

The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness

An introduction to the doctrine with a challenge to the contemporary church regarding the current crisis with reference to the entire doctrine of Justification

Reginald C. Kimbro

This paper was originally written as a contribution to the annual Bible Faculty Summit meeting of Fundamental Bible Colleges and Seminaries which met in the summer 2005 at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. Mr. Kimbro submitted the paper as an adjunct professor for Geneva Reformed Seminary. While it has been left in its original form with only slight alterations, the application and usefulness of the paper, it is hoped, will find a wider audience.

On some occasions Mr. Kimbro has made use of lengthy quotations rather than working through the text himself. This is in order to familiarize readers with the contributions and positions of the author's quoted with regard to the contemporary debate.

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Introduction

It is an irony that Martin Luther's statement regarding the doctrine of justification being *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*--the article by which the church stands or falls--possibly enjoys a broader familiarity within the modern evangelical¹ church than the doctrine of justification does itself. Truly, as we shall see below, these are dangerous times for Evangelicalism. Thus, the choice of themes for this year's Summit, *Guarding the Gospel*, is both timely and vital. No doctrine is more central to the gospel we must guard than the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This study focuses upon the imputation of Christ's Righteousness--the part of the doctrine of justification by faith that forms the pinnacle of the details of our soteriology. It is at the mountain peak of the doctrines of the gospel.

Within the doctrine of justification, three key issues come into view: the Nature of justification, the Ground of justification, and the Means of justification. The last of these, the means of justification, according to the biblical doctrine and Protestant standards of orthodoxy, is faith. To study this question in detail would include an analysis of the varied debates surrounding the nature of saving faith both within and without the pale of orthodoxy. This paper will not touch upon this vast topic within the broader context of the doctrine of justification, save in a few summary

¹Throughout the paper I will frequently use the term "evangelical" to designate both Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism without reference to the doctrine or practice of separation, because upon the subject of the present investigation, similar circumstances belong to both groups.

comments at the close. But the other two great questions with reference to justification are explicit in the subject assigned--*the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness*. This brings into focus both the Nature of justification--Imputation, and the Ground of justification--Christ's Righteousness.

Before attempting a survey of these foundational doctrines, a few comments about the current condition of Evangelicalism with reference to the doctrine of justification is in order.

The Present Crisis with Reference to Justification

If one accepts Martin Luther's famous analogy, the question follows: Is the modern evangelical church standing or falling? Perhaps the following illustrations will not commend themselves to everyone as conclusive that even the conservative church of the present hour has fallen with reference to justification, but it would seem that there is justification for the charge that the church at least staggers today with reference to the purity of the doctrine.

In an introductory essay to the 1961 reprint of James Buchanan's classic treatment of *The Doctrine of Justification*, J. I. Packer remarked:

This being so, it is a fact of ominous significance that Buchanan's classic volume, now a century old, is the most recent full-scale study of justification by faith that English speaking Protestantism (to look no further) has produced. If we may judge by the size of its literary output, there has never been an age of such feverish theological activity as the past hundred years; yet amid all its multifarious theological concerns it did not produce a single book of any size on the doctrine of justification. If all we knew of the church during the past century was that it had neglected the subject of justification in this way, we should already be in a position to conclude that this has been a century of religious apostacy and decline.²

Since the time of Packer's comment, and particularly since the publication of the ECT documents in the mid 1990's, that decline has come into some recognition and new treatments of the doctrine have begun to appear in answer to the crisis.³ But raising awareness of the crisis remains one of the pressing needs of the hour. Thus some illustration of the crisis is warranted.

The contemporary church must recognize that the crisis with reference to justification stems from two distinct sources. The doctrine clearly suffers attack by those who deny the truth. This has always been the case outside of Evangelicalism. But today formal denials of the doctrine have emerged *within* "Evangelicalism."⁴ Fundamentalists within the broader Evangelical camp should not simply dismiss this shocking state of affairs as a mere matter of a lack of separation and imagine that faithful separatists have no problem with reference to the doctrine of justification. A disturbing de-emphasis upon the details of soteriology among Evangelicals of all stripes has prepared the soil for those who have now openly attacked the doctrine of justification within the camp. Concerned Christians must realize that the doctrine of justification currently suffers from both *denial* by its enemies and *neglect* by its friends.

The condition of the doctrine among its friends should

² (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1961), viii. I would like to make two comments about this book: 1) We should all note and lament the movement in Dr. Packer's position since this date. One of my colleagues even commented after Packer's signing of the ECT documents that, "Packer needs to read his own essay again!" 2) Buchanan should be required reading by all seminarians.

³ See James R. White, *The God Who Justifies: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001); also R.C. Sproul's responses to the ECT documents in *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie that Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) and *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); and a helpful polemic by John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

⁴ This fact motivated Piper's work listed in footnote 3, and would include the likes of Robert Gundry, whom Piper answers, the ECT signatories, as well as those who subscribe to the New Perspectives on Paul.

concern us most at present, for only when this situation finds remedy will the friends of the truth be able to engage the enemies of the doctrine successfully. This warrants some self-evaluation among conservative Evangelicals.

Arguably two generations of Evangelical preachers have left colleges and even seminaries with inadequate and at times erroneous preparation for preaching and teaching the doctrine of justification. Consider the following examples from the author's own experience.

In spite of the fact that the author grew up in a believing home where both parents had attended and/or graduated from more than one Evangelical university, and that he was raised under the preaching and extensive teaching ministry of a church of over 1000, it was not until the days of his own formal education that he was introduced to the details of the doctrine of justification including the doctrines of the imputation of believer's sins to Christ, and the imputation of His righteousness to believers. The words "Active and Passive Obedience" with reference to Christ's work, had to his knowledge, never been put before him. The fact that his introduction to these truths did *not* come in the classroom even during those initial years of undergraduate and graduate training, but through personal study and exposure through a local church, only adds to the seriousness of the situation.

Lest the author's personal background seem suspect as an isolated case, consider this further illustration. On one occasion in a graduate level theology class attended by the author, the instructor gave an unannounced and informal quiz taken from a periodical which sought out the student's knowledge of soteriology under the question "Are you Catholic or Protestant?" The quiz primarily asked only one question worded 10 different ways. In answering A or B the students were asked to indicate which view of salvation was correct. In each case the answer would reflect a view of salvation by either imputed righteousness or infused righteousness--the classic difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism articulated at the Reformation. In a class of approximately twenty students, only two received what would

have been a passing mark. Perhaps the embarrassment, laughter, and apathy that followed should have been replaced by conviction, tears, and determination.

A colleague of the author from later seminary days remarked about attending a friend's ordination in the mid 1980's at a Fundamentalist church. His friend had been required to prepare his own doctrinal statement, submit it to a committee, and then take questions from the committee at his examination. Copies of the statement were available and it was read by the author's colleague, who unfortunately was not a member of the examination committee. The candidate had erred in his brief statement of justification, and had stated the Roman Catholic doctrine that believers are saved by the "infused" righteousness of Christ. Perhaps one could forgive the candidate for the error, and consider it an unintentional substitution of one long word for another long word with a similar phonetic ring to it, all committed while under the stress of a long week and a hurried final draft. But how should one deal with the ordination committee--none of whom caught the error?!

Lest it appear that these anecdotes illustrate only isolated examples of a limited problem with reference to the doctrine of justification in the modern context, consider this from an internationally respected evangelical preacher and teacher and seminary president. In his commentary on *Romans* in 1991, John MacArthur made the following statement in a context dealing with justification:

When a sinner believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is declared to be righteous, *because* he now possesses God's own righteousness as a gift of His grace. God *does not consider a believer to be righteous; He makes him righteous.*⁵

Several things deserve attention surrounding this quotation, which by the way was not an isolated statement. It should first be emphasized carefully and pointedly that MacArthur has corrected

not only this statement, but also his other erroneous statements regarding justification. He now clearly teaches an orthodox doctrine. He has in fact become a champion of preaching imputation over the past decade.⁶ (Fundamentalists, suspicious of MacArthur, should not seize upon such a statement and publicize it, while refusing to recognize MacArthur's withdrawal of such statements and his current teaching). While he has not done so with the same publicity or under the same language of *recantation* as he has with reference to his previous denial of the doctrine of Eternal Sonship, MacArthur, nonetheless has corrected his teaching and now visibly and frequently emphasizes justification by imputed righteousness. MacArthur has chosen to refer to his transition regarding justification under the language of "clarification" or "refinement"⁷ rather than recantation. The author notes these things as one not antagonistic to MacArthur's ministry but one who is grateful for many positive contributions that he has made, especially in his written ministry over the past decade. The shift in his statements, however, warrants more than the claim of clarification or refinement. It manifests a fundamental transformation. Consider this from his later statements in the book *Faith Works*:

In its theological sense, justification is a forensic, or purely legal, term. It describes what God *declares* about the believer, not what He does to change the believer. In fact, justification effects no actual change whatsoever in the sinner's nature or character. Justification is a divine judicial edict.⁸

This statement clearly places MacArthur back within the borders of Protestant theological orthodoxy and at great distance from his

⁵ *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 208. Emphasis added.

⁶ I will comment later about the content of MacArthur's current orthodox teaching on justification, and that of John Piper.

⁷ *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1993), 13.

previous error.

While Fundamentalists may still continue a dialogue with MacArthur and his associates with reference to the doctrine and practice of separation,⁹ the former quotation and several other statements in a variety of publications caused concerned friends and caustic critics to challenge MacArthur with reference to his views of justification and successfully motivated him to examine his teaching and make that change. It appears obvious (especially considering the limited amount of time that passed before restatement was made) that MacArthur never intended to teach the heresy of justification by an infused righteousness. Yet in his zeal to counteract the growing antinomianism of the modern church, he did in fact clearly, albeit unintentionally, attempt to counteract that error with the twin error of legalism mirroring the Roman doctrine of justification. But good motives do not excuse bad doctrine.

But why resurrect this controversy over MacArthur's self-correction after more than a decade has passed? For the simple reason that it illustrates a problem that still needs illustration and might otherwise continue to stay off the church's radar. The author is not concerned with a personal challenge to or endorsement of the ministry of John MacArthur. It would be naïve, however, to believe that MacArthur was alone in his misunderstanding or deficiencies regarding justification. MacArthur's failures and corrections simply present themselves as a towering illustration of the current crisis among well meaning Evangelicals with reference to the doctrine of justification. He serves as a highly visible example of what is out there theologically, dare one even say, what is out there theologically in the *better* quarters of the con-

⁸ (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1993), 89.

⁹ I wish to commend Dr. Doran of DBTS for his recent labors in internet dialogue with Phil Johnson of Grace Community Church following Mr. Johnson's notable comments regarding Fundamentalism at the 2004 Shepherd's Conference at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California. A nice compilation of this dialogue is found at

<http://www.karaministries.com/articles/fundamentalism/Dialogue%20between%20Phil%20Johnson%20and%20Dave%20Doran.pdf>

temporary church. If a man of MacArthur's obvious abilities and credentials could manifest such a glaring and fundamental error as he did, and as late in his ministry as it occurred, the source of the problem cannot be reduced to his being absent from class one day while the topic was being covered. The ministry of the local church, and the institutions which provided his training, had obviously failed to emphasize the details of soteriology sufficiently. When the "Lordship" crisis demanded that the evangelical church revisit the details of the gospel, the champion of the better side of the debate illustrated that even on that side of the divide the soteriological currency of evangelicalism was trading at an all time low. MacArthur's desire to be true to scripture on this doctrine is obvious. What is equally obvious is that the issues surrounding justification were never clearly placed before him until he was challenged on the subject in the early 1990's. And where were the sharp questions regarding the gospel when he was examined for ordination?

Other illustrations may help to drive the point home. In places where erroneous statements regarding justification are not present, as they surfaced in MacArthur's case, serious ignorance of the true doctrine, nonetheless, still prevails. That is, there are many within Evangelicalism who have not made or written statements that contradict the truth, who nonetheless do not promote or perhaps even understand the truth.

Some years ago a friend who had at one time been a PhD candidate approached the author with great enthusiasm as they met at a conference. His statement was, "I'm reading that book you gave me, and it's changing my life." Having given the friend several books over the years, the author replied, "What book?" To which the friend replied, "Buchanan on *Justification*.--We're not preaching this!" Again, this, some may argue, serves as only another anecdote from the author's limited experience. But consider the parallel from last year's Shepherd's Conference at Grace Community Church which the author attended. After a clear presentation of the historic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone and the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness

by Dr. R. C. Sproul the previous evening, at a question and answer period the following day a conference attendee and Evangelical pastor stated that he had never before heard the doctrine of Christ's Active Obedience (imputed righteousness) as presented by Dr. Sproul and asked whether Dr. MacArthur agreed with it or not. The stillness in the room was tangible as thousands of pastors from a variety of backgrounds waited for Dr. MacArthur's positive response.

Leaving the author's personal observations behind again, one is further impressed with the correctness of the assessment that the church finds itself in crisis when he reads the following admission by Mark Talbot in one of the many endorsements that appear inside the cover of John Piper's recent work on Justification:

Although I have been a Christian for a long time, I became aware of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active righteousness only fairly recently. Yet in the years since I have become aware of the 'Blessed Exchange'--my sin for Christ's righteousness--I doubt a day has gone by without my feasting on this core truth of the biblical faith.¹⁰

How can a fundamental, if not *the* fundamental of the Christian faith, remain in obscurity in the life of a believer for years, especially in the life of one training for leadership in the church? Thankfully someone got the word to Professor Talbot, and he received it with joy. Doubtless, in the case of many others, this ignorance has remained for the entirety of their ministries. It is a sobering reality that this condition prevails within the contemporary church.

Our esteemed colleague, Dr. M. P. V. Barrett, reflecting over his first thirty years of teaching ministry, made this observation in the conclusion to his book *Complete in Him*, which draws

¹⁰ Ibid., Mark R. Talbot, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Wheaton College; Executive Editor, *Modern Reformation* magazine.

our survey of the present crisis to a close:

Although my conscience dictates my fundamentalism, there are some things about typical fundamentalism that distress me. Even within traditional fundamentalism, Christianity has been reduced to nothing more than the observance of certain principles and rules that externally, but not internally, mark the difference between faith and infidelity. I have had students over the years who know the rules of proper conduct and appearance, but whose only motive for conforming to those standards has been the fear of rebelling against God-established authority, a common theme for sermons. These same students were often incapable of defining any of the essential doctrines of the faith. I will never forget a young woman sitting in the front row of one of my classes who wept uncontrollably and joyously when she learned for the first time what it meant *to be justified and accepted by God in union with Jesus Christ*. I was simultaneously happy and sad. Happy that she grasped the truth. Sad that she never heard it before, even though she was raised in fundamentalism.

There seems to be such widespread ignorance of what the Bible says.¹¹

One could sadly multiply evidence that the doctrine of justification finds itself in crisis within the modern church. These thoughts, again, have only focused upon the condition of the doctrine among its friends. There are many and multiplying enemies of the doctrine out there today. This paper has taken time and space for this call to awareness prior to the presentation of the doctrine for the simple reason that the availability of good literature on the subject is not the problem. The willingness or perceived need of the conservative church to take up that literature,

¹¹ *Complete in Him: A Guide to Understanding and Enjoying the Gospel* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2000), 267-268, emphasis added.

and more importantly, take up their Bibles, and hammer out this fundamental doctrine in the seminary, in the pulpit, in the Sunday School (and where are the catechism classes by the way?),¹² and of course the home, is the problem. Perhaps the church has not perceived the study of the details of soteriology as helpful enough in the practical need of getting Evangelical Christians to live better. In reality, a return to a thorough going understanding of the doctrine of justification in all its details and power supplies the key answer to both the doctrinal and practical problems that confront the contemporary church. And without a revival of understanding and preaching this doctrine, where will the Evangelical church be in the next generation?

A Survey of the Doctrine of the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness

To assume that a paper of this size and limited exposure could answer the crisis outlined above would only serve to perpetuate the problem. Repeated instruction and emphasis from a variety of quarters will be necessary. To work toward that end, one could do no better than to offer a heartfelt appeal for modern evangelicals to find and dust off the pages of Buchanan's work,¹³ or spend some needed time in the standard systematic theologies of Hodge, Shedd, Berkhof, or Reymond. A smattering of Bonar and Boston would be nice. And not to leave out our Baptist brothers, the London Confession of 1689 and even a healthy diet of unedited Spurgeon would go a long way.

One goal of these pages, to challenge the friends of imputation to further study and to a deeper appreciation for and more fervent proclamation of the doctrine, hopefully has been accom-

¹² I do not know at present if one of the other suggested topics for this year's Summit, "The Use of Confessions to Safeguard Fundamentalism" will be taken up, but I would like to insert my hearty approval of the reintroduction of the historic Confessions back into Fundamentalism. Just an understanding of the first 38 questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism would for the most part end the justification crisis.

plished. Now it remains to survey the key facets of the theology. In doing this, two key foci remain in view: the Nature of justification--imputation, and the Ground of justification--the righteousness of Christ. The first of these should find hearty acceptance among all the recipients of this paper. The truth contained within this point forms a necessary part of orthodoxy. The second of these, while still crucial in the main, will necessitate discussing details that may stress the limits of our ability to reach a consensus in the realm of systematic theology. But the author believes that exposure to those issues is desirable even if consensus on every detail is not forthcoming.

Though key scriptural passages will come under consideration, the following survey is more theological than exegetical.

Justification is by Imputation

A brief summary of justification itself is in order. Justification is the legal aspect of the doctrine of salvation. Perhaps one could look no further to find a good definition than that of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

In justification, God accepts believers as righteous, even though in themselves they are not righteous. Justification differs from sanctification in that in justification, as well as in adoption, no actual change takes place in the believer. While in sanctification and glorification, the moral character of the person is affected.

¹³ If I might be permitted yet another personal anecdote at this point--I have often remarked with some humor, but nonetheless with sincere earnestness, that "If I were king for a day, I would require every Fundamentalist pastor to be locked in a cave with nothing but bread and water until he read Buchanan's work." It cannot be too highly recommended, given current circumstances, and it's still the best book on the subject by far.

Imputation belongs to justification.

The choice even of lesser words in the definitions of Westminster proves instructive in keeping the distinct nature of these parts of salvation in view. Justification and adoption are defined as “*acts*” of God’s free grace, while sanctification is described as a “*work*” of God’s free grace. The objective nature of justification stands in bold relief. Justification is a complete act. No one believer is any more or any less justified than any other believer. No individual believer moves or grows into a more justified position at one point than he has enjoyed at any other point of his Christian experience. He is either accepted with God, or he is not. He is either completely justified, or he is completely condemned.

This highlights the key difference between Protestant theology and Roman Catholic theology. In Rome, justification and sanctification are confused--in the true sense of the word. They are not distinguished. The believer may hope to be justified at the final day, but a lifetime of sanctifying cooperation with God, and perhaps many thousands of lifetimes’ worth of purgatorial fires may stand in between. Thus the believer’s legal acceptance with God¹⁴ is dependent in part upon a righteousness that inheres within him in the Roman system, while in Protestantism, the believer’s legal acceptance with God rests entirely upon a merit that finds its source outside. Understanding this, older writers could even use the term “alien” righteousness. It can be illustrated as simply as this: In Romanism the believer’s confidence rests upon the work of Christ *in* him. (It does not matter whether one attributes this work to grace, as Rome in fact does, but whether or not one sees the actual moral condition of the believer as forming any part of his legal acceptance with God). In the Protestant and biblical doctrine of salvation, the believer’s confidence rests upon the work of Christ *for* him. Thus, in one system, merit is recognized within the believer. In the other system, merit is reckoned to the

¹⁴ This is why it is so important that Evangelicals flesh out their terms, as in the historic Confessions. To simply say, “Salvation is by grace through faith,” is not enough. Rome can affirm that.

believer's account when he actually possesses no saving merit in himself. That describes the nature of justification. When God justifies a sinner, He does so by accounting him as perfectly righteous, when he is not perfectly righteous. God justifies "the ungodly" (Romans 4:5). This is accomplished by imputation. A brief look at a few key passages will establish that imputation is indeed the Bible's teaching as to the nature of justification.

In the chapter just cited, the Apostle Paul introduces two Old Testament illustrations of the truth of justification by imputation rather than by the recognition of righteousness inherent in the believer (i.e. "works"--which would, as is clear from Paul's argument, include works performed by the abilities of the natural man, and even works performed by the believer with new abilities infused into him). This should seem clear from the fact that "the ungodly" are the ones counted as righteous. Positively, Paul argues that Abraham's faith was counted for righteousness (vs.5), not any works he performed.¹⁵ The timing of this justification as preceding Abraham's ritual works gives illustration to the Apostle's point. There was another righteousness that was reckoned to him from outside.

In refuting a contemporary opponent of imputation (Robert Gundry), John Piper offers the following helpful discussion of some of the scriptural terminology and metaphor surrounding justification found in Romans 4.

Thus the idea of "imputation" is introduced by the word "credited" (= "reckoned" or "counted" or "imputed"--וַיַּחֲשֶׁבֶהָ wayyah^hs^hbeha' and ἐλογίσθη, elogisthe) from Genesis 15:6. This idea of imputation or

¹⁵ This anticipates a great point of consideration under the Ground of justification to be dealt with below. Is faith itself, considered as an act of the believer, counted as righteousness? This passage, as well argued by Hodge, finds faith *including* its object.

But to return to the phrase, 'Faith is imputed for righteousness.' It is very common to understand *faith* here, to include its object, *i.e.*, the righteousness of Christ; so that it is not faith considered as an act, which is imputed, but faith considered as including the

crediting is introduced in connection with Romans 4: 2 to show that Abraham was not “justified by works.” (If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about).

So Paul is forging the link here between “justification” (vs. 2, ἐδικαιώθη, edikaiothe) and “imputation” (ἐλογίσθη, elogisthe). We know, Paul says, that Abraham was not “justified” by works because Genesis 15:6 says “faith was *credited* to him for righteousness.” Thus we learn that when Paul thinks of the *justifying* work of God he thinks of the *imputing* or *crediting* work of God. ...

In Romans 4:4-5 Paul places the idea of imputation or crediting in the context of wages and debts. This seems to be the framework of thought that Gundry finds foreign to Paul’s description of God’s reckoning righteousness to our account. He calls it a “bookkeeping framework” over against a “covenantal framework.” But the idea of imputing or crediting or reckoning in a financial or “bookkeeping” framework seems plain in this context. The question is: How does faith relate to this act of “crediting?” ... [*Piper then quotes the passage.*]

Immediately, something seems out of sync here with the way Gundry conceives of imputation in Romans 4:3. When Paul quotes Genesis 15:6--that “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness”--Gundry construes this (with all its parallels) to mean that Abraham’s righteousness “consists of faith even though faith itself is not a work” (I, 8). So God’s imputation, in Gundry’s view, is not crediting an external, divine righteousness to Abraham, but counting something he has, namely faith, to *be* his righteousness.

What seems out of sync with this interpretation is

merit which it apprehends and appropriates. Thus *hope* is often used for the thing hoped for, as Rom. viii. 24, “Hope that is seen is not hope,” &c.; and *faith* for the things believed, Gal. i. 23, “He preacheth the faith,” &c.

Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, reprint 1983), 108.

that Paul’s exposition of imputation, which immediately follows verse 3, gives us a conceptual framework for imputation very different from the one Gundry sees in verse 3. Paul speaks immediately in terms of something *external* (a wage) being credited to our account, rather than something *internal* (faith) being treated as righteousness.¹⁶

This accurately describes the biblical meaning and usage of “imputation.”

Next in Romans 4, Paul turns to the exclamations of David in the 32nd Psalm to illustrate the truth positively and negatively.

Even as David describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin (vs. 6-8).

Not only does Paul credit David with recognizing that God counts those as righteous who are not actually righteous, but also he recognizes that God does not count those as being unrighteous who actually are unrighteous. From both directions, God is reckoning something to be true that is not actually true. A survey of just a few occurrences of David’s word for impute bears this out.

The term and its family occur commonly in the Old Testament. The root is *הִשָּׁב* *hashab* (“think,” “plan,” “make a judgment,” “count”—per Leon Wood in *TWOT*). While in key texts, such as Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2 already considered, the meaning of “counting something to one’s account” has direct

¹⁶ Ibid. 54-56. My pointings and accent marks are incomplete and suspect, and do not completely match Piper’s, especially in the English transliterations. My newly discovered fonts were limited.

bearing and reference to the justification of the sinner, other contexts also serve to illustrate the idea apart from the actual topic of justification. In Genesis 38:15, as Tamar deceived Judah, he saw her and “thought” her to be a harlot. It was not true that she was a harlot, but when Judah saw her, he saw a harlot. Eli’s similar mistake about Hannah in I Samuel 1:13 also illustrates the term. When he saw her praying, he “thought” she was drunk. When he saw her, he saw a drunken woman. She was not a drunken woman.

That to justify means to “reckon” as righteous rather than to “constitute” or make one righteous also finds illustration in the occasions in which the term “justify” is used in a legal or declaratory setting. In the Old Testament civil legislation, the judge was to justify the righteous, and to condemn the wicked (Deut. 25:1, etc.). The pronouncement of the judge did not change the character of the person involved. It merely declared what his position with reference to society would be. Obviously, in such cases, the goal is to have the pronouncement to coincide with the facts. But Proverbs 17:15 illustrates that this is not always the case.

He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD.

A wicked man, in human society, is not to be considered righteous, nor is a just man to be considered guilty. The only way that these forbidden errors could occur is by these terms referring to a legally recognized standing rather than to a moral condition. It hardly needs saying that God would not call the making of a wicked man into a righteous man an abomination! But He does call it an abomination to count a man known to be guilty as innocent and refuse to convict him.

A striking example of this also occurs in Luke 7:29 where the hearers of John the Baptist are said to “justify” God. Obviously these men did not *make* God righteous, but being moved by the preaching of the truth, they *declared* or *proclaimed* Him to be

righteous in their sight.

One further text and comment brings this hasty discussion of the nature of justification to a close. In Romans 5:12-19, a text that will figure prominently in the following discussion of the ground of justification, the Apostle elaborates upon the believer being justified by the work of Christ being *imputed* to his account rather than by God's dealing with the believer based upon his own works or his own actual condition. It is quite obvious that this accurately describes the Apostle's meaning, and that Paul understands the implications of what he is saying, for the reader finds that Paul, having unfolded the doctrine, then responds immediately to an anticipated objection--that if this were true, it would lead to antinomianism.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

No one could object to a doctrine of justification by an infused or an inherent righteousness by claiming that it would lead to antinomianism. This objection could only be advanced by one who perceived that justification was by an imputed righteousness--that justification was obtained by those who were still unrighteous in themselves but were counted as righteous in spite of this fact.¹⁷ This fleshly deduction could be stated as follows, "If God is going to treat me the way that Christ deserves to be treated rather than the way that I deserve to be treated, then it doesn't matter how I live." The Apostle rebukes this reasoning in chapter 6. But he does not rebuke the deduction as a *misunderstanding* of the doctrine he has just stated, rather he rebukes it as a *misapplication* of the doctrine that fails to see the rest of the picture. Having taught universal condemnation in chapters 1-3a, justification by imputed righteousness in chapters 3b-5, the Apostle teaches upon sanctification (which invariably accompanies justification) in chapter 6, upon the battle with indwelling sin in chapter 7, and finally upon the great deliverance of glorification in chapter 8.

The biblical teaching regarding the nature of justification

is clear. Believers are justified by having a righteousness that finds its source outside of them credited to their account. Any other view of justification involves recognizing saving merit inherent within the believer, whether it was there to start with, or whether it was infused. That resolves down to a works righteousness in which men could boast. The Bible clearly rejects all such views of justification.

May all the friends of the gospel come to a greater awareness of the truths of imputation as an answer to the crisis of our day! But clarity on imputation itself does not finish the job of preaching the gospel. The preacher of the gospel must continue and preach the *ground* of justification. He must deal with *what* is imputed. He must explain *how* a holy God can count those as righteous who are not actually righteous. To borrow from what Lloyd-Jones called the most important two verses in the whole range and realm of scripture¹⁸ (Romans 3:25-26), the preacher must explain how God can be “*just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.*” This necessitates examining the final topic of this paper--the righteousness of Christ.

Christ's Righteousness is What is Imputed

In answer to the question of how a holy God can count those who are not perfectly righteous as being perfectly righteous, the scriptures are not silent. God imputes the righteousness of Christ to believers. His righteousness is counted as theirs. It is as

¹⁷ An interesting reality with regard to Gospel preaching surfaces at this point. If we accurately preach the gospel of saving grace as the Bible presents it, we will frequently be accused of preaching false doctrine. Being accused of preaching antinomianism could be one of the best indicators that we really are preaching the gospel of grace. Preaching the inevitability and necessity of a changed life, that is, preaching the biblical doctrine of sanctification alongside of justification, may also lead to our being accused of preaching legalism. But this has always been the case with those who miss the gospel. The same Pharisees that accused John of preaching legalism, rebuked Christ for eating with Publicans. They accused Him of antinomianism. When, in fact, Christ and John were preaching the same gospel.

simple as that. This simplicity, however, has not kept the details of this truth from falling into obscurity. It is with reference to this particular that the contemporary church still finds itself in great need. Thus the scriptural and moral context in which that transaction occurs provides the focus for the final point of consideration in this survey. It is one thing to arrive at the conviction that the scriptural view of justification is one of the imputation of righteousness rather than the infusion of righteousness or the recognition of righteousness that is already there. It is another thing to accurately define the righteousness that is imputed. Failing to supply this definition, even many of the modern defenders of imputation must be described as orthodox, but incomplete.¹⁹ They have reaffirmed the true nature of justification. But they have not yet fully rediscovered its ground.

In a general sense, even during the decades of the suggested crisis, the contemporary church *has* preached imputation when it comes to the imputation of the believer's sins to Christ. Evangelicals have not been preaching that Christ was punished for His own sin. Even in proclaiming that the sins of believers were placed upon Christ, the conservative church has not been preaching that Christ was turned into a sinner. The sins of believers were *counted* as belonging to Him, and He bore the wrath that was their due. This message has been getting out, even if the terminology of imputation has not been accurately used. The problem has come with reference to the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. In a sense, one might say that the church has been busy preaching half of the gospel. "Christ died in your place; will you trust Him as your Saviour?" This is wonderfully true. But happily, it is also not the whole story.

A capital text in expounding both "halves" of the gospel is 2 Corinthians 5: 21. There is a *double imputation* that is in view in the text.

¹⁸ *Romans*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 95.

¹⁹ This is true of MacArthur, and even to some extent of Piper, though he certainly goes much farther in answering this question as we shall see below. See Piper, pp. 101-114.

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

In the same way in which the sins of believers were counted as belonging to Christ, His righteousness is counted as belonging to believers. In a sense this is all simple enough, and has at times crossed the lips and ears of evangelicals.

So why has the doctrine of justification fallen upon such hard times? What has caused the lack of emphasis and even the above noted errors and ignorance? Why is it that the church has been on solid, if albeit shallow, footing with reference to the imputation of sin to Christ, but has stumbled so badly with reference to the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers? *The answer lies in the failure of the modern church to understand the proper relationship between the law and the gospel.* The lack of emphasis that has led to the stumbles has followed a lack of understanding. It is not too much to say that one cannot fully understand the gospel until he understands the law.

A proper understanding of the law was of paramount importance in the opinion of James Buchanan. After surveying the testimony not only of scripture, but of church history in the first half of his book, Buchanan felt confident enough later in his exposition of the doctrine to say:

It may be safely affirmed that almost all the errors, which have prevailed on the subject of Justification, may be traced ultimately to erroneous, or defective, views of the Law and Justice of God.²⁰

Today's situation is no different. The contemporary church desperately needs to re-examine its understanding of the law of God.

The relationship of the law of God to our justification finds great prominence in scripture. In the book of Romans--the Bible's systematic statement of *the gospel of Christ* in which *the*

righteousness of God is revealed (1:16-17)--the Apostle moves with the precision of a spiritual attorney in unfolding the particulars of the good news to his readers. Having introduced his great subject, he begins his opening argument in the very next verse, stating that *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*. In the chapters that follow, carrying right through to the end of the opening argument in (3: 20), Paul takes pains to establish that *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*.

In seeking to understand the ramifications of this conclusion, one should take care to bring alongside a scriptural definition of sin. In a formula that stands out as definitive, the Apostle John states clearly that *sin is the transgression of the law* (1 John 3:4). Paul confirms this in Romans 7:7 when he states *I had not known sin but by the law*, and in 3:20 where he states, *by the law is the knowledge of sin*. To discover what is sinful or not sinful, all that is required is a look at the law. One finds further confirmation that sin is defined as breaking the law when he reads *where no law is, there is no transgression* (Romans 4:15). Scripture repeatedly establishes this truth.

The reader is not surprised then to discover that Paul's opening argument in Romans proves that all men are under the law. Chapter 1 describes the downward spiral of ungodliness and depravity that follows those who have suppressed the truth that was revealed to them. Paul even states to the religious Jews that the Gentiles who had not as yet received the inscripturated Word, nonetheless, showed *the work of the law written in their hearts* (2:15). As he begins to draw his opening argument to a close, he emphatically states in (3:9) that he had *before proved both Jews and Gentiles that they are all under sin*. According to the biblical definition of sin, Paul has argued therefore that Jews and Gentiles are all recipients of the law of God, accountable to the law of God, and transgressors of the law of God. That this is indeed the case is obvious from Paul's conclusion. He states in (3:19-20):

Now we know that what things soever the law

²⁰ Ibid., p. 268.

saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God. 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.

Paul has not concluded that some men were under the law and some men were not, as have some modern evangelicals, he has concluded that all have *transgressed the law* and thereby come short of the glory of God. Every man who is outside of a saving union with Jesus Christ finds himself in this condition. He is a transgressor of the law.

As one follows the Bible's teaching with regard to depravity and inability, he discovers that not only is the sinner in a position of condemnation with reference to the law of God (this would be the very definition of being a sinner), but he has no means of remedy within himself. Therein lies his dilemma--he owes a debt he cannot pay. He will be judged by a standard of righteousness that obligates him, but that he has transgressed, and no longer possesses the ability or the possibility of obeying. This is exactly what Paul would have his readers understand about the condition of the sinner before he begins the revelation of the *righteousness of God* in (3:21- 5:21). He has shown them the nature of their need before he shows them the answer.

All this is to say that the Gospel is God's gracious remedy to the demands of the situation in which the sinner finds himself with reference to the Law. The work of Christ, therefore, must meet these demands in order for the sinner to pass from a state of condemnation to a state of justification. The law, and the sinner's situation with reference to its righteous standard, cannot simply be ignored.²¹ Christ's work as Mediator and Surety for His people, demands that He remove them from the state of condemnation in which they find themselves with reference to the broken law, and provide them with a justification with reference to that same law.

In this position as Mediator, Christ undertakes to meet the

demands of the law with reference to both its penalty and its reward. The truth that the penalty of the broken law is condemnation, alienation from God, and death, should find no detractors in the conservative church. But the corollary doctrine that *obedience to the law* merits justification, communion with God, and life, has found few proponents in the years of the crisis. Yet this provides the very heart of the doctrine of the *ground* of justification. It is this truth that the theological categorizations of Christ's "Active" and His "Passive" obedience serve to underscore.²² His Passive obedience refers to His bearing the penal sanctions of the broken law, (condemnation and death) and His Active obedience refers to His fulfilling the promised blessings of the fulfilled law, (justification and life).

Perhaps the whole question of "righteousness" itself deserves attention at this point. Righteousness may be defined as *conformity to a standard*.²³ The vocabulary bears this out. In the Old Testament, צְדָקָה --"straightness," and יְשׁוּעָה --"righteousness," signify conformity to accepted norms. A "just" weight and balance was required (Lev. 19:36, etc.). The shop keeper's scale had to be "righteous." It had to conform to a uniform standard of measurement. This requirement holds true whether in the physical sense, the legal sense, or the moral sense. The use of the New Testament δικαιοσύνη--"righteousness," in the LXX to translate צְדָקָה bears out this meaning in the New Testament, as well as the New Testament usage itself. This being the case with the vocabulary of "righteousness," not surprisingly, one finds the terms "sin" and "righteousness" in direct opposition to each other. Sin is the transgression of a standard. Righteousness is conformity to a stan-

²¹ This must be true, unless one maintains that the law of God is mutable. This, of course brings in the varied debates involved in our systems. Dispensationalism, apparently in all its forms, and the fledgling New Covenant Theology, clearly suggest and even demand that we view the law as mutable, and normally as a unit. Covenant Theology, as found in the Reformed Confessions, recognizes that the moral law of God is immutable and therefore has offered the historic three-fold division of Moral, Civil, and Ceremonial when looking at the Old Testament, and when confronting the various difficulties in the New Testament usages of *νομος*. See footnote 26.

dard. It should seem obvious that in the case of one's legal standing in the courts of heaven, this standard is the same in both instances. It is the moral law of God. This being the nature of righteousness, Buchanan remarked in his chapter on the Law and Justice of God:

To be accepted as righteous in His sight, every subject of that law must have a righteousness answerable to its requirements; for, if it be true that where 'there is no law there is no transgression,' *it is equally true that where there is no law, there is no 'righteousness';* and 'if sin is not imputed, where there is no law,' neither can righteousness be imputed without reference to its requirements. The rule in both cases is the same,--and righteousness is nothing else than conformity to the Law, while sin is any want of conformity to it. That Law, considered as the rule of His moral government, requires perfect obedience; and as partial compliance with it is inadmissible, so it is impossible, from its very nature, that there can be any neutral character,--which is neither godly nor ungodly,--neither righteous nor wicked,-- neither innocent nor guilty,-- neither justified nor condemned.

Such being the nature of God's Law,--and that Law being an expression of His justice,--it follows, that Justification must necessarily have some reference to both. In the case of the innocent, Justification would have consisted in the recognition and acceptance of a righteousness, personal and inherent, and amounting to a perfect conformity to the divine Law; in the case of the sinful, Justification, --if it be possible at all,-- must

²² "Passive" is not the best term, because Christ was not passive in any aspect of his obedience. He could say, "No man takes my life from me. I lay it down of myself." This is active. But while the terms, fixed by usage, are not entirely precise, they nonetheless point out a vital distinction which must not be abandoned.

²³ We also find this sense in the English term. As I struggle with computers in general, but especially now with fonts and pointings, one of my decisions and command questions is whether or not to "justify" the right margin.

still have some relation to the Law and Justice of God; since it includes the pardon of sin, which reverses the sentence of condemnation; and the acceptance of the sinner as righteous, which implies some standard of righteousness as the rule of the divine procedure. *What that righteousness is, or can be, in the case of the guilty, is the great problem which is solved only by the Gospel of Christ.*²⁴

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that this recognition that the law has a positive side--that it does contain a promise--does not imply or suggest that fallen sinners possess the ability to merit the reward of a fulfilled law by any inherent or infused righteousness. The scripture clearly describes all the fallen sons of Adam as lacking any ability to do this, and repeatedly rejects the idea of sinners being accepted by virtue of their own works in attempt to satisfy the claims of the law that rest upon them (Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16; Romans 10:3). Any attempt to do so only serves to insult the divine justice and seeks to redefine the law itself. (This in fact is what all legalists must do. They must redefine the law by *reducing* it to a standard they are capable of successfully fulfilling). But admitting the sinner's inability does not free one from recognizing that the law in itself promises positive rewards. The problem is not with the law, but with the sinner. That is why Paul could speak in Romans 8:3 of *what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh*.

The reward or promise of the fulfilled law is *life*--life in all its fullness and connectedness to the Author of life (Lev. 18:5; Romans 10:5; Ezekiel 20:11,13,21; Nehemiah 9:29; Gal. 3:12, etc.). Modern theologians have challenged this tenet of historic Covenant Theology; challenging even the existence of the Covenant of Works (which is merely the theological title given to the nature of the moral law currently under discussion). But was this not Paul's own conclusion when he understood the true nature of the law and remarked that what was *ordained to life*,²⁵ he found,

²⁴ Buchanan, pp. 269-270. Emphasis added.

in his condition as a sinner, *to be unto death*. Was this not behind Christ's own reasoning and method with the Rich Young Ruler when he came to Christ with the question "*What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?*" and Christ's answer pointed the man to the moral law and its promise--"*If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.*" Any modern theological denial that there is a promise affixed to the fulfilled law, challenges the veracity of our Saviour's response to this man. The context and the Lord's subsequent dealings with the man clearly show that Christ was using the moral law as an evangelistic tool in convincing this man of his need, and not as a suggestion that he could merit his own righteousness. But the fact that fallen men no longer possess the ability to fulfill the law does not make the law go away, nor does it remove the promise that affixes to the fulfilled law. The standard still remains intact. It now just marks sinners as condemned, and shows them their need of a righteousness from another quarter if they are to be justified.

This further explains Christ's method in dealing with the other religious leaders of His day. The opening thrust of the Sermon on the Mount was designed to shake the Pharisees' confidence in their interpretations of the law of God, and therefore destroy their confidence in their own abilities to fulfill the law of God. The five contrasts and their explanations found in (Matthew 5:17-48) mark the difference between the outward commission of extreme transgressions of the law such as murder and adultery, etc. (which the Pharisees concluded made up the whole of the law), and the mere inward inclinations of the heart and will which Christ explains were themselves transgressions of the law of God. The moral law is *spiritual* (Romans 7:14).

Those (such as the Dispensationalists and now the New Covenant Theologians) who have suggested that in the Sermon on the Mount Christ was actually changing the law of God, fail to recognize that the standard Christ unfolded was not new. Which of these men is ready to argue that unjust anger was permissible

²⁵ The reader will note that "ordained" is supplied by the translators of the AV, but that this sense is demanded by the context should be clear.

in the Old Testament? Which of these men is prepared to argue that lust was permissible in the Old Testament, etc.? A cursory reading of the Old Testament makes such a manipulation of the text impossible. Also, this suggestion of the modern theologies robs the Sermon of its power in convincing those immediate hearers of their need of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, rather than retaining confidence in their own spiritual condition. Under such a theological understanding of the Sermon as these systems propose, the only problem of their generation was their refusal to go along with the new economy. Their only crime was their failure to recognize Christ, not their sin and self-righteousness. On this scheme, their current spiritual condition isn't in view at all in the Sermon. That is, they weren't being rebuked for being what they were, *i.e.* transgressors of the law who needed salvation; they were being rebuked for refusing to become what they should have become, *i.e.* followers of the new law rather than the old one they had been correctly following before Christ arrived.²⁶

It has been common in the modern context for preachers and theologians to suggest that when the scripture speaks of Christ's fulfilling the law (Matthew 5:17, etc.), that it merely means that He supplied the antitype to the many Old Testament types and shadows. Others have suggested alongside this, that He fulfilled the law only in that He perfectly went through all the ritual motions that the Old economy required and now they can be done away. But these observations miss the real point of Christ's work. If one believes that Christ fulfilled what was required for the justification of all believing sinners, for ones living in the New Testament economy as well as the economies of the Old Testament, then it follows that He fulfilled what was required of *all men*, not just men living under a ceremonial administration.

²⁶ This would reflect upon the teaching of the Old Scofield Reference Bible, many Dispensational teachers since, including Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) p. 107-108; as well as the foundational tenet of New Covenant Theology as found in John Reisinger's seminal book, *But I Say Unto You* (Southbridge, MA: Crown Publications, Inc., 1989).

This places the nature of his work in a moral context, not a ceremonial context.²⁷ The only alternative to this is to suggest either that Christ did different things for different people, because different things were required of them, or to suggest that what Christ did applied only to the people living under one particular economy. Both of these errors have found their way into the modern systems of theology.

At this point, care should be taken to discover the Bible's own definition of the Moral Law. It is commonly believed that Reformed theology defines the Moral Law as the 10 Commandments. But this is not accurate. The answer to question 41 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism provides the accurate *confessional definition*:

Q. Where is the moral law *summarily comprehended*?

A. The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments.

This is to say that Reformation theology does not suggest that the Decalogue exhausts the moral law. The Ten Commandments merely form the *summary* of what obedience is. They form the table of contents of sorts for the moral law.

The *scriptural definition* of the moral law, found in numerous passages, supports this understanding. When asked which commandment was greatest, Christ summarized the “two tables” of the law by saying:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor

²⁷ This should be carefully considered by those who take issue with the Reformed understanding of the Moral Law. However one defines the law with reference to the work of Christ, if it applies to all believers of all ages, it must be defined as Moral and not Ceremonial, because ceremonies change and do not touch men of every age. Morality cannot change and does touch men of every age.

as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

The law, in Christ's summary, could be comprehended in the command to *love* both God and one's neighbor.

The Apostle Paul, obviously with the Decalogue in view, quoting five of the ten commandments, states this summary of the law in Romans 13:9-10.

For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet: and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

An even more striking distillation of the law, paralleling these statements, occurs in Paul's words to the Galatians in (5:14).

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

That these references to loving one's neighbor, which encompasses the "second table" of the law, also include love to God as required in the "first table," receives clear articulation in 1 John 4:20-21 where the reader finds:

If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God, love his brother also.

The simplicity and unity of the moral law, as discovered

in the preeminence of love, finds illustration also in the words of James when he remarks that *whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all* (2:10). Further emphasis occurs when Paul, on two occasions, *equates* the first commandment and the tenth commandment: *covetousness, which is idolatry* (Colossians 3:5), and *nor a covetous man, who is an idolater* (Ephesians 5:5).

In summary, a study of the Bible's doctrine of the moral law finds that the moral law is at the same time larger and smaller than the Decalogue: larger in that the moral law encompasses all sin underneath the headings of the ten words and not just the ten specific items listed in each case; and smaller in that it can be summed up in one word--love.

Relating this definition of the moral law to the present survey of the ground of the believer's justification simply requires that the reader understand that it was this standard that Christ fulfilled for His people. Christ took the penalty of our failure to perfectly love by enduring God's wrath in our place. Christ merited life by His rendering the obedience of perfect love to secure God's promise on behalf of believers. He did *always the things that please* the Father (John 8:29). The vicarious nature of not only His sufferings, but His life of obedience forms the ground of our justification. In theological language this translates into saying that Christ entered into the Covenant of Works on behalf of His people and God graciously imputes His obedience to that Covenant unto them. This defines the great Gospel Covenant. It is a Covenant of Grace unto believers, because it was a Covenant of Works unto Christ. In the greatest sense, believers *are* saved by works--the works of Christ. The argument from a few key passages brings this overview of the ground of justification to a close.

Galatians 4:4-5

But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that

we might receive the adoption of sons.

It seems inappropriate to suggest that those to whom the text refers as *them that were under the law* means only Israel. Paul has been at pains in Galatians to establish that New Testament *Gentile* believers belong to the same promise of life in Christ that God gave to Abraham (3:16, 29; 6:16). Paul must be referring to the same parties that he concluded were *under sin* in Romans 1-3, as shown above.

Two things stand out in the text. First Christ was *made of a woman*. This highlights the necessity of His taking into union with Himself our nature. A high priest must be *taken from among* those he represents (Hebrews 5:1). The representative nature of His work demanded that he be truly man.²⁸ Only in this way could He stand as the Second Adam in Federal Headship of those for whom He lived and died. *Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people* (Hebrews 2:17). Christ was *made in the likeness of men* (Philippians 2:7). A body was prepared for Him (Hebrews 10:5).

The second feature of the text deserving attention is the fact that Christ was said to be made *under the law*. This does not mean simply that Christ was born under the Old Testament economy, or that His work hinged upon the fulfillment of ceremonial ritual. His being made under the law was the focal point of His redeeming work for those who were themselves under the law. The Incarnation of the Eternal Son was necessary in order for Him to fulfill the righteousness of the law for those in whose place He stood. He voluntarily placed Himself under the demands of the moral law. Fulfilling these demands constituted His righteousness. Just as the Passover lamb had to be selected and set apart for examination, the years of Christ's earthly life proved His worthiness to represent His people. No blemish was found in Him. The Father twice spoke from heaven in approval of this Lamb. In the historic language, this means that Christ entered the

Covenant of Works for believers. It is not true that His earthly life was merely a demonstration of His righteousness; it was the venue in which it *behoved Him to fulfill all righteousness* (Matthew 3:15).

Romans 5:18-19

Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

This is one of the most important texts within the entire subject of justification. Beginning in verse 12, the Apostle brings in a lengthy and important comparison between Adam and Christ. In fact, in verse 14, Paul actually states that Adam was a type of Christ when he remarks that Adam *was the figure of him that was to come*. A full exposition of the entire passage exceeds the limits and focus of the present study,²⁹ but the thrust of the passage cannot be missed. Piper offers this suggestion as to the connection between Adam and Christ.

Now here is the all-important question: Why did Paul exactly at this point--at the end of verse 14, right after saying that death came to those who did not sin personally against an explicit law with a death penalty the way Adam did--why exactly here did Paul insert the all-important words, "who was a type of him who was to come"? Why precisely at this point, did Paul say that Adam is a type of Christ?

He says that Adam is a type or pattern of Christ

²⁸ Conservatives must keep this doctrine of Christ's true humanity in sharp focus. The last century has seen many battles defending the true deity of Jesus Christ, but Church history has shown that the attack upon Christ's Person does not come only from that direction.

because the all-important parallel is seen here. The parallel here is this: The judicial consequences of Adam's sin are experienced by all his people not on the basis of their doing sins like he did, but on the basis of their being in him and his sin being imputed to them. As soon as that becomes clear in Paul's argument--just at this point--he brings in Christ as the parallel. The point is to make clear what the focus of the parallel is: The judicial consequences of Christ's righteousness are experienced by all his people not on the basis of their doing righteous deeds like he did, but on the basis of their being in him and his righteousness being imputed to them.³⁰

Just as sinners are not condemned because of their own actual sins, though those sins invariably manifest themselves in the life of every son of Adam; so believers are not justified because of their own acts of obedience, although those acts (imperfect as they are) invariably manifest themselves following the believer's salvation. Theologically this translates into saying that sinners are not condemned because of *infused corruption*, although it exists, but they are condemned because of *imputed guilt*. The parallel follows in the passage that believers are not justified because of an *implanted holiness*, although it too exists, but because of *imputed righteousness*.

The focus must now come to rest upon verses 18 and 19. In verse 18 Paul uses the term δικαιωματος--dikaïomatos, translated "*righteousness of one*" in the AV, with the marginal reading being, "*by one righteousness.*" The ESV translates it as an "*act of righteousness.*" Piper comments on this term and its usage saying:

²⁹ For a helpful exposition of the passage, offered in the context of the current debates in Evangelicalism, see Piper, pp. 101-114. While Piper stops short of using the terminology of Covenant Theology regarding the Covenant of Works and the Moral Law, his conclusions are consistent with the historic language.

³⁰ Piper, p. 101-102.

This suggests that in Paul's mind the "one act of righteousness" that resulted in our justification may well refer to the entire obedience of Jesus viewed as a single whole--as one great act of righteousness--rather than any single act he did in life.³¹

The matter important to the present question of the ground of justification is this: In what capacity did Christ act when He procured the righteousness that is imputed to His people?

The very fact that this righteousness was procured by an *act* speaks in itself to the truth that this righteousness was *not* something that belongs to His eternal nature as Deity. Something He *did* is counted as the righteousness His people need. Also this righteous act is called *obedience* in verse 19. In what capacity could it be said that Christ *obeyed*? This cannot be true of His divine nature. In that capacity He owed no obedience. *To whom* would a Divine Person render obedience? The Eternal Second Person of the Godhead owes no obedience to a superior. This must refer to an obedience that He took upon Himself voluntarily. This was made possible by virtue of His incarnation. The obedience He rendered, He rendered as a man.

Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15

The connection between Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 cannot be missed at this point. In both passages--passages, by the

³¹ Piper, p. 112. Again, while Piper stops short of taking up the historic terminology of Covenant Theology, he shows that his understanding of the passage is consistent with the system by this statement: "I do not think the historic doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ depends on proving that these phrases refer to the *entire life of Christ's obedience*. **I do think that this is in fact what Paul means**, but the really crucial and more important thing at stake in the controversy is whether or not *any* of Christ's 'obedience' or 'act(s) of righteousness' are imputed to us" (p. 110, Bold emphasis added, italicized emphasis is in original). He makes this point while dealing with the passage as it touches the Nature of justification rather than the details of the Ground of justification which is our point at present.

way, which together supply the two most doctrinally significant and theologically concentrated passages in the whole of scripture--the parallel between Adam and Christ stands as the centerpiece. It is in His capacity as the *Second Man* or the *Last Adam* that Paul presents Christ to view in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49. The role of each, both Adam and Christ, as a Covenant or Federal Head and representative of their respective peoples, forms the theme of the Corinthians passage. Just as Christ is introduced as the “One” as opposed to the other “one” repeatedly in the Romans passage--the Corinthians passage presents these “Adams” as the ones in and through whom God will deal with their respective peoples.

Again, while the present study cannot offer a full exposition of the passage, one text in 1 Corinthians 15 deserves special notice. Verse 21 states:

For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

It is normal for Christians to attribute supernatural work to God as God. It is also normal for Christians to consider the resurrection of their bodies as a supernatural work, and perhaps in the greatest sense it is. But the focus of 1 Corinthians 15 does not fall upon a mere miracle of God’s raising His people from the dead to enjoy a resurrection body. The passage explains that the believer’s resurrection is based upon his union with Jesus Christ. The believer’s resurrection is the inevitable, and, could one say *natural*, result of his union with Christ. Just as his union with the first man resulted in his condemnation and death when Adam sinned as his first head, his union with the Second Man results in his justification and life because Christ died and rose again as his second Head. This is the clear teaching of the passage. Piper states it this way: “By his obedience he undoes what Adam did. By his obedience he fulfilled what Adam failed to do.”³²

Strikingly the text attributes the resurrection to one identified as “*man*” rather than God. This is not to deny or downplay the deity of Jesus Christ, or to overlook the union of natures in

His one Person, but it is to highlight once again His work on behalf of His people in His state of humiliation as their Mediator and as a man, the *Second Man*, the *Last Adam*--the very sense in which He was *made under the law*. In this capacity Christ secured the resurrection of His people. It seems conclusive, when one views the success of His work as *procuring life*, that this corresponds exactly with the promise of the Covenant of Works. This furnishes the ground of the sinner's justification.

Conclusion

The church must come again to realize and to teach that the righteousness which provides the ground of believers' justification is not the righteousness that Christ possesses as the Eternal Son of God, but the righteousness that He merited for them as the Incarnate Son of Man. Was this not His own 'favorite' title for Himself? Such was His love and desire for the welfare of our souls!

Failing to accept this historic view of justification, the modern church has been left to fall into some of the classic historical errors regarding justification. Many of these errors have robbed God's people of grounds of assurance that otherwise would have been theirs. This is not only true in Arminian circles where it is admitted theologically that assurance rests upon the subjective performance of the believer and that his justification is subject to being lost, but this condition sadly prevails in circles where "eternal security" is embraced. The ground of the believer's confidence has not been preached. On the one hand, many have come to view justification as if it were the mere pardon of sin--missing or denying the positive imputation of righteousness. "Just as if I hadn't sinned" is often the deepest definition of justification that believers hear. On these terms they may come to see why they may not perish in hell. Christ bore that for them. But they fail to embrace the reason, or better, the *right* God has to let them into heaven. The objective nature of their legal

³² Piper, p. 103.

standing is unknown to them. The fact that a positive righteousness is imputed to them has not dawned in their conscious religious experience. They do not understand the fullness of what it means to have *the right to be called the sons of God* (John 1:12).

On the other hand, many have unwittingly embraced the error of Neonomianism in one form or another. Neonomianism is the teaching of a “new law.” This error has plagued the church through the centuries and under various titles. Buchanan supplies this definition:

The Neonomian doctrine of Justification amounts in substance to this--That Christ, by His death, made full satisfaction to divine justice for the sins of all mankind, so as to remove every obstacle to their pardon, and acceptance, and to bring them into a salvable state, or to *make their salvation possible*:--that having satisfied the claims of the old law on their behalf, He procured for them ‘a new law,’ called the law of grace, to distinguish it from the law of works,--a new law, which prescribes easier terms of salvation, and instead of requiring a perfect righteousness as the ground of a sinner’s justification, is satisfied with sincere, though imperfect, obedience;...³³

The fact that this doctrine has permeated Evangelicalism and many of its modern theological systems, not in name, but in practice, should be evident for all to see. The ‘new law’ that has been prescribed by the modern church is *faith*. Faith has been removed from its proper place as the Means of justification, and has instead been substituted as the Ground of justification.³⁴ The ‘neonomian’ nature of faith as it is preached in the modern church brings the believer to view faith, that is, *his own act of believing*, as the meritorious ground of his acceptance with God. The frustration and lack of assurance that follows in the wake of this bad theology plagues multitudes in the modern church. They have been left to view their *decision* as what God accepts *in lieu* of per-

³³ Buchanan, pp. 177-178 (emphasis added).

fect righteousness. They live daily, albeit often subconsciously, with the erroneous conclusion: “God lowered His standard in order to let me in.” This is not the gospel.

Only when faith is properly understood as the Means of justification and not its meritorious Ground, can the believer come to full assurance. For even faith as a *grain of mustard seed*, though it be weak and trembling, if it is placed in the *One Mediator between God and men*, brings a man into *full* salvation. What gives faith its value is not its strength, but its Object. Men should be turned away from the constant re-evaluation of their *decision--* which leads so often to a seemingly endless cycle of decisions-- and be turned rather to contemplate the success of the work of their Redeemer in their behalf. Faith is no ground of justification. In fact, a proper understanding of saving faith recognizes that faith has as its peculiar quality that it looks *away from self* and unto Christ as the ground of the believer’s confidence. God did not lower His standard in order to let believers in; He *magnified the law and made it honourable*.

If the contemporary church is to recapture the heart of the gospel and to fight off the many theological and practical dangers of the present crisis, she must climb again to this mountain peak. The vague generalities that reside in the hearts of believers need to be stirred to life and replaced by a biblically educated appreciation of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to them. The objective and perfect nature of their standing with God must become the much needed food and refreshing water to their souls.

The author has suggested a return to the old Protestant doctrines known as Covenant Theology as the remedy for the church’s problems with reference to justification. If some struggle with fears of this system, let them re-examine the system--but from primary sources, not from modern criticisms of the system. All Evangelicals must agree with the above teaching regarding the Nature of justification in order to remain Evangelical in the true sense of the word. All should agree with much of the above

³⁴ This in fact, on this point, directly parallels the position of Robert Gundry, who rejects imputation and that Piper takes to task.

teaching regarding the Ground of justification. If they find that they cannot accept the claims or titles of Covenant Theology, the author believes that it is far better that Covenant Theology be understood for what it really is at the heart of its system, than for it to be criticized and rejected for false characterizations regarding hermeneutics or eschatology.

Evangelicals may find, should they return to preaching the Ground of justification as outlined above, that there is an unexpected benefit in the practical lives of God's people. Good teaching on justification, far from producing the antinomianism that the flesh would introduce, produces motives and successes in the realm of sanctification. When believers are freed from looking at the law as a covenant of works, they rejoice to look at that same law as a rule of life. *They rejoice in the law of God after the inward man* and they strive against indwelling sin. The thoughts of Francis Goode in this regard bring the present study and challenge to a close:

For, of all truths, I am persuaded, there is none to which a Christian will more readily respond than to this,--that the soul is more vigorous, the affections heavenly, and growth in holiness more abundant, exactly in proportion as the believer has a firm hold on the free, full, sure, and everlasting grace of the gospel, walks in the joyful sense of it, as secured to him in covenant, and so experiences "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost." This intimate connection between the *consolations* of the gospel, and that *holiness* of Christian walk whereby the believer glorifies God is strikingly exhibited....To preach (as we must preach) the need of holiness in the believer, and to rest the attainment of it upon any other grounds than a sense of free salvation, (not *procured by* holiness, but bestowed as the *means* thereto,) is like crying to the wretched prisoner in a dungeon,--Be free,--while we take not off his chains. Tell him of salvation as the *gift* of God in Christ Jesus,...and the man has encouragements and motives he never had before. Before he was

to *purchase* life by holiness, and the task was hopeless. Now, he is to *enjoy* by it a life freely *freely given* him in Christ. He sees the light of day: he feels the beams of the Sun of righteousness: and he would as soon abide among the dead, as go back to that darkness, and the deeds of it, in which he once lived as others. This unutterable love of God, to one so undeserving, constrains even his hard heart to love again: and “this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.”³⁵

Preaching free justification based upon the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ does not lead to loose living among the Lord’s people. It is the only solid ground for practical godliness.

Luther’s analysis of the importance of the doctrine of justification was exactly on target. It does mark whether the church is standing or falling. The modern church has indeed stumbled in its understanding and in its fidelity to this doctrine. Thankfully, some Evangelicals are rising up to meet the need of the hour. May Fundamentalists *not be the last* to bring the doctrine back to its proper place³⁶--with a renewed emphasis upon the details of the doctrine, and a renewed zeal that God’s people enter in to the full enjoyment of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

³⁵ Francis Goode, *The Better Covenant* (London: Hatchard and Company, 1864) pp. iv-vi.

³⁶ See 2 Samuel 19:11.

