

Historical Reformed Formulations of the Doctrine of Justification

The Genevan Catechism of 1537 (Questions 114-115)

Q114: What good accrues to us from this faith, when we have once obtained it? It justifies us before God, and this justification makes us the heirs of everlasting life.

Q115: What? Are men not justified by good works when they study to approve themselves to God, by living innocently and holily? Could anyone be found so perfect, he might justly be deemed righteous, but as we are all sinners, guilty before God in many ways, we must seek elsewhere for a worthiness which may reconcile us to him.

The Belgic Confession of 1561 (Article 23)

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle says that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ.

And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in anything in ourselves or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves. And verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should alas be consumed. And therefore everyone must pray with David: O Lord, enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 (Questions 60&61)

Q60: How are you righteous before God? Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, with ought any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin; yes, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me, inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

Q61: Why do you say that you are righteous by faith only? Not that I am acceptable to God, on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, is my righteousness before God; and that I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only.

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 (Chapter XV)

Of the True Justification of the Faithful

WHAT IS JUSTIFICATION? According to the apostle in his treatment of justification, to justify means to remit sins, to absolve from guilt and punishment, to receive into favor, and to pronounce a man just. For in his epistle to the Romans the apostle says: "It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?" (Rom. 8:33). To justify and to condemn are opposed. And in The Acts of the Apostles the apostle states: "Through Christ forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38 f.). For in the Law and also in the Prophets we read: "If there is a dispute between men, and they come into court...the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty" (Deut. 25:1). And in Isa., ch. 5: "Woe to those...who acquit the guilty for a bribe."

WE ARE JUSTIFIED ON ACCOUNT OF CHRIST. Now it is most certain that all of us are by nature sinners and godless, and before God's judgment-seat are convicted of godlessness and are guilty of death, but that, solely by the grace of Christ and not from any merit of ours or consideration for us, we are justified, that is, absolved from sin and death by God the Judge. For what is clearer than what Paul said: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23 f.).

IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS. For Christ took upon himself and bore the sins of the world, and satisfied divine justice. Therefore, solely on account of Christ's sufferings and resurrection God is propitious with respect to our sins and does not impute them to us, but imputes Christ's righteousness to us as our own (II Cor. 5:19 ff.; Rom. 4:25), so that now we are not only cleansed and purged from sins or are holy, but also, granted the righteousness of Christ, and so absolved from sin, death and condemnation, are at last righteous and heirs of eternal life. Properly speaking, therefore, God alone justifies us, and justifies only on account of Christ, not imputing sins to us but imputing his righteousness to us.

WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH ALONE. But because we receive this justification, not through any works, but through faith in the mercy of God and in Christ, we therefore teach and believe with the apostle that sinful man is justified by faith alone in Christ, not by the law or any works. For the apostle says: "We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom. 3:28). Also: "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness....And to one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:2 ff.; Gen. 15:6). And again: "By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God--not because of works, lest any man should boast," etc. (Eph. 2:8 f.). Therefore, because faith receives Christ our righteousness and attributes everything to the grace of God in Christ, on that account justification is attributed to faith, chiefly because of Christ and not therefore because it is our work. For it is the gift of God.

WE RECEIVE CHRIST BY FAITH. Moreover, the Lord abundantly shows that we receive Christ by faith, in John, ch. 6, where he puts eating for believing, and believing for eating. For as we receive food by eating, so we participate in Christ by believing.

JUSTIFICATION IS NOT ATTRIBUTED PARTLY TO CHRIST OR TO FAITH, PARTLY TO US. Therefore, we do not share in the benefit of justification partly because of the grace of God

or Christ, and partly because of ourselves, our love, works or merit, but we attribute it wholly to the grace of God in Christ through faith. For our love and our works could not please God in Christ through faith. For our love and our works could not please God if performed by unrighteous men. Therefore, it is necessary for us to be righteous before we may love and do good works. We are made truly righteous, as we have said, by faith in Christ purely by the grace of God, who does not impute to us our sins, but the righteousness of Christ, or rather, he imputes faith in Christ to us for righteousness.

The Irish Articles of 1615

Of Justification and Faith.

34. We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, applied by faith; and not for our own works or merits. And this righteousness, which we so receive of God's mercy and Christ's merits, embraced by faith, is taken, accepted, and allowed of God for our perfect and full justification.

35. Although this justification be free unto us, yet it cometh not so freely unto us that there is no ransom paid therefore at all. God showed his great mercy in delivering us from our former captivity, without requiring of any ransom to be paid, or amends to be made on our parts; which thing by us had been impossible to be done. And whereas all the world was not able of themselves to pay any part towards their ransom, it pleased our heavenly Father of his infinite mercy without any desert of ours, to provide for us the most precious merits of his own Son, whereby our ransom might be fully paid, the law fulfilled, and his justice fully satisfied. So that Christ is now the righteousness of all them that truly believe in him. He for them paid their ransom by his death. He for them fulfilled the law in his life. That now in him, and by him every true Christian man may be called a fulfiller of the law: forasmuch as that which our infirmity was not able to effect, Christ's justice hath performed. And thus the justice and mercy of God do embrace each other: the grace of God not shutting out the justice of God in the matter of our justification; but only shutting out the justice of man (that is to say, the justice of our own works) from being any cause of deserving our justification.

36. When we say that we are justified by faith only, we do not mean that the said justifying faith is alone in man, without true Repentance, Hope, Charity, and the fear of God (for such a faith is dead, and cannot justify), neither do we mean that this our act to believe in Christ, nor this our faith in Christ, which is within us, doth of itself justify us, nor deserve our justification unto us (for that were to account ourselves to be justified by the virtue or dignity of some thing that is within ourselves): but the true understanding and meaning thereof is that although we have Faith, Hope, Charitie, Repentance, and the fear of God within us and add never so many good works thereunto: yet we must renounce the merit of all our said virtues, of Faith, Hope, Charitie, and all our other virtues, and good deeds, which we either have done, shall do, or can do, as things that be far too weak and imperfect, and insufficient to deserve remission of our sins, and our justification: and therefore we must trust only in God's mercy, and the merits of his most dearly beloved Son, our only Redeemer, Saviour, and Justifier, Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, because Faith doth directly send us to Christ for our justification, and that by faith given us of God we embrace the promise of God's mercy, and the remission of our sin (which thing none other of our virtues

or works properly doth): therefore the Scripture saith, that Faith without works; and the ancient fathers of the Church to the same purpose, that only Faith doth justify us.

37. By justifying Faith we understand not only the common belief of the Articles of Christian Religion, and a persuasion of the truth of God's word in general: but also a particular application of the gratuitous promises of the Gospel, to the comfort of our own souls: whereby we lay hold on Christ with all his benefits, having an earnest trust and confidence in God that he will be merciful unto us for his only Son's sake. So that a true believer may be certain, by the assurance of faith, of the forgiveness of his sins, and of his everlasting salvation by Christ.

38. A true, lively, justifying faith, and the sanctifying Spirit of God is not extinguished nor vanisheth away in the regenerate, either finally or totally.

The Canons of Dort of 1619 (Heading 2)

Heading II: The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.

The True doctrine having been explained, the Synod **rejects** the errors of those who teach:

* that the new covenant of grace, which God the Father, through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man, does not herein consist that we by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of faith, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.

This contradicts the Scriptures: "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus Whom God has set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood (Romans 3:24-25). And these proclaim, as did the wicked Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God against the consensus of the whole church.

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 (Chapter XI)

Of Justification

I. Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

II. Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.

III. Christ, by His obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to His Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, in as much as He was given by the Father for them; and His obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead; and both, freely, not for any thing in them; their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice, and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

IV. God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

V. God does continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

VI. The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.

The Westminster Confession Shorter Catechism (Question 33)

“An act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

The Westminster Confession Longer Catechism (Questions 70 & 71)

LC70: What is justification? Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners, in which He pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

LC71: How is justification an act of God’s free grace? Although Christ, by his obedience and death, did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God’s justice in the behalf of them that are justified; yet inasmuch as God accepts the satisfaction from a Surety, which he might have demanded of them, and did provide this surety, his own only Son, imputing his righteousness to

them and requiring nothing of them for their justification but faith, which is also his gift, their justification is to them of free grace.

The Welsh Calvinist Methodist Confession of Faith of 1823 (Article 24)

24. Of Justification.

Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he accounts and declares a man righteous by imputing to him the righteousness of Christ, which the sinner receives by faith (a). In the justification of sinners, God manifests his righteousness and the honor of his law as well as his grace and mercy; inasmuch as he justifies them "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (b). The righteousness of Christ, whereby sinners are justified, is called "the righteousness which is of God by faith" (c). It is not befitting to ascribe to faith the merit that belongs only to the righteousness of Christ : that would be to confound the sun with the window that transmits the light. Justification contains in itself pardon of all the sinner's transgressions, that he perish not because of them (d); the acceptance of his person in the sight of God (e), and the giving him a lawful claim to the enjoyment of eternal happiness. It is called "justification of life (f)", and the transgressor is thereby made the "heir of eternal life" (g).