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# AFFIRMATION

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# & CRITIQUE

*Special Issue*

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

*A Historical Evaluation*

# AFFIRMATION & CRITIQUE

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## Copy Editors

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For more information, write us at  
**Affirmation & Critique**  
P.O. Box 2032, Anaheim, CA 92814-0032  
or email us at [affirm@lsm.org](mailto:affirm@lsm.org)

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Vol. XXIX • No. 2 A Christian Periodical

Fall 2024

*Special Issue*

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

*A Historical Evaluation*

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## About This Special Issue

In this issue of *Affirmation & Critique* we depart from our usual collection of articles and departments and instead present a condensation of a recently published evaluation of justification by faith across the various historical Christian traditions. The two-volume evaluation, entitled *Challenging the Traditional Interpretations of Justification by Faith*, looks at the teaching of justification by faith from the early church to modern times in light of the Scriptures and the ministry of Watchman Nee (1903-1972) and Witness Lee (1905-1997). While the truth concerning justification by faith may seem to be basic and hardly contestable, the fact is, few believers have more than a rudimentary understanding of this matter in God's full salvation, and many believers fail to appreciate the importance of coming to a full knowledge of this foundational truth. Indeed, many believers today seem stranded on the shores of traditional understandings of this truth and are therefore held back from the full benefit of their justification before God. By examining these traditional interpretations, one by one and in their historical contexts, the shortcomings and the advances in understanding are easily perceived, and we are greatly helped in our appreciation and apprehension of the truth concerning justification by faith. What seemed to be basic and unworthy of our attention now becomes a vital foundation for our whole Christian life, giving us great boldness for the progress and joy of our faith. While being justified by God is something at the beginning of our complete salvation—following the forgiveness and the washing of our sins (Eph. 1:7; Heb. 1:3)—it is impossible to progress in our full salvation without the assurance and without the security that come with a proper realization and experience of justification by faith. The faith that joins us to Christ as righteousness for our justification is the very faith that permeates and operates throughout all of God's salvation work in His believers (1 Tim. 1:4), and thus, a proper understanding of justification by faith sets us on the right path to

the full salvation of our entire being. Our hope is that in reading these accounts of the church's advancing understanding of justification by faith across the millennia, our readers will come to the same appreciation and the same boldness that we have arrived at in writing these accounts.

Because the articles in this special issue condense the much longer chapters in the two-volume work, there are no individual authors for the articles. Instead, our readers will find repeated short citations to the two volumes throughout the articles at the end of each condensed section (for example, "Campbell et al. 1:75-79"). The full citation of the published work is given at the end of each article, but we also give it here for ready reference:

Campbell, John A., Tony H. Espinosa, Martin H. Fuller, Mitchell J. Kennard, Joel I. Oladele, John-Paul Petrash, and Kerry S. Robichaux. *Challenging the Traditional Interpretations of Justification by Faith*. 2 vols. Anaheim, CA: Living Stream, 2021-2023.

Further, because these articles seek to condense and not necessarily to prove our evaluations, we have deliberately excluded the full "justification" for many of our claims. This may give the articles a somewhat provocative and perhaps even a somewhat cavalier quality, and for this we beg our readers' forgiveness and indulgence. If we wish to provoke at all, it is to encourage our readers to examine the longer work from which these articles are drawn and to assess there our claims and our heart. At the very end of this issue, there is full information for obtaining the two-volume evaluation in print and electronic formats, and we invite all our readers to get and read the full historical account of this important truth in the church's understanding.

*The editors*

### IN THE NEXT ISSUE

In the April 2025 issue of *Affirmation & Critique* we inaugurate a new series of issues called The Words of This Life. This series will focus on some of the foundational words of the Christian life, words in common Christian parlance and yet sometimes with vastly different meanings among Christians. We begin with an issue on *faith*, that ubiquitous word that characterizes not only God's New Testament believers (those who have faith) but also all that God does in His New Testament economy ("which is in faith"—1 Tim. 1:4). We devote one article to what subjective faith (our believing ability) is and is not, and another to what objective faith ("the faith") is and is not. In the third article we unpack the crucial expression "God's economy, which is in faith" (1 Tim. 1:4) and show the principle of faith (both subjective and objective) operating in all that God does in the New Testament age. Then, we follow with an article on what living by faith means practically in our Christian experience and church life. In the next two articles we present that great benefit of faith, that is, the victory of our faith, and that great responsibility to faith, that is, our properly contending for it. Our hope is that this issue will be a great service to the faith of all our readers (Phil. 2:17) and will protect all of us from the unique sin of unbelief, which so easily besets even Christ's believers.

*This new series of issues also comes in a new issue size and page format for A&C. Look for it in April 2025.*

# JOINED BY FAITH TO CHRIST AS RIGHTEOUSNESS: A BIBLICAL PRESENTATION OF JUSTIFICATION

*Who shall bring a charge against God's chosen ones?*

*It is God who justifies.*

(Paul, *To the Romans*, 8:33)

The apostle who trumpeted this truth had discovered the victory of justification, that is, the victory of God the Justifier and of all those justified by Him through faith in Christ. That it is God—and God alone—who justifies stirred the apostle Paul, as it should stir us, to accept, to exult, and to boast in God with all boldness and assurance, for the only One qualified to condemn us, to “bring a charge” against us, has approved us according to His righteousness. Paul was keenly aware that the God who justifies is righteous in all His acts (Psa. 103:6), that righteousness is the foundation of His throne (Psa. 89:14), and that He judges everything according to righteousness. But in reading Romans 8, we get the impression that Paul was not cringing in fearful expectation or wallowing in self-condemnation but rejoicing with exuberance in the righteous God who justifies. How could he rejoice in the God who justifies and even boast that he was justified, and how can we do the same today?

The answer has everything to do with Jesus Christ the Righteous (1 John 2:1), the One who is absolutely righteous in both His divinity and humanity (e.g., Heb. 1:8-9; Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; 1 Pet. 3:18). As God, certainly He is righteous; but as the God-man, He lived a human life of absolute righteousness and suffered death under God’s righteous judgment for our sake, “the Righteous on behalf of the unrighteous” (1 Pet. 3:18), thus satisfying the demand of God’s righteousness and redeeming us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13). This wonderful God-man is the very righteousness of God. God the Father delights in Him (Matt. 3:17) and has approved Him (Rom. 4:24-25). And as incomprehensible as it may seem, God the Father delights in and approves all those who turn from themselves to Jesus Christ and believe into Him, thereby discarding the filthy rags of their own righteousness (Isa. 64:6) and donning Christ Himself as their righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:27). To those who believe into Christ, the Father does something most remarkable

and almost unutterable: He approves the believers as righteous—He justifies them—based on Christ as their righteousness. He makes Christ Himself their righteousness for their justification. One of the wonders of justification, then, is that the believers’ righteousness before God is not a condition or a status that they possess in themselves but a person whom they are joined to, the living Christ Himself. Those who receive Christ are approved by God according to Christ as righteousness. God sees them as righteous, for they have Christ as their righteousness. Their righteousness before God is perfect because the Christ who is their righteousness is perfect, and their righteousness before God is unchanging because the Christ who is their righteousness is unchanging. Those who have laid hold of such a righteousness by laying hold of Christ can surely exult, as the apostle Paul exulted, in the victory of justification and in the God who alone justifies.

Another wonder of justification is that God justifies the believers *through faith in Jesus Christ* (e.g., Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 2:16). This faith is not blind, nor is it a mere assent. The apostles taught that faith in Christ issues in receiving Him through the Spirit (John 1:12; 7:39). Thus, faith ushers those who believe in Christ into an organic union with Him, and God approves them based on their oneness with Christ as righteousness. The Epistles of Paul disclose the relationship between the believers’ union with Christ through faith and their justification in Him, and it is manifest that the apostle’s consideration of justification was enriched and buoyed by his deep knowledge of Christ and of the believers’ union with Him. As his Epistles testify, Paul was intimately familiar with Christ, not in the way of doctrine but in the way of spiritual knowledge and experience. He knew Christ (Phil. 3:8, 10), pursued Christ (Phil. 3:12, 14), aspired to be found in Christ (Phil. 3:9), and even described himself as a man in Christ (2 Cor. 12:2). In Acts 13:39 Paul preaches Christ as the One in whom “everyone who believes is justified.” In 1 Corinthians 1:30 he declares that we who believe are “in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption” and in Romans 8:1 that “there is now then no condemnation to

those who are in Christ Jesus.” Further, in Galatians 2:16-17 he speaks of believing “into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ” and of “seeking to be justified in Christ.” According to the apostle’s profound realization, justification is by faith because faith brings the believers into an organic union with Christ, the righteousness of God. Viewed intrinsically, justification is thus a matter of Christ becoming the believers’ righteousness in their union with Him through faith and of God approving the believers on account of their union with Christ as righteousness. The work of God the Justifier appears all the more wondrous when we realize, as the apostle Paul surely realized, that this work is centrally concerned with bringing fallen but repentant human beings into Christ—through the faith of Jesus Christ—so that in Christ and with Christ as their righteousness they might be approved by the God who “justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

HOW COULD PAUL  
REJOICE IN THE GOD WHO JUSTIFIES  
AND EVEN BOAST  
THAT HE WAS JUSTIFIED,  
AND HOW CAN WE DO THE SAME TODAY?

The truth concerning God’s justification of the believers by faith is profound and multifaceted. In the presentation that follows we aim to present this truth from the Scriptures as clearly as possible. We will consider several crucial matters related to justification by faith, including the basis and the result of justification, but the heart of our presentation will focus on *how* God justifies the believers. The striking revelation in Scripture is that God justifies the believers “through the faith of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:22), and we will consider in detail how God produces this faith in the believers and why this faith alone justifies them before God (Campbell et al. 1:1-6).

## Justification by Faith as Revealed in the Scriptures

### *An Overview*

How does God justify those whom He has chosen for salvation? In the way of an overview, we would like to present our understanding of this as completely and yet as succinctly as possible. Then, we can proceed to give in finer detail the biblical motivations for each aspect of this understanding. God’s justification depends on His predestination and His calling. In eternity past He chose some for His glory, and in time He called them to His salvation. But before He could

justify them and in keeping with His own righteousness, He had to deal with the problem of sin with its consequences. Thus, He sent His only begotten Son, and through His Son’s incarnation, human living, and death, God provided propitiation for sins and accomplished the redemption of His chosen ones (though these matters were not the only goal for the sending of His Son). With these as a basis, God, through a multitude of means and in a multitude of ways, calls His chosen ones practically through the preaching of the Word as the gospel. In this preaching He appears to them in the way of glory to attract them to who He is and to what He has done in Christ Jesus. In His appearing He sovereignly illuminates His divine person as the merciful yet righteous God and His divine work to mercifully and righteously forgive the sins of those who believe in His Son. His appearing and their being attracted can be, but need not be, gradual and repeated, but always His glorious shining in the Word of Christ infuses something divine into His chosen ones. Because God shines into them through the Word of Christ, Christ as the Word Himself is infused into them for their appreciation and apprehension. This divine infusion first results in a simple appreciation for Christ as the precious Savior, which grows, often through the further appearing of the God of glory in the repeated Word of the gospel, into belief in and apprehension of God and His work for the believers’ salvation. The Christ who is infused into the believers by the appearing of the God of glory constitutes their believing ability, and thus, the faith infused into them is not a kind of gift that is distinct from God but is Christ Himself as both the source and the object of their believing. Faith is of Jesus Christ and into Jesus Christ. It is not the result of human effort but the action and effect of God in Christ within the believers. This faith substantiates the reality of the Word of the gospel, that is, the Christ given to them from the Father. It is not simply an assent to the truth of the gospel on the part of the believers, though it includes as much, but much more it is the organic union of the believers with Christ by which they possess all that He is for their salvation. God has given Christ as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption to the believers for their full salvation in all its aspects, and of these three, Christ has been given to them as righteousness for their justification. Through God’s infusion into them, the believers are joined to the Christ whom they believe into, and He becomes, among many other things, their righteousness before God. In themselves, apart from Christ, the believers have no righteousness that God can accept for their justification, but through the faith that God has infused into them they are one with the Christ who is righteousness in Himself as both God and man. Since they are inseparable from Christ as righteousness, God accepts the believers in their union with Him and justifies them because they have Him as their righteousness. Thus, justification is God’s accounting Christ as the believers’ righteousness because of their faith, that is, their union with Him.

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This union, secured by the divine life, the divine power, and the divine promise, is eternal and cannot be dissolved nor will it be revoked, as it is according to God's predestination and calling. While sins have been forgiven, it is not the forgiveness of sins that constitutes their justification. Propitiation and the forgiveness and cleansing of sins take away the barriers to justification but can never be equated with it; otherwise, we would have to admit that human beings are somehow sufficiently righteous in themselves once they are forgiven and cleansed of their sins. The only basis for God's justification of His chosen ones is the righteousness of God Himself, and this must be given by Him and taken hold of by them. He gives Christ as His righteousness to the believers for their justification, and through faith they lay hold of Christ as their righteousness and are accordingly justified by Him. God's justification in its most narrow meaning as that which is objective to the believers—that is, not of themselves but purely because of their union through faith with Christ as righteousness—is complete and once for all. It is the action of God to approve His chosen ones according to the standard of His righteousness through their union with Christ as righteousness. That union will ultimately transform His chosen ones to such an extent that they will eventually fully experience and fully express Christ as their subjective righteousness—that is, as the righteousness of their thoughts, words, and deeds that incorporate Him as the righteousness of God and never apart from Him as such. However, the certain and secure fruition of righteousness as subjective justification is not the basis of God's initial justification objectively, nor does He need to include it in His view as He justifies His chosen ones initially. Christ alone, given as righteousness by God through grace and possessed as righteousness by His chosen ones through faith, is the sole ground and reason for their initial and objective justification by Him (Campbell et al. 1:11-13).

### *Justification by Faith through the Redemption Which Is in Christ Jesus*

Objective justification is God's action of approving people according to His standard of righteousness, and Paul consistently argues that this justification is by faith and not by works. In Romans he says, "We account that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Rom. 3:28). Likewise, in Galatians he writes, "A man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). In his earliest recorded preaching in Acts, Paul had already taught that justification is by faith and not by works (Acts 13:38-39); however, he was forced to contend strongly for this basic truth of the gospel when some began to teach that salvation depends on adherence to the Jewish law (Gal. 2:12-16). Consequently, in his Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans, he needed to demonstrate why works of law cannot justify and why justification is by faith. These two

concerns guide Paul's exposition of justification in Romans 3 and 4, and they will guide the presentation of objective justification offered in this section.

In Romans 3:23-24 Paul identifies both sin and falling short of the glory of God as reasons for the need of justification: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." The thought in these verses is that fallen human beings need to be justified by God not only because they have sinned but also because they cannot meet the requirement of His glory. This requirement of God's glory is made plain in the subsequent verses where Paul draws on the Old Testament image of expiation and shows that justification occurs on Christ as the propitiation place. In verse 25 Christ is the One "whom God set forth as a propitiation place...for the demonstrating of His righteousness." This propitiation place is typified by the expiation cover above the Ark in the tabernacle (Exo. 25:17). According to Exodus 25:22 God met with the high priest, a representative of the Israelites, at the Ark, which contained the law of the Ten Commandments, and spoke with him "from between the two cherubim" on the expiation cover. Hebrews 9:3-5 locates the Ark in the Holy of Holies, a realm of God's holiness, and identifies these cherubim with God's glory when it refers to them as the "cherubim of glory overshadowing the expiation cover." Thus, whenever the high priest came to contact God, he met not only the requirements of God's holiness (indicated by the location of the Ark) and righteousness (embodied in the tablets of law within the Ark) but also the requirement of God's glory (signified by the cherubim overarching the Ark) (Rom. 7:12; Exo. 25:18; Heb. 9:5). This implies that all contact with God was governed by a threefold requirement of righteousness, holiness, and glory. Drawing on this image, Paul in Romans 3 indicates that even if we could fulfill the law, we would not be justified, because we still would not meet the requirement of God's glory, not to mention the requirement of God's own righteousness (Rom. 3:23).

Paul stresses that only God's righteousness can meet the standard of His glory, and he consistently contrasts this righteousness with the righteousness of the law. In Philippians 3 Paul identifies two kinds of righteousness: "my own righteousness which is out of the law" and "the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith" (Phil. 3:9). Paul claims that "as to the righteousness which is in the law," he had, even before his conversion, "become blameless" (Phil. 3:6). Nevertheless, he accounted his attainment in the law as nothing in relation to the righteousness which is out of God. In Romans 10 he again contrasts our own righteousness with God's, this time placing them in opposition. Concerning Israel's attempt to obtain righteousness through works of law, Paul states, "Because they were ignorant of

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*God's righteousness* and sought to establish *their own righteousness*, they were not subject to *the righteousness of God*" (Rom. 10:3; emphasis added). *Their own righteousness* refers to the "righteousness...out of the law," which involves performing human work (Rom. 10:5); *the righteousness of God* refers to the "righteousness...out of faith," which involves receiving a person—the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Christ—through believing (Rom. 10:6-9). Like the Israelites, anyone who seeks to establish human righteousness by keeping the law is not subject to Christ as the righteousness of God and thus misses the way of God's salvation. For it is Christ, the person, with all He is and has accomplished, who meets the requirements of God's glory, and it is only by obtaining Him as righteousness that we can be justified and saved (Rom. 10:11, 13).

In Romans 3 Paul shows more specifically that by meeting God's threefold requirement of righteousness, holiness, and glory, Christ with His redemption is the unique and free provision that enables God to justify us. Romans 3:24 reads, "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." God justifies freely without the requirement of human work. Instead, all that is required for our justification was accomplished by God in Christ and given freely by His grace. In Jesus Christ, God gained a human being who not only knew no sin but also lived a life that fulfilled the requirements of God's righteousness, met the standard of God's holiness, and satisfied the expression of God's glory (2 Cor. 5:21; Acts 3:14; 22:14; 13:35; John 1:14). Such a One was fully qualified to offer Himself as our redemptive sacrifice (1 Pet. 1:18-19; Gal. 3:13; Titus 2:14). Thus, Christ's death on the cross and the eternal redemption that He obtained by His blood serve as the judicial basis for God to justify the believers (Heb. 9:12-14; Rom. 5:18). Moreover, since God was satisfied with Christ's death on behalf of fallen sinners, He raised our Lord Jesus from the dead (Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 3:18). In Romans 4:25 Paul says that Jesus Christ "was delivered for our offenses and was raised for our justification." Christ's resurrection, therefore, is the proof and assurance of our justification.

Justification is by faith because faith receives Christ with all that He is and has accomplished. By faith the believers approve of God, affirm His condemnation of fallen humanity, and receive His gift of grace in Christ (Rom. 3:4; Eph. 2:8). Rather than trying to fulfill God's promise by their own effort, the believers receive God's promise by faith as Abraham learned to do: "He [Abraham] considered his own body as already dead, being about a hundred years old, as well as the deadening of Sarah's womb; but with regard to the promise of God, he did not doubt in unbelief, but was empowered by faith,...being fully persuaded that what He had promised He was able also to do" (Rom. 4:19-21). Abraham had previously attempted to fulfill God's promise by

his own labor (Gen. 16). But he eventually learned to simply believe that God would fulfill what He Himself had promised, and Isaac was born "at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him" (Gen. 21:2). Abraham's experience suggests that faith believes that what we are, what we have, and what we can do are nothing. Only God is, only His speaking will come to pass, and only what He does can fulfill His promise. This is the faith accounted as righteousness, the faith that believes that God is and that we are not (Rom. 4:21-22; cf. Heb. 11:6).

The record of Abraham's faith being accounted as righteousness "was not written for his sake only...but for ours also to whom it is to be accounted, who believe on Him who has raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom. 4:23-24). Thus, Paul applies the example of Abraham to the New Testament believers and draws a parallel between Abraham's faith regarding Isaac and the believers' faith in Christ. In Romans 10 Paul tells us that the only condition for a fallen human being to be justified is to believe and receive Christ:

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart there is believing unto righteousness, and with the mouth there is confession unto salvation. (Rom. 10:9-10)

Justification is by faith, not by works. By works we seek to establish our own righteousness; by faith we are subject to God's righteousness. By works we boast in what we can do; by faith we approve of what God has done (Rom. 4:2; 3:4). By works we offer something to God; by faith we receive God's Christ as our righteousness. The sole condition for a fallen sinner to approach the God of righteousness, holiness, and glory is to believe in the resurrected Christ and to confess that He is Lord (Campbell et al. 1:13-16).

### *Faith Being Produced by the Transfusion of Christ*

Having seen that justification is by faith, it is profitable to ask two questions. First, what is faith? And second, how does a human being come to have faith? Paul's focus on Abraham as the example of justification by faith and Stephen's account of the origin of Abraham's faith suggest that the answers to these questions are evident in Abraham's story. Furthermore, the answers are confirmed and elaborated in Paul's account of the apostles' experiences as described in the New Testament.

Before God accounted Abraham's faith as righteousness, He appeared to Abraham a number of times. In the book of Acts Stephen recounts the history of Israel to his persecutors before they stone him to death, and he includes an important detail in Abraham's experience: "The God of glory

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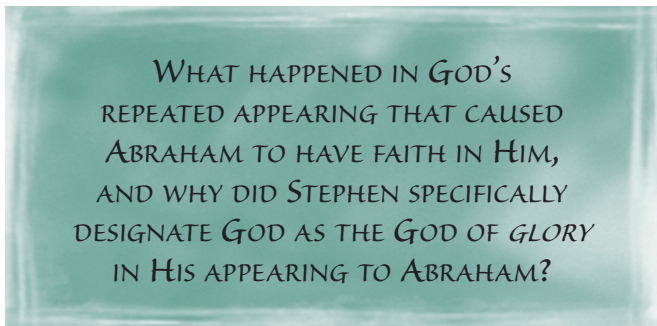
appeared to our father Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran” (Acts 7:2). In Mesopotamia, where he and his family “served other gods” (Josh. 24:2), Abraham lived in ignorance of the true God, but it was there that the God of glory appeared to him and said, “Come out from your land and from your relatives, and come into the land which I will show you” (Acts 7:3). After that appearing, God appeared to Abraham in Haran and at least three more times in Canaan, as narrated in Genesis (Gen. 11:32—12:4, 6-7; 13:14-17; 15:1-7). At the consummation of all those encounters Abraham believed God, and God accounted Abraham’s believing as righteousness, as we saw above. Our focus here is to see what happened in God’s repeated appearing that caused Abraham to have faith in Him, and why Stephen specifically designated God as the God of *glory* in His appearing to Abraham.

The Bible does not indicate that Abraham was seeking the true God while in Mesopotamia or that he had any capacity in himself to believe in Him; nonetheless, the unsolicited and repeated appearing of the God of glory elicited from Abraham the reaction of faith. The more God appeared to Abraham—in Mesopotamia, in Haran, and in Canaan—the more the shining of God radiated into him. This shining of the God of glory produced the faith by which Abraham responded “by faith...to go out unto a place which he was to receive as an inheritance” and to dwell “as a foreigner in the land of promise as in a foreign land” (Heb. 11:8-9). The issue of God’s shining was faith as Abraham’s reaction to God’s attraction. Faith was not a product of anything in Abraham; rather, it was the result of God radiating Himself into Abraham to become his believing ability.

This experience is not unique to Abraham; it is also evidenced in the experience of the apostles and described by them as the experience of all believers. In the New Testament Paul writes that the apostles experienced the radiating of God: “Because the God who said, Out of darkness light shall shine, is the One who shined in our hearts to illuminate the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). In the context of this verse, Paul makes a comparison between the face of Moses and the face of Jesus Christ. The glory of the old covenant that shined on the face of Moses was a fading glory, and it shined superficially, only on the skin of Moses’ face (Exo. 34:29-33; 2 Cor. 3:7, 13); conversely, the glory that radiates in the face of Jesus Christ is an eternal glory, shining in the human heart. The glory of God manifested in the face of Jesus Christ is the God of glory expressed through Jesus Christ, and it is Jesus Christ as the effulgence of God’s glory.

As ministers of the new covenant, the apostles lived and preached the gospel of Christ as “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11), the gospel of the One who

called them “by His own glory” (2 Pet. 1:3). Paul asserts that Satan blinds the thoughts of the unbelievers “that the illumination of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, might not shine on them” (2 Cor. 4:4). The apostles’ testimony was not that they preached doctrines about Christ but that in their living and preaching they illuminated others with Christ as the One who had shined in their own hearts. Apart from that illumination, the hearers of the gospel cannot contact God, who dwells in “unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16). By that illumination, they receive God in Christ, just as one receives the sun in the heat and light of its rays. Paul understood his ministry to be an enlightening of others (Acts 26:18; Eph. 1:18; 3:9), and our gospel preaching should be the same today—not the mere preaching of doctrines about Christ but the shining forth of Christ Himself, the glory of God, in the living and preaching of genuine new covenant ministers. When unbelievers contact such ministers, they receive the shining, the enlightening, of divine glory, which transfuses them with God as faith to be their ability to believe in His crucified and resurrected Son.



WHAT HAPPENED IN GOD’S  
REPEATED APPEARING THAT CAUSED  
ABRAHAM TO HAVE FAITH IN HIM,  
AND WHY DID STEPHEN SPECIFICALLY  
DESIGNATE GOD AS THE GOD OF GLORY  
IN HIS APPEARING TO ABRAHAM?

In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul writes, “So faith comes out of hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). To hear the word of Christ is not to hear something separate from Christ, for Christ is the Word of God, the definition, explanation, and expression of God (John 1:1, 14, 18; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 19:13). By linking the word, hearing, and faith, Paul identifies a crucial transaction between God and man, even a transmission from God to man, in which Christ as the living Word of God and the reality of faith is conveyed to and infused into hearers through the preaching of the written Word of God, the Bible. It is the glorious commission given to God’s redeemed to preach the gospel, that is, to proclaim the Bible’s revelation of the beautiful Christ, thereby infusing others with Christ as the source of faith. As Paul writes in Romans 10:14, “How then shall they call upon Him into whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe into Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without one who proclaims Him?” The source of faith, therefore, is not us but Christ, the Word of God imparted through the preaching of the gospel.



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We can crystallize the understanding of faith presented here by attending to the much debated phrase *the faith of Jesus (Christ)* in Romans 3:22 and 26 and Galatians 2:16 and 3:22. The Greek phrase πίστις Ἰησοῦ (Χριστοῦ) (*pistis Iēsou [Christou]*) is commonly translated “faith in Jesus (Christ)” in these verses, but Paul elsewhere captures the notion of faith in Christ with the Greek preposition ἐν (*en*, ‘in’) (Gal. 3:26; Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4; 1 Tim. 3:13; 2 Tim. 3:15), suggesting that his use of the genitive case (i.e., ‘of Jesus Christ’ in Greek) in these instances is with a particular and different purpose. Depending on the context, a single instance of the genitive case can imply meanings that include agent, object, and even means and element. But the genitive case can also have an appositive sense (e.g., *city of Antioch* denotes the city that is Antioch), and thus it is legitimate to understand *faith of Jesus Christ* to indicate Jesus Christ as faith, as Paul may have intended. Adolf Deissmann argues that *the faith of Jesus (Christ)* is yet another instance of what he has termed “the mystical genitive” (*Religion* 177-178, 250). The faith of Jesus Christ is, according to Deissmann, “the faith which lives in Paul in the fellowship with the spiritual Christ” (205-207). Taken together, these appositional and mystical senses comport with the understanding of faith that we have presented in this section to convey that Christ is joined to us to become our faith, our believing ability. Our faith, therefore, is not of ourselves. It is the faith of Jesus Christ in this fuller sense of the phrase (Campbell et al. 1:16-19).

### ***Faith Ushering the Believers into an Organic Union with Christ***

The faith of the New Testament believers does not have Christ as simply its origin; this faith also has Christ as its destination. Faith is not only produced by the transfusion of Christ into the believers through the preaching of the gospel; faith also ushers the believers into an organic union with Christ. To be a Christian, according to the New Testament, is to be *in Christ*. Paul uses the phrase *in Christ* eighty-two times, and if we include the various related phrases (e.g., *in Him*), that number exceeds one hundred sixty, the vast majority of which speak of the believers being in Christ (Deissmann, *Neutestamentliche Formel* 1-2). The believers have not been metaphorically placed in Christ, as is often supposed. To be “in Christ” is not simply to be under Christ’s reign or to be in covenant with Christ or to be empowered by Christ. Given the way Paul uses this peculiar idiom, we take him to mean that the believers are literally placed by God into Christ as a realm for their existence, life, and service. Paul refers to himself as “a man in Christ” (2 Cor. 12:2). His deepest longing was to be “found in Him” (Phil. 3:9). The believers, too, are “in Christ” (Rom. 16:7), first as infants “in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1), exhorted by Paul to grow up “into Him” (Eph. 4:15), to walk “in Him” (Col. 2:6),

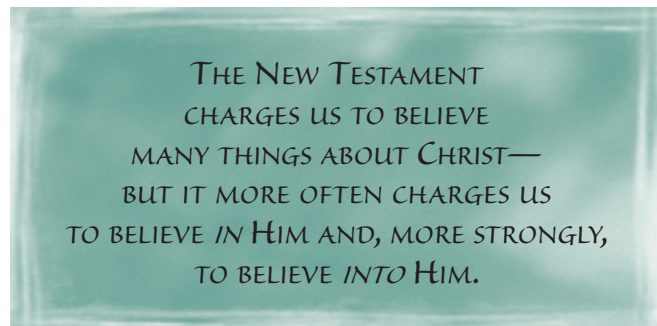
and to live godly “in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:12) until they finally fall asleep “in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:18). Paul was not the first to describe the Christian life as a life in Christ. Shortly before His glorification, the Lord promised His disciples, “In that day,” the day of His resurrection, “you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20). He also told them the way to enter into Him: “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe into God, believe also into Me” (John 14:1).

The New Testament charges us, of course, to believe many things about Christ—that He is (John 8:24); that He is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31); that He came forth from the Father (John 16:27) and was sent by the Father (John 17:21); that He died and rose (1 Thes. 4:14)—but it more often charges us to believe *in* (ἐν, *en*) Him and, more strongly, to believe *into* (εἰς, *eis*) Him. Indeed, the stronger *into* is the preferred utterance for the Lord’s speaking in the Gospel of John, at least as it comes down to us in Greek. While some may be tempted to interpret *believe into* as equivalent to *believe in*, the prominence of each phrase compels us to maintain the distinction and understand the former in its root sense: to believe *into* Christ is to move into, that is, to enter into Christ by believing. With the sole exception of “His name” (John 1:12), the New Testament never speaks of believing *into* anything or anyone other than a divine person (typically Christ, though sometimes “God” more generally), and given the close biblical connection between the divine persons and their names, this should come as no surprise.

Just as the Lord charges us to *believe into* Him, so the apostles speak of *faith into* Christ. The faith of the New Testament believers, then, is not only the faith *of* Christ (πίστις Χριστοῦ, *pistis Christou*), as discussed in the previous section; this faith is also faith *into* (πίστις εἰς, *pistis eis*) Christ (cf. Acts 20:21; 24:24; 26:18; Col. 2:5). Faith is *of* Christ because it has Christ as its source; faith is *into* Christ because it has Christ as its destination. Faith is *of* Christ because it issues forth from the Christ imparted into the believers through the preaching of the gospel; faith is *into* Christ because it ushers the believers into Christ as a realm for their living and service. Faith is *of* Christ because He is infused into the believers; faith is *into* Christ because, by it, the believers are brought into Him. Paul puts these two functions of faith together in Galatians 2:16, which can literally be rendered: “We also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of the faith of Christ.” By means of the faith of Christ—the faith generated by the Christ transfused into us—we believe into Christ; that is, we enter into Him.

The faith of the New Testament believers, then, brings them into a relationship of mutual indwelling with Christ. The

various physical images to which the Lord and the apostles liken this union attest to the realism with which they understood it. According to the Gospel of John, Christ is the vine, and the believers are His branches (John 15:5). According to the Epistles of Paul, He is the Head, and the believers are His members (1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12). According to Peter, He is a living stone, and the believers are living stones being built into a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:4-5). How were the Gentiles grafted into Christ to become branches of the vine? Paul tells us that some in Israel were broken off “because of unbelief” and that the Gentiles were grafted in because they “stand by faith” (Rom. 11:20). How do they come to Him, a living stone, to be built up as living stones into a spiritual house? “For it is contained in Scripture: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a cornerstone, chosen and precious; and he who believes on Him shall by no means be put to shame’” (1 Pet. 2:6). Faith believes many things revealed by God. Faith trusts in God and His promises. But in the deepest sense, faith brings the believers into union with Christ. Given the



organic images employed by John, Paul, and Peter (i.e., vine, Body, and house of living stones), we can say that faith’s most intrinsic work is to usher the believers into an organic union with Christ. It is this uniting character of faith that supplies the deepest rationale for justification being “by faith.” It is certainly the case that justification involves an accounting, but justification is not by accounting alone. Justification is by faith alone, and it is by faith alone because faith ushers us into an organic union with Christ, the righteous One (1 Pet. 3:18).

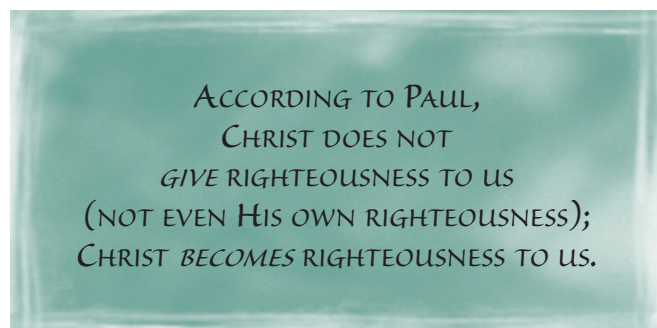
Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that God has given us the righteousness of Christ as something apart from Christ Himself. Instead, it tells us that God has put us in Christ and thus made Christ Himself our righteousness: “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). According to Paul, Christ does not *give* righteousness to us (not even His own righteousness); Christ *becomes* righteousness to us. We are not justified by a righteousness inherent in us that is merely produced by Christ. Neither are we justified by a righteousness external to us that is merely transferred to us before the divine

tribunal. Rather, the righteousness by which we are justified is Christ Himself, the divine and human person with all that He is and has done. Even if God were to make us wholly righteous within and, in addition, transfer Christ’s perfect fulfillment of the law to our account, we would not, thereby, be justified unless the Father, beyond both of these, organically united us with Christ as our righteousness. Conversely, even if God does no more (or, rather, no less) than unite us organically with Christ as righteousness, we have all that we need for our justification before Him. To insist on anything additional as necessary for justification betrays an inadequate appreciation of the significance of our union with Christ. In Christ alone are we approved of the Father. Christ the person and Christ alone is our righteousness for initial, objective justification.

This close relationship between union and justification is helpfully illustrated by a number of Old Testament types. In the Old Testament, salvation is often associated with particular physical locations. On the Day of Expiation the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies to meet with God at the expiation cover on the Ark of the Covenant. As we saw above, Paul tells us that Christ is this place of God’s forgiveness: “Whom God set forth as a propitiation place through faith in His blood” (Rom. 3:25). Only in Christ are God’s forgiveness and justification secured. In a similar vein, Noah and his family were saved by entering into the ark and passing through the flood, which Peter tells us is a type of the baptism that consummates our union with Christ (1 Pet. 3:21). On various other occasions, God requires that His people be in a particular place for forgiveness, justification, and salvation, typifying that the New Testament believers receive these blessings only because they are, by faith, in Christ (e.g., Exo. 12:7; Num. 35:11, 25).

The close connection between union with the person of Christ and the application of the work of Christ is clearly seen in the sacrificial ordinances of Israel. The children of Israel were not only charged to offer sacrifices, which are a clear type of the Christ who would come (Heb. 7:27); they were also instructed repeatedly to lay their hands on the head of these sacrifices (Exo. 29:10, 15, 19; Lev. 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; 8:14, 18, 22; 16:21). The offerer was to do this so that the offering might be “accepted for him, to make expiation for him” (Lev. 1:4). The sacrifice could serve as a substitute because the offerer and the sacrifice had been identified by the laying on of hands. All substitutionary functions of the sacrifices of Israel, in other words, were based on an identification between the offerings and those who offered them. The most detailed account of this, on the negative side, is seen in the ordinances regarding the Day of Expiation (Lev. 16). In this case two goats were involved, the first offered to Jehovah as a sin offering (Lev. 16:9) and the second “sent away for Azazel into the wilderness”

(Lev. 16:10). The identity of Azazel need not detain us here. The important point to note is that, before the second goat was sent away, Aaron laid his hands on its head: “Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them on the head of the goat” (Lev. 16:21). The laying on of hands secured the transfer of sin to the goat. In some other cases in the Old Testament, the offerer not only laid hands on the sacrifice but received the blood of the sacrifice upon him and ate its flesh (Lev. 8:23-31), an even stronger intimation of the organic union between Christ and the believer. Surely, in justification, a transfer of sin and righteousness transpires, but this transfer is not executed at a distance; it is based upon a union of persons.



Perhaps the most consistent biblical theme along these lines is that of covering garments, seen in both the Old and the New Testaments. In the Bible, garments often signify conduct: “All of us became like him who is unclean, and all our righteousnesses are like a soiled garment” (Isa. 64:6). God justifies us not by ignoring our garments, charging us to clean them, or even cleansing them Himself. Instead, God justifies by giving us new garments: “Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and was standing before the Angel. And He answered and spoke to those standing before Him, saying, Remove the filthy garments from him. Then He said to him, See, I hereby make your iniquity pass from you and clothe you with stately robes” (Zech. 3:3-4). Isaiah thus jubilantly declares, “I will rejoice greatly in Jehovah, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10). From the very beginning, after Adam’s fall into sin, God came in not simply to forgive but to cover. Adam and Eve covered themselves with leaves, but God came in to cover them with “coats of skin” (Gen. 3:7, 21). The Lord, too, draws on this image of the covering garment. In Luke 15, when the prodigal son returns to his father’s house, declaring, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you,” the father responds, “Bring out quickly the best robe and put it on him” (Luke 15:21-22). Likewise, Paul tells the Galatians, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ

have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:26-27). The believers are righteous in the sight of God because they have put on Christ as their garment of righteousness by their faith and baptism into Him. Paul was clear that the righteousness with which God clothes His believers is nothing less than God Himself in Christ, and in this he followed the prophets before him: “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called: Jehovah our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6) (Campbell et al. 1:19-25).

### *The Result of Justification*

God’s objective justification of the believers—based on their organic union with Christ as righteousness—produces a number of wonderful results. Here we present three results that we feel are especially precious and essential to the believers in their daily Christian life. As those who have been justified by faith, the believers can experience full peace in their conscience, boast in God with all boldness, and enter into grace for the enjoyment of God in His organic salvation. All three of these results are evident in Romans 5.

One result of our justification by faith is that we can experience full peace in our conscience. This is indicated in Romans 5:1: “Therefore having been justified out of faith, we have peace toward God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The peace mentioned here issues from our justification by faith. It flows from our realization that Christ’s death on the cross satisfied all of God’s requirements and solved every problem between us and God. In Christ we have been forgiven, washed, and justified by God; reconciled to God; and sanctified unto God. This peace also flows from our recognition that God raised Christ from the dead “for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Christ’s resurrection stills our doubts and proves that we have been justified by God because of Christ’s death. The peace that we enjoy is thus a genuine and stable peace, one that follows from our realization that our sins have been forgiven and that we have been approved in Christ.

Our inward sense of peace with God is bolstered by our recognition that the eternal salvation we have received in Christ is certain and secure. The certainty of our salvation is proved by the Spirit’s inward witness that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), by the scriptural promise that all who believe into Christ have eternal life (1 John 5:13), and by our love for our fellow believers in Christ (1 John 3:14). We can thus know with full assurance that we are saved. Moreover, we can know that our salvation is eternally secure because it is according to God’s unchanging purpose (2 Tim. 1:9), irrevocable calling (Rom. 11:29), eternal love (Jer. 31:3; Rom. 8:38-39) and life (John 10:28), and even His unchanging being (James 1:17; Mal. 3:6). The unchanging

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character of our eternal salvation thus reflects the unchanging character and purpose of our Savior God. The security of our eternal salvation rests altogether on our unchanging God, not on our inward feeling or even our inward assurance of salvation—both of which tend to fluctuate.

A second result of our justification by faith is that we can boast in God and His approval of us. Romans 5:11 speaks of “boasting in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.” In the context of Romans 5 boasting denotes glorying and exulting with shouting and rejoicing. As those who are in Christ, and are thus partakers of all that He is and has accomplished, how can we refrain from glorying and exulting in God? God has given us Christ Himself as our righteousness! This divine fact should elicit much praise and rejoicing in our daily Christian life. As those clothed with Christ, we should stand before the righteous God with all boldness, not based on our merit, conduct, or feeling but based solely on Christ our righteousness. Our boldness in approaching God derives from our apprehension of who Christ is and who we are in Him. We have no confidence in ourselves apart from Christ, but we have the utmost confidence in Christ and in our union with Him. We thus approach God and boast in Him because we realize, as our brother Paul realized, that of Him we “are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

A third result of our justification by faith is that we are ushered into grace for the enjoyment of God. This result is indicated in Romans 5:1-2, which says, “Having been justified out of faith, . . . we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.” Through faith we enter into a realm of grace. As we stand in grace, we are saved in Christ’s life (Rom. 5:10) and are thereby ushered into the organic aspect of God’s full salvation. Although justification by faith is not God’s goal, it is the gate through which we enter into the organic aspect of salvation for the accomplishment of God’s goal. Apart from the justification by faith defined and illustrated in Romans 3—4, we could not experience the riches of God’s organic salvation unveiled in the subsequent chapters of Romans. We therefore treasure justification by faith as a foundational truth in the Scriptures. Even more, we treasure our Father God, the One who justifies us (Rom. 8:33), and our Lord Jesus Christ, the One in whom we are justified (Acts 13:39) (Campbell et al. 1:25-27).

### Clarifications on Objective Justification

In the articles to follow we will examine the progress in the understanding of justification throughout the centuries of the Christian church after the time of the apostles. We will find many things that match what we have presented

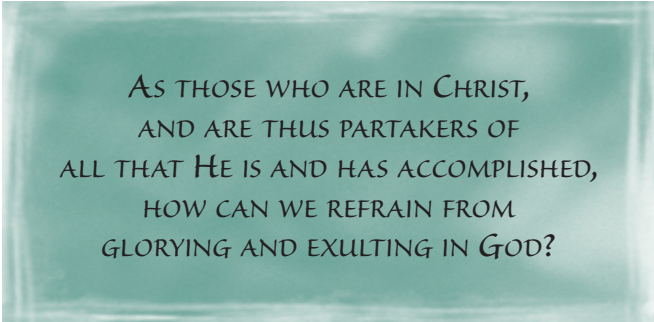
in this article as the biblical understanding of justification, and we will encounter many things that deviate from this proper understanding. While the details of our historical evaluation must constitute the articles to follow, there are certain general clarifications about our view of justification that should be made in advance. We hope that these general points will help our readers winnow more ably the wheat from the chaff in all that we will present in the following articles. Mainly these are clarifications about what justification is not, offered here in brief after the rather extensive presentation above of what justification is. If there can be one overall evaluation of the entire history that we will trace, it is this: objective justification, as we have termed it here, relates singly, solely, and narrowly to God’s action to render His chosen ones righteous by faith, and any attempt to extend it beyond this understanding has introduced confusion and ultimately deviation. As we wade into the details of development and deviation across the centuries, it is good for our readers to be cognizant of the clarifications we offer below since these clarifications address some misconceptions that have persisted stubbornly for centuries and some that lie as hidden obstacles today (Campbell et al. 1:43-44).

### *Objective Justification is Not Forgiveness of Sins, nor Is It Applied in Baptism*

God justifies the believers solely because by faith they are joined to Christ and possess Christ as their righteousness before Him. Thus, God justifies the believers according to the standard of His own righteousness. But across the centuries many have understood justification as something related simply to sins and have therefore equated justification with the forgiveness of sins. According to this view, if a believer’s sins are forgiven, then that person is righteous before God. Hence, righteousness is the absence of sins. The concept seems logical enough, and it is easy to see how this view came to be adopted even in the earliest centuries after the first apostles and how tenacious it has been even to this day. It is quite natural to think that if a person has never sinned, he or she is righteous before God. And by extension it seems reasonable to assume that if someone sins and then has his or her sins truly forgiven by God, he or she is righteous before God and can be justified by Him. The absence of sins, either in one’s living (though not actually possible) or through God’s forgiveness, certainly suggests itself as righteousness, and we can expect that in human eyes it is. But how human beings view righteousness is not what matters, because “it is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33), and it is not human beings who determine what justifies before God. Thus, the question is, what is the righteousness that satisfies God and gives Him the way to justify human beings in His own eyes and according to His own standard?

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The apostle Paul makes this distinction between a righteousness of our own and a righteousness according to God. In Philippians 3:7-11, in what is no doubt the unique passage in his writings (Lee, *Life-study of Philippians* 203-204) concerning his highest aspirations as a believer, he expressed the earnest desire to “be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is out of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith” (Phil. 3:9). In his former manner of life as a devout keeper of the Mosaic law, Paul’s standard of righteousness was determined completely by the law. The law through its many ordinances commanded him how to live, and the law through its prescribed sacrifices provided the way for the forgiveness of his failures in keeping the law. But by the mercy of God and through the revelation given to him by God, Paul came to know that the law could give only knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20) and offer a righteousness that is only of itself. Further, by revelation he understood that “the righteousness which is in the law”



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(Phil. 3:6) is not the righteousness that God accepts; it is not “the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith.” In Philippians 3:9 Paul is directly referring to his aspiration for subjective righteousness, which is God Himself lived out to be righteousness through faith in Christ (Lee, Recovery Version, Phil. 3:9, note 5) and which he had not yet fully attained to (Phil. 3:12). But the principle for the righteousness that God accepts is clearly articulated here and most certainly obtains as well in the experience of objective justification: the righteousness that God accepts cannot be of the law (Gal. 2:21; 3:21); it must be out of God Himself and based on faith in Christ. Even if Paul had been able to keep every commandment of the law, which he was not able to do, and even if he could count himself blameless through the covering of the sacrifices of the law, that is, even if he obtained the forgiveness of his sins against the law, he could not be justified by God according to His own standard. God requires a righteousness that is apart from the law, a righteousness that is in fact His own righteousness embodied in Christ, and only those who believe in Christ and are thereby joined to Christ are justified according to God’s own standard. The forgiveness of sins may bring a person into blamelessness, and this may be righteousness

in our eyes and according to our own satisfaction. However, God is righteous in a unique way, and to be justified by Him requires an answer to His own standard of righteousness. The standard is indeed too high and absolutely unreachable for any human being, whether he or she keeps the law completely (impossible!) or is forgiven for not doing so (what mercy!). Apart from what we may try to do to reach the standard, God instead gives His Christ to us as righteousness when we believe and are brought into an organic union with Him. This far surpasses the human concept about righteousness and is indeed the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30).

This is not to say that justification has nothing to do with forgiveness of sins. The many facets of God’s complete salvation work together in unison, and what is distinctly one facet is always related to what is distinctly another. All facets of God’s salvation are related to the attributes of God (cf. Rom. 3:23), and thus, His operations to save are as intimately related to one another as are His attributes within Him. The writers of the New Testament clearly understood this relational quality among the distinct facets of salvation but certainly not within modern systematic frameworks. Rather, their understanding was derived from the divine revelation that they received and corresponded to the realities that they experienced as ones who were shown mercy to see and experience these things first for the sake of all of us. The revelation they received was complete, and their experience was holistic. Because of this, they easily speak of one facet of salvation in close relation to another, and sometimes from our perspective it is easy to lose sight of the distinctions among the facets.

This seems to be the reason for the identification of forgiveness of sins with justification by some teachers across the centuries. For example, in Romans 5:9 Paul says that we have been “justified in His blood,” and without doubt, the mention of Christ’s blood points to His death for the forgiveness of sins. But we need not see in this compressed statement an equivalence of justification and forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is necessary for our justification, but it is not the essence of it. We do not become righteous, at the standard of God’s righteousness, simply by having our sins forgiven. Rather, because our sins are forgiven through our faith in Christ and His death, we are able to be joined to Christ in that faith and to possess Him as the righteousness that justifies us before God. Thus, certainly we are “justified in His blood” since His death for the forgiveness of our sins opens the way for us to possess Him as our righteousness. Yet it is not forgiveness of sins but faith possessing Christ as righteousness that justifies us before God.

Similarly, in Romans 3:24-26 Paul shows in a very uncompresssed way that justification, while related to forgiveness

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of sins, is distinct from it. In verse 24 he says that the believers are “justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” He then explains what God has done to set Christ forth for the propitiation of sins. Some may take Paul to mean here that justification equals forgiveness of sins, but this is not what he is saying. Justification is “through the redemption,” and the propitiation of sins is “for the demonstrating of His righteousness.” In speaking this way, Paul clearly distinguishes between justification and forgiveness. God holds Himself to His own righteousness (as He must according to His own being) when He forgives sins because of the death of His Son, but this does not justify the believer. Rather, it demonstrates that God is righteous; in a sense, it justifies God before the entire universe. But He justifies the believer, that is, He recognizes that the believer is righteous, because the believer is “of the faith of Jesus,” and this faith is not simply assent to Christ but, more intrinsically, union with Him, who is the believer’s righteousness. Justification is certainly through the forgiveness of sins, but it is not identical with it.

Romans 4:6-8 has also been used by some to identify justification with forgiveness of sins. In verse 6 Paul says that David “speaks blessing on the man to whom God accounts righteousness apart from works,” and then in verses 7 and 8 Paul quotes Psalm 32:1-2, which speaks of the forgiveness of sins. Some understand Paul to be saying that when God forgives sins, He accounts righteousness; that is, He justifies. But Paul’s whole point in Romans 4 is that God justifies because of faith apart from works, not because of forgiveness of sins. Abraham is the prime example of one who believed God and whose faith was accounted as righteousness, as Paul relates in this chapter, and in the example of Abraham forgiveness of sins is not involved at all. But Paul also offers David’s psalm as an additional example of the same principle, that is, of God accounting someone’s faith as righteousness. It is not the forgiveness of sins itself that God accounts as righteousness, according to the flow and sense of Paul’s argument here; rather, it is the faith in God who forgives sins that is accounted as righteousness. We must read this citation from David as an additional example of God accounting faith as righteousness and not as God equating forgiveness of sins as righteousness. The blessedness spoken of here relies on the faith that those ones have in God’s forgiveness of their sins, and though David does not mention faith or believing explicitly, the apostle Paul invites us to understand that faith is implicitly present and that David’s words are an additional proof that God accounts faith as righteousness for our justification. To take Paul’s use of David’s words as a proof that forgiveness of sins equals justification is to read too narrowly and to miss the point of Paul’s quotation entirely.

Finally, a brief word should be said about baptism in relation to justification because in many Christian traditions

baptism is also equated with the forgiveness of sins, and that equivalence leads to the mistaken notion that justification occurs in baptism. In the New Testament, baptism is said to be “for forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; cf. Acts 2:38), and based on this, many traditions understand baptism to be the sacramental application of the initial forgiveness of sins. The early church’s misstep concerning infant baptism served only to reinforce this notion. Once the forgiveness of initial sins was closely bound to the sacrament of baptism, it was but a small leap to bind justification to baptism, based again on misunderstanding justification as simply the forgiveness of sins. When the New Testament mentions baptism for forgiveness of sins, it does so in relation to repentance as the condition and forgiveness of sins as the result (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38). While some traditions may be able to forego conscious repentance in the infants whom they baptize and to expect that original sin is effaced in baptism, our consciences will not allow us to believe that sins are forgiven without conscious and deliberate repentance or to say that baptism equals forgiveness. Rather, we are bound to understand that in the most effective preaching of the gospel, as seen in Peter’s preaching in Acts 2, repentance is an inward condition that leads to immediate baptism as an outward testimony, “the appeal of a good conscience unto God” (1 Pet. 3:21). While it is best that one be baptized immediately when he or she believes and repents, we should be careful not to equate baptism with forgiveness of sins (or with regeneration particularly and salvation generally). Taking the matter one step further, we should be careful not to think that baptism is a sacramental application of justification based on the forgiveness of sins, as though we could be justified through some outward action. Again, only faith, as that which joins us to Christ and makes Him our righteousness from God, is what justifies us before God (Campbell et al. 1:44-48).

### *Objective Justification Is Not Subjective Justification*

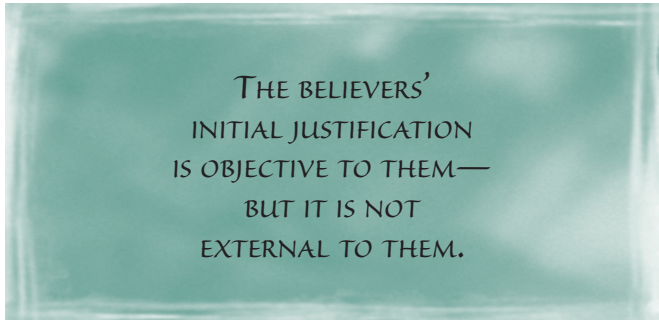
Two aspects of justification are evident in Scripture: objective justification and subjective justification. Lest some of our readers unwittingly conflate these two aspects or confuse our understanding of the terms *objective justification* and *subjective justification* with the understandings common to other theological traditions, we think it is profitable to explain some of the main distinctions between these two aspects of justification (as we understand them) and to clarify that objective justification is not subjective justification. Objective justification is accomplished once for all when we believe into Christ and are thus brought into an organic union with Him. It is based on a righteousness that is objective to us, which is the Christ whom we receive by faith and put on (Gal. 3:27) as our “robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10). As a judicial matter, objective justification

secures for us a position of righteousness before God, precedes (causally though not temporally) our regeneration by the divine life, and brings us into a righteous condition in which we may receive and enjoy the divine life (Rom. 1:17; 5:17-18, 21; 8:10). In contrast, subjective justification is carried out progressively and organically after our regeneration as we live out Christ as our righteousness and eventually become “the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). It is based on a righteousness that is subjective to us, which is the Christ who dwells in us to live in us a life that is acceptable to God.

Some might ask why we feel the need to distinguish between the objective and subjective aspects of justification, which correspond with an objective righteousness and a subjective righteousness, respectively. Perhaps the simplest reason is that Scripture in its totality requires that we do so. Many recognize an objective aspect of justification but deny a subjective aspect. However, there are many portions of Scripture that reveal that the believers ought to become subjectively righteous in their inward constitution and to manifest righteousness in their living and works. Second Corinthians 5:21 says that Christ, who did not know sin, was “made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” The emphasis here is not on Christ becoming the believers’ righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30) but on the believers becoming the righteousness of God in Christ. Through their gradual and inward transformation by the divine life, the believers become not only righteous but the very righteousness of God. This righteousness is manifested in their righteous living and works. First Peter 2:24 speaks of living “to righteousness,” and Titus 2:12, of living “righteously.” Romans 8:4 speaks of “the righteous requirement of the law” being “fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the spirit.” Matthew 5:20 says that “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of the heavens,” and Matthew 13:43 declares that “the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” Revelation 19:8 reveals that the wife of the Lamb will be “clothed in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteousnesses of the saints.” The righteousness spoken of in these verses is a righteousness that is subjective to the believers, a righteousness that is possessed by them and aptly described as “the righteousnesses of the saints.” It is a righteousness that should characterize their inward being—to the extent that they become not only righteous but the righteousness of God in Christ—and should be manifested in their living. This righteousness is a righteousness of life, for it issues from the divine life and can be practiced only by those who have been regenerated by the divine life. This organic relationship between the believers’ regeneration and their practice of righteousness is evident in 1 John 2:29: “If you know that He is righteous,

you know that everyone who practices righteousness also has been begotten of Him.” As the believers live according to the divine life, their living will issue in the works spoken of in James 2:24 and in the justification by works spoken of in the same verse. God justifies the believers subjectively on the basis of these works.

In light of these verses, some recognize a subjective aspect of justification but deny an objective aspect. However, Scripture clearly speaks of an objective aspect of justification that is not at all related to works—not even to those righteous works that issue from the divine life—but is related only to faith in Christ. The Epistles of Paul speak repeatedly of this aspect of justification, the justification of the ungodly that is not by works but by faith alone and that is accomplished when a person first believes into Christ. Romans 3:28 states clearly that “a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” Romans 4:5 draws a sharp contrast between work and faith when it says, “But to the one who does not



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work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted as righteousness.” Galatians 2:16 presents a similar contrast: “Knowing that a man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, we also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ and not out of the works of law, because out of the works of law no flesh will be justified.” That the believers are justified simply by faith in Christ is also made clear in Romans 3:26, which declares that God justifies “him who is of the faith of Jesus,” and in Acts 13:39, which says that “in this One,” the resurrected Christ, “everyone who believes is justified.” This aspect of justification corresponds with the “righteousness which is out of faith” spoken of in Romans 9:30 and 10:6. This is not a righteousness that issues from the divine life but a righteousness that results in life. It is this righteousness that is spoken of in Romans 8:10, which declares that “the spirit is life because of righteousness.” This righteousness is for the believers’ justification by faith, a “justification of life” (Rom. 5:18) that provides the judicial basis for God’s organic work within the believers, beginning with their regeneration by the divine life. This aspect of justification is completed when the believers first receive Christ as their righteousness through faith in Him.

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God justifies the believers objectively by faith alone; this objective justification is instantaneous, secure, and invariable. Whereas the believers' subjective justification should progress over the full course of their Christian life, their objective justification is accomplished when they first believe into Christ. Those who have been justified by God can thus speak, as the apostle Paul speaks, of "having been justified out of faith" (Rom. 5:1) and of "having now been justified in His blood" (Rom. 5:9). The verses we have cited above are a sampling of the New Testament declarations concerning objective and subjective righteousness. In this light many passages on justification can be placed in one or the other category (or both!), resolving all apparent contradictions concerning the meaning of justification.

God surely intends that all those who receive Christ as their objective righteousness through faith would express Him as their subjective righteousness in their living, but God's objective justification of the believers is not based on their subjective condition, inward transformation, or even their expression of Christ as righteousness. Rather, it is based purely on their organic union with Christ as righteousness, for it is only by means of this union that Christ as the righteousness of God becomes righteousness to the believers (1 Cor. 1:30). God regards this Christ as perfectly sufficient for the believers' objective justification even though they have yet to apply Christ and live Him out as their subjective righteousness. He thus approves the believers—objectively and judicially—because of their oneness with Christ as righteousness through faith without conditioning this approval on the believers' (gradual and future) appropriation of the Christ whom they have received. This means that the believers' objective justification is not based on their being made inwardly righteous in the present or in the future. In this sense God's initial justification of the believers is based on a righteousness that is objective to them. They are not yet the agents of this righteousness, which is Christ Himself received by faith, and this righteousness is not something of themselves or even something produced within them by the divine life.

Our description of the believers' initial justification as something objective should not be taken to mean that this aspect of justification is external to the believers, as traditional Protestant accounts of justification are often accused of holding. We maintain that the believers' initial justification is objective to them but deny that it is external to them. It is objective in the sense that it is based on a righteousness that the believers have received by faith but have yet to apply in their living; it is internal in the sense that it is based on the believers' organic union with Christ as righteousness through faith. Through faith the believers are in Christ, the very righteousness of God, and Christ as God's righteousness is in them as their righteousness. Because of this organic union God justifies the believers, thereby securing their

salvation from eternal perdition and positioning them to participate in the organic aspect of His salvation (Campbell et al. 1:48-51).

### *Objective Justification Is Not to Be Confused with Reward Based on Works*

In speaking of the believers' salvation, the New Testament at times speaks of its gracious, gratuitous nature, but at other times it speaks of requirements on the part of believers and seems to make their full salvation conditional, based on their living and service to the Lord. Because of this, several traditions of Bible interpretation have confused justification by faith with reward based on works. Those of one school insist that justification is based on a kind of merit, bypassing those passages of Scripture that speak of its gratuitous character; those of another school recognize that objective justification is given freely but do so by neglecting those passages that speak of requirement. A proper understanding of the believers' full salvation must account for both sides of the truth. On one side, subjective justification relates to the believers' condition and work, for which the New Testament speaks of a reward. On the other side, objective justification is clearly presented in the New Testament as being a free gift; it is not a reward based on works. Paul states, "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). Objective justification is the free gift of God graciously given through the faith of Christ apart from all works (Rom. 5:15-17; 6:23; 8:32; Eph. 2:8; Heb. 6:4), as Paul says, "We also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ and not out of the works of law, because out of the works of law no flesh will be justified" (Gal. 2:16; cf. Rom. 3:20, 26-28; 4:4-6; 11:6; Gal. 3:11; Eph. 2:8-9).

In apparent contrast, however, the New Testament also speaks of a reward for the believers. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great" (Luke 6:35). Paul writes, "If anyone's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward" (1 Cor. 3:14), and he describes God as "a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). The New Testament is rich in its revelation and in its vocabulary related to reward and recompense, offering a variety of terms to express these notions.

In Romans 4:4 Paul gives a working definition of reward: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not accounted according to grace, but according to what is due." Clearly then, a reward is not a free gift; it is "what is due," a wage, a hire, a payment to a laborer for works, deeds, or services rendered. Although the New Testament clearly reveals that justification is a free gift, in certain contexts it frequently applies the language of reward to the believers. The kingdom



of the heavens is a great reward for those who are persecuted (Matt. 5:11-12; Luke 6:23); the workers among God's people will receive a reward according to their labor (1 Cor. 3:8, 14); those who reap in God's field will receive their wages unto eternal life (John 4:36); and at Christ's return He will give His faithful ones the reward, their inheritance from Him as a recompense (Rev. 11:18; Col. 3:24). In many similar passages we are taught that the Father and the Son will repay the believers (Matt. 6:4, 6; Luke 10:35; 14:14), Christ as the Householder will pay them their wages (Matt. 20:8), and the Lord as the righteous Judge will recompense them in judgment both for good and for evil (2 Tim. 4:8, 14; Heb. 10:30).

The truth of the believers' reward, and punishment as well, centers around the judgment seat of Christ. Paul states, "We must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Rom. 14:10). This does not refer to the judgment at the great white throne in Revelation 20:11-12. The latter will take place after the millennium, the thousand-year kingdom set up by Christ at His second coming (Rev. 20:4-7). This will be the judgment of the dead and resurrected unbelievers, whose names are not written in the book of life, resulting in their eternal perdition (Rev. 20:12-15). In contrast to this, the judgment seat of Christ is for the believers and will take place at the resurrection of the righteous when the dead in Christ will rise (Luke 14:14; 1 Thes. 4:16), which will transpire at Christ's coming before the thousand years. At this judgment seat we the believers will render an account to the Lord for our living and service in the church age, and Christ the righteous Judge will give to each one the reward or discipline due to him or her. Thus, the Lord proclaimed to John, who represents all the believers in the church age, "Behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to render to each one as his work is" (Rev. 22:12). Paul tells us that if anyone's work remains, that is, is found approved at the judgment seat, he will receive a reward, but if anyone's work is consumed, "he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Paul draws a distinct contrast between "suffer loss" and "be saved." As to the reward, the unapproved believers will suffer loss, but as to their eternal destiny, they will be saved. These two greatly different phrases—*be saved* and *suffer loss*—clearly distinguish between the believers' eternal salvation, which is based on justification, and the receiving of a reward, which is based on works. Whereas the believer's eternal salvation, issuing from justification, can never be lost, his or her reward can be forfeited; and whereas the believer's objective justification is a matter of grace through faith alone, his or her reward is based on subjective righteousness and works.

Justification by faith and reward or discipline for works

constitute two great aspects of the believers' full salvation, and a proper understanding of them resolves many apparent contradictions and unlocks many puzzles in the New Testament. God gives freely, yet He also recompenses justly; by simple faith we enter the kingdom of God, but believers who practice sin will not inherit the kingdom as a reward in the coming millennial age (John 3:3, 5; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5); everyone who believes into Christ has eternal life, but only those who follow Him absolutely will inherit life as a fuller enjoyment in the age to come (John 3:15; Matt. 19:28-29), that is, in the thousand-year kingdom. Moreover, it is by faith that we are justified for our salvation, yet we still must grow unto salvation and develop in the divine life so that an entrance into the kingdom may be richly supplied to us (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). And very significantly, it was in freely given justification that Paul exulted, but it was with the reward in view that he pursued Christ at all costs if "perhaps" he may attain to the out-resurrection from the dead, the outstanding portion of the coming resurrection that will

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be a prize to the overcoming believers (Phil. 3:7-12). Indeed, as of the writing of the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul still claimed to have not already obtained the prize. Only at the end of his course did he proclaim, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, with which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will recompense me in that day" (2 Tim. 4:8). On the one hand, it was through the faith of Jesus Christ that Paul was justified, establishing his eternal salvation before God; on the other hand, it is for his great labor and sacrifice that he will receive a just reward, the recompense due to him, at the Lord's coming. Yet while speaking soberly concerning the believers' reward or discipline for their works done in this age, the New Testament still holds forth justification for our eternal salvation as a gracious gift, a free gift, the heavenly gift, the gift of God given freely (Rom. 5:15-16; 6:23; Eph. 2:8; Heb. 6:4).

The Bible reveals much more on this crucial subject, but here we can offer only a brief hint. This and subsequent articles treat in detail the truth of justification by faith as the entrance into God's full salvation. Nevertheless, it is necessary and healthy to understand our accountability to the Lord

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for our life and work in this age, which will be judged at Christ's judgment seat when He comes, issuing in a reward or a chastisement in the coming age of the kingdom. This is a very great matter to which all Christians should give diligent heed. As believers, we must cut straight the word of the truth so as never to confuse the two issues of objective justification and reward (Campbell et al. 1:51-54).

### ***Objective Justification Is Not Based on Christ's Righteousness but on Christ as Righteousness***

In these articles on justification, we often emphasize our fundamental position that justification is not based on the righteousness of Christ but on Christ as righteousness. A common teaching among Protestants is that justification is accomplished by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, whereby the righteousness that Christ attained in His human living and death is accounted as the believer's righteousness in a purely forensic, external sense. This view suggests that God merely credits an attainment of Christ to the believer rather than acknowledging the believer's union with Christ. Justification, however, is based not on Christ's righteousness—which is related to Him but distinct from Him—but on Christ Himself as the righteousness of God. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 1:30, Watchman Nee (d. 1972) writes:

This verse shows us clearly that Christ has become the righteousness of the believers. It is not something about Christ that has become our righteousness; rather, Christ Himself in His entirety has become our righteousness. Something of Christ can never be as absolute and perfect as Christ Himself. When Christ Himself becomes our righteousness, God receives us. (CWWN 45:1027)

The "something about Christ" that Watchman Nee refers to is the righteousness of Christ, that is, the righteous living that was "the qualification which the Lord had before God when He was a man" and that "has absolutely nothing to do with us" (45:1026). This righteousness, which belongs only to Christ, is not accounted to the believer; rather, through faith the believer is brought into union with Christ Himself as the righteousness of God. Thus, faith denotes the union on account of which God justifies and thereby receives the believer. Apart from this faith-union with Christ, the just One, there can be no justification of the believer.

Furthermore, justification is often presented as an either-or proposition, that is, that a believer in Christ is either declared righteous without any change in his or her actual condition or is actually made righteous in justification. This insistence on one understanding or the other has caused much debate and division in the church. Those in the "declared righteous"

camp see justification as a judicial act in which God declares the believer righteous (based on Christ's righteousness), even though the believer is not actually righteous in his or her inward condition. For adherents of this position, the believer is thus simultaneously righteous and a sinner. Those in the "made righteous" camp reject the notion that God would declare someone righteous who is not actually righteous in an interior, moral sense. Adherents of this position argue that God makes a person inwardly righteous in justification. They contend that in justification God eradicates sin through an infusion of grace, and thus the thought of a person being at one time righteous and inwardly a sinner is rejected. We believe that to frame justification in either-or terms is to miss its intrinsic significance. In our view justification by faith involves both a declaring righteous and a making righteous. It involves a declaring righteous but not a *mere* declaring righteous, since the one declared righteous has truly been made righteous in the eyes of God. It involves a making righteous, not by an infusion of righteousness that expels sin but by union with Christ, the righteousness of God. While justification has both objective and subjective aspects, objective justification is a matter of being righteous because Christ, the One to whom the believer is joined by faith, is righteous. Because God justifies the believers based solely on their union with Christ through faith, nothing in addition to faith is needed for the objective aspect of justification. It is from this perspective and according to this standard that we evaluate, in the articles that follow, the teaching of justification by faith in the major Christian traditions (Campbell et al. 1:54-55).

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# JUSTIFICATION FROM THE PATRISTIC PERIOD THROUGH LUTHER'S BREAKTHROUGH CONCERNING FAITH

In April 1948 Watchman Nee (d. 1972) told his co-workers: "In Luther we see the recovery of faith. However, Luther did not recover justification by faith. He only recovered faith; he was not so clear concerning justification" (*CWWN* 57:51). If we did not know and trust Brother Nee (as indeed some may not), we would easily view his statement as either full of hubris or short of understanding. After all, Martin Luther (d. 1546) is credited almost universally, by both his admirers and his detractors, as being the main one in history to promote justification by faith alone apart from works. But knowing and trusting Brother Nee, we should consider his observation carefully because, as we will see in this article, it is a piercing evaluation of Luther's contribution to the steadily progressing understanding of the divine truth in the Bible and one that will help us know more fully how God justifies His chosen ones for their salvation.

The impact of Martin Luther on the Christian church cannot easily be estimated, and it certainly cannot be limited to the impact of his understanding of justification by faith. Nonetheless, his most significant impact on the Christian church does lie in his understanding of justification by faith, which for him was "that central article of our teaching" (*WA* 40.III:335); "for when this article stands, the church stands; when it falls, the church falls" (*WA* 40.III:352). While he no doubt overestimated the value of justification in God's full salvation, and this has led to serious consequences today for many Christians, it was certainly the most important matter needing to be addressed in his day and the one matter that most hindered the progress of the believers at that time. Hence, his understanding of justification by faith deserves our particular attention here.

While most Christians commonly associate justification by faith with Martin Luther along with the Protestant Reformation that ensued from his stand against the Roman Catholic Church, there is ample treatment of this truth in those periods of the Christian church that precede him. It

is fair to say that the relative nebulousness in the centuries before Luther concerning this important truth allowed a number of misunderstandings and even some distortions concerning it to enter in, and these, we say, compelled the Lord to raise up Luther to recover this truth for all the church. Therefore, before we consider Luther's understanding of justification by faith, we should briefly look into justification as taught in the writings of the church prior to Luther.

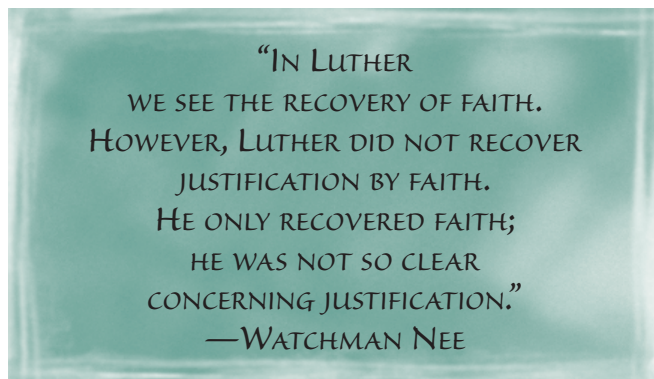
## In the Patristic Period (Second through Sixth Centuries)

Some modern writers have cautioned against looking for a solidified understanding of justification in the patristic period, while other scholars have tried to establish that there is indeed a developed doctrine of justification even in those early centuries. The truth depends on one's perspective. If we use the Reformation and Christian thought thereafter as the standard for a solid understanding of justification, we will be hard pressed to find something with that clarity and emphasis in the writings of the second through sixth centuries. We agree with one scholar that "the claim that the Fathers held to a Protestant doctrine of justification is untenable" (Lane 187). But if we can imagine what many patristic writers might think, we will have to admit that they would take great exception to being characterized as having no solid and unified understanding of this basic and important doctrine. If anything, they might find odd the later emphasis on justification over other aspects of God's full spectrum of salvation and take exception to that. The church in the patristic era did indeed have some depth in its understanding of justification. As careful readers of the New Testament, like those in later periods of the church, the patristic writers could see the importance of justification in the apostles' teaching, especially in Paul, and did not ignore it. While they had other important concerns that demanded their attention, many readily attended to justification not simply by repeating Paul's key phrases but more

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significantly by laying out in many aspects what they understood him to be saying.

Initially, in the second and early third centuries, what can be gleaned from Christian writers regarding justification is probably best characterized as early misconceptions. For Theophilus of Antioch the basis of God's salvation goes no further than human works under God's law, that is, what was understood among the Jews, even if his major intention is to show the uniqueness of the Christian "faith." For Justin Martyr the basis of God's salvation is reduced to active participation in the Logos (reason) that is instilled in every human being; thus, the uniqueness of faith is suppressed. Clement of Alexandria shows some improvement over his predecessors in that he recognizes the necessity of faith, but at the same time he is careful to assert that faith alone is not sufficient for God to save us. But in defense of these writers, we can say that these expressions concerning God's salvation are not major emphases in their writings and that these expressions are, at best, unguarded, indeliberate, and unfortunate (Campbell et al. 1:75-79).



Beginning in the third century, we find more definite teaching on justification that shaped post-patristic understandings to a great extent. Some writers (Origen, Ambrose of Milan, Ambrosiaster, Augustine) understood justification as simply the forgiveness of past sins, and some construed baptism as the means of attaining the forgiveness of sins and therefore initial justification (Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, Augustine). In our view, these two notions fall short of a full and proper understanding of justification and confuse justification with other aspects of God's judicial redemption, but both notions have prevailed among some Christians to the present day. Because infant baptism was the common practice among the churches from the second century well into the sixteenth, the true significance of justification was occluded until confidence in the permanence of justification as bestowed in baptism began to erode (Campbell et al. 1:79-88).

But patristic writers also have much to say about certain more intrinsic aspects of justification—that it is by faith apart from works, that it is God's gift in grace, and that it results in certainty and even boasting for the believer— aspects that properly reflect the teaching of the New Testament. Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrosiaster in the Latin West and John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea in the Greek East give definite testimony of their understanding that justification is by faith apart from works. Hilary is noteworthy in this regard because it is in his *Commentary on Matthew* that he gives great attention to Paul's teaching on justification apart from works: that he does so in this work, of all places, demonstrates the indispensability of this notion in his understanding of justification (Williams 657). A very striking detail in John Chrysostom's understanding of justification is his recognition that there is an aspect of it that happens immediately. This aspect is related to his general understanding that justification is by faith alone apart from works. Along this line, throughout the patristic period there is an excellent thread of commentary on the thief on the cross as an illustration of justification apart from works. This thief, obviously apart from any prior justifying works, merely believed in Christ on the cross, and for that he was assured by the Lord of his salvation (Luke 23:39-43). Chrysostom offers perhaps the best presentation of this, but Origen and Cyril of Jerusalem likewise present the thief on the cross as evidence that justification is apart from works (Campbell et al. 1:88-102).

Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, Augustine, Jerome, Fulgentius of Ruspe, and John Chrysostom all speak of justification as God's gift in grace, a fact that is corollary to justification apart from works. This is Paul's point in Romans when he opposes grace to works: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not accounted according to grace, but according to what is due" (Rom. 4:4); and "if by grace, it is no longer out of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom. 11:6). Thus, he considers that justification, as a matter of grace from God, is not something that is given to human beings based on their works. This is, of course, the striking revelation in the gospel, and many patristic writers take definite note of this (Campbell et al. 1:102-105).

Further, certainty of one's justification before God will become a major issue (some would say *the* major issue) during the Reformation, and much effort will be spent in that later period to affirm the assurance of salvation based on God's justification. In the patristic period this issue was not much in focus, and therefore, it did not receive much attention. However, there are important and respected patristic writers who encouraged their readers to be certain of their justification before God and to even boast in

it, as Paul exhorts in Romans 5:1-2. Cyprian, in a treatise written after the persecution of the Roman emperor Decius and during a terrible plague, gives a particularly touching exhortation to his flock, encouraging them, in the face of such dangers and death, to be assured of their justification if they live by faith. Likewise, Hilary, in his same *Commentary on Matthew*, offers similar encouragement to those who are anxious about even the mundane things in human life. Indeed, Basil of Caesarea goes so far as to encourage boasting and exulting in the certainty of justification by faith, which is of God and through Christ (Campbell et al. 1:105-108).

Although we can find testimony for the assurance or certainty of justification in the patristic era, it was commonly held at the time that justification could nevertheless be forfeited through sin, and one could lose his or her salvation. In other words, justification was not a secure matter and needed to be guarded throughout a proper Christian life. The early writers Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century and Origen in the third express the view common at that time that God could and would revoke His initial justification if a believer did not maintain a sinless life before God. Thus, what we find in the patristic era on these points is a nebulous concept of assurance and a complete occlusion of security. The practical effect of this was that any consolation of assurance was undermined by all lack of security. It is hard to boast in the certainty of one's justification by God when there is always the possibility—or shall we say, the threat—that God will revoke it (Campbell et al. 1:108-110).

These general themes, however, do not constitute the main contribution of the patristic writers to the church's understanding of justification. That comes from Augustine, who at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries, began to mine the riches of Paul's thought concerning not only justification but also ancillary issues related to it, such as faith, grace, predestination, inherited sin, and the role of the human will. It is clearly evident that for this purpose the Lord prepared an extraordinary vessel, a man of much capacity, who combined the passion, tenderness, and zeal that produce mystic sensibilities with a logical and systematic mind that seeks to grasp divine truths. The teachings of Augustine mark a milestone in the historical development of Christian thought not only because of the truth that he expounded but also because of the clarity and emphasis with which he expressed it, to the extent that the interpretations of his writings dominated theological study in the West for the next thousand years. Related specifically to justification, he opened up the truths of the futility of merit for our righteousness, the absolute necessity of grace for our salvation,

grace and faith as free gifts from God, and the effectiveness of faith for our justification. For Augustine the truth of justification is captured in the Latin word *justificare*, that is, *justus facere*, 'making (fashioning, causing to be) righteous'. Justification is to make an unjust person just, that is, to make an unrighteous one righteous. What Augustine does not make clear, however, is the full implication of "making righteous" as it pertains to the event of justification. He sees righteousness in a believer as beginning not only with faith but also, or possibly more so, with the love in which faith operates, based on Paul's word in Galatians 5:6: "faith..., operating through love." A reader of Augustine may ask whether it is faith that justifies or the love in which faith operates. We find many passages that indeed affirm the former, but even these do not explicitly identify Augustine's conception of the role of love in our justification, for he often insists that the faith that justifies is precisely the faith that works through love. This lack of clarity became the source of great debate, and a great divide, in the understanding of justification among Christians particularly in the sixteenth century, a debate and a divide that continue to this day (Campbell et al. 1:110-127).

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Within a hundred years of Augustine's death in 430, his views on a number of issues were opposed and denounced by some, particularly in Gaul (corresponding roughly to modern-day France and Belgium). Caesarius of Arles, who took up Augustine's position on a number of issues, became the focus of scrutiny and condemnation. There were probably political motives at play here, but the teachings of Augustine were used as the more serious and more noble reason to try to limit the authority of Caesarius of Arles. To protect his influence and reputation, Caesarius countered in July 529 by convening the Second Council of Orange (in Gaul). The Second Council of Orange was a personal victory for Caesarius and a lasting triumph for Augustine's teaching on nature and grace not only in Gaul but also in the Western church. The decisions of this council affirm that God, as the Holy Spirit, gives grace first—that

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is, grace prevenes—then human reaction in faith follows for justification by God. Nothing in a person’s created nature will compel him or her to make even the slightest movement toward God in a way that deserves His justification, but God Himself as the Holy Spirit must infuse, illuminate, and inspire him or her to believe, desire, will, seek, choose, and accept God’s justification. These matters, we feel, are sterling in worth and give Second Orange an eternal weight, for which we ought to be full of praise and thanks to the Lord. Yet this council was hardly a universal one: only thirteen bishops signed its decisions. But two years later Pope Boniface II confirmed the Second Council of Orange, giving it universal standing among Roman Catholics. Strangely enough, however, the Second Council of Orange seems to have fallen into obscurity after the tenth century and until the sixteenth, and thus, medieval theologians did not draw on its conclusions to support their understandings of justification. It is a lamentable irony of history that what had been endorsed by the Western church in the sixth century found no place to be authoritative until Luther’s sixteenth century. But as we will see below, by this time Catholic theology had developed into a multitude of perspectives (Campbell et al. 1:127-134).

While some of the patristic writers understood simply that we are justified by faith alone, most did not consider deeply what faith really is, as later writers would. Nor did they, apart from Augustine to some extent, strain over the exact meaning of the word *justification*, as Lutherans, Catholics, and Reformed writers later would and still do today. The patristic writers, taken as a whole and probably representative of the understanding of leaders throughout the church then, realized and appreciated that justification before God depends on the bounty of His mercy and grace. Some writers may have misunderstood the exact value of human effort and merit in justification, but through the massive effort of Augustine a satisfactory understanding of even this issue was laid out in the church and was eventually adopted at Orange and endorsed by Boniface II. Thus, it would be an unfair characterization of the patristic period to say that there was no solid or even unified teaching on justification then. Theirs was not a Lutheran notion, nor a Reformed notion, nor indeed a Roman Catholic notion; but they had their notion of justification, which served their times, and during their times they preserved this item of truth adequately. Of course, while we can easily find individual writers whom we would not agree with on justification, some of the things in the patristic period correspond to what we hold today. But many things in their understanding fall short of the full knowledge of the truth concerning justification—a lack in seeing the union with Christ for justification, a mistaken identification of

baptism with justification, a lack of security in justification, to name a few. However, it would be unfair to try to press these writers beyond the boundaries of their understanding into realms of consideration that they never had or needed to have back then. They had other important concerns related to the truth (e.g., concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ) that demanded their attention and manifested them as great contenders for the faith. The Lord was to shine more light on justification in the later centuries and will reward others for bearing that light to the church, but we believe that many writers in the patristic era will also be rewarded for what they offered us on justification by faith through God’s mercy and grace (Campbell et al. 1:134-136).

### In the Medieval Period (Seventh through Sixteenth Centuries)

Despite the loss of the canons of the Second Council of Orange (529) for much of the medieval period, Augustine’s own words and, more importantly, the words of Paul were not lost. While the nature of justification remained an open question during the Middle Ages, careful reading of Paul’s Epistles, or of Augustine’s writings based upon them, led many prominent medieval theologians to a clearer understanding of the basic truth concerning justification by faith. The progress made among the patristic writers was thus preserved in many medieval commentaries on Paul’s Epistles and also in many of the most prominent medieval writers, including Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and Jean Gerson (d. 1429). These writers continued to insist that we are justified freely by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ apart from any merit or works of our own (Campbell et al. 1:140-150).

But despite this continuation of these generally patristic themes, one also finds in the medieval period the emergence of an intricate theology of justification that, regrettably, is in many respects an outworking, elaboration, and development of Augustine’s mistaken understanding of justification as a making righteous by the infusion of loving faith. Due to their high regard for Augustine, medieval writers made his mistaken view the heart of their own understanding of justification and developed that view in sometimes excruciating detail. According to Thomas Aquinas—a good representative of the medieval consensus—faith justifies not because it unites us with Christ, the righteousness of God, but because faith is the first part of the righteousness that God infuses into the believer in justification. Faith is the beginning of this inherent righteousness, but it is not the consummation of this righteousness; love is also required for justification and is the main

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part of the righteousness infused in justification. According to the consensus medieval view, then, faith alone without love is insufficient for justification, a view clearly at odds with the Scriptures. The Scriptures repeatedly insist that faith is indeed sufficient for justification and nowhere suggest that love is required for justification (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:26, 28, 30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24). We do not deny, of course, that faith and love are righteousness, but we do deny that they are the righteousness by which we are initially and eternally justified. Christ alone is the righteousness by which we are justified (1 Cor. 1:30). Justification is by faith because faith is produced by the transfusion of Christ into us and because faith brings us into an organic union with Christ as righteousness (Campbell et al. 1:150-154).

Despite this magnification of Augustine's mistaken view that justification is a making inherently righteous, we can affirm at least two points of the medieval consensus that we regard as genuine progress in the church's understanding of justification. The first is that Aquinas and many of his contemporaries clearly saw that there is a divine infusion that precedes our faith. Faith is not produced out of ourselves, nor is it the gift of a God who remains outside of us. God first gives Himself to us in grace and then produces faith within us by granting to us a participation in His own indwelling presence. A second point that we can affirm as genuine progress is the medieval insistence that union with Christ is central to justification, a theme that can scarcely be found in the patristic writers. Bernard of Clairvaux clearly connects justification and union with Christ: "It was to unite them with Himself that He was Himself made sin, who did no sin, that the body of sin might be destroyed in which sinners had once been incorporated, and that they might become righteousness in Him, being justified freely by His grace" (*LWSB* 4:439). Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) connects them even more strongly: "Abraham was *just*, because God's justice was in him. Christ is the true Justice that justifies everyone who is just. Thus, in every believer who is justified by faith it is necessary that Christ be present, who alone is the justification of those who are just" (190). The patristic writers often connected faith with justification and often connected faith with the believer's union with Christ but did not often connect justification and union directly. During the medieval period, the connection between union and justification became much more prominent, and we regard this development as one of the primary contributions of the medieval church to our understanding of the truth concerning justification. As we will see later in this article and in those to come, many others would pick up this connection between union and justification in a fruitful way (Campbell et al. 1:154-163).

An additional medieval development that would have long-standing negative implications for the understanding of justification was the close interweaving of justification with the sacrament of penance, in which penitent Christians confessed their sins to a priest, who then pronounced on them the forgiveness of sins. While patristic writers would generally point to baptism as the practicality of justification, most medieval theologians thought that the justification bestowed in baptism was easily lost and had to be regained repeatedly through the sacrament of penance. Justification in the medieval church was thus no longer understood as a one-time event in the life of the believer, the foundation of an entire life in Christ. Justification was now a repeated event, undergone as often as one lost the grace of justification. Medieval writers tended to think that such loss of grace was a common occurrence, requiring annual restoration, if not more often than that. In addition, medieval writers more strongly insisted that the sacrament of penance conferred the forgiveness not just of the church but of God Himself and that it did so only on the condition that the interior penitence of the penitent was sufficiently strong. The increased frequency of penance, the close conjunction of ecclesial and divine forgiveness, and the intensified attention to the interior disposition of penitence help to explain the fact that justification was much more on the minds of medieval writers and medieval Christians generally. Patristic writers did not often attend carefully to justification, perhaps because it was not, to them, a central concern for most believers. By the end of the medieval period, the situation had changed considerably. Justification was not only a central concern but was now, in many cases, the most central concern of the Christian life. Justification, which should serve as the firm foundation of the Christian life, had unfortunately become for many an uncertain and fleeting state.

This close connection of justification and the sacrament of penance has done great damage to the believers that could have been easily avoided by maintaining the clear distinction between justification and forgiveness of sins. In our view, forgiveness of sins is not itself a part of justification (see pages 11-13 in the biblical presentation article of this issue). While we recognize several different kinds of forgiveness in the Scriptures, we do not recognize a corresponding kind of justification for each. There is a forgiveness offered in baptism (Acts 2:38) and a forgiveness offered by the church (John 20:23), but these are nowhere described in the Scriptures as justifying. God alone is the One who justifies (Rom. 8:33), and He does so without any intermediary, whether the church or any of its members. Justification, then, is not through any sacrament, as the example of Abraham demonstrates. Abraham was first justified by faith and then received "the sign of circumcision, a seal of

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the righteousness of the faith which he had while in uncircumcision” (Rom. 4:11). Paul directly identifies baptism as the New Testament reality of circumcision (Col. 2:11-12), and we take this to mean that even baptism does not effect our justification; rather, baptism follows faith, which alone justifies. Once justified by God on the basis of faith alone, the believers cannot lose their justified status before God, for God glorifies all whom He justifies (Rom. 8:30). The New Testament thus often speaks of justification as an event already secured at the initiation of the Christian life (Rom. 5:1). Justification by faith, then, is once for all and eternally secure (Campbell et al. 1:163-171).

Even more disturbing than the medieval identification of justification with the sacrament of penance is an increasing insistence among some late medieval writers and preachers that in some sense we can merit the grace of justification in the sacrament of penance. In clear disagreement with the

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canons of the Second Council of Orange (529), forgotten for much of the medieval period, many prominent late medieval writers came to hold that something is required of us, from our own natural capacities apart from God’s grace, to merit the reception of justifying grace through the sacrament of penance. Some also taught that, once in grace, the gift of perseverance in grace (i.e., being preserved in grace until the end of one’s life) and even eternal predestination to grace can be merited by our good use of the grace infused into us in justification. Only if we do our best to cooperate with the grace of justification, they taught, will God ensure that we die in grace and thus merit eternal glory (Campbell et al. 1:171-181).

Several prominent medieval theologians thankfully decried these views as adamantly as Luther later would. Thomas Bradwardine (d. 1349) fiercely opposed the teachings that God gives grace on account of merit, that we can open to the grace of God apart from the grace of God, and that God gives grace to those whom He sees will use it well. Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), too, opposed the teachings that we can merit entrance into grace and that we can merit

perseverance in grace. Martin Luther was thus by no means the first to resist those who taught that we can merit the grace of justification, and he happily recognized his debts to those who had preceded him. The Catholic Church ultimately condemned again the possibility of our meriting the grace of justification at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), as we will see in the Roman Catholic article (54-62 in this issue). It did so to a significant degree in response to the Protestant Reformers and the great release that their message offered to so many anxious consciences. We owe a debt not only to Luther and the other Reformers but also to these medieval writers, who encouraged and strengthened them to follow the Lord in His move at their time (Campbell et al. 1:181-185).

The medieval innovations regarding the sacrament of penance likewise did not go unnoticed or uncontested. John Wycliffe (d. 1384) argued that it is a grave error to require the sacrament of penance as necessary for salvation without any scriptural grounds for doing so, and he contended that the emphasis on confession to and absolution by a priest had the potential to distract the penitent from the true and inward repentance, which is before God alone. John Huss (d. 1415), too, was wary of too close a connection between the forgiveness of God and the absolution of the priest. The church’s forgiveness, he insisted, is only valid insofar as it follows divine forgiveness. At the Council of Constance (1414-1418) a collection of propositions of John Wycliffe and John Huss were condemned, several related to the sacrament of penance. Huss was burnt at the stake. Wycliffe had already died, but the council ordered his bones removed from sacred ground, and they were later exhumed and burned. We can surely thank and praise the Lord for these martyred forerunners of the Reformation, who stood for the truth regardless of the opposition, often unto death. The time was not yet ripe for the Reformation that would ensue at the time of Luther, but the Lord continued to maintain many witnesses to the truth and anti-testimonies to the degradation that came in during the medieval period. The seeds that they sowed would blossom in Luther’s Reformation, and for that alone we owe them our deepest gratitude (Campbell et al. 1:185-188).

What, then, shall we say about justification by faith as understood in the medieval West? On the one hand, significant progress was made regarding the truth of the dispensing of the Triune God that produces faith and regarding the truth that faith justifies because it unites the believers to Christ. This we surely applaud. On the other hand, the medieval church was limited in its success to hold on to the light concerning justification by faith that was delivered to the



apostles. While the apostles' understanding was by no means completely lost during the medieval period, there was a noticeable decline, particularly in the later medieval period. Increasing emphasis on the possibility and the requirement that the believers merit justification was not only against the clear teaching of the apostles but also took away the assurance of salvation that is so foundational to the believers' life in Christ. The medieval church thus inflicted great anxiety on the consciences of the believers under its care. This anxiety was further aggravated by the heightened sacramental context of the medieval understanding of justification. Justification was no longer understood to be a foundational experience in the Christian life, the entrance into all the riches of God's organic salvation. Instead, justification was understood to be frequently lost and restored through the sacrament of penance. The implications of justification thus weighed heavily on the minds of medieval Christians. Finally, even among those medieval theologians

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with a more adequate understanding of justification by faith, we find the mistaken view of justification as a making inherently righteous. This view, inherited from Augustine, was developed considerably throughout the medieval period and became, with its medieval accretions, the official Catholic view at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

The impact of these errors is hard to overestimate. Justification is the foundation of the Christian life and the entrance into all the riches of God's full salvation. When the primary concern of the believers is their eternal status before God, it is difficult for them to progress properly. Rather than being perpetually concerned for their eternal status before God, the believers ought to be occupied with growing in life for their transformation and building up in the Body of Christ. Only the Lord knows how many dear believers were hindered in their growth and development in the divine life and their participation in God's move in the church by being cheated of the peace, joy, and boldness that are the birthright of every believer. Regardless of the advances made during the medieval period in the understanding of justification, we cannot but agree that

a reformation was needed. Many late medieval Christians felt the need for reform but were waiting for the right time and the right person. That person, of course—the person the church needed and the person the Lord provided—was a German monk, steeped in tradition but tormented in conscience, named Martin Luther (Campbell et al. 1:188-189).

### The Great Beginning of Recovery through Martin Luther

Martin Luther was a man acutely aware of his sins, as his biographers consistently recount. As a monk in an Augustinian cloister at Erfurt (in what is now Germany), he struggled with his sins and with the realization that he could never meet the righteous claims of God upon him. His apprehension about his sinfulness was fueled by nearly two years of reading the Scriptures in Erfurt (July 1505 through May 1507). But ten years later as a Doctor of Theology at Wittenberg, he formalized, at least initially, his understanding of sin in his *Lectures on Romans* (April 1515 through September 1516):

Either I have never understood, or else the scholastic theologians have not spoken sufficiently clearly about sin and grace, for they have been under the delusion that original sin, like actual sin, is entirely removed, as if these were items that can be entirely removed in the twinkling of an eye, as shadows before a light, although the ancient fathers Augustine and Ambrose spoke entirely differently and in the way Scripture does. But those men speak in the manner of Aristotle in his *Ethics*, when he bases sin and righteousness on works, both their performance or omission. But blessed Augustine says very clearly that "sin, or concupiscence, is forgiven in Baptism, not in the sense that it no longer exists, but in the sense that it is not imputed." (LW 25:260-261)

Luther takes exception to the view that original sin, first formulated in clearest terms by Augustine, is removed through baptism, and he looks to Augustine to support his understanding that sin is only forgiven in baptism but not taken away. He understood that sin remains after baptism and still constitutes human beings sinners throughout their whole lives. Thus, it is not sinful action but sin dwelling in the flesh that defines human beings as sinners and frames their entire existence as long as they live in mortal flesh. This was a significant denunciation of what had been taught in the main in the late medieval church (and before). For him sin was not simply external works but the inward opposition to God that we derive from the fall:

They [the pope with his bishops, theologians, monks, and all the rest] take mortal sin to be only the external work committed against the Law, such as murder, adultery, theft, etc. They did not see that ignorance, hatred,

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and contempt of God in the heart, ingratitude, murmuring against God, and resistance to the will of God are also mortal sin, and that the flesh cannot think, say, or do anything except what is diabolical and opposed to God. (LW 26:125)

Luther further held the view that because of the sin rooted in human nature after the fall, human beings have no real choice between doing what is good and what is evil. He is famously credited with bringing into very strong relief the notion of the “bondage of the will” (LW 33:15-296), by which human beings are understood to be so corrupted by the fall of Adam that free will is something that exists in name only, that because of sin human will is now unable to choose God. The true and actual condition of human free will is that of a slave to sin, death, and Satan; it does not do, it cannot do, and it cannot even attempt to do what is acceptable to God. But what it can do actively is commit sin.

Certainly Luther’s view of sin was far more extensive than the predominant view of late medieval theology, and thus, it is not surprising that he condemned things that trivialized sin in any way. Early in his ministry this caused him to cry out against the profligate sale of indulgences, which were often presented to the common believers as if the mere purchase of a plenary indulgence would result in the forgiveness of sins apart from a life of repentance. It was this concern that motivated him to post his famous *Ninety-five Theses* on 31 October 1517. The heroic image of a young Luther defiantly nailing to a church door a proclamation to reform the whole church is far from accurate. But even after we demythologize the posting of the *Ninety-five Theses*, we must admit that it was indeed a first open assault in his long battle for reform. In Luther’s day and in Luther’s land, the church was active in the monetary sale of indulgences, and this trafficking in satisfaction for sins made the whole concept of indulgences even more abhorrent to him. In his *Ninety-five Theses* Luther sees the abuse of indulgences as extremely serious not simply because it is wrong according to truth in Scripture but because it deceives people into thinking that through them they are eternally secure. He contends that the false trust put in indulgences can instead lead to eternal damnation. The danger is that indulgences may convince a sinner that no repentance is needed for forgiveness of sins and that indulgences were often presented as such. Understanding the seriousness of sin, Luther rose up to sound the alarm against the abuse of indulgences. In his theses he contends for proper repentance for sins by the believers, and actually he has much more to say about that than he does about indulgences (Campbell et al. 1:193-200).

Luther came to understand sin as a much more serious

problem than most of his predecessors and contemporaries did, and he believed that part of the problem lay in an ignorance of sin that derives from sin itself. In his *Lectures on Romans* he speaks of sin as that which leaves human nature “so deeply curved in upon itself” (LW 25:291) that it is completely unaware of its depravity in using God’s gifts and even God Himself for its own sake. The fallen natural condition of human beings seeks self only and rejects God completely, which for Luther is the epitome of sin, and built into this sinful human condition, so to speak, is a complete ignorance of this condition. Thus, it is no wonder that the seriousness of sin had been so easily ignored in the church, in his estimation. The remedy to the inherent ignorance of sin in human beings, as he sees it, is the law. In *The Bondage of the Will* he writes:

It is the task, function, and effect of the law to be a light to the ignorant and blind, but such a light as reveals sickness, sin, evil, death, hell, the wrath of God, though it affords no help and brings no deliverance from these, but is content to have revealed them. Then, when a man becomes aware of the disease of sin, he is troubled, distressed, even in despair. (LW 33:261-262)

For Luther it is imperative that the law function in a full way of being preached actively in the church. His view on this matter would end up shaping the ministry of the Word in Lutheran congregations for centuries, and even today there are some Lutheran pastors who are committed to this use of the law in their preaching. But in Paul’s teaching, the law is to be less actively appropriated in the ministry to the church than what Luther teaches. Thus, we are compelled to say that while Luther’s views on the full extent of sin in human nature and on the intrinsic significance of the law in God’s economy accord with the apostles’ teaching, his use of the law in the ministry of the church goes beyond the teaching and practice of the apostles, and especially of Paul. Luther’s expectation was that the preaching of the law, even to the believers, should engender misery and despair, and this reflected his own experience with the law. But it was his own experience of distress and despair that eventually led him to understand and believe in the gospel in a new way, for which the descriptor *reformation* is certainly apt (Campbell et al. 1:200-204).

It is important to try to understand Luther’s anguish over sin, which he encountered throughout his lifetime, since this anguish, in his view, was not simply a negative feeling to try to escape from; it was a constant impetus that drove him toward the righteousness of God. Luther’s own term for this anguish was, in his Latin works, *tentatio*, which is usually translated “temptation.” This is probably the core notion for Luther since in his experience despair, anguish,

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and doubt about God always led to temptation to mistrust and turn away from God. In his native German, however, he labels this anguish with the much more graphic word *Anfechtung*, which is not easy to translate into a single English word. Roland Bainton, a highly esteemed modern biographer of Luther, perhaps gives us the best help on this:

The word he used was *Anfechtung*, for which there is no English equivalent. It may be a trial sent by God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man. (42)

Luther applies *Anfechtung* to a broad range of Christian experiences, but what is germane to our consideration here is his understanding of it insofar as it motivates sinners toward the gospel. For him the *Anfechtung* that the law engenders should make sinners aware of their need for the gospel. As a young monk, Luther himself experienced this strong *Anfechtung* when he tried to deal with his sins through penance:

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession." Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it. In this way, by observing human traditions, I transgressed them even more; and by following the righteousness of the monastic order, I was never able to reach it. For, as Paul says, it is impossible for the conscience to find peace through the works of the Law, much less through human traditions, without the promise and the Gospel about Christ. (*LW* 27:13)

Luther followed the norms of Roman Catholic sacramental penance—contrition, confession, and satisfaction ("the assigned penances"). But his conscience was always tormented that he had not been contrite enough or that his confession had not been complete enough, and if either of these were so, then surely the assigned penances had not been effective and he was left unforgiven (Campbell et al. 1:204-210).

In considering Luther's recovery of justification by faith, his *Anfechtung* prior to his faith is key to understanding how he was brought to the most important revelation that he

received from the Lord. Near the end of his life, after he had taught often and written much on righteousness, faith, and justification, he recounts how, some three decades before, he came to see righteousness in a new way, which utterly changed him and, we know, ushered in the Reformation. In his *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*, published in 1545, a year before his death, he offers this account, which, though lengthy, shows how his *Anfechtung* served to drive him to see the righteousness of God in a new light:

Meanwhile, I had already during that year [1519] returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skilful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated [in the autumn of 1514] with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of

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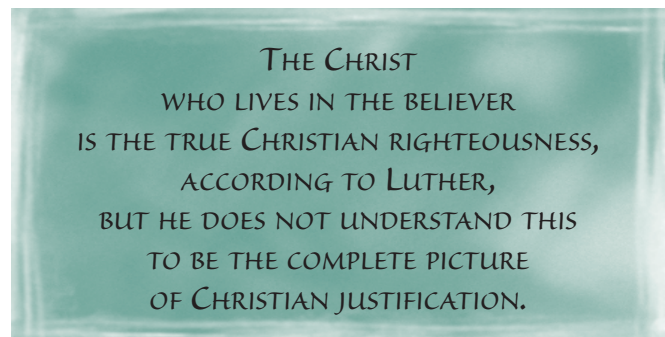
God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine’s *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God’s righteousness with which we are justified was taught. Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter. (LW 34:336-337)

Luther had been taught to understand the righteousness of God as that attribute in God that allows and indeed even compels Him to punish the ungodly, which, according to Paul, included everyone (Rom. 3:23; 5:12), but more pointedly, included Luther. Luther was convinced of his sinfulness before God and was certain that God was in every way right to be angry with him and to punish him. He had no faith in the effectiveness of the sacrament of penance for himself and especially in its third component, satisfaction, that is, the temporal punishments assigned by absolving priests. He had, no doubt, fallen prey to the devil’s temptation (or *tentatio*) to secretly malign God, to be angry with God, and to even hate God, and he certainly experienced deep anguish (or *Anfechtung*) because of his severely perturbed conscience. For him the gospel was no good news at all but only more bad news: miserable sinners, already lost eternally through original sin, are further oppressed by the Ten Commandments; now God adds to the pain, through the threat of righteousness and wrath revealed in the “gospel.” But this torment drove him to beat persistently on Paul’s words in Romans 1:17. His testimony is that by God’s mercy he was led to pay attention to the context of the troubling phrase *the righteousness of God* and to see that the righteousness of God that Paul speaks of here is related to faith. This is not the righteousness that inheres in God as an attribute within Himself and that compels eternal death for the ungodly; this is the righteousness that God gives as a gift through faith and that allows the believing recipient to live. This righteousness is not that which condemns and forebodes wrath; this righteousness is that which God applies to human beings to justify them by faith. It is not the righteousness within God that He actively exercises with appropriate wrath; it is the righteousness applied by Him to the believers, who passively receive it through faith and are thereby justified. Luther then understood that it is passive (or received)

righteousness that is revealed in the gospel, not active (or executed) righteousness as he had been taught.

Luther testifies to a real and substantial change in his being: his hatred of God turned to love. He recalls that he extolled the sweetness of the phrase *the righteousness of God* with a love that was as great as his former hatred for it, and he goes so far as to say that this phrase now came to be “truly the gate of paradise” for him. Can we take this to mean that this was Luther’s moment of salvation? Certainly some may scoff at this, but if there ever was a moment in Luther’s life when he was changed inwardly and henceforth believed in what God does instead of anguishing over what he could not do, it had to be this moment. Assuming this to be the case, the question arises, how much does Luther’s “salvation” depend on his experience of turning from hatred to love for God? The question is perhaps anachronistic because it reflects the essence of



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the later debate over justification. A Roman Catholic could seize on Luther’s testimony of overwhelming love for God along with his testimony, in the same breath, of his newfound faith in God as proof that justification depends not just on faith but also on the love that arises from faith. A Protestant could argue that it was what Luther believed, and only what he believed, that brought him to salvation and that the love that he experienced was not justifying at all; rather, love was simply proof that his faith, which alone justified him, was living, real, and operative within him. Given the whole of Luther’s teaching on justification, we know that he himself strongly insisted on faith alone as the basis for justification without reference to love at all, as he had pointedly said a decade before he penned his testimony: “Faith justifies without love and before love” (LW 26:137). Yet in that testimony of his own experience, which he relates near the end of his life in the vivid and genuine detail that is typical of any true believer’s memory of salvation, it is hard to separate faith and love. It is no wonder that theologians, including Luther himself, would later likewise strain over the role of faith and love in justification. Based on the order given in Luther’s account, faith

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happens first then love, and both are quite real. But the real question is, when, or rather, based on what, does God actually justify a human being? To this very day that question is stridently debated (Campbell et al. 1:210-214).

In that same testimony Luther opens up the key notion in his own understanding of justification in a single word—*imputation*. His understanding of justification consists of two very distinct and necessary notions: imperfect faith grasping Christ as righteousness in the heart and God's imputation of this faith as perfect righteousness with His non-imputation of sin. This understanding (along with other important views about justification) is best expressed in his later *Lectures on Galatians*, given in 1531 and published in 1535 from notes principally taken by one of his editors. He explains:

Christian righteousness is to be defined properly and accurately, namely, that it is a trust in the Son of God or a trust of the heart in God through Christ. Here this clause is to be added to provide the differentia for the definition: "which faith is imputed as righteousness for the sake of Christ." For, as I have said, these two things make Christian righteousness perfect: The first is faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift and which formally believes in Christ; the second is that God reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness for the sake of Christ, His Son, who suffered for the sins of the world and in whom I begin to believe. On account of this faith in Christ God does not see the sin that still remains in me. For so long as I go on living in the flesh, there is certainly sin in me. But meanwhile Christ protects me under the shadow of His wings and spreads over me the wide heaven of the forgiveness of sins, under which I live in safety. This prevents God from seeing the sins that still cling to my flesh. My flesh distrusts God, is angry with Him, does not rejoice in Him, etc. But God overlooks these sins, and in His sight they are as though they were not sins. This is accomplished by imputation on account of the faith by which I begin to take hold of Christ; and on His account God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin, even though it really is sin. (*LW* 26:231-232)

The faith that is required is a trust in the Son of God, which Luther reframes as a trust in God's heart toward the sinner as manifested in Christ's person and work. But faith in the heart is not a sufficient definition of Christian righteousness, as he sees it. There is something else that needs to be added if we are to arrive at a full definition of Christian righteousness, and that is God's imputation, or reckoning, of that imperfect faith as perfect righteousness. The faith, he maintains, is something that God gives, and this faith takes hold of Christ, but this alone cannot make a sinner perfectly righteous, because this faith is still weak

due to the sin that remains in him or her. Again, we should remember that for Luther sin is never washed out of human beings as long as they are still living in the mortal flesh. Even though a sinner comes to trust in God's heart through Christ, sin is still there clinging to the flesh and sometimes even moving the sinner to distrust God, to be angry with Him, and to commit open sins. Thus, the faith that takes hold of Christ is, to Luther's mind, "imperfect faith" and therefore insufficient in itself to be called perfect righteousness. And further, the sin that still remains in the flesh speaks loudly against calling the sinner righteous. At best, this imperfect faith in the still imperfect sinner can be only imperfect righteousness, which is not enough to justify the sinner before God. But against all reason—as Luther emphasizes often—God considers and declares this "imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness" and that "[remaining] sin as not sin," basing His judgment on what Christ is and has done. The righteousness of faith is imperfect, and the sin really is sin, but on account of Christ God says that the righteousness is perfect and the sin is not sin. Thus, God justifies the sinner by imputing righteousness to him or her, not merely by what the sinner believes or takes hold of through faith.

As imperfect as it may be and as short as it comes to being the perfect righteousness by which God justifies, faith is a genuine righteousness even if it is imperfect, as Luther understands it, since faith apprehends Christ:

If it is true faith, it is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself.

Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ...Where the confidence of the heart is present, therefore, there Christ is present, in that very cloud and faith. This is the formal righteousness on account of which a man is justified; it is not on account of love, as the sophists say. In short, just as the sophists say that love forms and trains faith, so we say that it is Christ who forms and trains faith or who is the form of faith. Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life. (*LW* 26:129-130)

The Christ who lives in the believer is the true Christian righteousness, according to Luther, but again he does not understand this to be the complete picture of Christian justification. Christ dwelling in the believer as righteousness through faith serves as the basis for God to count the believer as righteous, that is, to justify him or her, and this imputation of righteousness, based on Christ as righteousness but nevertheless in addition to Christ as righteousness,

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is what finally, effectively, and perfectly justifies a person. We should not take Luther to mean that there is some deficiency in Christ as righteousness. Such would be jumping to an unfair conclusion. Luther understands the deficiency not in Christ but in the believer's weak faith, which renders it an imperfect righteousness in need of perfecting imputation.

For Luther faith is necessary for justification but not sufficient; God's imputation of that faith as perfect righteousness is also necessary. Further, it is not difficult to see that, for Luther, even God's imputation of weak faith as perfect righteousness is insufficient. God's imputation also necessarily depends on His imputing of sin as not sin. Thus, ultimately, imputation is, at the base, a reckoning more concerning sin than concerning righteousness. That makes much sense, given Luther's innovative (at least to him) understanding of sin and the tremendous *Anfechtung* that this understanding brought down upon him.

LUTHER'S ULTIMATE POSITION  
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AS NOT SIN.

Therefore, according to Luther justification has two foci with three distinct elements: *faith* grasping *Christ* as righteousness within the believer and *God imputing* that imperfect faith as perfect righteousness from without. All three are necessary, and all three join together to bring about justification in Luther's view. In one further passage from his latter Galatians lectures, he offers a fuller presentation of his understanding:

Here it is to be noted that these three things are joined together: faith, Christ, and acceptance or imputation. Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses the gem. And whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteous. This is the means and the merit by which we obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness. "Because you believe in Me," God says, "and your faith takes hold of Christ, whom I have freely given to you as your Justifier and Savior, therefore be righteous." Thus God accepts you or accounts you righteous only on account of Christ, in whom you believe.

Now acceptance or imputation is extremely necessary,

first, because we are not yet purely righteous, but sin is still clinging to our flesh during this life. God cleanses this remnant of sin in our flesh. In addition, we are sometimes forsaken by the Holy Spirit, and we fall into sins, as did Peter, David, and other saints. Nevertheless, we always have recourse to this doctrine, that our sins are covered and that God does not want to hold us accountable for them (Rom. 4). This does not mean that there is no sin in us, as the sophists have taught when they said that we must go on doing good until we are no longer conscious of any sin; but sin is always present, and the godly feel it. But it is ignored and hidden in the sight of God, because Christ the Mediator stands between; because we take hold of Him by faith, all our sins are sins no longer. But where Christ and faith are not present, here there is no forgiveness of sins or hiding of sins. On the contrary, here there is the sheer imputation and condemnation of sins. Thus God wants to glorify His Son, and He Himself wants to be glorified in us through Him. (LW 26:132-133)

We should point out that in Luther's understanding of imputation he includes both past committed sins and remaining indwelling sin in God's reckoning of sin(s) as not sin. Above he mentions "forgiveness of sins or hiding of sins," which captures both aspects (Campbell et al. 1:214-219).

For Luther justification is not dependent on Christ as righteousness alone but requires, in addition, the imputation of our weak faith as perfect righteousness and the imputing away of the indwelling sin that remains in the believer. For him sin is ever the looming problem, and he feels compelled to account for the reality that for the believer both righteousness and sin somehow coexist, a reality that tradition before him assumes cannot exist. What he received from the teaching of the church before him was that in baptism original sin is removed and that what remains is concupiscence, which was understood not to be sin itself but a simmering inclination toward sin. Luther took exception to this view and maintained that sin is sin and remains as sin even after baptism. But this created the contradiction that both righteousness and sin pertain to the believer at the same time, and in his view on justification he provides a solution to the contradiction. Thus, from the time of his earlier Romans lectures he calls a Christian "at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man": *simul peccator et iustus* (LW 25:260). And in both his earlier and later lectures on Galatians he uses the more famous order for the epithet: "at the same time righteous and a sinner" (WA 2:497.13; 40.I:368.26). Sin remains in the believer in Luther's view, but it is not imputed as sin by God. While in both his earlier and later positions, non-imputation of sin is a factor in justification, in his later and final view it

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features much more prominently as a necessary component of justification, which brings the imperfect righteousness of faith to its perfection before God.

The points here are indeed very fine. But we feel it is important to make them, for Luther's ultimate position sells Christ as righteousness short and places the final operation of justification in God's imputation of sin as not sin. That is, of course, in keeping with his deep *Anfechtung* concerning sin and in line with the view that sin is the primary problem with humankind. We believe that God is concerned negatively with sin, but His greater concern is positively with Christ the Son. In all things God intends for Christ to be preeminent (Col. 1:15-20), and we expect that in justification Christ as the righteousness of God, not the imputing of our weak faith as perfect righteousness or the imputing away of indwelling sin, must be the true and sufficient basis for justification. He was given by God to the believers as righteousness for their justification (1 Cor. 1:30). We do not take exception with Luther that God does not regard our sins, but we must disagree with him that in order to justify us God must additionally blind Himself to the sin that remains within us. No, Christ as the righteousness of God, whom the believers possess through faith, as Luther says—indeed, whom the believers are joined to as one through faith, as we prefer to say—is the sole basis of justification.

We agree with Luther that sin remains even after justification; we are indeed simultaneously righteous and sinners. But we do not have the same compulsion to solve the contradiction and to allow it to annul the justification that depends solely on Christ as righteousness; we do not have the same compulsion to expect that God imputes remaining sin as not sin. All past sins are forgiven through the death of Christ in initial repentance (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31), and all present and future sins are forgiven through later confession based on that same death (1 John 1:9). But even though indwelling sin remains (Rom. 7:17; 1 John 1:8), we do not see this as an impediment to God for His justification. Every believer, whether or not he or she knows it precisely or believes it precisely (or even denies it precisely), is joined to Christ (1 Cor. 6:17) as the righteousness of God through faith, and this is all that God needs to justify him or her. Then, what about indwelling sin? How does God get around it? He Himself, through the apostles, warns us not to deny that it exists. It is sin, and we should not regard it as not sin; thus, we do not think that He regards it as not sin. Sins that have been confessed and repented of are forgiven and forgotten by Him (Heb. 10:17), against all our logic regarding an all-knowing and unchanging God; but He does not need to

impute indwelling sin as not sin in order to justify those who have become one with Christ as His righteousness through faith. Of course, we agree with David and Paul: "Blessed are they whose lawlessnesses have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered over. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall by no means account sin" (Rom. 4:7-8; cf. Psa. 32:1-2). But the words in the first sentence must point to past sins ("lawlessnesses," "sins"), not indwelling sin, and the accounting of sin in the second sentence, which seems to encompass the whole condition of sin, "must be referred to the great final judgment" as this construction is usually future in the New Testament (Alford 2:349). Hence, indwelling sin does not seem to be in consideration in these verses. But even if it were, David and Paul refer *simply* to the Lord's not accounting sin to a person, not to His accounting sin *as not sin*. Luther's bias is that this is an accounting of sin as not sin, but Paul and David can, and should, be read to mean that the Lord simply does not take sin into account. That does not mean that He views it as not sin; it simply means that He does not take account of it when He justifies. But the important point here is not whether non-imputation of indwelling remaining sin occurs or not; the point is whether faith requires the additional imputing away of sin before it suffices for justification, as Luther has it, or not, as we maintain. In our view, Christ alone suffices in all things and particularly in justification, and the imputing away of indwelling sin, or even not taking account of it, is not the crucial condition for justification in our view. We see Christ as the righteousness of God for the believers' justification, and we expect that God does also. A person who believes has his or her sins forgiven at repentance, and faith brings that person into an organic union with Christ, who is the righteousness of God. That union through faith justifies because that Christ is now a believer's righteousness, not out of works in righteousness that he or she has done (Titus 3:5) but as "the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith" (Phil. 3:9). Sin certainly remains, but God takes no account of it, knowing that Christ "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3) on the cross and that every believer can and will be freed from this indwelling sin in time by Him as the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2).

Luther complains that a believer's faith is always a weak faith, made weak by indwelling sin, and therefore the righteousness that it possesses, even though it is Christ Himself as the righteousness of God, is an imperfect righteousness that God cannot justify. We agree that faith resides in the believers in degrees (cf. Rom. 14:1; 15:1; 1 Cor. 8:9; 9:22), implying that there is some weakness of faith in all believers because indwelling sin hinders faith. But this does not diminish the righteousness of God that is embodied in the

Christ who is possessed through even the weakest faith in Him: everyone who believes in Him (John 3:15-16; 6:40; 11:26; 12:46; Acts 10:43; 13:39; Rom. 1:16; 10:4, 11; 1 John 5:1)—Scripture adds no qualifications or exceptions—gains Him in this way for his or her justification. Luther was certainly right that our faith is weak, but he was certainly not right that the righteousness of faith is thus also weak, imperfect, and simply inchoate. Our faith is certainly a righteousness in and of itself, because to believe in God is the most right thing for a human being to do. But faith itself is not the righteousness that avails before God; the righteousness that avails before God is Christ Himself, to whom we have been wholly united through even the meagerest faith. The faith may be weak, but Christ the righteousness of God, who is at the same time the power of God, is not (1 Cor. 1:24). Luther wishes to shift the believers' attention outside of themselves to a God who is concerned above all things with sin and to allay their

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*Anfechtung* with the notion that God in heaven above has been placated by the death of His Son. For Luther this alone suffices to alleviate the stress of sin upon the believer's conscience. But we maintain that God sees things somewhat differently because Christ as His very righteousness is within the believers through faith, even as weak as that faith may be because of indwelling sin, and He always smiles on His Son (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; 2 Pet. 1:17) and justifies those who are joined to Him. His attention is focused on Christ as His righteousness, not on the weakness of our faith or on our remaining sin. It is difficult for us to believe that God could see us, or anyone, in His Son and still require something more for approval before Him. What pleases the Father is not the absence—actual or imputed—of sin in us but the Christ in us. The Christ within us, even in opposition to indwelling sin (cf. Gal. 5:17), gives us greater relief from any *Anfechtung* that we may have because, as the One who alone pleases and satisfies God and who alone is the righteousness of God, He is with us, even in our hearts (Eph. 3:17; John 14:20; 15:4-5; 17:23, 26; Rom. 8:10).

For Luther imputation is God's act of reckoning something deficient in righteousness as something perfectly righteous in His sight. Even if we accept Luther's declarations concerning Christ as righteousness, we cannot ignore his insistence that indwelling sin makes the faith that grasps Christ as righteousness deficient for justification and that God must impute that deficient faith as a perfect righteousness that satisfies Him for our justification. This, we feel, is the flaw in his view, particularly as he presents it in his later writings. If, however, we admit that Christ as the righteousness of God is alone sufficient for our justification and that faith, regardless of how weak it is and in spite of the indwelling sin that remains after baptism, possesses Christ within us, then justification by God is not an act of reckoning something deficient in righteousness as perfectly righteous but an acknowledging and a taking account of a righteousness that is real, present, and joined to us inwardly through faith. It is based on an actual value of righteousness, not on a concession in valuation. It is not as if God sees a copper penny and calls it a gold bar; it is that God sees a gold bar and takes account of its full value. This, we believe, is why Paul uses a Greek word that refers to taking account of something (λογίζομαι, *logizomai*: Rom. 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24; Gal. 3:6). It is not that Paul means that God considers a deficient righteousness as perfect righteousness; he means that God takes account of Christ as righteousness, who was given to the believers by God and who is now joined to the believers through faith, and God acknowledges that the believers are righteous, that is, justified in His sight. *Imputation*, then, if we are forced to use the word at all, refers to God's acknowledgement of the positive reality of righteousness within the believers through their organic union with Christ. Indeed, this is not a righteousness that derives from themselves, either in their nature or through their actions; it is Christ Himself as righteousness joined to them through faith. It is not a righteousness that is external to the believers, as later Lutheran and Reformed theologians will insist in speaking of an alien righteousness. We are not inclined to shrink back from declaring the value of the Christ to whom we have been organically united as the righteousness of God simply because any notion of something within the believers may be construed as Roman Catholic error (which relies on love in the believers as the formal basis of justification). We believe that God gave Christ as His very righteousness to those who believe into Him, and through faith they are organically joined to Christ as God's righteousness, not in some union with Him externally but in a union that is instantiated and maintained by His being in us, and that God acknowledges, accounts, and validates the faith that grasps Christ and unites us to Him as the positive



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reality of righteousness for our justification (Campbell et al. 1:224-229).

We should finally present in this article at least a brief evaluation of Luther's views on the assurance that a believer can have in his or her justification. While it is beyond the bounds of what we can cover in detail here, the truth concerning the assurance of salvation was first recovered through Luther's constant attention to it, and we should not completely pass over his important rediscovery of it. The assurance of salvation was not unknown before Luther, but like many uncontested issues, the teaching was not greatly emphasized. Over time there was a tendency to assume that a believer could not be absolutely certain of salvation apart from special divine revelation (as in Paul's case) until the final judgment, and this was what Luther inherited from many of his medieval predecessors. One of the ways that this understanding was upheld in the medieval period was by appealing to a particular interpretation of Ecclesiastes 9:1. But in 1518, in his *Lectures on Hebrews*, Luther objects to this understanding of the verse and, by extension, to the medieval position on assurance in justification:

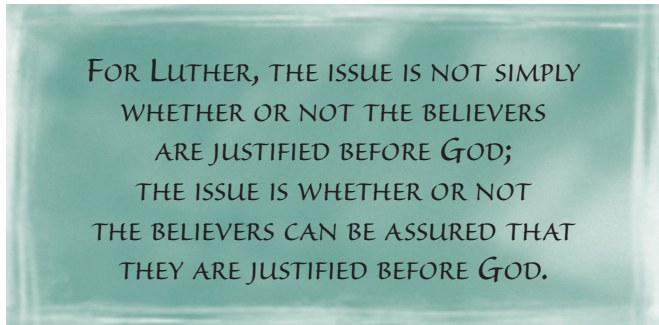
For this reason one must observe most prudently and circumspectly the opinion of those who apply the well-known statement in Eccles. 9:1, namely, "Man does not know whether he is worthy of love or of hatred," to the circumstances of the present hour in order that in this way they may make a man uncertain with regard to the mercy of God and the assurance of salvation. For this amounts to a complete overturning of Christ and of faith in Him. For Ecclesiastes is not speaking about present circumstances. No, it is speaking about perseverance and future circumstances, which are certain for no one, as the apostle says: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). And Rom. 11:20 says: "You stand through faith. Do not be high-minded"—that is, boast—"but fear." (LW 29:217-218)

Here Luther lays out in brief form his positions on two issues: assurance of salvation and perseverance (or security) in salvation. In a great turn from what he received from the medieval period, he advances the view that the believers can and should have the assurance of their salvation in "the present hour." He does this based on an implied, simple, and self-evident meaning of faith: if faith is assurance, then those who have faith must have assurance. For anyone—he means here the medieval schoolmen—to try to make the believers uncertain of their salvation is simply to try to overthrow the assurance that faith actually is.

Near the end of his life, in 1543, he speaks quite explicitly of faith as assurance, and here we can see clearly why throughout his life he insisted on assurance in one's salvation:

"Faith is the assurance" [Heb. 11:1]; in Greek, ὑπόστασις, which we have rendered in German: *Der Glaube ist eine gewisse Zuversicht* ("Faith is a definite assurance"). You cannot express this differently to a German if he is to comprehend it. For faith is and must be a confidence of the heart which does not waver, reel, tremble, fidget, or doubt but remains constant and is sure of itself...Such is... "one who is established, substantiated, supremely steadfast, made to stand, able to stand, sure passively as the Word of God is sure actively," as St. Paul declares in 2 Tim. 1:12: "I know whom I have believed, and I am sure, etc." (LW 15:272)

There can hardly be a stronger assessment of the assurance that faith gives to the believers than what Luther offers here, and this is the assurance that, he contends, a believer must have. It is interesting to note, especially in view of his



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THEY ARE JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD.

denial of the security of salvation, that he cuts off Paul's quotation of 2 Timothy 1:12 where he does. The verse in fact ends with "I am sure that He is able to guard my deposit unto that day." It seems that Paul was more secure in his salvation than Luther was in his.

The second position that Luther lays out in the excerpt from his *Lectures on Hebrews* quoted above concerns perseverance in salvation. While Luther strongly maintains that the believers can be certain of their justification at any given point in time, he just as strongly asserts that no one can be certain that he or she will be preserved in faith throughout his or her lifetime, and he claims that such is the true meaning of Ecclesiastes 9:1. Salvation is not secure, as Luther sees it, since no one can be certain that he or she will not fall and that his or her faith will not fail. Assurance of salvation, therefore, is for the moment, not for the future.

The believers' assurance in God's acceptance based on Christ's death indeed becomes the bedrock of the Reformation and is without doubt the greatest truth recovered through Luther. For him, the issue is not simply whether or not the believers are justified before God—the church had long taught justification in one form or another, as we saw in the previous sections—the issue is whether or not the believers can be assured that they are justified before God. As far as the believers are concerned, the problem is not simply on God's side. There is also their side, where the problem is the fear and torment that God may actually be angry still and ready to punish eternally. The relief from this *Anfechtung* is just as much a benefit of the gospel for Luther as is actual justification before God; in fact, it is the gospel for Luther. His great stand is to deny the ministry of uncertainty that prevailed in the Christian church in his day and that held the believers, those who genuinely had faith in God because of the work of His Son, as captives to doubt, fear, and anguish (Campbell et al. 1:239-246).

We are grateful to the Lord for His use of Martin Luther in recovering justification by faith. But we must admit that Luther's actual usefulness lies in the recovery of the mere fact of justification by faith, not in the exact details of how God carries it out. Thus, Watchman Nee was correct in his assessment that Luther "was not so clear concerning justification" (CWWN 57:51). But it is fair to say that in Luther's day the mere fact of justification by faith needed to be recovered first, given the confusion that prevailed at the time. Against the backdrop of Roman Catholicism's use of indulgences to drug the consciences of the believers in regard to sin and the tendencies of late medieval scholasticism to promote works for acceptance before God, a major correction in the church was in order. Thankfully, the Lord raised up Luther to see that God justifies human beings only by faith, and this much alone was enough to turn the entire situation to a positive direction for God's economy. Of course, the challenge that Luther faced was in offering an exact explanation of how God justifies by faith. In this we follow Watchman Nee in saying that Luther was not so clear, and we are not alone with him in this assessment. As later articles in this issue will show, very many non-Lutheran writers, some very early on, take exception to Luther's view on the "mechanics" of justification, even while not denying the fact of justification by faith alone. Even many Lutheran teachers, some immediately after Luther's departure and others throughout the centuries since then, differ from him in his understanding of exactly how God justifies the believers. On the one hand, knowing simply that God justifies by faith alone is a great blessing to every believer, and it is due to the Lord's

operation in Luther for his unbending insistence on this point that we owe this blessing, each and every one of us who believe. But on the other hand, knowing exactly how God justifies us unveils to us how real, present, and inward Christ is to us as righteousness, how marvelously effective faith is in its operation within us, and how wise, not to mention how truly righteous, God is to justify those who simply believe and receive Christ as His righteousness within (Campbell et al. 1:229-230).

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# THE EXTERNALIZATION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: JUSTIFICATION IN THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

Martin Luther (d. 1546) was indisputably the leading personality of the Protestant Reformation, but he was not alone in the work of reform. Luther was surrounded by several co-workers, who adopted and developed this or that strand in Luther's teaching, making it the prominent feature of their competing accounts of justification. Through a series of confessional documents, authored not only by Luther but also by various of his co-workers, a distinctively Lutheran account of justification emerged, which differs from Luther's view in a number of important respects.

Luther's understanding of justification is, of course, an important contribution to the Lutheran view, but among the confessional documents that are now constitutive of Lutheran identity, Luther's written contribution is the shortest and the least prominent. The earliest confessional document of the Lutheran Church that addresses justification directly was written not by Luther but by Philipp Melancthon (d. 1560), perhaps Luther's closest co-worker. The emperor Charles V had summoned the Lutherans to defend their call for reform at an imperial assembly in the city of Augsburg in 1530, and because Luther had been declared an outlaw ten years prior, Melancthon was the primary Lutheran representative at the diet. Prepared primarily to defend their proposals for church reform, Melancthon and those with him were greeted with an assault on Lutheran teaching. Melancthon responded with a defense of those teachings in his 1530 Augsburg Confession. Catholics countered with their Confutation, and Melancthon replied in turn with his substantial 1531 Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which includes by far the longest treatment of justification in the Lutheran confessional documents. In 1536 Pope Paul III called for a general council, insisting that Protestant representatives attend. In preparation for the council (which never took place as such), John Frederick I, Elector of Saxony, commissioned Luther to compose a final and definitive account of his own teaching. Luther offered such an account in the 1537 Smalcald Articles, which include no more than a short paragraph on justification by faith. After Luther's death in 1546, hidden rifts among his co-workers came to the surface, and open conflict broke out regarding justification and several other

important truths. Andreas Osiander (d. 1552), who claimed that Melancthon and others had strayed from Luther's teaching, was at the heart of the earliest controversy concerning justification and became the target of nearly every one of Luther's other co-workers. The factiousness of this and other debates among Luther's co-workers before and after Luther's death threatened to tear the Lutheran Reformation to pieces. A variety of efforts to unite the Protestant churches in Germany finally culminated in the 1577 Formula of Concord, which includes a substantial treatment of justification by faith and a final resolution of the Osiandrian controversy. In 1580 the Formula of Concord was combined with three of Melancthon's works (including the Augsburg Confession and its Apology), three of Luther's works (including his Smalcald Articles), and three creeds of the early church to become the Book of Concord. This Book of Concord was to become the doctrinal standard of the Lutheran Church and remains such to this day. To be a Lutheran does not necessarily mean to agree with Luther; to be a Lutheran means to subscribe to the Book of Concord (Campbell et al. 2:1-3).

## The Augsburg Confession

Here we can only consider the Augsburg Confession, a somewhat all-inclusive document that began to serve and still serves as the basic statement of Lutheran belief. It consists of twenty-one "Articles on Faith and Doctrine" and another seventeen articles on church abuses that the Lutherans wished to correct. For our purposes here we will consider primarily Article IV, on justification, which reads:

Likewise, they [i.e., the Lutheran churches] teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness (Rom. 3[:21-26] and 4[:5]). (Kolb-Wengert 39, 41)

While the statement is brief, the main points concerning

the Lutheran understanding of justification are set forth in summary fashion. These notions are seminal here; they were developed more fully in later Lutheran writings, including in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. The first notion that is expressed is that human beings “cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works” but “are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith.” This echoes Luther’s main complaint against late medieval Catholicism. The negative statement—that justification is not by one’s own works—would not have bothered many Catholic theologians at the time, since they would have likewise asserted that one’s *own* works are insufficient before God. That was really not at issue, and Melancthon, the author of the Augsburg Confession, no doubt assumed that this was a common point among Catholic and Lutheran churches. What was at issue was the positive statement that follows, which concerns the actual basis of justification by God. For Catholics the generally accepted teaching was (and is) that God justifies by infusing love together with faith. For the Lutherans, the declaration in Article IV of

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the Confession is that faith suffices for justification without love. Thus, they asserted that God accounts only faith as justifying righteousness, not love giving a proper form to faith, as the Catholics said.

It is important to note the intrinsic difference between these two standards for justification because this difference motivates the debate between Catholics and Lutherans (with the Calvinists) to this very day. The core issue is what must be within a human being for God to justify him or her: for Catholics it must be faith operating through love that comes out of infused grace; for Lutherans it must be only faith. The Lutherans firmly held that anything beyond faith within a human being, even love motivated by grace, amounted to a kind of work that is accomplished by him or her. And if it is a work in any sense of the term, it cannot be the justification that Paul heralds, because he is so adamant that justification is apart from works (Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:2, 5; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:9). The Lutherans did not deny that faith operates through love, as Paul also teaches (Gal. 5:6), but they did deny that faith operating through love is what justifies a believer. The Catholics understood that God justifies, more fully, by faith operating through love. Thus, the Lutheran standard for justification was much more limited than that

of the Catholics. The Lutherans wanted to ensure that the believer possessed, and was therefore responsible for, nothing other than faith in order to be justified. The Catholics wanted to ensure that the believer contributed something in cooperation with the divine grace received through faith in order to be justified. The Lutheran insistence on only the minimum of faith for justification, and indeed on the rejection of anything beyond faith, served as their chief distinctive at Augsburg. Anything that gave even the slightest hint that something more than belief was required for justification was to be rejected, and this set the mold for all later Lutheran considerations about justification.

Article IV of the Confession also offers a statement on the particular faith that justifies: “They believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ” (Kolb-Wengert 41). For Luther and Melancthon, to be received into grace is to come under God’s gracious kindness and mercy (41n52), not to have something dispensed into human beings. For them grace is a disposition within God toward human beings that is gracious, kind, and merciful; it is not something of Himself given to them. To be justified, in their view, a person must believe that God receives him or her because He is graciously and mercifully inclined toward him or her. Further, one must also believe that God has forgiven his or her sins on account of Christ. Thus, justifying faith, the faith that God reckons as righteousness, is a belief in how God now views the believing one based on God’s forgiveness of sins on account of Christ. This belief is pointed at things external to the believer: God’s gracious inner disposition and His forgiveness on account of Christ; and being external to the believer, these things cannot in any way be construed as one’s “own powers, merits, or works.” For the Lutherans, even in the early period of the Augsburg Confession, justification had to rely on things external to the believer lest one might consider anything internal as something of one’s own self, of one’s own righteousness in some way.

In the Confession, as in all the later confessional writings of the Lutherans, God is said to justify those who believe that God has forgiven their sins “on account of Christ.” This phrase, very Lutheran in its particular application, refers to God’s perspective for the forgiveness of sins. He does not look at the sins of the sinner but at the sacrifice of the Savior, and on account of the Savior He righteously forgives the sinner who believes. Once again, the perspective is external to the believer (and rightly so insofar as it relates purely to the sacrifice for sins), and attention is turned away from what the believer is and does. All aspects of justification, according to the Augsburg Confession—Christ and His sacrifice, God’s grace (as His gracious disposition toward the believer), and God’s forgiveness—are resolutely understood to be outside of the believer, and thus, justification for the Lutherans was something completely external.

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In considering justification in the Augsburg Confession, we may not easily be able to find fault, especially if we accept the notion that justification consists in the forgiveness of sins. Of course, this is not a novel understanding but one that reaches back as far as the patristic period. But as we have said in the Patristic article (18-21 in this issue), we do not accept that notion. Of course, the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sins is historical and external to the believers, even if it is apprehended by the faith within the believers. Thus, to say that God forgives our sins “on account of Christ” is certainly correct. And God’s gracious disposition is something within Him and external to the believers, if we wish to limit God’s grace to His internal disposition. (We do not wish to, but we can concede the point simply because God is indeed gracious in forgiving sins.) But to say that God justifies us *only* on the basis of His forgiveness of sins and therefore that justification consists in the forgiveness of sins falls short of a full and proper understanding of justification. Justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins, though this is certainly prerequisite to it and shows that God is righteous on His part (Rom. 3:26: “so that He might be righteous”). For our part, Christ Himself has become directly our righteousness for our justification (1 Cor. 1:30), not merely on account of His righteous human life and His redemptive death but by virtue of who He is as righteousness itself both as God and as man. Further, this Christ who is righteousness is made real to the believers and apprehended by them inwardly by faith, and thus, the believers are justified by faith because faith inwardly apprehends Christ as righteousness. This is certainly not something of themselves; it is not “by their own powers, merits, or works” as the Confession declares. But neither is it something external to them. The faith that justifies is not simply an assent to externalities, even if it is a strong trust with personal effect, as the Confession describes it (Kolb-Wengert 57). Faith is even more significantly a receiving (John 1:12), and what is received first by faith is Christ as righteousness for justification. While the prerequisite for justification is the forgiveness of sins accomplished by Christ on the cross and accepted by God externally to the believer, justification itself occurs when a believer’s faith apprehends and possesses Christ as righteousness inwardly. Thus, justification is not at all something that is external to the believers, even if it is indeed not an action, a virtue, a power, a merit, or a work that they themselves provide. Christ can be and is within the believers through faith in the gospel without this being something of the believers themselves.

In the Lutherans’ zeal to understand justification apart from works, they kept Christ outside of the believers in justification, and in doing so they made justification external to the believers. To them, there was great consolation of conscience (Kolb-Wengert 55) in claiming that the believers did not need to look within themselves for the basis of their justification. But what greater consolation can there be than Christ Himself within a believer as righteousness before

God, even apart from any living out of that righteousness by him or her? If Christ was righteous in His life and death and this could assuage one’s conscience, how much more will He Himself as righteousness within the very being of a believer offer even greater consolation! The gospel is not that God accepts the righteous Christ outside of you for your sins and that He justifies you when you assent to that. The gospel is that by faith you apprehend Christ as righteousness before God and therefore He justifies you. Surely faith believes in who Christ is and in what Christ did for the forgiveness of your sins, for which you must repent. But that faith does so much more than simply assent; that faith inwardly receives the full reality of righteousness in the person of Christ the God-man, and that faith, not merely in its ability to believe but more intrinsically in its facility to receive, justifies. This is truly good news with the greatest comfort (Campbell et al. 2:5-10).

### The Osiandrian Controversy

For the most part the Augsburg Confession and its Apology established the Lutheran view of justification by faith for its adherents, and justification seemed to be a settled issue among the Lutherans by the end of 1531. There were other controversies, even great ones, that arose among Luther’s followers both before and after his death in 1546, but these do not relate directly to the topic at hand. What does relate, in a very significant way, is the teaching concerning justification by faith by Andreas Osiander (d. 1552), who attracted the attention, and the ire, of nearly all his contemporaries when he began to put forth his own views in October 1550. His views are significant not only in themselves but also for their effect on Lutheranism. His views on justification were at odds with much of what Luther and Melancthon had put forward, and due to his own insistence on proclaiming them and publicly setting them in opposition to Melancthon’s views particularly (he always claimed that he was faithful to Luther’s true views), he drew the ire, and the pens, of almost all Lutheran writers in his day. Eventually, his views served to galvanize the view of justification that has characterized Lutheranism since then, and he has gone down in history as one of the first defectors from the Reformation view of justification. The final confessional statement of the Lutherans, the Formula of Concord (published in the Book of Concord in 1580), took direct aim at Osiander in its Article III. John Calvin, on behalf of the Reformed churches, attempted to refute him “point-by-point” in the 1559 edition of his *Institutes*.

Unlike Philipp Melancthon, who emphasized the pronouncing aspect of justification based on forgiveness of sins, external to the believer, Osiander understood the declaration of righteousness to be based not just on forgiveness of sins but more importantly on the Christ who indwells the believers as righteousness through faith, as he declares in his *Disputatio de iustificatione*:

73. They teach things colder even than ice who teach that we are reputed to be righteous only on account of the remission of sins and not also on account of the righteousness of Christ dwelling in us through faith. (GA 9:444)

For Luther, Melanchthon, and almost all other Lutheran teachers, the believers are reputed to be righteous based solely on account of what Christ has done to obtain the forgiveness of sins, and this basis is external to the believers. God disregards their unrighteousness and imputes Christ's righteousness to them for their justification. While Osiander does not completely deny this basis, he insists on a more intrinsic one: "the righteousness of Christ dwelling in us through faith," and this is his great departure from Lutheran teaching, for which he was and still is severely censured by Lutherans. But as we maintained throughout our evaluation of the traditions up through Luther (in the last article), the basis of our justification by God is indeed Christ Himself as righteousness dwelling in the believers through faith and not simply the One who is righteous externally. Hence, we certainly agree with Osiander's thesis 73 as he states it

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without elaboration. It is his elaboration, particularly of the phrase *the righteousness of Christ*, that is problematic for Lutherans and for us.

For Osiander the righteousness that justifies the believers is not something imputed externally to them by God, as Luther and Melanchthon taught, nor is it the righteousness associated with Christ's humanity in His fulfilling the law during His living and by His death. Rather, it is particularly the righteousness of His eternal sonship, which is the same righteousness possessed by the Father and by the Holy Spirit. This stance eventually provoked an almost universal reaction from other Lutheran teachers for two reasons. First, by denying the righteousness associated with Christ's humanity as the basis of justification, Osiander seemed to be discounting the value of Christ's redemptive death in His humanity. If the believers are justified only by the righteousness of the eternal Son of God, why did Christ die on the cross, and for that matter, why did God become human in the first place? Second, because Osiander distinguished so forcefully between Christ's human righteousness and His righteousness as God, many took this as an opportunity to accuse

him of cleaving Christ into two persons, the Son of God and the man Jesus (the fifth-century Nestorian heresy).

In the eyes of other Lutheran teachers, to be justified was to be forgiven of one's sins, and thus, Christ's death on the cross was the cause of justification. Hence, His righteousness in His humanity was indispensable. That is not to say that Christ's divine righteousness was not just as important to them. The righteousness imputed by God to the believers for their justification was the righteousness of Christ as both God and man, but it was particularly His righteous act in death that served as the cause of their justification, in their view. But Osiander's focus on Christ in His divinity as the basis for righteousness dissolved the identification of justification with forgiveness of sins, an identification that lay at the very heart of the Lutheran view. Although it seemed as if Osiander's opponents simply seized on a theological technicality, albeit a massive one related to the very person of Christ and historically very significant, in actuality the technicality involved the essence of Lutheran justification, that is, the righteousness involved in Christ's action on the cross. Osiander persisted in isolating the divine righteousness of Christ from His human righteousness and in basing justification on the former rather than on both, and this persistence makes his account of justification incomplete.

Like the Lutherans, we believe that Osiander erred in holding only to Christ's divine righteousness for the believers' justification. The Christ given to the believers as righteousness is righteousness by virtue of His divinity and His humanity. No one, of course, contested the righteousness of His divinity, and no one doubted the righteousness of His humanity, not even Osiander. But while Osiander was right to teach that justification is not merely the forgiveness of sins but is more intrinsically the indwelling of Christ as righteousness, he made the mistake of assuming that Christ was the believers' righteousness by virtue of only His divinity. This flaw eventually derailed everything else in his understanding, and that was most unfortunate (Campbell et al. 2:15-24).

### Justification as Forensic Declaration in Post-Concord Lutheranism

The publication of the Formula of Concord was one of the most important moments in the formation of Lutheran identity, setting the course for the development of Lutheran teaching for centuries to come. Post-Concord Lutherans had much to say about union with Christ, but the condemnation of Osiander's teaching resulted in a general suspicion among Lutherans of basing justification on union with Christ. The Formula of Concord identifies divine indwelling as a result, not the basis, of justification, and many Lutherans have taken this to imply that union with Christ is likewise a result of justification and not its basis:

To be sure, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the

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eternal and essential righteousness, dwells through faith in the elect, who have become righteous through Christ and are reconciled with God. (For all Christians are temples of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who moves them to act properly.) However, this indwelling of God is not the righteousness of faith, which St. Paul treats [Rom. 1:17; 3:5, 22, 25; 2 Cor. 5:21] and calls *iustitia Dei* (that is, the righteousness of God), for the sake of which we are pronounced righteous before God. Rather, this indwelling is a result of the righteousness of faith which precedes it, and this righteousness [of faith] is nothing else than the forgiveness of sins and the acceptance of poor sinners by grace, only because of Christ's obedience and merit. (Kolb-Wengert 571-572)

There is much in Lutheran theology concerning the believers' union with Christ that is worthy of our attention, but we cannot consider it here, because the standard Lutheran position is that the believers' union with Christ is an effect rather than a cause of justification. Justification, in other words, is not based on an internal union with Christ; union with Christ is based on an external justification. According to Johannes Quenstedt (d. 1688), one of the most authoritative of the later Lutheran orthodox theologians,

Justification and regeneration are prior in order to the mystical union. For when, in regeneration, a man receives faith, and by faith is justified, then only does he begin to be mystically united to God. (Schmid 481)

This was the standard way of ordering justification and union among the Lutheran orthodox theologians, and it remains the standard Lutheran way of ordering the two to this day.

Lutheran theologians not only generally place union with Christ after justification but also often warn against basing justification on a preceding union. Francis Pieper (d. 1931), one of the most influential theologians among modern confessional Lutherans in the United States, has the following to say about mystical union:

The *unio mystica* is the result of justification. To make it the basis of justification means to mix sanctification into justification. All those who deny that the reconciliation of the world has been brought about through the vicarious satisfaction of Christ are forced to teach that justification is not based on Christ's vicarious work, but is the result of man's ingraftment into the Person of Christ. (2:410)

As we will see in the Reformed article (44-50 in this issue), the importance of union with Christ for justification became central to the Reformed tradition, more central than in any of the other major Christian traditions. Regrettably, many Lutherans have contended with the Reformed on this matter. Pieper, for instance, does not hide the fact that he has the Reformed ("Calvinists") in mind, among others, when he warns against basing justification on the Christ within the believers:

Here the way of the Lutheran Church and that of the Romanists, 'enthusiasts,' and consistent Calvinists diverges. The latter groups with one accord base justification on the Christ in us...

The Lutheran position is that justifying, saving faith deals only with the Christ *outside* us, or the Christ *for* us. The grace that justifying faith grasps is the gracious disposition of God (*favor Dei*) which is and remains in God's heart, but which He exhibits in the Gospel. (2:435-436)

The Lutheran tradition, for the most part, has thus marshaled its ranks against not only the Catholic account of justification but also the Reformed. Indeed, at least on the matter of the relationship between union and justification, Lutherans often imagine themselves to be the sole contenders for the wholly external character of justification by faith against both the Catholic and Reformed traditions.

This insistence that justification is entirely external and forensic, coupled with the fact that Lutherans regard justification by faith as the highest teaching in the Scriptures, has regrettably contributed to a lack of attention if not outright suspicion among Lutherans of anything internal in the life of the believer, whether preceding or following justification. In other words, the forensic character of the Lutheran understanding of justification has often tended to infect other areas of Christian teaching as well. According to Wilhelm Dantine (d. 1981):

Man's relationship to God bears a forensic character in its total breadth and fullness. On the basis of this insight we are absolutely forbidden from viewing the forensic aspect as only a partial truth, as one of several possible ways of viewing the relationship to God. We are thus forced into the fundamental discovery that the Bible sees the total relationship between God and man as forensically structured. (82)

For many Lutherans, then, all Christian teaching is fundamentally forensic.

There is much in the Lutheran tradition concerning the interior aspects of Christian life and experience. But attention to these interior aspects has generally declined over the centuries, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the exaltation of an entirely external justification is one of the major contributing factors to this decline. The seeds already sown in the Formula of Concord's resolution of the Osiandrian controversy have thus fully blossomed through the intervening centuries, resulting in one of the most external accounts of the Christian life among all the major Christian traditions (Campbell et al. 2:29-34).

### The Assurance and Security of Salvation

Luther's teaching concerning the assurance (or certainty) of

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salvation was challenged by a number of prominent Catholic critics during his lifetime. Luther never compromised on this great truth, and the Lutheran confessional documents join him in his stand. The Formula of Concord, for instance, says:

We believe, teach, and confess that in spite of the fact that until death a great deal of weakness and frailty still cling to those who believe in Christ and are truly reborn, they should not doubt their righteousness, which is reckoned to them through faith, nor the salvation of their souls, but they should regard it as certain that they have a gracious God for Christ's sake, on the basis of the promise and the Word of the holy gospel. (Kolb-Wengert 496)

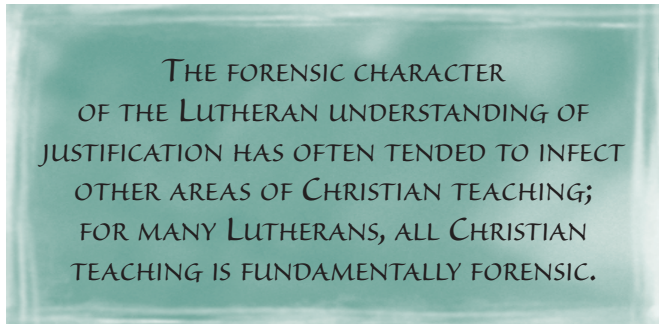
We certainly commend the Lutheran tradition for being faithful to Luther and to the truth in this respect. The Lutheran tradition was the first to strongly uphold the assurance of salvation, and we are surely beneficiaries of this bold stand.

We must lament the fact, however, that neither Luther nor the Lutheran tradition embrace the security of salvation (Kolb-Wengert 579). According to the Lutheran tradition, the believers can know that they are justified, but they must constantly fear that they will lose this justification and be liable again to eternal condemnation. Johann Gerhard (d. 1637) thinks that the believers' fear should be great indeed, arguing that few persevere to the end: "Nothing should more effectively lead us to cast away false security than the thought of the comparatively small number of those who persevere to the end" (*Meditations* 167). While we applaud the Lutheran tradition for its stand against the Catholic ministry of doubt, we must lament the fact that it has replaced this ministry of doubt with its own ministry of fear.

The main argument that Lutherans use to defend their rejection of the security of salvation is the various scriptural passages that suggest faith can be lost, particularly those in 1 and 2 Timothy (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:19; 4:1; 5:8; 6:10; 2 Tim. 2:18). The most serious of these cases is that of Alexander and Hymenaeus. Paul tells us not only that they had "become shipwrecked regarding the faith" (1 Tim. 1:19-20) but also that Hymenaeus overthrew the faith of others (2 Tim. 2:17-18). Surely those who damage others and not only themselves are liable to more severe treatment, but Paul's language urges us to assume that even these two were not lost. Paul tells us that he "delivered [them] to Satan that they may be disciplined not to blaspheme" (1 Tim. 1:20). The word *discipline* is often clearly employed in the New Testament to describe the relationship between God and a believer and is never clearly employed in the New Testament to describe the relationship between God and an unbeliever. In fact, the word is often employed to describe the relationship between God as Father and the believers as His children (Heb. 12:5-9; cf. Deut. 8:5; Prov. 3:11-12). Given the particularly close connection between discipline and sonship, we should assume that Alexander and Hymenaeus retained faith, justification, and salvation, which are

the foundation of the believers' sonship. In addition, Paul's delivering of these two to Satan calls to mind the identical language of 1 Corinthians 5:5 regarding a heinous case of fornication: "...to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh." Later in the same chapter Paul prescribes the general rule: "I have written to you not to mingle with anyone who is called a brother, if he is a fornicator or a covetous man..." (1 Cor. 5:11). Here Paul implies that the sinning one he has delivered to Satan remains a brother. Neither this case nor the case of Alexander and Hymenaeus are cases of Paul's committing an unbeliever to eternal condemnation, a prerogative that surely belongs only to God. Rather, Paul is delivering these ones to Satan as an instrument of the Father's discipline.

Lutherans also appeal to more positive cases like that of Peter, who according to the Lutheran account lost faith and thus justification when he denied the Lord three times, later regaining faith and justification when he repented.



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According to Gerhard, "It is absurd to claim that the threefold denial of Peter, made not only with words but by calling on the Divine as his witness and by calling down curses on himself, could have existed together with true faith and the gracious indwelling of the Holy Spirit" (*Commonplaces* 20:262). We do not think it is absurd to claim that Peter's faith remained. In fact, we think it is necessary to claim this, for if Peter's faith truly failed, then the Lord's prayer for Peter—that his "faith would not fail" (Luke 22:32)—was ineffective. The Lord did not make petition that Peter's faith would not fail *permanently* (as Lutherans often insist); He made petition that it would not fail without further qualification. Even while Peter was openly and repeatedly denying the Lord, we must believe that the Lord's prayer for him was effective and that his faith remained. We believe that such faith has been given to all who genuinely believe into Christ for justification and that such precious faith cannot be eradicated regardless of what the believers do. Even if they temporarily deny the Lord before others, the Christ who has been infused into their being as faith remains permanently within them. Of course, even to deny Him before others is a serious matter. The Lord says that He will deny all those who deny Him (Matt. 10:33; Luke 12:9). But 2 Timothy 2:12 indicates that this



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relates not to the believers' eternal salvation but to their status in the coming kingdom of God: "If we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us." Once Christ has been infused through the appearing of the God of glory in the preaching of the gospel to become our believing ability, He remains eternally within us for our justification even if we deny Him and deny the contents of the faith with our lips. He may deny to us the reward of the kingdom in the next age, and we must surely pray that it would not be so, but He will never deny that in Christ we are as righteous as God Himself is (Campbell et al. 2:41-49).

### Frequency of Justification

According to the Lutheran tradition, faith does not justify before God merely at the moment that faith first arises; rather, faith continuously maintains the justified status throughout life. Because Lutherans teach that faith can fail and thus that justification by faith can fail, they consider the whole Christian life to be a constant struggle to maintain the faith that alone justifies before God. Luther himself had insisted, "Daily we sin, daily we are continually justified, just as a doctor is forced to heal sickness day by day until it is cured" (*LW* 34:191), and the Lutheran tradition has generally followed his lead in this regard.

According to Pieper, faith's laying hold of justification occurs day by day throughout the Christian life (even during sleep!): "The faith of a Christian...is a continuous act (*continuata actio*), by which he, asleep or awake, standing still or walking about, lays hold of the forgiveness of sins offered in the Gospel" (2:433). Eduard Preuss (d. 1904) contends that the believers should not settle for a justification that is renewed only daily or even hourly: "We would not consider it to be too often if we received forgiveness of sins twenty times every hour" (142-143). For Preuss, then, justification is or at least ought to be constantly on the minds of the believers. Justification is not the unshakable foundation of the Christian life; it is the constant concern of the Christian life precisely because it is so shakable. The believers are not constantly held up by their justification; rather, the believers must constantly hold up that justification lest it fall. For the Lutheran tradition, then, the more proper the believers are, the more they experience justification. The ideal Lutheran Christian is not justified once; the ideal Lutheran Christian would be justified at every waking moment and even in sleep.

We agree entirely that the believers require the continuous cleansing of the blood of Jesus from every sin (1 John 1:7), but we do not agree that their justification is likewise perpetual and continuous. Justification by faith is not the forgiveness of sins, even though there is an aspect of forgiveness of sins (namely, eternal forgiveness) that precedes justification by faith (Acts 13:38-39). While the Scriptures often speak of the believers' continual need for the forgiveness of sins, they

typically speak of justification by faith as a completed past event. In Romans 5:1 Paul speaks of "having been justified out of faith." In Romans 5:9 he speaks of "having now been justified in His blood." In Titus 3:7 he speaks of "having been justified by His grace." And in 1 Corinthians 6:11 he says that the Corinthians "were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." The fact that Paul frequently speaks of justification by faith as a past and completed event urges us to think of justification by faith in precisely the same way. Justification is a past and completed event, the unshakable and irreversible foundation of the Christian life, not a fleeting condition that must be repeatedly and continuously maintained (Campbell et al. 2:49-52).

### Justification and the Sacraments

As we saw in the Patristic through Luther article (18-33 in this issue), justification was closely associated with the sacrament of baptism in the early church and became tightly interwoven with the sacrament of penance in the medieval West. This close connection between justification and the sacraments continues in the Lutheran tradition.

In his Large Catechism Luther identifies not only the gospel but also the sacraments and absolution of the church as the means by which the forgiveness of sins is conveyed: "Further we believe that in this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins, which takes place through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire gospel" (Kolb-Wengert 438). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, published in 1531, takes the same position, including absolution among the sacraments:

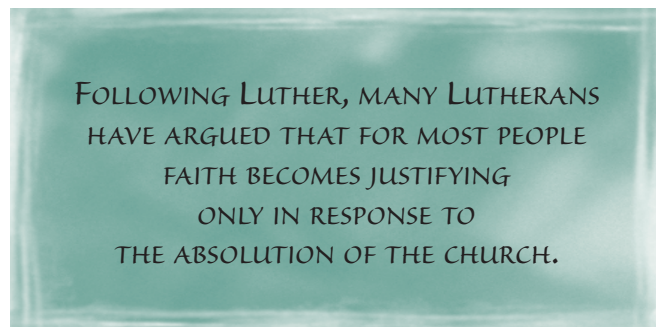
The sacraments are actually baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution (the sacrament of repentance). For these rites have the command of God and the promise of grace, which is the essence of the New Testament. (Kolb-Wengert 219)

The inclusion of absolution as a third sacrament of the church in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession may be surprising to some. Absolution is a reference to the sacrament of penance, or confession, offered through the church, which we have seen was the source of a great deal of Luther's *Anfechtung*. Still, despite all his torment Luther did not intend to dispense with the sacrament. Much to the contrary, he says, "I will allow no man to take private confession [i.e., confession to a priest privately] away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me" (*LW* 51:98). Even after his break with the Roman Catholic Church, Luther continued to confess his sins, always to an ordained minister, and seems to have done so regularly throughout the rest of his life and on his deathbed. Luther, in fact, argues that most people (including himself, it seems) do not have the adequate faith to confess to God alone: "One who has a strong,

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firm faith that his sins are forgiven may let [private] confession go and confess to God alone. But how many have such a strong faith? Therefore, as I have said, I will not let this private confession be taken from me” (LW 51:99). Following Luther, many Lutherans have argued that for most people faith becomes justifying only in response to the absolution of the church.

Even during Luther’s lifetime, one of his co-workers attempted to abolish private confession, and another attempted to abolish public confession. On both instances, Luther intervened and insisted that the two practices be allowed to continue. Private and corporate rites of absolution have thus often remained a distinctive feature of Lutheranism among all the Protestant traditions. In this respect at least, Lutherans continue to think of justification in similar ways to Catholics. Justification is not a one-time event at the beginning of the Christian life; rather, it is a frequent occurrence mediated to a significant degree through the church.



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When addressing the medieval intertwining of justification and the sacrament of penance, we set forth in brief our evaluation of this intertwining, and our evaluation there applies also to the Lutheran position. Justification is not the forgiveness of sins. Even though we constantly stand in need of forgiveness of sins, we do not thereby constantly stand in need of justification by faith. Similarly, while there is a forgiveness of sins in which the church plays an important role, there are no grounds in the Scriptures for the teaching that the church or any believer, ordained or not, plays a role in the justification of others. God is the One who justifies, and without scriptural warrant otherwise, we cannot presume to think that God does so through the church, through its sacraments, or through any of its members. The Lutheran Reformation was certainly a step in the right direction, but a fuller reformation would have dispensed with penance entirely (Campbell et al. 2:53-56).

### The Importance of Justification by Faith

One final point that deserves our attention is the relative importance that the Lutheran tradition assigns to justification by faith not only within the broader compass of the divine revelation but also within the broader context of

the Christian life. The Lutheran tradition has for the most part trumpeted that the truth concerning justification by faith is the article by which the church stands or falls.

Luther himself did not coin this Lutheran catchphrase in its standard form, but the sentiment surely abounds in his writings: “When this article stands, the church stands; when it falls, the church falls” (WA 40.III:352). Late in life, Luther says, “The article concerning justification is master and prince, lord, ruler and judge over every kind of doctrine... Without this article the world is total death and darkness” (WA 39.I:205). We can perhaps excuse such statements in Luther’s own ministry, for justification was certainly the particular truth God gave to him to trumpet at his time, and his circumstances required that he emphasize this foundational truth more than might otherwise be warranted. But once the victory had been won and the truth concerning justification had been worked into the church, this assuredly great truth ought to have been allotted its appropriate place in the divine revelation as a foundational rather than consummate truth. Regrettably, the Lutheran tradition has continued to maintain Luther’s overemphasis. Pieper, for instance, claims that “the doctrine of justification by faith is...the most important doctrine of the Christian religion,” constituting “the specific difference (*differentia specifica*) between the Christian religion and all other religions” (2:404). According to Pieper, the distinctive feature of Christianity that sets it apart from all other religions is not the Trinity or the incarnation but justification by faith. Pieper does not deny, of course, that these other teachings are essential to the Christian faith, but he argues that all these other teachings serve the cardinal teaching concerning justification by faith:

In Scripture all doctrines serve the doctrine of justification. Take the doctrine of Christ’s Person and Office. Moved by His love toward men,...God, the great Philanthropist (Titus 3:4: The “love of God our Savior, toward man [φιλανθρωπία] appeared”), sent His own Son, not merely as a teacher of morals, but to perform a very specific function, to fulfill the Law and to give up His life in the stead of man in order that men might be justified by the suffering and obedience of the Son of God, without works of their own (Rom. 5:9-10, 18-19; 2 Cor. 5:21). Thus Christology serves merely as the substructure of the doctrine of justification...What is the Church? Scripture tells us that it is nothing else than the communion of those who believe the promise, that is, the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake (Gal. 4:21 ff.). What is the Christian ministry? It is the “ministration of righteousness” (2 Cor. 3:9), the office which teaches righteousness as coming from the Gospel, without the deeds of the Law. (2:513-514)

According to Pieper, all other Christian teachings are oriented toward justification by faith, they serve justification by faith, and they derive their ultimate significance and intelligibility only in relation to justification by faith.

We consider this a gross reduction of many of the great

truths revealed in God's Word. We certainly affirm, for instance, that the church is "the communion of those who believe the promise," but we must take exception to the claim that it is "nothing else" than this. The scriptural portrayal of the church is rich and multifaceted, and to suggest that it is nothing else than the communion of the justified is to greatly impoverish the teaching concerning the church. The church is also, among other things, the household and kingdom of God (Eph. 2:19), the Body and bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). The richness of these themes in the Scriptures compels us not to reduce them to statements ultimately about justification by faith. Similarly, Christ assuredly came "to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). But He also came "that they may have life and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Again, Lutherans might interpret this to mean merely that the believers have been saved from eternal condemnation through justification by faith, but the organic theme in the Scriptures is far too prominent to allow its total reduction to the judicial theme in those same Scriptures.

Pieper claims that justification by faith is not only the holding center of all Christian teaching but also the center of the Christian life: "Indeed, justification by faith represents the climax in man's earthly life, inasmuch as man in this life can reach no higher status" (2:405). In fact, some Lutherans warn against the notion that the believers can make progress in their Christian life. According to Gerhard Forde (d. 2005), "talk about sanctification is dangerous" because it tempts the believers to lose sight of the heart of the matter—God's unconditional promise of grace to those who believe (15).

This Lutheran sentiment conflicts acutely with the sentiment even of the apostle Paul, the great champion of justification by faith. After his astounding proclamation of justification by faith in the opening chapters of Romans, Paul tells us that "if we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled" (Rom. 5:10). Reconciliation is not the same thing as justification, but reconciliation and justification are closely related in Paul's understanding, and "having been reconciled" is clearly meant to mirror "having now been justified" in the preceding verse. The justification of the believers in Christ is an astonishing truth, but Paul speaks of a salvation in Christ's life that is "much more" even than this. In making such a comparison, the apostle Paul is not belittling the judicial component of salvation that he has just heralded; rather, he proclaims the even greater organic salvation for which justification by faith is only the foundation. This emphasis on life is consistent in the rest of Paul's Epistles, and we can hardly imagine Paul saying that justification by faith is the highest possible status of the believers and the church in this age. When the Father sends the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, He does not there cry "Gracious Judge!" but "Abba, Father!" (Gal. 4:6). And when the Son sings in the midst of the church, He does not hymn

with His beneficiaries to God the Judge but with His brothers to God His Father and theirs (Heb. 2:11-12). If anything, it is the relationship of life between the Father and His sons that is primary in the thought of the apostle Paul, to say nothing of the apostle John. Justification by faith is an important and precious truth, one worth contending for, but it is neither the peak of Christian teaching nor the summit of the Christian life.

The same emphasis on organic salvation can be seen also in the Lord's prayers regarding His believers. Surely, He continues to pray at least what He prayed on earth before His glorification, namely, that the believers would be in Him (John 17:21), that He would be in them (John 17:26), that the Father would "sanctify them in the truth" (John 17:17), that the believers might be with Him where He is and behold His transforming glory (John 17:24; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18), that they may be "perfected into one" (John 17:23), and that they "may be one" even as He and the Father are one (John 17:11).

"THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IS A SECT OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IS COMPLETELY SCRIPTURAL AND NECESSARY FOR SALVATION, BUT CONSIDERING JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH AS A PARTICULAR MINISTRY PRODUCED A SECT."—WITNESS LEE

The Lord undoubtedly prays for human beings to be justified, but their justification is not what is primarily on His mind and in His prayers, according to the Scriptures. The express prayers of the Lord as recorded in the New Testament indicate that His primary petitions for the believers regard not their judicial redemption but their organic salvation (i.e., sanctification and glorification) for His corporate expression (i.e., their being one even as the Father and the Son are one). And if this is what is primarily on His mind, it ought to be what is primarily on ours as well.

Luther's Reformation was a great service to the Christian church, irreversibly recovering the truth concerning justification by faith as the solid foundation of God's salvation and of His building. Tragically, rather than building on that foundation, the tradition that now bears his name has sought to repeatedly re-lay that same foundation and has at times even warned against building upon it (Campbell et al. 2:56-61).

## Conclusion

Luther's Reformation was certainly a great beginning of recovery regarding the truth of justification by faith, but it was only a beginning. That beginning, regrettably, was not furthered by the tradition that now bears his name.

Lutherans have continued to boldly and firmly stand for the truth that justification is by faith alone, but they have stood wrongly in their understanding concerning both the nature and the basis of justification. The standard position of the Lutheran tradition is that justification is a forensic declaration of the forgiveness of sins based on a faith in the external work of Christ accomplished on the cross. We affirm, of course, both the forgiveness of sins and faith in the work of Christ. But faith justifies not primarily because it takes hold of the work of Christ accomplished externally to the believers but because it brings the believers into internal union with the person of Christ Himself, and justification is not the forgiveness of sins but the Father's approval that the believers who have been united to Christ by their faith now possess Christ as their righteousness before Him. Despite the flaws in his own view, Andreas Osiander rightly fought for a more intrinsic understanding of justification based on internal union with Christ, but the Formula of Concord's condemnation of his teaching galvanized the Lutheran commitment to a predominantly external and forensic account of justification.

Lutherans have not only wrongly understood the justification by faith for which they fight so valiantly; they have also wrongly emphasized it, often insisting that justification by faith is the pinnacle of Christian teaching and of the Christian life and warning the believers against the notion that they can make any real progress in God's salvation. Given the distorted emphasis that the Lutheran tradition places on justification, even to the detriment of further progress in God's full and organic salvation, we fully agree with Witness Lee's (d. 1997) assessment of this tradition:

The Lutheran Church is a sect of justification by faith. Justification by faith is completely scriptural and necessary for salvation, but considering justification by faith as a particular ministry produced a sect. (CWWL, 1988 1:615)

Luther's fight for justification by faith was a great gift to the Body of Christ, a genuine advance in the church's progressing understanding of the truth. But justification is neither the whole of the church's understanding of the truth nor the most important item of the truth. By holding to its particular gift and rejecting what God has given to others both before and after Luther's Reformation, the Lutheran tradition has closed itself to the fellowship of the one Body. In its attempt to be the guardian of the truth concerning justification by faith, the Lutheran tradition has instead become a sect of that truth, and this we surely lament. Thankfully, the seeds that Luther sowed have borne fruit outside of his own tradition. While the Lutheran tradition has made little to no progress in the understanding of justification since Luther's death, Luther's great beginning of recovery was more faithfully continued by that other great strand of Protestantism—those followers of John Calvin called "Reformed" (Campbell et al. 2:61-63).

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# IMPUTED OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW THROUGH UNION WITH CHRIST: JUSTIFICATION IN THE REFORMED TRADITION AND ITS HEIRS

While Martin Luther (d. 1546) and his followers were carrying out the work of reform in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli (d. 1531) and his contemporaries were engaged in their own work of ecclesiastical and civic reform in Switzerland. These Swiss reformers inherited Luther's recovery of justification by faith and, like Luther, prioritized the Scriptures over tradition and affirmed the priesthood of all believers. But they differed from Luther on some key points, disagreeing with him most famously over the presence of Christ in the bread at the Lord's table. Their teaching thus heralded the beginnings of what would come to be known as a Reformed, as distinct from Lutheran, interpretation of the Scriptures within Protestantism. Their labors also anticipated the reforming efforts of a French lawyer whose piercing intellect, theological acuity, and organizational acumen would shape the contours of Reformed theology and practice for generations to come.

For some of our readers, the terms *Reformed* and *Reformed theology* will immediately bring to mind the name of John Calvin (d. 1564) and the teaching that bears his name, Calvinism. The association is not wrong, for Calvin and Calvinism are the most influential part of the Reformed tradition and are inseparable from it. But neither is the association fully accurate, for Reformed theology is broader than the teaching of Calvin embodied most notably in his masterwork *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Reformed hallmark of predestination, for example, is not as prominent in Calvin's teaching as it is in some later Reformed expositors. Some Reformed versions of predestination may not even qualify as strictly Calvinist. Reformed theology, therefore, manifests some variation among the many groups claiming a Reformed identity, some of which are more Calvinist than others. Nonetheless, the emphases in Reformed theology are consistent across Reformed denominational boundaries. Thus, we can speak of a distinctly Reformed theology with the understanding that the term is not monolithic, as the misapplication of the term *Calvinism* may at one time have suggested (Campbell et al. 2:65-66).

## Justification in the Reformed Tradition

We can discern in this theology a distinctive understanding of justification by faith. In their efforts to define justification, the Reformed have made positive contributions to a proper understanding of the doctrine but also, in our estimation, have erred with particular consequence. On the positive side, Reformed theology stresses that justification is the first effect of faith and that it flows out of the believers' mystical union with Christ; therefore, union is logically (not temporally) prior to justification and is necessary for justification. Moreover, the Reformed were the first to recover the truth concerning the security of salvation—a welcome advance over traditions that have taught that believers remain in perpetual danger of losing their salvation. But Reformed theology also teaches that although believers are mystically united to Christ prior to justification, that union is not the immediate ground of justification. Rather, justification for the Reformed is a purely forensic matter in which God imputes to the believers Christ's righteous obedience to the law. God therefore reckons the believers righteous on account of Christ's imputed righteousness, not on account of the believers' union with Christ as righteousness. We see this as a serious misunderstanding that has regrettably become a mainstay in Protestant theology. In what follows we first offer an overview of justification by faith in Reformed theology. We then narrow our focus to three features of the Reformed teaching concerning justification that we consider distinctive to the tradition and most worthy of evaluation: the role of faith and union in justification, the ground of justification, and the security of salvation (Campbell et al. 2:69-70).

## Overview of Justification by Faith in Reformed Theology

Reformed theologians have long contended that the main or exclusive sense of the term *to justify* (and its variants)

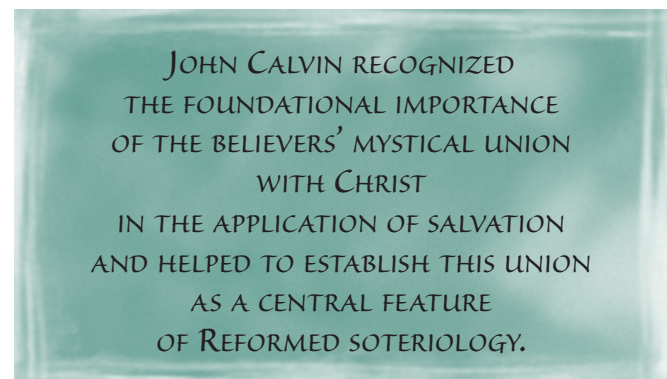
in the Scriptures is forensic. To be justified is to be pronounced righteous by God in His court of law. This legal pronouncement does not make sinners righteous in their internal state or condition; rather, it accounts them righteous in their external status before God's law. The most distinctive feature of the Reformed understanding of justification concerns the ground of justification, which the Reformed claim to be Christ's perfect righteousness imputed to the believers for their justification. This imputed righteousness refers to the obedience that Christ exercised in His human living and crucifixion to fulfill the law on behalf of His people and in their stead. The Reformed contend that only Christ's perfect righteousness can satisfy the demands of God's law, which they take as the standard of justification. It is this righteousness alone that constitutes the ground of justification. Although the ground of justification is Christ's imputed righteousness, not our faith, faith is integral to justification because it is only by faith that we can receive Christ's imputed righteousness. The Reformed thus deny that faith is the righteousness on account of which we are justified while affirming that faith is indispensable to justification. In the Reformed understanding, then, justification is a judicial act in which God declares a person righteous on account of Christ's imputed righteousness; this act is motivated by God's free grace, grounded upon Christ's work of redemption, and received by faith alone. According to the prevailing view in Reformed theology, those whom God justifies are not only forgiven of their sins but also counted (in a strictly legal sense) as perfectly righteous according to God's law. Consequently, they are entitled to the reward of eternal life promised to those who keep this law.

Two final points will round out our presentation of the Reformed understanding of justification by faith. First, the Reformed tradition stresses that justification and sanctification are distinct but inseparable items in God's salvation. In justification, God imputes righteousness to believers so that they might stand in a proper legal relationship with God. In sanctification, God infuses righteousness into believers so that they might be inwardly sanctified and renewed after the image of Christ. Although God infuses righteousness into believers in the same instant that He imputes righteousness to them, this infused righteousness—which is the principle of sanctification—is never the ground of justification and does not factor into justification. Second, the Reformed tradition affirms the security (i.e., preservation) and assurance (i.e., certainty) of the believers' salvation, which includes their justification. Against both Catholics and Lutherans, the Reformed contend that the salvation of the believers is eternally secure and can never be lost. According to His unchanging purpose, God causes all the elect to persevere in grace in the present age that they might

be glorified in the age to come. As a corollary of the security of salvation, the Reformed also maintain that the believers can and should have the assurance, or certainty, that they are saved and will persevere in their salvation (Campbell et al. 2:70-79).

### *Faith and Union with Christ in Reformed Theology*

From the Reformation period onward, countless Reformed theologians have contended that faith ushers the believers into a mystical union with Christ and that this mystical union is necessary for the believers' justification, for it is only by being mystically united with Christ through faith that the believers can receive the benefit of Christ's righteousness and thereby be justified by God. The believers are justified *by faith* because faith unites them with Christ, and the believers are justified *in Christ* because it is only



by being in Christ that they can have communion with His righteous obedience to the law, which God graciously imputes to them for their justification. Thus, in the Reformed understanding, faith and mystical union are intimately related to justification and pivotal to it in the application of salvation.

In this section we focus on three common and interwoven strands that can be readily discerned in Reformed teaching: that the believers' union with Christ is foundational to their justification; that this union is mystical, spiritual, and most intimate; and that faith justifies by bringing the believers into mystical union with Christ. In what follows we will consider these three strands as they appear in the writings of John Calvin, with the understanding that these three strands are also evident in the writings of some of the most authoritative theologians within the Reformed tradition after Calvin.

Calvin recognized the foundational importance of the believers' mystical union with Christ in the application of

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salvation and helped to establish this union as a central feature of Reformed soteriology. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he describes the believers' union with Christ in terms of their being joined to Christ as members of His Body, putting on Christ, and being indwelt by Christ. He argues that all the benefits of salvation issue from union with Christ and indicates that Christ dwelling within the believers is a prerequisite for salvation:

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. (1:537)

Here Calvin speaks of the believers' obtaining the benefits of salvation through Christ's dwelling within them.

In a later portion of his *Institutes*, Calvin identifies the believers' union with Christ as a mystical union and highlights its importance in the imputation of Christ's righteousness (i.e., His righteous obedience to the law) to the believers:

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him. (1:737)

To Calvin, the believers' union with Christ is a mystical union; it is a spiritual and holy union in which Christ dwells in the believers' hearts and is joined to them as their Head. Moreover, it is a union in which the believers put Him on, are grafted into Him, and are made one with Him. Any benefit of Christ to be enjoyed by the believers in Christ, whether justification, regeneration, or any other aspect of God's salvation, must of necessity come through union with Christ. Thus, Calvin asserts that such a union is accorded "the highest degree of importance."

Moreover, in his *Institutes* Calvin draws a close connection between the believers' union with Christ and their faith in Christ. The Christ to whom the believers are joined is "grasped and possessed...in faith" (1:725), and the benefits that the believers possess in their union with Christ are

obtained "by faith" (1:537). In Calvin's understanding, faith may be likened to a vessel that receives Christ:

We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ's grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ. From this it is to be inferred that, in teaching that before his righteousness is received Christ is received in faith, we do not take the power of justifying away from Christ. (1:733)

To Calvin, faith functions as an instrument, as "a kind of vessel," to receive Christ. Only after Christ is deposited into, possessed by, and grasped by faith can there be a receiving of Christ's righteousness for the believers' justification.

Following Calvin, many Reformed theologians throughout the centuries—including standard-bearers such as John Owen (d. 1683), Francis Turretin (d. 1687), Jonathan Edwards (d. 1758), Charles Hodge (d. 1878), and Herman Bavinck (d. 1921)—have affirmed that justification is based on the believers' mystical union with Christ enacted through faith and have developed Calvin's understanding of this union. The Reformed understanding of the mystical union with Christ that undergirds justification is, in our estimation, the tradition's primary contribution to the discussion of justification by faith (Campbell et al. 2:79-105).

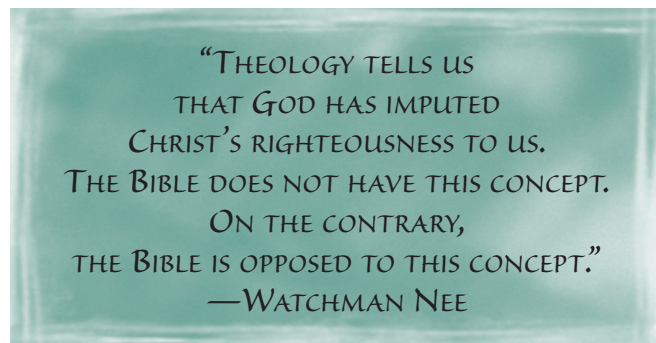
### *An Evaluation of the Ground of Justification*

As we have seen, Reformed theologians have often perceived a close connection between faith, union with Christ, and justification and have treated faith and union with Christ as prerequisites for justification. Reformed theologians stress, however, that in the heavenly court God justifies the ungodly only on account of Christ's righteous obedience to the law, which is extrinsic to the believers but is graciously imputed (i.e., reckoned) to them by faith. This means that God does not justify the ungodly on account of their faith or their union with Christ, although both are necessary for justification and are closely related to it. According to the Reformed, the righteous God cannot judge a person as righteous in His sight unless that person is righteous according to the standard of God's law. The perfect righteousness demanded by God's law can be found only in Jesus Christ and, more specifically, in His perfect righteousness, which consists of His active and passive obedience to God's law. In His active obedience Christ completely fulfilled God's law, thereby earning the reward of eternal life promised to those who fulfill the law. In His passive obedience Christ became a curse on the cross and

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endured the penal sanction of the law, thereby making satisfaction for sin. In the Reformed understanding, it is this righteousness (i.e., obedience)—and only this righteousness—that constitutes the ground of justification. God justifies the ungodly not by infusing Christ’s righteousness into them but by reckoning it to them such that, in their legal standing before God, they are clothed with Christ’s perfect righteousness and are thereby accounted righteous (Campbell et al. 2:105-109).

Although we can agree with the Reformed claim that justification demands a perfect righteousness, we cannot agree with the derivative claim that God justifies the ungodly by imputing to them Christ’s righteous obedience to the law. According to Reformed theology, God justifies us on account of a property (i.e., righteousness) that belongs to Christ and is reckoned to us in a purely forensic manner. But we stress, as we believe the Bible does, that God jus-



tifies us on account of our organic union with Christ, who is our righteousness. In the Reformed understanding, something of Christ is accounted to us forensically for our justification; in our understanding Christ Himself is given to us organically for our justification. We find the Reformed contention that Christ’s imputed obedience to the law is the ground of justification especially dissatisfying in light of Reformed theologians’ robust accounts of the believers’ mystical union with Christ, which is essential to justification (and to salvation generally). Reformed theologians have stressed that justification presupposes mystical union with Christ and have often described this union in the most intimate and organic terms. But, to our disappointment, this mystical union is largely absent from Reformed accounts of the ground of justification. In the Reformed understanding, union with Christ is necessary because it is only by being in Christ that we can have communion with His benefits (including His righteousness). But union is not sufficient, because what is really needed for our justification is Christ’s righteous obedience to the law, which can become ours only through a forensic imputation. This imputation is a strictly legal transaction, although it is made possible (in an

instrumental sense) by a mystical union with Christ through faith. To the Reformed, then, mystical union with Christ functions as a delivery mechanism for justification but is not itself the ground of justification.

This view of justification falls short of, and even distorts, the much higher view of justification revealed in the Scriptures. In the understanding of this higher view, offered in the biblical presentation article (3-17 in this issue), we find it most striking that God gives us Christ Himself as our righteousness for our justification and that He makes Christ our righteousness not by imputation but by transfusion and organic union. That is, God makes Christ our righteousness not by imputing Christ’s obedience to us but by transfusing Christ as faith into us so that, through “the faith of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:22), we might be brought into an organic union with Christ Himself, the righteous One. It is in this most precious union that Christ becomes our righteousness, and it is based upon our union with Christ that God approves us according to His standard of righteousness. Our organic union with Christ through faith is not merely instrumental to our justification, as Reformed theology mistakenly holds. Rather, it is central to our justification and can even be considered the ground of our justification before God. We do not deny that there is an accounting of righteousness to the believers, but we are persuaded that such an accounting is not a mere outward application of a property of Christ. In an incisive passage that might shock some of our readers, Watchman Nee (d. 1972) writes:

Christian theology says that God has made the righteousness of the Lord Jesus ours. God has transferred the Lord’s righteousness to us in the same way that banks transfer money from one account to another. The Lord kept the law for us. We have disobeyed the law. But the obedience of the Lord Jesus has earned us God’s satisfaction. But let me ask emphatically: Has the Bible ever mentioned the “righteousness of the Lord Jesus”? Who can find a place in the New Testament that speaks of “the righteousness of the Lord Jesus”? If you read the entire New Testament, including the Greek text, you will discover that the New Testament never mentions the words *the righteousness of Christ*. One place seems to say this [2 Pet. 1:1], but it does not refer to Christ’s own personal righteousness...Theology tells us that God has imputed Christ’s righteousness to us. The Bible does not have this concept. On the contrary, the Bible is opposed to this concept. The righteousness of Jesus of Nazareth is His own righteousness. It is indeed righteousness, but it is the righteousness of Jesus of Nazareth. This righteousness qualifies Him to die for us and be our Savior, but God has no intention to transfer the righteousness of Jesus to us. (CWWN 28:113-114)



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Elsewhere Watchman Nee helpfully distinguishes between Christ's righteousness and Christ as righteousness:

Once I was talking to a theological student. I said, "The Bible does not say that we have put on the righteous garment of Christ. It only says that we have put on Christ." Galatians 3:27 says that we have put on Christ. Today we have not put on the righteousness of Christ, but Christ Himself. The righteousness of Christ is something that is in Christ Himself, and it is history. Today Christians come to God through putting on Christ. Christ Himself has become our righteousness, and we can come to God at any time because Christ lives forever. (CWWN 45:1026)

Although God's act of accounting righteousness to the believers in objective justification is itself a judicial matter, we maintain that it is grounded upon the believers' organic union with Christ as righteousness rather than upon the "alien righteousness" of Christ (Campbell et al. 2:109-116).

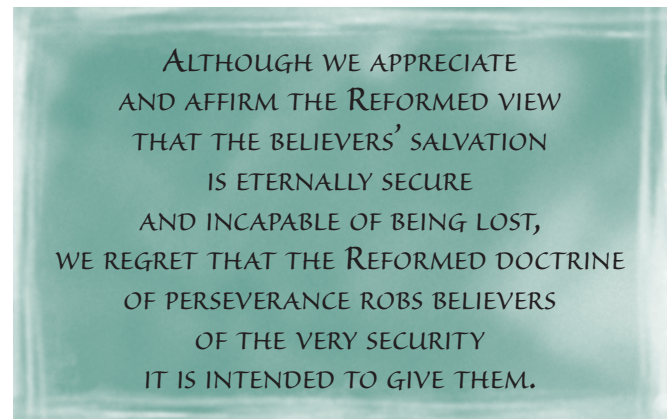
### *The Security of Salvation*

While we strongly believe that Reformed theologians have misaimed concerning the ground of justification, we gratefully acknowledge that they have made an important contribution to biblical interpretation by affirming the security of salvation based on God's predestination of the elect. The Reformed have long argued that the believers' salvation, including their justification, is eternally secure and can never be lost, and they have marshaled convincing support for their position concerning the security of salvation, including the certainty of election, the eternal nature of the life received through regeneration, and the permanence of the union that makes believers members of the Body of Christ. However, we must point out that Reformed understandings of the security of salvation are often interlaced with—and sometimes subsumed by—what we feel is a problematic notion: the perseverance of the saints. Although the Reformed rightly argue that the believers' salvation is eternally secure and can never be lost, they perpetrate a serious error by contending that a person is only a true believer if he or she perseveres unto the end.

The crux of Reformed teaching concerning perseverance is that true believers will persevere to the end by God's grace and will not fall away from the inheritance of eternal life. Perseverance, therefore, becomes the evidence of salvation. If one perseveres to the end, then he or she is clearly saved and proven to be one of the elect. Conversely, if one dies in a backslidden, defeated state, then he or she, as Reformed reasoning goes, must never have been truly saved and therefore must never have been among the elect. Concerning the necessity of perseverance as evidence of having been born again, the influential Reformed theologian Wayne Grudem (1948-) writes:

This doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, if rightly understood, should cause genuine worry, and even fear, in the hearts of any who are "backsliding" or straying from Christ. Such persons must clearly be warned that only those who persevere to the end have been truly born again. If they fall away from their profession of faith in Christ and life of obedience to him, they may not really be saved—in fact, the *evidence* that they are giving is *that they are not saved*, and they never really were saved. Once they stop trusting in Christ and obeying him (I am speaking in terms of outward evidence), they have no genuine assurance of salvation, and they should consider themselves unsaved, and turn to Christ in repentance and ask him for forgiveness of their sins. (989)

Believers who struggle with sin or a lack of faith may thus conclude that they are not actually saved and that the salvation they thought they had experienced was in fact a deception. We firmly reject the Reformed error concerning perseverance and the consequent torment that it causes genuine believers in Christ to needlessly suffer.



ALTHOUGH WE APPRECIATE  
AND AFFIRM THE REFORMED VIEW  
THAT THE BELIEVERS' SALVATION  
IS ETERNALLY SECURE  
AND INCAPABLE OF BEING LOST,  
WE REGRET THAT THE REFORMED DOCTRINE  
OF PERSEVERANCE ROBS BELIEVERS  
OF THE VERY SECURITY  
IT IS INTENDED TO GIVE THEM.

The Reformed doctrine of perseverance betrays a lack of clarity concerning the distinction between eternal salvation and dispensational reward or punishment. In their zeal to counter Arminianism, which wrongly teaches that a person's eternal salvation is contingent upon how he or she lives in this age, Reformed theologians have gone to the opposite extreme by teaching that the elect can do nothing to incur loss on the pathway toward full salvation. The reason for these extremes is that Reformed and Arminian teachers do not recognize that God has ordained the kingdom of a thousand years as an incentive to the believers in Christ to live faithfully in this age (Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12; 20:4, 6). Understanding the kingdom as a reward to the faithful believers resolves difficult New Testament verses that seem to suggest that a believer can lose his or her salvation. For example, when the apostle Paul wrote, "I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest perhaps having

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preached to others, I myself may become disapproved” (1 Cor. 9:27), he did not fear that he would lose his eternal salvation but that he would suffer the loss of the kingdom reward. Other seemingly problematic verses (e.g., Matt. 7:21-23; John 15:2, 6; Rom. 11:22; Gal. 5:4; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-27) do not indicate that unfaithful believers can lose their salvation or were never saved to begin with. They convey, rather, that unfaithful believers will forfeit the opportunity to reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom and will instead incur the Lord’s discipline, yet their eternal salvation remains secure (1 Cor. 3:15). It would take theologians in England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to recover the matter of the kingdom reward and bring balance to the extremes of Reformed and Arminian theologies, as Witness Lee (d. 1997) explains:

You must also be familiar with what Calvin saw concerning the revelation of predestination. He asserted that God chose and predestinated us in eternity past to be saved once for all (Eph. 1:4-5). Although this revelation is correct, the Arminians oppose this view. They believe that even though our salvation is by God’s grace, if we do not fulfill our responsibility after being saved, we will lose our salvation. Therefore, in their view salvation is not once for all; after being saved we still may perish. But if we repent, we can be saved again. This concept totally emphasizes man’s responsibility, and it is therefore called the doctrine of human responsibility. Of these two schools, we accept the former totally and reject the latter entirely. Then how can we resolve the dispute between these two schools? How can they be balanced? According to the history of theology, after Calvin and Arminius, another group of theologians emerged, beginning from [Robert] Govett, then [D. M.] Panton, and then [G. H.] Pember. Their school has formed a line concerning the truth of the kingdom in the New Testament. They saw that once a person is saved, he will not perish forever (John 10:28). However, in order to encourage those who follow Him faithfully after salvation, God has set up a kingdom full of requirements to be their reward. If one is faithful, he will be rewarded (Matt. 24:45-47; 25:19-23). If one is not faithful, he will be punished and will lose the kingdom, but he himself will still be saved (24:48-51; 25:24-30; 1 Cor. 3:10, 12-15). This is called the truth of the kingdom reward and punishment. (*CWWL*, 1985 4:172-173)

Apart from the kingdom truth, Christians may be led to believe that they can lose their salvation or that difficult verses indicating that believers can suffer loss actually refer to those who were never saved. Both misunderstandings are perilous to believers and rob them of the incentive that God has graciously offered to encourage them to follow Christ faithfully in this age. Although we appreciate and affirm the Reformed view that the believers’ salvation is eternally secure and incapable of being lost, we regret that

the Reformed doctrine of perseverance robs believers of the very security it is intended to give them (Campbell et al. 2:117-123).

### *Reformed Teaching on Justification: A Concluding Word*

The Reformed tradition, like the Lutheran tradition, strongly affirms that justification is by faith, but contrary to the Lutherans, the Reformed rightly emphasize that the believers’ mystical union with Christ through faith is a prerequisite to justification. The notion that all the benefits of salvation (including justification) flow out of the believers’ union with Christ was enunciated from the tradition’s inception, and this notion quickly achieved axiomatic status within Reformed theology. In Reformed accounts of justification by faith, then, we find ample consideration and commendation of the fact that the believers are justified in Christ, that is, in union with Him.

But despite their positive emphasis on union with Christ through faith, the Reformed have diverged from God’s economy by seeking justification not in the person of Christ but in the righteousness of the law. In the Reformed mind, justification is the answer to the vexing question of how fallen sinners, wholly incapable of keeping the law, can obtain the works of righteousness demanded by God’s law, not only to avoid punishment for violating the law but also to secure the right to eternal life promised to those who fully keep the law. Since fallen sinners cannot satisfy the law’s demands, they stand in need of someone who can perform these works on their behalf, and this is precisely what Christ accomplished for them through His perfect obedience to God’s law in His human living and death. This perfect obedience is legally imputed to the believers through their faith in Christ so that, in God’s estimation, they can stand before His law as those who have perfectly fulfilled its demands and are thereby entitled to eternal life. Or so the Reformed story goes. Thus, in Reformed teaching, the righteousness required for justification is the righteousness of the law, a righteousness that is wrought by perfect obedience to the law. It is this conception of righteousness that suffuses Reformed teaching concerning justification.

In the light of God’s economy to make Christ everything to the believers (not least their righteousness) through their union with Him, this conception proves to be a grave misconception by aiming at the wrong kind of righteousness for justification. God’s economy is centered not on the law but on Christ, and God’s intention in His economy is that the believers would gain not the righteousness out of the

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law but the righteousness that is out of God, which is Christ Himself as righteousness given to the believers for their justification. In seeking to lay hold of Christ's obedience to the law, rather than Christ Himself, as their righteousness before God, the Reformed have misaimed. In so doing, they have shown themselves ignorant of the righteousness of God manifested in the New Testament "apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21) and have reduced the believers' union with Christ through faith to a gracious means of gaining, by imputation, the perfect obedience that satisfies the law (Campbell et al. 2:306-307).

### Justification in the Baptist and Evangelical Traditions

In this section we evaluate the teaching of justification by two groups that defy strict definition but whose enduring influence on Christian thought and practice since the Reformation is undeniable: Baptists and evangelicals<sup>1</sup>. The two groups are related but distinct. While Baptists represent a denominational tradition with a majority of members identifying as evangelical, evangelicals represent an ideological movement that includes adherents from many denominational traditions. Both are heirs of the Reformation, and thus there is much theological commonality between them. On the matter of justification, Baptist teaching is essentially Reformed and thus emphasizes that justification is by faith alone and that it is based solely upon the forensic imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience to the believer. Like the Baptist teaching on justification, the evangelical teaching closely resembles and is largely derived from Reformed understandings. It follows that, in the main, our assessment of the latter can be applied to Baptist/evangelical understandings.

In this article we make the perhaps surprising argument that there have been evangelical theologians—and we appeal primarily to evangelical Baptists in what follows—who have improved on the Reformed understanding of justification, particularly on the critical matters of union with Christ in justification and the security of the believers' salvation. Although these theologians are respected but little considered today, we feel that their contributions are significant, and we hope their insights will receive renewed attention. The story of the Baptist/evangelical understanding of justification is therefore marked by both promising development and disappointing decline (Campbell et al. 2:237-241).

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<sup>1</sup>Evangelicalism is a broad movement within Christendom and not a strictly defined ecclesial tradition; therefore, we use the lowercase *e* to denote evangelicals and the evangelical movement. Because we include evangelical Baptists and non-Baptist evangelicals in this article, we refer to "Baptists and evangelicals" when referring to the people themselves. When referring to a teaching or understanding that Baptists and evangelicals hold in common, we designate it as "Baptist/evangelical."

### *Union with Christ in Baptist/Evangelical Accounts of Justification*

In general, Baptist/evangelical understandings of how the believers' union with Christ factors into their justification resemble Reformed understandings. The predominant understanding among Baptist and evangelical theologians is that the believers' justification presupposes their union with Christ, such that the former is impossible apart from the latter. The believers' union with Christ is thus necessary for, and logically prior to, their justification. Among those theologians who share this basic understanding, however, several different approaches can be discerned. One approach gives at least some attention to the believers' union with Christ and its general soteriological significance but gives little to no attention to the bearing that this union has on the believers' justification specifically. This approach is evident in the systematic theologies of contemporary Baptist theologians James Leo Garrett Jr. (d. 2020) and Wayne Grudem (1948-). A second approach gives some attention to the bearing that the believers' union with Christ has on their justification but ultimately leaves this matter underexplored. That is, the exposition of justification includes explicit reference to union, but union does not feature prominently and is often treated only cursorily or nominally. An early exemplar of this approach can be found in the writings of Baptist theologian John L. Dagg (d. 1884). A more recent exemplar can be found in the writings of dispensationalist theologian Charles Ryrie (d. 2016). A third approach, which is a significant improvement over the first two approaches, depicts the believers' union with Christ as something central (rather than peripheral) to their justification and gives sustained attention to how this union factors into justification. This approach is evident in the expositions of justification presented by Baptist theologian Augustus H. Strong (d. 1921) and dispensationalist theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer (d. 1952), among others. These expositions are enriched by their elucidation of the vital, organic character of the believers' union with Christ and their insistence that this vital and organic union—rather than a legal or metaphorical one—grounds the believers' justification by God. It is in the accounts of justification offered by these theologians that we can discern genuine progress in the understanding of the truth concerning justification (Campbell et al. 2:241-244).

Augustus H. Strong wanted believers to know Christ as the Savior within, and the key to knowing Him as such was to know the truth concerning the believers' union with Him. For Strong, this union is unlike any other because it is

a union of life, in which the human spirit, while then most truly possessing its own individuality and personal distinctness, is interpenetrated and energized by the Spirit

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of Christ, is made inscrutably but indissolubly one with him, and so becomes a member and partaker of that regenerated, believing, and justified humanity of which he is the head. (*Systematic Theology* 3:795)

It is on the basis of this union that the sinner is justified. Regrettably, Strong maintains, like the Reformed, that the standard of justification is God's law and that sinners can therefore be justified only by the imputation of Christ's obedience to the law. It is nonetheless significant that he views the mystical union with Christ as the basis for the imputation. He writes:

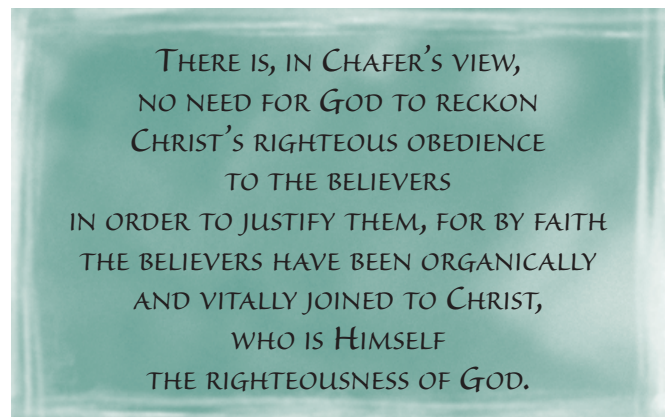
*Imputation is grounded in union, not union in imputation. Because I am one with Christ, and Christ's life has become my life, God can attribute to me whatever Christ is, and whatever Christ has done. (What Shall I Believe 91)*

Moreover, the believer's participation in Christ by virtue of the union with Him, which the believer is brought into by faith, precludes the imputation from being a mere legal fiction. Strong's key contribution to a theology of justification, then, is his emphasis on the union of life between Christ and the believer, which serves as the basis of imputation. It is lamentable that such a robust view of union with Christ has largely receded from Baptist/evangelical accounts of justification. But before the decline set in, the crucial role of union in justification found further expression in the theology of Lewis Sperry Chafer (Campbell et al. 2:244-247).

In his theological writings Lewis Sperry Chafer, cofounder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, offers ample consideration of how the believers' union with Christ factors into their justification. Chafer perceives an intimate, causal relationship between the believers' union with Christ and their being made righteous and justified. Perhaps more strikingly, he stresses both that Christ Himself as the righteousness of God becomes the believers' righteousness through their organic union with Him and that God's declaration of the believers as righteous (i.e., His justification of the believers) is based upon this union. What he does not stress or even acknowledge as valid is the pervasive (and problematic) Protestant notion that justification involves the forensic imputation of Christ's alien righteousness, a righteousness that is external to the believers but is reckoned to them in a legal sense. How Chafer came to be unshackled from this notion we do not know. What we do know is that Chafer's account of justification is enhanced by his attentiveness to the biblical revelation that the believers' righteousness is not Christ's (imputed) obedience to the law but Christ Himself as righteousness and

that Christ becomes righteousness to the believers through their union with Him.

Throughout his effusive writings on the union between Christ and the believers, Chafer consistently characterizes this union as organic and vital in nature. The oft-used New Testament phrase *in Christ* indicates, according to Chafer, an organic union with Christ. Moreover, Chafer repeatedly identifies imputed righteousness with Christ as the righteousness of God and stresses that the believers' righteousness is actually Christ Himself. By repeatedly tying imputed righteousness to the believers' union with Christ, Chafer stresses that the believers' righteousness before God has everything to do with the fact that they are in Christ. God accounts (i.e., imputes) righteousness to the believers because they are in Christ, the righteousness of God, and are thus partakers of what Christ is.



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WHO IS HIMSELF  
THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.

In Chafer's understanding, the believers' justification logically follows both their union with Christ and their being made righteous—by divine imputation—in Him. Justification “is the divine acknowledgment and declaration that the one who is in Christ is righteous” (3:128). It is thus an acknowledgment and declaration of a divinely accomplished fact: the believers have been made righteous through their union with Christ, the righteousness of God. God pronounces the believers righteous (i.e., He justifies them) because they have been made righteous in Christ. Hence, according to Chafer, justification is “not the creation and bestowment of righteousness which is secured only through the believer's relation to Christ, but rather the official divine *recognition* of that righteousness” (2:276).

Whereas the predominant, though often implicit, view among Baptist and evangelical theologians seems to be that the believers' union with Christ is necessary but not sufficient for their justification, Chafer's view seems to be that the

believers' union with Christ is not only necessary but also sufficient for their justification. There is, in Chafer's view, no need for God to reckon Christ's righteousness (i.e., His active and passive obedience to the law) to the believers in order to justify them, for by faith the believers have been organically and vitally joined to Christ, who is Himself the righteousness of God. By virtue of their union with Christ, the believers are made righteous—even the righteousness of God. And based upon the divinely wrought fact of their being made righteous in Christ, the believers are subsequently justified by God; that is, their righteous standing in Christ is recognized and proclaimed by God. Chafer's shift in emphasis from Christ's imputed righteousness to Christ Himself as righteousness is, in our estimation, a commendable feature of his account of justification, as is his unmistakable emphasis on the believers' organic union with Christ as the ground of their being made righteous by God. Sadly, these commendable features seem to have had little to no effect on Baptist/evangelical theology generally, and Chafer's account of justification thus stands, it seems, as a noteworthy but largely neglected departure from more common Baptist/evangelical accounts (Campbell et al. 2:247-252).

### *The Security of Salvation*

Although many Baptists and evangelicals affirm that the salvation of true believers is secure and cannot be lost, there is no single view of the security of salvation that is shared by all Baptists and evangelicals. One view—derived from Reformed theology and popular among Baptists and evangelicals with Reformed sensibilities—maintains that all true believers will persevere unto final salvation. According to this view, it is impossible for those who have been genuinely saved to lose their salvation. The grace they have received for salvation cannot be lost, and God causes them to persevere in their salvation unto the end. It follows that those who do not persevere unto the end were never truly regenerated. Like the first view, a second view—popular among dispensationalists—maintains that those who have been genuinely saved cannot lose their salvation. However, this view focuses less on the believers' continued perseverance and more on their initial conversion through faith in Christ. Relatedly, the preferred idiom of this view is eternal security rather than perseverance or preservation. According to this view, the salvation of all those who have been genuinely converted is eternally secure irrespective of whether they persevere to the end. A third view—more common among Baptists and evangelicals who espouse Arminianism—maintains that genuine believers can lose their salvation. According to this view, it is possible for genuine

believers to lapse from faith, and those who do lapse from faith are at risk of losing their salvation. It follows that salvation is not unconditionally secure. We have evaluated the first of these views—the Reformed understanding of perseverance—earlier in this article, where we expressed our disagreement with the teaching that those who fail to persevere to the end were never regenerated to begin with. We can set aside the third view—the Arminian understanding—by simply but emphatically stating that we reject any notion that believers can forfeit their eternal salvation. Our focus in what follows will be to evaluate the second view, for which we turn to Chafer and Ryrie.

In volume 3 of his *Systematic Theology*, Chafer presents many compelling proofs for the security of salvation without tying it to the believers' perseverance to the end, and in this regard, his account of security is markedly different

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from accounts that frame security in terms of perseverance. One of the most compelling proofs that Chafer offers concerns a sinner's regeneration, which occurs at the moment that he or she believes into Christ. Chafer understands that the believer is regenerated by the Holy Spirit to become a new creation and a partaker of the divine nature, which nature is eternal and therefore endures eternally. Because the nature that the child of God receives through regeneration is eternal, "the truth of eternal security is inherent in the nature of salvation itself" (3:272). Therefore, one who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit through faith can never be lost, for regeneration secures the believer's immutable status as a child of God. Although many of the proofs offered by Chafer in his affirmation of eternal security are also used by proponents of the perseverance of the saints, Chafer's account of eternal security does not rely upon the troubling notion, endemic to the doctrine of perseverance, that only those who persevere to the end are genuine believers. That is, Chafer presents a compelling affirmation of the security of salvation without insisting

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that only those who persevere to the end have been truly regenerated.

Chafer's influence is evident in the teaching of his student Ryrie, whose writings affirm Chafer's position on eternal security. Like Chafer, Ryrie rightly contends that belief in Christ initiates the Spirit's indwelling of the believer and makes him or her a child of God by virtue of the divine birth. The believer's status as a regenerated child of God and his or her salvation are thus eternally secure as a result of the divine indwelling. Ryrie writes: "Scripture gives no hint that a Christian can lose the new birth, or that he can be disindwelt, or that he can be removed from the body of Christ (thus maiming His body) or be unsealed. Salvation is eternal and completely secured to all who believe" (384). For Ryrie, the divine birth is immutable, and disobedience or weakness cannot affect the eternal salvation of the believer that is predicated on that birth. Ryrie did recognize, however, that believers can suffer consequences for failing to mature spiritually, even though they will not lose their eternal salvation. The consequence for unfaithful living and spiritual immaturity is a loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ. According to Ryrie, those unfaithful believers, who have forfeited some reward, will nonetheless participate in the kingdom of a thousand years with the Lord's approbation. What Ryrie does not see is that the millennial kingdom is a reward to only the faithful believers, not to all believers in Christ. Those believers who fail to live faithfully in the present age will forfeit the reward of the kingdom and will suffer the Lord's discipline in the coming kingdom age, although their eternal salvation will remain secure (Campbell et al. 2:252-259).

### ***Baptist/Evangelical Teaching on Justification: A Concluding Word***

The contributions of Strong and Chafer in particular represent a high watermark in Baptist/evangelical teaching on justification by faith, but these gains did not make a lasting impact and seem to have been, in the main, lost among subsequent expositors. But there does seem to be a budding resurgence of interest in the role that an organic union plays in the justification of the believer. For example, Marcus Peter Johnson of Moody Bible Institute writes:

Our saving union with Christ is a participation in him, through whom we share in his relation to the Father through the Spirit. This union is the most real and personal of all unions, a union described in the most intimate ways in Scripture, and which we justly describe as vital, organic, personal, and profoundly real. It is through this union, which eclipses merely legal and moral descriptions,

that we enjoy any of that which Christ has accomplished in our flesh for our salvation. Thus, to be justified before God, we must be united to Christ in this way, and this union must precede our justification in terms of causal priority. This is how the Reformers spoke of the relationship between union with Christ and justification—as a mysterious but nevertheless profoundly real “cementing, ingrafting, implanting, conjoining, flesh-union” with/into Christ, who is the reality of which justification is an inevitable consequence. (95)

Perhaps the insights of Strong and Chafer can yet be recovered among Baptists and evangelicals as scholars like Johnson probe for more satisfying accounts of justification by faith. Although Baptist/evangelical teaching on this crucial matter can fairly be described as still in a state of decline, there is at least a glimmer of hope that fresh explorations may be on the rise (Campbell et al. 2:259-261).

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# MADE RIGHTEOUS THROUGH THE INFUSION OF LOVE: JUSTIFICATION IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC TRADITION

On 15 June 1520 Pope Leo X (d. 1521) promulgated the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* condemning several of Luther's views after Luther refused to recant. Everyone was clear that Luther had explicitly contradicted Catholic teaching on many matters, but as odd as it may seem to us today, it was not initially clear whether justification was among those matters. *Exsurge Domine* condemns Luther's rejection of the sacrament of penance, his rejection of indulgences, his rejection of purgatory, his rejection of the infallibility of the pope or of an ecumenical council, his teaching that sin remains in the justified, and his teaching that faith suffices when doing penance and participating in the Lord's supper. While many of these issues are closely related to justification, Luther's teaching regarding justification itself is nowhere condemned or even mentioned. This was largely because the medieval Western church had no official teaching on justification. The late medieval church was home to a variety of understandings of justification, and this variety was part of the reason that the Lord raised up Martin Luther and the other Reformers of his generation to clear up much of the confusion that had been sown.

This article will primarily consider the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the most important early modern council of the Catholic Church, which promulgated by far the most important statement concerning justification in the entire Catholic tradition. Indeed, the Council of Trent introduced an important innovation in the conciliar history of the West. Before Trent, no council had ever set forth a definition of any doctrinal point; the councils had merely condemned various errors and promulgated brief creedal formulae. In contrast, Trent not only included various condemnations of what it saw as deviant teaching but also set forth a positive definition of several doctrines, justification being the most important. The Protestant Reformation, in other words, forced the Catholic Church to set forth its own official stance on justification and other matters so as "to put an end to the doctrinal uncertainty from which the Church had suffered

so long and to replace the preachers' instructions with which the faithful had had to be satisfied, by an official, systematic teaching supported by the authority of the General Council" (Jedin 2:240). Given the Catholic commitment to the infallibility of an ecumenical council, little historical evaluation will be required for the Catholic tradition after Trent. Once the Council had made its determinations, Catholic teaching on justification was more or less settled, since Catholic theologians, if they are to remain Catholic, are not allowed to dissent from its teaching.

As we will see, the Protestant view of justification, or at least certain of its features, found plenty of Catholic defenders both before and at the Council. In some cases, the defenders of the Protestant view prevailed, and Trent moved Catholic teaching regarding justification closer to the truth. In other cases, the defenders of the Protestant view were overpowered, and Trent moved Catholic teaching regarding justification further from the truth. While we can affirm that the Council genuinely reformed some of the most egregious errors of late medieval theology, we must ultimately conclude that the resultant Catholic understanding of justification still falls short, in various ways, of the truth as we understand it (Campbell et al. 2:125-128).

## Justification and Merit

One of Luther's primary targets in late medieval theology was the prominent teaching that the believers can, should, and must merit the grace of justification by their own natural resources alone (see the Patristic through Luther article [18-33 in this issue]). Thankfully, the Council of Trent clearly and emphatically rejected this egregious error in late medieval theology. It did so, in part, due to the rediscovery of the decisions of the Second Council of Orange (529; henceforth Orange II), which strongly affirm the priority of grace in justification. In accordance with the decisions of Orange II, the Council of Trent agrees with Luther and the other Reformers that the believers can in no sense merit the grace

of justification by their own natural powers. Chapter 5 of its “Decree on Justification” insists that “the beginning of justification must be attributed to God’s prevenient grace through Jesus Christ, that is, to his call addressed to them without any previous merits of theirs” (Denzinger §1525). Chapter 8 affirms that “we are said to be justified gratuitously because nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification” (§1532). Canon 3 declares, “If anyone says that without the prevenient inspiration of the Holy Spirit and without his help, man can believe, hope, and love or be repentant, as is required, so that the grace of justification be bestowed upon him, let him be anathema” (§1553). According to the very important chapter 7, what merits justification is “the most beloved only begotten Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, ‘while we were enemies’ [Rom 5:10], ‘out of the great love with which he loved us’ [Eph 2:4], merited for us justification by his most holy Passion on the wood of the Cross

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and made satisfaction for us to God the Father” (§1529). In this respect, the Council of Trent agrees not only with Luther and the other Reformers but also with Augustine, Bernard, Aquinas, Gerson, Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini, and many others. Nothing that precedes justification, the Council insists, merits that justification. Justification is not something earned by the believers in any way; justification is bestowed entirely by God’s free gift of grace.

This determination of the Council of Trent has remained the teaching of the Catholic Church to this day. The 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for instance, insists that “since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion” (2010). In the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Catholics confess together with (some) Lutherans that “by grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit” (15).

For this we can surely thank the Lord. It is a testament to

the power of Luther’s Reformation, and the release of conscience it offered, that the Catholic Church learned from its mistake and condemned some of the excesses of late medieval theology. In this respect, Witness Lee’s (d. 1997) evaluation of Luther’s significance applies even to the Catholic Church:

During the sixteenth century the Lord was able not only to recover the truth concerning justification by faith but also to work this truth into His Body through Martin Luther, a vessel prepared by Him. Since that time the church has been unable to lose that truth. (CWWL, 1973–1974 1:308-309)

The medieval church clearly did, to a significant degree, lose sight of one of the most basic truths concerning justification, namely, that it is granted to the believers freely by God’s grace without any merit on their part. It seems highly unlikely that the Western church, even its Roman Catholic part, will lose it again (Campbell et al. 2:128-130).

### How God Justifies

While we can certainly applaud Trent’s strong affirmation of the priority of grace in justification as a clear correction of late medieval teaching, Trent’s teaching on justification still falls short of the truth concerning justification as we understand it. Despite their general agreement with Luther regarding the priority of grace in justification, the bishops and theologians gathered at the Council of Trent were divided regarding how to rightly understand justification itself. Several prominent Catholic theologians were of the mind that Luther’s account of justification was not only right but also generally in line with that of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, and Jean Gerson. While these same Catholic theologians disagreed with Luther on many other matters, they pleaded that the Catholic Church not condemn justification by faith simply because Luther taught it. To condemn justification as understood by Luther and the other Reformers, they warned, would be to condemn many of the patristic writers and medieval and contemporary theologians that all Catholics held in high regard.

Among the pre-Tridentine Catholic defenders of the Protestant view of justification, Gasparo Contarini (d. 1542) is perhaps the most significant:

We should not rely on the righteousness inherent in us, by which we are made righteous and do good works. Instead, we ought to rely on the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to us on account of Christ and the merit of Christ. Indeed, it is by this latter [righteousness] that



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we are justified before God, that is, considered and reputed righteous. (Brieger 594)

We attain to a double righteousness. The one is inherent in us, by which we begin to be righteous and are made partakers of the divine nature and have charity poured out in our hearts. The other in truth is not inherent, but is given to us with Christ, the righteousness, I say, of Christ and all His merit. (CC 7:28)

Contarini does not deny that the believers are made inherently righteous in their justification, but he does not think that this suffices for their justification before God. Their approval by God rests primarily on the righteousness of Christ imputed to them because they are “grafted into Christ and have put on Christ” (7:29). Contarini thus fully agrees with Luther that inherent righteousness, even the righteousness imparted into the believers by God, is insufficient for justification. Only if they are in Christ can the believers be truly accounted righteous in God’s sight.

This account of “double righteousness” found an adamant defender at the Council of Trent in the person of Girolamo Seripando (d. 1563), general of the Augustinian order, who was asked by the Council to draft its “Decree on Justification.” According to Seripando, “We are designated righteous because we are something of Christ, namely His members, participants in the righteousness of Him who alone is righteous truly and simply” (CT 12:669). In his initial draft of the decree, we read:

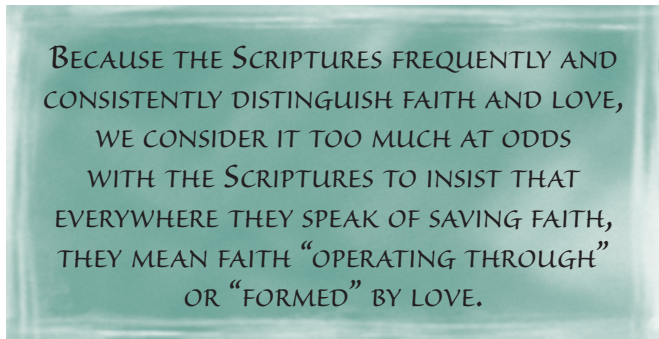
Beyond that most pure and most perfect righteousness of Christ, our Savior and Head, which is poured into His whole Body, that is the whole church, communicated and applied to all His members through faith and the sacraments; by the merit of this same Redeemer of ours, grace, or charity, is poured into their hearts, who are justified through the Holy Spirit who is given to them. (5:825)

Seripando distinguishes between a righteousness that is poured into the whole Body united to Christ as Head and a righteousness that is imparted to those so united to Him. According to Seripando, the believers are first righteous because they are in Christ. Once in Christ, they are then made inherently righteous by the Christ to whom they have been united. The primary error of the Protestants, he thinks, is that they grant a righteousness by union but not the additional, inherent righteousness that follows from that union.

There is much that we disagree with in this account of justification. We consider union with Christ to be the sole basis upon which God accounts righteousness to the believers without the additional requirement of an infused and

inherent righteousness. But we can still appreciate the prominence that these pre-Tridentine Catholic theologians gave to the believers’ union with Christ. Justification, as understood by them, is not primarily a making inherently righteous; justification is primarily an accounting righteous based on union with Christ.

Regrettably, while this theory of “double righteousness” found some staunch supporters at the Council, it was ultimately rejected by an overwhelming majority of those present. In an address to the Council that lasted two or three hours, Diego Laínez (d. 1565), soon to be the second general of the Jesuit order, offered twelve arguments against an imputation of righteousness in justification, insisting instead on the sufficiency of inherent righteousness for justification without an additional accounting of union with Christ. Laínez won the day, and much to Seripando’s dismay, his



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draft was modified to insist that the “single formal cause” of justification—its single, essential content or constitutive element—is a righteousness infused into the believers by God for their spiritual renewal:

The single formal cause is “the justice of God, not that by which he himself is just, but that by which he makes us just,” namely, the justice that we have as a gift from him and by which we are spiritually renewed [*cf. Eph 4:23*]. Thus, not only are we considered just, but we are truly called just and we are just [*cf. 1 Jn 3:1*], each one receiving within himself his own justice. (Denzinger §1529)

Trent’s insistence that there is but a “single formal cause” of justification that is an inherent righteousness within the believers was a direct rejection of the “double righteousness” championed by Seripando and others. This infused righteousness—renewing the believers so that they are “not only...considered just, but...are truly called just and...are just”—is the sole content of the believers’ justification. According to the Catholic position, God justifies the believers by making them inherently righteous. God considers them righteous, in other words, because He has made them

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such by an infusion of inherent righteousness. This infused righteousness and this righteousness alone justifies the believers, and Trent rules out any appeal to union with Christ to supplement this inherent righteousness.

Trent's first mistake, then, is to insist that justification consists primarily (indeed solely) in the interior change that God works within the believers. We grant, of course, that there is an interior change worked by God in justification. The faith produced in the believers by the transfusion of Christ through the preaching of the gospel is certainly an interior change, and this faith is certainly righteous, but it is not that righteousness on account of which God approves the believers according to His standard of righteousness. God approves the believers as righteous in His sight because, and only because, He sees them in Christ and Christ in them. Justification is through faith not primarily because of what faith is but because of faith's relationship to Christ. Faith justifies because it is produced by the Christ who has been transfused into the believers and because it brings them into an organic union with Christ as righteousness. The righteousness by which they are justified is not, as Trent insists, that "by which he makes us just" but Christ Himself, whom the Father has made righteousness to us by putting us into Him (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ Himself, and nothing else, is the righteousness that serves as the basis of justification before God.

Trent's second mistake in its understanding of justification is its insistence that the infused and inherent righteousness by which the believers are justified includes not only faith but also hope and love (*caritas*, 'charity'):

In the very act of justification, together with the remission of sins, man receives through Jesus Christ, into whom he is inserted, the gifts of faith, hope, and charity, all infused at the same time. (Denzinger §1530)

According to Trent, to say that the believers are justified "by faith" does not mean that faith suffices for justification (it clearly does not suffice, in Trent's view). Instead, justification is "by faith" because faith is the first of several things infused into the believers by God in the single moment of justification: "We are said to be justified through faith because 'faith is the beginning of man's salvation,' the foundation and root of all justification" (§1532). According to Trent, faith is the first but not the only thing infused when God makes the ungodly righteous in justification. Hope and love, at least, are also infused, and these infused and inherent virtues of faith, hope, and love together constitute the inherent righteousness by which the believers are justified, or made inherently righteous, in God's sight.

Because the single formal cause of justification includes not only faith but charity, Trent teaches that it is possible to have faith and not be justified: "The grace of justification, once received, is lost not only by unbelief, which causes the loss of faith itself, but also by any other mortal sin, even though faith is not lost" (Denzinger §1544). Trent thus clearly claims that faith does not suffice for justification. Many, it argues, lose the grace of justification but retain faith, meaning that it is possible to have genuine faith and not be justified.

This is a clear contradiction of the Scriptures, which repeatedly claim that believing is sufficient for justification (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:26, 28, 30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24). Love is required for subjective justification, but faith, and faith alone, is identified by the Scriptures as sufficient for initial, objective justification. Indeed, what we call "objective justification" is called by the Scriptures justification "by faith." Catholics contend that when the Scriptures speak of justification by faith, they always mean justification by faith "operating through" or "formed" by love. But the Scriptures associate love not with objective justification but with the regeneration that follows justification (Rom. 8:10). The apostle John thus always identifies the love within the believers as a sign of their regeneration, not a sign of their justification (1 John 3:14; 4:7; 5:1). Faith, not love, is what the Scriptures identify as the sole requirement for justification, and because the Scriptures frequently and consistently distinguish faith and love (e.g., 2 Pet. 1:5-7), we consider it too much at odds with the Scriptures to insist that everywhere they speak of saving faith, they mean faith "operating through" or "formed" by love. The Scriptures do not require our emendation and certainly not on so many occasions. Justification is identified with faith at least ten times in the Scriptures (see above) and nowhere with love.

Trent's third mistake in its understanding of justification likewise follows from this Catholic insistence that God's accounting righteous is according to inherent condition. The Council teaches that no sin remains in those who have been justified:

If anyone denies that the guilt of original sin is remitted by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ given in baptism or asserts that all that is sin in the true and proper sense is not taken away but only brushed over or not imputed, let him be anathema.

For, in those who are reborn God hates nothing. (Denzinger §1515)

Several at the Council, mostly Augustinians, were appalled

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at the statement that “God hates nothing” in those who have been reborn and called for its removal. The Augustinian Stephen d’Sestino’s pleading with the Council is instructive:

There exists in the justified, however good they are and however much they exist in grace, a continuous battle with wickedness; and would that the victory were frequent rather than rare...I beg you, fathers, that you recognize our infirmity; and thus we should not set up nor fashion man cured in every part, nor righteous in all respects; but rather one who is infirm and carnal until this mortal shall put on incorruption, and this corruptible immortality. Therefore, let us not speak of transcendent things; let us not square the circle through logic. Let us speak concerning what each of us experiences within himself. (CT 5:609)

The argument of these Augustinians was that the Council’s proposal regarding inherent righteousness as the single formal cause of justification to the exclusion of indwelling sin was at odds with the experience of the believers, including those gathered at the Council themselves. Regrettably, the pleading of the Augustinians was denied by the Council, which unambiguously rejects Luther’s teaching that indwelling sin remains in those who have been justified. While the Council affirms that “concupiscence or the tinder of sin remains in the baptized” and explains that Paul “occasionally calls [this concupiscence] ‘sin,’” it argues—following Augustine, no doubt—that this concupiscence is not called sin “in the true and proper sense” (Denzinger §1515). We do not feel the same liberty to correct the apostle. We prefer, rather, to stand with the apostle Paul, and with the Spirit who inspired him, to simply call what remains within us “sin.” We do not see this as a challenge to the infallibility of the God who accounts us righteous despite our remaining sin. God accounts us righteous not because of what we are inherently, whether righteous or sinner, but because of what we are in Christ and what He is in us.

Catholics, then, understand justification to be the divine action by which God makes the believers inherently righteous. He makes them righteous in an instant, and He makes them wholly righteous. The role of union with Christ in justification was not entirely ruled out by the Council of Trent, and post-Tridentine Catholics have sometimes appealed to union with Christ in their accounts of justification, but the Council’s rejection of “double righteousness” seems to have pushed justification by union into the shadows for much of the post-Tridentine Catholic tradition (Campbell et al. 2:131-140).

## Justification and Penance

The medieval church had, long before the dawn of Luther’s Reformation, made the ancient practice of penance one of its seven official sacraments. All medieval Christians were required to participate in the sacrament of penance at least once per year on pain of exclusion from the life of the church, and the medieval church was so committed to this teaching and practice that it persecuted many who dissented regarding this innovation, and some unto death. The Council of Trent thus introduced no innovation when it taught that penance is one of the seven sacraments, but it did introduce an innovation when it insisted that “this sacrament of penance is necessary for salvation for those who have fallen after baptism” (Denzinger §1672). In doing so, the Catholic Church asserted a much stronger connection between the sacrament of penance and justification than had previously been defined. A significant debate arose during the medieval period regarding the necessity of the sacrament of penance for the restoration of the grace of justification. Some argued that it was entirely possible to be reconciled to God apart from the sacrament. In contrast, others argued that all restoration of the grace of justification is caused, in some sense, by the sacrament of penance. The Council of Trent ruled in favor of the latter position, insisting that all restoration of the grace of justification depends on the sacrament of penance, thus ruling out the possibility of extra-sacramental justification:

The council teaches that, although it sometimes happens that this contrition [i.e., inward remorse] is perfect through charity and reconciles man to God before this sacrament is actually received, this reconciliation, nevertheless, is not to be ascribed to contrition itself without the desire of the sacrament, a desire that is included in it. (§1677)

The sacrament of penance, then, is not simply one means of justifying reconciliation with God alongside other extra-sacramental means. It is, rather, the *only* means by which the grace of justification can be restored after baptism, according to Catholic teaching. We cannot possibly evaluate in detail here the close connection between salvation and the sacraments, which is held so dearly by so many of the Lord’s people. We can only state firmly that we wholeheartedly disagree with the view that justification is received sacramentally, and we refer the reader to our brief statements regarding justification and baptism on page 13 in the biblical presentation article of this issue (Campbell et al. 2:140-142).

## Justification and the Assurance of Salvation

After “double righteousness,” the second most contentious

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issue related to the doctrine of justification at the Council of Trent concerned the “certitude of faith,” or what we prefer to call the assurance of salvation. The early church affirmed nearly unanimously that the grace of justification can be lost, but at least some of the patristic writers assured the believers that they could be certain of their justified status before God in the present moment. The medieval period in general, and the late medieval period in particular, engendered a variety of views on the degree of certainty regarding one’s possession of the grace of justification. The Protestant recovery of the assurance of salvation forced the Catholic Church to clarify its own position.

Prior to the Council of Trent, no council of the Catholic Church had said anything explicitly about the assurance of salvation. Those gathered at the Council were convinced that something needed to be said, but determining what should be said proved to be a difficult task. Thankfully, the Council of Trent does not rule out the possibility of the assurance of salvation; quite to the contrary, the majority of those present at the Council were in favor of assurance, harnessing various arguments from the Scriptures, patristic writers, and medieval theologians in its defense. According to John-Baptist Moncalvius, the assurance of salvation is so certain a truth that not even the Protestants could sully it: “[The certitude of faith] is so true an opinion that the heretics were entirely unable to corrupt it with their poison of wickedness” (CT 5:535).

Despite the majority in favor of the assurance of salvation, the minority who rejected it was large enough and strong enough to stop the Council from explicitly affirming such assurance. In fact, several at the Council were convinced that if the Catholic Church were to endorse such assurance, the battle against the Protestants would surely be lost. After accusing several present at the Council of favoring Lutheranism, Dionysius Zannettino (d. 1566) pleaded with the Council not to explicitly endorse assurance:

If this falsity of the Lutherans is conceded, the entire decree on justification would be ruined, and the error would be worse than before. (CT 10:586)

We wish, of course, that the Council of Trent had fully endorsed the assurance of salvation, but we can thank the Lord that it at least left this possibility open to all its members, and we hope that more Catholics will take advantage of what Trent allows. Still, even this somewhat positive result of the Council of Trent (its refusal to condemn assurance) is sullied by its recommendation of doubt concerning salvation:

Whoever considers himself, his personal weakness, and his lack of disposition may fear and tremble about his own grace. (Denzinger §1534)

While the Council refuses to condemn the assurance of salvation, it clearly endorses the cultivation of doubt regarding the believers’ standing in grace.

Doubt concerning one’s standing before God is certainly a common occurrence among believers, but the appropriate response to those suffering such doubt is not to encourage and cultivate it but to shepherd into full assurance. This is the pattern of the apostles’ teaching, and the ministry of Watchman Nee (d. 1972) and Witness Lee (d. 1997) has helped us see this pattern clearly. The New Testament identifies at least three proofs of our salvation on which we can base our assurance: faith as the sole condition for salvation, the Holy Spirit’s witnessing with our spirit that we are children of God, and our love for the brothers.

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A first and basic proof of salvation offered to us in the Scriptures is the consistent assertion that the only requirement for salvation is that we believe into Christ. Some Catholic theologians have insisted that we cannot be sure that we have believed, and thus we cannot be sure that we have fulfilled even this most basic requirement for justification. For instance, Robert Bellarmine (d. 1621) argues:

The adversaries err in deducing an absolute conclusion from a conditioned antecedent. For these propositions—“He who believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36) and “In this one everyone who believes is justified” (Acts 13:39)—are conditioned, as if it were said, “if anyone believes in the Son, he has eternal life” and “if anyone believes in Christ, he is justified.”...

From these conditional propositions, [only] a *conditional* conclusion can be rightly drawn. Therefore, I, *if I believe*, have justification and eternal life. However, the *absolute* conclusion that the adversaries desire requires the absolute assumption that I, indeed, believe in the Son. (6:165)

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Since Bellarmine is convinced that no one can know that he or she is justified, he is also forced to argue that no one can know that he or she believes.

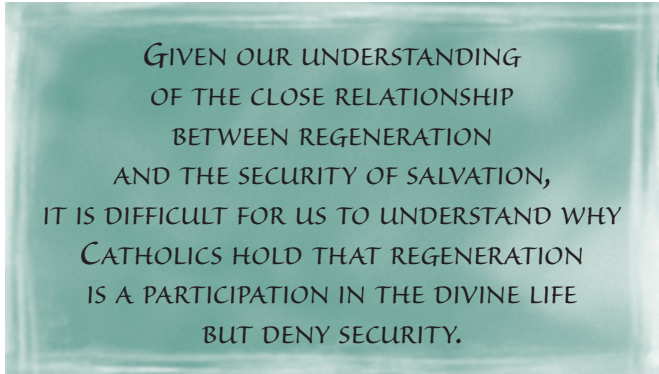
We strongly reject, of course, the view that we cannot know that we believe. The Scriptures do not, as Bellarmine wrongly claims, include only “conditional propositions” regarding faith and salvation. Paul, speaking to Peter, makes a statement of fact: “We also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ and not out of the works of law” (Gal. 2:16). The “we” here seems to refer not simply to Paul and Peter but to “we [who] are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:15). Paul thus has no problem speaking of Jewish Christians in general as having believed and thus having fulfilled all conditions for justification. Paul does not say, “We Jewish Christians, *if we have indeed believed*, are justified out of faith.” He simply assumes and states that this is the case. John, likewise, tells us that we who believe may know that we have eternal life: “I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life, to you who believe into the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). John does not say, “You have eternal life *if you believe*” but, to paraphrase, “You, who believe, have eternal life,” and this he wrote not simply to the “fathers” in the churches but also to the “little children” and “young children,” that is to say, to the newer and younger believers in the churches (1 John 2:12-19).

Indeed, the New Testament’s common reference to “the believers” implies that there is little mystery as to who these believers are. The New Testament simply assumes that we know not only that *we* believe but also that others believe likewise. Paul, for instance, instructs Timothy regarding slaves that “those who have believing masters should not despise them, because they are brothers; but rather they should serve them, because those who recompense them for the kindly service received are believers and beloved” (1 Tim. 6:2). Slaves, here, are assumed to know not only whether they themselves believe but also whether their masters believe. If the Scriptures assume that we can know that others believe, we can certainly know this regarding ourselves. Catholics often counter by arguing that justifying faith is always faith “operating through love” or at least faith “formed by love” and thus that we cannot know that we believe in a saving way. But this is clearly contrary to the Scriptures’ way of speaking. The Scriptures everywhere assume that we *can* in fact know that we believe, and they identify believing as the sole condition for salvation. To claim that these two types of faith are of fundamentally different sorts—the one saving and the other not—is to ascribe to the Scriptures an ambiguity far beyond what we can allow.

A second proof of justification offered in the Scriptures is Paul’s word that “the Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). While Catholics would not openly contradict the apostle Paul, Johann Adam Möhler (d. 1838), the preeminent modern Catholic apologist, does not think that this witness precludes doubt:

Undoubtedly, according to the sentence of the apostle, the Spirit testifies to the spirit, that we are the children of God; but this testimony is of so delicate a nature, and must be handled with such tender care, that the Christian in the feeling of his unworthiness and frailty, approaches the subject only with timidity, and scarcely ventures to take cognisance of it. (156)

Möhler argues that Paul’s word here should not be taken as license to be assured of salvation. In fact, he seems to counsel that the believers ignore this witnessing within them,



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BUT DENY SECURITY.

“scarcely [venturing] to take cognisance of it.” In doing so, he does precisely the opposite of what Paul says the Holy Spirit Himself is doing. There is, we believe, deep within every believer the inner witness that he or she has been begotten of God, and because this begetting is based on God’s justification (Rom. 8:10), the believers can be fully assured of their standing before God. Paul says that this inner witness comes not only from the believers’ own regenerated spirit but also from “the Spirit Himself” (Rom. 8:16). The Spirit of the Son, sent into their hearts by the Father, causes the believers to cry out to Him, “Abba, Father!” (Gal. 4:6). The fact that the believers, sinners though they are, can spontaneously and sweetly call the righteous God “Father” is, to us, one of the greatest proofs of their salvation, and if the Holy Spirit witnesses to this same testimony, then neither Möhler nor anyone else has the right to take this testimony away from the Father’s own children. We would hardly praise a human father who encouraged his children to doubt that they are in fact his children, and we cannot imagine that our divine Father would wish such doubt upon any of His own. Any proper human father would

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grieve to learn of such doubt in his children, and we surely believe that the Father is likewise grieved that so many of His children entertain such doubt with respect to His fatherhood.

A third proof of justification offered in the Scriptures is the believers' love for all of God's children: "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers" (1 John 3:14). Catholics call this kind of assurance, an assurance based on manifestations of our salvation, "moral certitude." It is, regrettably, the only proof of salvation admitted by the majority of Catholic theologians today. Those Catholics in favor of such proofs from manifestations in our living tend to elaborate on the required extent of these manifestations to a much greater degree than the Scriptures themselves do. Only "men of outstanding holiness can have moral certitude which excludes any serious act of fear, but not the possibility of fear" (Nicolau et al. 3B:169-170). These stringent requirements for moral certitude are clearly much higher than those evident in the Scriptures. As already mentioned, John tells even "little children" among God's people that they can know that they have passed out of death into life based on their love of the brothers, and we do not think that this love for the brothers is anything other than an inward affection for all those begotten of our Father. The believers' instinctive love for all those begotten of the Father is a sure sign that they have themselves been justified and begotten of the Father, despite all their failures to live out this love in a practical way. Just as our failings in our relationships with our brothers and sisters in the flesh do not discount our instinctual love for them, so the failings of the believers in their relationships with one another do not discount the instinctual love that all of God's children have for one another. This instinctual love for the children of the Father is one of the greatest assurances to us that we, too, have been begotten of the same Father (Campbell et al. 2:142-151).

### Justification and the Security of Salvation

While the majority of those present at the Council of Trent at least affirmed the possibility of the assurance of salvation, no one at the Council wished to defend the security of salvation. Even if the believers can know that they are saved, those gathered at the Council were unanimously agreed that the believers can, at any moment, lose that salvation. As we have seen, the Reformed were the first to recover the truth concerning the security of salvation, and they are the only major Christian tradition to maintain this great and precious truth. The standard teaching prior to this recovery was that salvation can be lost, and at the Council of Trent

the Catholic Church strengthened its commitment to this ancient error: "Let no one promise himself any security about this gift [of perseverance] with absolute certitude, although all should place their firmest hope in God's help" (Denzinger §1541).

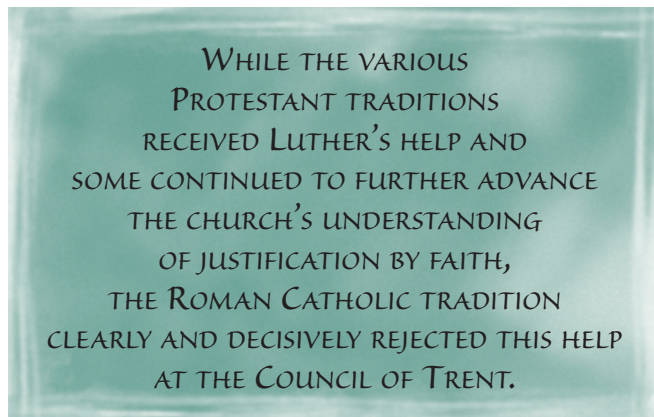
In certain respects, we find it odd that the Catholic tradition so adamantly rejects the security of salvation. We are especially attentive to the organic character of salvation (i.e., to its intimate relationship with the divine life), and in this we find the Catholic tradition closer to the truth than many Protestant traditions. While the Catholic tradition broadly understands regeneration as a real participation in the divine life, certain Protestant traditions more often understand regeneration to be roughly equivalent to the impartation of faith, with little attention to the believers' being begotten in the divine life. Given our understanding of the close relationship between regeneration and security, it is difficult for us to understand why Catholics hold that regeneration is a participation in the divine life but deny the security of salvation. Most people recognize, intuitively, the moral failings of parents who terminate their relationship with their children, either literally or figuratively, and we lament that so many of the Father's children could imagine that He would act toward them in such a way, bestowing and retracting life at will, and giving His children no way of knowing what their standing is before Him at any given time. In our view, once the Father has committed His life to one of His children, He does not retract it.

To approach the matter from yet another organic angle, when the believers are justified and regenerated, they become not only children of God but also living members of the organic Body of Christ. Just as Catholics have maintained the truth concerning regeneration much more faithfully than most Protestant traditions, so, too, Catholics have much more faithfully maintained the truth concerning the organic Body of Christ. We thus find it odd that Catholics are often closer to the truth concerning the organic Body of Christ but farther from the truth regarding the security of salvation. Just as all human beings cherish their own bodies, so too does Christ the Head (Eph. 5:29), and we find it hard to believe that Christ will suffer the eternal loss of any of His members. The truth concerning the organic Body, then, provides another organic proof for the security of salvation. At the close of this age, the Lord's Body will be complete, not missing any of His members. The Lord does not have temporary members. Once He has incorporated a believer into His organic Body, that member cannot be removed (Campbell et al. 2:152-155).

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## Conclusion

While there is much to be said for the view that Trent's account of justification is nothing more than a faithful outworking of Augustine's own understanding (and that of Aquinas after him), we have evaluated Trent much more extensively than we did those earlier, patristic and medieval writers, who did not have the benefit of the help rendered to the church through Martin Luther. Despite the shortcomings of his account, Luther is the one whom the Lord used to open up the truth concerning justification by faith. In our view, all who come after him must consider what they will do with the light and help that the Lord provided through him. While the various Protestant traditions have received his help and some have continued to further advance the church's understanding of justification by faith, the Roman Catholic tradition clearly and decisively rejected



this help at the Council of Trent. Against Luther's contention that faith apart from love suffices for justification, Trent insists—following Augustine and Aquinas—that love is the central justifying factor within the believers. Against Luther's insistence that the believers can be assured of their salvation and the Reformed teaching that the believers' salvation is eternally secure, Trent commits itself fully to the ancient errors that the believers ought to doubt their salvation and that their salvation can be lost. Against the Reformed disentanglement of justification and the sacraments, Trent strengthens the Catholic position on the connection between them. And while several Catholic theologians before and at the Council appealed to the believers' union with Christ in justification, this view was decisively rejected by the Council. Perhaps it is because of this rejection of the light and help offered by the Protestant Reformers that the Catholic tradition ceases from this point on to contribute anything to the understanding of justification by faith. It has maintained much of the advance made during the patristic and medieval periods, but it has not offered anything more of positive value. This ceasing to be a positive

contributor to the ongoing advance of the church's understanding of this truth is perhaps the strongest indictment of the Roman Catholic tradition with respect to the truth of justification by faith (Campbell et al. 2:163-165).

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# ABIDING IN ANCIENT SHORTCOMINGS: JUSTIFICATION IN EASTERN ORTHODOXY

The consideration of justification is a watershed in church history and more importantly in the progressive development of the understanding of the divine revelation in the Scriptures. In the West it defined Protestantism and caused Roman Catholicism to refine its own stand on faith, grace, and works. No one in the West was left unaffected by the deep consideration of justification. In the East, however, there is a different story. Eastern Orthodoxy offers only a response to Lutheran and Reformed understandings of justification, and its response is far less robust than the one offered by the Roman Catholic Church.

In Eastern Orthodoxy, justification is not a pressing issue but more of a minor feature in a larger view of God's salvation. By the time that the issue became prominent in the Latin West, through the careful attention to it by Augustine, the Greek East was already out of the room and away from earshot of the discussion. The West continued to discuss for another thousand years before the East reentered the room, and by then justification by faith had become a major tenet that distinguished parties and divided the West. Certainly, Luther's insistence that justification is the central article of the faith, by which the church either stands or falls, would have seemed completely alien to the East, and indeed the development in the Lutheran understanding of justification was met with suspicion and incredulity.

To this day objective justification by faith alone is viewed in Eastern Orthodoxy as something outside the purview of their authorities and thus alien to their understanding of God's salvation. This is not to say that justification by faith has been altogether ignored in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Some medieval writers in the East and even prior to the Reformation in the West attest to this. For instance, Symeon, called the New Theologian (d. 1022), writes in one of his hymns of a faith that suffices to justify in place of all things, including works, and that the faith that justifies assures that the justified will be a partaker of God's eternal glory. Regrettably, later Orthodox writers seem to ignore the small but revealing contributions of writers such as Symeon to an understanding of justification by faith alone. Thus, at best, we can say that justification has traditionally taken a minor role in the whole purview of Eastern Christianity (Campbell et al. 2:167-171).

In his polemics against the papal church, Martin Luther (d. 1546) often appealed to the beliefs and practices of the Greek church. He was under the impression that the Orthodox East preserved the teachings of the apostles, the definitive councils, and the writers of the early centuries without the corruptions of subsequent centuries. This hopeful but inaccurate impression was inherited by the generation of theologians after Luther. Having broken away from Rome, and now engaged in a polemic struggle with the teachings of Catholicism, the followers of Luther, including Philipp Melanchthon (d. 1560), thought that in Constantinople they would find a common ally.

Melanchthon, with the help of an Orthodox scholar, translated into Greek the Augsburg Confession, the statement of faith of the Lutheran churches prepared for Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1530. The resulting document, known as the Augustana Graeca, is a free translation of the original, often a paraphrasing, containing emendations and additions that use Byzantine liturgical language in order to accommodate the Orthodox reader. In 1559 Melanchthon sent the Augustana to Patriarch Joasaph II of Constantinople but never received a reply. Later, in 1575, another copy was presented to the new patriarch, Jeremias II (d. 1595), and his theological advisers, with a letter from Jacob Andreae and Martin Crusius of the University of Tübingen. The patriarch's answer of May 1576 so fully embodies Orthodox teaching that the East regards it as a *de facto* confession of faith and has given it a place in the "symbolical books," the highly authoritative statements of dogma that are second only to the seven ecumenical councils.

The patriarch's answers to the Lutheran theologians were sincere and irenic but ultimately disappointing to them. Of the twenty-one articles in the Augustana, justification was one of the primary subjects of disagreement, and the main question of concern to Jeremias was whether justification is by faith alone or by faith and works. He responded to the Protestant account of initial justification by saying that there is no initial justification whatsoever. Justification is only an ongoing process, and its consequences are entirely future. In essence, this is the position that Luther reacted to some years before, the position that prevailed in late medieval Catholic



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theology; and the problems that motivated Luther to react to this position should be brought to bear on Jeremias's response to the Augustana Graeca. Without the recognition that God initially justifies in a real and unconditional sense, there will always be the specter of doubt, fear, and condemnation, and the very race that we are to run is undermined from the start. Certainly there is the reward for the subjective righteousness that is to be lived out by us, but without the solid beginning, without the initial, genuine, and unconditional righteousness, which is Christ given to us by God for this very purpose and grasped by us in an organic union through faith, there can hardly be any boldness to race in the long run. While we are certainly meant to arrive at subjective righteousness, and this indeed takes a lifetime to reach, we are first set on the path by God in a solid and real way with Christ as our initial and objective righteousness unconditionally, and the path is, in fact, the growth in our experience and expression of Christ as righteousness through faith. But we should not ignore the unconditional and objective beginning or confuse it with the subjective process and goal. If we do, we will be greatly hindered in our progress in the faith, and evidence for this abounds in both East and West.

For the most part, Jeremias's response to the Augustana Graeca ended the discussion concerning justification in the East for the time being. The East, through their patriarch, desired no more consideration, no more grief, and no more writing on this same subject from the Protestant West. But in the seventeenth century a number of Eastern scholars came into contact with and were influenced by the teachings of the Protestant and Catholic West. Some of these Eastern scholars found what they learned in the West convincing and sought to adjust Eastern teaching in accordance with it. Of all such instances, the most striking and instructive is that of Cyril Lucar (d. 1638). Lucar studied in western Europe, and as patriarch of Alexandria he continued to correspond with writers in the West. In this way he became acquainted with, and convinced by, the teachings of the Reformation.

Lucar's *Eastern Confession of the Christian Faith* reflects the Reformed convictions he had come to embrace. The brief chapters of his *Confession* deal with a number of major subjects, including original sin, predestination, and the sacraments, and most notably, chapters 13, 14, and 16 deal with free will, grace, and justification. In chapter 13 Lucar's clear statement of objective justification for a believer's salvation differs very much from the response of Jeremias. Had the East embraced this confession, the response of Jeremias to the Western account of justification might have been annulled, and the West's advance in this truth might have come to benefit the eastern half of Christendom. Regrettably, the East as a whole did not approve of Lucar's embrace of the West's help. Lucar was anathematized only three months after his death, and his *Confession* was repudiated by six successive synods. In addition to condemning Lucar's *Confession* (and Lucar himself), the East approved two other confessions, each of which responds to the *Confession* of Lucar with an alternative account of justification in line with that of Jeremias (Campbell et al. 2:172-179).

The basic response of the East is that there is no initial justification; justification is only an ongoing endeavor. But on occasion, some in the East have been willing to affirm two justifications, though these do not seem to correspond to objective and subjective justification as we have described them in the biblical presentation article (3-17 in this issue). We applaud these attempts by a minority of Eastern thinkers to affirm a double justification, one at the initiation of the Christian life and one continuing throughout the Christian life. But even though these Eastern thinkers affirm an initial justification, we note that this justification is not, in fact, a purely objective justification. It is, rather, simply the beginning of subjective justification. In this respect, even these few Orthodox thinkers willing to grant an initial justification hold accounts of justification that are Catholic at best. The Catholic tradition insists that the essence of justification is the renewal of the inner being of the believer in righteousness. Here we see that even when the East grants an initial justification, it is the Catholic rather than the Protestant version that they allow. For most in the East, there is no sense in which the believer can boldly declare, "I have been justified!" For the small few who grant an initial justification, this declaration amounts to no more than "I have begun to be justified!" (Campbell et al. 2:180-183).

The position of the East is not simply a relic of the controversies of bygone centuries. It continues to animate Eastern responses to the West to this day. Kallistos Ware (d. 2022) rejects the notion that the believers can say, in any sense, that they *have been* saved. He remarks, "The question to be asked is not, 'Have I completed the journey of salvation?' The true question is 'Have I even begun?'" (131). This latter question is more than mere pious humility; it sums up the Orthodox rejection of any initial and objective component of justification. Even though we must respect the Orthodox for their deeper understanding of full salvation as deification, we cannot deny that their rejection of initial justification is against the truth of the Scriptures. Have we even begun? The Scriptures say that we have begun by the Spirit and that God Himself is the One who has begun this good work in us (Gal. 3:3; Phil. 1:6), and the Scriptures encourage us to "hold fast the beginning of the assurance firm to the end" (Heb. 3:14). With this we must stand, and in this we should even boast. If the true question is indeed "Have we even begun?" we must say absolutely yes, and we must point back, at least, to justification by faith alone as that true beginning (Campbell et al. 2:179).

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# PROGRESS, STAGNATION, AND BREAKTHROUGH: JUSTIFICATION IN THE ANGLICAN, METHODIST, AND PLYMOUTH BRETHREN TRADITIONS

In 1533, while the Protestant Reformation was underway in continental Europe, King Henry VIII of England formally severed ties with the Roman Catholic Church and made himself the temporal and spiritual head of the Church of England. The break, precipitated by the pope's refusal to grant Henry an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, was at first felt more politically than religiously. But through reforming efforts led by Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer (d. 1556), Protestant doctrine slowly gained ground during Henry's reign and took firm hold under his successor, Edward VI. After Edward died at the age of fifteen, the newly crowned Mary Tudor abruptly brought England back under the authority of the pope for five tumultuous years until her death in 1558, when Elizabeth I began a forty-five-year reign and, in the interest of political stability, steered the country on a mediating course between Protestantism and Catholicism. This "Elizabethan Settlement," as it is known to history, established what some have identified as a *via media*, or middle way, that allowed for doctrinal ambiguity but also placed the Church of England on a long and uncertain course to more fully define its ecclesial and theological identity.

Since the Reformation three strands of Anglicans with distinct theological commitments have emerged within Anglicanism. Those who identify with the teaching and practice of the Reformed branch of Protestantism are designated Reformed Anglicans below. Those who are of a more Catholic persuasion are designated Anglo-Catholics. A third strand consists of liberal Anglicans, whose evolving theological positions we do not evaluate in this issue. One consequence of this diversity is that there has been no coherent, clearly identifiable theological tradition in Anglicanism. Anglicans of different theological positions are at liberty to interpret and apply the Church of England's foundational documents—the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the two Books of Homilies—according to their respective understandings of what constitutes true Anglicanism and faithful Anglican theology. The absence of an authoritative theological tradition thus allows for significant

doctrinal diversity under the broad label *Anglican* (Campbell et al. 2:185-188).

## Justification by Faith in the Anglican Tradition

This doctrinal diversity is readily apparent in the Anglican treatment of justification. While the Anglican formularies are Protestant on the matter of justification, there is nonetheless a variety of interpretations of justification in the Anglican tradition that seems sure to persist indefinitely. Rather than constructing a "consensus" Anglican understanding of justification, then, we will instead identify themes in the teaching of justification that emerge in the work of various Anglican theologians through the centuries. In what follows we will consider Anglican theologians' views on objective and subjective aspects of justification, the role of union with Christ in justification, the assurance and security of salvation, and the relationship between justification and the sacraments. Our final sections will consider the teaching of justification by faith in the Methodist and the Plymouth Brethren traditions—both of which had their origins in, but eventually departed from, the Anglican fold. We forgo consideration of the Pentecostal tradition—which emerged from Methodism—because its teaching on justification generally follows Methodist teaching (Campbell et al. 2:188). (See Campbell et al. 2:225-229 for an assessment of Pentecostal teaching on justification.)

## Objective and Subjective Aspects of Justification

At different periods in the history of the Church of England, prominent teachers have granted a fuller understanding of justification than either the Protestant view of imputed righteousness or the Roman Catholic view of infused righteousness allows by itself. While efforts to broaden the scope of justification did not produce a representative Anglican view, they nonetheless demonstrate a willingness among some Anglicans to recognize an objective aspect and a subjective aspect of justification. These more holistic perceptions are not consistent with one another in every detail, but our point

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here is that some Anglican teachers were not content with an either-or approach to justification. Such teachers aimed instead to incorporate an objective aspect and a subjective aspect into a coherent doctrine that affirmed both as complements in a justificatory whole.

An early Reformed Anglican expositor who evinced some hesitation to rule out a subjective aspect of justification was John Davenant (d. 1641), a Cambridge scholar whom King James I appointed bishop of Salisbury in 1621 and who served in that capacity under Charles I, James's son and successor. For Davenant there are two formal causes of justification because there are two aspects of justification. Objectively, the formal cause by which the sinner is accounted perfectly and absolutely just is the imputation of a perfect righteousness, that is, the righteousness of Christ, to the sinner. Subjectively, the formal cause by which the sinner is made imperfectly and incipiently righteous is the infusion of righteousness as the initiation of "inchoate justification" (1:159-160), that is, a justification that is not yet fully developed and therefore can and should increase. By holding to imputation as the formal cause of an objective justification, Davenant manifests his Reformed heritage. By teaching infused righteousness as the formal cause of an inchoate, subjective justification, he recognizes an inherent operation of righteousness that he is willing to employ new language, that of "justifaction" (1:159), to describe.

John Henry Newman (d. 1890), an Anglo-Catholic priest and theologian who eventually converted to Catholicism, affirmed before his Catholic conversion the objective and subjective aspects of justification in his *Lectures on Justification*. At the beginning of the *Lectures*, Newman expresses his conviction that the Protestant understanding of justification by faith and the Roman Catholic view of justification by obedience are not irreconcilable. Further, he argues that either understanding taken by itself is problematic. Later in the *Lectures*, he makes three points regarding justification that, taken together, are atypical of the Catholic understanding. The key issue concerns the declaration of righteousness. While Catholics grant that one will be declared righteous who has been made righteous, Newman argues that the declaration of righteousness *causes* the inward renewal by which one is made righteous. We do not agree with Newman that such a declaration causes an inward renewal, but we do find it noteworthy that he embraces an objective aspect of justification by which the sinner is accounted righteous objectively without previously having been made righteous within. While Reformed Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics typically hold strictly to an objective or a subjective aspect of justification, Newman is right to point out that the two aspects are not inconsistent. Both must be taken into account to arrive at a proper understanding of objective and subjective justification in God's full salvation (Campbell et al. 2:189-194).

### *The Role of Union in Justification*

As with the topic of the objective and subjective aspects of justification, Anglican theologians have varied views of the role of union in justification by faith. Many Reformed Anglicans have a high appreciation for union with Christ in justification, and this should come as no surprise. As we have seen elsewhere in this issue of *A&C*, the Reformed have one of the highest estimations of union with Christ in justification among all the Christian traditions. What might be more surprising, as we will see, is that some Anglicans outside the Reformed tradition likewise have much to say regarding union in justification.

We begin with several Reformed Anglicans who emphasize the need of union in justification by faith while espousing a typically Reformed understanding of the topic. In *A Learned Discourse on Justification*, Richard Hooker (d. 1600) writes:

The righteousness wherein we must be found if we will be justified, is not our own, therefore we cannot be justified by any inherent quality. Christ hath merited righteousness for as many as are *found in him*. In him God findeth us if we be faithful for by faith we are incorporated into him. (*FLE* 5:112)

Like Hooker, John Davenant argues for the importance of union in the believer's receiving of Christ's righteousness. Davenant does employ the language of imputation, but he stresses that it is not the imputation of Christ's righteousness alone that justifies a believer. That righteousness is imputed to the believer only when he or she is engrafted into Christ and made one person with Him. Davenant observes,

The Apostle here [in Phil. 3:9] teaches what that righteousness is, upon which we must rely before God; namely that which is apprehended by faith. But this is imputed righteousness. He also shews the cause why it is made *ours* by right; namely, because we are Christ's, and are found in Christ. Because then we are engrafted into his body, and are united with him into one person, therefore his righteousness is reckoned *ours*. (1:246)

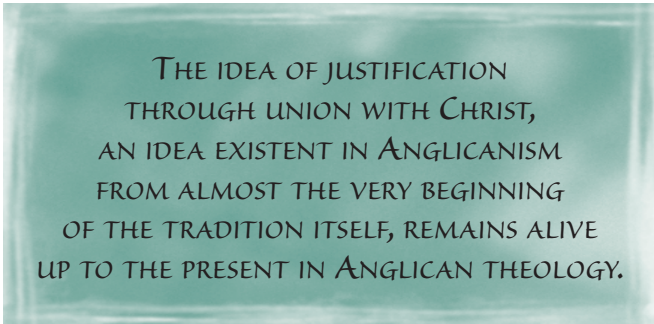
Following Davenant, the Anglican bishop Ezekiel Hopkins (d. 1690) also uses the language of imputation while elaborating on the mystical union with Christ, into which a believer is brought through faith. It is in this union, so strong that the believers are said to be one spirit with the Lord and are even called Christ Himself (1 Cor. 12:12), that believers receive all that Christ is. American Episcopal bishop Charles McIlvaine (d. 1873) further illustrates the believers' union with Christ through faith with Old Testament pictures such as the cities of refuge. Just as a fugitive could enter a city of refuge and receive all the benefits of the city once inside, so too can the believer be incorporated into Christ and receive everything of His, including righteousness. These writers exemplify the recurring thought among some Reformed

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Anglicans that a believer obtains righteousness by being incorporated by faith into Christ, whereby the believer enjoys all that Christ is, including His righteousness.

Interestingly, the idea of union in the believers' justification is a hallmark of not only Reformed Anglicans' understanding but also that of many Anglo-Catholics. While the Reformed tend to see union as a factor in justification but not its formal cause, John Henry Newman makes union with Christ the formal cause itself. According to Newman,

Christ then is our Righteousness by dwelling in us by the Spirit: He justifies us by entering into us, He continues to justify us by remaining in us. *This* is really and truly our justification, not faith, not holiness, not (much less) a mere imputation; but through God's mercy, the very Presence of Christ. (150)



THE IDEA OF JUSTIFICATION  
THROUGH UNION WITH CHRIST,  
AN IDEA EXISTENT IN ANGLICANISM  
FROM ALMOST THE VERY BEGINNING  
OF THE TRADITION ITSELF, REMAINS ALIVE  
UP TO THE PRESENT IN ANGLICAN THEOLOGY.

In this union, the believers are justified because they are united to the One who is Righteousness itself, Christ. Summing up his remarkable statements on the believer's justification, Newman concludes:

*This*, I repeat, is our justification...; we are in Him, He in us; Christ being the One Mediator, the way, the truth, and the life, joining earth with heaven. And this is our true Righteousness,—not the mere name of righteousness, not only forgiveness or favour as an act of the Divine Mind, not only sanctification within (great indeed as these blessings would be, yet it is somewhat more),—it implies the one, it involves the other, it is the indwelling of our glorified Lord. (219)

With this understanding of justification in mind, Newman believes that Protestants and Catholics can resolve their conflict by emphasizing union as the essence of justification, since they both grant union as an element of justification. Later Anglo-Catholics, such as Thomas Holtzen (1968-), also include union as instrumental in the believers' justification. Thus, the idea of justification through union with Christ, an idea existent in Anglicanism from almost the very beginning of the tradition itself, remains alive up to the present in Anglican theology. The quotations presented in this section in no way demonstrate an official Anglican position on the subject, seeing as Anglicanism has very few defined views

on any theological subject. Nevertheless, many key Anglican theologians, including both Reformed and Anglo-Catholic writers, have crafted their views on union in justification either to reconcile the two parties within Anglicanism or to answer the objections of the opposing party (Campbell et al. 2:194-200).

### *The Security of Salvation*

In its foundational formularies, the Church of England takes a discernible stance on the security of a believer's salvation. Despite the Reformed tradition's recovery of the truth concerning the security of salvation and the pervasive influence of the Reformed tradition on the Church of England, the Anglican formularies maintain the ancient error that salvation can be lost. The Thirty-nine Articles, the two Books of Homilies, and the Book of Common Prayer indicate that grace can be forfeited after baptism, that it can be restored through repentance, and that salvation, therefore, is not secure.

In *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, an older but still valuable work, the Anglican theologian and bishop Edward Harold Browne (d. 1891) traces the Church of England's position on the insecurity of grace in its foundational formularies. In the Thirty-nine Articles, Article XVI ("Of Sin after Baptism") states, "After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and by the grace of God we may arise again, and amend our lives" (Cummings 678). This indicates that the Church of England rejected the Calvinist teaching of perseverance. Like the Thirty-nine Articles, the two Books of Homilies affirm that grace can be lost. A homily from the first book, "A Sermon, How Dangerous a Thing It Is to Fall from God," leaves no doubt as to whether a person once saved can finally be deprived of that salvation. Of this homily, Browne writes, "It is impossible to doubt, that the doctrine contained in it is, that we may once receive the grace of God, and yet finally fall away from Him" (377-378).

Reformed Anglicans naturally desired the Church of England to adopt a more Calvinist understanding of security, but early attempts to introduce that view met with resistance. Nevertheless, there remains a strong Reformed presence in Anglicanism that affirms the eternal security of salvation. E. A. Litton (d. 1897) argues that Article XVII ("Of Predestination and Election") of the Thirty-nine Articles can be interpreted to mean that the Church of England itself affirms the security of salvation. He states,

The reformed divines hold that the regenerate cannot finally fall away, since in fact they are the elect. That our Church leans to this latter view seems implied in Art. xvii: "They be made sons of God by adoption, they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy,

they attain to everlasting life.” No intimation is given that they may possibly come short of this destination. (346)

The Reformed are right to insist on security, and we wish they were right to claim that the Anglican formularies affirm this great truth. But we agree with Browne that the formularies teach the insecurity rather than the security of salvation (Campbell et al. 2:200-207).

### *Faith and Baptism*

If we are to locate a typically Anglican position on the means of justification, we again must look to the formularies. Those sources indicate that while justification is by faith only, baptism is also an instrument of justification, through which the baptized are forgiven of sin, regenerated, and thereby justified. Anglican theology thus continues a longstanding error in the Christian tradition by joining justification and baptism, thereby undermining the exclusive role of faith in justification and perpetuating the fallacy that justification is sacramental.

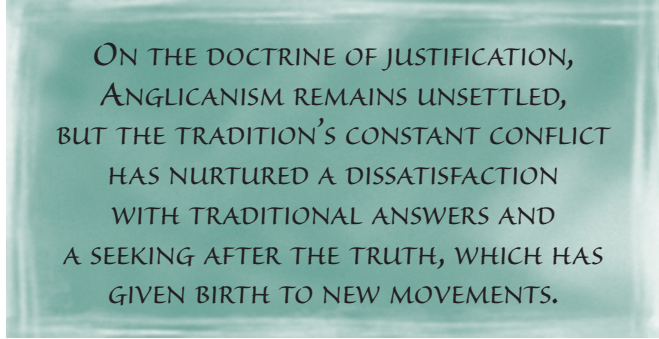
Anglo-Catholic writers have affirmed the formularies’ teaching of baptism and its relation to faith and justification. Francis J. Hall (d. 1932), for example, states that baptism is “the instrumental cause of justification” and that through the work of the Spirit in baptism, “justifying faith” is “made possible for us to attain by His grace” (8:30). In other words, faith does not precede justification; rather, justification, enacted through baptism, leads to faith. This deliberate joining of baptism and justification undermines the power and efficacy of faith for the objective justification of the believer. In such an understanding, faith becomes subordinated to the sacrament of baptism.

Reformed Anglicans such as E. A. Litton affirm the necessity of baptism, but they teach that justification is by faith only and not through baptism as an instrument. Litton writes that “nothing but faith is spoken of as the channel through which remission of sin is obtained” (306). Moreover, he says that it is “hardly safe to argue” from passages such as Romans 6:4-5 “that because baptism is said (in some sense) to unite us to Christ, and union with Christ includes justification as the general includes the particular, therefore baptism conveys justification” (307). Taking the typical Reformed view that justification is the declaration of a completed act, Litton denies that baptism can add anything to that declaration.

Despite such disparity between Anglo-Catholic and Reformed Anglican renderings of faith and baptism in justification, some effort has been expended to reconcile the two into a more holistic understanding, which has led to some unfortunate results. In an otherwise valuable account of justification that we have treated above, John Henry Newman seeks a *via media* between Anglo-Catholic and Protestant-leaning Anglican understandings of faith and baptism and

thus introduces a fatal flaw into his work. For Newman, justification is not by faith alone but by baptism and faith as complementary instruments. In Newman’s understanding, baptism is the primary instrument and faith is the secondary instrument; or, put differently, the sacraments are the “instrumental” cause and faith is the “sustaining cause” of justification (226). As the primary instrument of justification, baptism for Newman necessarily precedes faith, and thus faith follows justification and is itself justifying only in its relation to baptism.

Faith, then, being the appointed representative of Baptism, derives its authority and virtue from that which it represents. It is justifying because of Baptism; it is the faith of the baptized, of the regenerate, that is, of the justified. Justifying faith does not precede justification; but justification precedes faith, and makes it justifying. (227)



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In trying to find a *via media*, Newman ultimately subordinates faith to the sacrament of baptism and thereby devalues the function of faith in the objective justification of the believer. Moreover, by assigning a requisite justifying function to baptism, Newman and traditional Anglicans have wrongly compromised the role of faith as that which uniquely justifies (Campbell et al. 2:207-211).

### *A Concluding Word regarding the Anglican Tradition*

The broadness of the Anglican tradition allows Protestant and Catholic views of justification by faith to live together under one ecclesial roof, thus allowing for, in Alister McGrath’s words, “a spectrum of theologies of justification” (41). As we have seen, there are elements in those competing views that can be affirmed and other elements that, we feel, are in error. But the presence of such variety has fostered theological experimentation in Anglicanism, and this has borne some promising fruit.

At times in the history of Anglicanism, certain theologians were willing to reach beyond their respective Catholic or Protestant heritages to appropriate elements from both sides and thus made progress toward a more fully developed notion of justification. But the examples treated above serve

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as a reminder that the gains in Anglican understandings of justification have been undermined by persistent misunderstandings. On the doctrine of justification, then, Anglicanism remains unsettled, but the tradition's constant conflict has nurtured a dissatisfaction with traditional answers and a seeking after the truth, which has given birth to new movements. One of these new movements, as we will see below when we examine the Plymouth Brethren, attained an unprecedented understanding of justification (Campbell et al. 2:211-212).

### Justification by Faith in the Methodist Tradition

Methodism began in the eighteenth century as a move of reform within the Church of England. The main proponents of reform among those who were eventually labeled Methodists were John Wesley (d. 1791), his brother Charles (d. 1788), and George Whitefield (d. 1770). During their lifetime this move of reform became its own tradition separate from the Church of England. Despite the split, there are few authoritative doctrinal differences between the Methodist tradition and the Church of England. The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church (commonly known as the Twenty-five Articles of Religion) are little more than Wesley's abridgment of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. The Methodist article on justification by faith closely follows that of the Church of England (Campbell et al. 2:212-213).

### Justification as Forgiveness of Sins

Most of the prominent teachers within the Methodist tradition, beginning with John Wesley, have held that justification is no more than forgiveness of or pardon from sins. Many Christian traditions in some way identify justification with forgiveness of sins, of course, but they have attempted to account for an additional positive reality of righteousness in justification (e.g., the imputed active obedience of Christ or the renewal of the believer's inner being). The Methodist tradition generally rejects these proposed positive components of justification. For instance, after rejecting several prominent notions of justification, Wesley insists:

The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is that act of God the Father, whereby for the sake of the propitiation made by the blood of his Son, he "showeth forth his righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of the sins that are past." (*WJW* 1:189)

Thus, Wesley held to an understanding of justification consistent with the account of the patristic writers—that justification is God's forgiveness of past sins based on Christ's redemptive work on the cross—and rejected the additions that had accumulated during the controversies of the intervening centuries. The Methodist tradition in general has

followed Wesley in this respect. A more intrinsic understanding of justification can be found in the Methodist tradition, in the writings of William Burt Pope (d. 1903) for instance. But the prominent Methodist view is that justification by faith is simply the forgiveness of sins with no positive reality of righteousness, a view that comes short of justification as revealed in Paul's Epistles (Campbell et al. 2:212-218).

### *The Spirit's Inner Witness as Assurance of Justification*

Closely related to the Methodist teaching of justification by faith is the teaching concerning the assurance of justification. The primary argument that Methodists employ in their defense of assurance is the inner witness of the Spirit, and much of their understanding of this witness draws upon John Wesley's own understanding.

Wesley understood the assurance of justification to consist of the Spirit's inner witness in Romans 8:16. In his *Sermons on Several Occasions*, he devotes three sermons, written over a span of twenty-four years, to the teaching of the witness of the Spirit. Wesley saw a twofold witness in Romans 8:16 and argued that the witness of the Spirit is a direct testimony of the Spirit of God, an immediate and inward impression upon the believers' souls that they are children of God. Wesley considered this direct testimony of God's Spirit vital to justification and thought it impossible for believers to be able to love God and pursue holiness without the Spirit of God first making them aware that God loves them and has forgiven them.

As with his teaching on justification, Wesley's teaching on the inner witness of the Spirit as the assurance of our salvation is held by the majority of those within the Methodist tradition. Thus, the Methodist tradition holds that every believer should have an assurance of faith upon or shortly after believing. This assurance consists of a direct testimony of the Spirit of God—an inward impression on the soul of God's love and forgiveness—and the believer's own testimony. Whereas the appeal to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit for the assurance of salvation is not unique to the Methodist tradition, Methodism emphasizes and develops this point more extensively than other major Christian traditions do. We agree with the Methodists that every believer can and should have the inner witness of the Spirit as an assurance of salvation (Campbell et al. 2:218-221).

### *The Insecurity of Justification*

As we have seen, the Twenty-five Articles, which represent the teachings of Methodism, are adapted with judicious changes from the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. A notable difference is the omission from the Twenty-five Articles of the latter's Article XVII on predestination

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and election. In contrast to Calvin, Wesley taught that those who believe in Christ and are thus justified by faith can still fall away from their faith and suffer eternal perdition. Wesley testifies that he himself saw many fall away who were later restored:

It is remarkable that many who had fallen either from justifying or from sanctifying grace, and so deeply fallen that they could hardly be ranked among the servants of God, have been restored...They have at once recovered both a consciousness of his [God's] favor and the experience of the pure love of God. In one moment they received anew both remission of sins and a lot among them that were sanctified. (*WJW* 3:225)

This is the portion of those who fall, even apostatize, and then repent. However, not all who fall are restored. The lot of these, Wesley believes, is perdition: "For a great part of these 'it had been better never to have known the way of righteousness.' It only increases their damnation, seeing they die in their sins" (3:224). We surely do not agree that those who believe into Christ can fall away from salvation. Because justification is appropriated by faith alone, it can never be annulled by works. This gives the believers boldness before God and security in their salvation. Having this boldness, the believers are then free to apply all diligence in the pursuit of Christ for sanctification and growth in life (Campbell et al. 2:221-225).

### Justification among the Plymouth Brethren

When compared with the traditions considered thus far, the Plymouth Brethren are numerically less prominent, yet their apprehension of justification advanced beyond the understanding in those traditions. Concerning this advancement, Witness Lee (d. 1997) said, "Luther recovered the truth of justification by faith, but he did not expound it clearly enough; the Brethren thoroughly expounded the truth of justification by faith" (*CWWL*, 1956 2:378-379). Brethren thought on this subject was, in large part, shaped by John Nelson Darby (d. 1882), who presents his most concentrated statements on the believer's justification in his pamphlet *The Righteousness of God*. In this pamphlet, Darby disagrees with the imputation of Christ's active righteousness, a hallmark of Reformed teaching, because the idea depends upon the fulfillment of the law for justification as opposed to the believer being in Christ. The law, Darby argues, is related to the old man, whom God set aside. Now the believer is not in the old man, who is finished, but in the new man, the "second Adam," Christ. Concerning the righteousness of God, Darby states,

It is an entire setting aside the old man, his whole condition and existence before God, by which we get our place before God: not a keeping the law for the old man. Then you must keep him alive. God forbid! I live by the

second Adam only, with whom I have been crucified: nevertheless live not I, but Christ in me. But then, in the new man I am not under law, so there is no question of fulfilling it for me, because I am already accepted and have life. There can be no Do this and live. I am, as even Luther expresses it, Christ before God. If righteousness come by law, then Christ is dead in vain. But if Christ has fulfilled the law for me, it does come by law, and Christ is dead in vain. Law applies to flesh, is weak through it, sets up, if it could, the righteousness of the first man. But I am not in the flesh at all—I am in Christ. (*CWJND* 7:440)

God declares believers righteous not by reckoning to them Christ's obeying the law perfectly throughout His life but by putting them into a new position—in Christ. Christ becomes the believer's righteousness because the believer is now united with the One who is the righteousness of God Himself. Darby elaborates,

Hence Christ was, in sovereign grace, made sin for me and died, not to build up the old man again, after death, when it was dead, and confer righteousness on it, but to put me in a wholly new position in the heavenly man, who is my righteousness; to set me in the righteousness of God, seated in heavenly places in Him. (7:410)

Although Brethren thought after Darby is hardly monolithic, numerous Brethren evangelists and authors continued to stress union with Christ as the basis of a believer's justification. Charles Stanley (d. 1890) also strongly disagreed with the Reformed notion of the imputation of Christ's active obedience:

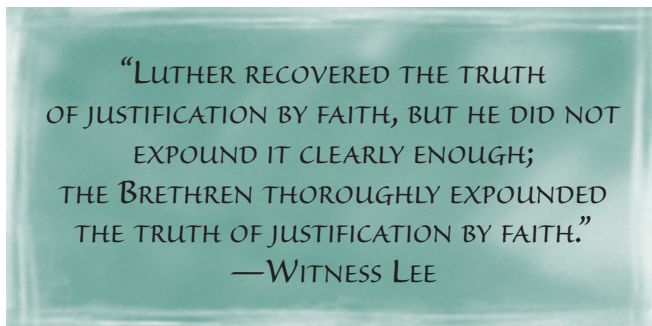
Oh, say they, you are under it, and break it; but Christ kept the law for you in His life, and this is imputed to you for righteousness. I would say, in answer to many enquiries on this solemn subject, I cannot find this doctrine in Scripture: it cannot be the ancient doctrine of God's church. The basis is wrong—to refer to the illustration, on the wrong side of the river. Justification is not on the principle of law at all. "The righteousness of God without law is manifested." "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin."...But does Scripture ever say that Christ kept the law for us for justifying righteousness? I am not aware of a single text. And yet, if it were so, there are many places where it should say so. (*CST* 2:4-5)

How, then, is the believer made righteous? According to Stanley, "It is thus risen in Him, one with Him, we are made 'the righteousness of God *in him*'" (2:6). William Kelly (d. 1906) also contends that a believer is justified by being brought into union with Christ completely apart from the law:

Law-righteousness differs from that of God. Law promises earth and living long thereon to those who keep it. Grace gives Christ to suffer for our sins, the Just for the unjust, raises Him for our justifying, glorifies Him in heaven, and makes us God's righteousness in Him there. (50)

Even though these earlier Brethren teachers emphasize that believers are justified by being brought into union with Christ rather than by having Christ's active righteousness imputed to them, the influence of the early Brethren teaching seems to have dwindled among subsequent expositors. Later Brethren authors such as Sir Robert Anderson, A. J. Pollock, William E. Vine, and F. F. Bruce do not accord union the role that it had among earlier Brethren related to the believer's justification. Thus, it seems that the Brethren's distinctive understanding of justification waned among some of the Brethren themselves (Campbell et al. 2:229-234).

With John Nelson Darby and other early Plymouth Brethren, we see a seismic shift in the understanding of the righteousness that God desires and requires. It was they who dared to unshackle justification from the principle of the law, for which the church of God owes them a debt of gratitude. The Brethren understood an important distinction between the righteousness of Christ and the righteousness of God in relation to justification. While they heartily acknowledged



that Christ was absolutely righteous according to the law throughout His life and in His death, they challenged the assumption that God imputes Christ's obedience to the law, His righteousness, to the believers for their justification. Such a construct, the Brethren protested, is altogether absent from God's Word. In challenging this assumption, the Brethren saw that the righteousness spoken of in relation to justification is actually the righteousness of God, not the righteousness of Christ (a phrase used only once in the entire New Testament), and that this righteousness, as they tenaciously affirmed, is “apart from the law” (Rom. 3:21; cf. Rom. 6:14; Gal. 2:21; 3:11). God's righteousness in justification is not only “apart from the works of the law” (Rom. 3:28), meaning that our works to fulfill the law can never justify us, but also “apart from the law,” meaning that justification is entirely apart from the principle of the law. The Brethren saw that the righteousness of God and the righteousness of the law are two completely different kinds of righteousness. Hence, even if Christ's righteousness could somehow be imputed to those who believe, that righteousness would still be a righteousness of the law, a righteousness within the system of the law. The righteousness of God, however, is not of the law but “out of God and based on faith” (Phil. 3:9). The Brethren understood that faith actually removes

believers out from under the whole milieu of the law and places them in an entirely new position in union with Christ before God. In Christ the righteous One, God sees the believers as righteous and justifies them. This is the righteousness of God, absolutely apart from the righteousness of the law. We thank the Lord for the light that He gave to our brothers as well as for their determination, like Luther, to declare what they saw in spite of theological tradition (Campbell et al. 2:309-310).

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# CHRISTLESSNESS, APOSTASY, AND NOVELTY: MODERN VIEWS ON JUSTIFICATION

In this article we turn to justification by faith as understood in modern theology. After briefly considering some of the more prominent accounts of justification proposed by modern theologians, we turn to the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which represents the peak of modern ecumenical discussions of justification by faith. Finally, we conclude with an evaluation of justification as understood by N. T. (Nicholas Thomas) Wright (1948)—the leading representative of a group of biblical scholars often identified as proponents of a “new” perspective on Paul (Campbell et al. 2:263).

## Justification in Modern Theology

With the advent of the so-called Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the Christian faith came under increasingly harsh and public attack. Many of the foundational teachings of the Christian church were ridiculed as contrary to reason or inimical to moral progress, and this onslaught included an attack on justification by faith. Many attempts by modern Christian philosophers and theologians to salvage justification by faith (e.g., those of Immanuel Kant [d. 1804] and Friedrich Schleiermacher [d. 1834]) suffer from the same fatal defect, namely, that they do so without a divine Christ. Other attempts suffer from the conviction that the language and concept of justification are no longer relevant to modern people. According to Paul Tillich (d. 1965), for instance, the language of justification is a relic of Paul’s Jewish background, having no significance in the present. The primary concern of modern people, Tillich argues, is the quest to “find meaning in a meaningless world” (3:227). In light of this primary concern, Tillich urges us to understand justification by faith to be little more than our acceptance of the fact that God has accepted our lives as meaningful. Another prominent view among modern theologians is that objective justification is God’s declaration ahead of time concerning what He will do in the future life of the believers to make them actually righteous within. According to Karl Holl (d. 1926), for instance, “In God’s verdict of justification, the final outcome, the real sanctification of man, is the decisive

point. Otherwise, His act of grace would be a caprice and a self-deception” (13). Yet another novel approach has drawn on the modern speech-act theory of John L. Austin, which distinguishes between words that describe reality (e.g., “We are married”) and words that constitute reality (e.g., “I now pronounce you husband and wife”). When God justifies, some argue (e.g., Oswald Bayer [1939-]), He is not stating a counter-factual (e.g., this sinner is righteous) but bringing about a new state of affairs, namely, the state of righteousness.

All these distinctively modern accounts of justification attempt to evade the charge that the Protestant account of justification by faith is no more than a legal fiction. We agree, of course, that justification by faith is not a legal fiction. Justification by faith is based on the believers’ union with Christ as righteousness, but none of these thinkers appeal to this union. In this way, they have offered more confusion than help, distracting the believers from the Christ who is everything in God’s operation, not least of all, the righteousness of God and of the believers (Campbell et al. 2:263-272).

## The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

On 31 October 1999 in Augsburg, Germany, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation ratified the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, the long-awaited culmination of several decades of ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans and several years of intensive revision of the *Joint Declaration* itself. According to its preamble, the *Joint Declaration’s* intention is

to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining

differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations. (10-11)

Whatever the *Joint Declaration*'s significance may be for the ecumenical movement and Catholic-Lutheran rapprochement, our interest is only in the content of the *Joint Declaration*, that is, in the understanding of justification that it presents. Even this merits only brief attention for the simple reason that, in our estimation, the understanding of justification presented in the declaration is unremarkable, for it bears no evidence of the believers' steadily progressing understanding of the truth.

Although the *Joint Declaration* suffers from many deficiencies, we will address only three of them in the interest of brevity. A basic deficiency, illustrative of the declaration's ambiguity, is that the declaration does not give us a clear, consistent definition of justification. What we find in the *Joint Declaration* are diverse statements about what justifi-

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fication is, and what it means, with little to no explanation of how (or whether) these diverse statements can be fit together into a coherent conception of justification. This is a significant shortcoming for a declaration aimed at presenting a common understanding of justification.

A related deficiency of the *Joint Declaration* is that it skirts one of the most crucial issues related to justification: the so-called formal cause of justification, which refers to its essential content or constitutive element. This issue has been a major source of disagreement between Catholics and Lutherans (among others) since the Reformation, with Catholics insisting that justification's essence is *righteousness infused into the believers* and Lutherans contending that justification's essence is *Christ's external righteousness imputed to the believers*. This is no minor disagreement, for it concerns whether, in justification, a person is made righteous internally (through infused righteousness) or merely accounted righteous externally (through imputed righteousness). Although the *Joint Declaration* includes mention of "justification as forgiveness of sins and making righteous" (18), it ultimately evades the fundamental, centuries-old disagreement between Catholics and Lutherans concerning

the essence of justification, and the "common understanding" of justification it presents does not demonstrate a genuine resolution of this disagreement.

A third deficiency is that, in its explication of justification, the *Joint Declaration* neglects the believers' union with Christ. It thus fails to elucidate a central matter in the scriptural revelation of justification: that the believers' (objective) justification by God is based upon their union with Christ as righteousness. Although several references to the believers' union with Christ can be found in the declaration, these do little, if anything, to clarify the relationship between union and justification and to bolster the understanding(s) of justification presented in the declaration. The *Joint Declaration* does not tell us, for instance, whether the believers' union with Christ is a cause or an effect of justification. Nor does it tell us much about what this union is or how it comes about. As a result, everyone is free to read what they want into these scattered affirmations of union (or to ignore them), no real consensus is reached, and no impetus for further refinement is supplied.

Given these (and other) deficiencies, we can only conclude that the *Joint Declaration* does not present a common understanding of justification. What it does present is a multiplicity of understandings, some of which are not ultimately compatible. But even if we were to grant that the declaration expresses a common understanding of justification, we would still conclude that there is nothing remarkable about this understanding compared to those Catholic and Lutheran understandings already evaluated in this issue. As an ecumenical initiative, the *Joint Declaration* may represent an advance for the modern ecumenical movement and Catholic-Lutheran reconciliation (although this is debatable), but as a theological statement it does not represent an advance in the understanding of the scriptural revelation concerning the believers' justification by faith (Campbell et al. 2:272-278).

#### N. T. Wright's View of Justification by Faith

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) is an informal name for a new interpretive approach espoused by an increasing number of biblical scholars. These scholars generally agree that previous understandings of Paul and his view of justification by faith are insufficient—even misleading—because they lack an appreciation of the historical factors of Second Temple Judaism relevant to the time in which Paul developed his understanding. The leading proponent of NPP is N. T. (Nicholas Thomas) Wright (1948-), Oxford research fellow and former bishop of Durham, England. Influenced by the work of E. P. Sanders, Wright addresses the subject of justification in a way that, he feels, has been missed by all theologians from the time of Augustine to the present, including to some extent even his fellow authors who take the NPP approach. Wright's view of the whole of God's plan

begins with and centers on God's covenant with His people Israel and how that covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment in the work of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. According to Wright, the central issue in justification is the righteousness of God and His requirement for human righteousness, but not as understood in the individualistic, go-to-heaven gospel of popular evangelicalism. God sits as Judge in a law court, but this is not a criminal court after the manner of Luther's self-centered preoccupation with sin; it is a kind of civil court hearing the "implicit lawsuit" between God and Israel concerning the latter's restoration to the Abrahamic covenant, which they have broken (*Justification* 63). In the language of covenant, therefore, *righteousness* refers not to a moral quality or virtuous acts but to acts in fulfillment of God's covenant promises. In this light the righteousness of God is simply His faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. On God's side, righteousness is manifested when, according to the stipulations of the covenant, He restores His fallen yet repenting people to full covenant status. On the human side, righteousness is covenant membership in good standing. Hence, justification is God's declaration of His civil court verdict, His vindication, that His people have been restored to good standing in the covenant family. According to this view, God's "single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world," which faltered due to Israel's failure, came to fruition in the work of Israel's representative, Jesus the Messiah, whose death and resurrection reconstituted God's covenant community by redefining its boundaries (104). Justification is thus carried out through Christ's faithfulness to God's covenanted plan.

Wright claims that this view of God's plan fits all the puzzle pieces of Romans and Galatians in their right places, allowing us to finally understand the real meaning of the conflict over justification between first-century Judaism and the New Testament gospel. God's law court verdict (justification) now includes an added stipulation: the Gentiles also can become members of the true covenant family that God originally promised only to Abraham and his Jewish seed. In Paul's day, however, a problem arose in that the Jews, being ignorant of the enlargement of God's covenant faithfulness, "sought to establish their own righteousness" (Rom. 10:3), not in a legal or moral sense, but by the now-outdated insistence that their ethnic claim to the Torah was the unique sign of covenant membership, a claim that the Gentiles could not make. Wright finds this problem, with the solution, most dramatically expressed in Paul's exposition of justification in Romans 3. After announcing justification by faith in verses 21 through 28, Paul asks, "Or is He the God of the Jews only?" (Rom. 3:29). To Wright, the word *or* is of paramount importance, having the meaning of 'in other words...'; it is Paul's way of restating all that went before as a single, succinct rhetorical question related to covenant membership: Which people can now claim God as their own—the Jews, or Gentiles also? This was the question

that Peter had still not resolved, as indicated by his unwillingness to eat with the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-13). Paul's opposing argument in Galatians 2 is that now "a man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). For Wright, *justified* means 'declared to be members of the covenant,' and *works of law* in verse 16 refers not to a legalistic struggle for approved behavior but to the ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary-markers—the Sabbath, regulations on eating, and circumcision—that had served as the qualifying tokens for covenant membership. Paul's argument is that the Gentiles' faith in Christ serves as their own mark of admission to the covenant, just as circumcision had served for the Jews. Hence, the Gentiles too are justified. Wright asserts that his understanding of justification as God's verdict on covenant membership corrects one and a half millennia of failed expositions. Justification is wholly a matter of membership in the covenant that God made with Abraham and that Christ the Messiah opened to the Gentiles, and God's righteousness is His faithfulness to that covenant.

BY CONSTRUING FAITH AS A BADGE  
OF COVENANT MEMBERSHIP  
AND REDUCING THE BELIEVERS' UNION  
WITH CHRIST TO THEIR MEMBERSHIP  
IN GOD'S COVENANT FAMILY,  
N. T. WRIGHT EFFECTIVELY HOLLOWS OUT  
THE TRUTH CONCERNING JUSTIFICATION  
BY FAITH IN CHRIST.

We feel compelled to offer a critique of Wright's view of justification by faith, not least because his view falls far short of—and even distorts—the Pauline view while pretending faithfulness to it. Although such a critique could easily be more extensive, we will focus on four especially egregious errors in Wright's account of justification. These errors lie in the basic understanding of four great and crucial truths: the righteousness of God, the righteousness that becomes the believers', the causal role of faith in justification, and the reality of the believers' union with Christ through faith. Wright has much to say about righteousness, but we do not believe that his usage of the term comes close to the enlightened understanding that is according to the Scriptures. God is righteous, and He is righteousness itself. Righteousness is a chief attribute of God and is manifest in His ways, procedures, methods, and actions (Ezra 9:15; Psa. 11:7; 48:10; 71:19; 92:15; 145:17; Isa. 45:21; Jer. 12:1; Dan. 9:14). Moreover, Christ, the person, is the righteous One; He is called "Jesus Christ the Righteous" and "Jehovah our righteousness" (1 John 2:1; Jer. 23:5-6). Righteousness, then, is not only a divine attribute but a divine person. However,

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Wright's definition of the righteousness of God, which forms the core of his thesis, is that it is God's "unswerving commitment to be faithful" to His covenant with Israel, through which He will put the world at right (*Justification* 66-67). Thus righteousness, as Wright claims, must be thought of in a supposedly Hebrew sense as proper standing within the context of a covenant. We certainly acknowledge the close relationship between God's righteousness and His faithfulness to His covenants. But this does not entail that the one is reducible to the other. Wright's account altogether misses the view of righteousness as an identity of the person of God Himself and His saving Christ, which is the deeper revelation of both the Old and New Testaments. Wright's notion implies that righteousness is not an intrinsic feature of God's very being. On this account God would not be righteous if He had not made a covenant. It seems to us much more reasonable to say that God is faithful to His covenant *because* He is righteous in His being, even righteousness itself. God is continually revealed, proclaimed, and praised in the Scriptures as righteous in His being, whether in the context of a covenant or otherwise, and so we must protest that Wright's account of God's righteousness is far too limited. All consideration of righteousness and justification must be based on the crucial understanding that righteousness in its highest definition is a divine person, not merely an attitude, manner, or action. God made Christ, the person, to be righteousness to us (1 Cor. 1:30)! It is this, the scriptural understanding of righteousness, that is intrinsic to the truth of justification, which entails our being joined through faith to Christ the righteous One. But it is a view that is thoroughly neglected by Wright.

Wright's view of the righteousness that becomes the believers' also falls short of Paul's revelation. Again, Wright's emphasis is entirely on the forming and maintaining of God's covenant with Israel. A believer's righteousness, in this view, is simply his or her status as a member of the covenant, and justification, in law court terms, is the declaration of the verdict that creates that status. It is strictly objective and need not, and ought not, be a judgment of any kind on the righteousness of the defendant in the moral or spiritual sense. In this way Wright altogether minimizes the aspect of sin, sinfulness, and God's judgment on sinful humanity in his perspective of justification. We feel that Wright's view, with its sole emphasis on covenant membership, neglects the relationship of justification to the problem of sin, corporately and individually. Although justification by faith is not the forgiveness of sins, there can be no justification without prior forgiveness. The chief attributes of God—His righteousness, holiness, and glory—place requirements on sinful human beings that they are unable to meet. Within the Ark of the Testimony was the law with its holy and righteous requirement, exposing human beings and bringing them into condemnation, and watching over the Ark were the cherubim of glory (Exo. 25:17-21). Only

by the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice on the propitiatory cover, signifying Christ Himself with His redemptive work on the cross, can the demands of God be satisfied. This is the argument that Paul makes in Romans 3, declaring that God set forth Christ "as a propitiation place through faith in His blood, for the demonstrating of His righteousness, . . . so that He might be righteous and the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26). Justification must, and does, speak directly to the need of sinful humankind to meet the holy and righteous requirements of God. Although all genuine Christians should believe and cleave to this truth, it may still be occluded by an emphasis that misses the mark of the gospel of God, and we feel that this is precisely what Wright's New Perspective view has done. We consider this to be a defrauding to Wright's readers.

Wright's account also obscures the causal role of faith in the believers' justification. In his understanding, faith is evidentiary rather than causative. Although he affirms on a superficial level that justification is by faith, this (human) faith is simply "the recognisable badge of a renewed covenant people" marking out those who belong to God's covenant community ("*Justification*" 57), a community centered around the Messiah and His covenant faithfulness. This conception of faith—as a badge of covenant membership—predominates Wright's consideration of how faith pertains to justification. But Wright's evidentiary conception of faith in relation to justification falls short of the biblical revelation, which depicts a direct, causal relationship between faith and justification. This relationship is clearly seen in the experience of Abraham, whom the apostle Paul points to as the example of justification by faith. Genesis 15:6 tells us that, in response to Jehovah's speaking, Abraham "believed Jehovah, and He accounted it to him as righteousness." Abraham reacted to Jehovah's speaking by believing, and Jehovah reacted to Abraham's believing (i.e., his faith) by justifying him. Shortly after quoting this verse in Romans 4:3, Paul declares a profound truth: "But to the one who does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). Elsewhere Paul says, "Knowing that a man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, we also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ" (Gal. 2:16). Here Paul does not say that we have believed into Christ *because* we are justified; he says that we have believed *that* we might be justified. Faith does not simply evince our justification; it causes it. These and other verses (e.g., Rom. 3:26) draw a direct, unambiguous relationship between the believers' faith in Christ and their justification, revealing that, in a real sense, their justification by God issues from and hinges upon their faith in Christ. Their faith in Christ has real efficacy in their justification by God. Although Wright attempts to explain how verses such as these fit into his overarching conception of justification as covenant membership, our frank assessment is

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that he fails to elucidate a most basic matter: justification is uniquely and effectively *by faith*.

Wright's account of justification by faith is further impaired by a deficient understanding of the believers' union with Christ. Wright states on several occasions that justification is "in the Messiah" (e.g., *Paul* 2:831-832, 950-951) and that justification by faith and being in Christ "must not be played off against one another, and indeed they can only be understood in relation to one another" (*Justification* 229). However, Wright's understanding of being in Christ proves hollow, and he thus fails to properly explain what bearing the believers' union with Christ has on their justification. His overwhelming tendency is to explain our being "in Messiah" in terms of our being in the covenant family that is represented and summed up by the Messiah. According to Wright, being "in Christ" means "belonging to the people of the Messiah" (*Pauline Perspectives* 109). God's justifying verdict is pronounced over those who are "in Messiah" in the sense that they are in God's covenant family, "the people-of-God-in-the-Messiah" (*Paul* 2:912). Their membership in this family ostensibly gives God the ground to justify them, thereby rendering His verdict "as to who really is a member of his people" (*Justification* 121). Whereas in our understanding, God justifies the believers because they are in Christ and thus have Him as their righteousness, in Wright's understanding, God justifies the believers because they are in His covenant family.

The errors we have spotlighted in Wright's account of justification are not inconsequential. By construing faith as a badge of covenant membership and reducing the believers' union with Christ to their membership in God's covenant family, Wright effectively hollows out the truth concerning justification by faith in Christ. His account does not leave us with a clear impression that justification is actually by faith. Neither does it leave us with a clear impression that justification is by faith because faith in Christ unites the believers to Christ. Wright's view thus obscures and deflates what the Scriptures clearly and vividly reveal: God's justification of the believers is based upon their union with Christ—the person—as righteousness through their uniting faith. It is only by being joined to Christ by faith that the believers can receive Him as their righteousness, and it is only by receiving Christ as their righteousness that the believers can be approved by God according to His standard of righteousness, which is Christ as the righteousness of God. Remarkably, Wright proffers an ostensibly Pauline view of justification by faith that ignores the salience of the believers' union with Christ through faith. This is tragic, but it is also unsurprising because, if Wright is correct, there seems to be no need at all for a person to be joined to Christ as righteousness in order to be justified. Justification, according to Wright, is "all about being declared to be a member of God's people" (*Paul* 2:856). Moreover, the righteousness

that pertains to justification is not Christ Himself or even His righteousness; it is, rather, a status of covenant membership, a status created by a speech-act of God pronounced over those who are now in His covenant family. This, allegedly, is the righteousness of which Paul speaks in *Philippians* 3:9, which Wright suggests that we read in the following way:

And that I may be discovered in him [Messiah], not having my own covenant status (*dikaioσynē*) defined by Torah but the status (*dikaioσynē*) which comes through the Messiah's faithfulness: the covenant status from God (*tēn ek theou dikaioσynēn*) which is given to faith. (2:831)

On Wright's reading, the righteousness that Paul attained was a covenant status given to him by God through the Messiah's faithfulness; it is this righteousness—not Christ Himself as righteousness—that is relevant to the believers' justification. We reject Wright's misreading of Paul's Epistles, not least because it misrepresents the righteousness relevant to the believers' justification. According to the Scriptures, God demands nothing less than Christ Himself as righteousness for our justification, and He gives us nothing less than Christ as righteousness for our justification when we first believe into Him.

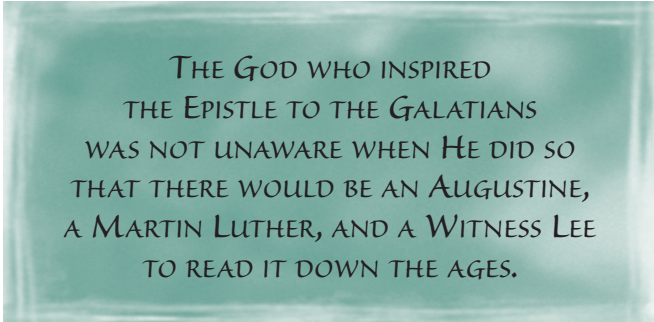
Despite the many flaws in Wright's account of justification, his views have been widely appropriated by biblical scholars and theologians alike. This is explained in part by the fact that Wright offers a novel and more fashionable counterproposal to some of the admittedly underwhelming accounts of justification offered by many of the major Christian traditions today. But the widespread appropriation of his views also relies on the fact that Wright often flaunts his training as a biblical scholar to buffalo his reader into agreeing with him, and this too we must protest. Wright often appeals to a pervasive assumption that only biblical scholars can accurately read the text of the Scriptures because only biblical scholars have the requisite linguistic and cultural training to do so. In a chapter entitled "Rules of Engagement," for instance, Wright foists upon his readers the following principle of interpretation:

In our effort to understand Scripture itself...we are bound to read the New Testament in its own first-century context...This applies at every level—to thought-forms, rhetorical conventions, social context, implicit narratives and so on—but it applies particularly to words, not least to technical terms...

...The more we know about first-century Judaism, about the Greco-Roman world of the day, about archaeology, the Dead Sea Scrolls and so on, the more, in principle, we can be on firm ground in anchoring exegesis that might otherwise remain speculative, and at the mercy of massively anachronistic eisegesis, into the solid historical context where—if we believe in inspired Scripture in the first place—that inspiration occurred. (*Justification* 46-47)

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Because all texts are produced within a particular cultural-linguistic world, Wright argues, we must read them within that cultural-linguistic world if we are to read them rightly. There is some truth in the assumption, of course, and there are many ancient texts that would appear to the modern reader impenetrable in meaning even in English translation. But this impenetrability arises from the fact that these ancient texts are largely captives of their cultural particularity. Not all ancient texts, however, are so captive. Even among the multitude of ancient secular texts, some break through the constraints of their cultural particularity to speak concerning matters of more universal concern, and so, among the plethora of ancient texts, there are some we now call classics and incorporate into precollegiate curricula without concern that the students who read them do not have the purportedly requisite training to do so. The existence of these classics, even among secular writings, tells against Wright's claim that his reading is somehow privileged above the readings of those without similar academic standing.



THE GOD WHO INSPIRED  
THE EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS  
WAS NOT UNAWARE WHEN HE DID SO  
THAT THERE WOULD BE AN AUGUSTINE,  
A MARTIN LUTHER, AND A WITNESS LEE  
TO READ IT DOWN THE AGES.

Surely, someone with a doctoral degree in classical studies will better understand some of the nuance of the Platonic dialogues, and someone with a doctoral degree in the history of Elizabethan England will better understand some of the nuance of Shakespearean drama, but that does not by any stretch entail that these texts are somehow obscure to the untrained who read them. Human thoughts and human words are certainly colored by historical particularity, but the marvel of human thoughts and words is that they are able to transcend that coloring and to communicate meaning to peoples of vastly different circumstances, whether present or future.

And if this is true of merely human words, how much more it must be true of those precious words that the Christian church has always confessed to be not only the words of human beings but the Word of God Himself. The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians is certainly the word of Paul, but it is also the Word of God; it is certainly written to the Galatians, but it is also written to all of God's people spread across both space and time. Paul himself claims without apology that portions of the Old Testament were written for the sake of the New Testament believers: "These things happened to them as an example, and they were written

for our admonition, unto whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11). The inspiration of the Scriptures surely happened in time, as Wright insists above, but Paul claims here that they were inspired not only for those who read them at that time but also for us at the ends of the ages, and surely we are closer to the ends of the ages than even Paul himself was. Wright is thus wrong when he insists that "Scripture... does not exist to give authoritative answers to questions other than those it addresses—not even to the questions which emerged from especially turbulent years such as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (*Justification* 40). The God who inspired the Epistle to the Galatians was not unaware when He did so that there would be an Augustine, a Martin Luther, and a Witness Lee to read it down the ages. If Galatians is, as the church confesses it to be, the Word of God, then it is not only God's Word to the Galatians but also God's Word to all of us who come after them. And if He inspired these words for all of us, He surely crafted them in such a way that they are fully able to convey His meaning to His church without any extraneous materials to supply cultural context. God operated according to His sovereignty to ensure that the sacred writings were preserved, collected, edited, and translated for the sake of His people throughout the earth and throughout the centuries; He did not so operate to ensure that biblical scholars were always on hand to decipher these texts wherever they went. He did not do the latter, because He did not need to. Once the text has been accurately translated, God speaks through it, and to this all the nations, tribes, and tongues can readily testify.

That is not to say, of course, that we do not all stand in need of some to interpret God's Word. God's Word is written to each of us individually but not to each of us alone. It is rather written to the whole church of God, and so each of us stands to benefit from fellowship in the one Body of Christ, whether with those members of the Body on the earth today or with those who have gone before us through the history of biblical interpretation. In every age, God has given gifts to His Body to open up His Word for the building up of His Body, and in the other articles of this issue we have happily acknowledged our great debt to Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others as well. These gifts were not great scholars of Second Temple Judaism and Greco-Roman culture, offering insights from the cultural backgrounds of the world in which the New Testament was produced, but enlightened interpreters of the Scriptures, bringing forth new light and truth from the text of the Scriptures themselves for the building up of the church. These gifts to the Body many have rightly regarded highly (and some too highly). But to these great gifts of the Body, Wright clearly prefers himself, claiming that "the church has indeed taken off at an oblique angle from what Paul had said, so that, yes, ever since the time of Augustine, the discussions about *what has been called* 'justification' have borne a tangled, but ultimately

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only tangential, relation to what Paul was talking about” (*Justification* 80).

Wright constantly tells us that he (sometimes he alone) is simply explaining what Paul really meant, in stark contrast, he claims, to the whole history of biblical interpretation. But the Paul presented to us by Wright—his new perspective on Paul—is decidedly contrary to Paul’s own self-description. Paul understood himself to be “less than the least of all saints” (Eph. 3:8), but he did not blush to say that to him it had been given to “complete the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations but now has been manifested to His saints” (Col. 1:25-26). In contrast to this high view of Paul’s significance, we must say that Wright’s Paul is little more than an agent of Second Temple Judaism. Wright regularly argues that later interpretations of Paul cannot possibly be correct because no one in Paul’s day was thinking about such matters. For instance, he argues, “The worry about the afterlife, and the precise qualifications for it, . . . which have shaped and formed Western readings (both Catholic and Protestant) of the New Testament, do not loom so large in the literature of Paul’s contemporaries” (*Justification* 56). The particular argument about the afterlife is not what concerns us here. What does concern us is the implicit argument that for a reading of Paul to be plausible, it has to fit with the particular concerns of Paul’s cultural circumstances.

This might be true if Paul’s primary commission from God were to solve the conundrums of Second Temple Jewish concern. Perhaps Paul did do so, but only because he unveiled the mystery of *all* the ages, and so a ponderous study of Second Temple Judaism simply cannot be as necessary (or even as helpful) as Wright often insists. Were we to trouble Paul with questions about his cultural circumstances, we suspect he would enjoin us not to pay so much attention to his earthen vessel and to instead pay more attention to the treasure within it (2 Cor. 4:7). Paul urged us to know no one according to the flesh, and if he included in this number even Jesus Christ, he surely would have included himself as well (2 Cor. 5:16). It is thus Wright himself—rather than Augustine, Luther, or Calvin—who has spilled too much ink over matters only tangentially related to what Paul was really talking about. Paul was not a mere agent of Second Temple Judaism but a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1); the justification he proclaimed was not primarily his answer to the temporary problem of how Gentiles were to be brought into the church but his answer to the eternal problem of how human beings are to stand approved before the God of all righteousness. Paul’s justification is not God’s declaration that Gentiles can have table fellowship with Jews apart from Jewish ceremonial law (though they certainly can!); Paul’s justification is God’s approval that the believers whom He has placed in Christ as righteousness now have Christ as their eternal righteousness before

Him. That piece of good news is as relevant to any cultural-linguistic world as it was to the Galatian world, and we wish that Wright would cease his campaign to seize it from all the world and make it captive to one world alone (Campbell et al. 2:278-295).

## Conclusion

Having sifted through a sampling of distinctively modern accounts of justification by faith, we can conclude that these accounts lack anything of real value. There is nothing in them that we can honestly acknowledge as an advance in the understanding of justification by faith. Even worse, there are many things in these accounts that obscure or distort the truth concerning justification by faith; if ingested, such things can frustrate the believers from a proper understanding of this crucial truth. In guarding against the faulty modern accounts of justification propounded by the likes of Tillich and Wright, we do well to heed Paul’s warning to the Colossians not to allow anyone to defraud them (Col. 2:18). In relation to justification by faith specifically, we as believers should not allow anyone to defraud us of Christ as our righteousness, whom we receive for our justification simply by believing into Him (Campbell et al. 2:295).

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# UNION WITH CHRIST THROUGH FAITH FOR JUSTIFICATION: A HISTORICAL PRESENTATION

As we pointed out in the biblical presentation article (3-17 in this issue) and wish to reiterate here, justification is God's accounting Christ as the believers' righteousness because of their faith, that is, their organic union with Him. Through God's infusion of faith into them, the believers are joined to the Christ whom they believe into, and He becomes their righteousness before God (1 Cor. 1:30). Since they are inseparable from Christ as righteousness, God accepts the believers in their organic union with Him and justifies them because they have Him as their righteousness. This intimate relation between the believers' union with Christ through faith and their justification by God is revealed in Galatians 2:16 (among other verses), which says that "we also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ." Commenting on the expression *out of faith in Christ* in his *Life-study of Galatians*, Witness Lee (d. 1997) helpfully explains that "this faith creates an organic union in which we and Christ are one. Therefore, the expression *out of faith in Christ* actually denotes an organic union accomplished by believing in Christ" (1:69). He continues by emphasizing that the believers' organic union with Christ as righteousness is the basis of their justification by God:

How could Christ be our righteousness if we were not organically united to Him? It is by means of our organic union with Christ that God can reckon Christ as our righteousness. Because we and Christ are one, whatever belongs to Him is ours. This is the basis upon which God counts Christ as our righteousness. (1:70)

Given the importance of the believers' union with Christ for their justification by God, we wish to let our readers hear from select theologians who have recognized this importance, albeit to varying degrees, in their own accounts of justification. While the quotations below are spread throughout the tradition-specific chapters of *Challenging the Traditional Interpretations of Justification by Faith* (and some appear elsewhere in this issue), we felt compelled to gather them together here to highlight the range of theologians across the centuries who have given considered attention to union with Christ as it relates to justification, sometimes against the grain of their own theological traditions. Whatever the

limitations of their respective understandings of justification may be, we find their emphasis on union with Christ commendable, especially in light of how often this union has been ignored or slighted in the numerous notions of justification offered throughout the history of Christian thought. We expect that these quotations from this cloud of witnesses will greatly strengthen those who are already convinced that the believers are justified by their union with Christ and by this union alone. Moreover, we hope that these quotations will prod those who are not yet convinced to reconsider this foundational truth.

## Union in the Medieval West

The patristic writers often connected faith with justification and often connected faith with the believer's union with Christ but did not often connect justification and union directly. During the medieval period, the connection between union and justification became much more prominent. Before we turn to the medieval writers, we should note that for most if not all of them faith is not the only thing required for union with Christ in justification. Love also is required. In many of the quotations below, faith and love (or charity), loving faith, faith formed by love, or faith operating through love are identified as what unites the believers to Christ for justification. As we indicated in the Patristic through Luther article (18-33 in this issue), it is a great mistake to suggest that justification is obtained by faith *and* love rather than by faith alone. But because our primary task in this section is to trace the medieval understanding of the relationship between union with Christ and justification, we will pass over an evaluation of the view that love justifies and trust that our reader will not interpret this silence as an implicit affirmation.

The connection between union and justification appears repeatedly in Bernard of Clairvaux's (d. 1153) sermons on the Song of Songs, a book that he reads as an allegory of the believer's union with Christ. One of the benefits of salvation that the believers receive by virtue of their union with Christ, Bernard says, is their justification in Him: "It was to unite them with Himself that He was Himself made sin,



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who did no sin, that the body of sin might be destroyed in which sinners had once been incorporated, and that they might become righteousness in Him, being justified freely by His grace" (*LWSB* 4:439). No sin, Bernard argues, is so great that it cannot be covered by the merits of Christ of whose Body we are members:

Thus it plainly appears how greatly that man erred who said, "My iniquity is greater than I can bear" (Gen. iv. 13). Except that he was not among the members of Christ, nor did the merits of Christ pertain to him, so that he could have a dependence upon them, or say, as a member asserting an interest in that which belongs to His Head, that they were his. (4:367-368)

In the thirteenth century, Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) insisted that no works of any kind can justify us because works do not in any sense unite us to Christ. Faith is what unites us to Christ, and therefore it is faith alone that justifies:

By works of law no one at any time is justified or can be justified, for He justifies only the faith of Christ whether before the law, under the law, or in the time of grace. For only the passion of the Son of God in the assumed flesh was able to satisfy for the sin of the human race...

Since, therefore, this offering alone is able to be satisfaction for sin, no one is rightly absolved from sin unless so united to this offering and this sacrifice, so that he is one with Him, offering the same sacrifice in that offering. This union, moreover, cannot be except through loving faith in this offering and sacrifice; through which faith all who are united with Him are one Christ...Therefore no works of law, nor even other works, namely moral, justify a sinner. (*CCCM* 130:62-64)

In the fifteenth century, Jean Gerson (d. 1429) argued that the grace of justification is given through Christ to those "incorporated into Him":

God does not give and will not give grace to anyone except through the medium of the Mediator of God and man, which grace He merited for everyone in sufficient measure, but only in efficacious measure for those incorporated into Him either through the virtue of faith, as in the case of children, or through both the acts and the virtue of faith which operates steadfastly through love. (*JGO* 9:196-197)

Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) teaches perhaps more clearly and consistently than any other medieval writer that justification is by faith because faith brings the believer into union with Christ as righteousness:

Abraham was *just*, because God's justice was in him. Christ is the true Justice that justifies everyone who is just. Thus, in every believer who is justified by faith it is necessary that Christ be present, who alone is the justification of those who are just. This justification is received when one takes account of the merit of the suffering by

means of which when [Christ] obeyed the Father He merited eternal life for all those who accept Him by faith. Because they believe Christ, Christ makes them to be sharers of the merit of Him who justifies everyone who is justified. (190)

The theme continues well into the sixteenth century. Luther often quotes Bernard on union with Christ, but he would have just as easily encountered the theme in Johann von Staupitz (d. 1524), his mentor and superior among the Augustinian friars in Erfurt. Staupitz affirms that in justification the merits of Christ are transferred to the believers by virtue of their union with Christ:

The contract between Christ and the Church is consummated thus: "I accept you as Mine, I accept you as My concern, I accept you into Myself." And conversely the Church, or the soul, says to Christ, "I accept You as mine, You are my concern, I accept You into myself." In other words Christ says, "The Christian is My possession, the Christian is My concern, the Christian is I"; so the spouse responds, "Christ is my possession, Christ is my concern, Christ is I." (Oberman 187)

For the medieval writers discussed in this section, justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins executed at a distance in a court of law. Rather, God justifies because He sees Christ in the believers and because He sees them in Christ. He justifies the believers because, as Grosseteste suggests above, He sees them in and together with Christ as "one Christ," one corporate Christ sharing all that He is, has, and has done. The medieval church witnessed many regrettable developments (see pages 21-24 in the Patristic through Luther article of this issue), but that history should not discount the fact that many medieval writers saw that justification is by faith because faith brings the believers into union with Christ (Campbell et al. 1:157-163).

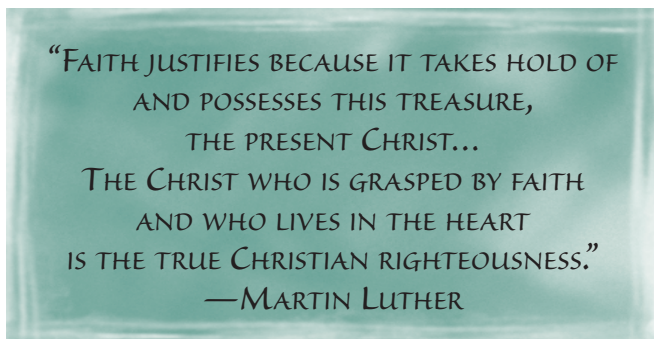
### Union in the Lutheran Tradition

At least on occasion, the medieval theme of justification by union with Christ appears in the writings of Martin Luther (d. 1546): "Faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ...The Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life" (*LW* 26:129-130). But Luther was ultimately convinced that justification is by extrinsic imputation rather than by inward union with Christ. Andreas Osiander (d. 1552) picked up the theme of justification by union and fought vigorously for it, but his teaching was ultimately condemned in the Formula of Concord of 1577. Post-Concord Lutherans did not stop talking about union with Christ, but the Formula of Concord resulted in a general suspicion among Lutherans of basing justification on union with Christ. The Formula of Concord identifies divine indwelling as a result, not the basis, of justification, and many Lutherans have taken this to imply that

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union with Christ is likewise a result of justification and not its basis.

Despite the predominantly forensic character of justification as understood and taught in the Lutheran tradition, prominent Lutheran theologians have on occasion emphasized the importance of union with Christ for justification, and we present a sampling of these authors in this section. We should note, though, that even for the writers here cited, union does not play a prominent role in justification in most cases. These passages generally represent flashes of insight that do not bear much weight in the larger accounts of justification offered by these theologians, and these passages are often explicitly contradicted by other statements made by the same authors. While the light of the truth occasionally breaks forth in the writings of some Lutheran theologians, union with Christ has never displaced the more common ways of thinking about justification by faith in a distinctively Lutheran way.



We begin with one of the most respected and authoritative representatives of the entire Lutheran tradition—Johann Gerhard (d. 1637). Gerhard's account of justification is classically forensic, but even he affirms on occasion the importance of union with Christ for justification:

Just as divine and human things are predicated about Christ because of the personal union of the two natures in Christ, so also through the spiritual union God and the faithful soul, and Christ and the Church, become one mystical thing, "one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17), about which both human and divine things are predicated...

Through this mystical exchange, Christ transfers our sins to Himself and grants His righteousness to us through faith. "He became sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). This is not a bare and verbal predication but a most effective and, so to speak, most real imputation. Christ took our sins into Himself (Isa. 53:12; John 1:29; 1 Pet. 2:24)...In turn, Christ grants His righteousness to believers, and the heavenly Father imputes it to believers (Rom. 4:5), on account of which they are called "righteousness," that is, perfectly righteous in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). (E4:187)

Statius Buscher (d. 1641) likewise understands union with

Christ to be central to justification. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Buscher argues that the believers' union with the Triune God in Christ is the basis of the believers' justification rather than its effect:

Through and on account of this union [with Christ], God attributes to Himself what is of man, and the believing man attributes to himself what is of God. Thus, God attributes to Himself our sin in Christ "who was made sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21)...So also, through the same union, man attributes to himself what is of God: the righteousness of Christ. (461-463)

Wilhelm Leyser (d. 1649) has an even stronger account of union as the basis of justification:

For through faith Christ unites and joins that person to Himself, and that person thus gains Christ, and Christ is made the believer's. And in this way he has the righteousness of Christ, not indeed from himself originatively, not through himself essentially, not in himself subjectively, but nevertheless in such a way that the perfection of Christ is communicated to us through imputation and our cohesion with Christ. (1559)

This is not merely an occasional statement of Leyser; union with Christ plays a major role in his account of justification. At the beginning of his section on imputation, Leyser lists eight propositions that constitute the essence of his understanding of imputation, the seventh of which reads: "The basis [of imputation] is the present union with the Mediator through faith" (1545).

Jesper Brochmand (d. 1652), one of the most important Danish Lutheran theologians, urges his reader not to understand justification in a purely external way:

We ought to most diligently avoid thinking that by the righteousness of Christ imputed to us we are made righteous by nothing more than a certain external denomination. Since we, who acquire our righteousness from Christ by faith, are united with Christ in a way more intimate than we are with ourselves. (2:180)

David Hollaz (d. 1713), the eminent Lutheran orthodox theologian, maintains the standard position that mystical union is an effect of justification, but he is at least willing to concede some kind of union in justification itself, speaking of a "formal union of faith":

Although mystical union, by which God inhabits the soul as in a temple, comes after justification in the order of nature according to our way of understanding; nevertheless, it ought to be confessed that the formal union of faith, by which Christ is apprehended, put on, and united with us as the mediator and procuring source of grace and the forgiveness of sins, is prior to justification...See Rom. 8:1: "There is no condemnation for those who are

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in Christ Jesus.” The righteousness of Christ is the chief spiritual benefit accounted to the believers who are most closely united with Him, who are found to be just as members in Him (Phil. 3:9). (933)

Hollaz is convinced that the Scriptures teach a union with Christ preceding justification as its basis. In his attempt to be faithful both to the Lutheran tradition and to the Scriptures, Hollaz coined a new term, identifying a “formal union of faith” as the basis of justification, a distinct union from the mystical union that follows justification.

Union with Christ can also be found in a number of nineteenth-century Lutheran theologians. Ernst Wilhelm Christian Sartorius (d. 1859) argues that the righteousness of Christ becomes the believers’ through their union with Him:

As appropriating (as putting on, Gal. iii. 27) Christ, justification places the sinner in the closest communion with Him, and receives him into the fellowship of His sufferings, as well as into the glory that is to follow...As what was ours became His—for He bore our sins and shame—so does what is His—His righteousness and glory—becomes ours, for He is Himself ours, has united Himself with us as the head with the members. (CFTL n.s.18:227-228)

Union was likewise important for justification according to Fredrik Hedberg (d. 1893), one of the most important Christian leaders and writers in the history of Finland:

For me to be righteous before God, then, Christ and I must become united in the most intimate manner, so that He lives in me and I in Him. It follows that, if you separate yourself and Christ, you are already under the Law and you are no longer living in Christ.

Christ has loved His Church, and has given Himself for it so that we would become united with Him into one body, own Him completely and have for ourselves everything that He has. (109)

In the twentieth century also, some Lutheran theologians continued to appeal to union with Christ in their accounts of justification. Wolfhart Pannenberg (d. 2014) is a good example:

Ecstatic fellowship with Christ, to whom believers entrust themselves, forms the basis of Luther’s understanding of justification. He starts here with his view of the act of faith that takes believers out of themselves and sets them in Christ...Luther stated in his Galatians lectures, with reference to the basis of the Pauline thesis that we are righteous by faith in Christ (Gal. 2:16), that those who believe in Christ are one with him by faith. (3:215-216)

Finally, Carl Braaten (d. 2023) has perhaps the strongest account of union in justification among recent Lutheran theologians:

Those are justified who are in Christ, and those are condemned who are in Adam. The question whether they are in Christ because they are justified, or whether they are justified because they are in Christ, would have no meaning for Luther. Christ *is* our justification. He *is* our righteousness. Justification is not a transaction going on between God in heaven and the individual on earth *on the condition* that the individual first does some necessary things as a result of which he or she acquires the righteousness of Christ. Christ is not a means to justification, nor is justification a means to Christ. They are one and the same—objectively. Justification is by Christ alone. (23)

We should emphasize again that these attestations to the importance of union with Christ in justification, significant though they are, do not represent a prevalent tendency in the Lutheran tradition. They do not even represent a prevalent tendency in most of the authors quoted in this section. It is worth noting, in addition, that in many of the passages quoted in this section, Luther is explicitly mentioned either in the quotation itself or in the near context. Lutheran accounts of justification, in other words, are more likely to feature union with Christ the more closely they attend to the writings of Luther. The light that Luther received thus continues to flicker here and there in the Lutheran tradition. The fact that it did not more thoroughly penetrate the teaching of Luther’s followers is one of the great tragedies in the history of the church’s teaching concerning justification by faith. At least one younger Lutheran theologian has urged his tradition to restore union with Christ to its rightful position at the center of the Lutheran understanding of justification (Cooper *Union*). We can only hope that these efforts will bear fruit in the years to come (Campbell et al. 2:34-41).

### Union in the Reformed Tradition

Countless Reformed theologians from the Reformation period onward have contended that faith ushers the believers into a mystical union with Christ and that this mystical union is necessary for the believers’ justification, for it is only by being mystically united with Christ through faith that the believers can receive the benefit of Christ’s righteousness and thereby be justified by God. This prominent notion in Reformed theology—that justification is dependent on mystical union with Christ—is clearly expressed in the following quotations, selected from the writings of notable Reformed theologians and representative of the general understanding within the Reformed tradition.

The pioneering Reformed theologian John Calvin (d. 1564) argues in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that all the benefits of salvation issue from union with Christ and indicates that Christ dwelling within the believers is a prerequisite for salvation:

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he

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has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. (1:537)

In a later portion of his *Institutes*, Calvin identifies the believers' union with Christ as a mystical union and highlights its importance in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believers:

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him. (1:737)

To Calvin, any benefit of Christ to be enjoyed by the believers in Christ, whether justification, regeneration, or any other aspect of God's salvation, must of necessity come through faith and union with Christ. Thus, Calvin asserts that such a union is accorded "the highest degree of importance."

In his *Confession of Christian Religion*, the Reformed scholastic Girolamo Zanchi (d. 1590) stresses that salvation and eternal life are in Christ alone; hence, it is only by being joined and united with Christ that believers can partake of salvation and eternal life. Zanchi describes the "true and real" nature of this union in this way:

For even as the branch can draw no lively sap from the vine, nor the bough from the tree, nor the members any motion, sense, or life from the head, unless they be joined to the vine and tree and these to the head; even so cannot men receive any salvation or life from Christ (in whom only it consisteth), unless they be grafted into him and coupled in a true and real union and being coupled do abide in him. (1:233)

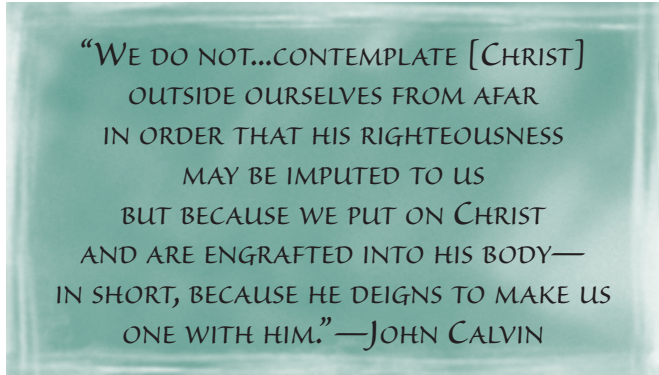
Like Zanchi, the Reformed scholastic Francis Turretin (d. 1687) treats the believers' mystical union with Christ as essential to their participation in all the benefits of salvation. In one of his richer descriptions of the believers' mystical union with Christ, Turretin writes:

The nature of the union of believers with Christ (as of the members with the head)...is not only intimate and most strict intensively, but also incapable of being dissolved (*adialytos*) extensively and of perpetual duration. Thus nothing can break the bond, or separate us from him (Rom. 8:38) because "he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit with him" (1 Cor. 6:17) and from him has not only an influx of regenerating grace, but also of strengthening

and preserving grace...And as from the natural body of Christ now glorified it is impossible that one member can be torn away, thus from his mystical body no believer can be torn away. Hence believers planted in Christ by true faith may be said both as to the past to have now passed from death to life, and as to the present to have eternal life, and as to the future that they will not come into condemnation, nor will they perish forever (Jn. 5:24; 10:28). (2:600)

Turretin's conception of union with Christ is closely related to his conception of justifying faith. He describes the "formal and principal act" of faith as

the act of reception of Christ or of adhesion and union, by which we not only seek Christ through a desire of the soul and fly to him, but apprehend and receive him offered, embrace him found, apply him to ourselves and adhere to and unite ourselves to him...And because the soul thus apprehending Christ reclines upon him and rests upon him and cleaves to him, faith is also sometimes described



"WE DO NOT...CONTEMPLATE [CHRIST] OUTSIDE OURSELVES FROM AFAR IN ORDER THAT HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS MAY BE IMPUTED TO US BUT BECAUSE WE PUT ON CHRIST AND ARE ENGRAFTED INTO HIS BODY— IN SHORT, BECAUSE HE DEIGNS TO MAKE US ONE WITH HIM."—JOHN CALVIN

as an act of "reclining" (Ps. 71:5; Is. 10:20; 48:2; 50:10; Mic. 3:11); as also an act of adhesion and binding closely, and of the most strict union by which we are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh and one with him; and Christ himself dwells in us (Eph. 3:17) and we in him (Jn. 15:5). From this union of persons arises the participation in the blessings of Christ, to which (by union with him) we acquire a right (to wit, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification). (2:562-563)

The principal act of faith, then, is to receive Christ and to unite us to Christ such that He dwells in us and we dwell in Him. All the blessings of salvation, including justification, flow out of this union with Christ, which is realized in the principal act of justifying faith.

In his treatise *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, the Puritan theologian John Owen (d. 1683) understands the mystical union between the believers and Christ to be the basis upon which the sins of the believers are imputed to Christ and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believers; thus, the union is logically, though not temporally, prior to imputation. The nature of that union is both

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spiritual and, we may say, personal; that is, it is a union in which the Holy Spirit joins the believers to Christ in order to make them one mystical person, the Head with the Body:

The principal foundation hereof is,—that *Christ and the church*, in this design, were one *mystical person*; which state they do actually coalesce into, through the *uniting efficacy* of the Holy Spirit. He is the head, and believers are the members of that one person, as the apostle declares, 1 Cor. xii. 12, 13. Hence, as what he did is imputed unto them, as if done by them; so what they deserved on the account of sin was charged upon him. (WJO 5:176)

The foundation of the *imputation* asserted is union. Hereof there are many grounds and causes, as hath been declared; but that which we have immediate respect unto, as the foundation of this imputation, is that whereby the Lord Christ and believers do actually *coalesce into one mystical person*. This is by the Holy Spirit inhabiting in him as the head of the church in all fulness, and in all believers according to their measure, whereby they become members of his mystical body. That there is such a union between Christ and believers is the faith of the catholic church, and hath been so in all ages. (5:209)

The Scottish Presbyterian theologian Thomas Boston (d. 1732) continues the emphasis on union with Christ and its relation to justification as exemplified in the Puritan tradition. He observes that it is by faith that the believer receives Christ Himself and that the soul of the believer is thus “married to Christ”:

Faith unites us to Christ in the way of the spiritual marriage-covenant, Eph. ii. 17. Being united to him, we have a communion with him in all the benefits of his purchase, and so in his righteousness, which is one of the chief of them. He himself is ours by faith; and so all that is his is ours for our good. This union being most real, the communion is so too...Not that faith is our righteousness; for our righteousness is not our faith, but we get it by faith, Phil. iii. 9. We are justified by it instrumentally, as we say one is enriched by a marriage, when by it he gets what makes him rich. So that faith is that whereby the soul is married to Christ; and being married to him, has communion with him in his righteousness, which justifies the person before God. (WWTB 1:597-598)

As Boston sees it, the believer has the righteousness of Christ because he or she has Christ Himself by faith. He further relates that it is when the believer has Christ through union with Him that the righteousness of Christ is then imputed to the believer:

For a believer is by faith united to Christ. Having this union with him, we have a communion with him in his righteousness, which is ours, since we are one with him, and being ours, must be imputed to us, or reckoned ours on the most solid ground. (1:551-552)

Having Christ with His righteousness in reality through union

with Him, the righteousness of Christ is then imputed to the believer for his or her justification.

In his *Systematic Theology*, the Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge (d. 1878) counters the argument that justification consists only of pardon from sin and highlights the vitality of the mystical union that makes the believers so one with Christ that they partake of His life, participate in His experiences, and are, within their measure, what He is:

The theory which reduces justification to pardon and its consequences, is inconsistent with what is revealed concerning our union with Christ. That union is mystical, supernatural, representative, and vital. We were in Him before the foundation of the world (Eph. i. 4); we are in Him as we were in Adam (Rom. v. 12, 21; 1 Cor. xv. 22); we are in Him as the members of the body are in the head (Eph. i. 23, iv. 16; 1 Cor. xii. 12, 27, and often); we are in Him as the branches are in the vine (John xv. 1-12). We are in Him in such a sense that his death is our death, we were crucified with Him (Gal. ii. 20; Rom. vi. 1-8); we are so united with Him that we rose with Him, and sit with Him in heavenly places. (Eph. ii. 1-6.) In virtue of this union we are (in our measure) what He is. We are the sons of God in Him. And what He did, we did. His righteousness is our righteousness. His life is our life. His exaltation is our exaltation. (3:127)

Hodge thus places great stress on the crucial role of union in justification.

The Dutch American Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof (d. 1957) offers a clear and crisp characterization of the believers’ mystical union with Christ in his *Systematic Theology*. While acknowledging that, in Reformed theology, the term *mystical union* sometimes encompasses all aspects of the believers’ union with Christ, Berkhof indicates that the term refers more pointedly to the subjective union of life between Christ and the believers that is realized by the Spirit’s operation. He defines this union as “that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation” (449). Berkhof identifies six main characteristics of the believers’ subjective union with Christ: it is an “organic union,” a “vital union,” a “union mediated by the Holy Spirit,” a “union that implies reciprocal action,” a “personal union,” and a “transforming union” (450-451). Concerning the organic character of the believers’ union with Christ, Berkhof remarks that “Christ and the believers form one body” and references John 15:5 and Ephesians 4:15-16, among other verses, as support. Concerning the vital characteristic of this union, Berkhof explains that “Christ is the vitalizing and dominating principle of the whole body of believers” and that it is “the life of Christ that indwells and animates believers.” Like many of his Reformed forebears, Berkhof maintains that the believers’ mystical union with Christ “logically precedes” their justification by faith, for the believers are justified “only in Christ” (450).

The Reformed tradition has largely remained consistent in recognizing that the benefits of salvation, including justification by faith, flow to the believers by means of their mystical union with Christ. As we have shown, some of the most authoritative Reformed theologians describe the believers' mystical union with Christ as real, not metaphorical; spiritual, not material; supernatural, not natural; and even vital, that is, a union in and of life. They rightly argue that apart from such a living and real union with Christ there can be no justification. This rich understanding of the mystical union with Christ that undergirds justification is, in our estimation, the Reformed tradition's primary contribution to the discussion of justification by faith. Despite their positive emphasis on the believers' union with Christ, however, the Reformed err by treating this union as insufficient for the believers' justification (see the Reformed article [44-50 in this issue]). They wrongly claim that justification demands something beyond union with Christ—namely, Christ's imputed obedience to the law (Campbell et al. 2:79-105).

### Union in the Roman Catholic Tradition

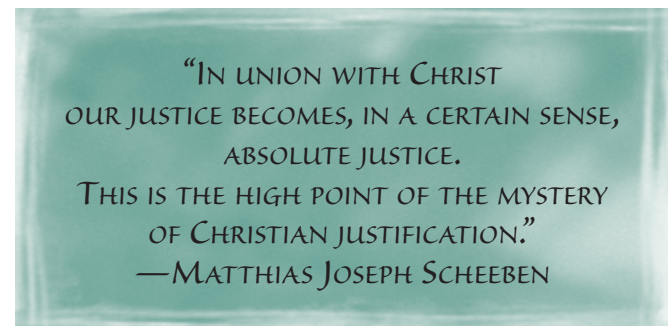
As we point out in the Roman Catholic article (54-62 in this issue), union features prominently in the writings of several Catholic theologians writing before and during the Council of Trent (1545-1563), and many wanted union to play a central role in the definition of justification at the Council. According to Gasparo Contarini (d. 1542), "With the Spirit of Christ, [the Father] gives us Christ Himself and freely, out of His mercy, makes all of His righteousness ours and imputes it to us who have put on Christ" (CC 7:27). According to Girolamo Seripando (d. 1563), "We are designated righteous because we are something of Christ, namely His members, participants in the righteousness of Him who alone is righteous truly and simply" (CT 12:669). Perhaps the strongest among the pre-Tridentine Catholic writers is Albert Pighius (d. 1542):

In Him, therefore, we are justified before God, not in ourselves—not by our but by His righteousness, which is imputed to us who now commune with Him. Destitute of any righteousness of our own, we are taught to seek a righteousness beyond ourselves in Him. He, it is said, who knew no sin, for us was made sin—that is, a sacrifice for the expiation of sin—so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. We are made righteous in Christ, not by our own but by the righteousness of God. By what right?...by being grafted into, cemented together with (*conglutinatis*), and united with Christ...Just as Jacob, although he was not the firstborn, hidden within the garment of his brother and having clothed himself with a blanket that breathed of noble scent, snuck himself in before his father and so received the blessing of the firstborn within an alien person. So also, it is necessary for us, within Christ, the Father's firstborn, to hide in precious purity, to smell of His good odor, of His perfection, to bury and conceal our vice as well; to thus throw ourselves

on the affection of the Father so as to acquire from Him the blessing of righteousness. (48-49)

In contrast to the "double righteousness" championed by these authors—in which the believers are justified by an infusion of righteous virtue and by union with Christ—the Council of Trent regrettably decided that an inherent righteousness infused into the believers suffices for their justification without any reference to their union with Christ. According to the authoritative teaching of Trent, the "single formal cause" of justification is "the justice that we have as a gift from him and by which we are spiritually renewed" (Denzinger §1529).

While this rejection of "double righteousness" resulted in a general wariness of appealing to union with Christ for justification among Catholic theologians after the Council of Trent, a close connection between union and justification



can still be found in some of the most prominent post-Tridentine Catholic theologians. Francisco Suárez (d. 1617), arguably the most significant representative of early modern Catholic theology, argues that even though the believers are justified through inherent gifts of grace, these inherent gifts are infused into them so that they might be brought into union with Christ:

Although men who are justified through Christ are pleasing to God on account of intrinsic gifts, insofar as they participate in these [gifts] so that through them they are united in a special way to Christ—who is loved by the Father in a nobler and singular way—they too are more pleasing to the Father. (FSO 10:119)

Suárez affirms the standard (and mistaken) idea that the believers are justified by the infusion of love and other virtues ("intrinsic gifts") and are thus rendered pleasing to God. But he insists here that the believers are made "more pleasing" to the Father by their union with Christ secured through those same intrinsic gifts. In their union with Christ—the Father's Beloved—the believers become more pleasing to the Father than they are merely by virtue of the intrinsic gifts infused for that union. Suárez's condensed argument would later be made much more extensively by Matthias Joseph Scheeben (d. 1888).

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Scheeben, often identified as one of the most preeminent nineteenth-century Catholic theologians, provides perhaps the best account of union's role in justification available in the Catholic tradition. Scheeben, like all post-Tridentine Catholic theologians, argues that the righteousness infused into the believers in baptism or penance suffices in and of itself for justification. But Scheeben is convinced that this is far too short an account of justification. In a section called "High Point of Christian Justice" in his influential *The Mysteries of Christianity*, Scheeben argues that the righteousness infused into the believers in their justification is supplemented and, indeed, far overshadowed by the righteousness that they obtain in virtue of their union with Christ. His account is worth quoting at length:

Thus described [i.e., as an infusion of righteousness], the mysterious nature of Christian justification and of the state it engenders might appear to have reached the peak of its perfection. But in line with the doctrine we have previously set forth, concerning the significance of the Incarnation and its relations to grace, we must add, for a complete clarification of the specifically Christian character of justification, that we are justified not only by regeneration, but by our incorporation into the God-man as His members. Justification makes us living members of Christ's body, and justifying grace flows into us from this source. But as living members of Christ we have a higher dignity, a greater sanctity, and a more glorious power of pleasing God, our real union with the God-man must also invest the justice we receive through the grace of Christ with a greater power and a higher value.

Because God beholds His only-begotten Son linked to us in living union, He can no longer look upon our sin, any more than He can perceive His own Son separated from Him thereby. Further, because God's only-begotten Son Himself lives in us, His members, we are enabled to do more than render honor to the infinite Majesty of God in our feeble human way. We can do so perfectly, as far as this is possible at all, seeing that in union with Christ we offer to the divine Majesty a glory corresponding to His greatness. In union with Christ our justice becomes, in a certain sense, absolute justice.

This is the high point of the mystery of Christian justification. This is the point at which the organism established in mankind by the Incarnation reaches its summit here on earth. (625)

While John Henry Newman's (d. 1890) *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* was first published prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Newman published the final edition of the work nearly thirty years after his conversion, assuring his reader, "Unless the Author held in substance in 1874 what he published in 1838, he would not at this time be reprinting what he wrote as an Anglican" (ix). The basic thesis of his series of lectures is admirably and simply stated:

Christ then is our Righteousness by dwelling in us by the Spirit: He justifies us by entering into us, He continues

to justify us by remaining in us. *This* is really and truly our justification, not faith, not holiness, not (much less) a mere imputation; but through God's mercy, the very Presence of Christ. (150)

The light that justification is secured by union with Christ has thus never been fully extinguished in the Catholic tradition. It shines with particular brightness in a number of post-Tridentine theologians. We suspect that these and similar accounts of justification are little more than a revival of the "double righteousness" account rejected at the Council of Trent and thus that these accounts are more likely to be freshly condemned than to be fully embraced. Even if they were embraced, the Catholic view of justification would still fall short of the truth as we understand it, for as we have repeatedly stressed, union with Christ suffices for justification without the infusion of righteousness. Still, we happily commend these Catholic theologians who identify union with Christ as central in justification, and we thank the Lord that the light of the truth continues to shine forth even in the tradition that rejected the truth of justification as recovered by Martin Luther (Campbell et al. 2:131-136, 155-163).

### Union in the Anglican Tradition

Anglican theologians have varied views of the role of union in justification by faith. Many Anglicans of the Reformed persuasion (see p. 65 in this issue) have a high appreciation for union with Christ in justification, and this should come as no surprise. As seen earlier, the Reformed have one of the highest estimations of union with Christ in justification among all the Christian traditions. What might be more surprising, as we will see later in this section, is that some Anglicans outside the Reformed tradition likewise have much to say regarding union in justification.

We begin with several Reformed Anglicans who emphasize the need of union in justification by faith while espousing a typically Reformed understanding of the topic. In *A Learned Discourse on Justification*, Richard Hooker (d. 1600) writes:

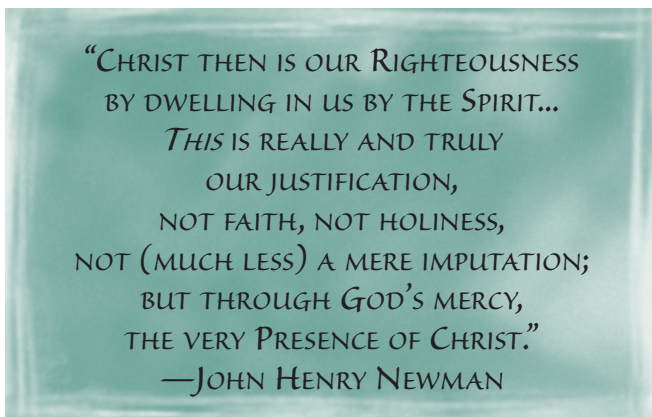
The righteousness wherein we must be found if we will be justified, is not our own, therefore we cannot be justified by any inherent quality. Christ hath merited righteousness for as many as are *found in him*. In him God findeth us if we be faithful for by faith we are incorporated into him. (FLE 5:112)

John Davenant (d. 1641) employs the language of imputation, but he stresses that it is not the imputation of Christ's righteousness alone that justifies a believer. According to Davenant, God "regards all who believe and are united into one person with Christ, as become truly partakers of his righteousness and obedience" (1:177). Later in the same work Davenant says:

For we do not suppose that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, as we are considered out of Christ, or dis-united from Christ our head, but considered as incorporated into him, and members under him as our head. (1:244-245)

The Apostle here [in Phil. 3:9] teaches what that righteousness is, upon which we must rely before God; namely that which is apprehended by faith. But this is imputed righteousness. He also shews the cause why it is made *ours* by right; namely, because we are Christ's, and are found in Christ. Because then we are engrafted into his body, and are united with him into one person, therefore his righteousness is reckoned *ours*. (1:246)

While continuing to use the language of imputation in his work *The Two Covenants*, Ezekiel Hopkins (d. 1690) notes that Christ's righteousness becomes the believers' through faith, a faith that is a "Bond of that Mystical Union" between Christ and His believers (*WEH* 2:212). This union makes the believers and the Lord one spirit. Furthermore, this union is so close that, in a sense, the church is called Christ:



Now if we can but apprehend how faith makes the righteousness of Christ to be ours, it will be very easy and obvious to apprehend the way and manner how we are justified.

To clear up this, therefore, faith makes the righteousness of Christ's satisfaction and obedience to be ours, as it is the Bond of that Mystical Union, that there is between Christ and the believing soul.

If Christ and the believer be one, the righteousness of Christ may well be reckoned as the righteousness of the believer. Nay, mutual imputation flows from mystical union: the sins of believers are imputed to Christ, and the righteousness of Christ to them; and both justly, because being united each to other by mutual consent (which consent on our part is faith) God considers them but as one person. As it is in marriage, the husband stands liable to the wife's debts, and the wife stands interested in the husband's possessions; so it is here: faith is the marriage-band and tie between Christ and a believer; and, therefore, all the debts of a believer are chargeable upon Christ, and the righteousness of Christ is instated upon

the believer: so that, upon the account of this marriage-union, he hath a legal right and title to the purchase made by it. Indeed this union is a high and inscrutable mystery; yet plain it is, that there is such close, spiritual, and real union between Christ and a believer: the Scripture often both expressly affirms it, 1 Cor. vi. 17; "He, that is joined unto the Lord, is one spirit"; and also lively illustrates it by several resemblances. It is likewise plain, that the band of this union, on the believer's part, is faith: consult Rom. chap. xi. ver. 17, compared with the 20th verse. And, therefore, from the nearness of this union, there follows a communication of interests and concerns: insomuch, that the Church is called Christ, 1 Cor. xii. 12; "So also is Christ." (2:212-213)

Interestingly, the idea of union in the believers' justification was a hallmark of not only Reformed Anglicans' understanding but also that of many Anglo-Catholics (on this designation, see p. 65 in this issue), one of whom was John Henry Newman. Newman saw union not merely as a factor in justification but as the essence of justification itself:

Christ then is our Righteousness by dwelling in us by the Spirit: He justifies us by entering into us, He continues to justify us by remaining in us. *This* is really and truly our justification, not faith, not holiness, not (much less) a mere imputation; but through God's mercy, the very Presence of Christ. (150)

Now, turning to the gospel we shall find that such a gift is actually promised to us by our Lord; a gift which must of necessity be at once our justification and our sanctification, for it is nothing short of the indwelling in us of God the Father and the Word Incarnate through the Holy Ghost. If this be so, we have found what we sought: *This* is to be justified, to receive the Divine Presence within us, and be made a Temple of the Holy Ghost. (144)

*This*, I repeat, is our justification, our ascent through Christ to God, or God's descent through Christ to us; we may call it either of the two; we ascend into Him, He descends into us; we are in Him, He in us; Christ being the One Mediator, the way, the truth, and the life, joining earth with heaven. And this is our true Righteousness,—not the mere name of righteousness, not only forgiveness or favour as an act of the Divine Mind, not only sanctification within (great indeed as these blessings would be, yet it is somewhat more),—it implies the one, it involves the other, it is the indwelling of our glorified Lord. (219)

More recently, Thomas Holtzen (1968-) has argued that union is crucial in the understanding of justification:

In speaking of justification through union with Christ by the Spirit, no attempt is being made to displace the Reformation slogans nor is any attempt being made to substitute it for any other official Church teaching, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. Rather, in speaking of justification through union with Christ by the Spirit what



is being argued is that justification cannot be abstracted as the theological idea apart from salvation “in Christ” as though one could understand justification through a forensic or transformative metaphor apart from the living Christ. Such an abstraction can only lead to a stale theology that does not seriously consider the human being as one who is ever before God and in relation to God. Justification cannot be described apart from the divine-human relationship that exists “in Christ.” (4)

These quotations in no way demonstrate an official Anglican position on the subject. However, they do demonstrate that the idea of justification through union with Christ remains alive up to the present in Anglican theology (Campbell et al. 2:194-200).

### Union in the Plymouth Brethren Tradition

The Plymouth Brethren, although numerically less prominent among the traditions considered in this issue of *A&C*, greatly advanced beyond the understanding of justification in those traditions. Brethren thought on this subject was, in large part, shaped by John Nelson Darby (d. 1882). Darby disagreed with the imputation of Christ’s active righteousness, a hallmark of Reformed teaching, because the idea depends upon the fulfillment of the law for justification as opposed to the believer being in Christ. The law, Darby argues, is related to the old man, whom God set aside. Now the believer is not in the old man, who is finished, but in the new man, the “second Adam,” Christ:

It is an entire setting aside the old man, his whole condition and existence before God, by which we get our place before God: not a keeping the law for the old man. Then you must keep him alive. God forbid! I live by the second Adam only, with whom I have been crucified: nevertheless live not I, but Christ in me. But then, in the new man I am not under law, so there is no question of fulfilling it for me, because I am already accepted and have life. There can be no Do this and live. I am, as even Luther expresses it, Christ before God. If righteousness come by law, then Christ is dead in vain. But if Christ has fulfilled the law for me, it does come by law, and Christ is dead in vain. Law applies to flesh, is weak through it, sets up, if it could, the righteousness of the first man. But I am not in the flesh at all—I am in Christ. (*CWJND* 7:440)

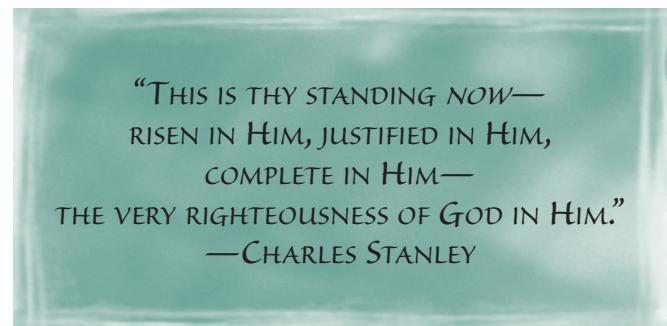
The whole of the system on which I am now commenting, and which places man on the ground of legal obedience flows from not apprehending the truth of being in Christ. (7:415)

According to Darby, the basis of our being approved as righteous in God’s eyes is not Christ’s keeping the law and imputing that to us, which would involve the imputation of something belonging to Christ yet apart from Him. Instead, the basis of our being made righteous is actually our being placed into the One who is righteousness itself:

Hence Christ was, in sovereign grace, made sin for me and died, not to build up the old man again, after death, when it was dead, and confer righteousness on it, but to put me in a wholly new position in the heavenly man, who is my righteousness; to set me in the righteousness of God, seated in heavenly places in Him. (7:410)

Like Darby, Charles Stanley (d. 1890) disagreed with the Reformed notion of justification, arguing instead that union with Christ is the basis for a believer’s being made the righteousness of God:

Oh, say they, you are under it, and break it; but Christ kept the law for you in His life, and this is imputed to you for righteousness. I would say, in answer to many enquiries on this solemn subject, I cannot find this doctrine in Scripture: it cannot be the ancient doctrine of God’s church. The basis is wrong—to refer to the illustration, on the wrong side of the river. Justification is not



on the principle of law at all. “The righteousness of God without law is manifested.” “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”...But does Scripture ever say that Christ kept the law for us for justifying righteousness? I am not aware of a single text. And yet, if it were so, there are many places where it should say so. (*CST* 2:4-5)

It is thus risen in Him, one with Him, we are made “the righteousness of God *in him*.” (2:6)

Oh! My reader, if you are dead with Christ, are you not justified from all sin? If you are risen with Him, are you not righteous in Him? (2:7)

This is thy standing *now*—risen in Him, justified in Him, complete in Him—the very righteousness of God in Him. (2:13)

William Kelly (d. 1906) concurred with Darby and Stanley, arguing that a believer is justified completely apart from the law by being brought into union with Christ:

They say, you need righteousness besides; and for this God needs Christ to obey the law for you. And what does scripture say? It gives the life of Christ, but life on

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the other side; not Christ keeping for me the law on the earth, but Christ risen. It is life in resurrection. In point of fact there is no such thing as identification with Christ as a living man here below; which is, without intending it, a virtual denial of Christianity. We are not Jews. Union is not with the blessed Lord as under the law, but with Him risen and exalted on high. (28)

Law-righteousness differs from that of God. Law promises earth and living long thereon to those who keep it. Grace gives Christ to suffer for our sins, the Just for the unjust, raises Him for our justifying, glorifies Him in heaven, and makes us God's righteousness in Him there. (50)

The Brethren rightly unfolded the truth of justification by explaining that those who believe into Christ—who is righteousness itself—are brought into union with Him. Then, in God's eyes the believer is approved as righteous in union with Christ (Campbell et al. 2:229-235).

### Union in the Baptist and Evangelical Traditions

In the main, Baptist and evangelical understandings of how the believers' union with Christ factors into their justification follow Reformed interpretations. The principal realization among Baptist and evangelical theologians is that the believers' justification by God requires their union with Christ. Union, then, is both logically prior to and necessary for the believers' justification. As we demonstrated in the "Imputed Obedience" article (44-53 in this issue), different theologians apply different emphases when expositing this basic understanding, but the approach that we find most helpful is that which depicts the believers' union with Christ as something central to their justification and focuses on how this union factors into justification. This approach is evident in the expositions of justification presented by Augustus H. Strong (d. 1921) and Lewis Sperry Chafer (d. 1952), among others. These expositions provide great insight into the vital, organic nature of the union with Christ and insist that this vital and organic union—rather than a legal or metaphorical one—grounds the believers' justification by God. In these accounts of justification we perceive genuine progress in the understanding of the truth concerning justification by faith.

Augustus H. Strong wanted believers to know Christ as the Savior within, and the key to knowing Him as such was to know the truth concerning the believers' union with Him. For Strong, this union is unlike any other because it is

a union of life, in which the human spirit, while then most truly possessing its own individuality and personal distinctness, is interpenetrated and energized by the Spirit of Christ, is made inscrutably but indissolubly one with him, and so becomes a member and partaker of that regenerated, believing, and justified humanity of which he is the head. (*Systematic Theology* 3:795)

In the same context, Strong cautions against regarding the scriptural representations, or "figures," of this union as mere metaphors, arguing instead that the believer is in Christ, that is, in union with Him, to such a degree that Christ constitutes the believer's very breath:

The fact of the believer's union with Christ is asserted in the most direct and prosaic manner. John 14:20—"ye in me"; Rom. 6:11—"alive unto God in Christ Jesus"; 8:1—"no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus"; 2 Cor. 5:17—"if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature"; Eph. 1:4—"chose us in him before the foundation of the world"; 2:13—"now in Christ Jesus ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Christ." Thus the believer is said to be "in Christ," as the element or atmosphere which surrounds him with its perpetual presence and which constitutes his vital breath; in fact, this phrase "in Christ," always meaning "in union with Christ," is the very key to Paul's epistles, and to the whole New Testament. (3:797)

Regrettably, Strong maintains, like the Reformed, that the standard of justification is God's law and that sinners can therefore be justified only by the imputation of Christ's obedience to the law. It is nonetheless significant that he views the mystical union with Christ as the basis for the imputation. He writes:

*Imputation is grounded in union*, not union in imputation. Because I am one with Christ, and Christ's life has become my life, God can attribute to me whatever Christ is, and whatever Christ has done. (*What Shall I Believe?* 91)

Strong's key contribution to a theology of justification, then, is his emphasis on the union of life between Christ and the believer, which serves as the basis of imputation.

In Chafer's extensive ruminations on justification by faith, the organic union between Christ and the believers is one of several prominent matters. He writes,

The believer is righteous because he is in Christ, and he is justified because he is righteous. God could not be just Himself and do otherwise than to justify the one who, being in Christ, is made the righteousness of God. (*Systematic Theology* 5:143)

Although Chafer has many striking things to say about the believers' organic union with Christ, our immediate concern is with the direct and unambiguous relationship he perceives between the believers' union with Christ and their being made righteous. This relationship is elucidated in numerous passages. In a passage on the imputed righteousness of God, for instance, Chafer remarks,

Through that vital union to Christ by the Spirit, the believer becomes related to Christ as a member in His body (1 Cor. 12:13) and as a branch in the True Vine (John

15:1, 5). Because of the reality of this union, God sees the believer as a living part of His own Son. He therefore loves him as He loves His Son (John 17:23), He accepts him as He accepts His own Son (Eph. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:5), and He accounts him to be what His own Son is—the righteousness of God (Rom. 3:22; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Christ is the righteousness of God, therefore those who are saved are *made* the righteousness of God by being *in Him* (2 Cor. 5:21). (*Bible Themes* 199)

In another passage, in which Chafer identifies the believers' union with Christ as the only ground for imputed righteousness, he writes that "to be in Christ is to be possessed with the righteousness of God which Christ is and which answers every need for such a character both in this life and in that which is to come," adding that "it is impossible that any should be in Christ and not partake of what Christ is, He who is the righteousness of God" (*Systematic Theology* 6:155). The thrust of Chafer's account of justification, then,

"THE BELIEVER IS RIGHTEOUS BECAUSE  
HE IS IN CHRIST, AND HE IS JUSTIFIED  
BECAUSE HE IS RIGHTEOUS.  
GOD COULD NOT BE JUST HIMSELF  
AND DO OTHERWISE THAN TO JUSTIFY  
THE ONE WHO, BEING IN CHRIST,  
IS MADE THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD."  
—LEWIS SPERRY CHAFER

seems to be that God's justification of the believers is ultimately based upon their vital union with Christ as the righteousness of God. In championing this view, Chafer cuts against the erroneous and centuries-old view, propounded by many Protestant theologians, that God's justification of the believers is based upon His forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to them. What is prominent in Chafer's view is not the forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believers but the organic identification of the believers with Christ Himself, who becomes righteousness to them not by forensic imputation but by organic union. In God's estimation the believers are righteous solely by virtue of their union with Christ, not by virtue of an additional imputation of Christ's righteousness. Chafer's shift in emphasis from Christ's imputed righteousness to Christ Himself as righteousness is, in our estimation, a commendable feature of his account of justification, as is his unmistakable emphasis on the believers' organic union with Christ as the ground of their being made righteous by God (Campbell et al. 2:241-252).

## Conclusion

The quotes presented in this article span nine centuries and

seven traditions to make the point that theologians from diverse historical periods and theological persuasions have seen an important relationship between union with Christ and justification. Although their contributions come with varying emphases and levels of insight, we believe that their respective observations warrant the attention we have given them here. At a minimum, these writers recognized that apart from union with Christ, there can be no justification. While most did not tap into the full and proper implications of that notion, they nonetheless heralded a foundational truth that stands in need of fresh appreciation today.

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## An Overview of the Various Understandings

Perhaps it would be beneficial—for the sake of easy reference—to have an overview of the understandings of justification and the assurance and security of salvation we have covered in more detail in the preceding articles. We limit this overview to prominent traditions that have distinctive and generally agreed upon views on these matters.

### On the Definition of Justification by Faith

For the Roman Catholic tradition, justification by faith is *an instantaneous infusion of righteous virtue* that makes the justified one no longer a sinner.

For the Methodist tradition, justification by faith is *pardon from sinful deeds*.

For the Lutheran tradition, justification by faith is *an external, forensic declaration* that the sinner is righteous despite the indwelling sin that remains.

For the Reformed tradition and its heirs, justification by faith is *a judicial act by which God transfers the record of Christ's perfect fulfillment of the law to the believer* and thereby declares him or her righteous.

For the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there is no justification by faith understood to be an instantaneous event at the initiation of the Christian life; justification is understood to be *a gradual and lifelong process* toward final approval at the judgment seat of Christ.

In our view—inherited from the Plymouth Brethren—justification is *God's approval of the believers based on their union with Christ as righteousness by faith*. Nothing can justify apart from union with Christ as righteousness, and union with Christ as righteousness suffices for justification without anything in addition (Campbell et al. 1:58-59).

### On the Assurance and Security of Salvation

*Neither assurance nor security*: The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions deny the security of salvation and generally deny the assurance of salvation to all but a small number of believers under very particular circumstances. For these traditions, only some of the believers can know that they are saved, and all the believers are liable to fall from salvation in the future.

*Assurance without security*: The Lutheran and Methodist traditions firmly hold to the assurance of salvation but deny its security. While both traditions teach that the believers can know that they are presently saved, they also teach that this present salvation can be lost due to sin.

*Security with weak assurance*: The Reformed tradition and its heirs affirm both the assurance and the security of salvation, but their teaching concerning the perseverance of the saints has greatly undermined the assurance of salvation. All who are saved are saved eternally, but because true saving faith always produces certain kinds of fruit in the life of the believers, faith is assumed to be false if such fruit is absent. Since the believers cannot know whether they will persevere to the end, they cannot know whether their present faith is saving or false.

*Full assurance and security with boasting*: In our view—inheriting the recoveries of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions—the believers should be helped to know with confidence and boldness that they are saved (i.e., they should have the assurance of salvation), and they should be helped to know that their salvation cannot be lost (i.e., they should have the security of salvation) (Campbell et al. 1:59-60).

### On the Frequency of Justification by Faith

For the Eastern Orthodox tradition in general, there is no justification as a single, instantaneous, and complete event; rather, justification is *a lifelong process* of being made increasingly righteous in God's salvation.

For the Roman Catholic tradition, the believers are *justified initially in baptism*, often as infants, but easily lose the grace of justification through various sins and must have it *restored through the sacrament of penance* offered through the church.

For the Lutheran tradition, justification is *a constant action of God that is initiated in baptism, maintained throughout life* while faith is continually exercised and tried, and in need of restoration whenever faith is lost.

In our view—inherited from the Reformed tradition and its heirs—justification is *a single, instantaneous, and non-repeatable event* (Campbell et al. 1:60).

# RETROSPECTIVE

Having traced the millennia of consideration and debate concerning justification in the various Christian traditions, we feel that it is worthwhile to take a large step back and reflect on our evaluation as well as on our evaluative standard in a comprehensive way.

Justification, of course, is related to righteousness, and the divergent understandings of justification that have arisen through the centuries can largely be traced to differences in the understanding of righteousness. Thus, we should first answer the question, What is righteousness, and more precisely, what is the righteousness that God requires for our justification? The common and natural answer to this question is that human beings should somehow be free from sins. We need not define this precisely; here it is necessary only to point out that the common assumption is that righteousness before God is related to somehow negating sins. This assumption is evident in many of the traditions that we have evaluated. But we believe that this assumption is mistaken, and because it is mistaken, many of the traditions have misunderstood justification before God.

In our view, being right before God relates directly to God's original intention in creating human beings, and thus, we appeal to the words of God's counsel in that creation: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion" (Gen. 1:26). To be right before God, to be right according to God, is to fulfill His intention in creating us, that is, to bear His image and likeness and exercise His dominion. These are, we would say, the finer characteristics of what the Bible elsewhere refers to as glorifying God. The right thing for a human being to do is to glorify God by expressing His image and likeness and exercising His dominion, not simply to be free from sin or to behave sinlessly. This, we submit, is the righteousness that God desires and requires. The sad fact of the fall of humankind, with the introduction of sin and death, neither changes God's original intention for human beings nor alters what is fundamentally the right thing for human beings to be and do. Thus, the issue that righteousness addresses is not simply sin but, more importantly, glory, which is God expressed. When we read what Paul writes, "All have sinned and fall

short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), we take him to mean that there are two separate issues with human beings that require attention: sin and glory. For sin there is the forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ, which we all must accept in faith. But glory refers to that original intention of God in creating human beings, which precedes the fall, and to that which is fundamentally right for all human beings to do: to express God in His image according to His likeness and to represent God with His dominion.

If we concede that the righteousness that God desires and requires for justification is related only to somehow negating sins, then we must also admit that human beings could be righteous in themselves before God if sin had not come in or once the problem of sin has been properly addressed. This we cannot accept. Paul makes a very clear distinction between a righteousness that is related to the law (and therefore to sin, which is exposed by the law and acts through the law [Rom. 3:20; 5:13, 20; 7:5, 7; 1 Cor. 15:56]) and a righteousness that is according to God (Rom. 1:17; 3:21; 10:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). Many of the traditions equate the righteousness according to God with forgiveness of sins. But to us that equation makes Paul's distinction meaningless. If the righteousness that God requires were related mainly to the forgiveness of sins, then the righteousness that is according to God would be a righteousness that is of the law, and the distinction of the apostle would dissolve. To uphold Paul's distinction, there must be a righteousness that is purely according to God, distinct from that which is obtainable through the law with its relationship to sin. Further, this righteousness cannot be one that is based only on what human beings are apart from sin, for that would be a righteousness that is according to human beings, not according to God.

The righteousness that is according to God must be a righteousness that is of God Himself, and according to Paul this righteousness is given to us by God as a gift (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 5:17) through faith. Many believe that this righteousness, given as a gift for our justification, is the righteousness of Christ, applied to us in some forensic and purely declarative sense. But nowhere in the Bible is this actually said, and

so we must reject this view. Rather, in accordance with the Scriptures, we understand that Christ is the very righteousness of God, whom we possess by faith, and He becomes righteousness to us for our initial and objective justification. Of course, we believe and confess that Christ was fully righteous in His human living, that He fully fulfilled the law and was without sin, and that His death on the cross fully met all the righteous demands of the law. But these constitute His own righteousness before God, which satisfied God for the forgiveness of our sins. And even if Christ's perfect fulfillment of the law could be credited to our account, that would still amount to a righteousness of the law, and therefore not that righteousness which is according to God and apart from the law. The greater righteousness that meets God's original intention for human beings to express God can be grounded only in Christ Himself because He alone, as the image of God in both His divinity and His humanity (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), expresses and glorifies God. Being such, He is the righteousness of God, and only those who are joined to Him through faith genuinely obtain and possess this kind of righteousness, the true righteousness that is according to God's intention for human beings in the first place.

Before the Reformation justification was generally thought to be based on something that God initially works into a human being, something that gives a human being a real condition of righteousness within, which God can justify. The Reformation broke with that understanding and maintained that there need not be any real righteousness within a human being for justification, because God, being God, can and simply does declare a believer righteous by imputing to the believer what Christ has righteously done apart from and external to the believer. The notion that righteousness within a believer must serve as the basis for God's justification was feared by many Reformers because they equated the innerness of that kind of righteousness with something subjective on the part of the believer and thus either a work in itself (which justification cannot be based on, according to Paul) or prone to doubt (which is the antithesis of the faith that justifies). But throughout this study we have maintained that there can indeed be a genuine righteousness within the believers, which God takes account of for justification and views not as that which is already lived out but only as that which is genuinely obtained and possessed by faith. By faith we lay hold of Christ, who has been given to us as the righteousness of God, and by faith we are united to Him as the righteousness for our justification. By faith we, of course, believe that our sins are forgiven through the righteous work of Christ, but that is not what justifies us before God. Christ Himself, as our possession by our union with Him through faith, is our righteousness before God and the sole basis of our justification by God. There is no need for Christ's righteous past to be reckoned to us, and there is no need for us to show forth some evidence of righteousness in love. Christ alone is sufficient as righteousness before God, and we who are joined to Him by faith are counted righteous by

God and have all the evidence He needs to justify us. This, we say, is the gospel. We who believe are truly, genuinely, and even essentially righteous before God, not at all by virtue of what we are or do by ourselves, but by virtue of what Christ, who is in us through faith, is in Himself. Our justification depends on Christ in us, not on Christ outside of us, and is as sure and eternal as He is.

Our view of justification, presented in this issue, adheres to what we feel are important overarching principles in God's economy and particularly in salvation as part of His economy: Christ as the centrality of all that God does in His economy, union as the characteristic of our relationship with Christ in God's economy, and righteousness as the base and expression of everything in God's economy. Our strong conviction is, first, that everything that God does in the whole

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procession of His economy He does in Christ His Son, taking Christ His Son as the sphere, element, and means of His economy. God created in the Son, He spoke of old in the Son, He came to humankind in the Son, He accomplished redemption and the forgiveness of sins in the Son, He brought the church into existence in the Son and as the Body of His Son, and He will be glorified in the Son in the ages to come. The same should be true of His justification: we should not understand that, out of step with everything else that He does, He applies the righteousness of Christ in His life and death to the believers as some external, forensic, and purely judicial declaration of righteousness. This would make Christ merely instrumental in this step of His economy for salvation and not actual righteousness within the believers. Rather, we should understand that God makes Christ actual righteousness within the believers for their justification. Thus, they are righteous not because of what Christ was and did in the past but because of what He is within them by their organic union with Him through faith. They possess true righteousness because they truly possess Christ.

Second, union with Christ is the characteristic of every aspect of our experience of God. "I am the vine; you are the

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branches. He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). This union is the true significance of Paul’s signature expression *in Christ* (and all the variants thereof). We the believers have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ: we were chosen in Christ, we died in Christ, we have been made alive in Christ, we have been raised in Christ, we are seated in the heavenlies in Christ, we are redeemed in Christ, we are made one Body in Christ...The list is too great to easily commit to writing here, and we expect that some of our readers will make our point by remembering many of the other aspects that we have not mentioned. Thus, the overwhelming evidence in the apostles’ teaching is that all that we obtain, attain, possess, and enjoy in God’s complete salvation is by virtue of our organic union with Christ. Thus, union must be the characteristic of our justification as part of that salvation. It cannot be the case that God makes justification an exception to His own rule and accomplishes it outside of our union with Christ in a way that is external, forensic, and merely judicially declarative. We protest against this as being contrary to the whole character of God’s economy and salvation. We were united to Righteousness Himself by our union with Him, and because of that—or rather, because of Him—we were justified by God.

Third, it can almost go without saying that righteousness, the element that defines justification, is a characteristic of every aspect of God’s economy. As the way of His acts (Psa. 103:6-7), righteousness is the power of God’s salvation (Rom. 1:16-17), the means for Him to impart grace into the believers (Rom. 5:21), and much else besides. In fact, righteousness is so important in His economy that God requires both objective justification for entry into His judicial redemption and subjective justification for the fulfillment of His organic salvation. And the only righteousness that avails before God is His own righteousness, a fact that the apostle Paul was fully cognizant of. In Philippians 3:9 he expresses his great desire: to “be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is out of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith.” Thus, according to Paul, to be found in Christ is to have the righteousness that is of God, not the righteousness in one’s self or out of the law. Certainly, in this passage Paul has subjective righteousness in view, that is, that which is lived out as righteousness by faith. But the principle must apply to all aspects of righteousness in God’s full salvation, even that which serves as the base of objective justification: it must be of God and found in Christ. Because of this, we understand that the righteousness that justifies us, which is the righteousness of God, is Christ Himself applied to us directly through our union with Him. This righteousness, given to us by God in Christ, is the ground of our objective justification and becomes the expression in our subjective justification (Campbell et al. 2:297-302).

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We opened this issue of *A&C* (p. 3) by quoting the apostle Paul, and we feel that it is appropriate to end this issue by repeating his exuberant challenge: “Who shall bring a charge against God’s chosen ones? It is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33). Many words have been expended over the past two millennia concerning justification, but we should be ever mindful of the reality that it is God who justifies and not we ourselves or the various traditions that characterize us. We believe that, for the most part, the consideration and wrangling over the past two thousand years have been motivated by a genuine desire to come to the full knowledge of this important blessing in God’s economy. And we suspect that God mostly smiles on all our good hearts to do so. But it is also true that sometimes the discussion has gone beyond the limits of true love and strayed into discord and divisiveness, and for that we all must ask God to be merciful to us. Even for our own writing in this issue we seek His mercy, and we ask Him as well as our readers to forgive us if we too have gone beyond a proper Christian love for all the believers; it was not our intent to do so. In the end, we realize that He alone justifies according to His good pleasure and His own way, even sometimes in spite of what we think or know. The squabblings of theologians here on earth below do not at all change the designs of God in heaven above. Knowing exactly how He justifies does not change the fact that He justifies; it simply changes how much we can appreciate and enter into the experiential benefits of His justification. This, of course, is important, and this is why we have added to the history of the discussion the two volumes that we summarize in this issue. But even though we find some fault in many of the traditions concerning the understanding of how exactly God justifies human beings, we firmly believe and even exult that those in all the traditions who genuinely believe in Christ, from the early patristic period to the modern era, are genuinely justified by God, and even beyond the protestations of most of them, their objective justification is secure eternally. We know that many will disagree and never give up the fight for their understandings of justification, and we know that some of this zeal will have detrimental effects on others (as the history of justification has shown). We lament this and can take comfort only in the realization and satisfaction that nevertheless it is God who justifies. But beyond this, if what we have presented here has helped anyone enter into the victory and even the boast of justification and into the full assurance and peaceful security of justification, then we count our work to have served its purpose, and we thank the Lord for making us sufficient for these particular things. All praise, honor, glory, and blessing be to Him who justifies those whom He has chosen for His wonderful salvation (Campbell et al. 2:313-314)!



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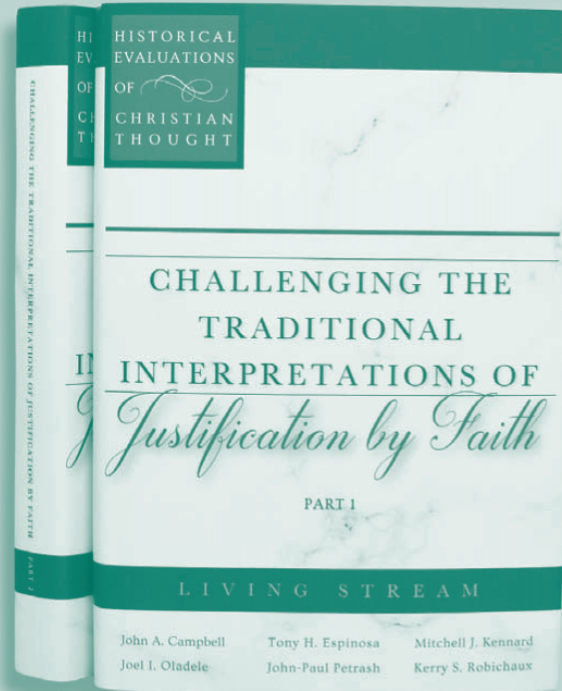
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