

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH – CHAPTER 11

“Justification” – Part 2 of 4*

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1. Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies^a, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins and by accounting and accepting them as righteous. It is not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone that they are justified. It is not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other act of Christian obedience to them, as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ to them^b who receive and rest on him and his righteousness by faith. Men do not have this faith of themselves; it is the gift of God.^c

a. Rom. 8:30; 3:24; 5:15-16 b. Rom. 4:5-8; 2 Cor. 5:19, 21; Rom. 3:22-28; Titus 3:5, 7; Eph. 1:7; Jer. 23:6; 1 Cor. 1:30-31; Rom. 5:17-19

c. John 1:12; Acts 10:43; 13:38-39; Phil. 3:9; Eph. 2:7-8; John 6:44-45, 65; Phil. 1:29

Section 1 – The central question upon which the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformers could never agree was: ‘On what basis will God pardon or declare righteous a sinful person in His sight?’

“Roman Catholicism worked on the assumption that what happens in justification is that an unjust person is changed and made righteous. The fundamental thesis of Rome was this: God will never declare a person to be righteous until that person actually is righteous. That is the worst of all possible news, for it means that before we can be justified, we must first be sanctified, and a person who still sins cannot enter heaven. That would leave us without any hope of heaven at all.

However, Rome said that God understands that man does not have the capacity in and of himself to make himself righteous.” “In order for that to happen, according to Rome, we must receive grace through their sacramental system, beginning with baptism.

The Roman church explains it this way: In baptism, the grace of justification, sometimes called the grace of the righteousness of Christ, is poured into the soul. This is called infusion. Without the assistance of the grace of justification, a person cannot be saved. Roman Catholicism teaches that we need to have the righteousness of Christ infused into our souls in order to be saved.

To be saved, several things have to happen. First, we must cooperate with, and assent to, this grace to such a degree that righteousness truly inheres” [exists] “within us. This grace is necessary but its presence alone is not enough for salvation. We must cooperate with it, agree to it, and work with it to such a degree that righteousness is truly in us. When that happens, we are placed in a state of justification before God. We remain in that state as long as we do not commit a mortal sin. Mortal sins are so serious that they kill the infused grace in the soul and leave a person in an unjustified state. If a person dies in a state of mortal sin, he is damned.” “The way to be re-justified, if we commit mortal sin, is through the sacrament of penance. In penance, one receives a renewed infusion of grace, and if we cooperate with it, we can be restored to a state of grace.”

[Note on mortal sin: If a person knowingly (full knowledge) and wantonly (full consent) commits an action consisting of any grave matter, for example, failure to keep the Ten Commandments, a mortal sin is committed.]

If we die without mortal sin on our souls, but we have lesser, or venial sins, we will not go to hell, but neither will we go to heaven. Instead, we will go to purgatory, where we may remain for five minutes or 5 million years, depending upon how many imperfections remain in our lives. Purgatory is called the place of purging, where the dross is burned away from the gold until we become righteous enough to enter heaven. Heaven is available only when we have enough inherent righteousness.

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The controversy in the sixteenth century initially focused not on baptism but on penance. The church needed a large sum of money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. So the pope authorized indulgences for those who contributed to the building program. What is an indulgence? In the Roman Catholic view, the church, specifically the pope, has the power to dispense forgiveness or pardon from required punishment. The pope can do this by issuing an indulgence, which reduces a person's sentence in purgatory.

The pope does not do it gratuitously" [costing nothing]. "A moral price must be paid for the reduction of time in purgatory. In other words, if we have a certain level of demerits on our accounts, we cannot get out of purgatory until we have made up for those demerits. The church can grant a transfer of merit from somewhere else to the sinner's account, sort of like a bank transfer. The treasury of merit is the repository of the Roman Catholic Church that contains not only the merit of Christ but also the merit of Mary and of the great saints of the ages." These deposits are due to some individuals doing more in their lifetimes, above and beyond what was necessary. "The church can make use of that merit for less fortunate people who have a deficit in their account."

"Restoration to salvation through penance requires confession of sins, repentance, and absolution from the priest (as a representative of Christ, who promises forgiveness to all who earnestly repent). The controversy in the sixteenth century pertained to the next step. In order for the sacrament to be complete and effective, works of satisfaction have to be performed. A priest assigns the work. It might be something as simple as saying five "Our Fathers" and three "Hail Marys," and a person, by that work of satisfaction, can earn what Rome calls *congruent merit*. That means it is fitting or congruous for God to reward this work of satisfaction in order for the person to be justified.

"In the medieval framework, there were many kinds of works of satisfaction that people could perform in order to meet the requirements of penance. All of them had to be done with a proper motive of humility and an honest desire to manifest one's repentance, not as a commercial transaction to purchase salvation. When Rome authorized contributions to St. Peter's to be used as indulgences, it authorized it as part of the sacrament of penance, as a part of the giving of alms, with the proviso that the transaction had to be motivated by a proper spirit. "

"Luther understood Rome to be stating that justification was by the sacraments rather than by faith, as the New Testament taught. Luther and the Reformers asserted that a person can be justified only if he possesses perfect righteousness in the sight of God. The only perfect righteousness was achieved by Christ in His life of perfect obedience. Therefore, the only objective merit in God's sight is the merit that Christ earned in and through His own obedience.

It is not the righteousness of Christ working in us that justifies us. It is the righteousness of Christ that He worked in His own life, which God now counts toward us. God transfers righteousness from the account of Christ to the account of everyone who believes. In justification, there is a double transfer. Our sin is transferred to Christ on the cross; His righteousness is transferred to us. He was not punished by God for any wickedness or sin in His own life. He was the Lamb without blemish. He had no sin. And yet, the full wrath of God was poured out upon Christ because our sins were imputed to Him. That is, our sins were legally transferred from our account to His account.

Luther said, that the righteousness by which we are justified is a foreign righteousness, rather than an inherent righteousness. It is not the righteousness of Christ *in* us; it is the righteousness of Christ *for* us. The righteousness by which we are justified is not our own; rather, it is outside of us. That does not mean that the Holy Spirit does not indwell us. When we come to faith, the Holy Spirit does indwell us, and Christ is in us and we are in Christ. But what is in dispute here is the basis for our justification. Does God look at some righteousness that we have cooperated with, in us, or does God look strictly at the righteousness of Christ that was produced in His own life for us?"

Our answer makes all the difference in the world. We have to receive Christ's righteousness by faith, not through the sacraments.

*Look for Part 3 of 4 in the August newsletter.