

“Freeing Our Conscience of Fear, Dread, and Terror”

An Exposition of Article Twenty-Three of the Belgic Confession.

Article 23: The Justification of Sinners

We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins because of Jesus Christ, and that in it our righteousness before God¹ is contained, as David and Paul teach us when they declare that man blessed to whom God grants righteousness apart from works. And the same apostle says that we are justified “freely” or “by grace” through redemption in Jesus Christ.² And therefore we cling to this foundation, which is firm forever, giving all glory to God,³ humbling ourselves, and recognizing ourselves as we are; not claiming a thing for ourselves or our merits⁴ and leaning and resting only on the obedience of Christ crucified,⁵ which is ours when we believe in him.⁶ That is enough to cover all our sins and to make us confident, freeing the conscience from the fear, dread, and terror of God’s approach, without doing what our first father, Adam, did, who trembled as he tried to cover himself with fig leaves.⁷ In fact, if we had to appear before God relying—no matter how little—on ourselves or some other creature, then, alas, we would be swallowed up.⁸ Therefore everyone must say with David: “Lord, do not enter into judgment with your servants, for before you no living person shall be justified.

¹ 1 Jn 2:1 ² 2 Cor 5:18-19; Eph 2:8; 1 Tim 2:6 ³ Ps 115:1; Rev 7:10-12 ⁴ 1 Cor 4:4; Jas 2:10 ⁵ Acts 4:12; Heb 10:20 ⁶ Rom 4:23-25 ⁷ Gen 3:7; Zeph 3:11; Heb 4:16; 1 Jn 4:17-19 ⁸ Lk 16:15; Php 3:4-9

It was Martin Luther who once stated that the doctrine of justification is the article by which Christ’s church stands or falls.¹ Luther was absolutely correct about this. If we do not understand how it is that we as sinners are made right before a holy God, we may misunderstand the gospel and therefore risk standing before God on the day of judgment expecting that our own righteousness will be sufficient. But we will also miss out on the wonderful comfort which this doctrine provides. As justified sinners, our sin has been reckoned to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness has been reckoned to us. We now possess the greatest gift imaginable, a conscience free from fear, dread, and terror. The knowledge that our sins are forgiven and that God is as pleased with us every bit as much as he is with his own dear Son, not only quiets our conscience and creates a sense of joy and well-being, but it also provides powerful motivation to live a life of gratitude before God. What is more, understanding this doctrine is the only way we will be able to give all glory and thanks to God, which is the ultimate goal of our justification.

Article Twenty-Three of our Confession summarizes the biblical teaching regarding the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. Article Twenty-Two deals with the nature of faith, point out that justification occurs when the saving merits of Jesus Christ become ours through the means of faith. These merits, which are the ground (or basis) of our justification, are based upon Christ’s active obedience; his perfect obedience to the law of God, as well as his passive obedience, in his voluntarily laying down his life for our sins.

¹ Although attributed to Luther, it was J. H. Alsted (1588–1638), who first used the phrase.

Our confession has made the point quite clearly in Articles Twenty and Twenty-One, that Jesus Christ as our great high priest not only satisfied God's just anger towards our sins when he suffered and died upon the cross for us and in our place, but Jesus also perfectly obeyed the law of God and fulfilled the demands of the covenant of works, doing what the first father of the human race, Adam, failed to do. This becomes evident when Jesus Christ was raised from the dead for our justification and thereby vindicated for laying down his life for his people. This is what our confession means when in Article Twenty-Two it speaks of "all the holy works [Jesus] has done for us and in our place." We need to be perfectly clear here; we are indeed justified by good works. Not our good works, mind you, but Christ's good works, which just like his death, were done for us and in our place.

But how is it that our sins are imputed (reckoned, credited) to Christ and his merits are imputed to us? This occurs only through the means of faith, which is why we cannot be justified on the basis of anything we have done or ever could do since all of our works are tainted by sin and always done from sinful motives. At its core, faith is the instrument which links us to Christ so that all that he is becomes ours through our union with him. Faith is not a work we perform. It is not something which God sees in our hearts which he then rewards with salvation—a view widely held throughout American evangelicalism. Rather, as J. I. Packer so eloquently states, faith is "an appropriating instrument, an empty hand outstretched to receive the free gift of God's righteousness in Christ."²

Faith links us to Christ and receives all that he has to give us. Through faith in Jesus, our sin is imputed to him so that he pays for these sins on the cross and through that same faith his righteousness (his merits and holy works) becomes ours. This is what we mean when we speak of being justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. This is the gospel! God freely gives us in Christ what he demands of us under the law. If we are not clear about this, we have no foundation for living the Christian life, no assurance of our salvation, and we have nothing left to confess to the unbelieving world around us.

Turning now to this wonderful doctrine of justification, Article Twenty-Three of our confession makes three primary points when discussing this topic.³ First, our confession sets forth the two primary aspects of justification (the imputation of our sin to Christ and Christ's righteousness to us). Second, our confession reminds us of the importance of this doctrine in enabling us to give all glory to God (a point which was especially significant at the time our confession was written in 1561, since it was this doctrine after all which tore the Christian church apart). Third, our confession discusses the comfort which this doctrine gives us—the knowledge that our sins have been forgiven and that we are clothed in the glorious and faultless righteousness of Jesus himself. Therefore, we need not fear God even though we were formerly God's enemies (Romans 5:10), because we have now been reconciled to God and can approach him on the most intimate of terms. We can now cry out "Abba, father" (Romans 8:15-16).

The first matter addressed in Article Twenty-Three is to clarify the two sides of the doctrine of justification based upon the passive and active obedience of Christ (the imputation of our sin to Christ and of Christ's righteousness to us).

In the opening line, our confession states, "we believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our

² Packer, "Faith," 401.

³ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 182.

sins because of Jesus Christ, and that in it our righteousness before God is contained, as David and Paul teach us when they declare that man blessed to whom God grants righteousness apart from works. And the same apostle says that we are justified “freely” or “by grace” through redemption in Jesus Christ.” The blessedness of which our confession speaks is a reference to the closing lines of Article Twenty-Two, which point out that “Jesus Christ is our righteousness crediting to us all his merits and all the holy works he has done for us and in our place.” The blessedness of which our confession now speaks is the glorious truth that Christ’s benefits (merits) are more than sufficient to justify us from our sins.

While this assertion is old hat in many ways for those of us who have come to bask in the light of this doctrine, we must not forget that when our confession was written in 1561, this statement was such an affront to the Roman church that the author of our confession (Guido de Brès) was put to death by Spanish civil authorities at the behest of the church. The Roman church affirmed that justification is not a declaration made about the sinner who has received the merits of Christ through faith, but that justification is a life-long process through which the sinner is transformed into a saint through continual infusions of the grace of the sacraments.

In declaring this, Rome thoroughly confuses justification (which is based on the merits of Christ) with sanctification which is, in part, an inward transformation of the sinner into the image of Christ. As de Brès pointed out, the Bible teaches that justification is based upon Christ’s work for us, not the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Justification is, therefore, not a process, but a once and for all declaration which God makes about us when we believe in Jesus, based on the merits of his son. When we are justified, we are acquitted from the guilt of our sins—all of them, past, present and future. And that is the best news imaginable! Our consciences are free from fear, terror and dread.

This becomes immediately apparent from the fact that the biblical data is clear that justification entails both the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, each of which are received through the means of faith. This is clearly taught in the proof-texts which support the confession. In Psalm 32, David speaks of the blessedness of that one to whom God does not impute (or count) their sin. This blessedness, David says, comes about because God does not count our sins against us. The basis on which God forgives our sin is not revealed until the coming of Jesus Christ, but what is made plain in Psalm 32 is that God forgives the guilt of those who freely acknowledge and confess their sins. David describes this as being “covered,” meaning the guilt of our sins is somehow hidden when God gazes upon us. This is a foreshadowing of the doctrine of justification as taught in the New Testament.

Paul cites this Psalm at length in Romans 4, likewise speaking of the blessedness of that one “*to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.*” Says Paul, quoting David’s words from Psalm 32, “*blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.*” That this blessedness is the result of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross was already spelled out in the previous chapter of Romans (Romans 3:21-24). Paul tells us,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Notice that our redemption from the guilt and power of sin does not come through our personal obedience to the law, nor does it come through a supposed transformation from sinner to saint.

Rather, our redemption comes solely through the work of Jesus Christ which Paul details in Romans 3:25,

whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

As we have repeatedly seen, our sins are forgiven because Jesus Christ paid for them on the cross, forever satisfying God's just anger toward our sins.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, Paul speaks of what has come to be known as the "great exchange"—our sins are imputed to Christ and Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. According to Paul,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

For Paul, to be in Christ is to participate even now in the new creation which dawns when God raised Jesus from the dead. Paul is crystal clear that the reconciliation of God to the sinner and the sinner to God is accomplished by Christ, for us, on our behalf. *"In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself."* This is not something we can do through our own pitiful efforts to appease God or satisfy his justice. Our reconciliation comes about only because Christ has been made sin (through imputation) so that we become righteous (likewise, through imputation). This is exactly the same thing Paul teaches in Romans 5:18-19: *"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."*

It is through Christ's obedience as the second Adam to the demands of the covenant of works that we are reckoned righteous! This is why we can only be justified by the merits of Christ and not on the basis of our own sinful works.

Then, in another passage we have already considered (Ephesians 2:8), Paul writes, *"for by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."* Deliverance from the wrath of God (i.e. salvation) is not something we achieve, rather it is a gift from God, who accomplished this for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Salvation (and even "faith") is something given to us as a gift. This is why Paul can speak of Jesus in 1 Timothy 2:6, as one *"who gave himself as a ransom for all."* Jesus is not paying off the devil as some have erroneously taught. Rather, he is satisfying the justice of God when he comes as our high priest to offer an all sufficient sacrifice for sin—himself.

There are also the well-known words of 1 John 2. The apostle writes, *"my little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father,*

Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Jesus not only intercedes for us when we sin, as our high priest he continually applies to us the benefits of his once and for all sacrifice for sin which has already satisfied the justice of God. He is and remains our defender and advocate.

From this short list of verses—and there are many more we could mention—it is clear that through his active obedience Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law so that through his obedience we are rendered or declared righteous once we renounce our own righteousness and through the empty hands of faith receive the perfect righteousness of Christ himself. And then through our Lord’s death upon the cross God is reconciled to us and we are reconciled to him; the guilt of our sin has been paid for and God’s righteous anger toward our sin is turned aside, once and for all, because God’s just anger toward our sin has been satisfied.

Therefore, to be justified is much more than to be forgiven, although that is a major part of it. To be justified is to be forgiven and to be positively reckoned as righteous as Christ himself because the righteousness that Jesus earned through his holy works is imputed to us. This is a far cry from the doctrine of justification as taught by Arminians (justification is the remission of past sins only),⁴ or of Roman Catholicism, in which it is taught that justification is a process through which the grace of the Holy Spirit cleanses us from sin and communicates (i.e. infuses) into us the righteousness of God through faith in Christ and through baptism.⁵

This brings us to the second point made by our confession, the importance of understanding the doctrine of justification since this is the foundation for everything else in the Christian life. Properly understanding the doctrine of justification is the only way we can truly give glory to God, since that righteousness which justifies, he provides.

Echoing Luther’s comments that justification is the article by which the church stands or falls, our confession points out what should by now be obvious, “And therefore we cling to this foundation, which is firm forever, giving all glory to God, humbling ourselves, and recognizing ourselves as we are; not claiming a thing for ourselves or our merits and leaning and resting only on the obedience of Christ crucified, which is ours when we believe in him.”

One of the most overlooked elements of the doctrine of justification now comes to the fore. While many of us are understandably concerned with our own individual salvation from sin (which no doubt explains why it is that evangelicals speak of Jesus as our “personal savior”), our confession reminds us that properly understanding this doctrine should lead us to consider the glory of God, something which our justification greatly magnifies. Our focus should not remain exclusively upon our own personal situation and deliverance from the wrath of God—important and comforting as that is—but we should also take into account something of far greater consequence—the glory of God!

In Psalm 115, the Psalmist exhorts us, “*not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the*

⁴ H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1952), II.394.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 1987.

sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!” This is the response from the saints in heaven as they watch redemptive history unfold and race towards its grand and glorious climax. In Revelation 7:10-12, the heavenly scene is described as follows:

and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

While we must oppose all those such as Rome and the Arminians whenever they misrepresent the biblical teaching on this most important doctrine, the goal is not to win an argument. The goal is to give God all praise and glory which are properly his because he has redeemed his people through the merits of his son, not counting their sins against them. And how can we give God all glory and honor if we misunderstand or misrepresent what God has done to save us from our sins? We cannot! To teach that justification is a process or that it only entails forgiveness of past sins is to say, to say that “Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most enormous blasphemy against God—for it then would follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior.”

humbling ourselves, and recognizing ourselves as we are; not claiming a thing for ourselves or our merits⁴ and leaning and resting only on the obedience of Christ crucified,⁵ which is ours when we believe in him.⁶

Having made the point then that God’s glory should be paramount in this matter (because that is the goal of our own salvation from sin), our confession tells us how we are to give all glory to God. “Humbling ourselves [before God], and recognizing ourselves as we are” And what are we? We are sinners who have no claim whatsoever on heaven, people whose own righteousness is nothing but filthy rags (as Isaiah puts it), and which amounts to what sanitized English translations of the Greek text of Philippians 3:8 speak of as “rubbish” or “dung.” The Greek word Paul uses is a bit more graphic, but you get the point. Therefore, “not claiming a thing for ourselves or our merits and leaning and resting only on the obedience of Christ crucified, which is ours when we believe in him.” This, then, is what we mean when we speak of being justified and that [Christ’s] obedience is ours when we believe in Him. Believing this doctrine and then confessing it before the watching world should have for its goal the exaltation of the glory of God.

This brings us to the third and final point made by our confession, not only should this doctrine lead us to give all glory to God, it provides us with unspeakable comfort and a clear conscience.

Our confession concludes by explaining to us the practical consequences of Christ’s obedience becoming ours through faith. [Jesus’ obedience] “is enough to cover all our sins and to make us confident, freeing the conscience from the fear, dread, and terror of God’s approach, without doing what our first father, Adam, did, who trembled as he tried to cover himself with fig leaves. In fact, if we had to appear before God relying—no matter how little—on ourselves or some other creature, then, alas, we would be swallowed up. Therefore everyone must say with David: “*Lord, do not enter into judgment with your servants, for before you no living person shall be justified.*”

This same thought is clearly expressed in the words of Psalm 130. The Psalmist writes,

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

The fact that the Psalmist need not fear the record of his sins being raised against him, moves David to long for God's presence, every bit as much as the watchman eagerly waits for the first sign of the coming dawn. For with God, there is full redemption from the guilt and the power of sin.

This very sentiment is also expressed by the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:4-9, only this time in light of how it is that God provides full redemption for his people.

I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order 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 comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

Despite his personal zeal and faultless legalistic (external) righteousness, Paul knows full well that his own righteousness is nothing but dung. Now he knows something so much greater—a righteousness not his own—the righteousness of Christ, which utterly surpasses knowing anything else!

And this brings us to that point in our discussion of justification, where, like Paul, we can draw out some obvious points of application. It is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God—unless and until we have received Christ's merits through faith. Then we have absolutely nothing to fear. The knowledge that our sins are forgiven frees our conscience from the fear of God's approach. The knowledge that we are justified frees us from the fear that God is out to get us, or that he punishes us with sickness or misfortune. While sickness and misfortune may indeed be a part of God's providential purposes for our lives, or such things may result from stupid things we may do, sickness and misfortune are not retributive acts which an angry God takes against us. Why? Jesus Christ has already suffered God's retributive justice on the cross for us and in our place. God cannot punish Jesus for our sins and then turn around and punish us a second time. This is what Paul had come to understand, and this helps to explain why knowing Christ Jesus as Lord, far surpasses anything else he had ever known.

Furthermore, understanding the doctrine of justification frees us from the thought of spending an eternity in Hell, facing the holy God in all his wrath without a mediator. The fact is, all of this was already done for us when Jesus Christ was forsaken by his father and experienced Hell upon the cross when he suffered for us and in our place, bearing the wrath of God in his own flesh. Not only did Jesus Christ exhaust God's anger towards us, but his perfect righteousness is reckoned to us so that God is pleased with us and the pitiful works we do, now that these works are sanctified by the righteousness of Christ.

What a powerful motive this provides to us so that we can now live lives of gratitude before God, demonstrated through our obedience to God's commandments. Because the merit of Christ's holy works have been reckoned or credited to us through faith, we are not only justified, and therefore can be certain of possessing eternal life, but all of our own attempts at doing good works are now fully accepted by God. Why? Not because we are no longer sinners or because grace has enabled us to do genuinely good works done from pure motives. God accepts all our works because our sinful attempts to do good are covered with the perfect righteousness of Christ. Thus our works not only bring as much joy to God as those works done by his son, but they also demonstrate before the watching world that God has redeemed his people from the guilt and power of sin. Instead of bringing shame upon his holy name, these same justified sinners now bring God that glory which he alone deserves. Now if that's not an incentive to do good works, I don't know what is!

At the end of the day, it is only a conscience freed from fear, dread, and terror which can truly give God glory, live humbly before him, acknowledge that we are sinners, and not claim anything for ourselves and yet which can confidently rest and rely upon the merits of Christ crucified! This is why the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, is the doctrinal article by which Christ's church stands or falls. And having been justified, and freed from fear, dread, and terror let us strive to give God that glory which he alone deserves.