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JUSTIFICATION JUSTIFIED: A BRIEF PERSONAL STATEMENT ON THE
DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION AS DEFINED IN THE WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

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Among the many benefits which Christians receive on account of their being united to Christ by faith in their effectual calling,¹ justification is receiving much contemporary attention among the American Presbyterian and Reformed community.² Being myself a fairly new Presbyterian who is currently under care of my Presbytery with hopes for future pastoral ministry, having a clear grasp on Scripture's basic doctrine of justification is an essential skill for rightly handling the Word (2 Tim. 2:15). Accordingly, as I prepare to enter the milieu of contemporary Reformed ministry I hope in this brief essay to explain my understanding of the main features comprising the doctrine of justification as defined by the Westminster Shorter Catechism and to clarify two points of this definition with the help of two recent writers' views on the same doctrine, namely Richard Gaffin and N. T. Wright.

What, then, is justification? "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."³ Let's take a closer look at the four parts of the Shorter Catechism's definition.

First, justification is "an act of God's free grace." This "act" is distinguished from a "work"⁴ in that the former refers to completed action and the latter to continuous action.

Justification is defined here as a one-time act, not an ongoing work.⁵ The act is "of God,"

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- 1 WSC 30-32; c.f. WLC 69. Justification is one among many benefits applied to believers on the basis of the covenant of grace, including "adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them" (WSC 32), namely "assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end" (WSC 36).
 - 2 See, for example, the reports on the doctrine of justification recently published by nearly all of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council denominations.
 - 3 WSC 33.
 - 4 Compare "act" and "work" in WSC 33-35.
 - 5 However, this one-time act can have multiple aspects or stages in its eschatological unfolding, as we will note later.

meaning He is the sole actor in justification, which signals the monergistic nature of His justifying action (Jonah 2:9; Psa. 3:8). Further, God's act is qualified as being of His "free grace," meaning justification is a gift (Eph. 2:8-9); God justifies "freely [δωρεάν] by his grace" (Rom. 3:24) with no strings attached.⁶ What, then, does God *do* by this justifying act of free grace?

Second, justification is God's gracious act "wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight." God's twofold justifying act of pardoning and accepting (the elect)⁷ reverses the twofold estate of sin and misery into which the fall brought mankind⁸ and transfers the elect into the estate of salvation.⁹ On the one hand, God graciously pardons man's sin by forgiving man's legal/covenantal culpability (Isa. 53:5; 2 Cor. 5:19), thereby changing man's legal status from guilty to not guilty (Rom. 5:1; Col. 2:14);¹⁰ On the other hand, God graciously accepts man as righteous by removing sin's corrupting miseries (Hos. 14:4; John 3:36)¹¹ and clothing him with God's own righteousness (Rom. 3:21-22; Rev. 6:11), thereby changing man's ethical status from "slave to sin" to "slave to righteousness" (Rom. 6:6-7, 18; Joh. 8:34-36). But how can the thrice holy God (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8), who must punish sin (Exo. 34:7; Num. 14:18; Nah. 1:3), pardon sinners and accept us as righteous without denying His holiness?

Third, God's mercy does not deny His holiness because He graciously justifies sinners, pardoning our sins and accepting us as righteous "only for the righteousness of Christ imputed

6 C.f. God's "mere good pleasure" in WSC 20.

7 WSC 20.

8 WSC 17.

9 WSC 20.

10 WSC 18.

11 WSC 19.

to us.” The “righteousness of Christ” which is imputed to the elect consists of both Christ’s “obedience and satisfaction,” His active and passive obedience.¹² Christ, the Second Adam, obeyed perfectly the covenant of life which the first Adam disobeyed; this is Christ’s active obedience. Christ, the Second Adam, also paid fully the legal penalty (“pain of death”) which the First Adam incurred upon breaking the covenant of life; this is Christ’s passive obedience (Rom. 5:14-17; 1 Cor. 15:20-22).¹³ Accordingly, the pardon and acceptance offered to us in justification is not given in a vacuum; rather, justification presupposes and is wholly grounded upon Christ’s righteousness—His active and passive obedience. Because Christ both satisfied the Father’s holy wrath against sin (Heb. 10:10) and won the reward of eschatological life through a holy life of perfect obedience to God’s law, He is now the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) who gives His twofold gift of righteousness (pardon and acceptance) to the elect. Therefore, without this third part of the definition, the second would be impossible; for God’s justifying act requires a just foundation. In what manner or by what means, then, is this most gracious gift of justification to be received?

Fourth, God’s gracious act of justification is “received by faith alone.” Just as Abraham believed God’s promise and thus by faith was accounted righteous by God (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-4), so too the elect are justified by “receiving and resting on him [Christ] and his righteousness, by faith.”¹⁴ “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28 ESV). “[Y]et we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but

12 WCF 11.1. Another parallel confessional phrase to “active and passive” as used here is “obedience and death” (11.3).

13 WSC 12.

14 WCF 11.1.

through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16 ESV). “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV). “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification...”¹⁵

Now having explored four main features of justification as defined in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, it will be helpful to clarify our thoughts on two related matters: the eschatological dynamics of justification and the ecclesiological dynamics of justification. First, then, is there a sense in which believers will be justified in the future?

Earlier we noticed the distinction in the Shorter Catechism between the one-time “act” of justification (and adoption) contrasted with the ongoing “work” of sanctification. There is one sense, however, in which this distinction is not absolute—future, or eschatological justification. For, as Richard Gaffin points out, insofar as believers’ bodies are not yet resurrected, a future justification still awaits:

...as believers are already raised with Christ they have been justified; as they are not yet resurrected they are, in some respect, still to be justified. In terms of the anthropological profile of 2 Corinthians 4:16, considered as ‘the outer man,’ subject to decay and wasting, mortal and destined for death, the believer’s justification is in some sense still future.¹⁶

We must qualify our statement about justification being a single act by pointing out that the “judicial consequence of the reversal of judgment already effected” by this single act “does not

15 WCF 11.2.

16 Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight* (Bucks: Paternoster, 2006) 86.

take place all at once but unfolds in two steps, one already realized and one still future.”¹⁷

Furthermore, this future justification is not a different justification, but the “open manifestation of that present justification.”¹⁸ In this specific eschatological sense, then, the one act of justification unfolds in two stages.

Second, how does justification relate to church membership? This question needs to be evaluated in light of popular contemporary theologian, N. T. Wright, and his ecclesiological redefinition of justification. Under parts two and three of the Shorter Catechism’s definition we explained above that justification has to do with God’s gracious “pardoning” and “accepting” sinners as “righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.”

Traditionally in Reformed dogmatics such forensic language is seen as relating to God’s application of salvation to the elect (*ordo salutis*). However, N. T. Wright thinks such a soteriological view of justification is a misreading of Pauline theology; rather, in Wright’s view justification relates only to ecclesiology:

‘Justification’ in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God’s eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. . . . In standard Christian theological language, it wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.”¹⁹

17 *Ibid.*, 88.

18 *Ibid.*, 98. In Gaffin’s terms, the twofold nature of the single act of justification is due to the “already-not yet structure of union with Christ by faith and in the nature of that faith, particularly as ‘faith working through love’ (Gal. 5:6). . . . For Christians, future judgment according to works does not operate according to a different principle than their already having been justified by faith. The difference is that the final judgment will be the open manifestation of that present justification, their being ‘openly acquitted’ as we have seen. And in that future judgment their obedience, their works, are not the ground or basis. Nor are they (co-)instrumental, a coordinate instrument for appropriating divine approbation as they supplement faith. Rather, they are the essential and manifest criterion of that faith, the integral ‘fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith,’ appropriating the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 16:2” (*Ibid.*).

19 N. T. Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 119.

To be justified, then, is not to be pardoned and accepted in God's sight as the Shorter Catechism explains. Rather, in Wright's view to be justified "is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences, as together they wait for the final new creation."²⁰ Wright bases his ecclesiological redefinition of justification upon (1) his interpretation of the Pauline phrase "righteousness of God" [δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ] as "God's covenant faithfulness";²¹ and (2) his understanding of Old Testament law court imagery, which by definition precludes the possibility of the judge *imputing* his own righteousness (or "covenant faithfulness") to the defendant or plaintiff;²² and (3) his belief that justification's "covenant declaration" is primarily eschatological and thus is only anticipated "when Jesus died on the cross, as the representative Messiah of Israel, and rose again," but not fully realized until the final judgment.²³

In terms of the Shorter Catechism's definition of justification parts two and three, Wright's view offers anticipatory pardon based on Christ's death and resurrection (His passive

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 98. "If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. For the judge to be righteous does not mean that the court has found in his favour. For the plaintiff or defendant to be righteous does not mean that he or she has tried the case properly or impartially. To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works."

²³ *Ibid.*, 131. Wright ascribes all three components of his definition of justification to the future: (1) the "covenant declaration" is "issued on the last day"; (2) the "verdict in the law court" is "the forensic dimension of the **future covenantal** vindication" of God's people [boldface mine]; and (3) the eschatological covenantal declaration of justification "is ultimately to be made at the end of history." While Wright does allow for an anticipatory experience of these three components of justification, situating the decisive application of these components in the future makes it unclear how a Christian can be forgiven and experience eternal life now before the final verdict has been given. For example, how Wright would explain the believer's present assurance of resurrection (John 11:25-26) is unclear if the decisive forensic judgment related to eternal life has not yet been given. Reformed covenantal theology differs from Wright's view. In the Reformed system the covenantal foundation of salvation is located not exclusively in the future but in God's eternal inter-Trinitarian *pactum salutis*, which provides the grounds for Christ's benefits being applied to believers in the past, present, and future according to the historic unfolding of the covenant of grace.

obedience). But, Wright's view does not offer present acceptance in God's sight based on the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Rather, Wright's definition of justification only offers sinners ecclesiastical acceptance in one another's sight.

Although Wright's ecclesiastical definition of justification expands the membership roles of the visible church by providing for a larger, multi-ethnic church (i.e. Jews *and* non-Jews now can sit at the same table) as compared to the Old Covenant, his definition offers no means for getting one's name written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 3:5). For, church membership is not the standard by which one earns the right to stand in the presence of the thrice holy God (just ask Esau or Ananias), but rather righteousness is the standard (Psa. 24:3; Rev. 21:27). Therefore, Wright's definition of justification is not an improvement upon, but a degeneration of the Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition. In a word, by failing to see the need for Christ's active obedience Wright's view of justification does not provide for "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14 ESV).

Undoubtedly what I have sought to briefly articulate here in explaining the Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition of justification is not all that can be or needs to be said about this important doctrine. Furthermore, as I hinted at in the opening sentence, we ought not reduce all of the Christian life to justification. For though it is an important doctrine, justification is one among many of the Gospel benefits applied to the elect in the *ordo salutis*. These qualifications notwithstanding, I do believe the Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition of justification explains poignantly what God does when He justifies His people, and I pray that God will give me the boldness and clarity to proclaim this truth powerfully in my future ministry.