

The Augsburg Confession

Article 4

The Chief Article

This article on justification is the chief article in the entire confession. To the average reader it may not seem like this article is of great importance especially when one considers the brevity in which it is presented. But as Christians we must properly understand what Scripture teaches regarding our salvation. Almost every religion teaches that salvation is received through righteousness. But, as we will see from the study of this article, the term “righteousness” is misapplied by almost all religions and even by many who consider themselves to be Christian. We consider this to be the chief article of the Confession because a misunderstanding of righteousness leads to the subversion of the work of Christ. This result will be seen in many of the following articles but especially in articles VI and XX which we will be considering next.

Righteousness and Justification

In order to properly understand God’s work of our salvation, we must have a correct understanding of the words “righteous” and “justify”.

First, let’s consider the words “righteous” and “righteousness”. The religions of the world understand righteousness in an outward sense, namely, in the actions of individuals who observe certain rules or guidelines. These religions teach that it is through such outward righteousness that a person obtains the hope of life in the world to come.

But Scripture describes saving righteousness quite differently. The Lutheran reformers confessed: *It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.*

Righteousness, rather than being a product of man, is a product of God. Quoting the Psalmist, the apostle Paul tells us that no one is righteous in and of themselves:

“There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one” (Romans 3:10-12).

Instead of seeking righteousness from within ourselves, Jesus tells us to seek righteousness which comes from God: ***“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).*** It is only through God’s righteousness that we can be saved from our sin and its punishment.

So, the word “righteous” is an adjective describing the state of an individual. The word “justify” is closely related. It is a verb describing how a person becomes “righteous”. The word “justification” is a noun describing the action of one becoming righteous.

Note: These words are all related in the Greek language, and are based on the concept of being righteous.

By Grace, For Christ’s Sake, Through Faith

The Confession divides the work of justification into three parts. We become righteous before God: by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith. Let’s consider the Scriptural basis for such a statement. Paul writes:

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:21-26).

- **By Grace** - our justification was completely the work of God which was a result of His undeserved love for us sinners.

The act of justification is not something that we have in ourselves. The act of justification is a declaration God pronounces upon us. Paul writes: ***“Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies” (Romans 8:33)***. We do not make ourselves righteous, nor does God make us righteous. We are declared righteous by God.

Our justification is completely the work of God. This excludes any work on our part. Most non-Christian religions make this the work of man. Even many within Christianity teach that our justification is the result of God and man working together. But Scripture declares that it is solely by the grace of God:

“And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Romans 11:6).

- **For Christ’s Sake** - our justification was a result of the work of Christ Jesus through His perfect obedience and sacrifice on the cross.

The work of Christ for our justification was two-fold. As sinners we have two problems. The first is that we are not righteous, we are sinners: ***“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)***. The second is that, by our sins we have deserved God’s eternal punishment in hell: ***“The soul who sins shall die” Ezekiel 18:20; cf. Romans 2:6-9)***.

As our substitute, Christ delivered us from both of these problems: ***“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21)***.

Through His perfect life He kept the Law of God perfectly in our place (Active Obedience):

“For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26).

Through His death on the cross He took upon Himself the punishment that we, by our sins, deserved (Passive Obedience):

“Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

- **Through Faith** - this justification from God in Christ is received by us through the working of the Holy Spirit who brings us to faith through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Finally, God’s gift of justification comes to us through faith in Christ. When we speak of faith we do not mean a historical knowledge of who Jesus was. James writes: *“You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe —and tremble!” (James 2:19)*. Saving faith is not just knowledge of Jesus, but a trust in the promise of God and Christ’s work for us. The object of saving faith is and can only be Christ.

“Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:8-11).

Thanks be to God for the righteousness that is ours - by grace, as a result of the work of Christ, and through faith, and faith alone!