

# Position Statement of the Eldership of Redeeming Grace Church on the Doctrine of Justification<sup>1</sup>

In every generation, the doctrine of justification by faith alone comes under attack. As the heart of the gospel, the doctrine of justification is most fundamental to the definition of salvation and any adequate understanding of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In our current cultural milieu where orthodox belief is despised and innovation is praised, many have ignored, maligned, or sought to redefine the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Unfortunately, there are even those within more conservative theological domains whose definition of justification by faith falls short of the biblical and reformed doctrine of justification,<sup>2</sup> particularly as defined by our Confession of Faith and the rich Reformed tradition in which we stand<sup>3</sup>. This is by no means a new issue. The Church of Scotland dealt with this in *The Marrow Controversy* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> The Puritans, both Credobaptist and Paedobaptists, had to defend this doctrine upon which the church stands or falls<sup>5</sup> in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Both John Owen and Benjamin Keach wrote extensively for a position similar to this paper in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> To combat these harmful deviations, we here seek to define a clear, biblical and confessional argument that might serve the church as a bulwark to “*strengthen what remains.*”<sup>7</sup>

Therefore:

**We affirm** that justification is by faith in Christ’s “*proper, real, and full satisfaction to God’s justice in the behalf of them that are justified.*” (BLC, 64; WLC, 71). As a Reformed and Baptist church in the tradition of broader Reformed piety and practice, we affirm the orthodox doctrine of justification set forth in the Word of God and defined in our Articles of Faith. The Word of God teaches that this satisfaction of God’s righteousness is imputed to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore that it requires “*nothing from them in return except faith, which they also have as a gift from Him. Consequently,*

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted, with permission, from “Resolution 82:07: On the Doctrine of Justification” adopted by the 82<sup>nd</sup> General Synod of the Bible Presbyterian Church. Commended by Dr. R. Scott Clark of Westminster Seminary of California

<sup>2</sup> Examples include The Federal Vision, New Perspective on Paul, and various schemes which posit two stages of justification.

<sup>3</sup> The Articles of Faith of Grace Evangelical Church being in the tradition of the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession of Faith with reference to the standards of the Westminster Assembly, this document appeals to the RGC Articles of Faith (RGC), the Baptist Larger Catechism (BLC) and the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC).

<sup>4</sup> See *The Whole Christ* by Sinclair Ferguson for a summary and bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> Based on Martin Luther’s statement, “Because if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses.”

<sup>6</sup> See *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone* by John Owen and *The Marrow of True Justification by Benjamin Keach*. For historical context of those works, and relevance to today, see <http://www.christurc.org/blog/2011/02/11/not-by-faith-alone-the-neonomianism-of-richard-baxter>

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 3:2

*justification comes to the justified as an act of God's free grace.*" (BLC, 64; cf. WLC, 71).<sup>8</sup> "Faith, thus resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the sole instrument of justification." (RGC, 11:2) Furthermore, we affirm that, "Christ, by His obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all who are justified, having made a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in their behalf." (RGC, 11:3). Therefore, we affirm that the material cause in justification is the righteousness of Christ's work on our behalf, and the means by which this righteousness is applied to the believer is faith alone.<sup>9</sup>

**We deny** that a man's works, in any way, contribute to his justification, whether before or after believing on Christ in faith.<sup>10</sup> We deny that we are justified by "*sanctifying fruit*"<sup>11</sup> in addition to faith in the perfection of Christ's work. Furthermore, we deny that doing such works from a "*justified position*"<sup>12</sup> qualifies those works to become somehow instrumental in obtaining one's "*final salvation*".<sup>13</sup>

**We affirm** that justification is a singular act of God's grace, whereby sinners are justified in their receiving faith as a "*gift of God*" when the "*Holy Spirit, in due time, actually applies Christ unto them.*" (RGC 11:2, 11:4). This justification, being predestined from all eternity and applied in due time is whole and entire upon application. Furthermore, we affirm that justification is forensic in application, declaring a sinner righteous in the sight of God, and therefore finally, irrevocably, and eternally saved from the condemnation of sin not progressively but instantaneously.<sup>14</sup> We maintain that our justification rests from the beginning to end in the sovereign will of Christ who, "*predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies.*"<sup>15</sup> We also maintain that religious works have no place in the justification of an

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 5:8-10, 1 Tim. 2:5-6, Hebrews 10:10, Matthew 20:28, Daniel 9:24-25, Isaiah 53:4-12, Hebrews 7:22, 1 Peter 1:18-19, 2 Cor. 5:21, Phil. 3:9, Acts 15:11.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:30, 3:24, 3:22, 3:28, 4:5, 5:17, 5:21, Titus 3:5, Ephesians 1:7, 2:7, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Galatians 2:16, Philippians 3:9, Acts 13:38, 1 Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 10:10, Isaiah 53:4.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* With Calvin we affirm works as a fruit of justification to Christ's glory and not deposited to the account of the believer unto final salvation: "In this, however, there is nothing to prevent the Lord from embracing works as inferior causes [of justification]. But how so? In this way: Those whom in mercy He has destined for the inheritance of eternal life, He, in his ordinary administration, introduces to the possession of it by means of good works. What precedes in the order of administration is called the cause of what follows. For this reason, He sometimes makes eternal life a consequent of works; not because it is to be ascribed to them, but because those whom He has elected He justifies, that He may at length glorify (Rom. 8:30); He makes the prior grace to be a kind of cause, because it is a kind of step to that which follows. .... The Lord adding grace to grace, takes occasion from a former to add a subsequent, so that he may omit no means of enriching his servants."(3:16:17) and "A man will be justified by faith when, excluded from the righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and, clothed in it, appears in the sight of God, not as a sinner, but as righteousness" (3:11:2)

<sup>11</sup> For example, see John Piper, "In *final salvation* at the last judgment, faith is confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and we are saved **through that fruit** and that faith." at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-really-save-us-by-faith-alone>. (bold emphasis added)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Also, in contrast, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 512-513: [describing the Reformation doctrine of sola fide] "As far as the ground of justification is concerned, they [the reformers] rejected the idea of Rome that this lies, at least in part, in the inherent righteousness of the regenerate and in good works, and substituted for it the doctrine that is found only in the imputed righteousness of the Redeemer. And in connection with the means of justification they emphasized the fact that man is justified freely by that faith which receives and rests in Christ only for salvation. Moreover, they rejected the doctrine of progressive justification, and held that it was instantaneous and complete and did not depend for its completion on some further satisfaction for sins."

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 25:6, 103:17, Romans 8:29-30, Romans 5:21, 8:1, 32-34, Hebrews 10:14, Psalm 103:12, Isaiah 44:22

<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:30

individual other than that of a necessary consequence. In no way do our works contribute to that justification, for this would be to put our works in the place of the work of Jesus Christ, who is, alone, our perfect and entire righteousness.<sup>16</sup>

**We deny** that our deliverance requires the believer's attainment of two statuses: namely initial justification and final salvation. While we still await the future enactment of our salvation, when the wrath of God against the nations is revealed and his children are brought into the kingdom fully, the ground of that future salvation is entirely present to the individual in the work of the Spirit at the moment of justification.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as God himself calls those whom he predestines, justifies those whom he calls, and glorifies those whom he justifies, we deny that any who are predestined, called, or justified may fail to partake of glorification in the end. Thus we deny that our salvation from the final judgment is established or obtained through the works which proceed from that justification.

**We affirm** that, without holiness, none shall see God.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, we insist that any who do not perform those works which must necessarily proceed from justification should have no presumption of enjoying the blessed presence of God in eternity, nor should they presume that they may avoid the pains of hell by such a dead faith.<sup>19</sup> Despite the necessity of good works as a confirmation of the presence of saving faith, we maintain that the distinction between sanctification and justification remains critical for the maintenance of a proper view of salvation. As the Reformed traditions states, *"Although sanctification is inseparably joined with justification, the two are distinctly different. In justification God imputes the righteousness of Christ to believers whereas in sanctification, His Spirit infuses believers with grace, and enables them to exercise this grace. In justification, sin is pardoned apart from the work of the believers; whereas in sanctification, sin is subdued by Spirit-empowered effort of the believer. Justification perfectly and equally frees all believers from the wrath of God so that they never fall into condemnation; whereas sanctification is not completed in any believer in this life, but only grows towards perfection"* (BLC 71; cf. WLC, 77). Works are necessary in the life of the believer, but are so as a confirmation, not an instrumental means of obtaining the promised end of salvation.

**We deny** that salvation, while inclusive of justification, sanctification, and glorification, is obtained by or through our performance of good works. We regard teaching that justification merely places us in right standing with God, but fails to deliver that promise of final glorification, that being attained by works done in love and obedience (sanctification) as erroneous and vexing to the consciences of believers.<sup>20</sup> The succeeding stages of salvation (sanctification, glorification) proceed from justification, and when saving faith is truly present, will always and necessarily proceed from that justification. Arguments or appeals which rely upon an intolerable division in the golden chain of salvation, suggesting that justification and sanctification may somehow be enacted separately, or

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<sup>16</sup> At issue is the basis of the Christian's confidence. The overwhelming testimony of the New Testament tells us that our confidence is in Christ and in Christ alone. The fruits of our union with Christ are not our confidence. They simply serve to confirm our confidence.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Peter 1:3-9

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 12:14

<sup>19</sup> James 2:18-26

<sup>20</sup> See John Piper's forward to Schreiner, *"Faith Alone"*, as well as Articles: *"Faith Alone: How (Not) to Use a Reformed Slogan"* and *"Does God Really Save us by Faith Alone?"* ([www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org))

that our final glorification rests upon the works we do in our sanctification, abuse the doctrine of justification by faith alone so vital and necessary to the church.

**We affirm** that, “*In this war, the regenerate person overcomes through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail. The saints thus grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*” (RGC, 13:3) Thus, although believers may be deeply embattled in continual and bitter struggles with sin, and with the apostle Paul, bemoan their weaknesses and failures, their lives will necessarily evidence a progressive, even if unsteady, growth in holiness, even though such transformation will always be quite incomplete in this life.<sup>21</sup>

**We deny** that as a consequence of the biblical doctrine of justification the truly regenerate Christians may sin with abandon, neglecting holiness, and pursue the lusts of the flesh. Accordingly, we deny that individuals given to such love of sin and persistent refusal of repentance were ever truly justified. While they may have, for a time, been visibly part of the church through a proper confession of faith, lacking the true substance of such a confession, they went out from the church, not truly belonging to Christ’s body.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Romans 7:23, Romans 6:14, 1 John 5:4, Ephesians 4:15 13 1 John 2:19

<sup>22</sup> 1 John 2:19