

SESSION 13: From Courtroom to Living Room

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 50-53, 56-57

WCF	WLC	WSC
11-12, 14	70-74, 153	33-34, 85-86

Introduction

In the last session, we began to unfold how redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*) is applied to us personally (*ordo salutis*). This application begins with effectual calling – an umbrella term used to describe the various aspects of conversion. In effectual calling God the Holy Spirit regenerates and brings us to faith, “thereby uniting us to Christ,” (WSC 30).

What comes next? In this united-to-Christ state we “partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them,” (WSC 32). In this session, we consider the first two of these – justification, adoption – and faith.

Justification

John Calvin described justification as “the main hinge on which religion turns... For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.”¹⁵⁷ Moreover, as Packer notes, “The entire New Testament is overshadowed by the certainty of a coming day of universal judgment, and by the problem thence arising: How may we sinners get right with God while there is yet time?”¹⁵⁸ The answer is justification.

To begin, let us consider the definition of ‘justification’ given in WSC 33: “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.” This concise statement points us toward all the essential tenets of the doctrine. What are these tenets?

First, we should understand the *ground* of justification. On what basis can God declare a sinner to be right? WSC 33 speaks of justification proceeding “only for the righteousness of Christ,” and WLC 70 expands this phrase as “the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ.” The two things in view here are Jesus’ *active* and *passive* obedience.¹⁵⁹ Justification is grounded *not* on our performance, but on the performance of Jesus – his perfect life and propitiatory death.

Second, we must understand the *means* of justification. How does the righteousness of Christ make us right with God? The answer is *double imputation*. The moment we trust Jesus Christ and are thereby united to him, an amazing thing happens: “that righteousness [of Christ] is ours and is made over to us. This is done by imputation, by which God reckons the righteousness of Christ to his people as if it were their own, and accounts to them Christ’s sufferings and satisfaction as if they had suffered and made satisfaction themselves.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

¹⁵⁸ Packer, *Knowing God*, 140.

¹⁵⁹ See the previous discussion of these terms under “The Obedience of Christ” in session 11.

¹⁶⁰ Letham, *Union with Christ*, 81.

When we trust Christ, his record of perfect obedience and full payment for sin is legally credited to us. Then, on the basis of this legal record, God declares us right. This declaration is *forensic*: it “has to do with a judgment given, declared pronounced.”¹⁶¹ It is also *final*: “true Christian identity... takes you *out* of the courtroom. The trial is over. The verdict is in.”¹⁶²

To speak of our trusting Christ is to raise the third essential tenet. What is the *instrument* of justification? Our standards tell us, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification,” (WCF 11.2).

The word ‘instrument’ is vitally important because it conveys the necessity of faith as the *mechanism* of justification without confusing faith with Christ’s righteousness as the *grounds* of justification. It is this distinction that the confession is keen to preserve when it states that believers are justified “not for anything 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,” (WCF 11.1). As WLC 73 notes, “Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God... only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.”

Adoption

Whereas justification is a *forensic* declaration, adoption is a *fatherly* declaration. In adoption God takes us from the courtroom to the living room.¹⁶³ As the catechism describes it, “Adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God,” (WSC 34). What are “the privileges of the sons of God”? WCF 12.1 gives us a thorough list:

Privilege	Meaning	Scripture(s)
Identity	“...have his name put upon them...”	Rev 3.12
Guarantee	“...receive the Spirit of adoption...”	Rom 8.15, Eph 1.14
Access	“...to the throne of grace with boldness...”	Rom 5.2, Eph 3.12, Heb 4.16
Confidence	“...are enabled to cry, Abba, Father...”	Rom 8.15, Gal 4.6
Pity	“...are pitied...”	Ps 103.13
Protection	“...protected...”	Prov 14.26, Ps 5.11, 1Jn 5.18
Provision	“...provided for...”	Mt 6.25-33
Chastening	“...and chastened by him as by a Father...”	Heb 12.5-11

As we consider the privileges of adoption, J.I. Packer urges us to consider adoption itself as “the highest privilege that the gospel offers”:

Our first point about adoption is that it is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification. This may cause raising of eyebrows, for justification is the gift of God on which since Luther evangelicals have laid the greatest stress, and we are accustomed to say, almost without thinking, that free justification is God’s supreme blessing to us sinners. Nonetheless, careful thought will show the truth of the statement we have just made.

That justification—by which we mean God’s forgiveness of the past together with his acceptance for the future—is the primary and fundamental blessing of the gospel is not in question. Justification is the primary blessing, because it meets our primary spiritual need....

But this is not to say that justification is the highest blessing of the gospel. Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves....

¹⁶¹ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 121.

¹⁶² Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Chorley, UK: 10Publishing, 2012), 43.

¹⁶³ The present author is indebted for this useful expression to the Rev. Dr. C.N. Willborn.

This free gift of acquittal and peace, won for us at the cost of Calvary, is wonderful enough, in all conscience—but justification does not of itself imply any intimate or deep relationship with God the judge. In idea, at any rate, you could have the reality of justification without any dose fellowship with God resulting.

But contrast this, now, with adoption. Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater.¹⁶⁴

Packer's point in all this is simple: *adoption is the house built on the foundation of justification*. As such, it is a correspondingly greater and richer blessing. "were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be adoption through propitiation, and I do not expect ever to meet a richer or more pregnant summary of the gospel than that."¹⁶⁵

What effect should his adoptive status have on the life of a believer? From Calvin we may cite at least three. First, it brings *security*: "By the great sweetness of this name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father."¹⁶⁶ Second, it creates in us an affectionate *motive for obedience*: "Because it acknowledges him as Lord and Father, the pious mind also deems it meet and right to observe his authority in all things, reverence his majesty, take care to advance his glory, and obey his commandments."¹⁶⁷ Third, it stirs in us an appropriate *filial fear* of God: "[the pious] mind restrains itself from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone; but, because it loves and reveres God as Father, it worships and adores him as Lord. Even if there were no hell, it would still shudder at offending him alone."¹⁶⁸

Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel – Believing God's Promises

Justification is the foundation of piety and religion. Adoption is the house built upon that foundation. Faith is the key by which we gain access. But what is faith?

In its most general sense, faith is *believing God*. The foundational text is Genesis 15.1-6:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Citing this very passage in Romans 4.1-3, Paul underlines this simple essence of faith:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For 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 counted to him as righteousness."

¹⁶⁴ Packer, *Knowing God*, 206-207.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.36.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.2.2.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

So faith is believing God. But how do we do that? WCF 14.2 describes faith as that by which “a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.”

Believing God has three essential components. First, there is *knowledge* of “whatsoever is revealed in the Word.” Second, there is *assent*; we “believeth to be true” what we read in Scripture. Finally, there is *trust*: we “acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come.”

Faith requires knowledge, but it is more than bare knowledge. It requires assent to truth, but it is more than mere assent. Faith is never an abstract relationship to certain *information*. It is always a relationship to a *person*. So faith is not faith until it *trusts* Jesus Christ. But how do we do this?

To understand how we trust Jesus, the key word is *promise*. WCF 14.2 says faith is “embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.” Promises are the way we form a believing connection to another person. A promise is an extension of the one who makes it – a commitment to do what is promised. Therefore, to believe a promise is to take hold of the person who made it. “Abraham believed God.” What did he believe? That God would keep his promise.

Promises are the bridge between heaven and our hearts. Jesus Christ is in heaven, but his promises are here with us. The gospel is his open hand of love to the world and to every person in it. Though we cannot yet take hold of Christ’s physical person, we may now take hold of his literal promise. In receiving his promise, we receive him – for a promise may never be separated from the one who gives it. It is for this reason that WSC 86 teaches us, “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, *as he is offered to us in the gospel.*” Truly Calvin wrote, “We enjoy Christ only as we embrace Christ clad in his own promises.”¹⁶⁹

How might we summarize the gospel promises of Christ? In *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the character ‘Evangelista’ states it thus: “‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved’; that is, be verily persuaded in your heart that Jesus Christ is yours, and that you shall have life and salvation by him; that whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, he did it for you.”¹⁷⁰

How can you “be verily persuaded in your heart that Christ is yours”? How could I ever be sure that he is given to me personally? Commenting on this passage in *The Marrow*, Thomas Boston wrote:

‘That Christ is yours,’ viz. by the deed of gift and grant made to mankind lost... By this offer or deed of gift and grant, Christ is ours before we believe... Even as when one presents a piece of gold to a poor man saying, ‘Take it, it is yours’; the offer makes the piece really his in the sense and to the effect before declared; nevertheless, while the poor man does not accept or receive it; whether apprehending the offer too great to be real, or that he has no liking of the necessary consequents of the accepting; it is not his in possession, nor hath he the benefit of it; but, on the contrary, must starve for it all, and that so much the more miserably, that he hath slighted the offer and refused the gift.

So this act of faith is nothing else but to ‘believe God’ (1Jn 5.10); ‘to believe the Son’ (Jn 3.36); ‘to believe the report’ concerning Christ (Is 53.1); or ‘to believe the gospel’ (Mk 1.15); not as devils believe the same, knowing Christ to be Jesus, a Saviour, but not their Saviour, but with an appropriating persuasion, or special application believing him to be our Saviour.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.9.3.

¹⁷⁰ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 132.

Now what this gospel report, record, or testimony of God, to be believed by all, is, the inspired penman expressly declares, "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his Son" (1Jn 5.11). The giving here mentioned, is not giving in possession in greater or lesser measure, but giving by way of grant, whereupon one may take possession. And the party to whom, is not the election only, but mankind lost. For this record is the gospel, the foundation of faith, and warrant to all, to believe in the Son of God, and lay hold on eternal life in him; but that God hath given eternal life to the elect, can be no such foundation nor warrant: for that a gift is made to certain select men, can never be a foundation or warrant for all men to accept and take it.

... The great sin of unbelief lies, not in not believing that God hath given eternal life to the elect; for the most desperate unbelievers, such as Judas and Spira, believe that, and the belief of it adds to their anguish and torment of spirit; yet they do not set to their seal that God is true; but, on the contrary, they make God a liar, in not believing that to lost mankind, and to themselves in particular, God hath given eternal life in the way of grant, so as they, as well as others, are warranted and welcome to take possession of it, so fleeing in the face of God's record and testimony in the gospel (Is 9.6, Jn 3.16, Acts 4.12, Pr 8.4, Rev 22.17).¹⁷¹

Though some of the language of this passage is dense, the density contains gold. When we really come to terms with what Fisher and Boston wrote, that gold will seep into our hearts: *God offers Jesus Christ, with all his benefits, freely and sincerely to every soul. Though not all will receive him, he is given as a gift to all. Though many refuse to believe it, the promise is made to all mankind.*

Because this is so, you may "be verily persuaded in your heart that Christ is yours." Calvin wrote, "Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them."¹⁷² Notice particularly the last sentence of *Heidelberg Catechism #60*:

How are you right with God?

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

The promise is given to all. Therefore it is given to me. Christian faith thus consists in *believing Jesus will keep his gospel promises to me*. "The revelation of God is gospel, promise, the promise of forgiveness and salvation; but on our part nothing can match a promise except believing it: faith. Only by faith does a promise become our possession."¹⁷³

Because our faith is based on Christ's promises, it *remains* effective even when it *feels* weak. This is what the confession is getting at in WCF 14.3: "This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed and weakened, but gets the victory..." How can this be?

Imagine you are on a high cliff and you lose your footing and begin to fall. Just beside you as you fall is a branch sticking out of the very edge of the cliff. It is your only hope and it is more than strong enough to support your weight. How can it save you? If your mind is filled with intellectual certainty that the branch can support you, but you don't actually reach out and grab it, you are lost. If your mind is instead filled with doubts and uncertainty that the branch can hold you, but you reach out and grab it anyway, you will be saved. Why? It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 136-137.

¹⁷² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.16.

¹⁷³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 566.

¹⁷⁴ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 232.

To use a more everyday example, resting on Christ is like going to bed. You may not understand much about bed construction, and you may have doubts that the bed can hold your weight. None of that matters. What matters is whether you lie down on the bed. The reality of the gospel is that no matter how little your knowledge or how many your doubts, Christ is strong enough to save you. Ultimately, then, what matters is not *how much* or *how well* you believe, but only *whom* you trust.

The Priority of Faith

Theologians sometimes argue together about which comes first: faith or repentance. The question may seem academic, since the two can never be separated in experience. Yet unless we maintain the priority of faith, we destroy the free offer of the gospel. "Only within the context of faith taking hold of Christ in whom we find the grace of God to us can repentance be evangelical. It cannot, therefore, take precedence over faith either logically or chronologically, since then it would be a work prior to and apart from faith."¹⁷⁵ If we require repentance before faith, rather than as the fruit of faith, we teach men that they must earn the right to trust Christ. This is legalism, and it imperils men's souls:

In a beautiful New England village a boy lay very sick, drawing near to death, and very sad. His heart longed for the treasure which was worth more to him now than all the gold of the western mines. One day I sat down by him, took his hand, and looking in his troubled face asked him what made him so sad. 'Uncle,' said he, 'I want to love God. Won't you tell me how to love God?' I cannot describe the piteous tones in which he said these words, and the look of anxiety which he gave me. I said to him: 'My boy, you must trust God first, and then you will love him without trying to at all.' With a surprised look he exclaimed, 'What did you say?' I repeated the exact words again, and I shall never forget how his large, hazel eyes opened on me, and his cheek flushed as he slowly said, 'Well, I never knew that before. I always thought that I must love God first before I had any right to trust him.' 'No, my dear boy,' I answered, 'God wants us to trust him; that is what Jesus always asks us to do first of all, and he knows that as soon as we trust him we shall begin to love him. This is the way to love God, put your trust in him first of all.' Then I spoke to him of the Lord Jesus, and how God sent him that we might believe in him, and how, all through his life, he tried to win the trust of men; how grieved he was when men would not believe in him, and everyone who believed came to love without trying at all. He drank in all the truth, and simply saying, 'I will trust Jesus now,' without an effort put his young soul in Christ's hands that very hour; and so he came into the peace of God which passeth understanding, and lived in it calmly and sweetly to the end.¹⁷⁶

Important Questions

1. Justification is forensic and final. Can this bring assurance to our daily Christian experience?
2. Why is it important that Christians identify themselves not simply as justified, but adopted?
3. How does the concept of promise help us understand both faith and the free offer of the gospel?

Additional Resources

Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 54-55, 58-62, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
13, 15, 16	75-78	35-36, 87

¹⁷⁵ Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 100-101.

¹⁷⁶ W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 789.