The proof of this is easily proved by Paul's laying down Abraham's justification in Gen 15 as the example and proof of the way in which all believers in all ages are justified by God (Rom 4.7-16; Gal 3.7-9).
- C. The faith of the OT saints looked forward to the righteousness of Christ promised by God and the faith of NT saints look backward to the righteousness of Christ provided by God, Gal 3.5-14; Rom 4.20-25

- ° This is the first time we get confessional Christianity saying that there is a distinction between what happens in *justification* and what happens in *adoption*. The chapter was warranted by the Divines' recognition that there are benefits of the relationship with God established by adoption that cannot be subsumed under the relationship with God established by justification.
- ° The most striking thing about the Confession's chapter on **Adoption** is its brevity. Given the place of adoption in Scripture, which puts it at the pinnacle! (Eph 1.5; Gal 4.4-6), it might be surprising that the Confession says so little about it.
- ° Yet, there may be several good reasons for this. First, it may be explained by the lack of dissent or heresy on this topic. Unlike the many errors which surrounded the doctrine of justification, which the previous chapter addressed, there were no errors surrounding the doctrine of adoption. This allowed the Divines to state the doctrine with exactness and succinctness. Secondly, this topic had not received much attention by theologians and pastors previous to the Assembly and therefore the statement was more narrowly limited to the several expressions of its truths in Scripture. Thirdly, there is significant overlap between the doctrine of adoption and the doctrines of perseverance (Chp. 17) and assurance (Chp. 18). This also allowed the statement here to be brief.
- ° The other striking thing about this Chapter is the way it harmonizes the forensic and familial elements of adoption (which could be said about every Chapter relative to the benefits we receive from Christ in the covenant of grace). Adoption is not treated merely as a forensic transaction by God on our behalf—though it is this; but it is also treated as an experiential reality with the real and consoling benefits of being a child of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Of Adoption

I. The first thing asserted is that adoption infallibly follows justification.

- A. Adoption has always been a part of God's plan and is the fruit of the good pleasure of His eternal will (Gal 4.4-5; Eph 1.5)
- B. Adoption is in and for the sake of God's only natural Son, Jesus Christ (Eph 1.5; Heb 2.9-12).
- C. Adoption follows justification. All the benefits of Christ come as a whole unto the sinner united to Christ by faith. Our union with Christ is the ground upon which all that Christ is and has is enjoyed by us, Eph 1.3. The benefits of Christ cannot be separated because Christ cannot be divided, Rom 8.30

II. Secondly, adoption comes with many privileges

- A. We are by nature children of the devil and under the wrath of God, 1Jn 3.10; Jn 8.44; Eph 2.3
- B. By adoption, we are transferred out of the family of Satan and admitted into fellowship, communion, and union with Christ, God's beloved Son, Col 1.13

- C. Like justification, adoption is not a change of nature, but a change of state and is therefore completed at once. Also like justification, this privilege is bestowed upon the sinner upon the merit of the obedience and satisfaction of Christ as his Surety, Gal 4.4-6. There is therefore just ground for this act of God in the life of His elect.
- D. Adoption is especially precious compared with the other benefits of redemption. Justification results in the happiness of a courtroom, sanctification results in the happiness of a surgery table, but adoption results in the happiness of a home and a family. There is nothing like being a child of God, enjoying the freedom to address Him as Father, having the pleasure of sanctified brothers and sisters, and being co-heirs with Christ Himself (Rom 8.17; Jn 1.12).
- E. The benefits of our adoption are many
1. We obtain a new name, Isa 62.2; 2Cor 6.18
 2. We receive the Spirit of adoption as the seal of God against the day of redemption, Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6; Eph 1.13-14
 3. We are granted access to the throne of grace with boldness, Lk 12.22-32
 4. We are the objects of God's fatherly sympathy and pity, Ps 103.13-14
 5. We enjoy the protection of our heavenly Father, Pss 34.7; 121.4; Heb 1.14
 6. We are provided for by our heavenly Father, Mt 6.30-32; Ps 34.9-10; Phil 4.19
 7. Fatherly correction is not withheld from us, Heb 12.6; Pss 89.30-34; 119.67, 71
 8. Unfailing establishment in our state of sonship, Jer 32.40
 9. We are heirs of all the promises, 2Cor 1.20; Heb 6.12, 17
 10. We are heirs of a rich and glorious inheritance reserved for us in heaven, 1Pet 1.4; Heb 1.14; 1Pet 3.7; Js 2.5; Rom 8.17
- III. How glorious will that day be when Christ appears and we are manifest as the sons of God (Rom 8.19)! Christ will acknowledge us as His brethren and put us in full possession of that inheritance which He's gone to prepare for us. Therefore let us look for His appearing, and in the meantime let us live in accordance with our high character and eternal prospects, walking as children of God, Eph 5.1.

Bibliography:

An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Robert Shaw
 The Confession of Faith, A. A. Hodge
 Confessing the Faith, Chad Van Dixhoorn
 Lectures on Theology Vol. 3, John Dick
 Westminster Standards class at WTS 2001, Sinclair Ferguson

Assignments:

*Read Chapters 11 and 12 in Hodge
 *Read Chapters 11 and 12 in the WCF
 *Memorize Shorter Catechism questions: 21-34 and Rom 3.24; Tit 3.7; Rom 5.19; 3.22; 2Cor 5.21; Rom 5.1; 3.21-26; Acts 15.11 and Eph 1.5-6; 1Jn 3.1; Rom 8.15; Gal 4.4-7; Heb 2.10

—The next class will meet, DV, at 8AM on **12 Dec** for a study of WCF 13 on Sanctification