

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 11

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION

In this article, Calvin shifts from the practical back to the theological. He wants to make his case for justification by faith.

Summary: Calvin begins by offering us a summation of God's work on our behalf, namely that, *"Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us through faith"* (pg. 725). And once we have *"grasped and possessed Christ"* through faith, two things happen. First we are reconciled to God, thus insuring that God is a *"gracious Father"* rather than a Judge, and that we become capable through the Spirit of cultivating a better life (pg. 725). The process through which this giving and receiving of Christ occurs is, for Calvin, justification by faith. We will examine justification by faith by asking a series of questions.

The first question is what does it mean to be "justified"? The answer is, it means to be declared to be a righteous person, meaning someone who has been declared to be innocent of sin. Calvin puts it this way, *"...now he is justified who is reckoned in the condition not of a sinner, but of a righteous man...who will be judged according to his innocence...Therefore we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous persons"* (pg. 726-7). In other words, justification is the act of God declaring someone innocent of sin (a righteous person), just as a judge might declare a defendant innocent of all charges in a court of law.

The second question is, how is such a declaration possible since, as Calvin has repeatedly pointed out, all human beings sin and fall short of the glory of God? The answer is that Christ's righteousness (his being an innocent man...the only innocent man) is "imputed" to us. *"And we say that it (justification) consists of...the imputation of Christ's righteousness"* (pg. 726-7). So what is imputation? It is literally the application of Christ's sinless perfection (his righteousness) to us. Again using the courtroom analogy, it would be as if a judge declared a defendant innocent because the defendant has the perfect character witness; Jesus Christ who has declared the defendant to be his friend and thus to be innocent. *"Therefore, since God justifies...us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ"* (pg. 728).

The third question is, does the process of justification come about through faith alone, works alone or a combination of the two? The Roman church taught that it was by a combination of the two. The process of justification began by having faith and was completed by good works. Calvin rejected this understanding, insisting that justification was by faith alone. The reason justification had to rest on faith alone is that all human works, even the best works, are tainted by sin, and thus could add nothing to the process of being declared innocent. The judge would still see what people had done wrong and would therefore still convict them. For Calvin then, all people can do is to have faith, meaning to be open to receiving the imputation of Christ's righteousness as a free gift; a gift that God gives to those whom God loves. *"This is the experience of faith through which the sinner comes into possession of his salvation when...he acknowledges that he has been...justified"* (pg. 746).

Reflection: Calvin believed that salvation, meaning justification, reconciliation and our personal growth as Christians was all the work of God; that we could add nothing to it. While we may not completely agree with Calvin, believing that we have some hand in responding to God's love, it is a comfort for many to know that it is God who makes our God/human relationship a reality, regardless of how perfect, or imperfect we may be.

Questions:

1. What is your response to Calvin's doctrine of justification by faith?
2. How does justification help you understand how we are brought into relationship with God?
3. How would you explain how Christ saves us?