

# We Teach

## Peace with God

Church of the **Lutheran Brethren**



The Doctrine of **Justification by Faith**



## The Doctrine of **Justification by Faith**

As a young person growing up, many of my spiritual struggles had to do with a lack of understanding of the doctrine of justification. How I could be in a right relationship with a holy and just God? I thought I had to somehow work for and earn friendship with God by being good and obeying Him. During my late teenage years, out of frustration, I turned away from God. I did not understand that my salvation did not depend upon my own spirituality or goodness, but upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ and His work on the cross. On the cross He died in our place for our sins. Through His sacrifice there is a way for me, for us, to be made right (to be justified) with God, so we can be at peace with Him. The doctrine of justification has become a favorite biblical truth for me.

The *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* has this definition of justification: "*Justification is the gracious act of God by which He, for Christ's sake, acquits me (declares me not guilty), a repentant and believing sinner, of my sin and guilt, credits me with Christ's righteousness, and looks upon me, in Christ, as though I had never sinned.*"

**Justification helps us focus on the gracious acts of God.** In justification, God is doing the work, not human beings. Today our thinking is often more self-centered than God-centered; we tend to focus on what we do to be justified, rather than what God does. This focus affects the way the gospel message is presented. When questions such as, "How does a person become a Christian?" or "How can one find peace with God?" are asked, the answer is given, "*By being born again or by accepting Jesus into your heart.*" Being born again, or the acceptance of Christ into our heart, is stressed so strongly that one might think that our *acceptance*

is more important than what God has done for us through Christ. Yes, each person needs to personally receive Christ by faith, but this subjective side of salvation should never become the main focus. Could you imagine giving a gift to a friend, and they chatter on and on about their *acceptance* of your gift, rather than the gift itself?

Justification is God-centered, not self-centered. Christians need to recognize that the basis of their assurance of salvation is found in Christ, not in their *acceptance* of Christ. The doctrine of justification points us to the gracious acts of God and clearly teaches us to rest in what Christ has done for us.

**Justification offers sinners free forgiveness of all their sin and guilt.** God forgives us because Christ made full satisfaction for all our sins. We do not earn forgiveness by our repentance. Forgiveness was accomplished on the cross; therefore, forgiveness is free, immediate, and complete. If we confess our sins we are forgiven, even if we don't feel forgiven, even if we are not yet free from that sin, and even if we are not sure that we want to be free from it. A Norwegian theologian named Ole Hallesby once wrote, "I hate the sin that I love." Do *you* ever feel like that?

**Forgiveness is in God's heart.** If you really want to be assured that you're forgiven, look into God's heart, not your own. Read what the Scripture declares: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin *the Lord will never count against them*" (Romans 4:7-8). It is the Lord who covers our sin. Our sins will be forgiven, covered, indeed even forgotten by God, but not necessarily by others, by Satan, or by ourselves.

The doctrine of justification gives us confidence to rest in the reality that all our sins are forgiven *because of Christ*.

**Justification declares that sinners are credited with a perfect righteousness.** In order for us to be able to stand before a holy God we must be perfectly righteous. Martin Luther, the sixteenth century reformer, struggled long and hard with this truth, crying out, “How can God demand of me that which I cannot do? ...I hate a God who demands a righteousness of me that I am unable to accomplish.” After much torment, Luther’s eyes were opened to see the truth of justification by faith. He saw that the righteousness God demands of us is the righteousness that God gives to us. God has fulfilled His own law on our behalf.

In Christ we are given the perfect righteousness we need: Jesus not only died for us, He also lived for us. This is the righteousness which makes us acceptable to God—not our righteousness, but His. Repentant and believing sinners are *declared* righteous before a holy God by faith. When we are in Christ, God looks upon us as though we have never sinned.

You might ask, “Does the righteousness God gives to me change me? No, justification is not about inner change. Justification only changes our standing before God—we are now at peace with Him. This concept is important. It gives us a firm basis for assurance. With this understanding we realize our salvation is not dependent on us changing our attitudes and actions, nor does it depend on our spiritual growth. God’s work in us *after* we are made right with him (sanctification) is what changes us. Consider this question from the *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism*: “Why

*should the church always hold and teach this doctrine of justification by grace alone? The church must always hold and teach this doctrine because it is the chief doctrine of the Christian religion; it distinguishes the Christian religion from false religion which teaches salvation by works; it gives enduring comfort to the repentant sinner; and it gives all glory to God.”*

**Conclusion:**

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). Notice this verse does *not* read, “Since we have been *born again*, or since we *feel forgiven*, or since we are *living a righteous life*, we have peace with God.”

Do you have peace with God today? On what foundation are you basing this peace?

I pray that today you can and will say with Paul the Apostle that you want to “be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9).

— Dale R. Hanson  
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*Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*

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