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A STUDY ON JUSTIFICATION

David H. Linden

I am alarmed to find in our age that the doctrine of justification is fading while the more experiential doctrines of regeneration and sanctification fill the vacuum.¹ For so many, "What God is doing in my life today" takes great precedence over what He did on the cross, and over the moment when we were pronounced righteous in His sight. Thus the imperfect pushes out the perfect!² I observe meetings of Christian workers where the focus is entirely on methods and the delivery of some message, the content of which is hardly ever discussed. Protestants today are more familiar with Luther's name and picture than his world-changing discovery of justification.

Sinners ought to have a little interest in God's verdict concerning our crimes, one announced for believers before the Judgment Day. That we may walk out of His court acquitted, in spite of our guilt, is a matter that raises profound questions about God's justice and the surprising grace of our Mediator. He, Jesus Christ our Lord, unlike any lawyer on earth, assumed our entire burden legally and experientially in His life and His death on the cross. God has even provided us with the benefit of the verdict of Christ's record as our own.

This is no small thing. If it can be treated lightly, it is the same as saying, "Who cares what God thinks?" since justification occurs in the mind of God, not our experience. Forgiveness happens only in the Forgiver. What God thinks

and declares about us should be the chief thing in any enlightened self interest. Here is a most basic element of our identity in Christ. When we speak of our new life, we speak of the superstructure. Justification is the foundation. And that foundation rests on our Savior's obedience and blood. So our Christian experience should not rest on the sand of our imperfect progress.

Justification is not just a nice doctrine. It is the key doctrine in our acceptance by God. Since it happens once, it cannot be repeated in the daily dynamics of Christian living, but it is the reason our walk with God can even begin. And in our many sins, it is the sure foundation on which our confidence to run the race is built. With heaven secured we are more prepared to face life on earth. With our status as righteous irrevocable, we may in God's enabling grace, work on our condition.

1. THE THREE QUESTIONS

- 1) Is there a holy God who requires righteousness of all men?³
- 2) Does He find it in any man?
- 3) How can unrighteous people acquire the righteousness God requires?

1) **Righteousness is required.** One of the fundamental mistakes made in theology, and thus in our assumptions of God, is the notion that God does not require what we cannot produce. If God does not act and have standards that are suited to His character, then it means that His own holiness is just a personal whim and He can create a universe where there are rebels against Him, but He has no basis to demand otherwise. That is a revelation of one of the evils of modern democratic society. It is that the standards of another can never be imposed.⁴ The increasing consistency in this attitude is killing our civilization. God is a great

King, not the elected president of a republic. His will is absolute as well as right. His rule is not based on the consent of the governed. He demands that we be holy because He is holy.

The good news is that God is God and that the righteous Lord loves righteousness and hates iniquity (Heb. 1:8). He governs without embarrassment according to His holy principles, absolutely unmoved whether or not He has the support of men or angels agreeing with Him. God is God. He thinks He is God and He is God. He bows to no one and will have His way. Though God puts down evil with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15), He is not hasty in His judgment—a truth that should make men respect Him greatly and be quick to repent. That He has delayed judgment is no proof He has discarded it. "For the sake of My name I delay My wrath, and for My praise I restrain it for you in order not to cut you off. . . . For how can My name be profaned? And my glory I will not give to another" (Isa. 48:9-11).

It is good news that God cannot change, but if we stand before Him in our sin, His holiness is hardly good news for us. Yet the gospel includes that God may change both the status and condition of sinners.

God did not give His law and require righteousness as a bluff to get mankind to do His will. God is both sincere and serious. He is determined to have "new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). And He will have it, since His words in 2 Peter are not some kind of divine daydreaming but a statement of fact.

Furthermore God is interested in His glory and will not allow His statements, promises or standards to be the laughing-stock of those who hate Him. He will not have His law or its requirements ignored. Every suffering soul in hell is a pitiful witness that God is not to be trifled with. He is a consuming fire who rewards to their face those who hate Him (Deut. 7:10). He insists on perfect righteousness

in angels, men and Himself. May all glory and praise be to God and a joyful fear of Him in us.⁵

2) **God does not find righteousness in us.** The eyes of the Lord are open to all the ways of men; He rewards everyone as His conduct deserves (Jer. 32:19). He has repeatedly told us that there is "none righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-20). His word even judges our thoughts and attitudes. Nothing in all creation is hidden from His sight; everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account (Heb. 4:12-13). The law leaves every excusing mouth silenced.

God searches the heart and not merely our external deeds. Saul of Tarsus was the eminent self-righteous Pharisee of his day who excelled above his peers. He thought he kept the law so well that it would declare him righteous (Phil. 3:5-6). Maybe he meant he had a righteousness that fully met the standards of his fellow Pharisees. In the eyes of his peers he was fine, but he had never heard at that point the Sermon of the Mount. Paul did have one disconcerting run-in with the law he felt he obeyed so perfectly. It said, "You shall not covet" (Ex. 20:17; Rom. 7:7-12). In his early estimation he had kept the law perfectly, as long as it was an observance that could be recorded on a video camera. But the command not to covet was a command directed to the heart, and that command of God made his sin sinful even to self-righteous Paul. What went through his mind when he read, "Let the evil man forsake his thoughts"? He probably assumed it applied to others. I suspect that Paul suppressed this and did not admit it. Others could not observe covetousness in the heart. However, God could. Paul's dirty little secret was that he actually was a sinner, a truth so suppressed by the deceitfulness of the heart that he could avoid admitting his need to real righteousness. He was like a man wearing cow manure for a tuxedo to a banquet and asking others how they like it (see Phil. 3:8 and Matt. 22:11-13).

I admit a measure of speculation concerning Paul's conviction of sin prior to his conversion. That Paul was a law-breaker at the same time he considered himself righteous is absolutely clear. When, with clearer insight, he later referred to himself as a blasphemer, his reference was to the self-righteous period of his life (1 Tim. 1:12-14). What emerges in the New Testament is the failure of the most religious of men to rise to the goal of being righteous before God, and they end up as the most miserable of sinners whose righteousness is the frequent target of the ridicule of Jesus. If the pros can't do it, who can?

We are doomed unless God can find some way to solve what is for us unsolvable. Unless He intervenes, we are left with insulting His righteous standards by imagining that we have attained them. To profess that we measure up is really to suggest that God's holy nature is on the level of our sinfulness. Conversely, it would be to imagine our iniquity as divinely accepted perfection which is an arrogant compliment to ourselves. This shows how our pride twists reality to such an extent that we glorify our sin as satisfactory to God. We should fall on our faces and cry out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." The tax gatherer's prayer comes out of our Lord's teaching on justification, where He opposed sinners' confidence in their righteousness (Luke 18:9-15).

3) **How can unrighteous people acquire the righteousness God requires?** The gospel of Jesus Christ can be understood only when the need for it is appreciated.⁶ The option of a holy God not requiring righteousness of us is impossible. The possibility of sinful men having a righteousness of their own that meets God's approval is equally impossible.

God has shut us up with no option apart from His intervention. This intervention we often call "salvation" since its purpose is to restore to normal. It is often called

“redemption” since it is a rescue where a price is paid to release the one redeemed from the bondage of an enemy, with the motive of making him the possession of the Redeemer. Salvation is the sole activity of whomever may properly be called Savior. In the Christian faith this is God alone, and the divine Person assigned that task of intervention is our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a primary emphasis of this article that the righteousness God provides must be human righteousness. God is righteous, but if He simply provided His own to us, it would mean that His requirement of human righteousness in human beings has been set aside.



How shall this be solved? Or can it be? God has decreed all things and He has “engineered” a situation that calls for the exhibition of His grace. God is gracious, but grace by its very definition can never be demonstrated unless there is a situation where He could justly refuse it and still graciously act on behalf of the undeserving. God’s grace can be shown only in a context of sin. God is who He is, and He, of His own will and desire to express Himself, has chosen to show mercy where He will show mercy and compassion where He will show compassion (Rom. 9:15). That His grace

would be on display is a certainty of His nature. That it would ever be shown to us who are saved is a kindness we have never deserved, and has come based on no good in us. Better people than any of the world’s worst sinners, have gone into perdition, while God chose to save the man who could call himself the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

If God requires a righteousness of us that we do not have, if we are ever to have it, God Himself must provide it for us. It is as simple as it is profound, and there is no other way. In the action that makes the gospel to be a gospel, God has addressed our sins by *giving* us a righteousness we do not have (Rom. 1:17, 3:21-22; 4:23-25; 5:17; 10:3-4). We do not deserve it; we cannot produce it. Yet we must have it or be banished from God’s favor and presence forever.

It is a primary emphasis of this article that the righteousness God provides must be human righteousness. God is righteous, but if He simply provided His own to us, it would mean that His requirement of human righteousness in human beings has been set aside. A righteousness produced anywhere else than in a human life, means that God has actually abandoned His requirement of righteousness in us. This cannot be; therefore another human must appear on the scene, and the only scene where humans live is this planet, so someone has to come here and be born here under the law of God, and keep it perfectly with all his heart, soul, mind and strength.⁷ This is a necessary part of the task of such a person. Much is required of Christ, the other Adam, for Him to be our Redeemer.

Some necessary features of the Redeemer are evident in the Scriptures.

- The substitute must be fully human, and therefore physical with an entrance into the world by means of a woman. Otherwise there would be the creation of

second human race, not a redemption of the fallen one. He must be flesh and blood.

- He must be vulnerable to sin, even though this one who is holy God could never sin. He must feel its power in the weakness of human flesh (Rom. 8:3).
- He must resist sin and overcome it in a test that displays His human righteousness. For His righteousness to stand as credible, He must be tempted in all the ways sinners are.
- There must be a connection to us, or His obedience to God would be a lovely thing to find out about, but one that would do us no good at all. Two doctrines are necessary for this connection: (1) Our union with Christ so that He has a claim on us and acts as a representative for us. This union is the underlying basis of all that God has planned, has done and does for us in the Redeemer He has sent. (2) Because of this genuine relationship between Him, the law-keeper, and us, the law-breakers, there will be a transfer of both benefits and liabilities. In Scripture, this transfer is called imputation.
- The Redeemer must be not only human but a male who stands in the same relation to God and to us as our father Adam. Adam was the head of the human race; Eve was not.
- The requirement of righteousness can never be met if the opposite of righteousness is still on our record to contradict it. There must also be the removal of sin. This, too, falls to the Redeemer.
- The burden our Lord had to bear was so heavy that it could not be borne by a mere man but only by one who, by His nature as God, has the power to consume the wrath of God against our sin. Only God can assume such a load. This is most clear when we see that God has an eternal punishment for our sins,

and only a transcendent person who inhabits eternity can carry an eternal penalty in a moment of time. The human Redeemer must be God Himself.

Redemption is not the obligation of God. It is gracious from start to finish, and though God, out of the necessity of His gracious nature, has made some the objects of His wrath, not one of us who has benefited from His salvation had to be His choice. Apart from His love for us and looking only from the standpoint of our nonexistent merit, He could have passed by all who are elect, and could have chosen others as a bride for Christ, leaving each of us in our sins to curse God eternally in our suffering, while they enjoyed Him forever. God would not be unjust to redeem no one at all.

The gospel is God's provision of a righteousness for the sinner who believes. This is the theme introduced in Romans 1:17 and then resumed in Romans 3:21. The righteousness of God is the righteousness that comes from God to be imparted to sinners who trust God. But that opens the next important subject.

2. THE THREE RIGHTEOUSNESSES: RRr

- 1) The Righteousness of God in His personal behavior.
- 2) The Righteousness of Jesus Christ as a human being.
- 3) The righteousness of redeemed believers in this life.

The *first* of these is perfect. It is the righteousness of the persons of the Trinity, including the Son. The *second* is perfect, but very different in kind. It is a righteousness of response to the Father, a *human* righteousness lived solely in the life of Jesus of Nazareth in His time on earth. The *third* is a consequence of God's salvation begun in justified sinners. (Thus the two upper case "R's" and the lower case "r".)

This third righteousness is transplanted, the result of the divine initiative in us where those chosen by God are called by God to be joined to Christ. This results in our being regenerated as a new heart for God is given to us, enabling us to believe in the Lord Jesus as the condition of justification.



This third righteousness is transplanted, the result of the divine initiative in us where those chosen by God are called by God to be joined to Christ. This results in our being regenerated as a new heart for God is given to us, enabling us to believe in the Lord Jesus as the condition of justification. Therefore God can appropriately treat us as righteous persons to whom He gives the Holy Spirit. The Spirit indwelling believers then enables us to live unto righteousness and to die unto sin. Thus finally, righteousness is actually being produced in the soil of the human heart where sin once reigned.

It is not our purpose now to pursue the righteousness of the believer who has been glorified. That is a perfect righteousness but still one that, while it has become native in the heart, was totally caused by the operation of the Holy Spirit acting within. *Sanctification has no imputation and justification has no implantation!* Since we are always contingent beings, never independent of the Lord who sus-

tains our life, we may view all the righteousness in us, even in the eternal state, as a fulfillment of Isaiah 61:3: "They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified." The redeemed will not boast of their works in their justification, for we had none. Neither shall we boast of our good works in our full sanctification because we are still His workmanship, apart from which we would never have walked in good works (Eph. 2:10). God has engineered a salvation where all the glory is His. If that seems selfish, remember He knows all truth and knows Himself to be the core of all things and the sole producer of righteousness in us.⁸ He cannot picture Himself, contrary to His own truth, as being anything less than the Savior He is. It is a part of His revelation that His Name is *I Am That I Am*. "I, even I, am the *Lord*, and there is no Savior besides Me" (Isa. 43:11). All salvation, including our sanctification, is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

1. **The righteousness of God.** Righteousness in any person is tied to the conduct and acts of that person (Deut. 6:25; Ezek. 18:20). If the deeds are unrighteous, so is the person. God acts righteously because He is righteous. The external reveals the internal. Our Lord taught that evil comes out of the heart (Matt. 15:19). What is within will always be revealed. Therefore righteousness may be defined as those deeds that flow from a righteous person. In the case of God, it is whatever God does. I cannot stress too much how important that is. He is righteous in His kindness and righteous in His wrath, which is one reason the exercise of vengeance is withheld from us. God is not, and cannot be, embarrassed at any action, word or decision He has ever made. If we say man is without shame, we mean he is so evil as to be beyond feeling. When we say God is without shame, we mean that He is so righteous as to be beyond any evil. One of the favorite sins of sinners is to ascribe to God unrighteousness, when men with sin dis-

agree with God's decisions and commandments.

The righteousness of God can never be imputed to anyone unless there is a union of two parties, in some kind of a peer relationship. This is not possible with God unless He becomes man. Amazingly, Christ is not ashamed to call us brothers (Heb. 2:11).⁹ For righteousness to be imputed He had to stoop to our level. He took on Himself the seed of Abraham. He had to share in our humanity in order to die, and He had to share in our humanity in order to produce in Himself human righteousness, so there would actually be something to impute. The divine righteousness is unavailable to be imputed to sinners. The righteousness of the God who commands our obedience can never be looked upon as the righteousness of the one responding in obedience. God does not confuse Himself with us. He looks for righteousness in us to be presented to Him as the basis of His approval of us. Only real human righteousness will do. The divine has "non-transferable" stamped all over it. We have none to present, and God has none in Himself that he may consider to be human—these impossibilities only highlight the task our Lord Jesus was sent to do.

An alternate view¹⁰ has long been proposed. I stress this issue because it has been asserted that God does not impute righteousness to us, but simply produces it in us, and therefore it is the righteousness of God since it has God as its source. And so, as this suggestion goes, He declares us righteous because He is looking at the improvements in our lives that He has graciously begun. In other words, God declares us righteous by looking at our improvements.¹¹

This alternate view sees only a divine repair being gradually produced in the sinner. That is, justification rests on righteousness being replicated in the human heart damaged by sin. But unless we are sinless, God is put in a situation where He would have to lie, pretending that some-

thing in our lives could be the basis of His saying we are righteous. This is plainly false in a volume of Scripture that asserts the sinfulness of believers (1 John 1:8-10). Justification is not based on God's ignoring sin, and His choosing instead to reflect on the supposed "good parts." Justification is based only on His appraisal of the righteousness of Christ.

Paul, as a Christian, did not count himself to have arrived at a perfect native righteousness (Phil. 3:12). His gospel was not of his works of law-keeping before his conversion, nor was it of what a wonderful regenerated fellow he was afterward. He was justified based on the *alien* righteousness of Christ (Phil 3:9). In our new Spirit-caused obedience, we are still unable to obey fully, so our native righteousness does not compare with the obedience of Christ. We do not offer such a product to God for Him to accept as perfect righteousness; it is contaminated and imperfect. That would be just another way of being justified by the works of the law, which is explicitly impossible. "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom. 3:28). We are not justified by our works as unbelievers when we had no good works, nor later as believers when we do good works.

The alternate view above has a lot of good sounds in a very false assertion. It sounds good because the righteousness of the believer is real! Good words are employed in a bad doctrine, because in it no other righteousness is imputed to the needy. The gospel is not that God imputes *our* righteousness to us.

This alternate view is an explanation of salvation that: (1) Cuts out the human righteousness of Christ, and thus it cuts out the Savior. To depart from the Savior as the source of the righteousness God gives in the gospel, is to be cut off from the divine solution. No matter how the words are used, the only acceptable and available righteousness there

is, has been declined. The sinner is left naked, still in his sin and lost. The alternative view is a bubble with the imagery and wording of salvation, yet without the content of Christ's obedience. (2) Followed to its end, is a contradictory scenario that would have God requiring complete righteousness of all men (Deut. 6:1-9), and yet actually not finding it in us but declaring us righteous anyway. Perfect obedience to Him as God is the minimal requirement that He could have of us. (That it is also the maximum is not part of this discussion.) God must be treated as God; if He did not require this of us then He would cease to be God. Fancy footwork will not solve our alienation. It will take the blood, sweat and tears that flowed from Jesus Christ.

The Bible emphasizes the blood of Christ which is shorthand to refer to His sacrifice on the cross, and a way of connecting to the sacrificial principle of the Old Testament. No wonder we are told that we are saved by His blood (Acts 20:28; Heb. 9:13). I mention the sweat and tears above because they are also part of His life of obedience to God. It was the will of God that Jesus should honor Joseph and work in his carpenter shop, if Joseph could even afford one. Had Jesus refused to do so—an impossibility—there would be no righteousness to impute to us and we would all be damned. Our salvation directly depends upon His every act of obedience throughout His lifetime culminating in His obedience unto death. His blood atones, but His sweat and tears are part of the perfect obedience that qualifies Him as Redeemer.

2) **The Righteousness of Christ.** God is righteous, and God is not man. He is looking for righteousness to come back to Him from His intelligent creatures. In His holy angels He receives it. From humans, since the Fall and prior to their salvation, He has received none at all. So a new man has been sent, one not originally man, but who became man, and so is called in 1 Corinthians 15:49 "the

heavenly." Jesus was born of a woman under the law (Gal. 4:4). The gospel is not that we may receive divine righteousness from Jesus, but that we may find human righteousness from Jesus the divine human.¹²

Justification has two sides. There is a positive and negative side. Something *must be* there, and God provides it through Christ. And something *must not be* there and God has removed it through Christ. Neither of these is possible without imputation which, in this case, is God's judicial decision to assign what came from one to another, provided there is a willingness of both parties to give and to take, and that the two are in covenantal union. (We shall deal more with imputation later.) Our focus here is on the positive side, not on sins removed, but on righteousness provided.

If God is not going to play make believe by pretending that we have a righteous response of obedience when we do not, then whatever righteousness He imputes must be real, human, historical, tested, and perfect—something that passes divine scrutiny.



If God is not going to play make believe by pretending that we have a righteous response of obedience when we do not, then whatever righteousness He imputes must be

real, human, historical, tested, and perfect—something that passes divine scrutiny. We need to remind ourselves often how out of the loop we are. We are beggars, and in ourselves apart from Christ, under the divine wrath and curse and deserving every bit of it. We lack and we come short, but we have a Redeemer who is without sin, who, fully obedient, always did what pleased the Father. If we can have His righteous status transferred to us, and our guilt transferred to Him, then all will be well. This was the Father's plan and the Son's assignment, and all this with the absolute delight of the Holy Spirit. That we should embrace the righteousness of Christ as our delight is the issue in our conversion to God.

Paradoxically, our first act of obedience and (imperfect) righteousness is to accept the righteousness, so alien to us, and so freely given to all who repent and believe. But this act of faith is not meritorious, not the ground of our salvation, not self-generated, but only the instrument by which we receive, as we cast ourselves upon the merit of Christ. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Here is a faith that does not look at ourselves but at Christ. It is a faith that receives what it cannot give. Thus Christ is exalted and the Father is pleased.

That we may have the righteousness of Another is at the heart of the gospel. Clearly, it is not a righteousness that we have produced or it would be ours apart from Christ. Somehow it must be received. God deals with those He has eternally viewed as united with Christ, those whom He "had designs" to save, to bring them to Christ. They are Christ's by right, given Him by His Father before the world began, and it then becomes Christ's assignment to go and get them as His bride. Jesus once said of us who believe: "I have other sheep [Gentiles], which are not of this fold [Israel]; I must bring them also" (John 10:16). "They will listen to my voice," which means that He will make the

deaf to hear; He has given us life and a new heart to turn us from our hostility to Him. This is just another way to say He has given us life from above, the new birth. With a changed heart, we have a delight in the provision of God. We are pleased to receive a gift from one we are now inclined to respond to, and we take the gift offered us. That "free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification" (Rom. 5:16). The act of receiving is faith; the gift received is the righteousness of Christ and all else that He provides as our Mediator. To reject a gift is to reject its giver. When we receive the gift of righteousness we receive the one who produced it; we receive Christ Himself.

The faith we have in Christ does not offer anything in us to God; faith only takes what God gives. It receives, it rests upon Christ as He is offered to us in the gospel. We buy without money, since we have no currency to offer to God (Isa. 55:1-2). And yet faith is not a dead thing. There is no such thing as an unresponsive response. We do take; we embrace; we accept Christ and all the benefits that are in Him, even when faith is like a mustard seed, so small that we cannot grasp how massive is the heritage into which we have entered.

Faith in Christ means now that we have a righteousness we can point to. God has never revised His requirement for a full obedience to Him. We have acquired it in Christ. We curse our own native righteousness as unclean (Isa. 64:6), but we seize that of the only obedient man. Paul had more claim to self-generated righteousness than any sinful man recorded in Scripture. Later he received Christ and then spoke of his law-keeping, his false obedience, and all his works: ". . . and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:8-9).

Receiving the righteousness of Another is the heart of justification. (And justification, coupled with propitiation, is the dual heart of the gospel.) The way to gain Christ is to discard the competition to His righteousness, namely ours! Paul trashed his that he might gain Christ's. The rejection of his own was repentance; the reception of Christ's was faith. For Paul to retain his own righteousness would be to insult Christ's as if they were on a par. To reject his own was part of receiving the Lord's. No one admires Christ and retains his own righteousness.

In Romans 9:30-10:13, Paul sets up a contrast of two ways of justification. The Jews who were rejecting the gospel Paul preached were not insensitive to the law. They knew righteousness was required. But they blundered in supposing their own would do and that Christ's was not needed. Philippians 3 is Paul's theological explanation of his conversion, and Romans 10 reports the theological rejection by his beloved brothers in the flesh, his fellow Jews. They did not know the righteousness that comes from God and so they sought to set up in competition with His, their own, and in so doing did not submit to God's provision of righteousness. In not submitting to it, they rejected the wisdom of God, the kindness of God, the gift of God, the Son of God and all hope of ever being truly justified in His sight. They rejected forgiveness, and all who did so to the end have entered eternity without Christ, while one Gentile after another trusted in Christ and became sons of Abraham by faith in the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

The gospel is that God is so satisfied with the obedience and death of Christ that He would require nothing at all from us, either as law fulfillment or atonement for our sins. If God is satisfied with Christ's work, and He is, and if in Christ He offers full forgiveness plus a status of "righteous" in His sight, we too should be satisfied with such a provision and grab it with all our hearts. Such grabbing is faith.

The gospel is a promise that lays no reconciling burden upon us and that gives all things to us. We are worse than fools to reject it; we are rebels not only against the holy requirements of God, but despisers of the grace that would meet them for us. How horrible to face God in unbelief, when the Christian gospel is doubly good. It is peace extended and wrath averted. Rejection of Christ reverses both, because peace is scorned and wrath is still in place.

The one who believes in Jesus has this *assurance*. We need not look to our own performance to see if the goodness is enough. We look to Christ. We need not think about what our sins deserve so that we might make restitution to God with some kind of penance to merit our forgiveness. We look to Christ. Such looking is faith (John 6:40). We need only be satisfied that His life was good enough, His death was death enough and His Father pleased enough with Him, and peace floods our hearts. And even if we have clouded emotions, because of lingering guilt over current sins, the work of Christ still secures the status of the one who has believed in Jesus. The believer is totally justified even when sin is evident in us, and it always is. Confusion will upset our hearts. But we have assurance as we contemplate Christ, His worth, His work and the promises tied to Him. This never fails to result in real righteousness in us. It flows from Christ; it never compares to His.

3) The righteousness of redeemed believers. The righteousness of God and that of Jesus as a man is perfect. In fact His human righteousness is as perfect as the righteousness of God. Perfection is painted over the whole canvas. Perfect obedience is our calling as Christians, but it is not our experience. Our justification is not in jeopardy, though any sin without repentance gives us reason to question whether we have justification.¹³ Scripture tells us that the one born of God will not live in sin, yet affirms that we have sins (1 John 1:5-10; 3:4-10). Our justification is point-

ed solely at Christ's righteousness and our sanctification is solely focused on ours. Our discussion has moved from the alien righteousness (Christ's) to native (ours). My burden here is to convey that the native righteousness implanted in us is defective because it is mixed with sin, and yet is real—a proof in our experience of the presence of the living God within, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Many pitfalls await us, but the primary one I address here is the distinction between justification and sanctification. Both have real righteousness in view, one utterly perfect and the other imperfect. Justification is an act of God where a righteous status is granted us, and sanctification is a process of growth involving struggle with sin where the goal is never reached in this life. Holiness is never absent in the believer (Heb. 12:14-15), and sin is ever present.

It would be an insult to the Holy Spirit to deny that the righteousness in us is real. It is not bitter fruit but the fruit of the Spirit. It cannot be false; God is its source. But we are children learning to walk, learning to obey and die to sin. It is critical to our not destroying the gospel itself, that we see that the obedience and good works that are now a part of our experience are never the basis of God's declaring us righteous. If God looked on our lives as the ground of His declaration, He would pronounce us sinners, because in ourselves, we are.

The word "righteous" is used of us in two very different senses: (1) In Christ we are righteous only in the sense that He has represented us and obeyed God for us, thus this new *status was bestowed* on us. (2) In Christ we have received into our lives the Spirit who changes our behavior in a *change of condition* that is a qualitative change, not a mere improvement where the old is fair and the new is better. The old is the dead works of flesh hostile to God; the new is the fruit of the Spirit, which is pure and good but which has not yet fully transformed our behavior to full

obedience. What He has done is not to be despised, nor may we ever confuse it with the perfection of Christ. "Righteous," in this second sense, is a statement of our conduct.

Justification is a gracious act of God concerning undeserving sinners in which He both pardons us for all our sin, reversing our condemnation, and with this acquittal, bestows upon us the status of righteous persons. Justification occurs upon the response of faith in Jesus Christ when we believe the promise of the gospel.



If one views the real change in us when we have come to Christ and received God's Spirit, and if this change is believed to be the basis of God's justifying declaration, then the righteousness of Christ has been discarded, instead of our own. Hypothetically, justification could be on the basis of Christ or ourselves, not both! If on ours, it means that His obedience is disregarded and set aside, and we deal with God on our own with all the horrors of divine scrutiny upon us again, as we stand unrepresented by a Mediator. We are back to nakedness before God—lacking the clothing of the righteous linen of Christ, condemned for our sins and resting in ourselves as if there were no Sav-

ior at all. We must learn to distinguish Christ's righteousness which is the ground of our hope from our righteousness which is the focus of our duty. Ours is real; His is real; but ours is a consequence of justification, and His is the ground. His is the cause; ours is the effect. The cause is perfect while the result is still underway. I think God has refused to allow us a perfect sanctification in this life so that we will always have a keener sense of the righteousness of Christ.

3. THE CRUCIAL UNDERSTANDING OF IMPUTATION

1. A definition of justification. Justification is a gracious act of God concerning undeserving sinners in which He both *pardons* us for all our sin, reversing our condemnation, and with this acquittal, *bestows* upon us the status of righteous persons. Justification occurs upon the response of faith in Jesus Christ when we believe the promise of the gospel. The full guilt of our sin was imputed to Christ and its full penalty assumed by Him in human history on the cross. The needed righteousness was provided on the condition of faith, and has been imputed to us solely on the human obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who having become man died and obeyed in our place.

While this definition is my own construction, it is one that has drawn from many godly sources as the Scriptures have been assimilated by many who have gone before: the Reformers, the Puritans at the Westminster Assembly in London in the seventeenth century, even Miss Catherine McKenzie, who taught me about God's promise of a Lamb to come, as she instilled into the hearts of the little children in her Sunday school class the stirring story of Abraham and Isaac. My gratitude to my parents, my teachers in the schools where I studied, especially my mentor, Robert L. Reymond, is so great I cannot type these words with dry eyes.¹⁴ What a precious heritage and what a precious gospel

has been entrusted to us to teach, explain, defend and spread to all nations. Special credit is due the *Westminster Confession* and both *Westminster Catechisms*. One would do well to read carefully Questions 70-73 and 77 in the *Larger Catechism* and to memorize Q. 33 in the *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."

Note several important distinctions in a good definition of justification:

- Justification is not based on our experience. It takes place only outside our experience; the specific place is in the mind of God. Forgiveness can occur only in the Forgiver, not the forgiven.
- It always impacts our experience as a consequence. We have peace with God, the result of forgiveness. We have first the peace of reconciliation and then the peace we feel.
- As transcendent, it cannot be known apart from revelation. It has been revealed to us in the Scriptures, the Word of God, and is unknowable by any other means.
- It is a newly established relationship into which we are brought and in which we are to begin the Christian life. In the experience of regeneration we are alive, in the transcendence of justification we have been established as righteous persons; in adoption we are brought near as sons and daughters. Being a Christian can only follow becoming a Christian.
- Justification is unalterable with no vicissitudes of friction, offense, or the need of further forgiveness, as is the case with our chastening as children of God, and our need of sanctifying cleansing.

- It is perfect; we have been justified (Rom. 5:1).
- It is unrepeatable, the final sentence of acquittal that can never be rescinded. We have been “sentenced” to eternal life and heaven.
- Justification is judicial or forensic. When acquittal /justification vs. condemnation are seen as exact opposites, it helps us understand both.
- The act of justification is synonymous with the moment of imputation of righteousness to us. Justification from the divine perspective works by imputation.
- There is a response on the human side—faith. In our faith we do not impute (a) our sins to Jesus, or (b) His righteousness to us. Only God can do that. But we do believe His promise in the gospel that God has done and will do for the sinner who believes.
- There is no saving justification from the human side, since it is a unilateral divine act. We never justify ourselves. To justify ourselves is to justify our sin. God never justifies sin; He justifies sinners who have been united to Christ.
- It is not legal fiction. No fiction is involved since the obedience of Christ and His suffering on the cross are real history. It is legal, for it is a ruling of God in our favor because of Christ. In justification, we have been given the legal rights of righteous persons. To diminish justification’s legal aspect is to leave us with nothing but our condition. God cannot look at our condition and declare us righteous. So to remove the legal side of our salvation is to remove justification entirely.
- It is an act, not a process.
- Regeneration produces faith, and faith is the condition of justification but never its basis. The basis is the life and sacrifice of Christ.

- Justification is the basis of the reception of the Holy Spirit, the chief Gift of God to those who are already His children. The Spirit then unleashes all the stream of blessing that follows in this life and the next.

2) **The importance of imputation.** One of the saddest issues in this doctrine is the resistance there has been to this doctrine.¹⁵ To reject imputation is to destroy the only way my sins can be “laid on” Christ, which is a reference to imputation without using the word! Imputation is the “mechanism” of accounting and transfer. With those who do not accept justification, imputation is the specific concept usually being declined when justification is labeled a “legal fiction.” When I hear people mention justification by faith, I often want to say, “Yes, and justification by imputation!” Most evangelicals know that justification is not by works and is by faith. But that has reference only to *our* response. But how does God justify? What does He do? He certainly does not exercise faith. We believe and God imputes.

Our legal standing is the issue here. We have a stark choice when we read in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that “He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.” Either it is legal imputation, or it is a statement of His commission of sin. There is no other option. Our choice is between blasphemy or the gospel. Imputation alone protects the character of Christ. Without it Paul has said that Christ is a sinner, but with imputation He is the sinless sin-bearer of the sins of others.

God laid our sins on Jesus (Isa. 53:6). Sins are not material objects that have a certain size or weight. The load on Christ is an accusation He accepted for us, not a ton of bricks, but the verdict of “Guilty.” The One without guilt assumed guilt for us, so that He could take the penalty so that we could be relieved of the wrath of God. How do our

personal sin and His righteousness get transferred? By the gracious agreement of the Father and Son in a transfer called imputation.

We may speak of it as transferred charges, resulting in exchanged consequences, an accounting of the liabilities of one against the assets of another. It is not that Jesus just took our penalty; He took our place as guilty, while being personally innocent. He never sinned, so how could He become sin for us, according to 2 Corinthians 5:21? Sin outside His experience was transferred to His account. The Innocent One assumed the guilt of our sin, but not the commission of our sin. Who did it? I did. Who took it? He did. And so He was condemned and treated as the guilty one which He had legally become, so that the ones who committed the sins might be legally justified and receive the treatment the righteous deserve. Thus guilt was transferred to Christ when sentenced for us, and the "sentence" of righteousness was transferred/imputed to believers.

In Romans 4, the apostle repeatedly speaks of righteousness being imputed. Paul had shown earlier that we have no righteousness; therefore to receive righteousness requires an external source. And that source is Christ. The law and the gospel have combined to close one source and open another. That leaves us asking how it can be done. At this point imputation becomes everything to keep all the work of Christ from being merely a nice idea. Without imputation there may be a place for sin to go, but it cannot get there.

Imputation is at the core of our salvation, yet the word is now rarely used. I suspect that this is just another evidence of the decline of transcendence in evangelical life.¹⁶ When a modern Christian is faced with the choice of his own experience and what occurs in the mind of God, his modern appetites drive straight to the experiential. Who cares what goes on in the mind of God? Who cares? Only

the one who trembles before God concerning his sin is interested in justification. That the vocabulary of justification is in decline only reveals that the concepts are also in decline. The more recent expressions of "accounted" or "credited" are not common coin in current gospel communication either. If the concept fades, the gospel itself will be less and less understood. The subject is not exotic; it is basic.

Consider the following illustrations of imputation: (1) Sarah is a good piano player. (2) Sam stole the teacher's purse! (3) Christ became sin for us. (4) That sinner has been justified.

Each sentence has an imputation in it. Let us say that the facts are that Sarah *is* a good piano player, but that it was Ned who stole the teacher's purse, not Sam. The imputation of a talent to Sarah is true. It adds nothing to her but recognizes something about her. If this were the model of imputation, God would impute righteousness to Christ and none to us. That kind of nonrepresentational imputation adds nothing to Christ, and gives nothing to us. An imputation of what we are and have done is a recipe for our condemnation. We need to be delivered from this kind of imputation since a statement of what we are in ourselves is synonymous with condemnation. An imputation to us of what we are not, but what we are seen to be in Christ, is justification.

Poor Sam is being maligned. He did not steal the purse, and so a falsehood is being imputed to him. This too, is not the imputation in our salvation. Christ is not falsely accused, nor did He say that He did what He did not. In taking the sinner's place He does not pretend to have done what we have done. That would be a legal fiction, because He did not sin. Conversely, when we receive His righteousness the Father is not saying, "I approve of the way you fed the five thousand, and the way you replied to Pilate." We

are not talking nonsense! The specific deeds of Christ are not imputed to anyone, only the merit of His obedience giving us the same righteous status He has.

Adam's sin was imputed to all his race because he represented us and acted for us, such that his status as sinner became ours. Adam's transgression was his decision to sin. In that moment he decided that he would be a sinner and that we would be as well. See Romans 5. In Adam we sinned. Just as parents can decide their children's citizenship, so did Adam. He decided that we all would be sinners. The human race had a representative government with Adam as its head. When he fell we did too. His individual decision was an individual one for him but a corporate one for us.¹⁷

But we have been sent another Leader, thank God, who stepped in as the representative of His people. He, too, decided for us by obeying God and willingly taking on personal responsibility for our sin. There is nothing vulgar about such a kindness. He chose to fulfill a role for us as head of the new human race which involved absorbing the cost and penalty of the sin of those He represented. This is an intervention in depth and with massive consequences. For Him it meant the cross and for us it means the glory of His presence. His was and is a gracious complete personal involvement in our legal tangles. "While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6).

What Christ did was assume the power of attorney for us, not just in decision making, but in assuming personally our charges and thus the penalty of our transgressions. In this sense, as a loving capable Savior, He stepped in to solve the entire mess for us at His own expense. This should be believed as the doctrine of the Christian faith and as the gracious message it is. It compels us to love and good works or, if not, one can only wonder if it is truly under-

stood, or whether the benefits of imputation have ever been experienced. Those forgiven will forgive; those justified will give thanks to God. Some may struggle with the truthfulness of "Him who knew no sin to *be* sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21). If so, it is still what the Scriptures say. The depths and mysteries of salvation are past our finding out!

*The grace of Christ taking the place
of His helpless and undeserving people,
and giving us what we need, and
enduring what we deserved, is at the
core of our faith and the new model
of all healthy human relationships.
It is foundational to our ethics.*



Our union with Christ underlies the doctrine of imputation. Justification is not like Simon being tapped to carry the cross because he was big and strong and nearby. The Roman soldier who forcefully recruited Simon was being arbitrary and authoritarian. Christ has received us even before we became His in faith and consciousness. The Father gave us to Him before the world began (John 6:37; Eph. 1:3-11). In His assignment to redeem, Christ was acting on behalf of His own. If a rich man marries a poor woman, a woman deeply in debt, at the instant of their

union, her debts should become his. Since betrothed to us in God's eternal plan, He took on our troubles before we had them, assuming all responsibility for them in His humiliation on this earth. And He did it before we committed the very transgressions for which He suffered.

Love gives good and suffers harm. Cannot the greatest Lover of all step in by embracing our trouble? Can He not say, "You just lay that to my account, and give the blessing I deserve to her! Treat me as you would her, and her as you would me." Cannot God be this gracious?

The grace of Christ taking the place of His helpless and undeserving people, and giving us what we need, and enduring what we deserved, is at the core of our faith and the new model of all healthy human relationships. It is foundational to our ethics. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven and treat as God has treated us (Eph. 4:31). Why would some Christians seek to disparage the way God has transferred sin and righteousness, when we the poor have become the beneficiaries and God the One receiving the glory? In imputation, Christ is bringing home the groceries and taking out the trash. What a wonderful Husband He is.

Only by imputing sin to Christ does God protect His glory against the charge that He has done nothing about the sin in us He professes to despise. Only by imputation can sin get to Him or righteousness to us. Everything depends on it.

CONCLUSION

The obedience of Christ in living a righteous life under the law and meeting the law's penalty for us on the cross, is the sole basis of justification. To this great and complete work we add nothing, but receive all its benefits by faith alone, benefits made ours by divine imputation. May this gospel of grace delight your heart, remove your fear, seize

your mind, fuel your worship, spur your service, and produce a harvest of good works. God has sent and looked at Christ in our place. If the Father fixes His eyes on Christ, may we in believing the gospel do the same, for in that gospel a righteousness from God has been revealed.

Author

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Notes

1. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). "Evangelicals . . . have lost interest . . . even in those doctrines that articulate Christ's death such as justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. It is enough for them simply to know that Christ somehow died for people" (131).
2. This sentence has understandably troubled hearers. It is not that the Holy Spirit does imperfect work. It is that His work in us is intended to be incomplete prior to glorification. At the coming of Christ, the saving ministry of the Spirit will be seen to be as complete as the saving ministry of Christ. But we are left now with the perfect righteousness of Christ as a gift in justification, and our own developing righteousness as our experience in sanctification. We must not confuse the perfection of one with the imperfection (so far) of the other, yet the light of much current preaching is often turned to the improvements within us, the wrong place to worship, and away from the righteousness of Christ, the real place for unhindered delight.
3. Many teachers begin this subject with the question, "How can a man be right with God?" This is an equally appropriate way to open the question. It is of a sinful man looking up at a holy God. We can also begin with a holy God looking down at sinful men.
4. Here I recommend Wells' latest book, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998).
5. For excellent coverage of righteousness from a different perspective, see

- Fred G. Zaspel, "Four Aspects of Divine Righteousness," *Reformation & Revival Journal* (Fall, 1997), 6:4:67-85.
6. A recent translation of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English*, revised and updated by L. Edward Hazelbaker (North Brunswick, New Jersey: Bridge-Logos, 1998) is commendable. See chapter 19, "The Pilgrim's Deal with Ignorance," 189-99. Bunyan connects a confidence in the wrong righteousness with an inadequate conception of sin. I think Hazelbaker's translation conveys Bunyan's doctrine faithfully.
 7. Again I recommend the translation above of *The Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English*, chapter 18, "Hopeful Tells of His Conversion" (p. 83). "... Unless I could obtain the righteousness of a Man who never sinned. ... Did you think there was such a Man to be found? ... 'And did you ask who this man was?' asked Christian."
 8. *Ibid.*, 71. Zaspel has said it better than I: "It would be unrighteous, inconsistent with His own being, were He not to require us to live to glorify Him."
 9. I do not think we should call Him "Brother," because I think the divine condescension should not have a response of peer-like speech on our part. We are His bride and He is our husband, yet we call Him our Lord and our God. This is just my opinion.
 10. Quoting the Council of Trent, the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), says in paragraph (¶) 1989, "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner man." Further, "Justification is the acceptance of God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Righteousness here means the rectitude of divine love. . . (¶ 1991). So I say, this righteousness, if it is a change in us, cannot be the obedience of Christ for us outside of us, an obedience distinguished from all righteousness in us, because ¶ 1991 continues to focus justification on the change in the one justified. The *Catechism* is speaking from Romans 5:5, but in that verse Paul was speaking of the already justified. The *Catechism* uses his words not as a description of a result of justification but as a description of a process of justification, thereby confusing an act of God based on Christ's obedience with the Spirit's work when love is poured into one already justified. It says justification is a work (¶ 1994). I reply then that it cannot be an act. And probably worst of all is the teaching of merit after the sections on justification and grace. It says, "... No one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification," but it adds that if moved by the Holy Spirit, "we can then merit for ourselves and others the graces needed for . . . the attainment of eternal life" (¶ 2010). Rome has an ambivalence whether eternal life is a gracious gift or a partially merited attainment. A gift cannot be partially earned and still be a gift! In the new *Catechism*, the righteousness upon which justification rests is clearly not that of Christ imputed to us, but is primarily, after much grace, the defective righteousness growing up in our hearts, weeds and all. But in the gospel, God has provided a righteousness that he has no qualms in accepting as

- absolutely suitable. This is still lost in the great shuffle of human improvements buried under the language of grace, but when all is peeled back, there is still the sinner's cooperation to contribute his deeds to his justification. Sinners' righteousness is no match for Christ's. If we cannot see the distinction, God does! Roman theology lacks a sharp "either/or," and serves its people a "both/and"—His righteousness and ours!
11. Bunyan deals with this error with vigor! Ignorance said, "I'll be justified before God from the Curse through His gracious acceptance of my obedience to His law. . . ." Part of Christian's long reply to this was, "... You believe with a false faith because it takes justification away from the personal righteousness of Christ and applies it to your own" (*ibid.*, 93).
 12. We must be very careful here. The expression, "It's only human!" reflects an expectation that human sin is natural. But we were not created sinners; our sin is a terrible departure from God's original human creation. In order to stress that Christ has come as the last Adam to obey for us as a man, I have used such language as "human righteousness from Jesus the divine human." We must not lose that this is called "the righteousness that comes from God." John Murray says it is God-like in its quality, and this is what we would expect from the only Man in history to exhibit the untainted "image of God" in His humanity. His righteousness has God as its source or sender, and the human man in whom it was produced by the Holy Spirit, is God the Son. So it is proper to say that a divine quality characterizes the human obedience of Christ. I also refer the reader to what is said earlier in this article in the last paragraph of "Some Necessary Features of the Redeemer" in Part One.
 13. There is now a doctrine making its rounds in Western Canada that we are to confess our sins but once, only at conversion. It argues from the vantage of full forgiveness in justification, but fails to comprehend the imperfect righteousness of our sanctification. Of course, our confession of sins must not be a repudiation of the perfection of justification. But that perfection has not resulted yet in a perfection in us, so that it is a sin not to confess our sins. There is enough disobedience to warrant it. See Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Repentance, Recovery and Confession" in *Here We Stand, a Call from Confessing Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996). Ferguson is not the example of the error, but is a good study on repentance. Nor was his article written to refute the error mentioned.
 14. Two of these men died on the same day, November 15, 1998—my father, John Angus Linden, and the man who first taught me the book of Romans, Mr. Mark Bredin of New Brunswick Bible Institute. Their memory is sweet and their works do follow them.
 15. I have written elsewhere on one glaring example of this in an article titled, "Charles G. Finney's Doctrine of Justification" in *Reformation & Revival Journal* (Fall, 1997), 6:4. Finney deplored the idea that Christ's righteousness was imputed to believers. He held vigorously to an antievangelical notion that God justifies on condition of the sinner's

obedience to God, not Christ's. This is a shock to most who hear it for the first time, so we have no recourse but to urge people to read his theology for themselves in *Finney's Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1994).

16. This burden is set out so well in David F. Wells' *God in the Wasteland, the Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994). If we lose the transcendence of God, justification is an impossible doctrine to sustain. The trend today is to be preoccupied with our experience while the holy obedience that saves us happened entirely outside that preoccupation.
17. See John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979) or a shorter treatment of the subject in his commentary on Romans 5:12-21 in his *The Epistle to the Romans*, (178-210). This commentary was formerly part of *The New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965) but has been replaced by a more recent work. Murray's volume is still in print at this writing and is highly recommended.