

## The Larger Catechism

### Question 73

**73. Q How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God?**

**A.** Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it,[304] nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification;[305] but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.[306]

#### Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[304] **Galatians 3:11.** But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. **Romans 3:28.** Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. [305] **Romans 4:5.** But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. **Romans 10:10.** For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. [306] **John 1:12.** But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. **Philippians 3:9.** And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. **Galatians 1:16.** To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood.

#### Introduction

If the believer is not careful in stating his understanding of justification by faith, he can easily imply that his faith itself justifies. That is, the strength (or virtue) of our faith justifies us. It is similar to saying, “My act of believing is the cause and ground of my justification.” William Pope, a very competent Arminian, argued that for a believer “his faith is counted for righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> John Miley says that “faith itself, and not its object, that is thus imputed” as the righteousness.<sup>2</sup> Justification by faith was somehow related to righteousness. In explaining this, these Arminians did not want it to be Christ’s imputed righteousness.<sup>3</sup> Many of them simply ended up arguing that faith itself was the righteousness. At some points, it is difficult to understand how they explained this but what becomes crystal clear is the denial of Christ’s imputation of righteousness. Faith was not the means of justification but the ground for these Arminians.

For this reason, we must be give this particular question careful consideration. The Westminster divines clearly saw (or foresaw) how all this could be misunderstood — this question carefully answers what later would become a problem. [I have not done enough research to see if certain individuals advanced what the Arminians later taught (though Arminian thinking was already soundly refuted in 1618-19). The Confession was finalized in 1646. Question 73 seems to have in mind a specific error but I have not verified as of yet.]

#### Accompanying Graces do not Justify

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<sup>1</sup> William Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, nd), 2:408.

<sup>2</sup> John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:319.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Adam Clarke, *Christian Theology* (London: Printed for Thomas Tegg & Sons, 1835), 154ff.; Henry C. Sheldon, *System of Christian Doctrine* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1903), 445ff.

The answer states, **“Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it...”** This part of the answer carefully lists the two ways faith does not justify. The other graces which accompany faith, like hope, charity, etc. do not justify. The various “other graces” would be the “fruits of the Spirit” in Gal. 5:22, 23. Peter speaks of adding to faith in 1Peter 1:5-7. Nowhere does it ever say that love itself justifies, or that our joy, peace, patience, etc. justifies. Our repentance, which flows from faith, also does not justify.

Gal. 5:6 says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” This has been the *locus classicus* for Roman Catholics to refute *sola fide*. It seems clear that we are not justified by faith alone but instead are justified by “faith working through love” (πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη). Therefore, the Westminster divines err by saying “not because of those other graces which do always accompany” faith. Are they correct?

In interpreting passages, we must always consider the context. This verse is in the context of refuting those who boast in circumcision. Paul is saying being or not being circumcised is nothing. What matters is “faith working through love.” Is he speaking of justification? The context seems to suggest that. One commentator says, “The faith which operates through love is clearly the same as the faith which justifies.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, this author says, Paul “is saying simply that the faith which justifies is of such a nature that it will express itself through love.” That is, though faith alone justifies, it also expresses itself in love. By faith alone are we justified but this faith does more. as one author tersely summarized the verse with this maxim, “faith as root and love as fruit.”<sup>5</sup> So the *New Living Translation* pretty much got it right by translating it as “faith expressing itself in love.” Love is always the fruit, the fruit of the Spirit (v. 22) for those justified by faith.<sup>6</sup>

An illustration may help here. Electricity alone powers my router; nothing else can. Yet, electricity does far more than power my router — it warms my electric blanket, heats my electric heater, spins my blender, etc. Similarly, faith alone is the means of justification, yet faith does many other things. Thomas Schreiner says, “The participle ‘working’ (ἐνεργουμένη) should be construed as a middle here, so that faith is the root and love is the fruit.” That is, love is the fruit of faith which is precisely what Paul teaches in Ga. 5:22, “where love is the fruit of the Spirit, and therefore those who trust in Christ and embrace him as Lord show that faith in love.”<sup>7</sup>

We must not overlook the immense practical matters related to this theological observation. This is much more helpful than we can imagine. If we are justified by God’s grace through faith alone and these accompanying graces do not in the least justify, then we may be justified without joy,

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NICNT; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 229.

<sup>5</sup> Loosely following F. F. Bruce in Gerald L. Borchert, in *Galatians*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, vol. 14 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2007), 316, loosely follows or cites F. F. Bruce. Bruce says, “faith is viewed as the root, love as the fruit.”

<sup>6</sup> Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publications Company, 1982), 233.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 317. “Middle” voice indicates that the subject is the one acting and in this instance, it is “working itself” (almost like a reflexive verb).

peace, etc. Though these graces are essentially connected to faith, we may not sense them. Some believers have thought their sense of being accepted, their experience of God's peace, their felt sense of joy, etc. are the grounds of their justification. How can I be right with God if I don't "feel" peace, joy, patience, etc.? These graces accompany faith but they do not justify. I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; God justifies me as I humbly believe in His Son for my salvation, etc. To be declared forgiven, righteous on account of Christ's imputed righteousness, are forensic acts and not necessarily felt experiences (though these do most often accompany it).

### **Good Works that are the Fruits of Faith do not Justify**

Furthermore, **"good works that are the fruits"** of faith do not justify. Good works are always "fruits" and not the grounds of our justification. If we are truly justified, we will bear fruit and good works are themselves evidences, the fruits of our justification. As Paul said, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." (Rom. 3:28) Paul's statement is pitted against specific obedience to the law of God revealed in the OT (in particular, the Torah). That is what "deeds of the law" means. When it comes to justification, works of the law do not play any role. The "good works" that accompany those who are justified do not contribute to justification.

Major detractors to this interpretation have gained a hearing. N. T. Wright says that Paul is concerned with ecclesiology and not soteriology. So "Paul's point in the present passage is quite simply that what now marks out the covenant people of God, in the light of the revelation of God's righteousness in Jesus, is not the works of Torah that demarcate ethnic Israel, but 'the law of faith,' that faith that, however paradoxically, is in fact the true fulfilling of Torah." He states that Paul is stressing "the badge of membership in God's people, the badge that enables all alike to stand on the same, flat ground at the foot of the cross, is faith."<sup>8</sup> This seems convoluted because it imports what is not present in the context. Remember, Jews have sought to establish their own righteousness (Rom. 10:3). Christ is "the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). Many scholars have risen up to refute N. T. Wright. His innovative (and heretical) interpretation does not only destroy the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone but it will also kill the life and soul of the church because his focus on ecclesiology is nothing more than externalism. Much more could be said but that cannot engage our present attention. It will not do you any good to read N.T. Wright.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Act of Faith is not Justification**

The divines also state, **"nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification."** As mentioned in the beginning, the divines shut the door in attributing the act of faith as the ground of our justification. Vos summarizes the mistake in this way, "Abraham did not have a perfect righteousness, such as God originally required of men, but he did have faith, and so God graciously accepted faith as a substitute for righteousness." (Vos, 163) Additionally, the phrase **"any act thereof"** would probably include repentance, sorrow, etc. (those things mentioned above). Faith itself or any kinds of acts we might perform (whatever that might be), etc. are not substituted for our righteousness. God does not say, "You don't have good

<sup>8</sup> N. T. Wright, *Romans*, The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 482.

<sup>9</sup> Some mature believers are gifted enough to

deeds but do something, like believe, and I'll accept you as righteous."

Imputing faith for one's justification is plausible given Rom. 4:3: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." This verse sounds like God is accepting the act of believing as a substitute for what Abraham couldn't do and thus counting it as done. But as Douglas Moo says,

But if we compare other verses in which the same grammatical construction as is used in Gen. 15:6 occurs, we arrive at a different conclusion. These parallels suggest that the "reckoning" of Abraham's faith as righteousness means "to account to him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him." Abraham's response to God's promise leads God to "reckon" to him a "status" of righteousness.<sup>10</sup>

Paul makes it clear in v. 4 that this gift of righteousness is not what is earned or what is due on account of works ("Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due."). So the interpretation of v. 3 (i.e., making the act of believing the merit, basis, and the ground of one's righteousness) would contradict the teaching of v. 4. NT scholars have noted that many of the Jews believed Abraham's faith was Abraham's obedience to God and regarded as a work for which God owed him a reward.<sup>11</sup> Paul would have been very aware of that and vv. 3, 4 contradict the received Jewish opinion. To locate merit in the believer (his act of believing) would destroy Paul's argument. Bavinck puts it well:

If faith justified on account of itself, the object of that faith (that is, Christ) would totally lose its value. But the faith that justifies is precisely the faith that has Christ as its object and content. Therefore, if righteousness came through the law, and if faith were a work that had merit and value as such and made a person acceptable to God, then Christ died for nothing (Gal. 2:21). In Justification faith is so far from being regarded as a ground that Paul can say that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5).<sup>12</sup>

The Westminster divines obviously wanted to close the door on any and all kinds of imagined human activities that could be used to claim merit. Any act, whatever that might be, cannot imputed for one's justification. The faith that justifies has not merit in itself. This is a wonderful blessing. Faith must always look outside itself and never to itself. Too often people look in to see if they have "enough" faith, piety, repentance, sorrow, passion, zeal, etc. No act, even faith (if we trust in it), can justify.

### Faith is an Instrument

This last clause explains the function of faith. Faith is not itself a meritorious work but it is only an instrument by which we receive Christ: **"but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness."** How does faith justify a sinner? Faith is only an instrument — it looks beyond itself to Christ to receive Him. We have already noted that justifying faith is a saving grace (LC #72) — it is produced by the work of the Spirit. When He

<sup>10</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 262.

<sup>11</sup> See Moo cited above.

<sup>12</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:211.

works that faith in us, we look to Christ by faith and receive Him and all of His benefits. Thomas Watson summarizes it well: “The dignity is not in faith as a grace, but relatively, as it lays hold on Christ’s merits.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, nd), 158.