

Alien Righteousness?

A Re-examination Of The Idea That Believers Are
Clothed In The Righteousness Of Christ



Roderick Graciano

And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean;
for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

Revelation 19.8

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Dedication

To the glory of our Kinsman-Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In appreciation of [R. C. Sproul](#), [John Piper](#) and [Wayne Grudem](#), three of my favorite contemporary theologians, men whose hearts are wholly dedicated to the glory of Jesus, and whose teachings and writings have the clarity that makes them wonderfully amenable to testing by the scriptures. And in recognition of [N. T. Wright](#) for his part in rocking the theological boat and confirming our need to resubmit our Evangelical presuppositions about justification to the lens of holy writ.

In Memory Of

[George Eldon Ladd](#)

who first drew my attention to the relational aspect of righteousness through his book, *A Theology Of The New Testament*.

Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

ABBREVIATIONS	VII
PRONUNCIATION GUIDE.....	X
PREFACE	XI
SYNOPSIS	1
SOME IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS	5
THE DOCTRINE OF ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS AS CURRENTLY TAUGHT	9
1. JUSTIFICATION IS BASED UPON WORKS (ETHICAL PERFECTION).	9
2. JUSTIFICATION BY OUR OWN WORKS IS IMPOSSIBLE.	10
3. AS OUR FEDERAL HEAD, JESUS WAS ALSO OUR ETHICAL REPRESENTATIVE.	10
4. OUR SINS WERE IMPUTED TO CHRIST.	11
5. CHRIST’S DEATH AND RIGHTEOUS LIFE ARE IMPUTED TO THE BELIEVER.	12
6. GOD DECLARES THE SINNER JUDICIALLY NOT ETHICALLY RIGHTEOUS.	15
7. NEITHER FAITH NOR GOOD WORKS HAVE INTRINSIC WORTH BEFORE GOD.	17
SUMMARY OF THE DOCTRINE OF ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS	18
ARGUMENTS FOR THE DOCTRINE OF ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS	21
1. GOD OBLIGATES US TO BE ETHICALLY PERFECT AS WE COME TO HIM.	21
2. JUSTIFICATION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS ARE NECESSARILY FORENSIC.	22
3. JUSTIFICATION HAS TO DO WITH DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE.	23
4. JUSTIFICATION CANNOT OCCUR BY INFUSED RIGHTEOUSNESS.	23
5. OUR SINS WERE IMPUTED TO CHRIST.	25
6. SCRIPTURE TEACHES IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS.	27
7. PAUL HAD A RIGHTEOUSNESS NOT HIS OWN.	28
8. BELIEVERS ARE “IN CHRIST.”	28
9. IMPUTED GUILT IMPLIES IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS.	30
10. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IS GIVEN TO ALL WHO BELIEVE.	31
MORE ARGUMENTS FOR THE IMPUTATION OF CHRIST’S RIGHTEOUSNESS	32
PROBLEMS WITH THE DOCTRINE OF ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS	35
10. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IS HIS OWN ATTRIBUTE AND ACTION.	35
9. ROMANS 5.12-19 IS INADEQUATE AS IMPUTATION’S PROOF TEXT.	44

8. "IN CHRIST" REFERS TO FAMILIAL SOLIDARITY.	47
7. SCRIPTURE TEACHES THE PURSUIT OF PERSONAL RIGHTEOUSNESS.	58
6. IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IS A REFORMATION NOVELTY.	71
5. SIN-BEARING REQUIRES NO IMPUTATION.	80
4. IMPUTATION VS. INFUSION IS A FALSE DILEMMA.	85
3. DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AWAITS THE FINAL JUDGMENT.	99
2. JUSTIFICATION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS ARE RELATIONAL.	103
1. CHRIST CALLS US TO BE PERFECT AFTER WE COME TO HIM.	105
PORTRAYING GOD AS SELF-DELUDING PRESENTS AN ADDITIONAL PROBLEM.	109
WHAT SCRIPTURE TELLS US EXPLICITLY.....	123
ADAM'S DISOBEDIENCE BROUGHT UNIVERSAL SIN AND DEATH TO MANKIND.	123
THERE ARE RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE, NEVERTHELESS!	125
NOW THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD HAS BEEN REVEALED.	127
GOD IS THE ONE WHO JUSTIFIES.	130
WHAT THEN IS JUSTIFICATION?	133
CONCLUSION	135
1. JUSTIFICATION IS BASED UPON FAITH, NOT WORKS.	135
2. JUSTIFICATION BY OUR OWN WORKS IS IMPOSSIBLE.	135
3. AS OUR KINSMAN REDEEMER, JESUS INTERVENED AS OUR SUBSTITUTE.	135
4. CHRIST BORE THE SINS OF MANY.	136
5. IN CHRIST, WE HAVE BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD.	136
6. GOD RECEIVES THE REPENTANT BELIEVER AS FACTUALLY RIGHTEOUS.	136
7. GOD HIGHLY VALUES OUR FAITH AND SUBSEQUENT GOOD WORKS.	137
EPILOGUE	139
THE GLORY OF GOD IS AT STAKE.	139
THE HEALTH OF BELIEVERS IS AT STAKE.	141
WHY HAS THE DOCTRINE OF ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS PERSISTED?	143
GLOSSARY	145
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES.....	157
SCRIPTURE INDEX.....	167
BIBLIOGRAPHY	175
APPENDICES	181

Abbreviations

Abbreviations For Bible Versions

CJB	<i>Complete Jewish Bible</i> , © 1988 by David H. Stern.
CSB	<i>Holman Christian Standard Bible</i> , © 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers.
ESV	<i>The Holy Bible, English Standard Version</i> , © 2001, 2007 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.
GNT	<i>The Greek New Testament</i> , 4 th Edition, © 1975 by the United Bible Societies.
KJV	<i>King James Version of the English Bible</i> , © 1997 by the Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship of Ontario, Canada.
LXX	The Septuagint (ancient Greek version of the OT)
NAS	<i>The New American Standard Bible</i> , © 1977 by The Lockman Foundation.
NAU	<i>The New American Standard Bible</i> , © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.
NIrV	<i>The Holy Bible: The New International Readers Version</i> , © 2010 by Zondervan.
NIVO	<i>The Holy Bible: New International Version</i> , © 1984 by International Bible Society.
NKJV	<i>The New King James Version</i> , © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.
NLT	<i>Holy Bible, New Living Translation</i> , Second Edition, © 2004 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
RSV	<i>Revised Standard Version of the Bible</i> , © 1952 [2 nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
VUL	<i>The Vulgate</i> (ancient Latin version of the Bible).

Abbreviations For Bible Books

1Ch	1 Chronicles	Jam	James
1Co	1 Corinthians	Jdg	Judges
1Jo	1 John	Jer	Jeremiah
1Ki	1 Kings	Job	Job
1Pe	1 Peter	Joe	Joel
1Sa	1 Samuel	Joh	John
1Th	1 Thessalonians	Jon	Jonah
1Ti	1 Timothy	Jos	Joshua
2Ch	2 Chronicles	Jude	Jude
2Co	2 Corinthians	Lam	Lamentations
2Jo	2 John	Lev	Leviticus
2Ki	2 Kings	Luk	Luke
2Pe	2 Peter	Mal	Malachi
2Sa	2 Samuel	Mar	Mark
2Th	2 Thessalonians	Mat	Matthew
2Ti	2 Timothy	Mic	Micah
3Jo	3 John	Nah	Nahum
Act	Acts	Neh	Nehemiah
Amo	Amos	Num	Numbers
Col	Colossians	Oba	Obadiah
Dan	Daniel	Phil	Philippians
Deut	Deuteronomy	Phm	Philemon
Ecc	Ecclesiastes	Pro	Proverbs
Eph	Ephesians	Psa	Psalms
Est	Esther	Rev	Revelation
Ex	Exodus	Rom	Romans
Eze	Ezekiel	Rut	Ruth
Ezr	Ezra	Song	The Song of Solomon
Gal	Galatians	Tit	Titus
Gen	Genesis	Zec	Zechariah
Hab	Habakkuk	Zep	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai		
Heb	Hebrews		
Hos	Hosea		
Isa	Isaiah		

Bibliographic Abbreviations

ACCOS	<i>Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture</i>
Diog	<i>Epistle To Diognetus</i>
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Sir	<i>Wisdom Of Ben Sira</i> , aka <i>The Book Of Sirach</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament</i>
TDNTA	<i>Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament: Abridged In One Volume</i>

Miscellaneous Abbreviations

Ch.	Chapter
<i>et al</i>	and others
Grk	Greek
Heb	Hebrew
Ibid.	in the same place
Ms, Mss	Manuscript, Manuscripts
<i>op cit</i>	in the work cited
V., vv.	Verse, verses

Words and phrases in [blue](#) are terms that appear in the **Abbreviations** lists, the section on “**Some Important Definitions**” (p. 5), the **Glossary** (p. 145), or the **Biographical Notes** (p. 175).

Pronunciation Guide

For Greek and Hebrew words in this work I have provided a phonetic pronunciation after the word in its original form. For vowels, follow this key:

ä = a as in Father.

ā = a as in fate.

ă = a as in cat.

ē = e as in feet.

ě = e as in bet.

ə = a as in among.

ī = i as in bite.

ĩ = i as in bin.

ō = o as in vote.

ö = o as in lot.

ū = u as in cute.

ü = u as in blue.

The sound of consonants in the pronunciations should generally be self-evident, but note that in neither Greek nor Hebrew do we find the sound of *ch* as in *chew*. Rather, when *ch* is given in a pronunciation, it should be sounded as a guttural *k* as in *Bach*.

The accented syllable in the pronunciations will be marked with a preceding mark like this: ' .

Preface

In this book I urge my fellow believers to reexamine the idea of [Alien Righteousness](#) and its implications for the Protestant doctrine of justification. I do so, however, without iconoclastic zeal. I realize that I am disputing a cherished idea that, though questioned by others before me, has stood for 500 years. I humbly pray, therefore, that readers will discern and bring to my attention any errors in my research, interpretations or reasonings. “Let a righteous man strike me — it is a kindness; let him rebuke me — it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it” (Psa 141.5 ^{NIVO}). I assure the reader that it is with deep respect for our Protestant heritage and for the great [Evangelical](#) theologians of the past and present, that I dare to propose deleting a secondary idea from our larger doctrine of justification. I make such a proposal only in the hopes of nudging our understanding and teaching of justification onto a more solidly biblical foundation.

To those who, as they begin to read this work, say to themselves, “Oh, he is a Wesleyan, an Arminian,” I respond, with all love and respect for my Arminian friends, that I am not of that persuasion. To any who might suspect that I have become what the Reformers and Puritans called a Papist (Catholic propagandist) or a [Socinian](#) (anti-Trinitarian), let me say categorically that I am neither! To those who might think, “He is a [Pelagian](#), suggesting that people are justified by their own merit,” I only ask for a fair hearing. Anyone who reads to the end of this book will know with certainty that I fully subscribe to justification “by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.”

I have done my best to make this technical work readable and understandable to the layperson. After a beginning synopsis, I define a handful of important terms, and then also provide a more extensive Glossary, along with Biographical Notes, at the end of the book. Furthermore, where I mention Greek and Hebrew words, I have provided a phonetic pronunciation (rather than a classic transliteration).¹

May God bless all who read this book, and give them a renewed commitment to the authority of Scripture, along with a greater fervor to grow in the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Roderick A. Graciano
Tacoma, WA
December 19, 2011

¹ I have provided the Modern rather than Erasmian pronunciation for Greek words.

Synopsis

The central teaching of the Reformation was that justification is “by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.” As the Reformers developed their explanation of precisely how our gracious justification occurs, they hit upon the idea that God imputes “the righteousness of Christ” to us. This novel idea of *Alien Righteousness* (i.e., the idea that someone else’s righteousness is credited to us) soon became an integral auxiliary doctrine to the Reformers’ larger doctrine of justification by faith. Thus, *Alien Righteousness* is taught by Lutheran and Reformed theologians to this day, and even Evangelicals who do not think of themselves as Reformed have appropriated the idea, teaching that God imputes “the righteousness of Christ” to us, and “thinks of us as righteous” (even though we are not) because He sees us as clothed in the righteous works of Jesus.

While this auxiliary doctrine of *Alien Righteousness* commendably exalts Christ and emphasizes the impossibility of justification apart from Him, it nevertheless lacks a biblical basis for its core idea of the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ.” The main proof text brought forward on this point, Romans 5.12-19, is a passage which simply cannot bear the theological weight that has been hoisted upon it.

Therefore, those who defend the idea of *Alien Righteousness* often do so by implying that the only doctrinal alternative is the Roman Catholic idea of “infused righteousness.” This is the idea that ethical righteousness is infused into the soul sacramentally (through baptism, etc.) so that it becomes inherent in us, producing good works which finally justify us. Since this Catholic doctrine of (in effect) saving one’s self is excluded by Scripture, Reformed and Evangelical theologians thereby feel that their case for *Alien Righteousness* is proven by default.

However, until recently the theological debate has failed to take into account a third view of how justification works. What if righteousness is not primarily ethically-based, but relationally-based? We discover that the Hebraic principle of redemption by a kinsman provides the essential background for an alternative interpretation of the NT passages about justification, including the pivotal Romans 5 text. If we understand righteousness as *primarily relational* rather than *ethical*, then when God receives us as righteous, we really are righteous — not because we have attained to flawless *ethical* behavior, but because we are properly related to God by a trusting relationship, and are now members of His family.

Besides lacking scriptural basis, the doctrine of *Alien Righteousness* is theologically problematic in that it portrays God as self-deluding: God engages in a “legal fiction” and tells Himself that believers are righteous when they are not. The best attempts at rebutting this criticism of the doctrine’s portrayal of God have failed completely. Proponents of *Alien Righteousness* have insisted that the *imputation* of Christ’s righteousness is no fiction because “it is a real *imputation*,” but they have failed to see that they are begging the question and offering no rebuttal but a restatement of their own presupposition.

This brings us to the practical and pastoral concerns regarding the idea of *Alien Righteousness*. Portraying the omniscient God of truth as One who fibs to Himself has *not* helped the Church think correctly about Him, or Scripture, or morality. Also, our teaching that “God looks at us as clothed in the righteousness of Christ” has inadvertently made Western *Evangelicals* complacent about pursuing God’s “kingdom and His righteousness.”

When we look again at what Scripture tells us *explicitly* about justification, we find that the righteousness we receive in justification is indeed alien, but not in the way that is popularly believed. While the righteousness we receive by faith has alien aspects, it nevertheless becomes fully our own, such

that we are truly righteous in God's sight with no need for subterfuge on God's part.

If the 500-year-old doctrines of *Alien Righteousness* has no biblical basis, why did it take such a hold on Protestant and **Evangelical** theology? The surprising answer is that it is a foundation stone required in the complex doctrinal edifice that supports an ancient Catholic practice, a practice that many Protestants have been loathe to leave behind.

Some Important Definitions

What we are about to examine is an auxiliary doctrine to the great Protestant doctrine of Justification By Faith. The auxiliary doctrine is the teaching that in justification God imputes an *alien righteousness*, “the righteousness of Christ,” to the believing sinner so that the justified person becomes clothed in a righteousness completely extrinsic to himself.² I will henceforth refer to this auxiliary doctrine as the doctrine of Alien Righteousness. The overarching doctrine of Justification By Faith, and its subsidiary doctrine of Alien Righteousness are both expressed in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism’s* Question 33:

Q. 33: What is justification

A: 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.³

In this excerpt from the Catechism, we note that justification is “received by faith alone,” and that it involves the imputation to believers of “the righteousness of Christ.” The first of these two propositions I consider beyond question: Justification is “received by faith alone.” The second, the proposition that God imputes to believers “the righteousness of Christ,” is what we will carefully examine in this work.

Unavoidably, we must begin this examination with some attempts at definition. For the sake of clarity, I invite the reader to review the meanings of just a handful of words and phrases, beginning with the word:

² J. I. Packer, in the endorsements at the beginning of John Piper’s *Counted Righteous In Christ: Should We Abandon The Imputation Of Christ’s Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), writes, “With John Piper, I think that as the doctrine of justification by faith alone is a vital means to the church’s health, so the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ is a vital element in stating the doctrine.”

³ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996). The *Larger Catechism, Question 70*, expands this statement:

Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners, (Rom 3.22,24–25, Rom 4.5) in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; (2Co 5.19,21, Rom 3.22,24,25,27,28) not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, (Tit 3.5,7, Eph 1.7) but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, (Rom 5.17–19, Rom 4.6–8) and received by faith alone. (Act 10.43, Gal 2.16, Phil 3.9)

The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

Faith

In biblical usage, faith is a conscious state of dependent reliance upon God rather than self (Mar 11.22), with a trust in the verity of all God's promises, and is inevitably evidenced by a God-honoring life. This reliance and trust is a gracious gift from God (Eph 2.8; 2Pe 1.1; Act 3.16), and in justification focuses upon the atoning work of God in Christ (Rom 3.24-26).⁴ Part of this investigation has to do with the question of what is credited to believers when they place their trust in Christ, so we've already bumped into the words:

Impute and Imputation

The verb *to impute* simply means to credit something to someone, and *imputation* is the act or event of that crediting. What is credited can be something already possessed. For example, a professor might say to a student, "You have an A on your final, so I'm crediting (imputing) that to you in my grade book." In this kind of usage, imputation is simply a recognition or acknowledgement of what someone already has.⁵

However, what is credited in imputation can also be something not antecedently possessed. For example, a relative running the Ferris Wheel at the carnival might say to his two cousins, "I'm crediting you with two tickets (I'm imputing two tickets to you); go ahead and climb on the ride." In this usage, imputation means that someone is being credited with what they didn't have; a person in authority is acting as though they did (or do now) have it, possibly at a cost to himself.⁶

The imputation taught in the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) is called:

⁴ Cf. [Thomas Aquinas](#), "Faith is the act of intellect when it assents to divine truth under the influence of the will moved by God through grace," *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 2, a. 9. According to Glen H. Graham, in *An Exegetical Summary Of Ephesians*, 2nd Edition (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), Lenski notes that, "Even in relationships strictly on the natural, human level, 'faith' is something that is normally produced in one person by the actions of another."

⁵ Thus we see that in Job, the sins that are "reckoned" are *actual* (Job 31.28; 34.37) as are the sins *not reckoned* by love (1Co 13.5; cf. 2Ti 4.16), or by God (2Co 5.19). Nor does Paul "take credit" for what he doesn't actually do or say (2Co 12.6).

⁶ [John Owen](#) carefully explained that imputation can be of something already ours *or not* antecedently ours. He further distinguished four kinds of imputation and clarified that different kinds of imputation can occur simultaneously:

1. *Ex justitia*: Federal or Natural
2. *Ex voluntaria sponsione*: when one freely and willingly undertakes to answer for another, for unjust treatment or loss of property.
3. *Ex injuria*: when one is held responsible or punished for the sins of another (see 1Ki 1.21).
4. *Ex mera gratia*: the non-imputation of sins or the positive imputation of non-antecedent righteousness.

See John Owen, *The Doctrine Of Justification By Faith*, ed. William H. Goold (Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53), pp. 220-221, 223.

Forensic

This adjective describes something as having to do with discussion, debate or declaration in a public forum. An announced verdict or other declaration in a courtroom is therefore a forensic pronouncement, and such a courtroom pronouncement relates closely to our use of the word *forensic* in theological discussion. In theological formulations, *forensic* generally means that the thing in view has to do with *a judicial declaration*.

Now let's briefly consider the phrase:

The Righteousness Of Christ

Biblically, we cannot precisely define “the righteousness of Christ” since Scripture never uses this exact phrase.⁷ Generally speaking, though, past [Reformers](#) and present [Evangelicals](#) have used the phrase “the righteousness of Christ” to refer to the cumulative total of all Christ's righteous deeds (together with their merit) which He accomplished during His earthly life. In [Evangelical](#) teaching then, for God to impute the righteousness of Christ to us means that God chooses to think of us as having done all that Christ did. That is, God thinks of us as having lived an ethically perfect life, and allows us to benefit from the merit of that life.

Speaking of an ethically perfect life, let's think for a moment about the word:

Ethical

In Christian discussions about justification, the word *ethical* means “pertaining to right and wrong *in conduct*; being in accordance with the rules or standards for right conduct or practice.” Theologically, then, *ethical* righteousness is a righteousness based upon actual conduct (performance) as evaluated against an authoritative standard like God's law. A complementary idea to *ethical*, and one that in theology must be held in tension with it, is:

Relational

The word *relational* is a general term which simply speaks of the reciprocal attitude or interaction that two or more persons have toward or with one another. In this work, however, I will emphasize the kinship connotation of

⁷ Peter refers to “[the] righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2Pe 1.1), but in this instance refers to it as the source, not the result nor object, of our faith (contra Hiebert, Lenski, and Kistemaker); see David Strange, *An Exegetical Summary Of 2 Peter*, 2nd edition, (SIL International, Dallas, TX, 2008). The phrase “His righteousness” is used in the NT, but it refers to “the righteousness of God” which we will discuss below.

relational (Gal 3.26), and argue that justification is primarily *relational* rather than *ethical*. That is, I will propose that justification is based upon our relationship with God made possible by faith in Christ, rather than upon the *ethical* “righteousness of Christ” being imputed to us.

Another word we will run into as we discuss the doctrine of *Alien Righteousness* is:

Federal

In theology, and especially in what is known as *Federal Theology*, this adjective refers to the covenantal aspect of something. When theologians speak of Christ as our “federal head,” they refer to Him as our covenantal representative. According to the current doctrine of *Alien Righteousness*, we have entered into a covenant with God by faith, and in this covenant, Christ is our federal head, i.e., our legal “point man,” in all mediation before God’s throne.⁸

Finally, we must return briefly to the word:

Justification

We can only tentatively define *justification*, in spite of the *Westminster Catechism’s definition* given above, since the question of what justification *is* and *how* it occurs is at the core of our present investigation. Nevertheless, in theological discussion, *to justify* generally means to make right or acknowledge as right, and *justification* refers to the act of God, or the means, by which He reconciles the once estranged sinner to Himself.⁹

Now, with these definitions in mind, let’s look at how the doctrine of *Alien Righteousness* is currently articulated.

⁸ See *Federal Theology, Federal Headship* in Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary Of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

⁹ Recent scholarship, particularly that associated with what is referred to as the “New Perspective” on first-century Judaism and on Paul, has emphasized some corporate and eschatological aspects of justification that contrast with — but are generally complementary to — the traditional emphases on the individualistic and present-time aspects of justification. For this examination of *Alien Righteousness* we will mostly limit ourselves to discussing the traditional Protestant emphases, but we *will* touch on the relationship between present-time and eschatological justifications.

The Doctrine Of Alien Righteousness As Currently Taught

To understand the current teaching of [Alien Righteousness](#), we must break it down into its seven constituent ideas. These ideas are:

1. Justification is based upon works ([ethical](#) merit).
2. Justification by our own works is impossible.
3. As our federal head, Jesus was also our *ethical* representative.
4. Our sins were imputed to Christ.
5. Christ's death for sin *and* His perfect life are [imputed](#) to the believer.
6. God declares the sinner *judicially* righteous at the moment of faith, though the sinner himself is not *ethically* righteous.
7. Nothing done by the justified person pleases God nor has any virtue in itself, except for Christ's sake.

Let me briefly explain each of these points.

1. Justification is based upon works (ethical perfection).

It may strike a dissonant note in our theological ear to hear that our justification is based on works, but Presbyterian theologian, [Charles Hodge](#), insisted that this is true:

The meritorious ground of justification is not faith; we are not justified on account of our faith, considered as a virtuous or holy act or state of mind. ... The ground of justification is ... perfect obedience ...¹⁰

[Hodge's](#) meaning will become clearer when I fill in the ellipses in his statement later, but let the part I've just quoted help us realize that *many Evangelicals don't believe that acceptance with God is based upon faith!* Rather, they believe God accepts us on the basis of ethical performance. Indeed, [Evangelicals](#) generally believe that a person must be sinlessly perfect in conduct to enter God's presence. Of course, we understand that we can never attain such sinless perfection in and of ourselves, and so proponents of Alien Righteousness rejoice that we can avail ourselves of "the righteousness of Christ." As [Charles Hodge](#) explained,

The ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ, active and passive, i.e., including his perfect obedience to the law as a covenant,

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), p. 118.

and his enduring the penalty of the law in our stead and on our behalf.¹¹

Or as he put it succinctly in an earlier passage of his *Systematic Theology*, “By [Christ’s] obedience [believers] are justified.”¹² A current admirer of [Charles Hodge](#), [Robert L. Reymond](#), concurs, saying, “*Christ’s* character and conduct are the determinative ground of [the believer’s] approbation before God.”¹³

Let us understand, then, that according to this doctrine the ultimate basis for justification is perfect obedience. [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents teach that we must be able to present a perfect record of ethical performance to God in order to be justified, even if that record is someone else’s. [R. C. Sproul](#) analyzes [John Calvin’s](#) view on this matter and says, “Calvin identifies only two possible ways God can [justify a sinner]: that person is justified either by his own works or by Christ’s works.”¹⁴

2. Justification by our own works is impossible.

Of course, [Calvin](#) emphasized that no sinner can be justified by his own works. Regarding justification, he said,

... a man will be *justified by faith* when, excluded from the righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and clothed in it appears in the sight of God not as a sinner, but as righteous.¹⁵

According to [Calvin](#), then, man is *excluded* from attaining righteousness by works. However, by this he meant “by his own works.” Calvin believed that sinners are justified by the works of Christ.

3. As our federal head, Jesus was also our ethical representative.

Justification by the works of Christ is possible, according to [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents, because Christ is our new “federal head,” our

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), p. 118.

¹² Ibid., Vol. II, p. 551.

¹³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 440.

¹⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 101, citing Calvin’s *Institutes*, 2:38 (3.11.2). Calvin was a French Reformer, 1509-1564. He does not speak of being justified by “Christ’s works,” but Sproul has captured what Calvin means by his oft repeated phrase in the *Institutes*, “the righteousness of Christ.”

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes Of Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), III, xi, 2.

covenantal representative, superseding our father Adam.¹⁶ As such, Christ acted for His people, not only by suffering in their place, but also by His life-long obedience to God's law as He "fulfilled all righteousness."¹⁷ As [Wayne Grudem](#) puts it, "Jesus was our representative and obeyed for us where Adam had failed and disobeyed."¹⁸ [Grudem](#) elaborates on this idea in a more extensive passage, speaking of believers in the first-person and saying,

Throughout Christ's entire life on earth, from the time of his birth to the time of his ascension into heaven, God thought of us as being "in Christ." That is, whatever Christ did as our representative, God counted it as being something we did, too. ... God *thought of us* as going through everything that Christ went through, because he was our representative.¹⁹

The point not to miss here is that, according to this doctrine, Christ not only represented us by His death for our sins on the cross, but also by His preceding life. He represented us as He lived out his daily righteous conduct throughout the course of His sojourn on earth.

This brings us to the matter of [imputation](#).

4. Our sins were imputed to Christ.

Within the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#), bound up with its core idea of imputed righteousness, is the corollary idea of *imputed sin*. The doctrine teaches that our sins were imputed to Christ. Scripture tells us that Christ "bore the sin of many" and that "the LORD caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isa 53.6,12), and the doctrine of Alien Righteousness explains how this occurred. [Wayne Grudem](#) spells it out:

God *imputed* our sins to Christ; that is, he *thought of them as belonging to Christ* and, since God is the ultimate judge and definer of what really is in the universe, when God thought of our sins as belonging to Christ, then in fact they actually did belong to Christ.²⁰

¹⁶ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 439-440.

¹⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. II, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), p. 554. See also Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, *New Dictionary Of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), p. 698.

¹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), p. 540.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 841, italics original. Grudem here echoes Luther's words from the sermon of 1518, *Two Kinds Of Righteousness*, where Luther boasts, "Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did."

²⁰ Ibid., p. 574, italics original.

Grudem qualifies the above statement somewhat, saying, “This does not mean that God thought that Christ had himself committed the sins, or that Christ himself actually had a sinful nature, but rather that the guilt for our sins (that is, the liability to punishment) was thought of by God as belonging to Christ rather than to us.”²¹

R. C. Sproul, however, states this element of the doctrine without reserve:

God declares Christ to be “guilty” of sin after the Son willingly bears for his people sins that are imputed or transferred to him. Here is imputation with a vengeance — indeed a divine vengeance. This forensic act of imputed punishment is the very heart of the New Testament message. With no pun intended it is the *crux* of the matter.²²

So, we can summarize this constituent idea of the doctrine of Alien Righteousness this way: God, as a forensic act, credited Jesus with the guilt and punitive liability of our sins.

Now let us look at the other side of the coin, the core idea in the doctrine of Alien Righteousness, namely the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer.

5. Christ’s death and righteous life are imputed to the believer.

In a document released on June 1, 1999, and entitled “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,” leading Evangelicals signed on to the belief that:

As our sins were reckoned to Christ, so Christ’s righteousness is reckoned to us.

In the “Affirmations and Denials” at the end of the document, number 12 states:

12. We affirm that the doctrine of the imputation (reckoning or counting) both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us, whereby our sins are fully forgiven and we are fully accepted, is essential to the biblical Gospel (2Co 5.19-21).²³

²¹ Ibid., p. 574. Dabney would have concurred, saying, “it is only our guilt and not our moral attribute of sinfulness which was imputed [to Christ].” R. L. Dabney, *Lectures In Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1927), p. 641.

²² R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 104. For a conversation in which both John Piper and Rick Warren affirm that imputation is “at the core of the gospel,” please see Appendix 1.

²³ Committee on Evangelical Unity in the Gospel, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,” *Seek God*, ed. Vicky Dillen, June 1, 1999, <http://www.seekgod.ca/ec.htm> (accessed September 23, 2010).

It is clear, then, that the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) teaches not only that our sins were imputed to Christ, but that His righteousness is imputed to the believer. In current thinking, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer means the imputation of both *the judicial satisfaction accomplished by His death* and *the actual record of His righteous life*.

Though Scripture never says explicitly that Christ's death (or the judicial satisfaction of it) is imputed (i.e., credited) to the believer, it is apparent that this is so since "Christ died *for our sins*" (1Co 15.3) and became the guilt offering and [propitiation](#) for them (Isa 53.10; 1Jo 2.2). The doctrine of Alien Righteousness, therefore, strongly affirms this reasonable assumption *regarding Christ's death*. The great American intellect, [Jonathan Edwards](#), acknowledged the general agreement among earlier [Reformed](#) theologians regarding the imputation of Christ's suffering to us, saying in his sermon on Justification,

First, I would explain what we mean by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Sometimes the expression is taken by our divines in a larger sense, for the imputation of all that Christ did and suffered for our redemption, whereby we are free from guilt, and stand righteous in the sight of God and so implies the imputation both of Christ's satisfaction and obedience.²⁴

Note that according to "our divines" *imputation* means "the imputation of all that Christ ... suffered."

However, in this part of his sermon [Edwards'](#) intent was not to emphasize the imputation of Christ's death to the believer — which we have acknowledged is warranted from Scripture — but the imputation of *His life*. Having noted that theologians believe in "the imputation of both Christ's satisfaction [i.e. His death] and obedience [i.e. His life]," [Edwards](#) went on to say,

But here I intend it in a stricter sense, for the imputation of that righteousness or moral goodness that consists in the obedience of Christ. And by that righteousness being imputed to us, is meant no other than this, that the righteousness of Christ is accepted for us, and admitted instead of that perfect inherent righteousness which ought to be in ourselves. Christ's perfect obedience shall be reckoned to our account, so that we shall have the benefit of it, as though we

²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Justification By Faith Alone*, Vol. IV, in *The Works Of Jonathan Edwards* (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), pp. 359-360.

had performed it ourselves. And so we suppose that a title to eternal life is given us as a reward of this righteousness.²⁵

Similarly, John Murray affirmed that by *imputation* “the righteousness of Christ becomes that of the believer.”²⁶ Murray clarified that it is not merely the judicial satisfaction of Christ’s atonement that is credited to the believer, but Christ’s very acts of righteous obedience themselves:

... In justification ... it is not merely the *judicial benefit* of Christ’s righteousness or obedience that is imputed to believers but the righteousness itself.²⁷

In other words, God looks upon a justified person as though he had done everything that Jesus did during the course of His earthly life. Wayne Grudem offers an explanation for why this is necessary. The obedient life of Christ must be imputed to the believer — not just His death for sins — because,

...if God merely declared us to be *forgiven from our sins* that would not solve our problems entirely, for it would only make us morally neutral before God. We would be in the state that Adam was in before he had done anything right or wrong in God’s sight — he was not guilty before God, but neither had he earned a record of righteousness before God....

However, such [an attainment of guiltlessness] is not enough to earn us favor with God. We must rather move from a point of moral neutrality to a point of having positive righteousness before God, the righteousness of a life of perfect obedience to him....

Therefore the second aspect of justification is that God must declare us not to be merely *neutral* in his sight but actually to be *righteous* in his sight. In fact, he must declare us to have the merits of perfect righteousness before him.²⁸

²⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Justification By Faith Alone*, Vol. IV, in *The Works Of Jonathan Edwards* (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), pp. 359-360. Owen acknowledged that regarding “the righteousness of Christ that is said to be imputed unto us” there was controversy in the Reformed churches “for some would have this to be only his suffering of death, and others include therein the obedience of his life also.” John Owen, *The Doctrine Of Justification By Faith*, ed. William H. Goold (Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53), p. 93.

²⁶ John Murray, *The Imputation Of Adam's Sin* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), p. 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76. Dabney said it this way: “It may be said without affecting excessive subtlety of definition, that by imputation of Christ’s righteousness, we only mean that Christ’s righteousness is so accounted to the sinner, as, that he receives thereupon the legal consequences to which it entitles.” R. L. Dabney, *Lectures In Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1927), p. 641.

²⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), p. 725, emphasis original.

This is a faithfully Calvinistic perspective. John Calvin had long before written,

Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.²⁹

Notice how Calvin made “the forgiveness of sins” and the “imputation of the righteousness of Christ” two different things.³⁰ This is because in Calvin’s mind the one related to Christ’s death while the other related to Christ’s life. So, the doctrine of Alien Righteousness teaches that *both* the death of Christ (the propitiation for sins) *and* the life of Christ (“the righteousness of Christ”) are imputed to the believer.

6. God declares the sinner judicially not ethically righteous.

This double imputation, according to Alien Righteousness proponents, is forensic; that is, it consists of a judicial declaration. John Calvin evoked the imagery of the courtroom when he wrote, “For the righteousness of Christ (which, being the only perfect righteousness, is the only one that can bear the Divine scrutiny) must be produced on our behalf, and judicially presented, as in the case of a surety.”³¹ John F. Walvoord, put it more simply and spoke for all proponents of Alien Righteousness when he wrote,

The imputation of righteousness is a judicial act by which the believer is declared righteous before a holy God.³²

A question naturally arises about when, precisely, this judicial declaration and imputation occurs. Calvin answered, “all who are clothed with the righteousness of Christ are at the same time regenerated by the Spirit,” implying that the imputation of righteousness occurs at the moment of new birth.³³ Agreeing, but putting the accent on faith, Robert L. Reymond writes that “the ground of the Christian’s justification is Christ’s imputed obedience which saving benefit every Christian receives the moment he becomes a

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), III, xi, 2.

³⁰ As a parallel idea, Enns writes, “Whereas forgiveness is the negative side of salvation, justification is the positive side.” Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook Of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989).p. 326.

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, III, xiv,12, trans. John Allen, Vol. II, II vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board Of Publication, 1813), p. 13.

³² John F. Walvoord, “Imputation,” in *Baker’s Dictionary Of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1960), p. 282.

³³ John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, IV, xv, 12, trans. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

partaker of Christ through faith...”³⁴ R. C. Sproul concurs, saying, “What is required for our justification is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, and that righteousness is imputed the moment faith is present.”³⁵

A second question also comes to mind: With God’s declaration of righteousness, does the sinner become *actually* righteous or only “*thought of*” as righteous by God. In answer, Sinclair Ferguson is quoted as saying, “In the Bible the verb ‘justify’ means ‘to count righteous’ not ‘to make righteous.’”³⁶ Charles Hodge explained that so long as we understand the word *righteous* as expressing moral character, “it would be a contradiction to say that God pronounces the sinner righteous.”³⁷ The imputation of Christ’s righteousness does not suddenly change the sinner into a perfect saint. As Sproul puts it, “That a saint is still a sinner is obvious.”³⁸ Hodge, though, did opine that a justified sinner *is* righteous before God, but only *legally* so, because God “declares that his guilt is expiated, [and] that justice is satisfied.”³⁹

Wayne Grudem concurs with these other theologians, but goes beyond the purely legal aspect of justification to describe what occurs in the mind of God. Grudem says that God “thinks of Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us and so relates to us on this basis.”⁴⁰ Indeed,

When we say that God *imputes* Christ’s righteousness to us it means that God *thinks of* Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us, or regards it *as belonging to* us. He “reckons” it to our account.⁴¹

We are not just declared legally righteous, then, nor are we constituted actually righteous, but rather God pronounces us legally righteous *and* also imagines that we have lived the righteous life of Christ.

R. C. Sproul, well aware of the discomfort many feel with the idea that God imagines things that did not really happen, defends the tenet vigorously in various of his works. For example, in *The Holiness of God* he writes,

This all sounds something like a fraud, like God is playing legal

³⁴ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 747, 757.

³⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p 125. Likewise, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), p. 105.

³⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, @SFerguson, http://twitter.com/#!/SFerguson_ (accessed April 9, 2011).

³⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), p. 120.

³⁸ R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness Of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985), ch. 8.

³⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), p. 120.

⁴⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), p. 1244.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 726, italics original.

games. He counts us righteous even when in and of ourselves we are not righteous. But this is the gospel! This is the good news, that we can carry an account of perfect righteousness before the judgment throne of a just and holy God. It is the righteousness of Christ that becomes ours by faith. It is no fraud and much less a game. The transaction is real.⁴²

In summary, then, of this component of the [Alien Righteousness](#) doctrine, we learn that the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer occurs at the moment the sinner believes (which moment is considered as more or less concurrent with new birth), and that this imputation consists of a legal declaration that results in God *thinking of the believer* as having lived the perfectly obedient life of Jesus — even though the believer, in and of himself, is still a sinner.

7. Neither faith nor good works have intrinsic worth before God.

Not only is the believer still a sinner, but neither his act of believing nor any antecedent or subsequent works have any intrinsic worth in God's eyes. This final element of the doctrine of Alien Righteousness commendably endeavors to remove all temptation to find justifying merit in man himself. [Calvin](#) writes,

We say that faith justifies not because it merits justification for us by its own worth, but because it is an instrument by which we freely obtain the righteousness of Christ.⁴³

[H. W. Heidland](#) in [TDNTA](#) agrees, saying, "In Gen 15.6 God reckons faith as righteousness because he is pleased to do so and not because it has intrinsic worth."⁴⁴ Going further with the same idea, [R. D. Preus](#), in analyzing [Luther's](#) "theology of the cross," describes the Reformer's belief that,

God is pleased with the Christian's faith not because faith is a virtue, but for Christ's sake, because Christ is the object of the faith; he is pleased with the Christian's life, not because of the nobility or value of

⁴² R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness Of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985), ch. 8. What R. C. seems unwilling to understand is that critics see the transaction itself as fraudulent; granted it's a "real" transaction, but the transaction itself is dishonest. To insist on the reality of the transaction is to beg the question regarding a fictional element in justification.

⁴³ John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, III, xviii, 8, trans. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁴⁴ H. W. Heidland, "Logizomai, Logismos," in *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament: Abridged In One Volume*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985). Heidland might not have been careful in his wording, for he seems to equate the faith with the reckoned righteousness, exactly as Gen 15.6 implies, but as Piper and others are so forcefully denying.

his works, but again for Christ's sake, because the believing sinner stands and lives before God in the imputed righteousness of Christ. Even the Christian's worship pleases God, not because of its intensity or sincerity or outward form, but for Christ's sake.⁴⁵

None who hold this theology intend to diminish the rightness or value of good works as proper and beneficial social behavior, but only wish to repudiate any thought that faith or good works accrue merit before God. Accordingly, they teach that in connection with justification and the believer's ongoing acceptance before God, only the righteous behavior of Christ matters; the believer's faith and good works are completely subsumed and disappear within "the righteousness of Christ."

Summary Of The Doctrine Of Alien Righteousness

We can now summarize the doctrine of Alien Righteousness simply with the help of some graphic illustrations:



Figure 1

The doctrine teaches that a man must appear before God clothed in perfect righteousness or he will not be allowed to appear before Him at all. However, God sees the man apart from Christ as clothed in the filthy garments of his own sinful acts (Fig. 1 above). This man is powerless to wash or strip off the filthy robe he is wearing, and certainly cannot manufacture a robe of perfect righteousness for himself.

⁴⁵ R. D. Preus, "Lutheranism And Lutheran Theology," in *New Dictionary Of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), p. 406.

When the man comes to faith in Christ, though, the robe of “the righteousness of Christ” is brought out (Fig. 2 below).⁴⁶ This white robe represents both the [propitiating](#) sacrifice of Jesus *and* His life-long record of perfect obedience to God’s will.⁴⁷



Figure 2

God then imputes “the righteousness of Christ” to the man, and since this robe of righteousness includes the cleansing merit of Christ’s [propitiation](#) on the cross, the man’s filthy robe of sins is stripped away (Fig. 3 below).

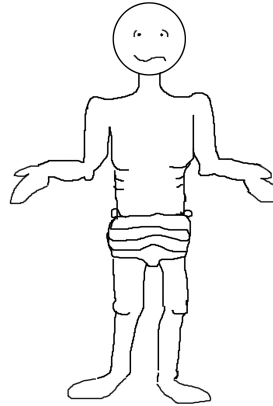


Figure 3

⁴⁶ According to [Alister E. McGrath](#), [Luther](#) thought of “the believer as covered in the righteousness of Christ in much the same way ... as Ezekiel 16.8 speaks of God covering our nakedness with his garment.” Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001). However, Eze 16 is about Jerusalem (Israel), not about us per se, and the covering that God does is subsequent to His declaration “Live!” (v. 6). Furthermore, God’s covering in this Eze passage has to do with entering a marriage covenant (vv. 8-10), and while it may indirectly allude to covering sin, it has nothing to do with imputed righteousness.

⁴⁷ John Gill saw the “righteousness of Christ” as represented by “the best robe” that was brought out for the prodigal son (Luk 15.22). John Gill, *The Doctrine Of Justification, By The Righteousness Of Christ, Stated And Maintained*, Sermon (Rio, WI: AGES Software).

However, the man cannot remain naked (without any positive merit) before God, so “the righteousness of Christ” instantly clothes him in perfect, though alien, righteousness (Fig. 4 below).⁴⁸ As [R. C. Sproul](#) puts it,

God clothes his filthy creatures with the coat of Christ’s righteousness.

This is the very heart of the gospel ...⁴⁹

Now the man is declared justified before God and can enter God’s presence. However, the man can never claim that he himself is actually righteous, nor that his faith had any intrinsic value. Not even his subsequent good works please God in and of themselves, for God only looks at the beautiful robe of “the righteousness of Christ.”



Figure 4

⁴⁸ “[Men] are justified by the righteousness of Christ — an ‘alien’ or ‘external’ righteousness, as Luther used to put it. He used the image of placing a cloak around his young son Hans before he left the house on a cold winter’s day to convey this idea: in the same way, God cloaks, or covers Christians with his righteousness to shield them from the consequences of our sin and final judgment.” Alister E. McGrath and James I. Packer, , *Zondervan Handbook Of Christian Beliefs*, ed. Alister E. McGrath and James I. Packer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 197.

⁴⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), p. 67. For a conversation in which both John Piper and Rick Warren affirm that imputation is “at the core of the gospel,” please see Appendix 1.

Arguments For The Doctrine Of Alien Righteousness

From the outset, the [Reformers'](#) doctrine of Alien Righteousness was attacked by Roman Catholic theologians and by [Socinians](#), both of whom were really attacking the overarching doctrine of Justification by Faith, and neither of whom warrant detailed discussion here. Suffice it to say that because the doctrine of Alien Righteousness has been questioned since its earliest articulation, its proponents have long been honing their arguments in its defense. Let's look at those arguments now.

1. *God obligates us to be ethically perfect as we come to him.*

The first argument put forward to support the doctrine of Alien Righteousness is the idea that we must have an ethically spotless life in order to enter God's presence. This is so because God is absolutely holy and He has commanded us, "be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11.44). Furthermore, Christ has confirmed that we must "be perfect, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect" (Mat 5.48), and the author of Hebrews assures us that "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12.14 ^{NIV}). Thus, [R. C. Sproul](#), in explaining our legal problem in approaching God, writes,

God commands us to be holy. Our moral obligation *coram Deo* (before the face of God) is to live perfect lives. One sin mars that obligation and leaves us naked, exposed before divine justice. Once a person sins at all, a perfect record is impossible. Even if we could live perfectly *after* that one sin, we would still fail to achieve perfection.⁵⁰

[Wayne Grudem](#) concurs with the moral obligation of "perfect righteousness," and writes of God's gracious solution for righteousness-challenged man:

God ... must declare us to have the merits of perfect righteousness before him. The Old Testament sometimes speaks of God as giving such righteousness to his people even though they have not earned it themselves. Isaiah says, "He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, *he has covered me with the robe of righteousness*" (Isa 61.10).⁵¹

⁵⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 96.

⁵¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), pp. 725-726, italics Grudem's.

Now, if we accept the premise that God demands an ethically perfect life before we can enter His presence, then justification must involve presenting God with the record of such a life, and since we have no such perfect record of our own, the only alternative is to present an extrinsic one. Accordingly, the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) teaches that in justification God allows us to enter His presence clothed by faith in an alien perfection, namely “the righteousness of Christ.”

2. Justification and righteousness are necessarily forensic.

A second line of argument advanced in support of the doctrine of Alien Righteousness, and intimately related to the first, is the tenet that *justification and the righteousness received in it are necessarily forensic*. To say that they are [forensic](#) means that they have to do with courtroom procedure and that they are received by legal pronouncement. Why they are said to be *necessarily forensic* will become clear shortly.

Alien Righteousness proponents believe that the thing at issue in the spiritual courtroom is the ethical matter of *what the accused has done or not done*. The defendant can only be justified, i.e., declared righteous, before the divine tribunal if he can provide a record of right behavior relating to the charge. Since the charge against him is “failure to live an ethically perfect life from beginning to end,” he must produce a record of perfect behavior from birth to death. Since no fallen man can produce such a record of perfect behavior in his own right, the defendant’s only recourse is to appropriate the perfect record of another. The doctrine of Alien Righteousness provides this recourse, teaching that the person on trial can be legally pronounced righteous (i.e., [forensically](#) justified) because by faith he is able to appropriate the perfect righteousness of Christ. When this happens, the divine Judge chooses to think of the accused as if the righteousness thus appropriated were the believer’s own.

The defenders of Alien Righteousness argue that this [forensic](#) approach to righteousness and justification is *necessary*, since upon justification the believer is obviously not transformed into someone who is ethically perfect, nor is he magically taken back in time to perfectly relive his past life. In other words, since the believer is not made actually righteous but is nevertheless justified, his justification must be [forensic](#), i.e., a justification granted by a judicial pronouncement that is independent of the believer’s own ethical record.

3. Justification has to do with distributive justice.

Assumed in the second line of argument just given is the idea that justification has primarily to do with distributive justice. In other words, justification is based upon giving each person their due, the distributing of rewards and punishments, *according to what each person has done*. Again, if justification is a judicial event based upon a person's deeds, *and requiring distributive justice*, then fallen man has no hope apart from the appropriated ethical performance of someone else, and this the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) provides in the "righteousness of Christ." By being clothed in Christ's righteousness, the believer escapes the distributive justice due to sinners, and instead receives the rewards appropriate for anyone who has lived a perfect life like Christ's.

4. Justification cannot occur by infused righteousness.

A fourth line of argument for the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) is the refutation of what is assumed to be the only alternative, namely, the Catholic doctrine of justification. The Catholic doctrine is based on passages like Heb 10.16-17:

"THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM
AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD:
I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART,
AND UPON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM,"
He then says,
"AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL
REMEMBER NO MORE."

On the basis of this text and others, Catholicism has taught since the time of the medieval [Scholastics](#) that beginning at the moment of a person's [regeneration](#) through Christian baptism, the Holy Spirit graciously works in the soul to prompt obedience to God's laws, thus helping the person become inherently righteous with a righteousness by which he or she is then justified.⁵²

[R. C. Sproul](#) puts it this way:

For Rome the righteousness of Christ is ... *infused into* the believer.
When the believer cooperates with this infused righteousness, the
believer then possesses an inherent righteousness, which then

⁵² John Henry Newman, *Lectures On The Doctrine Of Justification* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1914), p. 43. Evangelicals rightly point out that many Catholic proof texts for infused righteousness pertain to sanctification rather than justification, which two events coalesce in Catholic thinking.

becomes the ground of justification.⁵³

Sproul clarifies further, saying,

Rome declares that faith is necessary for justification. ... Works must be added to faith, however for justification to occur.

Likewise the righteousness of Christ is necessary for justification. This righteousness must be infused into the soul sacramentally. The sinner must cooperate with and assent to this infused righteousness, so that real righteousness becomes inherent in the person before he can be justified.⁵⁴

As the reader undoubtedly knows, justification in Roman Catholicism is very much a process rather than an event. The process not only involves the life-long endeavor of avoiding sin, doing good works, and obtaining merit through penance and the other sacraments, but extends beyond this life into the purifying torments of purgatory. R. C. Sproul has well summarized the implication of all this by noting that in the Roman Catholic understanding a person is finally admitted into heaven *on the basis of his own righteousness*. Ultimately the sinner justifies himself.

Wayne Grudem points out some of the more subtle problems with the Roman Catholic way of thinking:

If justification changed us internally and then declared us to be righteous based on how good we actually were, then (1) we could never be declared perfectly righteous in this life, because there is always sin that remains in our lives, and (2) there would be no provision for forgiveness of past sins (committed before we were changed internally), and therefore we could never have confidence that we are right with God.⁵⁵

The ultimate problem with the Catholic doctrine, which Sproul and Grudem illuminate for us, is that it negates the sufficiency of Christ's finished work on the cross, and implicitly denies Christ as the only Savior. Therefore, we unhesitatingly reject the idea of Infused Righteousness. If the

⁵³ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 108.

⁵⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), pp. 65-66. The Anglican turned Catholic, John Henry Newman, summarized the Protestant and Catholic doctrines of justification as "justification by faith, and justification by obedience" respectively, and also distinguishes them as teaching that justification means either "*counting* us righteous, or *making* us righteous." Newman further identified Faith as the instrument of justification in the Lutheran view, and the Sacrament of Baptism as that instrument in the Catholic view; see John Henry Newman, *Lectures On The Doctrine Of Justification* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1914), pp. 1,4,63.

⁵⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), p. 727.

Infused Righteousness of Roman Catholicism is the only alternative to Imputed Righteousness as currently understood in [Reformed](#) and [Evangelical](#) theology, then the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) as outlined above must be true.

5. Our sins were imputed to Christ.

A fifth argument offered in support of [Alien Righteousness](#) is the inference that since our sins were imputed to Christ, it's logical that His righteousness is imputed to us. The premise of the argument, that our sins were imputed to Christ, is an idea central to the Protestant understanding of atonement.

Now, the [NT](#) tells us explicitly that “Christ died for us” (Rom 5.8; 8.32; 1Th 5.9-10; Tit 2.13-14; 1Jo 3.16), and the idea that Christ’s death served a substitutionary purpose is also implicit in these texts. The Bible states an additional aspect of Christ’s death, however, namely that Christ “bore” our sins and that “the LORD caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa 53.6,12; Heb 9.28; 1Pe 2.24). Alien Righteousness proponents understand this sin-bearing as God imputing our sins to Christ. As we saw above, [R. C. Sproul](#) wrote, “God declares Christ to be ‘guilty’ of sin after the Son willingly bears for his people sins that are imputed or transferred to him.”⁵⁶ In other words, Christ died for us not only in the sense that He received punishment as our substitute, but also in the sense that He was actually declared guilty for our sins, because our sins were [imputed](#) to Him. In fact, [R. C. Sproul](#) understands the imputation of our sins to Christ as the essence of Christ’s substitution for us. “The atonement is vicarious,” he says, “because it is accomplished via imputation.”⁵⁷ For [Sproul](#), it’s not just the *substitutionary* idea that is dependent upon the imputation of our sins to Christ, but the reality of the atonement itself. In the same work he says, “Without the imputation of our sins to Christ, there is no atonement.”⁵⁸

Clearly then, in the understanding of [Reformed](#) theologians like [R. C. Sproul](#), atonement involves the imputation of our sins to Christ, and on the basis of this premise, it seems to follow that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. In his *Systematic Theology*, [Wayne Grudem](#) associates these two ideas:

This is the third time in studying the doctrines of Scripture that we have encountered the idea of *imputing* guilt or righteousness to someone else. First, when Adam sinned, his guilt was imputed to us; God

⁵⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 104.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

the Father viewed it as belonging to us, and therefore it did. Second, when Christ suffered and died for our sins, our sin was *imputed* to Christ; God thought of it as belonging to him, and he paid the penalty for it. Now in the doctrine of justification we see imputation for the third time. Christ's righteousness is *imputed* to us, and therefore God *thinks of it* as belonging to us. It is not our own righteousness but Christ's righteousness that is freely given to us. So Paul can say that God made Christ to be "our wisdom, *our righteousness* and sanctification and redemption" (1Co 1.30).⁵⁹

Granted, this excerpt from [Grudem](#) does not say directly that the imputation of our sins to Christ proves the imputation of His righteousness to us, but it shows the flow of thought in [Reformed theology](#): since God imputed Adam's sin to the whole human race (an idea we will say [more about below](#)), and since He then imputed our sins to Christ, it seems obvious that God is in the imputation business. If God imputes sin, why shouldn't He also impute righteousness?

[Jonathan Edwards](#) came very close to making the imputation of our sins to Christ a logical basis for Christ's righteousness being imputed to us. He wrote against detractors of the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) in his day, saying,

The opposers of this doctrine suppose that there is an absurdity in supposing that God imputes Christ's obedience to us ... But why cannot that righteousness be reckoned to our account, and be accepted for us, without any such absurdity? ... If Christ has suffered the penalty of the law in our stead, then it will follow, that his suffering that penalty is imputed to us, ... is accepted for us, and in our stead, and is reckoned to our account, as though we had suffered it. ... Why may not a price to bring into debt, be as rationally transferred from one person's account to another, as a price to pay a debt?⁶⁰

In other words, "if Christ suffered the penalty of the law in our stead," i.e., if Christ had our sins imputed to Him, why shouldn't it be plausible that His act of dying on the cross (which is one part of "the righteousness of Christ") be imputed to us "as though we had suffered it"? If its rationally plausible that the sins that put us into debt before God are "transferred" (imputed) to Christ, why wouldn't it be rational to have what Christ did to cancel the debt imputed to us?

⁵⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), p. 726, italics original.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Justification By Faith Alone*, Vol. IV, in *The Works Of Jonathan Edwards* (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), p 360.

6. Scripture teaches imputed righteousness.

Of course, evidence of plausibility based on a logical inference isn't the strongest support for an idea. However, [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents feel that stronger support for their doctrine, and a sixth line of argument for it, is found in biblical passages that speak explicitly about imputation.

The key Greek word from which the [KJV](#) has given us the vocabulary of "imputation" is λογίζομαι (lō-'yē-zō-mě) in the [LXX](#) and [GNT](#). The meaning of this word is probably rooted in commerce; its basic sense is *to reckon, credit or calculate*.⁶¹ Thus, when we first encounter the word in Gen 15.6^(NIV) it has a transactional ring to it: "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

Now, Gen 15.6 is Paul's great proof text for the principle of justification by faith (Rom 4.3; Gal 3.6-9), and so it is a key text for proponents of [Alien Righteousness](#). They feel that since Gen 15.6 teaches that *something* is imputed as righteousness, it must ultimately support the idea that Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer. We will say more about Gen 15.6 below.

Another imputation passage that Paul quotes from the [OT](#) is Psa 32.2 (31.2 in [LXX](#)): "Blessed *is* the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin" (Rom 4.8^{KJV}). In the context of Rom 4, Paul is indeed speaking about imputed righteousness (*credited* righteousness in the [NAU](#) and [NIVO](#)), as we see in v. 6, "David also speaks of the blessing of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works..." and v. 11, "that righteousness might be credited to them..." Again, the proponents of Alien Righteousness feel that since these texts clearly teach that "righteousness [is] credited [imputed]," Scripture thereby provides foundational support for the corollary idea that what is imputed is *the righteousness of Christ*.

⁶¹ In Num 18.26-31 the idea of *equivalence* comes through in the word λογίζομαι. The tithes the Levites receive from the people is counted as equivalent to their own crops (which they don't have for lack of farmland).

λογίζομαι can also mean *to consider, regard or esteem*. In the [LXX](#), silver was not regarded as valuable in Solomon's time (1Ki 10.21), God's people are regarded as sheep for the slaughter (Psa 44.22 (43.23^{LXX})). Likewise in the [GNT](#), "Artemis [is] regarded as worthless" (Act 19.27); the Gentile Christian, "the uncircumcised man [who] keeps the requirements of the Law," is regarded "as circumcision," i.e., as belonging to the people of God (Rom 2.26); "the children of the promise are regarded as descendents" (Rom 9.8). λογίζομαι can further mean *to treat wrongly or regard incorrectly or by appearance*: Laban treated his daughters like "foreigners" (Gen 31.15^{NIV}), Eli mistook Hannah for being drunk (1Sa 1.13), a fool is mistaken for a wise person if he keeps his mouth shut (Pro 17.28), Messiah was esteemed incorrectly by His people as one among other transgressors (Isa 53.3-4,12).

However, λογίζομαι never speaks of *purposely* regarding something as having happened which didn't, nor of thinking of something as real which is not.

7. Paul had a righteousness not his own.

Besides the passages about [imputed](#) righteousness, there are a couple about righteousness coming from outside of oneself, and this provides a seventh line of argument for the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#). In Phil 3.8-11, Paul expressed his willingness to sacrifice everything he once had valued in order that he might gain Christ and...

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...

In this statement Paul clearly refers to an extrinsic righteousness not his own — one that comes from God.⁶² Therefore, advocates of Alien Righteousness, often quote Phil 3.9 in support of the idea that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. *The Dictionary Of Biblical Imagery*, for example, in its entry on "Faith," says, "Faith is the means ... through which a person receives the righteousness of Christ," and then cites Rom 3.22 and Phil 3.9 in support.⁶³

8. Believers are "in Christ."

An eighth line of argument for the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) comes from the NT teaching that believers are "in Christ." There is hardly a more ubiquitous phrase in the NT (particularly in the writings of Paul) than "in Christ" with its variations, "in Jesus," and "in Christ Jesus." Appropriately so, since our redemption "is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3.24), our eternal life is "in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6.23), we are one body "in Christ" (Rom 12.5), we are sanctified "in Christ Jesus" (1Co 1.2), and God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph 1.3).

[Wayne Grudem](#) recognizes that the phrase "in Christ" has various connotations in the NT, but nevertheless finds support in the phrase for the idea that God imputes Christ's righteous acts to us. [Grudem](#) writes,

Throughout Christ's entire life on earth, from the time of his birth to the time of his ascension into heaven, God thought of us as being "in Christ." That is, whatever Christ did as our representative, God counted it as being something we did, too. ... God *thought of us* as going through everything that Christ went through, because he was our representative.⁶⁴

⁶² Cf. Rom 10.3.

⁶³ *Dictionary Of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper III Longman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). p. 261.

⁶⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004)., p. 841, italics original. Calvin, speaking of "an imputation of righteousness" wrote that "we are deemed righteous in Christ" (John

Let us carefully understand Grudem's thought here. Grudem does not derive the idea that "God *thought of us* as going through everything that Christ went through" from a biblical passage about being "in Christ." Rather, he takes that idea from his understanding of Christ as "our representative." In other words, this articulation of Alien Righteousness does not emerge from passages about being "in Christ," but from Grudem's Federal theology. Having subscribed to the premise that Christ is our *federal Head*, Grudem and others of like theology have then inferred that "in Christ" passages support the idea that God sees us as having done what Jesus did, i.e., the idea that God imputes Christ's righteousness to us.

Furthermore, we "put on" Christ.

Having said that the NT phrase "in Christ" supports the idea of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, Alien Righteousness proponents have also offered what they see as the parallel biblical metaphors of "being clothed" and of "putting on Christ" as supporting their thesis. R. C. Sproul provides an example of this sub point of the "in Christ" argument:

Calvin uses the biblical metaphor of clothing to describe imputation. In the biblical image the sinner is described either as "naked and ashamed" or as clothed in "filthy rags." The first conscious awareness of sin in Adam and Eve was a sense of being naked. ... God's redemptive grace occurred when he condescended to clothe his embarrassed fallen creatures.

The image of "covering" occurs frequently in Scripture, particularly in connection with atonement. The accusation of Satan against the priest of Zechariah was directed against the priest's soiled garments. God rebuked Satan and clothed the priest in a way that made him acceptable in God's sight (Zec 3.1-5). The New Testament speaks of "putting on Christ" (Rom 13.14) and of Christ being our righteousness.

By imparting or imputing Christ's righteousness to us sinners, God reckons us as just....⁶⁵

The *Reformation Study Bible* reflects this perspective. In its notes on the parable of the Marriage Feast (Mat 22.1-14), it explains,

Although everyone who hears the gospel has been invited, and although many may claim to be in the kingdom, only those clothed

Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), III,xi,3) but it is not clear that he thought the imputation was expressed by the biblical phrase "in Christ."

⁶⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 102.

with Christ's righteousness are actually presentable to God.⁶⁶

We will look more closely at both the passage from [Sproul's](#) book and the interpretation of [the Marriage Feast parable](#) below, but for now let us simply note that in the biblical metaphor of being clothed, proponents of [Alien Righteousness](#) see support for the idea that we are forensically clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

9. Imputed guilt implies imputed righteousness.

A ninth argument for the current doctrine of Alien Righteousness is the comparison between Adam and Christ that Paul makes in Rom 5.12-21. Note the contrasting parallels between Adam and Christ in Rom ch. 5, vv. 15, 17, 18 and 19:

Rom 5.15 ... For if by the transgression of the one [man Adam] the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many....17 For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. 18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

From these verses, [Reformed theology](#) teaches that Adam's first sin and the guilt of it was imputed to all his posterity.⁶⁷ On the basis of that premise, i.e., the idea that Adam's sin was imputed to his posterity, it follows logically from these parallels in Rom 5 that Christ's righteousness is also imputed to those under His federal headship. When Paul says that "through the obedience of the One [i.e., Christ] the many will be made righteous," it must mean that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers in the same way that the sin of Adam was imputed to his descendants.

[John Murray](#) articulates this argument in his classic book, *The Imputation Of Adam's Sin*. He wrote,

The parallel instituted in Romans 5.12-19 as a whole is that between the way in which condemnation passes upon men through the sin of

⁶⁶ Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al*, *The Reformation Study Bible: Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture*, ed. Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

⁶⁷ For a fuller examination of the doctrine of imputed sin, please see my forthcoming book *Magic Baptism and the Invention of Original Sin*.

Adam and the way justification comes to men through the righteousness of Christ. ... The one ground upon which the imputation of the righteousness of Christ becomes ours is the union with Christ. In other words, the justified person is constituted righteous by the obedience of Christ because of the solidarity established between Christ and the justified person. The solidarity constitutes the bond by which the righteousness of Christ becomes that of the believer. ... To put the argument in the order underlying the parallelism, immediate imputation in the case of Adam's sin provides the parallel by which to illustrate the doctrine of justification⁶⁸

We will examine the message of Rom 5 more closely below, but for now let us note that the key inference made from this passage in support of Alien Righteousness, namely, the inference that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers, is derived from the premise of [Federal theology's](#) tenet that the sin of Adam was imputed first to all mankind.

10. The righteousness of God is given to all who believe.

While the phrase "righteousness of Christ" does not appear in Scripture, "righteousness of God" does, as does the shorter "His righteousness" (referring to the righteousness of God). For example, we are all familiar with Christ's teaching to "seek first [the Father's] kingdom and **His righteousness**" (Mat 6.33). The fact that Scripture recognizes a "righteousness of God" is a tenth line of argument offered in support of the current Alien Righteousness doctrine, and specifically of the idea that Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers.

Of particular interest to [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents is Paul's use of the phrase "righteousness of God" in his epistles. For example, in 2Co 5.21, Paul wrote,

He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf,
so that we might become **the righteousness of God** in Him.

In his book *Counted Righteous In Christ*, [John Piper](#) comments on this passage and says,

...it is not unnatural or contrived to see in the words "in [Christ] we ... become the righteousness of God" a reference to the imputation of God's righteousness to us.

... It follows from the parallel with Christ's being "made sin" for us. Christ is "made sin" not in the sense that he *becomes* a sinner,

⁶⁸ John Murray, *The Imputation Of Adam's Sin* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), p. 70.

but in the sense that our sins are imputed to him the concept of “imputation” is in Paul’s mind as he writes these verses.

But if Christ’s being made sin for us implies the imputation of our sin to Christ, then it is not arbitrary or unnatural to construe the parallel — our “becoming the righteousness of God in him” — as the imputation of God’s righteousness to us. We “become” God’s righteousness the way Christ “was made” our sin. ... *He* was counted as having our sin; *we* are counted as having God’s righteousness.⁶⁹

Another passage mentioning “the righteousness of God” is Rom 3.21-22, where Paul says,

But now apart from the Law **the righteousness of God** has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even **the righteousness of God** through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe...

Since Rom 3.21-22 clearly speaks of a divine and external righteousness, a righteousness *for* those who believe rather than *of* those who believe, this passage has also become one of the supporting texts for the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#). Again in *Counted Righteous In Christ*, [John Piper](#), argues at some length that “the righteousness of God” in Rom 3.21-22 refers to “the external righteousness that is imputed to us according to Romans 4.6.”⁷⁰ Both earlier and later in the same book Piper writes that Christ’s “death is the climax of a perfect life of righteousness imputed to us” and then in support cites 2Co 5.21 *and* Rom 3.21-22 with other passages.⁷¹

We will postpone the question of whether “the righteousness of God” in Scripture can be equated straight across with “the righteousness of Christ” in theology. Suffice it to say, for now, that proponents of Alien Righteousness have enlisted the biblical mentions of “the righteousness of God” to support their doctrine’s principle idea, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

More Arguments For The Imputation Of Christ’s Righteousness

Alien Righteousness proponents have offered other arguments as well to support the idea that “the righteousness of Christ” is imputed to us. [John Piper](#) says, “My own experience has been that the doctrine of justification by faith, and the imputed righteousness of Christ, is a great marriage saver and

⁶⁹ John Piper, *Counted Righteous In Christ: Should We Abandon The Imputation Of Christ’s Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), pp. 68-69.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 65-68.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 41-42 and again on p. 124.

sweetener.”⁷² He also writes that, “The new challenge to justification [i.e., the denial of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness] obscures (not to put it too harshly) half of Christ’s glory in the work of justification.”⁷³ Piper further argues that “the overthrow of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness would involve the elimination of a great theme from our worship of Christ in song” since “the imputed righteousness of Christ has been a great cause of joyful worship over the centuries and has informed many hymns and worship songs.”⁷⁴ Because these arguments are anecdotal, irrelevant or fail to distinguish between the idea of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (which is in question) and the larger truth of justification by faith (which is not in question), we need give them no further attention here.

⁷² Ibid., p. 27. We could respond to Piper’s pastoral concern with N. T. Wright’s comment, “To know that one has died and been raised is far, far more pastorally significant than to know that one has, vicariously, fulfilled the Torah.” N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2009), p. 233.

⁷³ John Piper, *Counted Righteous In Christ: Should We Abandon The Imputation Of Christ's Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), p. 35.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Problems With The Doctrine Of Alien Righteousness

Let me assure the reader once again that I fully subscribe to justification “by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.” What we have been examining is an auxiliary doctrine to this great Protestant principle of Justification By Faith. The auxiliary doctrine is the doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#), the key point of which is the idea that in justification God [imputes](#) the righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner. We will see below that the righteousness of believers is indeed *imputed* and is most certainly *alien in origin*, but first we must consider the problems with the central idea of Alien Righteousness, namely the idea that it is *the righteousness of Christ* that is imputed to believers.

We will now consider the arguments for the imputed righteousness of Christ listed above in inverse order, and observe their shortcomings.

10. *The righteousness of God is His own attribute and action.*

When [John Piper](#) argues for imputed righteousness using the phrase “the righteousness of God” in Rom 3.21-22, he fails to quote the rest of Paul’s thought in verses 23 to 26.⁷⁵ This is a regrettable omission because in these following verses (vv. 25-26) Paul clarifies and emphasizes that he is talking about a demonstration or a vindication — *not an imputation* — of God’s righteousness.⁷⁶ In fact, the “righteousness of God” in Scripture is never a “thing” that is transferred, but is generally what God actually does. It is what He expresses by His character, words and deeds, and it particularly relates to His faithful action in redemption. The NT phrase “righteousness of God” never, except in the most indirect manner, refers to the perfect life of Christ. Far less does it refer to an ethereal, [discrete](#) merit-substance that can be moved about from one person to another.⁷⁷

How do we become “the righteousness of God”?

Likewise, 2Co 5.21 has nothing to do with “imputed righteousness.” When Paul says, “He made Him who knew no sin to *be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God,” it is in the context of describing and

⁷⁵ See page 32 above.

⁷⁶ Cf. the [NAU](#) and [CJB](#) of Rom 3.25-26.

⁷⁷ For more on the idea of righteousness as a discrete “substance,” see ... **the invention of discrete righteousness** below, p. 100.

defending his own ministry of reconciliation.⁷⁸ In an antithetical parallelism, Paul conveys that God made Christ the object of His judgment against sin so that He could make Paul (and the other true apostles) the instruments of His reconciling righteousness (cf. Rom 6.13; Jam 1.20). Since the apostles had *become* (γενώμεθα, yě-'nō-mě-thä) this “righteousness of God,” it should be clear that Paul does not here speak of [imputation](#), but only to his joining in God’s righteous work as His instrument, otherwise 2Co 5.21 would mean that Paul *became* what was imputed and Christ actually became *sin*!⁷⁹

The robe of righteousness is a robe of action, not a robe of merit.

Just as the “righteousness of God” is what God does, so also the “robe of righteousness” is a robe of action. As we [saw above](#), [Wayne Grudem](#) wrote,

The Old Testament sometimes speaks of God as giving ... righteousness to his people even though they have not earned it themselves. Isaiah says, “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, *he has covered me with the robe of righteousness*” (Isa 61.10).⁸⁰

[Grudem](#) provides no evidence for his assertion that, “The Old Testament sometimes speaks of God as giving ... righteousness to his people even though they have not earned it themselves,” other than the statement in Isaiah, “he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” However, this citation involves a [Hebraic](#) expression about how one *acts*, not about how one is clothed in alien righteousness. Such a *robe* expression appears in Job 29.14-17 where Job, in his defense before God and his friends, says,

I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
My justice was like a robe and a turban.
I was eyes to the blind,
And feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy,

⁷⁸ As N. T. Wright notes, 2Co 5.21 “is not, as a matter of good exegesis, a statement of [soteriology](#) but of apostolic vocation. The entire passage is about the way in which Paul’s new covenant ministry, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, is in fact God’s appointed means for establishing and maintaining the church. ‘So that we might become God’s righteousness in him’ means that in Christ those who are called to be apostolic preachers indeed embody God’s own covenant faithfulness.” See N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives On Paul,” in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 252-253.

⁷⁹ The verb *to become* (γίνομαι, 'yē-nō-mě) in *no way* speaks of imputation, but can only be so construed on the basis of theological presuppositions extrinsic to the text. For a full analysis of Paul’s argument leading up to and including 2Co 5.21, please see N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2009), pp. 158-167.

⁸⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), pp. 725-726, italics Grudem’s.

And I investigated the case which I did not know.
I broke the jaws of the wicked
And snatched the prey from his teeth.

In this passage we see a familiar poetic device: the Hebrew poets often metaphorically reference a static object to express active behavior.⁸¹ When Job says that “I put on righteousness” and “justice was like a robe to me,” he then goes on to make the metaphor explicit and explain that this righteousness that he wore consisted of *acting* on behalf of the blind, the lame, and the needy.

More importantly, the “robe” passage Grudem cites is about the Messiah, not about justified sinners.⁸² Isa 61.1-2a is the passage that Jesus fulfilled and quoted in the Nazareth synagogue (Luk 4.16-21): “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news, etc.” The rest of the passage, Isa 61.3-11, continues this context. It is Messiah Himself who says in v. 10, “[The Lord] has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness...” Some have alternatively interpreted the speaker in v. 10 as Zion personified, or as Isaiah himself, but it is Messiah here “expressing at the close, as he did at the beginning, the relation in which he stands in his own person to the approaching elevation of His people.”⁸³ In other words, He, Messiah, is the One who brings “salvation” and “righteousness” to people. “[The Lord] has clothed me ...” in v. 10 parallels “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me” in v. 1. It is through Him, the Messiah, that “God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up” (Isa 61.11).

Again, the metaphors of “garments” and “a robe” express *action*. We see this in the preceding messianic prophecy of Isa 59.16-17:

And He saw that there was no man,
And was astonished that there was no one to intercede;
Then His own arm brought salvation to Him,
And His righteousness upheld Him.
He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
And a helmet of salvation on His head;
And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing
And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle....

⁸¹ I refer the reader to my article *Making The Invisible Visible: An Introduction to The Characteristics of Hebraic Thought And Their Implications For Interpreting The Bible*, available at http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/Invisible_2011.pdf.

⁸² Cottrell is one of many who misapplies the Isa 61 passage. Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once For All: Bible Doctrine For Today* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), pp. 322-323.

⁸³ F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Old Testament In Ten Volumes: Isaiah*, trans. James Martin, Vol. VII, X vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 432.

A Redeemer will come to Zion...

None can argue that this passage is about Zion or Isaiah or justified sinners. It describes Messiah bringing salvation to Israel and vengeance upon her enemies. It is the messianic Redeemer who is clothed in salvation and righteousness. Granted, in this instance salvation and righteousness are portrayed as military garments rather than wedding garments as in Isa 61.10, but the message in Isa 59.16-17 and Isa 61.10 is the same: salvation for God's people requires militant intervention before the nuptial celebration. The warrior Redeemer is also the Bridegroom who dons the celebratory nuptial robe (Rev 19.7-16).

What then are the “white robes” of the saints?

“White garments” is a familiar motif in Scripture and this motif certainly conveys spiritual meaning. We must, however, interpret passages that mention white garments in their own context, and not decide beforehand what they connote based on our theological presuppositions. The Almighty Himself appears in white garments (Dan 7.9) as do angels (Mat 28.3; Mar 16.5; Joh 20.12; Act 1.10), so though such garments may in some sense convey the idea of righteousness, at least in these cases they do not represent the [imputed](#) righteousness of someone else.

For the purposes of this investigation, we are more concerned with references to the saints dressed in white (or clean) robes (or garments), and we find these references in the book of Revelation. The first mention is in Rev 3.4-5, where the Lord speaks about the church of Sardis:

“But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments ...”

As the reader undoubtedly knows, the book of Revelation entreats the saints to remain faithful in the face of temptations (to engage in idolatrous traditions) and in spite of persecution (arising from the believers' refusal to honor the pagan gods). Thus, in this first Revelation reference, we see white garments contrasted with garments stained by unfaithfulness; soiled garments mark those who have fallen into complacency regarding their testimony and service to God (Rev 3.2). The Lord, the “Faithful and True” (Rev 19.11), is Himself clothed in white and those who remain faithful in the face of hostility will reflect His faithfulness. There is nothing in this passage about [imputed](#) righteousness; the white robes of the saints are a symbol of their own purity and faithfulness (maintained by God's grace, of course).

In the same chapter of the Revelation, the Lord advises the lukewarm Laodiceans “to buy ... white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed” While some exegetes have inclined to the idea that the Lord here counsels the Laodiceans to buy salvation or the righteousness of Christ (without cost as in Isa 55.1-2), it is by no means clear that the self-sufficient Laodiceans addressed were unsaved. On the contrary, they appear to be spiritual sons whom the Lord loves, reproves and disciplines (Rev 3.19), and with whom He seeks more intimate fellowship (Rev 3.20). “Getting saved” is not in view in this passage, but rather repentance from a complacent and compromising Christianity.

[G. K. Beale](#) explains,

The advice to “buy white garments so that you may clothe yourselves” has the same metaphorical significance as “refined gold” [i.e., moral and spiritual purity]. This is evident from [Rev] 3.4-5, where the Sardinian Christians are “clothed in white” because they did not “stain their garments.” As indicated earlier, the idea behind keeping ones garments unstained (and obtaining white garments) is refusal to participate in idolatrous facets of society. Such refusal would spark off persecution and suffering “Uncovering the shame of nakedness” is language employed in God’s accusation of Israel and other nations for participation in idolatry (so Isa 43.3; Eze 16.36; 23.29; Nah 3.5...). The prophetic idiom is repeated here also to highlight the idolatrous nature of Laodicea’s sin.⁸⁴

The white garments, then, are garments of renunciation of (or repentance from) encroaching idolatry, and of renewed faithfulness to the one Lord. As [Andrew of Caesarea](#) put it in his commentary on Revelation, “wear the bright stole of virtue, through which the nakedness, which has come to you by sin, will be clothed.”⁸⁵ In this quotation, the commentator from antiquity *does* picture the robe as covering sin in some sense, but it is nevertheless the stole of the wearer’s own virtue.

On this same passage from the book of Revelation, [Mounce](#) comments that the needed “white robes of righteousness ... could be purchased at no cost ... except the acknowledgement of their shameful condition.”⁸⁶ There is certainly a *gratis* aspect of this transaction proposed to the Laodicean church; they are spiritually impoverished and have nothing with which to pay for that which the Lord offers them, except their repentance (itself a gift from

⁸⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 305-306.

⁸⁵ ACCOS, NT Vol. XII, p. 52.

⁸⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book Of Revelation: The New International Commentary On The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 127.

God). Nevertheless, whatever gratis aspect of the transaction is implied in the passage, there is still nothing here about a transference of “the righteousness of Christ.” As far as we can tell, the Laodicean audience had previously been justified by faith in Christ, were in a compromised state, and were now being called to don the white garments of *repentance*.

The Revelation also pictures the twenty-four elders around God’s throne as “clothed in white garments” and with “golden crowns on their heads” (Rev 4.4). We need not here delve into the interpretive question of these elders’ identity. We must note, though, that there is nothing in the immediate context of Rev 4 by which to interpret their “white garments” with certainty; for that we must continue exploring the wider context of the book for hints about the garments’ significance.

We come quickly enough to another reference to such garments in Rev 6.9-11. In this passage John says,

... I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until *the number of* their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.

The altar (of incense?) around which the souls are gathered certainly represents the intercession of Christ (see the emphasis on prayer in Rev 8.3-4), and — whether directly or indirectly — also represents His sacrificial atonement. However, the emphasis of this passage in Rev 6 is about the testimony of those faithful unto death. The text makes no point of connecting the symbolism of the white robes to the underlying symbolism of the altar. Rather, it is best to interpret the white robes given to the souls of the martyrs as congruous with the white garments already mentioned in the letters to the seven churches, and therefore as representing the faithfulness of the wearers even unto death.

In the very next chapter of the Revelation, ch. 7, verses 9-17 add significantly to the continuing theme of white garments. John sees a numberless international multitude “standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes,” and holding palm branches. This passage provides some interpretation of the motif. An elder asks John the identity of the people robed in white, then answers his own question: “These are the

ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Some may wish to find support for the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in the fact that the robes of these martyrs are made “white in the blood of the lamb.” However, while this passage *does* refer to the remission of sins, it *does not* allude to the imputation of alien righteousness. If the white robes of the “great multitude” were symbolic of the righteousness of Christ, those robes would not have to be “washed ... in the blood of the Lamb,” for they would have been spotless to begin with. We realize, therefore, that the white robes in this passage again represent the wearer’s own lives, lives cleansed and sanctified by the power of the blood. There is no support for the transference of an alien righteousness here.

Indeed, any impulse to hastily interpret the white robes of Rev 7 as the **imputed** “righteousness of Christ” will obscure the teaching that flows from the motif of white garments mentioned throughout the book of Revelation. The emphasis surrounding the motif of white garments in the Revelation is upon maintaining spiritual zeal and purity in the face of hostility. In Rev 7 as well, the multitude clothed in white robes “are the ones who come out of the great tribulation,” i.e., they are saints who remained faithful in the face of persecution. Therefore, without detracting at all from the reality of Christ’s atoning blood as the only grounds for justification and spiritual cleansing, we must not fail to see in this passage that the saints made their robes “white in the blood of the Lamb,” not by receiving the **imputed** “righteousness of Christ,” but by remaining faithful under persecution. The elder says that they made their robes “white in the blood of the Lamb,” because these saints remained pure by the grace flowing from their faith *in that blood*. In our evangelical zeal to deny any possibility of accruing merit before God by our works, we must not lose sight of our call to nevertheless do good works and fight the good fight of **faith** by God’s grace. In Rev ch. 7, the saints pictured in white robes are commended, not so much for the moment they believed — as though that were what is meant by “washing their robes” — but for their life-long faithfulness in keeping their robes washed (i.e., keeping their lives pure) by the power of the blood.

The final reference to white garments appears in Rev 19.14. We find there that the armies of heaven come clothed in white linen. While these armies do not explicitly exclude human saints, they most certainly do include angelic hosts. We see in this reference again, therefore, that the symbol of white garments does not *ipso facto* connote **imputed** righteousness, for such righteousness would not apply to angels.

While Rev 19.14 is the final reference to white garments, the capstone to the motif in the Revelation is in Rev 19.7-8:

“... the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright *and* clean; for the linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

While this passage does not include the word *white*, the congruence of this mention of “fine linen, bright *and* clean” with all the other passages in the Revelation about white garments cannot be denied. Furthermore, because this passage includes *interpretation* of the bright and clean linen, it must inform all the other references in the Revelation about the white garments of the saints. According to this key passage, those white garments are not the imputed “righteousness of Christ,” but “the righteous acts of the saints.” Granted, the righteousness acts of the saints are done *in Christ*, in the sense that they are done by the power of grace through faith in Him (cf. Gal 2.10), but they are nevertheless performed *by the saints*. Just as the saints of old “by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight ... and others were tortured, not accepting their release, ... and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment,”⁸⁷ so the saints in the book of Revelation are called, by the grace of God, to remain faithful in the face of temptation and tribulation, and are commended and rewarded with white robes when they do so. Let us not dishonor the testimony of their faithfulness by misdirected zeal for guarding the doctrine of justification from the heresy of works-righteousness. We are not justified by works, but we are “created in Christ for good works” (Eph 2.8-10). Therefore, while we must not diminish the reality of the free gift of justification in Christ, neither must we obscure the testimony that the white robes of the saints in the Revelation are *hard won by their wearers*.

What about the parable of The Wedding Feast?

We must not conclude our discussion of the “robe of righteousness” without considering the wedding feast parable told by Jesus in Mat 22.1-14. In that parable, after invited guests spurn their invitations, and previously uninvited guests are gathered in,

... the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw there a man not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And he was speechless.

⁸⁷ Heb 11.33-36.

Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

[Alien Righteousness](#) proponents will sometimes point to the wedding clothes in this passage as representing “the righteousness of Christ,” a righteousness freely given to clothe those who respond in faith to God’s invitation to salvation in His Son.⁸⁸ This interpretation is, of course, not explicit in the text — this is a parable, not a propositional narrative after all — and therefore many other interpretations of the wedding clothes are possible. [Origen](#) saw the wedding clothes as representing righteous behavior in contrast to the raiment of “one who had not put off his old behaviour.”⁸⁹ [Hilary of Poitiers](#) saw the wedding garment as “the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the purity of that heavenly temper,” and [Gregory I](#) saw it as “charity [i.e., love].”⁹⁰ Looking to more recent commentators, we find [Alfred Edersheim](#) interpreting the wedding garments as “evangelical holiness,” though without further definition.⁹¹ [Albright](#) and [Mann](#) equate the wedding garb with repentance.⁹² [Michael J. Wilkins](#) seems to favor the view that the wedding garments allude to “the imputed righteousness that Jesus hinted at early in his ministry (Mat 5.20),” but cites [Robert H. Gundry](#) and others as interpreting the wedding garments as “symbolizing not works meriting salvation but evidential works of righteousness.”⁹³ We could go on, but I concur with [D. A. Carson](#) who writes, “it is difficult to believe that the wedding clothes symbolize righteousness.” [Carson](#) continues, “It is better to leave the symbolism a little vague and say no more than that the man [without wedding clothes], though invited, did not prepare acceptably for the feast.”⁹⁴

Certainly the idea of imputation is not central to the parable of the wedding feast, nor can the idea of imputed righteousness be supported from

⁸⁸ Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al*, *The Reformation Study Bible: Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture*, ed. Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995). See also John J. Owen, *A Commentary Critical, Expository, And Practical On The Gospels Of Matthew And Mark* (New York, NY: Leavitt & Allen, 1864), p. 279; Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes On The Parables Of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1948), pp. 81-82.

⁸⁹ S. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary On The Four Gospels Collected Out Of The Works Of The Fathers*, Vol. I (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), p. 746.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 747.

⁹¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life And Times Of Jesus The Messiah* (New York: Longmans, Green, And Co., 1896), vol. 2, p. 429.

⁹² W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: The Anchor Bible* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

⁹³ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, Vol. I, in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p. 134.

⁹⁴ D. A. Carson, *Matthew* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

the parable unless the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) is first assumed.

9. Romans 5.12-19 is inadequate as imputation's proof text.

Alien Righteousness proponents believe that the imputation of the righteousness of Christ is more than just *assumed*. They believe that it is clearly established and the “very heart of the gospel.” However, an idea nowhere explicitly stated in Scripture can hardly be the “very heart of the gospel.” Still, while the teaching of Christ’s imputed righteousness has no explicit text for its basis, it does have a proof text. If Gen 15.6 is Paul’s great proof text for his doctrine of justification by faith, Rom 5.12-19 is the [Reformed](#) and [Evangelical](#) theologians’ great proof text for the imputation both of Adam’s sin and of Christ’s righteousness.

Romans chapter 5 remains — due in no small part to the difficulty of its language and of its non-linear argumentation — at the center of ongoing theological debate about justification and [imputation](#). We need not go into all the complexities of its exegesis here.⁹⁵ However, let’s look at two key verses from Rom 5 as they appear in the NAU:

v.12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—

v.19 For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

Arriving at the idea of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ from these verses (and their context) is a three-step process. First, [Federalism](#) is assumed, i.e., it is assumed that Adam is the federal head of humanity, and that Christ is the federal head of all who come to faith. This is a problematic assumption, since [Federalism](#) is not an apostolic teaching, but one developed in the [Reformation](#) era.⁹⁶ Second, verse 12 is interpreted as teaching that Adam’s sin was imputed to all his posterity. This is a problematic interpretation, since humanity’s inheritance of sin from Adam is clear enough, but the mechanism of that inheritance is not. Third, based on

⁹⁵ For a fuller treatment of Rom 5.12-19 I refer the reader to my forthcoming book *Magic Baptism And The Invention Of Original Sin*.

⁹⁶ The German [Johannes Cocceius](#) (1603-1669) is called the father of [federal theology](#), though he built on the ideas of covenant developed by J. Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), who in turn adopted and expanded ideas inherited from his mentor Zwingli. During Cocceius’ lifetime, the English were developing their own [federal system](#) of [reformed theology](#) with the help of such influential men as John Ball (1585-1640).

the parallels between Adam and Christ described in the larger passage, verse 19 is understood as signifying that Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers in the same way that Adam's sin was imputed to his offspring.⁹⁷ This conclusion is shaky, of course, because it is inferred from the two questionable ideas that precede it!

Basing exegesis on such stacked inferences illustrates the risk (I've already alluded to) inherent in systematic theology: the theological system can sometimes trump the direct and intended meaning of the biblical text. While systematic theology has rendered great service to the Church through the centuries by helping us think through the doctrines of the Bible, it also tempts us, once we have adopted a particular system, to force specific passages into that preconceived system and not allow biblical authors to speak in their own cultural, ecclesiastical and literary contexts. In the case of Rom 5.12-19, [covenant theologians](#) have imported the notions of [Federalism](#) into the text and have almost drowned out Paul's voice.

It's absurd to interpret "all sinned" in Rom 5.12 as meaning "all sinned in Adam when he sinned as their [federal](#) head." It's equally ludicrous to interpret the straightforward "all sinned" as meaning that "God thinks of all as having sinned in Adam before they existed." Still, to support such ideas, theologians have often argued that the Greek verb, "sinned," is in the [aorist tense](#), a tense that can *sometimes* convey an action as having happened all at once at a point in time. The inference is that if "all sinned" at a single point in time (as opposed to having sinned at various times over the course of history), this sinning by everyone at once could only have occurred at the moment when Adam sinned as our representative. However, if two words are inadequate foundation stones for a doctrine, then the [aorist tense](#) is hardly even sand.⁹⁸ We cannot insert such a radical idea as "imputation by virtue of federal headship" into a two-word phrase ("all sinned"), when Paul's argument has not [antecedently](#) mentioned the ideas of federal and representative

⁹⁷ Proponents of Alien Righteousness make much of the parallels between Adam and Christ in Rom 5, and therefore, since only Adam's *first* sin (not all of his subsequent sins) is in view (Rom 5.18), they should only suppose one of Christ's righteous acts (not all the righteous acts of His earthly life) to be imputed to us!

⁹⁸ While covenant theologians say the [aorist](#) verb in Rom 5.12 is punctiliar and points to mankind's sinning and dying as complete at the moment when Adam sinned, this [aorist](#) is better called a constative, a verb form that presents an action in summary or as a whole, without reference to duration. A good example of a constative aorist appears in Joh 2.20 where the whole history of the building of Herod's temple (46 years) is spoken of as a completed whole (see Robertson, *Grammar Of The Greek New Testament*, p. 833). Consider also ἦλθον ('ēl-thōn) in Mat 5.17 where the [aorist](#) does not denote that the action is fully completed, but refers to the whole process of His earthly mission, and thus the NIV uses "I have come."

headship, and when, in fact, Paul never mentions these ideas in any of his writings at all.⁹⁹ Had Paul's argument in Romans already explicitly introduced the idea of sinning *in* or *through* another, or the idea of the imputation of alien guilt, then a [Federal](#) interpretation of Rom 5.12 might be warranted. In lieu of those [antecedents](#), however, to read [Federal](#) representation into Rom 5 is just bad exegesis.¹⁰⁰ Even if Paul had waited to introduce the [Federal](#) principle in *this passage*, he would have done so with more than two words ("all sinned"). We know he would have been careful about this because of the novelty that such a principle would have presented to the Jewish mind; it had never been taught before! As [David A. Brondos](#) says, the "ancient Jewish writings that mention this relationship [between Adam's sin and the death of all human beings] do not provide *any evidence* for the idea that there had been some type of universal human participation in Adam's sin, or in Adam himself."¹⁰¹ So, we must face the facts: the idea of the [Federal](#) headship of Adam didn't develop until the [Reformation](#) era, and we cannot read this later dogma back into Paul's writings.

Regardless, the fatal blow to using Rom 5.12-19 *as a proof text* for imputed sin and righteousness is the fact that the passage is receptive to other interpretations. Receptivity to other interpretations does not prove the [Federalist](#) interpretation wrong, but only that the [Federalist](#) interpretation cannot begin with this passage as its foundation. If other biblical texts could be brought forth that explicitly teach the ideas that Adam and Christ are federal heads, and that both Adam's sin and Christ's righteousness are imputed, then Rom 5.12-19 could certainly be made to support those principles. But in the absence of those explicit, scriptural foundation stones, we need feel no obligation to force Rom 5.12-19 to conform to a theological system developed only within the last 500 years.

Let's remember that the question at issue here is not whether we have inherited a corrupted nature from Adam, and far less whether we are made righteous by and in Christ alone. There is no debate that "in Adam all die," and that "in Christ all will be made alive" (1Co 15.22). The question only regards the mechanics, if you will, of *how* we die in Adam (i.e., how we

⁹⁹ Paul does teach Christ's headship with regard to authority (1Co 11.3-10; Eph 1.20-23; 5.23; Col 1.18; 2.10), and as the source of growth in the body (Eph 4.15-16; Col 2.19), but says nothing about Christ representing us as one whose acts would be imputed to us.

¹⁰⁰ Nor can καθίστημι (kā-'thē-stē-mē) in v. 19 be forced to mean *appointed* in the sense of *imputed*. The passive form of the word that appears in this verse simply means "were made."

¹⁰¹ David A. Brondos, *Paul On The Cross: Reconstructing The Apostle's Story Of Redemption* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 185. Emphasis added.

inherited Adam's fallenness — a question we must discuss elsewhere¹⁰²) and *how* we are made alive (and righteous) in Christ. All I wish to assert at this point in our investigation is that the ideas that (1) we are sinners because Adam's sin was imputed to us, and (2) we are made righteous when "the righteousness of Christ" is imputed to us, cannot be proven from Rom 5.12-19. The passage simply cannot support that theological burden.

8. "In Christ" refers to familial solidarity.

Speaking of being made alive "in Christ," Alien Righteousness proponents find evidence for the imputation of Christ's righteousness in that very phrase, (as I noted above). However, while it is true that our redemption "is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3.24), that we are sanctified "in Christ Jesus" (1Co 1.2), and our eternal life is "in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6.23), not one of the [NT](#) passages that mention something existing or occurring "in Christ" connects this state of being in Christ to the idea of Christ's righteousness or actions being [imputed](#) to us. Nevertheless, the phrase "in Christ" clearly relates to the question of how we are justified. It is essential, therefore, that we understand just what kind of connection or relationship the Scriptures refer to when they mention our being "in Christ."

Statistically speaking, the Bible only rarely uses the preposition "in" (ἐν, ἔν) with reference to being *in another person*. Most commonly this word pertains to a spatial, temporal or psychological context. The preposition's less common application to speak of being in another person, though, makes this usage all the more significant. By far, the most frequent occurrence of the preposition "in" preceding a proper noun (that is not the name of a place), is in our phrase "in Christ."¹⁰³ However, we do find "in Elijah" meaning *regarding Elijah* (Rom 11.2), and "in David" meaning *through David* (Heb 4.7), and even "in Beelzebul" (Mat 12.27; Luk 11.15-19) meaning *by the power of Beelzebul*. More importantly, though, in the OT and Apocrypha we find "in Jacob" (Psa 78.5; 99.4; Sir 24.8), "in Isaac" (Gen 21.12), "in David" (2Sa 20.1; 1Ki 12.16), and "in Israel" (not the place, but the family of Israel, Gen 49.7; Num 1.45; 3.13; Jos 7.15; Jdg 20.6).

This points us back to [Hebraic](#) usage and what the biblical peoples meant when speaking of being "in" someone. It certainly speaks of solidarity, but primarily of familial solidarity. Furthermore, when the expression of being "in" someone has to do with God's redemptive plan, it points us to solidarity with the specific family line chosen by God, namely that of

¹⁰² I commend to the reader my forthcoming book, *Magic Baptism And The Invention Of Original Sin*.

¹⁰³ Over 100 verses in the [NAU](#) use the phrase "in Christ" or a variation of it.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Therefore, perhaps the most important background for understanding what the NT writers are connoting with the phrase “in Christ,” is God’s promise, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Gen 21.12^{LXX}; Rom 9.7; also Heb 11.18). The point of this phrase, “in Isaac,” both in its first utterance by God, and as quoted by Paul, was that whether or not one receives God’s promises is decided by the family line to which one belongs. It’s all about family. Descent from Esau and membership in his clan will not secure the promises. Not even descent from Abraham is enough (Rom 9.7). The promises come only to those in the family of the Son of promise, that is, to those in familial relationship with Christ.¹⁰⁴ “For as many as are the promises of God, *in Him* [Christ] they are yes” (2Co 1.20). To be “in Christ,” then, means primarily to be in His family, i.e., to be in God’s family through faith in Christ and thereby have a part in the world to come.¹⁰⁵

Jesus scandalized His audience by requiring kinship.

This *sine qua non* of eternal life, namely covenantal kinship with Christ, scandalized the first-century neighbors of Jesus. Many of Christ’s disciples stopped following Him after He spoke at the Capernaum synagogue, and said (Joh 6.53-57),

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.... He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.... he who eats Me ... will live because of Me.

Jesus’ requirement that they eat his flesh added to the consternation of the crowd already agitated by His claim to be the “true bread,”¹⁰⁶ and to have come down from heaven: “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, ‘I have come down out of heaven?’” Jesus’ insistence that they eat His flesh increased the scandal because by it He identified Himself as the requisite sacrifice of the approaching Passover (Joh 6.4; cf. 1Co 5.6-8).¹⁰⁷ Jesus’ audience in no way thought that He

¹⁰⁴ More often than not, where the NAU translates with “in Christ” the CJB translates “*in union with Messiah*.”

¹⁰⁵ Or as Brondos put it, “... to be ‘in Christ’ is merely to live under his lordship, as part of his community.” David A. Brondos, *Paul On The Cross: Reconstructing The Apostle's Story Of Redemption* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 189.

¹⁰⁶ Some commentators see this self-identification of Jesus as the true bread as a claim of preeminence over Torah. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel Of John: A Commentary*, Vol. I (Peabody, IL: Hendrickson, 2003), pp. 679-680.

¹⁰⁷ Offerers participated by eating the flesh of the sacrifice only in the peace offerings and in the Passover. John identifies the temporal context as that of the Passover (Joh 6.4) so the

proposed something cannibalistic — that would have been a conversation ender.¹⁰⁸ Rather, the scandal was Jesus' well-understood declaration that they had to appropriate Him as their Paschal sacrifice in order to have life (Joh 6.51-52).¹⁰⁹ The audience took this as nonsense.

Then, as if the provocation weren't sufficient, Jesus added, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man **and drink His blood**, you have no life in yourselves" (Joh 6.53). One ate the flesh of the Passover sacrifice, but never drank the blood! The blood of the Passover lamb was daubed on the doorposts and lintel, but not drunk.

To the Galilean crowd, this call to drink His blood was a "hard saying" (Joh 6.60), not because it was an unfamiliar metaphor, but because it pointed to another ancient custom whose connection to the Passover only came clear upon reflection. In word pictures rooted in the most ancient Middle Eastern customs for forming treaties and covenants between unrelated clans, Jesus was telling the people that in order to have eternal life they had to have His blood in them, i.e., they had to become members of His family by that kind of solemn covenant which included a symbolic sharing of blood.¹¹⁰ It was the sheer audacity of this statement that offended the hearers. When they asked "who can listen to it?" they meant, "who can accept such a claim?" Imagine how you would feel if a young man whom you'd grown up with in the neighborhood suddenly announced one day that unless you became his sibling by legal adoption you would never see God. The scandal would be all the greater if you were already the biological descendant of a royal or

reader will understand that Jesus was on this occasion presenting Himself as the Passover lamb.

¹⁰⁸ Contra Cyril of Jerusalem in *Mystagogical Lectures* 4.4-6, quoted in ACCOS, IVa, p. 239, and Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel Of John: A Commentary*, Vol. I (Peabody, IL: Hendrickson, 2003), pp 687-688. The remark, "How can this man give us *His* flesh to eat?" probably meant, "How can this man possibly become our Passover lamb?"

Neither is there a reference in Christ's words to the future ordinance of Communion. In the ordinance Christ refers to His "body." In the teaching at the Capernaum synagogue He uses the startling word "flesh." See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To John*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 331.

¹⁰⁹ By making Himself the Paschal Lamb, Jesus also implied that they needed Him in order to escape the judgment of the ungodly (Ex 12.23-27).

¹¹⁰ I refer the reader to H. Clay Trumbull, *The Blood Covenant: A Primitive Rite And Its Bearing On Scripture* (Kirkwood, MO: Impact Christian Books, 1975), pp. 276 ff. Trumbull writes, "The words of Jesus on this subject [of eating His flesh and drinking His blood] were not understood by those who heard him. ... But this was not because the Jews had never heard of eating the flesh of a sacrificial victim, and of drinking blood in a sacred covenant: it was, rather, because they did not realize that Jesus was to be the crowning sacrifice for the human race ..." I agree with Trumbull that the hearers in Capernaum had no inkling that Jesus Himself would become the ultimate sacrifice for mankind, but I disagree with Trumbull's statement, "The words of Jesus on this subject were not understood." With regard to Jesus telling them that they must join His family by covenant, I believe they understood this perfectly and were scandalized accordingly. Trumbull's own research documented in *The Blood Covenant* convinces me of this.

otherwise eminent family. Just so, in Capernaum the majority of these descendants of Abraham, perhaps some of them even descendants of David, could not stomach a fellow Galilean saying, “filial union with me is the only way to eternal life; to be saved you must be *in me* — just as the Passover blood on the doorposts and lintel marked out your ancestors as part of God’s covenant family, so you must appropriate my blood and become part of my covenant family to be saved!”

“In Christ” refers to kinship not headship.

Refocusing, then, on the NT phrase, “in Christ,” we realize that it emphasizes kinship rather than federal headship. That Christ is the head of the Church is beyond debate; no one questions His Lordship over the people of God. Nevertheless, the phrase “in Christ,” does not emphasize His headship over the family of God so much as it emphasizes our membership in that family. The reader will recall that the believers’ membership in God’s family is more than metaphorical. We are both born into God’s family by the Spirit (Joh 1.12-13), and adopted into it by divine law (Rom 4.16-17; Gal 4.4-7; Eph 1.5). The Father and Son come to live with us (Joh 14.23), and we partake of the divine nature (2Pe 1.4). “In Christ” we are family.

The requirement of familial solidarity is rooted in redemption law.

The NT emphasis on *familial* solidarity with the Savior will come as no surprise to students of the OT, because in biblical redemption law *only family can redeem* and *only family can be redeemed*. The family principle of redemption is strongly communicated in the Hebrew verb גָּאֵל (gä-’äl). This verb is surprisingly translated both *to redeem* and *to avenge* in various passages of our OT, but the surprise evaporates when we learn that “the primary meaning of this root is to *do the part of a kinsman*.”¹¹¹ In fact, the participial form of this verb, גֹּאֵל (gō-’ěl), “has practically become a noun in its own right,”¹¹² and is often translated in the NIVO as “kinsman-redeemer,” underscoring the kinship-redemption connection.¹¹³

¹¹¹ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, et al (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1980). Emphasis added.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid. There is another OT word that means *redeem* (פָּדָה, pä-’dä), but it lacks the “emphasis in [gä-’äl] on the redemption being the privilege or duty of a near relative.”

Kinship duty and privilege is codified in the Law.

This privilege and duty of the kinsman is codified in the Law. We see in Leviticus, for example, that an Israelite who sells himself into bondage for financial reasons can be redeemed from that bondage by a blood relative:

Lev 25.47 ‘Now if the means of a stranger or of a sojourner with you becomes sufficient, and a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to him as to sell himself to a stranger who is sojourning with you, or to the descendants of a stranger’s family, 48 then he shall have redemption right after he has been sold. One of his brothers may redeem him, 49 or his uncle, or his uncle’s son, may redeem him, or one of his blood relatives from his family may redeem him; or if he prospers, he may redeem himself.’

The same principle holds true when an impoverished Israelite is forced to sell part of his ancestral lands; it is the responsibility of a near kinsman to redeem that property:

Lev. 25.25 ‘If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold.’

These redemption laws are straightforward and uncluttered. They say nothing about the redeemer having to become the debtor in the eyes of the law, nor about the debtor needing to have the redeemer’s wealth legally credited to him. All that is required for redemption is a kinsman who is willing and sufficiently wealthy to pay off the debt. When a kinsman pays off the debt, the debtor (or his land) goes free. The paramount principle of the redemption laws is neither imputation nor headship, but *kinship*.

Kinship duty and privilege is illustrated in Ruth.

The story of Naomi and Ruth dramatically illustrates these redemption laws. Notice how forms of גֹּאֵל (gā-’āl) are used throughout the crucial exchange between Ruth and Boaz:

Ruth 3.9 And he said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.” [גֹּאֵל, gō-’ēl] 10 Then he said, “May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich. 11 “Now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence. 12 “Now it is true I am a close relative [גֹּאֵל, gō-’ēl]; however, there is a relative [גֹּאֵל, gō-’ēl] closer than I. 13 “Remain this night, and when

morning comes, if he will redeem you [יִגְאַלְכֶם, *yīg-ä-'läch*], good; let him redeem [יִגְאַל, *yīg-'äl*] you. But if he does not wish to redeem you [לֹגְאַלְכֶם, *lə-gä-ä-'läch*], then I will redeem you [אֶגְאַלְכֶם, *ü-gä-äl-'tēch*], as the LORD lives. Lie down until morning.”

In the happy ending of the story (Rut 4.14), when the women of Bethlehem recognize Ruth’s son as Naomi’s legal heir, they say, “Blessed is the LORD who has not left you [Naomi] without a redeemer [גֹּאֵל, *gō-’ēl*] today.”

It is crucial that we note in the story of Naomi and Ruth that Boaz offers to redeem *Ruth* (Rut 3.13), and the blessed offspring of Boaz’ and Ruth’s union is redeemer to *Naomi* (Rut 4.14), but in the public transaction it is Naomi’s *land* that is tendered for redemption (Rut 4.3). In ancient Israel, the redemption of the people and their land is intertwined. To be sure, Naomi wanted happiness and security for her beloved daughter-in-law, Ruth, but her ultimate goal was to save her own late husband’s line from extinction, and to save his ancestral lands from being lost to their family line forever. Obed (Boaz’ and Ruth’s baby) became Naomi’s “kinsman-redeemer” in that he would inherit her property in the name of Mahlon (Ruth’s late husband, Rut 4.10), legally continue Mahlon’s family line, and keep the ancestral land under the jurisdiction of the family of Elimelech (Naomi’s late husband, Mahlon’s father).

It is also crucial for our present study that we see how baby Obed became the kinsman-redeemer for Naomi’s family by a legal transaction rather than by direct genetic line. Obed was somewhat distantly related to the late Elimelech through Boaz, but was no descendant of Elimelech, Naomi nor Mahlon. This presented a potential problem since in redemption law, *only family can redeem and only family can be redeemed*. By the grace built into the law, however, there are ways other than biological to become family. When all hope of a direct biological kinsman is lost, the law provides a way for a more distantly related person to become a legal kinsman with the right to redeem. Thus, the story of baby Obed points forward (through his Davidic line, Rut 4.16-22) to the story of Jesus. Jesus, though only distantly related to us, may become our Kinsman-Redeemer as we enter into His family by faith. He may redeem us if we are “in Christ”!

The righteousness received in justification is relational.

All this should help us see that the righteousness received in justification is **relational** rather than **ethical**. As **Ladd** argued regarding the background of Paul’s justification teaching, “the majority of scholars understand justification to involve a relationship rather than an **ethical** quality, and the

distinctive Pauline meaning is ‘to be right with God.’”¹¹⁴ Indeed, the righteousness that God imputes to the believer is *relational righteousness* (more on this below). This truth underlies the triple declaration in Scripture that Abraham was the *friend* of God, and explains why James associates that fact with Abraham’s justification (2Ch 20.7; Isa 41.8; Jam 2.23). It also underlies Paul’s emphasis on reconciliation (Rom 5.11; 11.15; Eph 2.16; Col 1.20-22) — a relational phenomenon more than a legal one — and why he can characterize the gospel ministry as “the ministry of reconciliation” (2Co 5.18-21). Essentially, justification *is* reconciliation to God; it is the event by which a once alienated sinner becomes a “friend of God.”¹¹⁵ It is a reconciliation based on the atoning work of Christ which allows God to not count men’s sins against them, and which is effected through familial solidarity with Christ, entered into by faith.¹¹⁶

Emphasizing distributive justice in justification de-emphasizes the centrality of relationship with the Redeemer.

If justification and even righteousness are primarily relational, we should realize that to emphasize distributive-justice over kinship-redemption in justification is to risk obscuring the centrality of relationship with the Redeemer. One almost gets the impression in some [Reformed](#) and [Evangelical](#) preaching that one can be justified without Christ so long as we can appropriate His

¹¹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 439; p. 480 of the 1993 revised edition.

¹¹⁵ Contra Macquarrie who said, “justification has been vastly exaggerated in the attention that has been paid to it. It is one element in the Christian experience of reconciliation ...” At the risk of splitting hairs, I would say rather that justification *is* reconciliation, and thus “one element” in redemption (or salvation). See John Macquarrie, *Principles Of Christian Theology* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), p. 304.

¹¹⁶ This equation is consistent with the Westminster Catechism’s (composed in 1647-48) holistic definition of justification as “an act of God’s free grace unto sinners ... in which he pardoneth their sins and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight ...” (see above under **Some Necessary Definitions**). Baptist theologian John Gill (1697-1771), however, spoke of the debate among Divines over whether justification consisted of remission of sins *and* the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, or only of the imputation of righteousness. Gill felt that justification, “strictly, and properly speaking, ... is not the pardon of sin.... the blood of Christ was sufficient to procure pardon; but, besides, his suffering of death, the holiness of his nature, and the perfect obedience of his life, must be imputed for justification.” Gill’s emphasis on the distinction between pardon and justification proper, though, hinged entirely on his understanding of justification as “a pronouncing of a person righteous according to law.” See John Gill, *The Doctrine Of Justification, By The Righteousness Of Christ, Stated And Maintained*, Sermon (Rio, WI: AGES Software). So long as justification is seen as based on distributive justice rather than on relational redemption, the emphasis on the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ” must be maintained, and there will be a tendency to not see justification holistically as including both forgiveness (remission) *and* the imputation of righteousness.

righteousness.¹¹⁷ However, if biblical justification is informed by biblical redemption law, then we can hardly claim to be redeemed or justified if we have no authentic relationship with the Redeemer — assent to confessions of faith and past responses to altar calls notwithstanding. As John says, “He who has the Son [not ‘the Son’s righteousness’] has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1Jo 5.12).

Ignoring redemption law obscures the redemption of dominion.

Besides de-emphasizing authentic relationship with the Redeemer, the Church’s longstanding lack of reference to redemption law as the essential background of justification, has obscured the fact that the Redeemer redeems one’s dominion, not just one’s soul. In my youth, a mature man of God once reproved me for my stated goal to “save souls.” He rightly reminded me that God had a greater interest in people than just getting their “souls saved.” Indeed, the overarching message of scripture looks forward to the restoration of our race’s priestly relationship to its Creator, to redemption of the *earth* and the restoration of man’s dominion upon it (Rev 5.9-10). OT redemption law injects into the idea of justification the principle that we are justified and redeemed with the intent that we will take up responsibility in the Redeemer’s kingdom, and join in the work of redeeming our world, preparing for a glorious future reign. None of these ideas are inherent in simple distributive justice, and so to the degree that we have taken a distributive-justice approach to justification (influenced by the loss of **Hebraic** perspective as Christianity was **Romanized**), our understanding of our redemption has been impoverished.¹¹⁸

To be “in Christ,” then, according to what it means in redemption-law, is a vital component of our justification. However, it never means that “God *thought of us* as going through everything that Christ went through, because

¹¹⁷ Calvin cannot be charged with giving such an impression. He wrote, “Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ.” John Calvin, *Institutes* III.xvi.1.

¹¹⁸ The Roman legal understanding of justice emphasized the distributive idea of giving to each their due, the bestowal of rewards and punishments according to merit. However, as Ladd said, “The Pauline doctrine of justification can be understood only against the Old Testament background. ... The background for the Pauline doctrine is the Old Testament.” George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 439.

he was our representative.”¹¹⁹ Nor does being “in Christ” mean that we have “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” in the sense that we have clothed ourselves in His past deeds.

Putting on Christ means to walk as he walked.

Just as [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents have attempted to make the NT phrase “in Christ” support their doctrine of imputation, so also they have tried to hijack the biblical metaphors of clothing and of “putting on Christ” for the same doctrinal end. [R. C. Sproul](#) provides an example of this line of reasoning:

[Calvin](#) uses the biblical metaphor of clothing to describe imputation. In the biblical image the sinner is described either as “naked and ashamed” or as clothed in “filthy rags.” The first conscious awareness of sin in Adam and Eve was a sense of being naked. ... God’s redemptive grace occurred when he condescended to clothe his embarrassed fallen creatures.

The image of “covering” occurs frequently in Scripture, particularly in connection with atonement. The accusation of Satan against the priest of Zechariah was directed against the priest’s soiled garments. God rebuked Satan and clothed the priest in a way that made him acceptable in God’s sight (Zec 3.1-5). The New Testament speaks of “putting on Christ” (Rom 13.14) and of Christ being our righteousness.

By imparting or imputing Christ’s righteousness to us sinners, God reckons us as just....¹²⁰

How can a brilliant thinker like [Sproul](#) have written such a careless passage? Firstly he cites an important authority for [Reformed theologians](#), not Scripture but [John Calvin](#), to tell us that the biblical metaphor of clothing describes imputation. An *argumentum ad verecundiam*,¹²¹ however, does not help us. The fact that [Calvin](#) used a metaphor in a certain way does not prove that Scripture uses it in that way.

¹¹⁹ The evangelical teaching that “God *thought of us* as going through everything that Christ went through, because he was our representative” has its conceptual basis in Roman law rather than in Scripture. Scripture does not describe Christ as our representative in this way, and rarely speaks of a spiritual representative at all. Christ is our Savior, He is our Mediator but nowhere does the Bible say that God thought of us as going through everything Christ went through.

¹²⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 102.

¹²¹ An “appeal to [a respected] authority,” is fallacious in this case since we wish to know what *Scripture* says.

Secondly, [Sproul](#) writes that the “image of ‘covering’ occurs frequently in Scripture particularly in connection with atonement.” This is an odd thing to say since atonement is not *associated with* covering, it *is* covering. The Heb word normally translated *atonement* in the OT, כָּפַר (kā-’fār), means “to cover.” However, כָּפַר does not connote the act of clothing, but leans more to the idea of sheltering.¹²² Furthermore, any survey of the OT’s instruction on *atonement* will demonstrate that the word כָּפַר cannot convey the idea of covering something with the righteousness of Christ. After all, atonement is made for the altar, the holy place, the tent of meeting, for houses and for land (Lev 14.53; 16.16-20,33; Deut 32.43). Granted, a different word is used for covering in the Zec passage, the word לָבַשׁ (lā-’vāsh), which does mean to put on a garment or “to clothe.” However, לָבַשׁ is never used in connection with atonement, and so it is an exegetical stretch to interpret the Zec passage as illustrative of atonement, and a giant leap to interpret it as pointing to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness under the metaphor of covering.¹²³

Thirdly, “putting on Christ” in the NT always speaks of imitating Christ, not of appropriating the merit of His righteous acts. Look at the Rom 13.14 verse [Sproul](#) cited, and see that in its context it is an instruction to those *already* justified.¹²⁴ See also Eph 4.24 and Col 3.10, both of which instruct the person who is *already* a believer to “put on the new self,” and both of which are cited in *The Reformation Study Bible* (in the note on Gal 3.26[-27]) along with Rom 13.14 to support the statement, “To be clothed with Christ implies ... that His righteousness is our covering.”¹²⁵ This is most irresponsible exegesis.

¹²² Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Synonyms Of The Old Testament: Their Bearing On Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1897), ch. XII.

¹²³ לָבַשׁ is used of putting on righteousness, or a “robe of righteousness,” in Isa 59.17 and 61.10. See thoughts on these passages above, pp. 36 ff. The Psalms twice use a different verb, כָּסָה (kā-’sāh), to speak explicitly of God covering sin (Psa 32.1 and Psa 85.2; cf. Neh 4.5), but כָּסָה is so general a word that in these cases it hardly means more than “to forgive” and cannot be pressed into teaching the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

¹²⁴ Throughout Scripture, the idea of putting something on as a garment is a multifaceted metaphor. People and things can be clothed with strength (Isa 52.1), with salvation (Isa 61.10), with despair (Eze 7.27), with terror (Eze 26.16), with power (Luk 24.49), with humility (1Pe 5.5), and so on. The metaphor always has to do with the outward demonstration of an intangible, usually inner, reality. As people put on certain clothing to outwardly express either inner mourning or celebration, so Scripture uses clothing as a metaphor for the behavioral expression of an inward experience. To put on, or clothe oneself in, Christ, is to express outwardly the inner experience of receiving Christ as Lord. Baptism is a key moment when we publicly put on Christ in this way.

¹²⁵ Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al*, *The Reformation Study Bible: Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture*, ed. Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

Fourthly when the “New Testament speaks ... of Christ being our righteousness,” which it does *only once* in 1Co 1.30,¹²⁶ it speaks simultaneously of Christ becoming to us “wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” Others before me have pointed out the absurdity of teaching the imputation of Christ’s righteousness from this statement to the Corinthians.¹²⁷ Did God, when He imputed Christ’s righteousness to us, at the same time impute wisdom, sanctification and redemption to us?

We see, therefore, that in this regrettable passage [Sproul](#) offers only pseudo-evidence for his proposition. To support his point, he uses the irrelevant biblical metaphors of clothing and of “putting on Christ,” but nevertheless hopes that the reader will agree that, “By imparting or imputing Christ’s righteousness to us sinners, God reckons us as just...!” God *does* reckon us as just by faith, but not by “imputing Christ’s righteousness to us.” Likewise, God *does* cover sinners, but the scriptural emphasis in this covering is on the fact that He covers our sins. While this covering can only occur on the basis of Christ’s atoning work, it is nowhere in Scripture equated with the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ,” nor with God pretending that justified sinners have lived Christ’s perfect life.

While no one wishes to detract from nor diminish the absolute importance of Christ’s perfect life, we must now consider how the [Evangelical](#) emphasis on the imputed “righteousness of Christ” has obscured the believers’ call to grow in *their own righteousness*. Granted, the biblical call to personal righteousness is a matter of sanctification rather than justification, but my point is that after having been justified in Christ, God nevertheless calls us to grow in our *own* righteousness.

¹²⁶ Jeremiah predicted that the coming Righteous Branch would be called יְהוָה צְדִיקָנוּ (YHVH Tsíd-'kā-nü, Jer 23.5-6), meaning, *the LORD our Righteousness*. Likewise, Jerusalem will be called the same thing, *the LORD our Righteousness* (Jer 33.16). While these prophetic names point to Christ and His redeeming work, they nevertheless do not speak specifically of Jesus as our righteousness, but rather of “YHVH our righteousness.” I’ve never yet seen anyone suggest that the righteous deeds of YHVH are imputed to the redeemed.

¹²⁷ 1Co 1.30 is not about imputation, but about “the way in which the status of the believer in Christ overturns all the social pride and convention of the surrounding culture.” N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), pp. 42, 155-157.

7. Scripture teaches the pursuit of personal righteousness.

Personal righteousness is almost an Evangelical anathema!

To speak of anyone but Christ as having personal righteousness is almost an **anathema** in **Reformed** and **Evangelical** circles, but we nevertheless talk about people this way in casual conversation. For example, we might say something like, “Bob has treated his employees honestly and generously for 35 years; he’s a righteous man, I tell you.” More important than our conversational usage, though, is the fact that the Bible itself tells of people other than Christ who were personally righteous (Luk 1.6), and even perfect (Job 1.8).¹²⁸

Some have wondered about the issue of personal righteousness when reading about “the prayer of a righteous man” in Jam 5.16 or the blessings that accrue to the “righteous man” in Psalms and Proverbs (e.g., Psa 5.12; Pro 20.7). What distinguishes these righteous men from others? Is the righteous man of Jam 5.16 simply a professing Christian “whose sins have been confessed and forgiven”?¹²⁹ Are we to think of the “righteous man” of biblical poetry as simply a “saved man,” righteous *only in Christ* (though nothing in the context of the phrase hints of alien righteousness)?

Similarly, when Paul urged Timothy to “pursue righteousness” (1Ti 6.11; 2Ti 2.22), did he mean that Timothy was not yet justified, i.e., that Timothy had not yet been clothed in “the righteousness of Christ”? Or, by telling him to “pursue righteousness” was Paul urging Timothy to appropriate more of Christ’s imputed righteousness somehow? Again, when Christ taught people to “seek first [the Father’s] kingdom and His righteousness” (Mat 6.33), did he mean, “try to get into heaven by getting clothed in my righteousness”?

The polyvalence of words sheds light on the problem.

Our confusion about righteousness will persist until we give proper importance to the polyvalence of the words *righteous* and *righteousness*. To say that a word is polyvalent means that it signifies different things in different contexts. In the case of *righteous* and *righteousness*, these words

¹²⁸ Modern translators have shied away from having God call Job “perfect” (as in the KJV) and have used “blameless” instead. “Blameless” is a good translation pointing directly to Job’s personal ethical *righteousness*. Nevertheless, a quick study of the Heb word at issue, תָּמַר (tām) and its cognates, will show that it really does connote perfection, i.e., completeness.

¹²⁹ Thus Donald W. Burdick in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

never connote something other than “rightness,” but they do refer to “rightness” relative to different norms.

Interestingly, the word *righteous* continues to cycle in and out of different spheres of our own English slang. For example, the popular singing duo of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, The Righteous Brothers, got their name when they sang in black clubs and audiences commended their singing style, saying, “that’s righteous, brother.” Today, you might hear a surfer say, “Dude! That wave was righteous, man,” with *righteous* in this case meaning, “awesome or exciting.” Or, one frat boy might say to another, “Natalie Portman is so righteous...” with the meaning of *righteous* in this case having nothing to do with Miss Portman’s ethics. Even a lasagna can be commended today with, “Oh, man, that recipe was righteous!” Note that while the contexts of these examples are diverse, the fundamental meaning of *righteous* never changes: it always means well aligned or conformed to a norm (even if the norm is subjective).¹³⁰ However, the specific *kind* of righteousness varies according to the norm in view.

In biblical usage, as in current English, the words *righteous* and *righteousness* generally mean proper alignment to a norm.¹³¹ However, in different scriptural contexts two distinct norms take turns defining the kind of righteousness in view: the *ethical* and the *relational*.¹³² Now, influenced by its [Roman](#) heritage more than its [Hebraic](#), the Church has generally assumed that with regard to God’s demands upon man the ethical norm for righteousness (i.e., that pertaining to conduct) is the only one there is, and that therefore *righteousness* in the Bible always means [ethical righteousness](#).¹³³ We find, though, that the key OT and NT terms for *righteous*

¹³⁰ Cf. Ladd who says, regarding the [OT] verb “to be righteous” (*tsadaq*), “scholars generally agree that the basic idea is conformity to a norm.” George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 439.

¹³¹ Cf. Cottrell, “righteousness means ‘conformity to a norm.’” In typical evangelical blindness to the possibility of a relational norm, this author assumes that “Where salvation from sin is concerned, the relevant norm is the law of God, and justification can happen only when the requirements of the law have been satisfied as mandated by God’s own holy nature.” Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once For All: Bible Doctrine For Today* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), p. 323.

¹³² Cf. Charles Hodge: “The words righteous and unrighteous have two distinct meanings. Sometimes they express moral character. ... At other times, these words do not express moral character, but simply relation to justice.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), vol. 2, p. 195. I prefer *ethical* and *relational* to Hodge’s *moral* and *judicial*.

¹³³ Cf. K. L. Onesti’s and M. T. Brauch’s observation, “The history of interpretation ... reveals ... that the understanding of the righteousness of God has been largely dominated by Greek and Latin categories, where righteousness as a quality of God’s character is either given to us and makes us righteous, or is the basis for God’s judicial pronouncement, declaring us righteous ...” *Dictionary Of Paul And His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 836. Also, as N. T. Wright notes, “it is well known ... that

and *righteousness* are not inherently constrained to an ethical, conduct-based idea, and therefore, nothing in Scripture limits *righteousness* to the ethical kind only.¹³⁴ On the contrary, as [James D. G. Dunn](#) notes in his commentary on Rom 1.17,

The concept which emerged from the Greco-Roman tradition to dominate Western thought was of righteousness/justice as an ideal or absolute [ethical](#) norm against which particular claims and duties could be measured But since the fundamental study of H. Cremer it has been recognized that in Hebrew thought צדק / צדקה [*righteousness*] is essentially a concept of *relation*. Righteousness is not something which an individual has on his or her own, independently of anyone else; it is something which one has precisely in one's relationships as a social being. People [are] righteous when they meet the claims which others have on them by virtue of their relationship¹³⁵

Or, as he writes in another place, “In Hebrew thought, ‘righteousness’ was a [relational](#) term, denoting the conduct that meets the obligations laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he/she is part.”¹³⁶

[Ladd](#), discussing Paul's understanding of justification, had affirmed the same truth earlier, saying,

Basically, “righteousness” is a concept of *relationship*. He is righteous who has fulfilled the demands laid upon him by the relationship in which he stands. It is not a word designating personal ethical character, but faithfulness to a relationship.¹³⁷

Then, with regard to the word *justification*, [Ladd](#) continued,

The theological use of the word in Paul further reinforces the contention that justification is a matter of relationship to God and not of ethical righteousness.¹³⁸

Anselm of Canterbury, who gave massive impetus to Western thought on ... the notion of justification ... was working within a highly judicial context. He drew on Latin concepts of law and ‘right’ and applied them to the biblical sources in a way which, as we can now see, was bound to distort both the essentially Hebraic thought-forms in which the biblical material was rooted and the first-century Greek thought-forms within which the New Testament was designed to resonate.” N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 45.

¹³⁴ While it does not adequately explore the relational side of righteousness, the [TDNT](#) (and [TDNTA](#)) is a good place to begin a study of the diverse contexts and connotations for the biblical words for righteousness, under the headword *divkh*.

¹³⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 38A: Romans 1-8* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), pp. 40-41.

¹³⁶ James D. G. Dunn, “New Perspective View” in *Justification: Five Views*, edited by James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 181.

¹³⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 440; p. 481 in the 1993 revised edition.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 446; p. 487 in the 1993 revised edition.

Indeed, at the first mention of “righteousness,” in Paul’s great proof text, Gen 15.6, righteousness results from a relational act (“[Abram] believed in the LORD”) rather than an ethical one.

Contrary to popular assumptions, then, two kinds of righteousness appear in Scripture.¹³⁹ In fact, from the first mention of “a righteous man” in Gen 6.9, Noah’s righteousness is described in *both* ethical (“blameless”) *and* relational (“Noah walked with God”) terms. Likewise, when the law was instituted through Moses, it included moral and civil law to guide Israel in ethical righteousness on the one hand, and ceremonial law to facilitate Israel’s proper relationship with God on the other. These dual norms for righteousness, the ethical and the relational, revealed in the lives of the Patriarchs and in the law of Moses, logically govern the meaning of *righteousness* throughout Scripture, since Genesis and the subsequent books of Moses provide the Bible’s theological foundation.

Admittedly, **Ethical** righteousness and **relational** righteousness (and ethical and relational laws) interrelate closely with one another (see Figure 5 below), and the distinction is often quite subtle. For example, the Law and the prophets often emphasize the imperative of *ethical* behavior as that which will evince proper *relational* alignment with the God of Israel. Nevertheless, once we understand and appreciate the real distinction between ethical and relational righteousness, this insight will help us put our doctrine of redemption on a much firmer footing. So, let’s define the two kinds of righteousness a little further.

As I have said above, righteousness is simply proper alignment with (or conformity to) a norm.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, we can say that ethical righteousness is proper behavioral alignment vis-à-vis a given body of moral law, and relational righteousness is proper attitude alignment vis-à-vis a given person. As an example of ethical righteousness, think of how when we drive the speed limit and obey the road signs and signals, the officer with the radar gun allows us to pass by unbothered, because he considers us righteous with

¹³⁹ The two kinds of biblical righteousness are not to be confused with the twofold righteousness (*duplex justitia*) discussed by Protestant and Catholic theologians in their early attempts to reconcile theological differences. The twofold righteousness of these mid-16th century dialogues referred to inherent (or infused) righteousness on the one hand, and alien (or imputed) righteousness on the other. Thus, this *duplex justitia* of the **Reformation** era was not so much two *kinds* of righteousness as two *modes* of that ethical righteousness which had so long been the only kind recognized by theologians. See Anthony N. S. Lane, “A Tale Of Two Imperial Cities: Justification At Regensburg (1541) And Trent (1546-1547),” in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 125-126, 128-132.

¹⁴⁰ Sin, on the other hand, is misalignment, a departure from what is right, a missing of the mark.

THE TWO KINDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

DEFINITIONS

Ethical Righteousness: Proper behavioral alignment vis-à-vis a given body of law.

Relational Righteousness: Proper heart alignment vis-à-vis a given person.

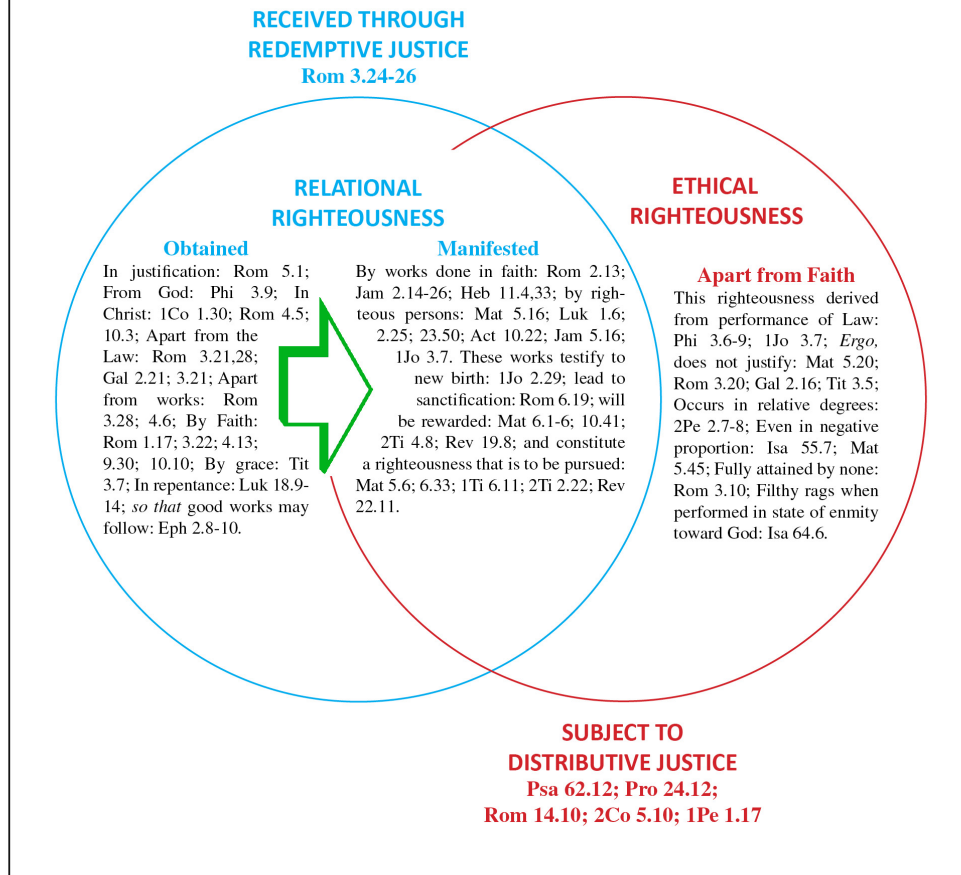


Figure 5

respect to his legal jurisdiction. As an example of relational righteousness, let's consider the dynamic between a private in the Marines and his sergeant. If the private sincerely and willingly, and in a consistent attitude of submission, recognizes the sergeant's authority over him, then in that sphere of life the private is righteous; he has taken the proper relational stance

toward his sergeant.¹⁴¹ In contrast, a rebellious and insubordinate private would be unrighteous vis-à-vis his sergeant.

We see, then, why Luke can speak of Zacharias and Elizabeth as “righteous” in connection with their “observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations” (Luk 1.5-6^{NIV}). The accent here is on their ethical righteousness. On the other hand, when Paul speaks of Abraham’s justification, saying, “to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,” his negation of works and his reference to the “ungodly” places the emphasis strongly on relational righteousness — this righteousness does not derive from what a person does but from the orientation of his heart toward God. That the righteousness received in justification is relational, helps us understand and appreciate the triple declaration in Scripture that Abraham was a *friend* of God (Isa 41.8; 2Ch 20.7; Jam 2.23) — and why James mentions that friendship in connection with Abraham’s justification.

We see again that though **ethical** and **relational righteousness** are distinct, they are intimately connected and overlap in their outworking (see fig. 5 above). This is why Jam 2.24 says that “a man is justified by works **and** ... faith” How does the marine sergeant know that his private is **relationally righteous**, i.e., submitted to his authority? By the private’s **ethical righteousness**, i.e., by what the private does. While **relational righteousness** derives from the orientation of the heart, **ethical righteousness** evinces that heart-orientation. As Jam 2.22 ^{NIVO} puts it with regard to Abraham, “his faith was made complete by what he did.” In other words, Abraham’s **ethical righteousness** (based on his works) demonstrated that the basis of his **relational righteousness** (faith) was truly present and alive.

So, though the distinction between **ethical righteousness** and **relational righteousness** is sometimes subtle, it is nonetheless real. It is because of this real distinction that Paul can speak of “the righteousness which is in the Law” (Phil 3.6) without in any way detracting from the reality *and priority* of “the righteousness ... which is through faith in Christ” (Phil 3.9). They are two different things and not interchangeable, but nevertheless, they are both properly called *righteousness*. Ignorance of the distinctions between these two kinds of righteousness inevitably leads to exegetical confusion and spiritual imbalance, so let’s do a concise comparison.

Perusing the biblical record with regard to the two kinds of righteousness we can say,

- **Relational righteousness** derives from faith (Gen 15.6);

¹⁴¹ Cf. the relational righteousness of David vis-à-vis Saul in 1Sa 24.17.

- **Ethical righteousness** derives from performance (1Jo 3.7).
- Relational righteousness originates from God (Phil 3.9);
- Ethical righteousness emerges from man (Luk 6.45).¹⁴²
- Relational righteousness is received apart from the law (Rom 3.21-22);
- Ethical righteousness is attained “in the law” (Phil 3.6).
- Relational righteousness is typified in ceremonial law;
- Ethical righteousness is guided by moral law.
- Relational righteousness is obtained in justification (Rom 4.5);
- Ethical righteousness demonstrates the authenticity of the believer’s justification (Jam 2.22).
- Relational righteousness is received by faith (Gen 15.6);
- Ethical righteousness must be faithfully pursued (1Ti 6.11).
- Relational righteousness is fully possessed in the present (Gen 15.6);
- Ethical righteousness will be wholly possessed in the future (Gal 5.5).
- Relational righteousness is tantamount to being justified (Jam 2.23);
- Ethical righteousness contributes to our being sanctified (Rom 6.19).
- Relational righteousness is received through redemptive justice (Rom 3.24-26);
- Ethical righteousness is subject to distributive justice (Rom 14.10; 2Co 5.10; 1Pe 1.17).
- Relational righteousness is recorded in the “other book, ... the book of life” (Rev 20.12), and appropriates the free gift of eternal life (Rom 6.23; Tit 3.7);
- Ethical righteousness is recorded in the first books John saw, and will be judged and rewarded (Rev 20.12).

We have been thinking about the two kinds of righteousness that apply to man, but Scripture also speaks of a righteousness pertaining to God (a fact

¹⁴² Though any goodness that emerges from a man’s heart is prompted (consciously or unconsciously) and enabled by God.

which underscores the [polyvalence](#) of *righteousness*). In fact, though the Bible never mentions “the righteousness of Christ” as such, it often mentions “the righteousness of God.” We need not delve more deeply into this topic here than we already have above, but suffice it to say that when Scripture speaks of God being righteous or acting righteously, it is not only in connection with his ethical judgment (Psa 9.7-8), but also frequently in connection with His covenant faithfulness, i.e., His *relational* righteousness (e.g., Deut 32.4; Psa 36.10; 65.4-5; 71.1-2; 85.1-13; 98.2-3; 143.1; Neh 9.7-8; Isa 48.8-10; Dan 9.7; Zep 3.5; Rom 3.24-26; 2Pe 1.1).¹⁴³

Now let’s consider the implications of the fact that Scripture speaks of two kinds of righteousness, and see how it helps our understanding of justification.

Though alien in origin, righteousness is really ours.

We have already referenced Phil 3.9 where Paul expresses his desire to be found in Christ, “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.” We know from this passage (supplemented by Rom 10.3) that the righteousness received in justification *is alien* in its origin — it comes from God. However, since this righteousness is *relational*, not the ethical kind “derived from the law,” it is fully realized at the moment of justification. Relational righteousness, because it is a gift (Rom 5.17), is fully possessed once obtained (Rom 10.10). The new believer may not have a track record of ethical righteousness yet, but he or she is truly and fully righteous relationally. God does not have to imagine that the believer is righteous — he or she *really is righteous*.

We realize now that the absurd notion of God having to imagine believers as righteous when they are not resulted from failing to distinguish between [relational](#) righteousness and [ethical](#) righteousness. This reminds us of the confusion of the Pharisees. Their legalism arose from supplanting relational righteousness with ethical righteousness. Likewise, the confusion in the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) arises from ignorance of relational righteousness and the confining of ethical righteousness to Jesus alone (more on this in the following paragraphs). Once we understand the Bible’s two kinds of righteousness, though, we are reassured that the God of truth does not have to pretend that believers are righteous. By God’s

¹⁴³ On Rom 3.24-26, see N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), pp. 52, 204, 227.

justifying grace, relational righteousness is fully possessed by believers, and there is no untruth in referring to them as *righteous*.

We also have our own ethical righteousness.

Amazingly, [ethical righteousness](#) also attaches to the believer. This truth is often obscured in [Evangelical](#) teaching, but nevertheless, as John wrote, “the one who practices righteousness **is righteous**” (1Jo 3.7).

This [ethical righteousness](#), righteousness derived from doing, cannot and does not justify us in a present salvific sense.¹⁴⁴ In fact, John in the passage just cited is exhorting believers *already* freely justified by God’s grace. Furthermore, until we are “made perfect” in the next life (Heb 12.23), our ethical righteousness is only relative and derivative. Compared to God, and ethically speaking, “There is none righteous, not even one” (Rom 3.10), and “No one is good except God alone” (Mar 10.18). Even the righteousness that we perform is nothing we can boast in because it comes from God working in us even *to will* what is pleasing to Him (Phil 2.12-13; cf. 1Co 4.7).

Nevertheless, the ethical righteousness performed by believers is truly their own. In God’s economy, He graciously acknowledges ethical righteousness as ours. “Beware of practicing **your** righteousness before men,” Jesus said (Mat 6.1). Note that the righteousness of which He spoke on this occasion was practiced; i.e., it is ethical and not the kind received by faith. Likewise, Paul spoke to the Corinthians about the harvest that would result from “**your** righteousness” (2Co 9.10). The righteousness in view was that which consisted of their ethical act of generous giving.

The reality of our possessing ethical righteousness is not emphasized in Scripture (though it is often assumed).¹⁴⁵ What *is* emphasized is that our ethical righteousness will be rewarded.

The Bible teaches that our righteousness will be rewarded.

The idea that our righteousness will be rewarded makes [Evangelicals](#) uncomfortable because it seems to suggest that man can somehow accrue merit in the eyes of God. This idea is rightly [anathematized](#) in the Protestant mind. Nothing we do can make God indebted to us. Any “righteous deeds” done apart from God are as menstruous rags in his sight (Isa 64.6), for they are done outside of proper relationship to Him. Any good works that Christians do are prompted, initiated and enabled by the Holy Spirit and

¹⁴⁴ There is a sense in which our good works will justify us in the future (Mat 12.37; Rom 2.13). See more on this eschatological justification below, pp. 129 ff.

¹⁴⁵ The emphasis is of course upon God’s uniquely absolute goodness and righteousness.

God's grace working within them, and those works are still rendered feeble and imperfect by our fleshly touch.

Nevertheless, the Bible clearly teaches that God will reward the good works done by His people, not because He is obligated to human merit, but because He is obligated to His own character and goodness.¹⁴⁶ God Himself is the One who ordained that "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," and Jesus is the one who said, "The laborer is worthy of his wages" (Deut 25.4; Mat 10.10; 1Ti 5.18). In fact, "he who comes to God must believe that ... He is a 'wage-payer' [μισθαποδότης, mēs-thä-pō-'thō-tēs] of those who seek Him (Heb 11.6).

The coming reward for ethical righteousness is implicit in Christ's warnings against doing one's righteousness for show (Mat 6.1-6, 17-18), and is explicit in His teaching about receiving righteous persons (Mat 10.41-42; Mar 9.41), loving one's enemies (Luk 6.35), and ministering to the poor (Luk 14.13-14). Paul promises a reward in the coming Day for the Christian whose work in building up the Church proves worthy (1Co 3.12-15), and for servants who do their work as for the Lord (Col 3.23-24). The Lord says, "I am coming quickly, and My reward *is* with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (Rev 22.12). Notice again that what is rewarded is what is done. The coming rewards are for ethical righteousness, not for the relational righteousness credited to us by faith and as a gift.

Not only will the ethical righteousness lived out by each saint be rewarded in the Day of the Lord, it will also *be recognized as personal righteousness*. Paul rejoiced in his knowledge that,

...in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,
which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day;
and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2Ti 4.8)

The crown of righteousness in view could hardly represent "the righteousness of Christ" supposedly **imputed** to Paul upon his conversion, for it was something Paul yet looked forward to receiving. On the contrary, this crown had nothing to do with salvation by grace, for this crown would be "awarded": Paul used the word ἀποδίδωμι (a-pō-'thē-thō-mē) here, the same term he used in Rom 2.6 to speak of God "who will **render** to each person according to his deeds." The crown of righteousness that Paul looked forward to was the *reward* he would receive for his own works of righteousness in God's kingdom.

¹⁴⁶ For the Bible student interested in learning about the NT's doctrine of rewards, I recommend beginning with a word study of μισθός (mēs-'thōs).

Indeed, as I have already explained above, when the marriage supper of the Lamb comes, the bride will have made herself ready and will be clothed in a robe of fine linen, bright and clean, but this robe will not consist of the “righteousness of Christ.” Rather, it will consist of “the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev 19.7-8).

The justified believer must pursue righteousness.

The preceding paragraphs should help us realize that every believer’s reward will be different when the Lord comes. If the coming rewards were for that relational righteousness we received in justification, then everyone’s reward would be the same because no one can add to the righteousness that is alien in origin and credited to us by God. Our coming rewards are based on our deeds, however, and therefore will differ from those received by others. Our rewards for what we do in Christ’s name are potentially huge, because our Master is lavishly generous. However, 2Jo 1.8 warns us to not jeopardize the good that we have done so far, or we may receive less than a “full reward.” This possibility of receiving a diminished reward is implied in the Lord’s parables of the talents (Mat 25.14-27) and the minas (Luk 19.12-26), and should prompt us “to be rich in good works” (1Ti 6.17-19).

I trust we can now see that these biblical passages urging the pursuit of good works, or describing persons as “righteous,” are indeed encouraging us toward personal righteousness, without jeopardizing the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Generally speaking, such passages are about ethical righteousness, not the relational righteousness received in our present experience of justification.

For example, when James commends the prayer of “a righteous man” (Jam 5.16), he does not refer to Christians in general, as though the righteousness in view were “the righteousness of Christ” received by every believer. In that case, James would likely have written, “the prayer of a brother is powerful and effective,” or simply, “your prayers are powerful and effective.” Instead James teaches us that our effectiveness in prayer can grow in proportion to our growth in godliness. In other words, and as experience has shown, there is a level of practical and personal righteousness that makes some Christians more effective intercessors than others.

Likewise, with regard to Paul’s admonition to Timothy (1Ti 6.11), we know that when Paul sent the pastoral epistles to him, Timothy was a “true child in the faith,” and the overseer of the Church in Ephesus (1Ti 1.2-3). Timothy hardly needed to “pursue righteousness” in the sense of “seek to be saved.” Nor would Paul have urged someone already justified to appropriate

more of Christ's merit — that scenario is only possible from a medieval Catholic point of view.¹⁴⁷ Rather, the most natural way to understand Paul's exhortation to Timothy is to see it as Paul telling his disciple, a man already justified and "saved," to grow in his personal discipline of *righteous living*. Just as Paul urged Timothy to pursue (i.e., diligently seek to grow in) "godliness, faith, love, perseverance *and* gentleness," so he wanted Timothy to keep growing as an example of a man who lives righteously.

In the same vein, our Lord's teaching to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" was not an admonition to seek that relational righteousness received in justification. Rather, as [R. T. France](#) wrote, it was "a demand to find and do the will of God out of total loyalty and commitment to God's purposes."¹⁴⁸ Or as [William Hendriksen](#) put it, to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" is "to make God king in [our] own lives and seek for him to be king in the hearts and lives of others in every sphere of living [so that] righteousness will prevail."¹⁴⁹ The point here is that Christians have historically understood this admonition of Jesus as an instruction to make the pursuit of righteousness a rule of life, and therefore this righteousness has implicitly been recognized as something other than the imputed righteousness of Christ. Rather it is righteous living, prompted and enabled by God's grace, no doubt, but nevertheless requiring the engagement of the believer's will in a disciplined pursuit.

Scriptural admonitions regarding the reward and pursuit of righteousness make perfect sense once we set aside the constricted presuppositions of the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#). Such admonitions are fully consistent with the Bible's overall teaching about righteousness, because the righteous man is one who actually "walks in his integrity" and leads "a blameless life" (Pro 20.7; cf. [NAU](#) and [NIVO](#)). The righteous man is one who is actually good in his conduct (Luk 23.50), and "practices justice and righteousness" (Eze 18.5). As the apostle John wrote, "the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous" (1Jo 3.7). We see, then, that though the Lord's righteousness is of a different caliber than our own, He is not the only One who is properly called "righteous." In the pursuit of our call to be like Him, we too must become *personally righteous*.

A sobering implication of the call to personal righteousness is that we cannot excuse our selfish behavior in the belief that God always and only sees

¹⁴⁷ See the explanation of indulgences below.

¹⁴⁸ Cited in Thomas Tehan and David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary Of The Sermon On The Mount*, 2nd Edition (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008).

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

us clothed in “the righteousness of Christ.” God sees us *exactly* as we are. If we Christians do not with God’s help examine and correct our own behavior, He will chasten us (1Co 11.31-32). “Whom the Lord loves He chastens” (Heb 12.5-11; Rev 3.19), and when the time comes for God to call nations to account, His judgment will of necessity “begin at the house of God,” i.e., with the professing Church (1Pe 4.17).

Furthermore, as we have seen, though we will go to heaven on the basis of Christ’s atoning work, we will not be rewarded in heaven on the basis of His righteous life (except indirectly), but on the basis of our own.

Thankfully, though our Lord chastens disobedience on the one hand and will reward our good works on the other, our status in God’s family does not rise or fall on the basis of our performance on any given day. No, our salvation and our place in God’s family is secure on the basis of relationship rather than performance — may God help us to accept one another accordingly (Rom 14.1)! Nevertheless, we must not forget that our works are the vital demonstration of the authenticity of our relationship with our Savior.

That there are two kinds of righteousness not only has implications for our works, but also for our faith. Contra [Luther](#), God does value our works, and *most certainly values* our faith. As we saw above, [H. W. Heidland](#) wrote, consistent with [Luther](#)’s viewpoint, that “God reckons faith as righteousness because he is pleased to do so and not because it has intrinsic worth.”¹⁵⁰ This is a regrettable statement because it makes God act arbitrarily without reference to His own character and attributes. [Heidland](#) makes it sound as if God randomly picked something man could do, i.e., believe, and then said to Himself, “Well, I’ll reckon *that* as righteousness.” [Luther](#) and [Heidland](#) missed the biblical and [Hebraic](#) emphasis on relationship, and therefore overlooked the fact that while faith has no intrinsic *judicial* worth, it has profound *relational* worth. God credits faith as righteousness because faith is the one and only proper relational bridge between sinful man and Holy God; there is no other act or asset that can join fallen man in right relationship with God. God values our faith every bit as much as the prodigal’s father in Luk 15 valued the humble contrition of the returning son: in the parable, the father rejoiced to see — at last! — the heart attitude in the son that would permit a healthy and fruitful relationship between them.

¹⁵⁰ H. W. Heidland, “λογίζομαι, λογισμός,” in *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament: Abridged In One Volume*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 537. Heidland’s original statements were: “Faith is reckoned for righteousness because this is pleasing to the will of Yahweh, not because faith has this value intrinsically,” and “what faith is intrinsically is of no relevance,” TDNT, v. 4, pp. 289, 291.

Furthermore, God is pleased to credit faith as righteousness because true faith flows from antecedent [regeneration](#) (new birth), and therefore stands as both the evidence of rebirth and as the seal guaranteeing personal growth by grace in ethical righteousness.¹⁵¹ “We have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Rom 5.2). God rejoices in our faith because it is by our faith that He can continue His work in us and through us.

Evangelicals have obscured the call to good works.

As I conclude this section affirming the pursuit of personal righteousness, I wish to confess my eternal gratitude for the [Evangelical](#) church’s stand against works-righteousness. I am ever grateful for the zeal of [Evangelicals](#) to safeguard the doctrine of justification “by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.” It was this ethos that delivered me from confidence in my own “goodness” and religiosity, and brought me to salvation. Nevertheless, to the degree that the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) obscures, by its unscriptural emphases, our biblical call to pursue good works and personal (non-justifying) righteousness, it is doing the Church and the world a great disservice. I know that by saying this I assail a long beloved belief, but let the reader understand that I wouldn’t dare to so criticize the current doctrine of Alien Righteousness if the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ” were explicitly stated *anywhere* in the Bible.

6. Imputation of Christ’s righteousness is a Reformation novelty.

The imputation of Christ’s righteousness lacks an explicit scriptural foundation.

A handful of enduring doctrinal disputes could be resolved if we all adopted the simple [hermeneutical](#) rule of basing our cardinal beliefs on an *explicit* declaration in the Bible.¹⁵² Unfortunately, many passionately held doctrines are based only on *implicit* statements in Scripture. The difference is that

¹⁵¹ For anyone taken aback by the idea that new birth precedes faith, I highly recommend Wayne Grudem’s explanation of Regeneration in his *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), or in his abridged, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings Of The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

¹⁵² In fact, if we wish to remain truly *biblical* in our belief and our teaching, we will give attention not only to biblical *truth*, but also to biblical *emphasis*. It is **the occurrence of clear and explicit statements of a proposition**, together with the number of times the proposition is repeated in the canon, that will help us recognize what the Bible emphasizes and what it does not. Recognizing the Bible’s emphases would greatly help us avoid wasting the church’s time with inconsequential teachings. For a full discussion of the hermeneutical principle of *Beginning From An Explicit Text*, I refer the reader to my article, “Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses.”

explicit statements permit only one interpretation (with regard to their main point) while *implicit* statements allow many.

For example, when John says *explicitly* in 1Jo 5.11-12 that, “... he who does not have the Son of God does not have the [eternal] life,” His words allow only one meaning with regard to the relationship between having the Son and having eternal life. The explicitness of the text completely prohibits the faithful expositor from saying that *really good people* can have eternal life without the Son of God, or from saying as Vatican II does, that,

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation.¹⁵³

The Vatican clearly errs: sincerely seeking God and trying to do His will is insufficient for salvation. The explicitness of 1Jo 5.11-12 allows no ambiguity about the fact that one must have the Son of God to have eternal life.

In contrast to John’s statement in 1Jo 5.11-12, Paul’s statement in 1Co 13.10 that “when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away” is subject to various interpretations because of the lack of explicit definition (within the verse and those immediately adjoining it) for the word *perfect* (τέλειος, 'těl-ē-ōs). Consequently, some [cessationists](#) have interpreted “the perfect” to mean the NT scriptures, and so have used 1Co 13.10 as a basis for teaching that the charismata ceased when the NT canon was completed. To teach this from a text that does not explicitly mention the corpus of scripture, however, leaves the [cessationist’s](#) exegesis open to criticism from those with a different interpretation of “the perfect.” For the [cessationist](#), that phrase may *imply* that Paul is speaking of the NT canon, but there are other and better ways to interpret the phrase. Consequently, the [cessationist’s](#) doctrine, if it rests only on this *implicit* basis, stands on shaky ground indeed.¹⁵⁴

This is not to say that the lack of an explicit text in support of a doctrinal proposition proves the proposition false. It does, however, indicate that the proposition is not a biblical emphasis, and hardly a cardinal doctrine of the faith. Therefore, it is highly significant that Scripture nowhere

¹⁵³ Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar And Post Conciliar Documents* (Collegville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1975), p, 367.

¹⁵⁴ We may choose to believe in the cessation of spiritual gifts on the basis of 1Co 13.10, but if we exclude someone from fellowship for not interpreting 1Co 13.10 in this way, we have become distinctly *unbiblical*.

explicitly states that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers,¹⁵⁵ and it is detrimental to sound teaching when this doctrine — or any other without an explicit foundation — is emphasized in the Church. Every widespread doctrine that lacks an explicit biblical foundation aids and abets heretics and skeptics who not only delight in pointing out that the Bible does *not* teach such ideas as “the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, [n]or the Augustinian doctrine of original sin,” but who also use these doctrinal missteps of the Church as an excuse to deny doctrines that do have explicit texts at their foundation.¹⁵⁶ We simply cannot afford to trumpet the [imputation](#) of the righteousness of Christ when it has no explicit text as its foundation.

Yes, [Louis Berkhof](#) did say that “the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ ... is imputed to the sinner in justification,” and that “this is *plainly* taught in several passages of Scripture.”¹⁵⁷ However, the passages he lists, namely, Rom 3.24; 5.9,19; 8.1; 10.4; 1Co 1.30; 6.11; 2Co 5.21; Phil 3.9, in not a single instance even mention [imputation](#) at all — far less do they provide a “plain” teaching that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner. The complete lack of an explicit text supporting the idea, not only in [Berkhof’s](#) list but in all of Scripture, belies the insistence of [John Piper](#), [R. C. Sproul](#) and others that the idea is “essential to the Gospel.”¹⁵⁸ [Sproul](#) has nevertheless stressed this. As I’ve already mentioned, he says in *Grace Unknown* that “God clothes his filthy creatures with the coat of Christ’s righteousness. This is the very heart of the gospel ...”¹⁵⁹ In another of his works, [Sproul](#) writes,

This is the truly good news of the Gospel that by grace God counts or reckons the very righteousness of Christ to us. Anything else is

¹⁵⁵ J. Reumann contends, “there is a stronger basis in Christian hymnody for [such a view] than in the NT.” *Dictionary Of Paul And His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Martin, Ralph P. and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 834.

¹⁵⁶ Neil B. MacDonald, “Enlightenment: The Bible,” in *The Dictionary Of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).p. 181. See also *New Dictionary Of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), p. 385, 553.

¹⁵⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 523, italics added.

¹⁵⁸ See for example, Committee on Evangelical Unity in the Gospel, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,” *Seek God*, June 1, 1999, <http://www.seekgod.ca/ec.htm#gospel> (accessed 12 15, 2010). This document states in *Affirmations And Denials*, 12, “We affirm that the doctrine of the imputation (reckoning or counting) both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us, whereby our sins are fully forgiven and we are fully accepted, is essential to the biblical Gospel (2 Cor. 5:19-21).”

¹⁵⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), p. 67. For a conversation in which both John Piper and Rick Warren affirm that imputation is “at the core of the gospel,” please see Appendix 1.

another Gospel... To preach or teach any other Gospel is to fall under the **anathema** of God.¹⁶⁰

This is strong language brought to the defense of an idea never explicitly stated in Scripture.¹⁶¹ Now, **Sproul** says in the continuation of the quote above from *Grace Unknown*, “This is the very heart of the gospel, expressed not only in the New Testament but in the Old as well,”¹⁶² but note his word “expressed.” **Sproul** makes this claim of bi-testamental support not on the basis of any explicit text *in either testament*, but only on the basis of analogies from implicit texts and the theological constructs based upon them. In fact, the specific idea that the righteousness of Christ is a **discrete** thing that can be imputed, not only does not appear in Scripture — it does not appear in the writings of the Church *at all* until the time of the Reformers.

James Buchanan attempted a historical defense of “reciprocal imputation.”

In his 19th century *Cunningham Lectures*, **James Buchanan** labored to prove that “the doctrine of Justification by grace through faith alone had some faithful witnesses in every ... age of the Church,” from the apostles onward. Buchanan’s thesis up to that point was true: there has always been a remnant of those who believed in and taught justification by faith alone.¹⁶³ However, in the rest of his lecture, Buchanan falsified his thesis by qualifying it, and incorrectly claiming proof that the witnesses through the ages included in their doctrine “the reciprocal imputation of our sins to [Christ], and of His righteousness to us ...”¹⁶⁴ While **early Church Fathers** certainly understood Christ’s death as substitutionary, “the righteous for the

¹⁶⁰ R. C. Sproul, “Justification By Faith Alone: The Forensic Nature Of Justification,” in *R. C. Sproul's Chapters From Symposium Volumes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

¹⁶¹ Apparently, “John Wesley had some doubts about the idea of a positive imputation of Christ’s righteousness — wondering whether the lack of an explicit use of the language in the New Testament did not serve to call the idea itself into question ... — [but] he did finally affirm it as sound teaching.” See Bruce L. McCormack, “*Justia Aliena*” in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 171. Speaking of ‘the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,’ J. I. Packer says, “The phrase is not in Paul, but its meaning is!” J. I. Packer, “Justification,” in *New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition*, edited by J. D. Douglas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1962), p. 639.

¹⁶² R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), p. 67.

¹⁶³ R. C. Sproul is, of course, correct when he says, commenting on Rom 3.21-26, that “Here Paul declares a way of justification [that] is not a novelty, proclaimed for the first time in the New Testament. This way of justification is witnessed to by the Prophets and by the law itself. It is justification through faith in Jesus Christ.” R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 72. Amen! Justification by faith in Messiah is no novelty, but justification by the imputation of Messiah’s righteousness *is*.

¹⁶⁴ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine Of Justification: An Outline Of Its History In The Church And Of Its Exposition From Scripture* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867), pp. 92-93.

unrighteous” (1Pe 3.18),¹⁶⁵ the idea of a reciprocal or even unilateral imputation of something from one person to another simply cannot be found in their writings.

This being the case, [Buchanan](#) was forced to repeatedly acknowledge the assertion by some *Protestants* of his time that “the doctrine of a forensic Justification, as taught by [Luther](#) and [Calvin](#), was ‘a novelty’ which first obtained a place in Theology at the era of the Reformation, — that it was unknown to the Church for fourteen hundred years after the Apostolic age, — and that it was at direct variance with the uniform and unanimous teaching of the Fathers, both of the Greek and Latin Church.”¹⁶⁶ [Buchanan](#) also had to attempt (unsuccessfully) to refute the allegation that even [Augustine](#), the favorite of the [Reformers](#), “knew nothing of a ‘forensic’ Justification by faith.”¹⁶⁷

Augustine provided more support for *infused* than *imputed* righteousness.

Contrary to [James Buchanan](#), a review of the writings of the [early Church Fathers](#) reveals that his unnamed Protestant scholars were right: neither [Augustine](#) nor the earlier [Fathers](#) taught a forensic justification involving imputation. While [Augustine](#) (c. AD 400) wrote of “the righteousness of God” in a way that undoubtedly contributed to [Luther’s](#) theological breakthrough regarding the Vulgate’s *iustitia Dei* of Rom 1.17, [Augustine](#) did not define this “righteousness of God” as the imputed righteousness of Christ, but only as the gift of righteousness “with which [God] endows man when He justifies the ungodly.”¹⁶⁸ This teaching of [Augustine’s](#) was no more specific than Paul’s “righteousness which *comes* from God” (Phil 3.9), and had no reference to the imputed righteousness of Christ. In fact, as McGrath notes,

There is no hint in [Augustine](#) of any notion of justification purely in terms of ‘reputing as righteous’ or ‘treating as righteous’, as if this state of affairs could come into being without the moral or spiritual transformation of humanity through grace....

The righteousness which God bestows upon humanity in justification, is regarded by [Augustine](#) as *inherent* rather than *imputed*....the righteousness which they thus receive, although originating from God, is nevertheless located within humans, and can

¹⁶⁵ See for example the late second-century *Epistle To Diognetus*, 9.2.

¹⁶⁶ James Buchanan, *op cit*, pp. 80, 87-88.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁶⁸ Augustine, *On The Spirit And The Letter* ch. 15. See also Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), p. 457.

be said to be *theirs*, part of their being and intrinsic to their persons.¹⁶⁹

In other words, [Augustine](#) provided more support for the Catholic [Scholastics'](#) idea of infused righteousness than for the [Reformers'](#) idea of imputed righteousness.

Luther's doctrine of alien righteousness evolved.

Not until [Martin Luther](#) do we see clear statements of the belief that Justification involves the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers (and the imputation of our sins to Christ).¹⁷⁰ [Luther](#), in his refutations of the [Scholastics'](#) corrupt doctrine of merit, spoke of the "passive righteousness" which "God through Christ ... imputeth unto us," and "the righteousness of Christ ... which we do not ... and have not, but receive," and the "eternal righteousness ... we shall never be able to attain ... unless God himself by mere imputation ... bestow it upon us."¹⁷¹ In [Luther's](#) letter of 1520 to Pope Leo X, entitled *Concerning Christian Liberty*, the [Reformer](#) described the believer's heart, and said, "it believes that the righteousness of Christ is its own, and that its sin is no longer its own, but that of Christ" In [Luther's](#) *Smalcald Articles*¹⁷² of 1537, he wrote, "man, both as to his person and his works, is to be called and to be righteous and holy from pure grace and mercy, shed upon us and spread over us in Christ." We also see [Luther's](#) belief in the imputation of our sins to Christ in his *Table Talk* (recorded sometime between 1531 and 1544), no. 202, where he said, "All the prophets well foresaw in the Spirit, that Christ, by imputation, would become the greatest sinner upon the face of the earth ... would be no more considered an innocent person and without sin ... but a notorious sinner, ... and have lying upon his neck the sins of all mankind"

Even in [Luther's](#) writings, though, one hardly sees the fully developed doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) as we know it today, but only the germination and sprouting of it. In 1518, with his doctrine still maturing, [Luther](#) said, in his sermon on *Two Kinds Of Righteousness*,

There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man's sin is of two kinds. The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of

¹⁶⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History Of The Christian Doctrine Of Justification*, 3rd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 47-48.

¹⁷⁰ The much earlier (late second-century) *Epistle To Diognetus* (9.3) asked, "what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness," but there is no idea of imputation here and it is unclear from the context whether the pronoun *His* refers to God or His Son.

¹⁷¹ Martin Luther, *Commentary On St. Paul's Epistle To The Galatians* (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), pp. 23-24. Luther's commentaries on Galatians were published in multiple editions from 1519 to 1538.

¹⁷² Article 13: *How One Is Justified Before God, And Of Good Works*.

another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith, as it is written in 1Co 1.30: “whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” ... This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: “Mine are Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.” ...

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours. Therefore the Apostle calls it “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1.17; For in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed...; as it is written, “The righteous shall live by his faith.”

However, later in the same sermon, [Luther](#) said,

Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.

So, we see that while [Luther](#) spoke of [alien righteousness](#) by this time, he did not yet teach imputed righteousness, and still retained some of the [Scholastics’](#) belief in infused righteousness whereby the righteousness of Christ grows in us over time.¹⁷³

Again, while [Luther](#) did speak in his Galatians commentary of Christ “whose righteousness is thy righteousness, and thy sin is his sin,”¹⁷⁴ in the same work he speaks somewhat more biblically of “... a faith and confidence

¹⁷³ For some time, “scholars have recognized the absurdity of seeing Luther’s theology as a clean break with the past.... In Luther, however, it is arguable that the concept and language of status have increasing priority over the concept and language of transformation.” Carl Trueman, “*Simul Peccator Et Justus: Martin Luther And Justification*,” in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 81, 86. Because of the slow evolution in Luther’s doctrine (from placing the priority on transformation to placing it on status), recent interpreters of the Reformer have argued that “Luther does not make a distinction between forensic and effective justification, but rather argues that justification includes both.” Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Justification,” in *Global Dictionary Of Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 449. Indeed, the 1970’s saw the development of a “New Interpretation” of Luther’s theology, a key point of which is that, “Luther does not make a distinction between forensic and effective justification, but rather argues that justification includes both. In other words, in line with Catholic theology, justification means both declaring righteous and making righteous.” Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Deification View,” in *Justification: Five Views*, edited by James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), pp. 220-222.

¹⁷⁴ Martin Luther, *Commentary On St. Paul's Epistle To The Galatians* (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), p. 246.

in the Son of God, ... which faith and confidence is accounted righteousness for Christ's sake. ... God accounteth this imperfect faith for perfect righteousness, for Christ's sake¹⁷⁵ In these words we see *faith itself* imputed, not "the righteousness of Christ." Indeed, in a summation, Luther wrote, "Christian righteousness, therefore, as I have said, is the imputation of God for righteousness or unto righteousness, because of our faith in Christ, and for Christ's sake,"¹⁷⁶ and, "... God doth account [our] faith, although imperfect, for perfect righteousness."¹⁷⁷

Clearly, Luther had not yet fully settled on the idea that it is the object of our faith rather than the faith itself that is imputed for righteousness. Granted, he had already taken a giant, theological step away from the dominant belief of his time in justification by one's own meritorious works, but as Timothy George observes, Luther shed his Augustinian presuppositions about *infused righteousness* only after a time. According to George, "in his mature doctrine of justification, Luther abandoned the medical image of *impartation* for the legal language of *imputation*."¹⁷⁸

Therefore, let us observe that when Luther "rediscovered" the gospel and had his new birth experience, his new understanding of justification did not dawn upon him complete with a full-blown belief in the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Though his epiphany came as he struggled with the meaning of Rom 1.17, and as he came to perceive that the *iustitia dei* of which Paul speaks in that verse was not a punitive justice after all, but rather the righteousness "by which the merciful God justifies us by faith," Luther nevertheless did not at that time have a conviction that this "righteousness of God" was the "righteousness of Christ" in which God clothes the believer.

How could he have? Neither Scripture, nor Augustine, nor the more recent teachings of the Scholastics, could have provided Luther with that idea. The idea of God imputing Christ's righteousness to the believer can only be arrived at by theological inference,¹⁷⁹ and it was only in the context of the Reformation's continuing doctrinal battles that great minds, striving to refute

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 246.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 247.

¹⁷⁸ Timothy George, "Dr. Luther's Theology," *Christian History Magazine*, 1992, italics original.

¹⁷⁹ Ladd acknowledged that "Paul never expressly states that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers." Regrettably, though, he nevertheless went on to say, "It is an unavoidable *logical conclusion* that men of faith are justified because Christ's righteousness is imputed to them." George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 449-450; p. 491 in the 1993 revised edition. Emphasis added.

the **Scholastic** principle of personal merit and infused righteousness, hit upon it. **Luther** did not immediately reason it out, but *it was in his generation* that the **Reformers** settled on the idea that “the righteousness of Christ” is imputed to the believer in justification.

Calvin codified the doctrine of imputation.

Luther’s germinal ideas about alien righteousness were further developed by his follower, **Philip Melancthon**, particularly with respect to the forensic aspects of justification,¹⁸⁰ but it was probably **John Calvin**, who first articulated the idea of the imputed righteousness of Christ in a way that still sounds contemporary to today’s **Evangelical**. **Calvin** wrote in his immortal *Institutes* things like,

... a man will be justified by faith when, excluded from the righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and clothed in it appears in the sight of God not as a sinner, but as righteous. Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.¹⁸¹

Calvin further wrote in his definitive statement contra the Roman Catholic idea of **infused righteousness**:

Hence also it is proved, that it is entirely by the intervention of Christ’s righteousness that we obtain justification before God. This is equivalent to saying that man is not just in himself, but that the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation, while he is strictly deserving of punishment. Thus vanishes the absurd dogma, that man is justified by faith, inasmuch as it brings him under the influence of the Spirit of God by whom he is rendered righteous. This is so repugnant to the above doctrine that it never can be reconciled with it. There can be no doubt that he who is taught to seek righteousness out of himself does not previously possess it in himself. This is most clearly declared by the Apostle, when he says, that he who knew no sin was made an expiatory victim for sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2Co 5.21). You see that our righteousness is not in ourselves, but in Christ; that the only way in which we become possessed of it is by being made partakers with

¹⁸⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), p. 458.

¹⁸¹ *Institutes* III, xi, 2.

Christ, since with him we possess all riches.¹⁸²

So [R. C. Sproul](#) may be right when he says that “to be declared righteous on the sole grounds of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was to [the [Reformers](#)] the very essence of the gospel.”¹⁸³ However, that the idea of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was *first inferred* by the [Reformers](#), and that the idea was never mentioned in the Church before [Luther](#), should give pause to Alien Righteousness proponents who use the [Reformers’](#) testimony to bolster the defense of their doctrine. Furthermore, we should all know that the [Reformers](#) — with their motto of *Sola Scriptura* — would have wanted us to base our beliefs on Scripture, not on the teachings of [Luther](#) or [Calvin](#).¹⁸⁴

The lack in Scripture of a single explicit mention of God imputing “the righteousness of Christ” to believers, and the absence of any such idea until the [Reformation](#), precludes us from construing it as a biblical touchstone. The imputation of “the righteousness of Christ” cannot be “the very heart of the gospel.”¹⁸⁵

5. Sin-bearing requires no imputation.

Just as no scripture states explicitly that “the righteousness of Christ” is imputed to believers, neither does any passage say expressly that our sins were “imputed” to Jesus. No scripture says, as [R. C. Sproul](#) does, that “God declares Christ to be ‘guilty’ of sin,” nor that “the atonement is vicarious because it is accomplished via imputation,” nor that “without the imputation of our sins to Christ, there is no atonement.”¹⁸⁶ Nor does the Bible say, as [Grudem](#) puts it, that “the guilt of our sins (that is, the liability to punishment) was thought of by God as belonging to Christ rather than to

¹⁸² *Institutes* III, xi, 23.

¹⁸³ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 44.

¹⁸⁴ The prolific [Martin Luther](#) hoped that “all my books would disappear and the Holy Scriptures alone be read.”

¹⁸⁵ For a conversation in which both John Piper and Rick Warren affirm that imputation is “at the core of the gospel,” please see Appendix 1. While I reject the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ” for its lack of mention in Scripture, N. T. Wright rejects it for its implied legalism. He writes, “the Torah, the Mosaic law, was never given or intended as a means whereby either an individual or the nation as a whole might, through obedience, earn liberation from slavery, redemption, rescue, salvation, ‘righteousness’ or whatever else. The gift always preceded the obligation. ... *It is therefore a straightforward category mistake ... to suppose that Jesus ‘obeyed the law’ and so obtained ‘righteousness’ which could be reckoned to those who believe in him.* To think that way is to concede, after all, that ‘legalism’ was true after all — with Jesus as the ultimate legalist.” N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2009), p. 232, emphasis his.

¹⁸⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), pp 104-106.

us.”¹⁸⁷ Nor does the Bible say, as [Cottrell](#) does, that “our sins, along with their guilt and penalty, are imputed to Christ ... [i.e.,] they are reckoned or charged to his account so that they are treated as his own.”¹⁸⁸ And the Scriptures most certainly do not say, as [Luther](#) did, that “... Christ, by imputation, would become the greatest sinner upon the face of the earth!”¹⁸⁹ All such formulations go beyond what Scripture tells us. It is one thing to say that Christ was “treated as a sinner and punished” in our stead;¹⁹⁰ it is quite another to say that God thought of Christ as a guilty sinner.

In a 19th-century attempt to clarify the doctrine of imputation, [Charles Hodge](#) wrote, “When it is said that our sins were imputed to Christ, or that He bore our sins, ... all that is meant is that ... He undertook to answer the demands of justice for the sins of men, or, as it is expressed by the Apostle, to be made a curse for them.”¹⁹¹ Now, this is a significant statement. It stays within the bounds of biblical revelation, but does so by making the word *imputed* a redundant term for *bore our sins*. See how Hodge’s statement works perfectly well when we remove the word *imputed* completely:

When it is said that ... Christ ... bore our sins, ... all that is meant is that ... He undertook to answer the demands of justice for the sins of men, or, as it is expressed by the Apostle, to be made a curse for them.

With such a statement, we can completely agree. Christ bore our sins; yes! He answered the demands of justice for the sins of men; yes! He became a curse for us; yes!

However, all these statements only indicate that Christ suffered the penalty for our sins. This is what Scripture means when it speaks of bearing one’s sin: it means to suffer sin’s consequences (see Lev 22.9; 24.15-16; Num 18.22; Eze 18.20). When the Bible says that Christ bore our sins (Isa 53.12), it means that He bore the penalty of our sins “on the cross” (1Pe 2.24). That Christ bore our sins (Isa 53.12) no more implies a transfer or imputation of

¹⁸⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), p. 574.

¹⁸⁸ Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once For All: Bible Doctrine For Today* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), p. 266.

¹⁸⁹ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, no. 202. Other Alien Righteousness proponents contradict Luther’s immoderate declaration. Boyce, for example, said, “So the imputation of our sin to Christ did not make him personally a sinner. He was still of himself ‘the holy and righteous one.’” James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract Of Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), p. 400.

¹⁹⁰ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary Of Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 645.

¹⁹¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), vol. 2, pp. 194-195. Ironically, just before this statement, Hodge wrote, “Much of the difficulty on this subject [of imputation] arises from the ambiguity of the language.”

our sin to Him, than the fact that He also bore our infirmities (Isa 53.4) implies that God imputed our sicknesses to Him.¹⁹²

Let us remember that in biblical redemption law, all that is required to redeem a man is that he have a willing and sufficiently wealthy kinsman. Paul's offer to make restitution for Onesimus' debt to Philemon provides us a picture of this kind of transaction. As a spiritual kinsman to both Philemon and Onesimus, Paul offered to pay Onesimus' debt, but in no way needed to take on the guilt for Onesimus' rebellion (Phm 1.18). The kinsman-redeemer is neither required to pretend to be, nor be declared to be, the one who incurred the debt, but only to pay its full penalty. This is exactly what Jesus Christ did. He willingly paid the full penalty for our sin as the *only One* in all the universe qualified and able to do so. When He did so, the Father did not have to impute our sin or guilt to Jesus; He did not have to think of Jesus as the One who was guilty of our sins.

Yes, Isa 53.6 does say regarding Christ that, "the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him," but this is just another way to say that Christ "bore the sin of many" (Isa 53.12), with the emphasis on Who caused Him to do so. It means that *God* caused our iniquity to fall on Christ. Consistent with the biblical meaning of sin-bearing, however, the meaning of the Hebrew words for "fall" (פָּלַח; hīf-gē-'yā) and "iniquity" (עָוֹן; ä-'vōn) in Isa 53.6 make it clear that God caused the *punishment* for our iniquity, not the iniquity itself, to fall upon Christ.¹⁹³ Isa 53.6 does not warrant the inference of the *Reformation Study Bible* that, "The guilt of our sin was transferred to Jesus..."¹⁹⁴ The verse has nothing to do with imputation, but only affirms that Christ suffered for the sins of us all.

Similarly, while 2Co 5.21 says that God "made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God," the idea of sin-bearing is present, but not the idea of imputation. In this context (vv. 18-21) Paul is talking about representation, not imputation. Christ represented us and our sin on the cross, so that we might represent Him as

¹⁹² Nevertheless, the bearing of our sins is constantly equated with the transfer of our sins to Christ. See James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract Of Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), p. 256, where he correctly says that Christ bore the sin of man, "was made sin (or a sin offering) for man, and was treated as though he were a sinner," but equates all this with the sin of man being "transferred to Christ," and then makes this the same principle by which "the righteousness of Christ is also imputed to man...."

¹⁹³ The verse's context and its translation in the LXX support this interpretation. See Edward J. Young, *The Book Of Isaiah*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 349-350.

¹⁹⁴ Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al*, *The Reformation Study Bible: Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture*, ed. Luder Jr. Whitlock, R. C. Sproul *et al* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), note on Isa 53.6.

ambassadors of God's righteousness.¹⁹⁵ As [K. L. Onesti](#) and [M. T. Brauch](#) put it,

The difficult expression of 2Co 5.21 ... underlines a relational rather than a judicial or [ontological](#) meaning. The text is concerned with reconciliation to God in and through Christ ... and calls those who are reconciled to become instruments of that reconciling work (2Co 5.18-19). In that context, the phrase "to become God's righteousness" means that believers become participants in God's reconciling action, extensions of his restoring love.¹⁹⁶

Clearly, then, [Evangelical](#) commentators go well beyond the substance of the text when they say,

Paul here speaks of some kind of transference, by which he takes away our sin, and gives us his righteousness. [Martin Luther](#) referred to this as a 'marvelous exchange'.¹⁹⁷

Such [eisegesis](#) is unwarranted. While 2Co 5.21 undoubtedly alludes to representation or substitution,¹⁹⁸ it mentions no "transference." The verse certainly says nothing about imputation, for in Paul's parallelism we *become* the righteousness of God, we are not clothed or credited with it.

None of this negates the fact that there is a biblical phenomenon of the imputation of sin. Scripture *does* describe sin as imputed (credited) to persons' accounts, but only to those persons who commit the sin (see for example, Job 34.37 in the LXX). Conversely, in the biblical act of forgiveness, sin is *not* imputed (Psa 32.1-2; 2Co 5.19; 2Ti 4.16), but again the sin is only *not* imputed (i.e., forgiven) to those who committed it. There is no basis in all the Bible for the idea that the sins or guilt of one person can be transferred by imputation to another. As [Andrew Fuller](#) put it, "Both guilt and innocence are transferable in their effects, but in themselves they are untransferable."¹⁹⁹ In other words, the only thing about sin that can be transferred is its penalty, and that only to a willing and qualified Redeemer. We can conclude,

¹⁹⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). See also J. H. Benard, *The Second Epistle Of Paul To The Corinthians*, in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. III, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (New York, NY: George H. Doran), pp. 73-74.

¹⁹⁶ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Martin, Ralph P. and Daniel G. Reid, , *Dictionary Of Paul And His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Martin, Ralph P. and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 836.

¹⁹⁷ Alister E. McGrath and James I. Packer, , *Zondervan Handbook Of Christian Beliefs*, ed. Alister E. McGrath and James I. Packer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 192.

¹⁹⁸ I.e., Paul was thinking of Christ as representing us or serving as our substitute with regard to the punishment we deserved for our sins.

¹⁹⁹ Andrew Fuller, *Three Conversations*. Vol. II, in *The Complete Works Of Andrew Fuller* (Harrisburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), p. 685.

therefore, that the Father never thought of our Lord Jesus as guilty of our sins.

Someone will object, though, and ask, “If the Father did not impute our sin and guilt to the Son, why did the Father forsake the Son on the cross?” In response, let us first acknowledge that Jesus’ experience of forsakenness by the Father, inferred from our Lord’s cry recorded in Mat 27.46 and Mar 15.34, is a phenomenon acknowledged to be one of the “most impenetrable mysteries of the entire Gospel narrative.”²⁰⁰ Nevertheless, if we believe that Jesus’ cry, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me,” was an authentic expression of personal agony, and not just an utterance made to follow the prophetic script of Psa 22.1, or to point the mocking bystanders to the ultimately triumphant message about Messiah in Psa 22.19-21,²⁰¹ then the forsakenness of Jesus by the Father is a reality that, no matter how mysterious, we should indeed integrate into our understanding of atonement and justification.

Now, while it is difficult to fathom what the experience of Jesus’ forsakenness was, we can confidently say what it was not. It was not the experience of a rift in the essence of the Trinity, for there can be no separation between Father and Son so far as their divine nature is concerned. Nor did Jesus perceive the Father departing Golgotha. The Father was not, as some suppose, compelled to flee the scene of the crucifixion by the facts that (a) His “eyes are too pure to look on evil” (Hab 1.13 [NIVO](#)) and (b) Christ had been transformed into the actual essence of sin.²⁰² This idea that the Father left the scene for such reasons is untenable because (a) God looks unflinchingly upon the totality of the sin and evil of men and angels every day, only not with approval (Hab 1.13), and (b) Jesus did not transform into some mystical substance on the cross. However, if no essential break occurred in the fellowship of the Trinity, nor any divine repulsion at Christ literally becoming sin, *nor* any divine rejection of Christ due to the [imputation](#) of our sins, then what did Jesus experience as forsakenness by God?

Whatever it was, it was the experience of the willing and qualified Redeemer who had volunteered to endure the full penalty for our sins. It’s a reasonable inference that part of that penalty was the [phenomenological](#)

²⁰⁰ Beale, G. K., and D. A. Carson, *Commentary On The New Testament Use Of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 100.

²⁰¹ Regarding this view taken by Hill and Keener, see the comments in Beale, G. K., and D. A. Carson, *Commentary On The New Testament Use Of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 99-100.

²⁰² The vague interpretations of 2Co 5.21 in various theology books seem to imply that Jesus was somehow changed into sin itself. Other works, like Calvin’s *Institutes* (II.16.vi.) are more precise in interpreting “made him to be sin for us” in 1Co 5.21 as meaning, “the Son of God ... took upon him the disgrace and ignominy of our iniquities.”

experience, i.e., *the human sensation rather than essential reality*, of estrangement from the Father. As a true human being hanging on the cross, Jesus probably felt a relational chasm open between Himself and the Father that the Son had certainly never experienced in all the eternity of His divine existence. The Father, in the ultimate “giving up” of His only begotten Son, withheld His normally ever-present succor from Jesus, even as Jesus reached the extreme limits of human suffering. The absence of that usual comfort and aid from the Father had to have registered on the humanity of Jesus as a shock of infinite proportion. For the first time in His life, Jesus could not summon terms of intimacy to His lips as He addressed the Almighty, but cried out to *God* (Mar 15.34) rather than to *Abba* or *Father* (Mar 14.36).²⁰³ At that moment, Jesus did not *feel* that God was acting as Father toward Him. Had Jesus continued to cry out the words of Psalm 22.1, He would have screamed, “so **far** from saving me, [and the] words of my groaning!”²⁰⁴ In His humanity, Jesus felt that God was terrifyingly far away, and the *sensation* of that distance was apparently necessary to the propitiation of sin, or else God would have surely spared His Son from experiencing it.

To so briefly contemplate the forsakenness of the crucified Christ, as we have just done, hardly diminishes the mystery surrounding our Lord’s sense of abandonment by the Father. Still, these few thoughts should suffice to show that the imputation of sin and guilt to Jesus is not a necessary pre-supposition for explaining His experience of forsakenness. Suffering that forsakenness was undoubtedly integral to the atonement, and thus foundational for our justification, but Christ’s suffering in such a way is adequately explained by His sin-bearing. That sin-bearing, likewise, requires no act of imputation for its explanation or its accomplishment, because sin-bearing is simply a bearing of the full penalty due for sin.

4. Imputation vs. infusion is a false dilemma.

Returning to the overarching subject of our justification, we must now address the infelicitous dilemma of “imputation vs. infusion” thrust upon us by the Reformers and their heirs. [R. C. Sproul](#) says, “The conflict over justification by faith alone boils down to this: Is the ground of justification the righteousness of Christ imputed *to* us, or the righteousness of Christ

²⁰³ “Feeling forsaken as if he were not being heard, he no longer presumes to speak intimately to the All-Powerful as ‘Father’ but employs the address common to all human beings, ‘My God.’” Raymond E. Brown, *The Death Of The Messiah: From Gethsemane To The Grave, Volume One and Two* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 1046.

²⁰⁴ My emphasis and translation. The NIVO better captures the sense of Psa 22.1b than does the problematic NAU translation.

working *within* us?”²⁰⁵ By “the righteousness of Christ working *within* us,” Sproul refers to the Roman Catholic doctrine of [infused righteousness mentioned above](#), so for Sproul, the question “boils down to” whether the righteousness of Christ is imputed *to* us, or “infused into the soul sacramentally.” If these are the only two alternatives, then any non-Catholic must choose to believe in the imputed righteousness of Christ.

However, [Sproul’s](#) summation of the issue presents a *false* dilemma, every bit as much as did [Calvin’s](#) parallel teaching that a “person is justified either by his own works or by Christ’s works.”²⁰⁶ In both dilemmas all the stated alternatives are wrong. There is a third alternative in both cases, and it is the biblically explicit one. We are neither justified by imputed righteousness nor by infused righteousness, nor are we justified by our own works nor by Christ’s: we are justified by faith (Gal 2.16; 3.24).

The Bible teaches us this explicitly and repeatedly: “a man is justified by faith” (Rom 3.28; 5.1). It also tells us explicitly that it is *faith* (not “the righteousness of Christ”) that is imputed to us as righteousness. In Gen 15.6, Paul’s great proof text on justification (Rom 4.3; Gal 3.6), we read:

Then [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.²⁰⁷

The pronoun *it* in the second clause refers back to Abraham’s act of believing, i.e., to his *faith*, as Paul makes explicit in Rom 4.5: “his faith is credited (imputed) as righteousness.” So, it is faith that justifies, and it is faith that is imputed as righteousness.

Nevertheless, theologians sometimes de-emphasize faith in order to accentuate “the righteousness of Christ.” Does this mean that [Evangelicals](#)

²⁰⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 73.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

²⁰⁷ Regarding the grammar of Gen 15.6, my mentor in all things Hebraic, Tim Hegg, explains:

The 3rd fem singular objective suffix refers to an unnamed antecedent, which must be generally understood as “the act of believing,” which would be clearly construed as the substantive “faith” (אמונה). This is how Paul interprets it in Rom 4:3-5, where, after quoting Gen 15.6, he specifically states (v. 5) that “faith is credited as righteousness.” The same may be said of Gal 3.6-7, where Paul specifically uses the substantive “faith” following the quote.

Thus, the 3rd feminine singular objective suffix of ויחשבה (translated “it” in the English) must refer to the substance of Abraham’s act of believing, i.e., faith, אמונה, which is 3rd fem sing. in the Hebrew. Though unnamed in the text, “faith” (the act of believing) is the obvious antecedent of the objective suffix. [E-mail correspondence, August 8, 2010.]

are departing from the principle of justification by faith? Not at all. Justification by faith remains a bedrock doctrine for [Reformed theologians](#) and all of today's [Evangelicals](#). The problem has to do with the different kinds of causes (which I will define in the next paragraph) that bring about our justification. The problem is not that [Evangelicals](#) have lost sight of faith as the *instrumental cause* of justification, but that they are compelled to stress "the righteousness of Christ" as the *material cause* of justification.²⁰⁸ Indeed, some have so exalted "the righteousness of Christ" that they almost make it the *efficient cause* of justification.

Let's understand the multiple *causes* of our justification.

Let me explain what philosophers and theologians mean by *efficient*, *material*, and *instrumental* causes. The philosopher [Aristotle](#), as reported in his *Metaphysics*, presented a theory of causation positing four kinds of causes: *efficient*, *material*, *formal*, and *final*. Aristotle was intent on limiting causes to four for man-made things and to two for natural things,²⁰⁹ but subsequent thinkers expanded the kinds of causes to six, adding *exemplar* and *instrumental*.²¹⁰ For our current inquiry we need only concern ourselves with the three kinds of causes I first mentioned: the *efficient*, *material*, and *instrumental*.²¹¹ The efficient cause is the chief agent producing an effect, the material cause is the "substance" of which the effect consists, and the instrumental cause is the tool or means used by the efficient cause to produce the effect.

We can illustrate these three causes by imagining that a brilliant builder singlehandedly constructs a stone bridge across a deep chasm, using a simple set of stonecutter's tools. In this scenario, we would say that the efficient cause of the bridge is the builder, the material cause is the mortared stone, and the instrumental cause is the set of tools. From this illustration, we can now observe several truths. First, we see that the builder, the stone *and* the tools all cause the bridge, and yet these simultaneous causes are distinct from one another. We also note that the tools couldn't build the

²⁰⁸ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), pp. 73-75. See Calvin, *Institutes* III.xiv.17, 21.

²⁰⁹ Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springstead, *Philosophy For Understanding Theology, Second Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 92. *Masterpieces Of World Philosophy*, ed. Frank N. Magill (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 67.

²¹⁰ For a basic explanation of these six different kinds of causes, and of the fallacy of confusing them, I refer the reader to Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason: An Introduction To Logical Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), p. 173 ff.

²¹¹ For a diagram explaining the involvement of all six kinds of causes in justification, please see Appendix 2.

bridge by themselves; they were entirely dependent on the builder for their efficacy. Finally, we also observe that while the bridge is properly called a bridge, it consists of something other than a bridge, namely, mortared stone.

Now, keeping in mind the preceding explanation and illustration of the three causes relevant to our present inquiry, let's return to the matter of justification. As in our bridge illustration, when we contemplate the event of justification, we can distinguish between the efficient, material and instrumental causes of it, and we can see that the instrumental cause of justification is dependent upon the efficient cause. Furthermore, even though justification is not a material thing like a bridge, we discover that it nevertheless "consists" of something.

What then are the three causes of our justification? The [Reformers](#) and their theological heirs put it this way:

1. God is the *efficient* cause, i.e., He is the One who justifies us.
2. "The righteousness of Christ" is the *material* cause of which our justification "consists."
3. Faith is the *instrumental* cause, the means by which God justifies us.²¹²

Points 1 and 3 of this formulation are on the right track. Paul clearly states that "God is the one who justifies," and repeatedly tells us that we are justified "**by** faith" (Rom 8.33; Rom 3.28, etc.). Furthermore, that God is the *efficient cause* of our justification, and [faith](#) is an *instrumental cause*, accords with the defined interaction of these two causes; [faith](#) is clearly dependent upon God, since "[faith](#) ... is the gift of God" (Eph 2.8). What derails the [Reformers'](#) formulation, though, is point 2, because Scripture never mentions "the righteousness of Christ" but once (2Pe 1.1), and never with any direct connection to justification. How can the material cause of our justification, that of which our justification consists, be something that Scripture never identifies?

If the material cause of our justification *is* something that Scripture identifies, what is it, if not "the righteousness of Christ"? What is the "stuff" that our justification consists of? Well, thankfully, unlike the Reformers who understood justification as primarily judicial rather than [relational](#), and who were compelled to assign a material cause to it that would bolster their argument that justification was purely [forensic](#), we can read the scriptures pertinent to this question in their relational context and take them at face

²¹² See Karla Wübbenhorst, "Calvin's Doctrine Of Justification: Variations On A Lutheran Theme," in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 109.

value. What we quickly discover is that, “having been justified by faith, **we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5.1; cf. Act 10.36; Eph 2.14-18; Col 1.20). “Peace with God” is the mortared stone that bridges the chasm between man and his Creator; “peace with God” (or “reconciliation,” Rom 5.10-11; 2Co 5.18-19; Col 1.19-22) is what our justification “consists” of.

Alien Righteousness proponents will object to this identification of a **relational** state, i.e., “peace with God,” instead of an **ethical** record, i.e. “the righteousness of Christ,” as the material cause of our justification. However, what commends “peace with God” over “the righteousness of Christ” is that “peace with God” has a biblical basis, textual and cultural, and “the righteousness of Christ” doesn’t. The missing biblical basis for belief in “the righteousness of Christ,” as the material cause of justification, underscores the point of this continuing digression about causes: we have no warrant to deemphasize the role of faith in our justification for the sake of elevating a material cause that is not taught in Scripture. It is shameful to obscure the biblical emphasis on faith out of misguided zeal to promote “the righteousness of Christ” as the material cause of our justification. Yet, the disparaging of faith for this reason, ironically begun by **Luther**, continues to this present day.

In an attempt to defend his disparaging of faith in the face of Scripture’s emphasis upon it, **John Gill** indulged in a regrettable bit of sophistry. He wrote that, “though we are said to be justified by faith, yet faith is never said to justify us.”²¹³ By this clever statement, **Gill** presumably meant that *faith* is never presented in Scripture as the subject (*efficient cause*) performing the action of justifying us, but only appears as the means (*instrumental cause*) by which we are justified. This is true so far as it goes, but **Gill** has fed us a partial truth.

Faith *is* an instrumental cause of justification, but it is not the *only* instrumental cause of it; the brilliant bridge Builder used a *set* of tools. The

²¹³ John Gill, *The Doctrine Of Justification, By The Righteousness Of Christ, Stated And Maintained*, Sermon (Rio, WI: AGES Software). Cf. Boyce’s similarly unhelpful statement, “We are never said to be justified, διὰ πίστιν (*dia pistin*), (on account of faith), but only διὰ πίστεως (*dia pisteos*), through faith, or ἐκ πίστεως (*ek pisteos*) of faith, εἰς πίστιν (*eis pistin*), unto faith, and ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει (*epi te pistei*), by faith.” Boyce seemed to not realize that both accusative and genitive διὰ phrases can carry causal force; with the genitive, διὰ can point to either an efficient cause or an intermediate agent. To say, therefore, that “We are never said to be justified, διὰ πίστιν (*dia pistin*), (on account of faith), ...” and then list a string of genitive (and dative) phrases in contrast, is meaningless. James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract Of Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), p. 400.

Bible mentions all of the following as means of our justification (see Fig. 6 below):

- Knowledge of Christ
- Faith
- Christ's Blood
- The Name of Jesus
- The Spirit of God
- Jesus Christ
- Grace
- The redemption that Jesus accomplished
- The obedience of Christ

Ignoring most of these items, but mentioning two of them, Gill completed his theological sleight of hand by saying that, “faith is not the blood, nor obedience of Christ, and yet by these we are said to be justified, or made righteous (Rom 5.9,19).”

Hold on! Let's look at the relevant clauses in the two verses Gill referenced:

Rom 5.9: “... having now been justified by (ἐν) His blood...”

Rom 5.19: “... through (διὰ) the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”²¹⁴

While the Bible has much to say about the blood (i.e., the suffering) of Christ, Rom 5.9 is the only passage that explicitly and directly connects justification to Christ's blood. Likewise, Rom 5.19 is the only passage that explicitly and directly connects justification to His obedience. Yet, Rom 5.9 does not say, “His blood justifies us,” or “His blood has now justified us.” Nor does Rom 5.19 say, “the obedience of the One justifies us,” or “the obedience of the One will make the many righteous.” Neither the “blood” nor “the obedience” are mentioned as the subjects doing the justifying, but rather are named as *means* (i.e. instruments) used to bring about the justifying. The “blood” and “the obedience” are mentioned in connection with justification in the very same way that faith is.

Here are some clauses, also from Romans, that refer to faith in connection with justification:

Rom 3.28: “ ... a man is justified by faith ... ”²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Rather than the verb “to be justified,” as in Rom 3.28, Rom 5.19 uses “shall be made righteous,” but I trust the reader will see the equivalence.

²¹⁵ The preposition, *by*, in this verse is implied by the dative case of the noun *faith*.

Rom 3.30: "... God who will justify ... the uncircumcised through (διὰ) faith ..."

When we compare Paul's mentions of the "blood" and the "obedience of Christ" with his mentions of "faith," we see that the "blood," the "obedience of

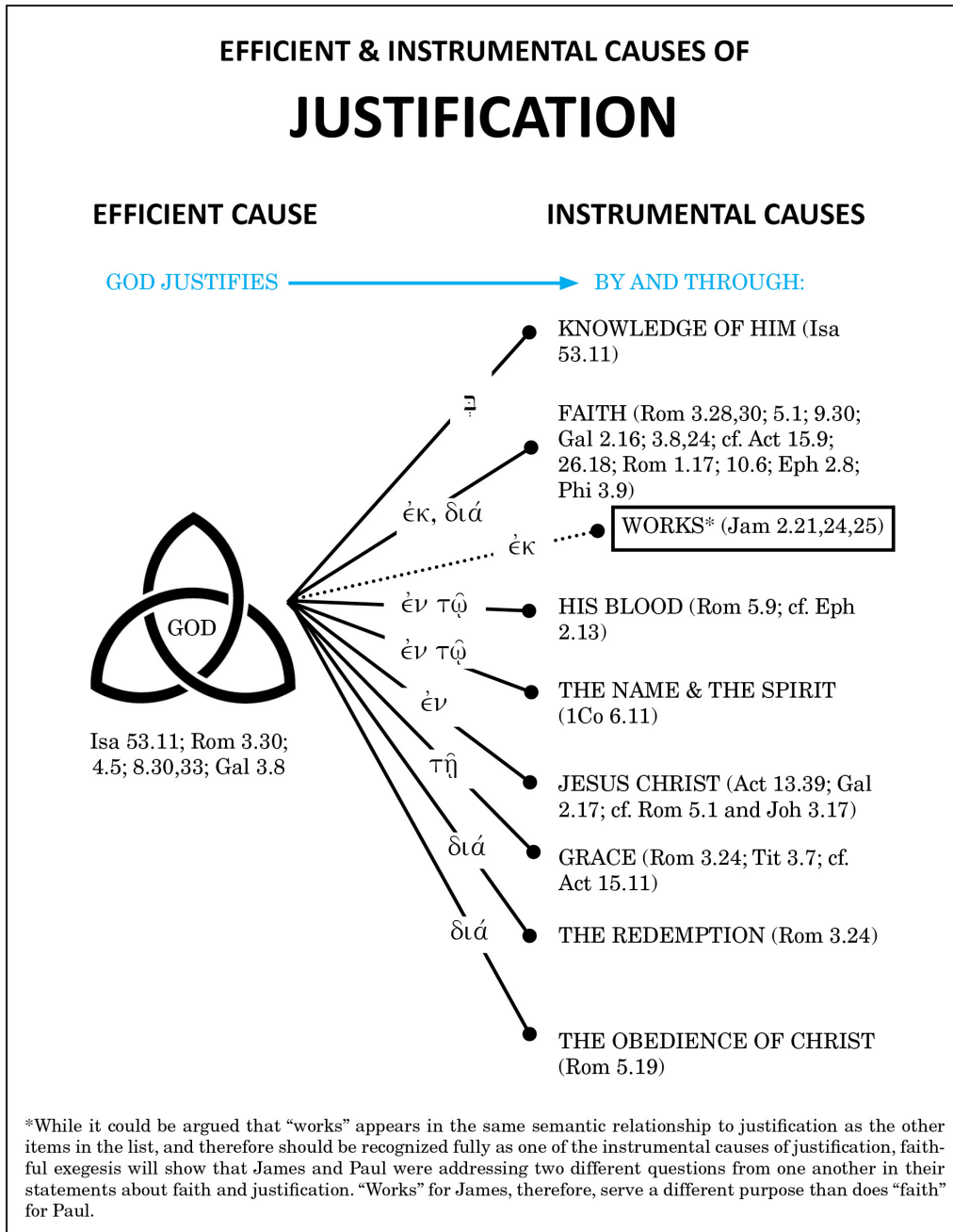


Figure 6

Christ,” and “faith” are all semantically related to justification in the same way.

Therefore, when Gill said that “faith is never said to justify us,” he should have also said, “neither does the Bible say that the ‘blood’ justifies us, nor that ‘the obedience of Christ’ justifies us.” Or when he said, “by [the blood and obedience of Christ] we are said to be justified, or made righteous,” he should have also said, “even as by faith we are said to be justified.” Instead, he pretended that with respect to justification Scripture speaks about the “blood” and “the obedience of Christ” in one way, and about “faith” in another, but this is not so.

Now, Gill understood and explicitly stated that “the author, or efficient cause of justification, ... is the great God of heaven and earth: ‘It is God that justifies’; (Rom 8.34 [sic]).”²¹⁶ Nevertheless, by the way he slyly contrasted faith with “the blood” and the “obedience of Christ,” he implied that while the latter actually justify us (as though *they* were efficient causes, or perhaps material causes, of our justification), faith is somehow subordinate to them. However, all nine items in the list above appear in Scripture with the same semantic relationship to justification; they are *all* mentioned as instrumental causes of our justification without one being explicitly elevated above another (see Fig. 6 above). If we were to go by verse count, though, *faith* is clearly emphasized above the rest as the practical means of our justification.²¹⁷ On what basis then can John Gill or anyone else demean faith as less important than the other items in the list?

Well, regarding this list, someone is apt to object that surely “Jesus Christ” is more important or significant in justification than “our faith,” and that is true. Christ is the *most* important cause of our justification because while in Act 13.39 and Gal 2.17 He is spoken of as the *instrumental cause* of God’s justifying work, we know from other passages that He is simultaneously the *efficient cause*. As God said through Isaiah (53.11), “the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many” Christ appears in Scripture as both the instrumental *and* efficient cause of our justification because of the multiple perspectives from which biblical passages speak. When Scripture considers Christ in relationship to the Godhead, it presents God as the (assumed) subject who justifies us *through* Christ. When Scripture considers Christ in His own right, He is the One who justifies us. So, yes, Christ is more important than the other instrumental causes I’ve listed, but what this proves is that unless another item on the list can also be shown to

²¹⁶ Ibid. The intended reference is presumably Rom 8.33.

²¹⁷ The first item, “knowledge” of Messiah, may also be tantamount to “faith.”

be an efficient — not just an instrumental — cause of our justification, it cannot be elevated above *faith*.

Once we acknowledge that Scripture presents all nine of the items listed above as instrumental causes of our justification, and once we recognize the practical preeminence given to faith as compared to the other eight, we can proclaim the Bible’s message that “a man is justified by faith,” without having to add caveats. We don’t have to garble the message the way [John Gill](#) did when he wrote,

We are, indeed, said to be *justified by faith* (Rom 5.1) but not by faith, as an act of ours, for then we should be justified by works; nor by faith as a grace of the Spirit, for this would be to confound sanctification and justification; but we are justified by faith objectively, as it looks to, apprehends, and embraces Christ’s righteousness for justification.²¹⁸

We don’t have to explain away faith in this manner and redirect the focus upon “Christ’s righteousness,” because a man *really is* justified by faith. When we read biblical passages about justification by faith, we can happily take them at face value.

Consider again Gen 15.6:

Then [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

There is no hint in Gen 15.6, nor in Paul’s arguments from it, that someone else’s righteousness was imputed to Abraham. It is a violent anachronism to read this [Reformation](#) idea back into Genesis.²¹⁹ Only an overly zealous commitment to a theological construct can force Gen 15.6 to support the idea that “the righteousness of Christ” is imputed to the believer. Yet, when we understand faith as the biblically emphasized *instrumental cause* of our justification, we can take Gen 15.6 at face value without having to read anything into the text.²²⁰

²¹⁸ John Gill, *The Doctrine Of Justification, By The Righteousness Of Christ, Stated And Maintained*, Sermon (Rio, WI: AGES Software).

²¹⁹ It would have been unlikely for Abraham in his time to have any inkling that his justification would involve a future perfectly-lived life that would be credited to his own account.

²²⁰ See how John Gill was constrained to twist the plain meaning of Gen 15.6:

The ... act of believing ... is not imputed to us for justification, as *Arminius* and his followers have asserted; endeavoring to establish this notion from some passages in Romans 4.3,5,9, where faith is said to be counted for righteousness; particularly the faith of *Abraham*; by which the apostle means not the act, but the object of faith, even the righteousness of Christ, which God, in verse 6, is said to impute without works.

Do we make too much of faith?

Still, some have complained that to so push *faith* to the forefront in justification is to make faith equivalent to righteousness, and therefore, to make those who possess faith into people who are righteous in and of themselves. James Petigru Boyce, for example, felt it necessary to say, “The fact that faith is counted for righteousness shows, that in itself [faith] is not righteousness ...”²²¹ John Piper also endeavors to persuade us that, “Justification in Paul’s mind is God’s imputing righteousness to us ‘by faith’ rather than faith being treated as righteousness within us.”²²² Piper reemphasizes this saying, “Paul ... thinks in terms of righteousness being imputed to us rather than our faith being recognized or considered as our righteousness,”²²³ and then concludes, “righteousness is *not* ‘righteousness that consists in our faith,’ but rather an external ‘righteousness credited to us because of our faith.’”²²⁴

In view of such statements, let me say three things clearly about faith. First of all, and as all Evangelicals agree, faith is a gift from God (Eph 2.8). Our faith *is* external in its origin, and not something a sinner can generate within himself nor claim merit for. Therefore, even if faith *is* tantamount to righteousness, it is still of God, not of ourselves.²²⁵

John Gill, *The Doctrine Of Justification, By The Righteousness Of Christ, Stated And Maintained*, Sermon (Rio, WI: AGES Software). Cf. John Miley, “it is faith itself, and not its object that is imputed.” John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, II vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1893), in his section on “The Condition Of Justification.”

²²¹ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract Of Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), p. 400.

²²² John Piper, *Counted Righteous In Christ: Should We Abandon The Imputation Of Christ’s Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), p. 58.

²²³ Ibid., p. 59.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 63. Remonstrances against equating faith with righteousness are more Presbyterian than biblical. They echo [The Westminster Confession Of Faith](#), ch. XI.1, which states that “Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth ... not for anything wrought in them, nor done by them ... **nor by imputing faith itself ... as their righteousness**; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them ...” (Emphasis mine.)

Piper’s protests on this point are largely in opposition to the statements of Robert H. Gundry in two successive issues of *Books and Culture* (January/February 2001, March/April 2001). Robert Gundry had written to explain, “Why I Didn’t Endorse ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration’ ... Even Though I Wasn’t Asked To.” I agree with Gundry that the document he refers to is deeply flawed. It can be found online.

²²⁵ As Gundry remarks, “insofar as Reformed soteriology takes faith to be a gift of God, the objection [that] counting faith as righteousness ... puts justification on a synergistic rather than solely gracious basis ... sounds hollow. ... the charge of synergism does not stick.” Robert H. Gundry, “The Nonimputation Of Christ’s Righteousness,” in *Justification: What’s At Stake In The Current Debate* edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), pp. 23-24.

Secondly, faith — technically speaking — is not righteousness; right relationship with God is righteousness. However, we must take into account the subtleties of human language as we think about this. To the extent that a state of active trust in God through Christ constitutes right relationship with God, to that extent faith *is* tantamount to righteousness, and this idea does not violate the prepositional statements in Scripture that provide slightly varied perspectives on the relationship between faith and righteousness.

Let me illustrate with a situation I've found myself in more than once. Having not received my theological education in the typical way, I do not hold any degrees. This only becomes an issue when I have been invited to teach for certain institutions or programs that maintain an accredited teaching staff. When I have offered to withdraw in view of my lack of credentials, I have on different occasions been told, "No, no, we still want you to teach here, you'll just need to do so under the supervision of Dr. So-and-so." In other words, so long as I submit my syllabus to a teacher or administrator in the school who is credentialed, and am willing to remain accountable to them for what I do, my submission to the credentialed person *is credited to me* as compliance to the program's requirements. Now, while we can make a technical distinction between my *act of submission* to a credentialed staff member and *the state of compliance* to the institution's requirements, in the real-life situation people will sometimes say, "Roderick's accountability to Dr. So-and-so has been credited to him *as* compliance," but sometimes they will simply say, "Roderick is in compliance."

In like manner, Scripture is not particularly concerned (as are [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents, who are quite concerned out of doctrinal necessity) about the distinction between faith and the-righteousness-that-results-from-faith (Rom 10.10). Still, a subtle distinction between faith and righteousness can be maintained. Let us note, though, that once the idea of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is set aside, we will have no problem recognizing faith as *tantamount* to righteousness.²²⁶

I will acknowledge thirdly, that a crediting (imputation) of faith as righteousness could not have occurred apart from the blood of Christ. Had the Messiah not atoned for sin, there would have been no Redeemer to believe in,

²²⁶ Augustine certainly had no such problem, writing to believers that "...it is thy faith that was thy righteousness. For 'the just lives by faith.'" Augustine, *Expositions On The Psalms*, XXXVII.6, in *Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VIII, edited by Philip Schaff (Edinburgh, T & T Clark). And, in another place, "Your faith is your righteousness..." Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 32.I.4, quoted in David F. Wright, "Justification In Augustine," in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 69.

and no removal of the barrier to right relationship with God. Abraham, like ourselves, would have remained alienated from God by all his sins. Therefore, to recognize faith as the most biblically emphasized instrumental cause of our justification, and as that which is credited as righteousness by God, in no way detracts from the agency of God and of Jesus Christ in justification, nor in anyway implies that man can save himself by some self-generated belief. I do not over-exalt faith; I recognize its inherent value without detracting from the efficient agency of God and Christ in our justification.

Alien Righteousness proponents view faith improperly.

Alien Righteousness proponents have not, however, maintained a proper appreciation for the gift of saving faith. Rather, they have long sustained a counterproductive bias against faith's inherent value. [R. C. Sproul](#), for example, writes, "Justification by faith alone' is merely shorthand for 'justification by the righteousness of Christ alone.'"²²⁷ Such an unbiblical statement seems to suggest that we can drop faith out of the formulation altogether.

[John Miley](#) provides another example of the Evangelical discomfort with faith. While [Miley](#) was a non-Calvinist who recognized that faith itself is imputed for righteousness, he nevertheless hastened to assure his readers that "faith itself cannot constitute ... personal righteousness," and that "faith is simply the [necessary] condition of righteousness," and that faith is only "accepted as the condition of justification or the remission of sin..."²²⁸ Now, while we have already acknowledged that faith is not strictly equivalent to righteousness, it is nevertheless something far more than just the necessary condition of righteousness or justification; it is an *active principle* in our justification, the instrumental cause which actually puts us right with God.

With a similar negativism toward faith, [James Petigru Boyce](#) wrote,

The fact that faith is counted for righteousness shows, that in itself it is not righteousness and has no merit, but is only so 'reckoned on the ground of something outside itself, viz: the saving work of Christ.' ... [Faith] is a condition which has in it no merit in itself, but only seizes upon merit in another.²²⁹

Understandably, [Boyce](#) was making certain that his readers did not think of faith as "a work, by which salvation is secured."²³⁰ He labored to protect the

²²⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), p. 67.

²²⁸ John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, II vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1893).

²²⁹ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract Of Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), pp. 400-401.

²³⁰ Somewhat in contrast to [John Gill](#) who described faith as a work of the law (see below).

idea that only the object of faith, namely, the imputed righteousness of Christ, justifies. The important thing for us to notice here, though, is Boyce's statement that "faith ... has no merit." Now if he used "merit" here in the medieval sense, referring to something which accrues to our account and puts God under obligation to us, then we must agree: faith has no merit of that kind.²³¹ However, by this statement Boyce bequeathed us one more ambiguous passage that demeans faith, putting it on a level below "the saving work of Christ," while Scripture puts both faith and Christ's work on the same level — *when considered as instruments* of God's justifying work (see Figure 6 above).

The disparaging of faith gets worse. Heidland writes in TDNT,

Faith is reckoned for righteousness because this is pleasing to the will of Yahweh, not because faith has this value intrinsically.²³²

This is a horrible statement because it implies that faith (as that which justifies) is an arbitrary choice of God rather than a reflection of His character. Perhaps Heidland didn't mean it that way, but as written, his words suggest that God could have decided to reckon twirling on tiptoes as righteousness, and it would have been just as meaningful as God's deciding upon faith as the justifying principle. But twirling on tiptoes is not a relational act; believing God is. The eternally relational, triune God reckons faith for righteousness precisely because He is relational, and faith is what restores and maintains man's relationship to Him. Faith is not one of an infinite number of options that God could have chosen as the justifying principle for fallen man; *it is the only option* given man's fallen state and God's eternal character and agenda.

As a sadly similar statement to Heidland's, I repeat R. D. Preus' description of Luther's perspective on faith. According to Preus, Luther believed that,

God is pleased with the Christian's faith not because faith is a virtue, but for Christ's sake, because Christ is the object of faith....²³³

Now, since faith is a gift from God, it is absurd to deny that God is pleased with faith *in itself*! Furthermore, when faith is negatively contrasted with its object, as in this synopsis of Luther's thinking, an inappropriate comparison

²³¹ No human acts accrue merit before God because all good that we do flows from God's grace working in us (Phil 2.13). God does, however, highly value our good works as expressions of His character and rule in our world.

²³² TDNT, vol. 4, p. 289, under the section on "λογίζεσθαι as the Saving Act of God."

²³³ R. D. Preus, "Lutheranism And Lutheran Theology," in *New Dictionary Of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988).

is set up between things in two different categories, i.e., things whose relative value cannot be logically compared. Would we ever pose the question: “What is more important, my wife or my love for my wife?” Of course not; such a question is nonsense. Both my wife and my love for my wife are essential in their own categories, namely, the object of love and the action of love respectively. Likewise, both Christ *and* faith are vital in their own categories, the Savior and our response to the Savior.

Speaking of nonsense, let me share more of the passage from [John Gill](#) that I excerpted above so that you can see how he reduced faith to *a work of the law*:

Moreover, faith, as an act of ours, is a duty; for whatsoever we do, in a religious way, we do but what is our duty to do; and, if it is a duty, it belongs to the law; for, as all the declarations and promises of grace belong to the gospel, so all duties belong to the law; and if faith belongs to the law, as a duty, it is a work of it, and therefore by it we cannot be justified; *for by the deeds of the law shall no flesh living be justified*. Besides, faith is imperfect, it has many deficiencies; and, was it perfect, it is but a part of the law, though one of the weightier parts of it; and God, *whose judgment is according to truth*, will never reckon or account a partial conformity to the law a complete righteousness. Add to this, that faith and righteousness are manifestly distinguished (Rom 1.17 and 3.22) *the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith*; it is *unto all, and upon all them that believe*. Something else, and not faith, is represented as our justifying righteousness: faith is not the blood, nor obedience of Christ, and yet by these we are said to be justified, or made righteous. (Rom 5.9,19) We are, indeed, ... said to be *justified by faith* (Rom 5.1) but not by faith, as an act of ours, for then we should be justified by works; nor by faith as a grace of the Spirit, for this would be to confound sanctification and justification; but we are justified by faith objectively, as it looks to, apprehends, and embraces Christ’s righteousness for justification. And let it be observed, that though we are said to be justified by faith, yet faith is never said to justify us.²³⁴

This is tragic writing. To thus make faith a work of the law is ludicrous since faith and works of the law are set at variance in Scripture, so far as justification is concerned (Rom 3.28; Gal 2.16; 3.12). Furthermore, as I have [already explained](#), Gill cannot, by grammatical sleight of hand, make *the blood and obedience of Christ* into things that justify us, and make *faith* into

²³⁴ John Gill, *The Doctrine Of Justification, By The Righteousness Of Christ, Stated And Maintained*, Sermon (Rio, WI: AGES Software), p. 9.

something that does not. All three have their rightful place in the larger picture of justification's causation.

John Gill erred because of his commitment to the primacy of “the righteousness of Christ,” but his words nevertheless help us understand the underlying motivation for the evangelical deprecation of faith: no one wants to give the impression that we are justified by something inherent to ourselves. I appreciate this commendable motive. Nevertheless, faith properly understood as a Holy-Spirit-generated gift from God, and as the active state that maintains us in proper relationship with God, *is* what justifies us and *is* what is imputed to us for righteousness.

We realize, therefore, that the choice insisted upon in the Protestant-Catholic debate about justification, the choice between the imputed “righteousness of Christ” on the one hand and sacramentally infused righteousness on the other, presents a false dilemma. Neither of these two things justifies, *faith* justifies! The dilemma between the Protestant and Catholic grounds for justification is a relic of medieval theological polemics, and Evangelicals should have long ago recognized that both its competing propositions are false.

3. Distributive justice awaits the final judgment.

Another relic of medieval theology is the idea that justification is primarily about distributive justice, i.e., the meting out to someone of what his or her deeds deserve. If this were the case, and we could only approach God with an ethically perfect life for which He would “distribute” His favor to us, then, as the doctrine of Alien Righteousness has taught, we must somehow produce the record of a perfect life — if not our own, someone else's.

However, while the NT does teach distributive justice, it presents this kind of justice not as occurring in the present experience of justification, but rather as an event at the climax of history when Christ returns (Mat 12.36-37; 16.27; Rom 2.5-6; 14.10; 2Co 5.10; Eph 6.8; Rev 20.12-13). Furthermore, the NT does not picture the Father meting out distributive justice on the basis of faith (or the lack thereof), but rather presents the Son, the Messiah, meting it out in the coming Day on the basis of what people have actually done, *including* their response to Himself (Joh 5.22; 12.48; Act 10.42; 17.31; Rom 2.16; 2Ti 4.8; Jam 5.9).

I continue to contend, therefore, that Scripture sets forth our present justification as primarily about relational justice, i.e., relational righteousness or “rightness,” attained “in Christ.” There is an underlying principle of distributive justice in the Gospel, *to be sure*, in that “Christ died

for our sins” (1Co 15.3). However, Christ dealt with our distributive-justice problem at the cross precisely so that our present experience of justification might occur on a relational principle rather than on a distributive one.²³⁵

Emphasizing distributive justice required the invention of discrete righteousness.

Tragically, the medieval focus upon distributive justice in justification necessitated the theological invention of an abstract, **discrete** righteousness that is foreign to Scripture. The Bible never speaks of righteousness except as an act or state of a person or a people. Even when the biblical poets use the term *righteousness* in their metaphorical phrases, as in Psa 23.3 or Psa 24.5, the metaphor points to the righteous acts of a person, rather than to some disconnected, objectified thing. Speaking of metaphorical language, when Paul mentions slaves of righteousness, he does not refer to enslavement to an abstract entity. Rather, he refers to being “enslaved to God” Who is righteous and directs us in doing righteous acts (Rom 6.18,22). Likewise, in **eschatological** passages, as when Peter personifies righteousness as something that will dwell in the new heavens and new earth, he did not imagine some creature named Righteousness, but rather intended us to understand that in the future world all the relationships and actions *of persons* will be righteous. Even in the all-important passages that mention the “righteousness of God,” the righteousness of God is His dynamic, faithful action in redemption, not a static substance that is imputed to others. Perhaps the most abstract way that the Bible speaks of righteousness is in reference to the law or word of God (Psa 119.123,144,160,172), but even this “righteousness” involves God’s relational action, expresses His character, and cannot be disconnected from Him nor made into a **discrete** entity. Finally, and tellingly, when John wrote about the distinguishing marks of the person born of God, he did not describe someone clothed in a **discrete** substance of righteousness, but someone who *practices* righteousness (1Jo 2.29). In the culturally **Hebraic** Scriptures, OT and NT, there is no such thing as a **discrete** righteousness that can be separated from the person to which it belongs.

Nevertheless, **Evangelicals** still speak of righteousness in this way. **N. T. Wright** alluded to this problem in a recent panel discussion on justification, where he said,

I fear ... this idea of righteousness as a sort of thing that gets passed

²³⁵ This is truly at the heart of the gospel. Christ accepted and endured the distributive justice due for our sins, and by so doing opened the way for our relational reconciliation to God (Rom 5.10; 2Co 5.18-21; Col 1.19-23).

around. “I’ve got some righteousness, quite a lot of it actually, I’m able to give some of it to you, and then you’ll be alright as well.” ...

... I think it goes back to the Middle Ages to the idea that there is this thing called *iustitia* which you need quite a lot of, otherwise God’s going to be cross with you. You don’t have any of your own so where [are] you going to get it from? So, well, Jesus has got quite a lot of it. I mean that’s a caricature, but that’s actually what a lot of people hear with certain kinds of presentations of the gospel.²³⁶

Similarly, Michael F. Bird writes that the Reformed view of imputation, that Christ’s obedience to the law is imputed to believers and makes them righteous, “is still trapped in medieval categories of merit” He goes on to say,

Jesus’ obedience matters immensely and without it no one can be saved. But that is not because Jesus was racking up frequent flyer points that could be transferred into our account.²³⁷

Today’s Evangelicals may not appreciate Bird’s comparison of imputed righteousness to frequent flyer miles, or Wright’s caricature of their presentations of the gospel, but Alien Righteousness proponents do indeed conceive of righteousness (*iustitia*) as a discrete, ethereal entity or substance that can be lifted from one person and transferred across space and time to another.

Frankly, this conception of righteousness echoes the Platonic idea of The Good, and I suspect that it originally derived from it, or from Plato’s more general idea of *forms*. For Plato, ultimate reality existed as eternal, impersonal *forms* or *ideas* (εἶδος, 'ē-dōs) that could be manifested in the “less real” things and events of the visible world, and the *form* he referred to as “The Good ... was Plato’s most ultimate concept.”²³⁸ However, as an impersonal and abstract idea, Plato’s The Good has no corresponding entity in the Bible.

Regrettably, the lack of a biblical parallel never stopped the medieval Church from assimilating a platonic notion into its theology.²³⁹ In this case, inventing an ethereal righteousness modeled after one of Plato’s *forms*, allowed the Church to sell “righteousness,” or at least merit, in the form of

²³⁶ N. T. Wright, ETS Panel Discussion, Nov 17-19, 2010.

²³⁷ Michael F. Bird, “Progressive Reformed View” in *Justification: Five Views*, edited by James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 145.

²³⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing, 1980), ch. 4.

²³⁹ Nevertheless, as Snaith said and as we all need to be reminded, “The message of the New Testament is in the Hebrew tradition as against the Greek tradition. Our tutors to Christ are Moses and the Prophets, and not Plato and the Academics.” Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas Of The Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), p. 158.

indulgences. Physically, an indulgence is nothing more than a church-notarized document, but the dogmatic principles behind indulgences are that:

- a. Justification/Salvation is by the merit of good works.
- b. While the vast majority of humankind fall woefully short of enough merit to go directly to heaven, Jesus, Mary and the Saints earned *more than enough* merit by their gloriously righteous lives to enter heaven themselves, and therefore their superfluous merit (*merita supererogationis*) was put into a heavenly bank for the benefit of others.
- c. The Roman Catholic church was given the monopoly on the dispensing of this merit from the Treasury of Merit (*thesaurus meritorum*) by the sale *for cash* of indulgences.

So here is a grand irony: [Luther](#) and the [Reformers](#) retained the underlying principles of indulgences (namely, the ideas that justification is by meritorious works, and that merit has a [discrete](#) existence) when it was the application of these principles in the sale of indulgences that so inflamed [Luther](#) and informed his insistence that justification is *by faith*.²⁴⁰ This is confusing, I know, but remember that [Luther](#) believed, as do most Evangelicals today, in justification by a faith *that appropriates the meritorious works of Jesus*.

The emphasis on distributive justice in justification requires us to imagine an unreal courtroom.

Another irony is that with their emphasis on the forensic nature of justification, [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents have used their platonic idea of [discrete](#) righteousness to imagine a courtroom with no parallel in this world. In a real courtroom, can someone satisfy justice for another? Yes. Can a judge choose to accept someone else's payment on behalf of the real debtor? Yes. But can a judge choose to pretend that what one person did was done by someone else? Well, yes, but he would be considered corrupt or irrational. Can a judge somehow lift the "quality" of righteousness from one person and put it on another? In no way.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ R. C. Sproul misses the implications of his own observation of irony: "Here is the grand irony: the Roman Catholic Church repudiates the concept of the imputation of the merit of Christ, but builds a whole doctrine upon the imputation of the righteousness of the saints, through the treasury of merits." R. C. Sproul, *The Gospel Of God: An Exposition Of Romans* (Christian Focus Publications, 1994), p. 84.

²⁴¹ In response to the objection that Christ's righteousness can't be transferred to us, [Millard J. Erickson](#) argues, "With regard to my spiritual status, a new entity...has come into being. It is as if Christ and I have been...merged.... The imputation of Christ's righteousness is not, then, so much a matter of transferring something from him to me, as it is of bringing the two of us together so that we hold all things in common. In Christ

2. Justification and righteousness are relational.

Speaking of the all-too-popular courtroom analogy, let us observe that Scripture nowhere teaches that righteousness and justification are primarily forensic. With the [Sinaitic Law](#) as its backbone, Scripture speaks often in legal terms and with legal metaphors, but rarely refers explicitly to the forensic phenomena of courtroom procedures and pronouncements.²⁴²

This distinction between legal and [forensic](#) is important, because while there is unquestionably a legal backdrop for [justification](#), it is not at all clear in Scripture that justification should be envisioned as occurring in a spiritual courtroom. A legal backdrop can inform relational and covenantal realities without reference to a courtroom. Indeed, [Snaith](#), writing about the OT background of Paul's doctrine of [justification](#), said, "Inasmuch, then, as the Hebrew picture did not generally involve a court of law, we suggest that it would be better if we could largely abandon the idea that the Pauline 'justification'-terminology is primarily, or even mainly, '[forensic](#) and judicial.'"²⁴³ Clearly it is not a settled fact that justification should be envisioned as occurring in a courtroom! Furthermore, what exegetes sometimes see as courtroom imagery pertaining to our *present* [justification](#), is better understood as throne-room imagery pertaining to our *future* vindication in the final judgment. Notice the future tenses in Rom 8.32-34, for example:

- He ... will ... freely give us all things
- Who will bring a charge ...
- Who will be the condemning one (taking the Grk participle as future).

Clearly, our present [justification](#) and future vindication are directly related to one another: "Who will bring a charge against God's elect [in the future, since] God is the one who justifies [in the present]."²⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the

I died on the cross, and in him I was resurrected. Thus his death is not only in my place but with me." However, if the righteousness of one person cannot be transferred to another in a courtroom, much less can two persons be "merged" into a new "entity." Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), p. 264.

²⁴² Forensic justification in a human courtroom (or at least before city elders) is a known phenomenon in Scripture (Deut 25.1), but it is not explicitly associated with justification before God. In a spiritual justification context, Paul's antithetical use of *condemnation* and *justification* in Rom 5.16-18 comes closest to alluding to courtroom procedure (cf. Deut 25.1).

²⁴³ Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas Of The Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), p. 167.

²⁴⁴ N. T. Wright emphasizes this connection when he writes that justification "is the anticipation, in the present, of the verdict that will be reaffirmed in the future." N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives On Paul," in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand

judicial tone of the future throne-room judgment, does not necessarily imply a courtroom context for our present [justification](#).

On the contrary, biblical justification is disassociated from “the works of the law” and thereby distanced from the courtroom. Instead, our justification is associated with faith, a relational phenomenon. Abraham was not justified in a courtroom, but in the context of a very personal, relational interaction with the Almighty (Gen 15.1-6). Also, let us recall how the humbled and repentant tax collector went home justified (Luk 18.13-14). One does not obtain exoneration in the *courtroom* by beating his breast and saying, “Judge, be merciful to me a guilty man!” However, one does obtain the restoration of fellowship in a *relationship* by repentance, confession and a plea for forgiveness.

Furthermore, if in connection with the question of courtroom imagery we search the Scriptures for a forensic *pronouncement*, we discover that there is no instance of God ever *declaring* a sinner righteous or just.²⁴⁵ The only one ever declared righteous in the Bible is the Lord Himself (Psa 22.31; 35.28). He, however, never *pronounces* someone just. Instead, He *justifies*, i.e., He actually makes people righteous. This does not at all contradict the truth that righteousness is imputed (Rom 4.3,9,22 etc.). However, since God makes people righteous *in fact*, we see that neither justification nor the imputation of righteousness require a courtroom setting or forensic pronouncement.

[Alien Righteousness](#) proponents argue that justification and righteousness are *necessarily forensic*, but their reasoning is based upon the presupposition that [justification](#) is about distributive justice based upon [ethical](#) performance. Contrary to their thinking, if we are correct in our assertions above that both justification and righteousness are primarily relational, then a person’s [ethical](#) performance is irrelevant in justification, and the need for a purely [forensic](#) righteousness evaporates. Now, having seen that Scripture neither clearly supports a courtroom context for [justification](#) nor ever describes a [forensic](#) pronouncement of righteousness, we

Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 260. In a different place, comparing Paul’s concern with that of the Dead Sea Scrolls community, he writes, “The question [of justification] is not, ‘What must I do to get to heaven?’ but *How can you tell in the present who will be vindicated in the future?*” N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2009), p. 146, emphasis his.

²⁴⁵ The only way to find a forensic declaration of righteousness in the Bible is to assume that justification is forensic, and that, therefore, the declaration is included in the act of justification. However, Snaith, in discussing the word “to justify” in Rom 4.5, rejected the idea that it meant “declare righteous,” and said, “Why should God declare anything, and to whom does He declare it? ... why declare the ungodly to be anything? Surely the action of forgiving him and saving him is sufficient and a far more adequate demonstration.” Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas Of The Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), p. 162.

must conclude that **justification** and righteousness are not **forensic** at all. Our present justification does not happen forensically in the courtroom; it happens relationally in Christ (Gal 2.17; 3.8).²⁴⁶

1. Christ calls us to be perfect after we come to him.

God never demanded a sinless life for justification.

That justification is relational (by faith) rather than forensic (based upon a judicial ruling of ethical righteousness) makes the first argument for Alien Righteousness above irrelevant. We do not need to produce an ethically spotless life in order to be reconciled to God because ethical righteousness is not the basis for justification. In fact, *Scripture never sets forth the obtaining of an ethically flawless life as relevant at all to either the gospel's proclamation or its theological foundation.*

What happened is that theologians made an inference, the reasoning of which goes something like this:

1. God is absolutely holy (Isa 6.3).
2. Sin alienates man from God (Isa 59.2; Hab 1.13).
3. A single sin is sufficient to alienate man from God (Gen 2.16-17; Jam 2.10).
4. Man's redemption requires the intervention of the "unblemished and spotless" lamb of God (1Pe 1.17-19).
5. Therefore, to be justified and reconciled to God, a man must present God with an ethically flawless life, if not the man's own, then one that he has appropriated by faith.

However, the conclusion (5.) does not necessarily follow from the preceding four premises.

²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, there is an underlying principle of distributive justice in the gospel that necessitated Christ's death for our sins (1Co 15.3), and so there is an aspect of the gospel for which the courtroom imagery may be appropriate. Ironically, though, the "courtroom" that Paul visualizes is the one with God, not man, on trial. In the book of Romans, Paul seems to imagine the courtroom of human (perhaps rabbinical) opinion as it weighs the redemptive plan of God. How can the God who "will not acquit the guilty" (Ex 23.7) justify the Gentiles by grace before they've even attempted to keep the Law of Moses? Paul answers that no sin goes unpunished; all sin requires propitiation, but God has provided that propitiation in Christ. And so, when God publicly displayed His Messiah "as a propitiation in His blood," it was "to demonstrate **His** righteousness, because ... He passed over the sins previously committed" — He did it for "the demonstration ... of **His** righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just [i.e., righteous] and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3.25-26). God is righteous after all, for He has not ignored the due penalty for sin, but has dealt with our distributive justice problem at the cross. Now man — Gentile and Jew — need not appear in the courtroom, but can receive justification on a relational principle rather than on a principle of distributive-justice.

It is true that God is absolutely holy, that our sins alienate us from God and that our redemption required a propitiation accomplished by a sinless Savior. Nevertheless, the propitiation having been made, it remains God's prerogative to declare how fallen man is to be reconciled to Him. That being so, God has declared that we must approach Him with repentant faith in Christ, period. If, alternatively, God had said, "I require an absolutely sinless life(time) of anyone who would have fellowship with me," then the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) would be unassailable. However, God has never said any such thing, nor have the prophets or apostles taught the requirement of a lifelong record of sinlessness as necessary for approaching God or as underlying the gospel.²⁴⁷ On the contrary, rather than calling man to produce a sinless life, Scripture calls upon us to become fully conscious of our sinfulness (remember the repentant tax collector who went home justified, Luk 18.13-14).

The current doctrine of Alien Righteousness undermines sanctification.

So, the first argument in support of [Alien Righteousness](#) (that God requires of sinful man that he have lived an ethically flawless life) is rendered irrelevant to the doctrine of justification by the relational nature of righteousness. However, the now widespread *belief* in God's supposed requirement of an ethically flawless life remains very relevant pastorally. A great irony associated with the current doctrine of Alien Righteousness is that the

²⁴⁷ The tone of Scripture is very *realistic* in its counsel to sin-burdened man about approaching God. When the prophet Micah asked rhetorically, "With what shall I come to the LORD?" (Mic 6.6, the LXX adds, "and lay hold of my God most high?"), the answer wasn't, "Only with flawless ethical righteousness." Instead, Micah said, "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6.8). I submit to the reader that "to walk humbly with your God" epitomizes the faith relationship: to live in constant recognition of one's dependency upon and need to trust in God. Let us note, therefore, that according to Micah, one did not need to come to God with a flawless record of sinlessness, but only with a life of integrity and kindness emerging from that humble faith walk with God. I do not suggest that Micah presents a formal doctrine of justification in this passage — and far less do I suggest that a person is saved by their own integrity and kindness — but Micah does describe what it looks like to maintain fellowship with God. In Micah, as elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Heb 11.6), entering into God's presence, whether initially or after repenting of waywardness (think of The Prodigal Son, Luk 15.11-24), is never by producing a record of flawless ethical righteousness, but by humble faith alone.

No wonder, then, that ethical perfection is never mentioned in the Apostolic proclamation of the gospel. When the Philippian jailer said, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas did not reply, "Well, you must have flawless righteousness, so you'd better believe in Jesus so you can get His righteousness imputed to you." When the Jerusalem crowd was cut to the heart on Pentecost, and cried out, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter did not say, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the imputation of flawless righteousness to you." No, the doctrine of Alien Righteousness has set forth a divine demand for flawless ethical righteousness that is as foreign to Scripture as the idea that Christ's righteousness can be imputed to us.

Evangelical emphasis upon the need for a flawless righteousness *when coming* to God has tended to make Christians complacent about pursuing any kind of righteousness *after coming* to God. The prevailing doctrine of justification — with its commitment to Alien Righteousness — has undermined our pursuit of sanctification.

The current doctrine has undermined sanctification firstly by its assumption — made long before the Reformation — that the biblical word *righteousness* is [univalent](#) in meaning, and that its meaning is inherently [ethical](#). The inference from this assumption, that righteousness is performance-based, has translated for many Christians through the ages into the belief that though they have been “saved” in some sense by Christ, they must nonetheless live up to a flawless ethical standard in order to retain approval from God and eventually attain heaven. That belief has, in turn, contributed to the developments of [sacramentalism](#), [perfectionism](#)²⁴⁸ (in its various forms, including [ascetic monasticism](#)) and [legalism](#) with its accompanying chronic guilt.

The prevailing doctrine has undermined sanctification secondly by its definitions of *holiness* and *perfection*. The emphasis upon our need to be clothed in the flawless “righteousness of Christ” has helped turn *perfection*, and by extension *holiness*, into ideas that a Jewish person of the biblical eras would not have recognized. For example, consider how [R. C. Sproul](#) speaks of holiness and perfection in [a passage already cited above](#):

God commands us to be holy. Our moral obligation *coram Deo* (before the face of God) is to live perfect lives. One sin mars that obligation and leaves us naked, exposed before divine justice. Once a person sins at all, a perfect record is impossible. Even if we could live perfectly *after* that one sin, we would still fail to achieve perfection.²⁴⁹

Not only does [Sproul](#) equate “to be holy” with “to live perfect lives,” but he also implicitly defines perfection as a flawlessly sinless life. If a person commits a *single* sin they “fail to achieve perfection.” Unfortunately, [Sproul](#) is thinking more in English categories than in Hebrew ones here. In contemporary English “perfect” implies “without flaw.” In contrast, the [Hebraic](#) idea of perfection speaks of *completeness* or *wholeness*, and when applied to a person the word generally has no reference to the issue of

²⁴⁸ Though it did not contribute so much to Wesley’s idea of perfectionism since he had a “relational understanding of sin,” and thus to some extent a relational understanding of perfection. See R. L. Shelton, “Perfection, Perfectionism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984, 2001).

²⁴⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 96.

flaws.²⁵⁰ To be *perfect* in the biblical milieu simply meant to have moral integrity, integrity that flows from spiritual and psychological wholeness. Personal “perfection” in the scriptures *never meant* “having maintained a flawless ethical record.”

Thus, Noah was “perfect in his generation” (Gen 6.9^{LXX}), as was Job (even by God’s estimation, Job 1.1; 2.3^{KJV}), though neither of these men were without flaws. Also, the sometimes deeply flawed David was able to say, “I will walk within my house with a perfect heart” (Psa 101.2^{KJV}). Thus also, God commanded Abraham, “Walk before me, and be perfect” (Gen 17.1), and then the Israelites, “You shall be perfect before the Lord your God” (Deut 18.13), and Proverbs promises that “the perfect shall remain” in the land (Pro 2.21). Our newer translations tend to use the word “blameless” rather than “perfect” in these passages, but it is the Hebrew idea of perfection they express that informs Christ’s words, “you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mat 5.48).

Now, there are several good ways to interpret Mat 5.48 as something other than a demand for [ethical](#) flawlessness. Nevertheless, we sense intuitively that this command of Jesus to be perfect reflects Deut 18.13, “you shall be perfect before the LORD your God,” and Lev 19.2, “you shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy,” and many commentators have noted this correspondence.²⁵¹ After all, whatever Jesus means, it is a command to be God-like in some sense, “... as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The average Evangelical feels uncomfortable, therefore, when he runs across Mat 5.48 in his Bible reading. Since he has been trained to think of perfection as absolute sinlessness, this teaching of our Lord seems utterly oppressive! Even if Jesus is willing to give us a clean slate, starting now, we will fail multiple times to “be perfect” within the next hour. Jesus seems to be setting the Christian up for a life of constant and spectacular failure. What is the Christian to do with Christ’s call to perfection?

Typically, today’s [Evangelical](#) Christian has been trained to respond in one of two ways. Either he thinks of Christ’s call to perfection as a rhetorical way to impress upon us our need to be clothed in His righteousness (parallel to Christ’s teaching that our righteousness must surpass “that of the scribes and Pharisees,” Mat 5.20), or he dismisses this saying of Jesus, and perhaps all of the Sermon On The Mount, as doctrine for a different dispensation and

²⁵⁰ Cf. *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), p. 439, the entry on *hl;k*; When speaking of a thing or a sacrificial animal, *perfect* can mean without defect, but this connotation must be explicitly appended (Lev 22.21).

²⁵¹ Thomas Tehan and David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary Of The Sermon On The Mount*, 2nd Edition (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008).

meant only for “the Jews.” Either way, Christ’s call to perfection is considered irrelevant to our daily lives. If it applies to us at all, Jesus has taken care of it, and we can go about our business. Thus, our misunderstandings of righteousness, perfection and holiness have contributed to the formation of a Christian culture that is difficult to differentiate ethically from the secular culture that surrounds it.²⁵²

Today’s Western [Evangelical](#) is not very concerned about the pursuit of personal holiness. We are in for a shock, therefore, when judgment begins “with the household of God” (1Pe 4.17). I rub shoulders with enough [Evangelical](#) congregations in my home county to know that some are shockingly riddled with immorality of all kinds, to the grief and consternation of their pastors and elders. We [Evangelicals](#) are in for a great chastening from our loving heavenly Father unless, among other things, we wake up to the [relational](#) basis of righteousness, holiness and perfection. A proper biblical understanding of these ideas makes us realize that Christ’s call to perfection isn’t a call to the unattainable, nor a call to something purely [forensic](#), nor to be clothed in His righteousness. Instead, it is a call to spiritual and moral wholeness and integrity, made possible by God’s grace in Christ. It is a call to grow in Christlikeness, and it is *incumbent upon all His followers*. Granted this Christlikeness is only possible as God works in us both to will and to do (Phil 2.12-13). Nevertheless, Christ calls us to an achievable goal, something we *can do* as He strengthens us (Phil 4.13).

The omniscient God is supremely realistic. Knowing that we are “but flesh” (Psa 78.38-39), He never demanded a flawless ethical record of a fallen man, whether for justification or for anything else. God does, however, demand of a *justified man* that he “pursue ... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12.14^{NKJV}).

Portraying God as Self-deluding presents an additional problem.

That God is the ultimate realist, i.e., the omniscient God of truth, makes the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) — with its theory of double imputation — particularly troubling. Look again at [Wayne Grudem’s](#) regrettable explanation of how Christ bore our sins:

²⁵² Louis Berkhof wrote that “it is often said that [the Reformed] doctrine [of justification] is ethically subversive, because it leads to licentiousness.” He rebutted the charge by saying, “there is no truth in this whatsoever, as even the lives of the justified clearly show.” Perhaps he would feel differently if he were able to make an intimate survey of the Evangelical church today. Evangelical worldliness is *not* due to the biblical doctrine of justification by faith, but I contend that the current lack of holiness is encouraged, inadvertently and in part, by the Reformation doctrine of imputation. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), p.524.

God *imputed* our sins to Christ; that is, he *thought of them as belonging to Christ* and, since God is the ultimate judge and definer of what really is in the universe, when God thought of our sins as belonging to Christ, then in fact they actually did belong to Christ.... the guilt of our sins (that is, the liability to punishment) was thought of by God as belonging to Christ rather than to us.²⁵³

Grudem's wording suggests that if God *thinks* of something as white, then it is white even if it is black, "since God is the ultimate judge and definer of what really is in the universe...." This is absurd and demeaning of our Lord. It would be one thing for God to decree, "We shall henceforth call black *white*, (and white something else)," for God has every right to name things however He wishes. It is another thing entirely for God to say, *without changing the definitions of words nor the laws of physics*, "I think of that darkest of colors as bright and reflective, and so, since I think of it as bright and reflective, it is." Normally, if someone thought black was white *in this way*, we would say they were mentally ill. Nevertheless, Alien Righteousness proponents inadvertently portray our Father as thinking in just such a self-deluding manner. They say that God really thought of our sins as belonging to Christ when they didn't, and really thinks of us as righteous when we aren't. As Wayne Grudem and R. C. Sproul put it:

God ... *thought of [our sins] as belonging to Christ* the guilt of our sins ... was thought of by God as belonging to Christ rather than us.²⁵⁴

And,

It is essential to the heart of the gospel to insist that God declares us to be just or righteous *not on the basis of our actual condition of righteousness or holiness*, but rather on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness, which he thinks of as belonging to us.²⁵⁵

And,

God considers [believers] ... just when in themselves they are not existentially, really, or empirically just.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), p. 574, italics original.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., italics original.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 727, italics added.

²⁵⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 130.

Roman Catholics accuse Protestants of involving God in a “legal fiction.”

It should not surprise us that Roman Catholic theologians have accused the Reformers and their heirs of teaching that God engages in self-deceit. As [R. C. Sproul](#) explains,

Rome rejects the notion of imputed forensic justification on the grounds that it involves God in a “legal fiction.” ... They claim that for God to consider someone just who is not inherently just is for God to be involved in some sort of fictional deceit. Rome cannot tolerate Luther’s dictum, *simul justus et peccator* [‘simultaneously just and a sinner’]. For Rome a person is either just or sinner, one cannot be both at the same time. For Rome only the truly just can ever be declared to be just by God.²⁵⁷

[Peter Kreeft](#), the contemporary Catholic theologian and philosopher, puts it this way:

Luther taught that the result of repentance and faith was only freedom from the penalty and punishment of God’s law, or legal justification, not real sanctification. He said that God saw us *as if* we were righteous because Christ had paid our debt.

But this is a very inadequate image for God. God is not a lawyer! More seriously, God cannot deceive himself; what he sees is true. We are made really righteous; we are sanctified as well as justified by God’s grace. Baptism really wipes away original sin and gives us supernatural life.²⁵⁸

Catholics and Protestants base justification on a false premise.

The Catholic perspective, of course, provides the opposite pole from that of the [Reformers](#) on the issue of justification. At the [Reformed](#) pole, the idea is that justification is forensic (by virtue of righteousness imputed to the unrighteous), distinct from the process of sanctification, and does not of itself change a person’s ethical character. At the Catholic pole, justification is actual (by the sacramental agency of the Holy Spirit), overlaps with sanctification, and infuses a true change in a person’s ethical character, since the justified person has been born again and cleansed of original sin. Let us observe, however, that while Catholic theologians have rightly chafed at the proposition that God considers someone righteous who isn’t, both they and

²⁵⁷ R. C. Sproul, “Justification By Faith Alone: The Forensic Nature Of Justification,” in *R. C. Sproul’s Chapters From Symposium Volumes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

²⁵⁸ Peter Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism Of Catholic Beliefs* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2001), p. 125.

the Reformers (with today's Evangelicals) have labored under the same false premise that the righteousness received in justification is *ethical*.

The Catholics are right that in justification a person becomes truly righteous and that justification (in some sense) sanctifies, but they are wrong in thinking of the righteousness involved as ethical and infused. The Reformers and current Evangelicals, are right that justification does not of itself make a person inherently, ethically righteous, but they are wrong in thinking that the righteousness of justification is *ethical* and *imputed*. The problems of both the Catholic and Reformed-Evangelical doctrines are removed, however, by the more biblical premise that the righteousness of justification is relational rather than ethical. Since justifying righteousness is relational, the justified sinner is made truly righteous before God, because God has given him that which God deems as putting the sinner into right relationship with Himself, namely faith. Were Catholic and Protestant theologians to adopt this alternative viewpoint, the Catholic would no longer need to complain of a “legal fiction,” and the Evangelical would no longer need to recoil at the suggestion that the sinner is justified by his own infused righteousness.

Evangelicals have failed at answering the Catholic charge.

In their continuing commitment to Alien Righteousness and the idea of imputation, however, Reformed and Evangelical scholars have repeatedly attempted to answer the Catholic charge of involving God in legal fictions. Embarrassingly, they have all failed to do so.²⁵⁹ They have consistently

²⁵⁹ Ladd is an exception, sort of. He maintained that justification is forensic, and that “It is an unavoidable logical conclusion that men of faith are justified because Christ’s righteousness is imputed to them” (though he does not develop this latter idea). Then, addressing the “legal fiction” problem, he wrote, “A man’s relationship to God is no fiction. God does not treat a sinner *as though* he were righteous; he is in fact righteous.” At this point in Ladd’s explanation, one might expect the typical insistence that justification is no fiction because it involves a “real imputation.” Instead, Ladd continued, “Through Christ [the sinner] has entered into a new relationship with God and is in fact *righteous in terms of relationship*. ... the doctrine of justification has to do with a man’s standing, his *relationship* to God and God’s attitude toward him. ... The theological use of the word [justification] in Paul reinforces the contention that justification is a matter of *relationship to God and not of ethical righteousness*. ... the man in Christ ... is in fact in terms of his relationship to God a righteous man.” Then, focusing on the ethical aspect of justification, Ladd wrote that the righteousness of the justified “is ‘sinlessness’ in the sense that God no longer counts a man’s sin against him (2Co 5.19). The righteous man is not ‘regarded as if he were righteous’; he really is righteous, he is absolved from his sin by God’s verdict.” George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 445-446, 450, emphasis added.

In other words, Ladd neutralized the “legal fiction” problem by (1) not developing what is meant by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, (2) positing a relational basis for righteousness and justification, and (3) defining “sinlessness” (and thereby *righteousness*) as “God no longer count[ing] a man’s sin against him.” So, he does not

begged the question, and simply restated *their own presupposition* that the imputation of Christ's righteousness is not a legal fiction "precisely because it is ... a real (or true) imputation of real and true righteousness."²⁶⁰ This is like a little boy, accused of fabricating a UFO sighting, defending himself by saying, "I'm telling the truth because *it was a real flying saucer!*"

Robert L. Reymond tries to soften the sound of divine self-deceit by saying, "God does not treat the justified sinner *as if* he were righteous To the contrary, the justified sinner is *in fact* righteous in God's sight because of the 'in Christ' relationship in which he stands (2Co 5.21), in which relationship the righteousness of Christ is actually imputed to him."²⁶¹ Had Reymond finished his statement before the Scripture reference, it would have been something we could agree with. However, with the added qualification, his argument simply repeats what others have said: imputation does not involve a legal fiction because "the righteousness of Christ is actually imputed."²⁶²

In the same vein, Buchanan said, "The imputation of sin and righteousness is not ... a 'legal fiction,' as it has been offensively called; nor is it a theory, invented by man, but a fact, revealed by God."²⁶³ One would expect evidence for this bold statement to follow, but Buchanan provided none. He simply denied the charge because (in his opinion) the charge is false! Ironically, Buchanan went on in the same paragraph to say, that while some have attempted to discredit the idea of the imputation of sin and righteousness, "intelligent men ... will require something more than an assertion to convince them..."! Here's the whole passage:

The imputation of sin and righteousness is not, in any bad sense of the expression, a 'legal fiction,' as it has been offensively called; nor is it a theory, invented by man, but a fact, revealed by God.

Instead of disproving the doctrine by a dispassionate appeal to Scripture, some recent writers have attempted to discredit it; and have characterized it sometimes as 'a fiction,' and sometimes as 'a theory.' This is a short and easy method of controversy, fitted to excite

really salvage the *prevailing* doctrine of Alien Righteousness (as defined above) from the charge of "legal fiction."

²⁶⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 106.

²⁶¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 753.

²⁶² Cf. Colin Brown, "For the notion of imputation is no mere legal fiction. Because the believer is in Christ, he is really righteous, since he has the righteousness of Christ" *New International Dictionary Of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1967), v. 3, p. 371.

²⁶³ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine Of Justification: An Outline Of Its History In The Church And Of Its Exposition From Scripture* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867), p. 334.

prejudice, while it dispenses with proof. But intelligent men, who know how often whatever is true and good among men has been caricatured and traduced by affixing to it some offensive epithet, will require something more than an assertion to convince them, that the faith of the Christian Church has rested from the beginning on nothing more solid than a fanciful figment, or an ingenious speculation.²⁶⁴

We see that after begging the question vis-à-vis the charge of “legal fiction” in the first paragraph, [Buchanan](#) then pulled a sleight of hand in the second. His treatise is about justification, but here he stealthily merged the baby of justification by faith with the bathwater of double imputation, in order to defend the latter. He said, “intelligent men ... will require something more than an assertion to convince them, that the faith of the Christian Church has rested from the beginning on nothing more solid than a fanciful figment, or an ingenious speculation.” By “fanciful figment” and “ingenious speculation,” Buchanan referred to the imputation of sin and righteousness which he considers factual but which those leveling the charge of “legal fiction” consider imaginary. He accuses those calumniators of asserting (by their charge of “legal fiction”) that Christianity was founded on a fanciful idea and challenges them to defend such a slander. However, no one said that the Church was founded on the idea of double imputation and that the idea is false; they said that the Church *was* founded on justification by faith, but *not* on the Reformation idea of imputation. To this day, no one of Evangelical persuasion has proposed that “the faith of the Christian Church has rested from the beginning” on a false idea; we say that while the doctrine of justification by faith was integral to the Church’s foundation, the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ” never was. [Buchanan’s](#) attempted rebuttal of the charge of “legal fiction,” turned out to be nothing but smoke and mirrors to draw our attention away from the embarrassing truth: his theory of imputation *does* posit a legal fiction.

[R. C. Sproul](#) has also tried ineffectively to rebut the charge of involving God in a legal fiction. His oft repeated response is that, “This is not a ‘legal fiction’ because It is a real imputation.”²⁶⁵ He has failed to see that this is simply begging the question. No one doubts that proponents of Alien Righteousness, in positing the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ,” believe that it is a “real imputation.” The charge at present, though, is that

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 334.

²⁶⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths Of The Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), § 66.

the “real imputation” *itself*, as articulated by Reformed and Evangelical theologians, pictures God as lying to Himself.

In one of the passages where Sproul speaks to this matter, he writes,

... when a person believes in Christ and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him ... the transfer of the merit of Jesus Christ to the account of the believer is a real transfer. It is, therefore, real merit, Christ’s merit transferred to the believer. So when God looks at the person who has trusted in Christ, he sees the unrighteous person covered with the righteousness of Christ.”²⁶⁶

Notice that Sproul stops short of saying that, God sees the believer as righteous. Rather, God sees the “righteousness of Christ” covering “the unrighteous person,” and apparently pretends that He doesn’t know what’s underneath!

In another work, [quoted above](#) in part, Sproul writes:

The biblical doctrine of justification is not a legal fiction. It is a legal reality precisely because it is based on a real (or true) imputation of real and true righteousness. Neither Christ’s righteousness nor its imputation to us is a matter of fiction.”²⁶⁷

Again Sproul misses the point. No one thinks of Christ’s righteousness as a fiction, even if they don’t believe it is something that can be imputed to another. Nor does anyone fail to realize that Evangelicals who presuppose the imputation of Christ’s righteousness believe that it is a “real (or true) imputation of real and true righteousness.” These are not the problem. The problem is the affirmation that God thinks of believers as righteous when they are not, and thought of Christ as guilty when He was not.

In lieu of really answering the “legal fiction” charge, Sproul heats up the rhetoric, and writes:

Perhaps the charge of legal fiction is the most serious and grievous charge leveled against the Reformation and *sola fide*. Nothing less than the gospel is at stake. The charge of legal fiction makes the gospel itself a fiction. The biblical gospel stands or falls with the concept of imputation.”²⁶⁸

Now, the first part of this statement is true with respect to the historic Roman Catholic charge of “legal fiction,” since the Roman Catholic doctrine of

²⁶⁶ R. C. Sproul, *The Gospel Of God: An Exposition Of Romans* (Christian Focus Publications, 1994), p. 83. How appropriate that this view of justification has been termed *synthetic justification*.

²⁶⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 106.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

infused righteousness *was* inherently an attack against *sola fide*, justification *by faith alone*. The rest of [Sproul's](#) argument about the gospel being at stake, etc., is no longer apropos, however, in the face of the *Evangelical* charge (as I am presenting it) of teaching divine self-deceit. To say that the current doctrine of Alien Righteousness describes the God of truth as deluding Himself, is neither an attack upon *sola fide* nor upon the gospel — it is just a repudiation of the unbiblical idea that righteousness is something that can be transferred from one person to another. [Sproul](#) is technically correct when he says that “The biblical gospel stands or falls with the concept of imputation,” but his statement is falsified by his particular “concept of imputation.” All Evangelicals believe in imputation. We do not question the biblical truth of imputation, we only deny the *Reformed* idea that it is the “righteousness of Christ” that is imputed.

Christ could not atone for sin if God thought of Him as guilty.

[Sproul's](#) rhetoric not only fails to answer the Roman Catholic charge of “legal fiction,” and the current charge of portraying God as Self-deluding, it also fails to address logical conundrums that follow unavoidably from the proposition that God thinks of people as righteous who aren't and thought of Christ as guilty Who wasn't. The first of those inferential problems is the question of how Christ could simultaneously offer Himself as a spotless and unblemished sacrifice (Heb 9.14; 1Pe 1.19) *and* be thought of by God as guilty of our sins.

Look again at [Wayne Grudem's](#) statement about the imputation of our sins to Christ:

God *imputed* our sins to Christ; that is, he *thought of them as belonging to Christ* and, since God is the ultimate judge and definer of what really is in the universe, when God thought of our sins as belonging to Christ, then in fact they actually did belong to Christ....²⁶⁹

Likewise, [R. C. Sproul](#) says, “God declares Christ to be ‘guilty’ of sin ... the Son willingly bears for his people sins that are imputed or transferred to him.”²⁷⁰ Similarly, [Jack Cottrell](#) says that, “our sins, along with their guilt and penalty, are imputed to Christ ... [i.e.,] they are reckoned or charged to

²⁶⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004)., p. 574, italics original.

²⁷⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine Of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 104.

his account so that they are treated as his own.”²⁷¹ On the other hand, [R. C. Sproul](#) also says,

Had Christ not been the “lamb without blemish” He not only could not have secured anyone’s salvation, but would have needed a savior Himself. The multiple sins Christ bore on the cross required a perfect sacrifice. That sacrifice had to be made by one who was sinless....

It was by His sinlessness that Jesus qualified Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. ... Jesus ... *died* as the perfect for the imperfect, the sinless for the sinful²⁷²

Then in the same vein, [Jack Cottrell](#) writes,

...the sinlessness of Jesus’ life was necessary so that he could be an acceptable sacrifice for our sins. He was “a lamb unblemished and spotless” (1Pe 1.19) who “offered Himself without blemish to God” (Heb 9.14). If he had committed even the least sin, he would have been a guilty sinner (Jam 2.10). In such a case he could not *be* our Savior, but would himself *need* a savior.²⁷³

So which is it? Did God think of Christ on the cross as spotless and without blemish and thereby accept His sacrifice, or did He think of Him as guilty, in which case our Lord was disqualified to make the necessary propitiation?

It’s axiomatic among Evangelicals, of course, that Christ had to be sinless to accomplish His atoning sacrifice. This conviction arises in part from the [Levitical](#) laws of sacrifice that foreshadowed Christ’s atonement. In the proclamation of those laws, God said that an offering must be “without defect ... Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, ... it must be perfect to be accepted” (Lev 22.19-21). As [John Hartley](#) comments,

The holy God required that animals sacrificed on the altar be free from all defects. An imperfect gift indicates that its giver does not comprehend the absolute perfection of the God to whom that person is making the offering....

The standard of a perfect sacrifice is the cornerstone of NT Christology. Jesus is the final, ultimate sacrifice *because he was free from any sin* (Heb 9.14). Truly Jesus was the lamb of God without blemish or spot (1Pe 1.19; [etc.]).²⁷⁴

[Matthew Henry](#) expressed the same thought when he wrote, “... Christ

²⁷¹ Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once For All: Bible Doctrine For Today* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), p. 266.

²⁷² R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths Of The Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), no. 28, “The Sinlessness Of Christ.”

²⁷³ Jack Cottrell, *op cit*, p. 229, italics original.

²⁷⁴ John E. Hartley, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 4: Leviticus*, ed. John D. W. Watts (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), p. 363, italics added.

HOW DID GOD THINK OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS?

As Guilty?

"God declares Christ to be 'guilty' of sin ... the Son willingly bears for his people sins that are imputed or transferred to him." — Sproul

"our sins, along with their guilt and penalty, are imputed to Christ ... [i.e.,] they are reckoned or charged to his account so that they are treated as his own." — Cottrell

"God imputed our sins to Christ; that is, he thought of them as belonging to Christ and, since God is the ultimate judge and definer of what really is in the universe, when God thought of our sins as belonging to Christ, then in fact they actually did belong to Christ.... the guilt of our sins (that is, the liability to punishment) was thought of by God as belonging to Christ rather than to us." — Grudem

...Or Sinless?

"Had Christ not been the 'lamb without blemish' He not only could not have secured anyone's salvation, but would have needed a savior Himself. The multiple sins Christ bore on the cross required a perfect sacrifice. That sacrifice had to be made by one who was sinless....

"It was by His sinlessness that Jesus qualified Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. ... Jesus ... died as the perfect for the imperfect, the sinless for the sinful" — Sproul

"...the sinlessness of Jesus' life was necessary so that he could be an acceptable sacrifice for our sins. He was 'a lamb unblemished and spotless' (1Pe 1.19) who 'offered Himself without blemish to God' (Heb 9.14). If he had committed even the least sin, he would have been a guilty sinner (Jam 2.10). In such a case he could not be our Savior, but would himself need a savior." — Cottrell

"Christ in the atonement, must be without sin and clear of all its penal liabilities. He must be personally holy. ... the sinlessness of Christ ... is emphasized [in Scripture] as fitting and necessary to the atonement." — Miley

Figure 7

offering himself to God without spot, without any sinful stain either in his nature or life ... was conformable to the law of sacrifices, which required them to be without blemish."²⁷⁵ John Miley concurred with these sentiments

²⁷⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible: Complete And*

when he wrote, “Christ in the atonement, must be without sin and clear of all its penal liabilities. He must be personally holy. ... the sinlessness of Christ ... is emphasized [in Scripture] as fitting and necessary to the atonement.”²⁷⁶

When we look at these various statements side by side (see Figure 7 above) — statements on the one hand about God imputing our sins to Christ and statements on the other about the requisite spotlessness of the atoning sacrifice — we see a problem! How could God accept Christ’s atoning sacrifice if the Father truly thought of the Son as guilty? Proposing sequential steps in God’s thought won’t solve the problem. We cannot suggest that God thought of Christ as guilty *just before* His death, but spotlessly sinless *at the moment* of His death, nor can we suggest the reverse sequence. Either Christ died sinless and so had no sins imputed to Him at the time, or He died guilty (in the mind of God) and accomplished no atonement. Nor can we propose that God thought of Christ as both guilty and sinless at the same time, for that would make Him the God of confusion.

No, the Scriptures are clear: “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1Pe 3.18 ^{NIVO}). *The righteous* one died for the unrighteous. It was not *the guilty* One who died, nor the simultaneously *righteous-and-guilty* One. R. C. Sproul is correct when he says, “It was by His sinlessness that Jesus qualified Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. ... Jesus ... *died* as the perfect for the imperfect, the sinless for the sinful”²⁷⁷ He and others have a problem, though, when they say that, “God declares Christ to be ‘guilty’ of sin.”

Perhaps it is only a semantic problem. Perhaps Wayne Grudem simply overstates the case when he says,

God *imputed* our sins to Christ; ... when God thought of our sins as belonging to Christ, then in fact they actually did belong to Christ....²⁷⁸

Earlier theologians did not describe the imputation of our sins to Christ in such a radical manner. J. P. Boyce, for example, said, “Christ stood also as the representative of his people and their sins were imputed to him and he was treated as though personally a sinner.”²⁷⁹ Note Boyce’s words, *treated as*

Unabridged In One Volume (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), comment on Hebrews 9.8-14.

²⁷⁶ John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, II vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1893), ch. VIII.

²⁷⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths Of The Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), no. 28, “The Sinlessness Of Christ.”

²⁷⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004)., p. 574, italics original.

²⁷⁹ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract Of Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), p. 400.

though. Apparently in Boyce's understanding, God did not think of our sins as actually belonging to Christ, but only treated Christ *as though* he were guilty. Surely all can agree with this simple formulation. There is no question that at the crucifixion Christ was treated *as though* he were a sinner, both by His human enemies and by the Father who withheld His succor. However, if this is all that the imputation of our sins to Christ means, then it is a redundant and unnecessary doctrine for it is only another way of describing how Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors; yet ... bore the sins of many" (Isa 53.12). In other words, it is just another articulation of the undisputed truth that Jesus bore our sins, but an articulation which brings unnecessary confusion with it,²⁸⁰ since Christ's sin-bearing was an event which did not require imputation (see the above section: **Sin-Bearing Requires No Imputation**).

Does God Think We Died For Our Own Sins?

The confusion doesn't end with the problem of whether Christ was spotless or guilty on the cross. We recall that besides teaching that God thought of Christ as guilty, [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents also teach that God thinks of believers as having lived the righteous life of Jesus. This idea compounds the divine fiction: God not only thinks of sinners as righteous, but even thinks of them as having done everything Jesus did! This additional fantasy grew out of the Reformers' need to counter the Catholic doctrine of penance. Medieval Catholic theologians had taught that Christ's atonement absolved from the guilt of sin but not from the liability to punishment for sin, since Christ's death was substitutionary but not His life.²⁸¹ Rather than see that the Roman Catholic church was just limiting the efficacy of Christ's atonement so that she could still sell her sacramental services and control her adherents, the [Reformers](#) failed to discern that Christ's substitutionary death was adequate to absolve from *both* guilt and punishment, and so they felt the need to posit that Christ's *life* was also of a substitutionary nature.²⁸² Hence, [Wayne Grudem](#)'s statement,

²⁸⁰ More recent theology professor, [Floyd H. Barackman](#), avoided the word imputation and wrote that, "At the cross our sins were judicially transferred to the Savior; and He bore their guilt, that is, the obligation to pay their judicial debt, which was death." While this statement overuses the word *judicial* it is nevertheless just another articulation of the biblical phenomenon of sin-bearing. See Floyd H. Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology: Examining The Great Doctrines Of The Faith*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), p. 162.

²⁸¹ See Richard A. Muller on "*Obedientia Christi*" in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1985), p. 205.

²⁸² The idea of Christ's *substitutionary life* then took on a life of its own, becoming, in Protestant thinking, a necessary ingredient for our positive righteousness before God.

Throughout Christ's entire life on earth, from the time of his birth to the time of his ascension into heaven, God thought of us as being "in Christ." That is, whatever Christ did as our representative, God counted it as being something we did, too. ... God *thought of us* as going through everything that Christ went through, because he was our representative.²⁸³

However, if God thinks of us as having gone through everything Christ did, "from the time of his birth to the time of his ascension into heaven," does He think of us as each having died for our own sins? Does He think of us as having died for the sins of the world? And if God thinks of us as having already risen from the dead and ascended to heaven, why would He resurrect us and catch us up into the clouds in the future? Does He think of us "as going through everything that Christ went through," *but not really*? Does He say to Himself, "Those precious believers have risen from the dead and ascended in my Son; well, but not really, so come the Last Day, I must remind myself to resurrect them." Or does Grudem mean that the divine Definer of Reality only thinks we went through everything that Christ did *in a judicial sense*? If that is the case, then God *did not really* think of us as having gone through everything Christ went through, and its time to abandon that "God-thought-of-us-as-having-done-what-we-didn't" language, along with any concept of imputation that depends upon it.

We must take up our theological responsibility.

In the current teachings of [Alien Righteousness](#), we see an example of the historical phenomenon of theological complacency. Once a doctrine has been generally accepted within a major religious association, its adherents become careless in their articulation of that doctrine. No one feels the need for exegetical or linguistic precision as they propagate what is already accepted by the majority. Let us note, however, that if the doctrine in view originated *by inference* from antecedent ideas in the religious association's systematic theology, then doctrinal intricacy will have preceded the theological complacency, and confusion will reign when the two phenomena meet. Doctrinal intricacy occurs because increasingly involved arguments are invented over time to defend what cannot be supported by explicit Scripture. When theological complacency arrives and adds imprecision to the already

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Bible Doctrine* (Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 1997, 2004), pp. 725-726.

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 841, italics original. Grudem here echoes Luther's words from the sermon of 1518, *Two Kinds Of Righteousness*, where Luther boasts, "Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did."

present intricacy, the doctrine becomes less and less intelligible. In the end, the uninitiated begin to dismiss the doctrine as esoteric and obscure. We can see that the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) — particularly with its notion of [imputation](#) — has evolved to just such a state of obscurity: it is now quite difficult to explain and defend to its challengers.

Clearly, it's time to go back to the theological drawing board and get out the specs manual again; it's time to dust off our Bibles! It's time for the [Evangelical](#) church to stop allowing herself to be spoon-fed by the theological establishment that clings uncritically to those elements of [Reformation](#) doctrine that were ill-conceived.²⁸⁴ The Holy Spirit did not retire and leave the [Reformers](#) in charge of defining the Gospel. Nor has any ecclesiastical decree set aside the Bible in favor of *Calvin's Institutes*. Nor have [Reformed Theologians](#) renounced the principle of the priesthood of the believer, thereby rescinding the responsibility of individual Christians to interpret the Bible for themselves. It's time for believers to remember that responsibility. Let us renew our commitment to study the Scriptures for ourselves and learn what the Holy Spirit says explicitly therein about righteousness and [justification](#).

²⁸⁴ [Alister E. McGrath](#) mentions “a growing perception that systematic theology has lost its moorings in the Bible, and prefers to conduct its disputes with reference to systematic theologians of the past, rather than by direct engagement with biblical texts.” Thank God for conservative scholars who are bringing a corrective influence to this state of affairs. See Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History Of The Christian Doctrine Of Justification*. 3rd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 420.

What Scripture Tells Us Explicitly

A pastoral colleague of mine told me of bumping into one of his seminary professors from years earlier. The professor, apparently entertaining doubts about the soundness of my colleague's theology, asked his one-time student, "Are your convictions still strong?" My colleague replied, "Stronger than ever; I just have fewer of them." My point from this anecdote is that denominations have often asked their members to subscribe to secondary doctrines that are far from central to the New Testament faith, but that are nevertheless prized elements of the denomination's own theological system. The individual Christian trustingly subscribes to his congregation's statement of faith, but upon further growth and maturity may come to realize that not all the denomination's tenets are clearly supported by Scripture. Indeed, as we continue to study the Bible for ourselves, and as we fully embrace those truths that are taught *explicitly* in Scripture, our "convictions" should become both stronger and fewer. Furthermore, while we cannot eliminate the complexity and depth of the biblical revelation itself (nor would we wish to), focusing upon the explicit teaching of Scripture, regarding righteousness and [justification](#), should enable us to explain redemption with less intricacy and greater brevity.

Let us attempt, then, to examine the biblical teaching on righteousness and justification in the simplest and most straight-forward way possible, namely, by focusing on those explicit texts pertaining to our topic. Happily, we will be able to do so with the aforementioned brevity. We shall begin with passages that speak of that universal problem which makes justification necessary: the problem of sin.

Adam's disobedience brought universal sin and death to mankind.

Paul tells us explicitly in Rom 5.12,19 that "through one man's disobedience," i.e., through Adam's breaking of God's one commandment in Eden, "the many were made sinners." In other words, through the one man, Adam, "sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." In 1Co 15.21-22, Paul repeats, "by a man *came* death," so that now, "in Adam all die." (In this last statement, Paul has the future resurrection in view, and clearly means that if Adam is our only father, then we can expect only death, but if God is now our Father through Christ, we "will be made alive" in the coming resurrection.)

All people have sinned.

The universality of sin in the human race is clear in the statements just quoted, but Paul makes this point explicit again in Rom 3.9 where he charges that “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.” He supports this point by quoting David in Psa 14.1-3 (and Psa 53.1-3), saying, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE,” etc., then concludes with “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Paul could have quoted Solomon (Ecc 7.20) to the same effect: “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins.”

Not only the ubiquity of sin, but the universal condition of “sinner” for all people is taught in these passages. Paul says in Rom 5.19 that through Adam’s disobedience “the many were **made** sinners.” What exactly he means has been hotly debated; does Paul speak of the corruption of human nature, or only of a legal sentence? The evidence points to the former. Comments by persons in the biblical narrative point to a real corruption of the human being, rather than to a regrettable legal sentence. Eliphaz, for example, says in Job 15.14-16,

What is man that he should be pure,
Or he who is born of a woman, that he should be righteous?
... one who is detestable and corrupt,
Man, who drinks iniquity like water.

Likewise, David, in Psa 14.2-3 (already referenced above) says,

The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men ...
They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt;
There is no one who does good, not even one.

Again, in Psa 51.5, David ties his own sinfulness to a congenital (rather than legal) problem, saying, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.”

The imputation of Adam’s sin is *not* explicit.

It is quite clear, therefore, that the human race is universally, morally corrupt, and that all human beings (excepting only the God-Man, Jesus Christ) have not only sinned but *are naturally sinners* and in need of redemption. It is also clear from Paul in Rom 5.19 that this universal predicament of human sin and sinfulness has occurred through our descent from Adam: It was because of Adam that we “were made sinners.”

What is not at all explicit in Rom ch. 5 is precisely *how* “the many were made sinners” (v. 19) nor precisely in what sense “through one man ... all

sinned” (v. 12). Rom ch. 5 (with 1Co 15.21-22) clearly teaches a solidarity between Adam and his descendants, but theologians recognize two possible kinds of unions that Paul might have had in view: *natural* and *representative*.²⁸⁵ While [Federal theology](#) posits a representative union between Adam and his race, the idea is speculative and not explicitly stated in Scripture. There is, on the other hand, no question that there is a natural union between Adam and his posterity. Therefore, while the Bible compels us to recognize that all are sinners and all have sinned due to our connection with Adam, we need feel no biblical compulsion to believe that Adam’s sin was *forensically imputed* to us.

There are righteous people, nevertheless!

Regardless of exactly how we became sinners, it is important to note that the Bible emphasizes the unrighteousness of man’s character *in contrast to God’s*. As compared to God’s character, “no man living is righteous” (Psa 143.2), and furthermore, “No one is good except God alone” (Mar 10.18; Luk 18.19). Our character vis-à-vis God’s is the assessment of our character that matters most, and this being the case, our unrighteousness *in His sight* settles the question of whether we need a Savior and redemption — we absolutely do!

Nevertheless, God is not blind to the differences between one man’s character and another’s, and so did not bar the biblical authors from referring to some people as righteous. Thus, the author of Gen does not hesitate to say that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time” (Gen 6.9), and records God as saying to Noah, “I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation” (Gen 7.1^{RSV}). Nor did God correct Abraham for referring to his nephew Lot as righteous (Gen 18.23-32), an assessment of Lot which Peter emphatically confirms (2Pe 2.7-8).

Indeed, from the time of the Patriarchs, God and God’s people, recognized that the population of the world was divided roughly into two groups, the righteous and the wicked. This distinction comes to full expression in the poets and prophets, and the latter often mentioned it in the context of coming judgment (Psa 1.5-6; 7.8-9; 34.15-16; etc., Pro 3.33; 10.6-7, etc., Isa 3.10-11, etc.). Jesus Himself spoke in terms of the same demographic dichotomy as did the poets and the prophets (Mat 5.45), and predicted the same crucial distinction between the righteous and the wicked in the coming day of judgment (Mat 24.41-43). Thus, the apostolic writers, like the OT authors before them, did not shy away from recognizing the righteousness of

²⁸⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 434.

people like Joseph (Mat 1.19), John Baptist (Mar 6.20), Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luk 1.5-6), Simeon (Luk 2.25), and Cornelius (Act 10.22).

From the many references to righteous people in the Bible, and in keeping with what we know of the [Hebraic](#) mind-set in antiquity, we find that Scripture constantly speaks of righteousness, whether the righteousness of God or man, as an active principle, never as a static quality, and far less as a [discrete](#) substance. The biblical writers have God's *acts* in mind when they describe Him as righteous (Psa 71.19; Dan 9.14). Likewise, they describe a man's *practice* as that which makes him righteous in God's eyes (Eze 18.5-9; 1Jo 3.7; Rev 22.11; see also Heb 11.4 with 1Jo 3.12). Additionally, Scripture presents the righteousness of the blameless as an aspect of *their own character, not as something extrinsic to themselves* (Pro 11.5; Psa 112 with 2Co 9.9-10). Indeed, God does not eschew recognizing the righteousness of those who do good, nor do those who do good hesitate to refer to themselves as righteous (Job 29.14). Furthermore, while the Bible tells us that righteous deeds cannot save us (Tit 3.5; Eph 2.8-9), it nevertheless teaches that personal righteousness will be rewarded with greater effectiveness in this life (Jam 5.16), and glory at the Lord's coming (2Ti 4.8). In fact, Scripture tells us that the bride of Christ will be clothed in that day in the "righteous acts of the saints" (Rev 19.8).

None of this means that any of the people referred to as righteous in the Bible (except for Jesus) were immaculately conceived and without need of salvation. Only Jesus is preached by the apostles as uniquely holy and righteous (Act 3.14; 7.52; 22.14), the One bringing salvation, not needing it. As for all the rest of the "righteous" in Scripture, some are so described when already in redemptive relationship with their God (e.g., Noah, Job). Others are referred to as righteous only in comparison to those who are blatantly wicked or rebellious. In neither case does Scripture imply that there is any kind of righteousness apart from the grace of God — whether it is the common morality of the upright citizen, or the godly behavior of the justified saint. So far as fallen man is concerned, no righteousness attaches to nor emerges from man apart from the grace of God. As Paul confessed, "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Rom 7.18^{NKJV}). Any righteous people mentioned in the Bible, therefore, received whatever good inclinations they have from God.

Nor do the frequent mentions of righteous people in Scripture imply that God turns a blind eye to the underlying motives of externally "good" actions. Isaiah was forced to confess on behalf of his people that "all our righteous deeds are like a menstruous rag" (Isa 64.6, my translation). By this the prophet did not mean that God turns up His nose at truly good deeds, any

more than a human father rejects as putrid the imperfect attempts by his small children to please him. Nor was Isaiah describing anyone's attempt to be justified by their works only to be rebuffed by the reminder that even the best works of man are like filthy garments in God's sight. No, God sees good works for what they are, and appreciates righteous deeds, but He rejects *religious acts* from those who have no interest in relationship with Him and who remain enslaved by the power of their own iniquities (Isa 64.7). This will ring true for any reader of the NT who knows that Jesus Christ hated religious hypocrisy!

Nevertheless, so far as the Bible is concerned, there are persons who are righteous, their righteousness is evidenced by what they do (though what they do does not justify them), and their righteousness is their own (even though grace-dependent) and not the imputed righteousness of another.

Now the righteousness of God has been revealed.

God's righteousness is His righteous action.

While the Bible does not shy away from speaking of the righteousness of men, it does, of course, emphasize the righteousness of God as greater in every respect. As we've already noted, though, the righteousness of God always refers to what He does, and while God has always done righteous deeds, relatively few of them were done in a way so open to human scrutiny as the sending and sacrificing of His Son. It fell to Christ's apostles, therefore, to revive the exposition of the righteousness of God, a righteousness now demonstrated afresh by His acts done through Christ. None of the NT writers developed this theme as explicitly as Paul.

Paul speaks extensively of the righteousness of God (Rom 1.17; 3.5; 3.21-22, 25-26; 10.3), i.e., the *righteous action* of God, both in redemption (Rom 5.18) and judgment (Rom 2.5, cf. Rev 15.4). With regard to redemption, what God had foretold in Isa 56.1, saying, "My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed,"²⁸⁶ Paul proclaimed as now fulfilled and revealed in the gospel (Rom 1.16-17):

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

²⁸⁶ Cf. Psa 98.2.

God's righteousness includes His act of giving "the gift of righteousness."

Indeed, the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel includes His act of justifying those who believe "as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3.21-24). In the flow of Paul's thought, this "gift by His grace," i.e., "being justified" (in Rom 3.24), is equivalent to "the abundance of grace," i.e., "the gift of righteousness" (in Rom 5.17). Therefore, we should recognize that the righteousness in the "gift of righteousness" does not refer to someone else's merit, but to justification itself; the believer is righteous because he is justified, i.e., because he is now in right relationship with God, not because he's clothed in someone else's merit.²⁸⁷

God's gift of righteousness does involve imputation.

The fact that Scripture nowhere mentions the transfer of someone else's merit does not negate that *there is an imputation involved* in "the gift of righteousness" (= justification). The gift of righteousness *does* come by imputation, but it is faith itself that "is credited as righteousness," (Rom 4.5, 9), not someone else's merit. Paul explains clearly that *Abraham's* faith was credited (imputed) as *Abraham's* righteousness.

God's gift of righteousness is alien and simultaneously our own.

So, we do receive a gift of righteousness from God (Phil 3.9), and in this sense our righteousness *is* alien, for its origin is extrinsic to ourselves: it "comes from God."²⁸⁸ Also, since "the gift of righteousness" is "through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3.21-24), by His blood and his obedience (Rom 5.9,19), it is also alien in that its basis is extrinsic to ourselves: it is solely and completely made possible by Christ's atoning work.²⁸⁹ (It is because of this alien *basis* that we joyfully speak of Christ as

²⁸⁷ Gundry puts it well: "For us, then, justification is both negative and positive. Negatively, God does not count our sins against us. Jesus took them away. Positively, God counts our faith as righteousness. These complementary elements suffice to eliminate any exegetical need to import into Romans 4 an unmentioned righteousness of Christ — and also any pastoral need to do so for the healing of Christians' hurting consciences." Robert H. Gundry, "The Nonimputation Of Christ's Righteousness," in *Justification: What's At Stake In The Current Debate* edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), p. 25.

²⁸⁸ Cf. Rom 10.3.

²⁸⁹ "There is salvation in no one else," including ourselves, and in "no other name" including our own (Act 4.12). As Hodge said, "[The believer] relies for his acceptance with God, not on himself but on Christ, not on what he is or has done, but on what Christ is and has done for him." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Electronic Edition, Vol. III, III vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), p. 142.

having become “our righteousness,” as Paul mentions (1Co 1.30)²⁹⁰ and as Jeremiah anticipated (Jer 23.5-6.) Furthermore, since the gift of righteousness is received by **faith**, and **faith** itself is a gift of God (Eph 2.8), our righteousness is alien in origin, basis *and means*. However, since “the gift of righteousness” we receive is not someone else’s **ethical** performance **imputed** to us, but simply right relationship with God, once we receive the gift, righteousness is truly ours. We really are righteous, because, by God’s grace we are truly in right relationship with Him.²⁹¹ The righteousness that remains alien *in origin, basis and means* has become nonetheless our own.

Recipients of God’s gift become His righteous instruments.

An exciting result is that, having received God’s gift of righteousness, we become “the righteousness of God” (2Co 5.21), i.e., His “slaves of righteousness,” promoting His righteousness in the Church and in the world (Rom 6.12-19). It is God’s own “kind intention” (εὐδοκία, *ēv-thō-’kē-ə*) for the world that we now endeavor to accomplish, as He continually prompts and empowers us, both to will and to act (Phil 2.13). It is God’s own righteousness, now gloriously revealed in Christ, that we — as His instruments — pursue *and emulate* as our top priority (Mat 6.33; 1Ti 6.11; 2Ti 2.22; 3.16; Jam 1.19-20).

There is a future “justification” by works.

Amazingly, God’s “slaves of righteousness” will be rewarded at Christ’s coming for those very acts which God prompted and empowered them to do (Mat 6.1-6; Luk 6.35; 14.13-14; 2Ti 4.8; etc.).²⁹² Furthermore, these same deeds (including their very words, Mat 12.35-37), will “justify” them when they appear, as we all must, before the judgment seat of Christ (Mat 16.27;

²⁹⁰ In 1Co 1.30 the apostle is thinking in opposition, perhaps, to those who would say “Moses is our righteousness,” or “our circumcision is our righteousness,” or “our Jewish birth is our righteousness.” This verse does not allude to our alien righteousness as Grudem thinks, but to the alien basis for our righteousness.

²⁹¹ As Ladd said, “Through Christ [the sinner] has entered into a new relationship with God and is in fact *righteous in terms of relationship*.” George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 445, emphasis added. N. T. Wright retains lawcourt imagery, but says similarly, “‘justification’ really does *make* someone ‘righteous’ — it really does create the ‘righteousness,’ the status-of-being-in-the-right, of which it speaks — but ‘righteousness’ in that lawcourt sense does not mean either ‘morally good character’ or ‘performance of moral good deeds,’ but ‘the status you have when the court has found in your favor.’” And later in the same book, “we discover what *dikaioσύνη* really is. It denotes a *status*, not a moral quality. It means ‘membership in God’s true family.’” N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2009), pp. 92, 121.

²⁹² As Augustine wrote, “[God] crowns His own gifts, not thy merits. ... God crowns [i.e. rewards] in us the gifts of His own mercy.” Augustine, *Tractates On John* III.10.

Rom 2.5-16; 14.10-12; 2Co 5.10). However, this *future* “justification” is not the salvation of the sinner (except in a culminant sense), but rather the vindication of the righteous saint who had previously been savingly justified by grace through faith.²⁹³

God is the one Who justifies.

That future vindication is not the justification of primary interest to us in this study, as important and as closely related to our concerns as it is. Rather, we are concerned with the present justification which saves sinners. In the future vindication of the righteous, saints will be graciously credited with and rewarded for their own good works, but in the present justification of sinners, there is no question that it is God who justifies — not the sinner himself, nor his works, nor the Law (Rom 3.26; 8.33).

In Rom 4.5, Paul says that God “justifies the ungodly.” That the ungodly are the subjects of justification should not surprise us, since “the godly” wouldn’t need it (cf. Mar 2.17). This justification of the ungodly does not imply, however, that they remain ungodly in the moment of justification nor after. In the context of Rom ch. 4 (vv. 6-8), Paul is speaking of the justification of the *repentant person* as epitomized by David in Psa 32.1-5, a contrite person who now retains “no deceit” in his spirit:

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin is covered!
How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit!
When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away *as with the fever heat of summer*....
I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”;
And You forgave the guilt of my sin....

So, yes, God justifies a person who has been ungodly up to the moment of repentance, but He does not justify apart from repentance (cf. Luk 18.9-14) and cleansing faith (Act 15.9).²⁹⁴ God does *not* justify the ungodly in the sense that He sees them as clothed in “the righteousness of Christ” though they

²⁹³ The future vindication does include a “salvation,” namely, the salvation from God’s wrath (Rom 5.9). We may properly say, then, that “we shall be saved” from wrath in the future *because* we are already saved from sin in the present.

²⁹⁴ I reiterate that since both repentance and faith are gifts from God, the justified person receives justification as a gift and can in no way claim to have merited it.

continue in their ungodliness! Rather, in the justification event, the ungodly turn from their ungodliness, put their trust in Jesus and His atoning work, and begin to walk on a new path of righteousness.²⁹⁵ This does not mean that at the moment of justification a person supernaturally ceases from sin forevermore, and far less does it mean that the person has magically had his or her ethical history rewritten. However, since there is a [regeneration](#) and a real heart change that accompanies justification (Tit 3.5-7), the justified person can no longer be properly called “ungodly.” Furthermore, since the righteousness received in justification is relational rather than ethical, the justified person is no longer ungodly but *righteous*.

The fact that the righteousness of the [justified](#) believer is a *real* righteousness does not at all detract from the truth — clearly and abundantly proclaimed in Scripture — that [justification](#) only occurs in and through Jesus Christ (Rom 5.1), and on the basis of His atoning death (Rom 5.9). Had Jesus Christ not borne our sins on the cross (1Pe 2.24; Heb 9.24-28) and died as our substitute (1Pe 3.18), there would be no justification. However, as we have seen above, [sin-bearing requires no imputation](#) of sins to the bearer; it requires no pretending that the sin-bearer is the one who actually sinned. On the contrary, sin-bearing requires a kinsman who is not already indebted himself. As we’ve [already read](#) in the words of [R. C. Sproul](#),

Had Christ not been the “lamb without blemish” He not only could not have secured anyone’s salvation, but would have needed a savior Himself. The multiple sins Christ bore on the cross required a perfect sacrifice. That sacrifice had to be made by one who was sinless....

It was by His sinlessness that Jesus qualified Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. ... Jesus ... *died* as the perfect for the imperfect, the sinless for the sinful²⁹⁶

While our sins were clearly *not* imputed to Jesus (though He bore them), I reiterate that God’s gift of righteousness *does* involve imputation. However, while God explicitly imputes (credits) *righteousness* to the justified (Rom 4.6,11,24), Paul does not at all mean that God credits believers with someone else’s righteousness, but simply that God credits them with *being righteous*. It is equally explicit in the key passage of Rom ch. 4 that what is

²⁹⁵ As Augustine wrote, “Christ died for the ungodly not that they should remain ungodly but that, having been justified, they should be converted from their ungodliness, believing in the one who justifies the ungodly.” Augustine, *Various Questions To Simplician* 1.2.3, quoted in David F. Wright, “Justification In Augustine,” in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 58.

²⁹⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths Of The Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), no. 28, “The Sinlessness Of Christ.”

being imputed *as* righteousness, is not someone else's ethical record, but rather the subject's own faith (Rom 4.3,5,9,20-22).

If there is an explicit emphasis in Paul's teaching on justification, it is upon the twin truths that justification is by faith in Jesus Christ and that it is apart from "the works of the Law" (Rom 3.28; Gal 2.16; 3.11). By "faith in Jesus Christ," the apostolic writers primarily mean trust in Jesus Himself as the One who saves (see the whole Gospel of John; Act 10.43; 16.31; etc.). Faith in Christ also means a heart-reception of the gospel message (Mar 1.15; Act 15.7; Rom 1.16; 1Co 15.2; Eph 1.13; 1Th 2.13; etc.), *as well as* trust in God as the One who accomplishes the work of redemption through Christ (Joh 12.44; Rom 4.5; 24; 1Pe 1.20-21). Believing the gospel *implies* trust in the blood of Christ, i.e., redemptive confidence in the work of atonement and propitiation accomplished through His death and resurrection (1Co 15.1-5), but the emphasis in the NT is upon the necessity of trust in the person of Christ Himself; all other important aspects of faith flow from that primary faith *in Him*.

As to the other side of the coin, the emphasis that justification is apart from "the works of the Law," we only need comment that Paul's references to "the works of the Law" are variously understood today as (1) the individualistic pursuit of merit by keeping the commandments, or (2) the "cultural badge" of Torah observance by which the Jew thought himself as demonstrably within the covenant people. The first idea is an expression of what we commonly call "works righteousness" and it is clearly excluded as a basis of salvation (Eph 2.8-9). The second idea is an expression of ethnic or cultural righteousness, if you will, and is essentially the idea that one is saved by becoming a Jew. Paul argues so strongly against this idea in the book of Romans, that he must take a step back and affirm that there *are* advantages to being a Jew (Rom 3.1-2). Nevertheless, automatic justification is not one of those advantages because "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (Rom 3.9). The relevant truth for both Jew and Gentile, then, is that justification and righteousness is of God, not of ourselves, and is "by faith from first to last" (Rom 1.17 ^{NIVO}).

All this being so, James seems to throw a wrench into the works by arguing that "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jam 2.24). However, we need only understand that when James and Paul spoke of justification they were answering two different questions. Paul was answering the question (among others), "Is a person justified by doing the works of the Law, or by trust in the atoning work of Messiah?" James, on the other hand, was answering the question, "Is a person justified by intellectual

assent to the *shema*²⁹⁷ and to the message of the gospel, or by a faith that produces godly living?” In both cases the latter option is correct, and I am confident that James and Paul would heartily agree with one another’s conclusions. Furthermore, James clarifies that when he says a man is also “justified by works,” he means that works complete faith (Jam 2.22), i.e., works demonstrate that faith is genuine and alive (Jam 2.17). The real issue for James then, is not faith vs. works, but living faith vs. dead faith (which is no faith at all). His conclusion, in complete harmony with Paul, is that it is a living faith, not a phony faith, that justifies.

What then is justification?

Having surveyed the explicit teaching of Scripture on these various related points, we may now define the biblical idea of justification with confidence. Let us recall the teaching of the Westminster Larger Catechism on this point:

What is justification?

Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners, (Rom 3.22,24–25, Rom 4.5) in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight (2Co 5.19,21, Rom 3.22,24,25,27,28) not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, (Tit 3.5,7, Eph 1.7) but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, (Rom 5.17–19, Rom 4.6-8) and received by faith alone. (Act 10.43, Gal 2.16, Phil 3.9)²⁹⁸

We realize now that we can heartily accept this definition of justification with a few minor improvements and one important deletion. Here is the catechism’s definition revised to better fit the biblical data:

What is justification?

Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto repentant sinners, (Rom 3.24; Tit 3.7) in which He forgives all their sins, accepts and counts them righteous in his sight (Rom 4.3-8; 5.1,9,11; 2Co 5.19) not for anything inherent in them, nor done by them, (Eph 2.8-10; Tit 3.5-7) but solely on the basis of the atoning work of Christ (Rom 5.9,15–19; 1Pe 2.24; 3.18; Heb 9.24-28), with both forgiveness and righteousness being received by faith alone (Act 10.43, Gal 2.16, Phil 3.9).

In short, and stated in a slightly expanded form as compared to the tentative definition offered at the beginning of this book, *justification* is the gracious act of God by which He reconciles once estranged sinners to Himself by the

²⁹⁷ The Jewish confession which recites Deut 6.4; see Jam 2.19.

²⁹⁸ *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs.* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996)

gifts of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, thereby making them righteous in His sight.

The main thing I have dropped from the [Westminster](#) definition is the idea of the [imputation](#) of Christ's obedience to the believer. I have found this idea both unsupported in Scripture and unnecessary for preserving the core principles of the gospel. The rest of the [Westminster](#) definition I can gladly commend, choosing, however, to interpret the phrase, "and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight," as meaning that God receives the [justified](#) as factually righteous ([relationally](#)), not just as "thought of as righteous" ([ethically](#)).

Conclusion

So, with regard to the main inquiry of this work, we see that while the Westminster definition of *justification* is correct in all but its idea of the imputation of “the perfect obedience ... of Christ,” the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#), on the other hand, — *and precisely because that false idea of imputation is at its foundation* — requires a complete overhaul to fit the biblical data. Here, then, are the main points of the doctrine of Alien Righteousness corrected to better reflect what Scripture tells us:

1. Justification is based upon faith, not works.

Though the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) teaches that the ultimate basis for justification is perfect obedience, i.e., the presenting of a perfect record of ethical performance to God, we find that this idea is never taught in Scripture. Since justification is primarily a relational matter rather than an ethical one, it is based on a relational act rather than on an ethical record or judicial declaration of ethical compliance. The familiar biblical truth that we are “justified by faith” should never have been obscured by the discordant theory that we are ultimately “justified by works.”²⁹⁹

2. Justification by our own works is impossible.

This is the one tenet in the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) that is biblical and can stand unaltered. Every Evangelical will affirm that neither Torah observance nor any other pursuit of personal merit can justify us before God. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2.8-9).

3. As our Kinsman Redeemer, Jesus intervened as our substitute.

The whole system of [Federalism](#), with its idea that Jesus became our “federal head” who superseded Adam, is a man-made, biblically unsupported and superfluous doctrine. While there are instances of corporate responsibility in the biblical story (e.g., the story of Achan, Jos 7), and while the connection with Adam *is* superseded by the believers’ connection with Christ, Scripture

²⁹⁹ The idea of justification by works is an absurdity. If a man’s works are inadequate they cannot justify him; if a man’s works are adequate, he doesn’t need justification. God would not have, nor did He ever, decree a justification by works, except in the sense of [eschatological](#) “vindication.”

does not teach [federal](#) headship in redemption law, but family solidarity instead. Jesus Christ has acted for His people, but not as their federal head. Rather, He acted as their Kinsman-Redeemer (which He became through His incarnation), by paying their redemption price, i.e., suffering in their place.

4. Christ bore the sins of many.

Jesus Christ bore the sins of many and is Himself the propitiation for not only our sins, “but also for those of the whole world” (1Jo 2.2). However, I reiterate that sin-bearing requires no such confused and unbiblical notion as that our sins were imputed to Him. On the contrary, Christ was able to bear our sins precisely because God saw Him as sinless from beginning to end. “For Christ died for sins once for all, **the righteous** for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (emphasis added, 1Pe 3.18^{NIV}).

5. In Christ, we have become children of God.

The current [Alien-Righteousness](#) idea that Christ’s life-long record of righteous behavior (including the act of His death) is imputed to believers, as though they themselves had accomplished it, is ridiculous, counter to God’s truthful character, never taught in Scripture, and superfluous to the biblical doctrine of justification.³⁰⁰ As I have already said, Christ’s sinless life allowed Him to die in our place, but it is no more necessary for God to think of us as having actually died His death, than it is necessary for a creditor to think of the destitute relative as having actually paid the redemption handed over by his kinsman. It is wholly sufficient for the redemption to have been paid by a qualified benefactor. Far more valuable than the fictional gift of having God think of us as having done something we didn’t, is the real gift of having God receive us as friends and family through our relational solidarity with our redeeming Kinsman.

6. God receives the repentant believer as factually righteous.

The current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) completely collapses as its two foundational presuppositions — that biblical righteousness is only ethical and that justification is therefore necessarily forensic — are swept away by a fresh study of the biblical record. Having reexamined the doctrine of Alien Righteousness, with our minds unconstrained by the presuppositions of the

³⁰⁰ In 2Co 5.14, Paul did conclude “that one died for all, therefore all died,” but in this passage he speaks practically rather than legally. The “all” who died did not die Christ’s own death, but emulate it in dying “to the old life of sin and self.” See David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary Of 2 Corinthians*, 2nd Edition (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008).

Reformers and their non-Hebraic hermeneutic, we see that the biblical teaching is more straightforward and consistent with God's truthful character. Since justification is about *relational* righteousness, there is no need for a declaration of legal-not-factual ethical righteousness for the justified. Ethical righteousness is a mandatory pursuit for those already justified, but is irrelevant to the event of justification itself. The justified are really and truly righteous in God's eyes because in Christ they are rightly related to the Father. The righteousness of justified believers is truly *their* righteousness, even though they have not yet attained complete ethical wholeness.

Still, if we should salvage anything from the Reformer's doctrine of Alien Righteousness (besides the fact that man cannot justify himself), it is the truth that the believers' righteousness *is alien* in origin, basis and means. To the question posed by the title of this work, [Does The Bible Teach] Alien Righteousness? we must answer, "In very important aspects of justification, Yes!" However, none of those alien aspects of righteousness involve the legal imputation of anyone else's righteousness to the justified, and none of them negate the truth that justified believers are factually righteous before God with a relational righteousness that is their own.

7. God highly values our faith and subsequent good works.

As I have noted, none of the Reformers nor those who hold the current doctrine of Alien Righteousness intended to belittle faith nor to diminish the rightness of believers pursuing good works. They only wished, and commendably so, to repudiate any thought that man can accrue merit before God. Sadly, the articulation of this repudiation has, nonetheless, discouraged believers from growing in faith and good works.

To our detriment, the Reformers tended to devalue faith as a quality arbitrarily chosen by God, simply as the means to get Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Faith, however, is of the utmost value inherently and practically. Faith, i.e., trust, is a relational phenomenon, and as such, its first significance is that it reflects God's relational character. Secondly, faith is the appropriate stance for a destitute, captive and dying malefactor to take toward an intervening, mighty and merciful benefactor. As such, it is also the one relational posture which properly aligns fallen man to his holy Creator, and thus (as the gift and instrument of God) effects the human-divine reconciliation. Finally, faith not only justifies, it moves mountains. Jesus habitually commended people for their faith, and the apostles celebrated it as that by which we overcome the world (1Jo 5.4). The fact that this faith is not

an intrinsic capacity that we stir up within ourselves, i.e., the reality that faith is not of ourselves (Eph 2.8), does not diminish God's pleasure in it. On the contrary, God delights in our faith as a quality that He Himself is growing in us.

Similarly, the fact that our works do not and cannot justify us, does not diminish God's pleasure in the faithful acts of those already justified. In fact the NT repeatedly urges us to pursue good works for God's glory, good works that He Himself "prepared beforehand so that we should walk in them" (Eph 2.10). In fact, God is so pleased with the righteous works of the saints, works that He Himself worked in them both to will and to do (Phil 2.13), that He will array the bride in those works at the marriage of His Son (Rev 19.8).

Epilogue

A doctrinal investigation like this one would hardly be worthwhile if its findings had no practical ramifications. I assure the reader, therefore, that while much in this book has been technical, and many of the points subtle, it is indeed the practical issues at stake that have kept the author writing. It would have been so much easier to go along with the theological establishment and not rock the boat of fellowship. However, the love of Christ compels us to share a better understanding of [justification](#) and righteousness with all who will give us a fair hearing, because the errors in the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#) impinge upon the very glory of God and the health of believers.

The glory of God is at stake.

In this truth-challenged age, the last thing we need in the preaching of the gospel is the teaching that God deceives Himself and pretends that things are true which are not. The current doctrine of [imputation](#) plays right into the hands of post-modern thinkers who delight in believing that two antithetical realities can both be true. To teach them that *in God's mind* Christians are both righteous and unrighteous, in the same sense,³⁰¹ and at the same time, and that God views them this way because He thinks of them as having lived Christ's life while at the same time having lived their own, cannot help but encourage the current epidemic of "Christians" who think they can be sexually profligate *and* saints in good standing at one and the same time.

When God revealed His glory to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex 33.18 to 34.8), the LORD proclaimed Himself, "The LORD, the LORD God, ... abounding in lovingkindness and truth...."³⁰² Joshua urged the people to fear this God of truth "and serve Him in sincerity and truth..." (Jos 24.14), as did Samuel (1Sa 12.24), and Jesus (Joh 4.24). The judgments of God "are true" (Psa 19.9; Rev 16.7), He ransoms His people as the "God of truth" (Psa 31.5), His truth preserves them (Psa 40.11), His truth is everlasting (Psa 117.2), and He commands them to love truth (Zec 8.19). His church is supposed to be "the

³⁰¹ Theologians make a distinction between *forensic* and *actual* righteousness, and so do not think of the justified believer as both righteous and unrighteous "in the same sense." Nevertheless, while *theologians* make the distinction, we have seen that they portray *God* as not making the distinction in His mind.

³⁰² The Hebrew word translated "truth" by the [NAU](#) can also connote "faithfulness" ([NIVO](#)), or "reliability." This is consistent with the Hebraic disinclination to think in purely abstract terms and dissociate truth from truthful action. The God of truth is the God who does all things in truthfulness, whether it is His thinking, speaking or other acts.

pillar and support of the truth” (1Ti 3.15), and His wrath is focused upon “men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1.18).

Is it not madness, then, to continue painting God as One who deludes Himself, choosing to believe things that are not so? How shall we face Him if we continue teaching such a doctrine? Will we defend ourselves to the LORD saying, “It was the [Reformers](#) whom You gave to instruct us, they gave us this doctrine, and we partook”? Will our theological constructs excuse us? Not hardly! “Let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar.” For God’s glory *and* for the health of the Church, we must delete the false doctrine of the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ” from our teaching.

[John Piper](#) worries that if we do repudiate this doctrine of imputation, we will fall short of “giving Christ all the glory due to him,” and quotes Edward Mote’s hymn, “The Solid Rock” in support.³⁰³ Christ should be honored, [Piper](#) says, “as the one who provided a perfect righteousness for us as the ground of our full acceptance and endorsement by God.”³⁰⁴ However, with these words [John Piper](#) expresses the Reformed theologians’ belief that the atoning death of Jesus was, in and of itself, *insufficient* for our justification. The belief is that we need *both* Christ’s death for the forgiveness of our sins, *and* the imputation of Christ’s perfect life for our “full acceptance and endorsement by God.” As noted above, this idea — that not only Christ’s death but also His life must be imputed for justification — grew out of the Reformers’ felt need to counter the Catholic doctrine of penance, a doctrine which itself grew out of the Roman [Scholastics’](#) refusal to see the all-sufficiency of Christ’s death for the expiation of both the guilt and punishment of sin. Ironically, then, while the Reformers taught that the death of Christ *is* sufficient to remove both the guilt and punishment of sin, they said it *is not* sufficient to provide the basis for reconciliation to God, and so in their way, the Reformers and their theological heirs have *preserved this calumny* against the atoning work of our Lord on the cross. How is this “giving Christ all the glory due to him”? Contrary to this theory that Christ’s death only cleanses us and it is Christ’s antecedent life that makes us acceptable to God, Scripture tells us repeatedly that it is *the death of Christ*

³⁰³ John Piper, *Counted Righteous In Christ: Should We Abandon The Imputation Of Christ’s Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), p. 51. Mote’s classic song says, “My hope is built on nothing less, Than Jesus’ blood *and righteousness...*” (emphasis mine). In the final verse, the lyrics read,

When He shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh, may I then in Him be found,
Clothed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne!

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

that reconciled us to God (Rom 5.10; Eph 2.16; Col 1.20-22), that it is by *the “one offering” of his death* that “He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10.14), and that it is by *His blood* that “we have confidence to enter the holy place” of God’s presence (Heb 10.19). In contrast to this emphasis on Christ’s death, the Bible nowhere speaks of Christ’s pre-crucifixion life — as precious and necessary as it was — as directly effecting anything in justification.³⁰⁵ Therefore, it is those who teach the necessity of the imputation of “the righteousness of Christ” who have actually been robbing Christ of the full significance of His atoning work on the cross! This must stop.

Furthermore, it adds no honor to Christ to invent things for Him to have done. The tendency to do this in the apocryphal gospels and Gnostic writings cheapened His real miracles and confused His true teaching. The bare fact that Jesus lived a sinless life brings Him great glory; to embellish the meaning of that sinless life with the unbiblical doctrines of men detracts from, rather than enhances, the glory of which He is worthy.

The health of believers is at stake.

It also detracts from the glory of Christ when our doctrine undermines the believer’s commitment to grow in faith and in the pursuit of good works. Jesus said, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples” (Joh 15.8). However, the current doctrine of [Alien Righteousness](#), has inadvertently trained many [Evangelicals](#) to feel that what they do is irrelevant, since, no matter what, God looks at them through “the righteousness of Christ” in which they are clothed, and thinks of any good works they perform as “filthy rags” anyway. Additionally, the reticence of [Alien Righteousness](#) proponents to remind us of the coming reward for good deeds, and judgment for the lack of them (Mat 16.27; Rom 2.6; 2Co 5.10; Rev 20.12-13; 22.12), has allowed a chilling complacency to seep through the church.³⁰⁶ This exaltation of the imputed “righteousness of Christ” on the one hand, and avoidance of teaching about rewards on the other, is a far cry

³⁰⁵ Paul speaks of how “we shall be saved by His life” (Rom 5.10), but the apostle has Christ’s resurrected life in view and the final salvation in the day of judgment, not present justification.

³⁰⁶ [Michael F. Bird](#) rightly criticizes “the Protestant paranoia against reminding our communities of judgment according to works, lest we become Catholic ...” He writes that this paranoia “has fostered fans of Jesus rather than followers of Jesus. It has reaped decisions that amounted to little, rather than disciples who finished the race.” Michael F. Bird, “Progressive Reformed View” in *Justification: Five Views*, edited by James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), pp. 154-155.

pastorally from the biblical call to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb 10.24^{NIVO}).³⁰⁷

Ironically, while the articulation of [Alien Righteousness](#) in our churches has made many Christians complacent about good works, the emphasis upon the necessity of perfect life in order to be justified has unintentionally given others the impression that our *continued acceptance* with God is based upon our [ethical](#) performance. I saw the extreme expression of this outlook in a Seventh Day Adventist woman who lived in constant fear because she believed that Christ had forgiven her past, but upon her “salvation” had made her responsible to safeguard her future entrance into heaven by keeping completely free from sin. Her state of constant fear dismayed me, but I have been grieved to find a similar anxiety even among my own solidly [Evangelical](#) friends. In my own circles I have seen a misguided perfectionism and a bondage to external appearances — in effect a leaning toward [legalism](#) — based on a sense that God will not bless a Christian whose ethical and religious performance is less than stellar. All such spiritual bondage robs the believer of an authentic relationship with Jesus.

Happily, bondage to perfectionism and legalism is broken when the believer learns that his acceptance with God, present and future, is not based upon his performance, but upon membership in the family of God made possible by our Kinsman-Redeemer. Just as the child in an earthly family has lifelong acceptance by blood rather than by achievement, much more, the child of God has guaranteed acceptance in the heavenly family by the blood of his adoption. Once this is understood, the Christian is able to pursue good works for the glory of God and the benefit of others, without the constant selfish motive of safeguarding his own interests.

Finally, it grieves the Holy Spirit and any faithful teacher of the Bible when the words of Luther, Calvin or any other earthly authority are given greater weight than the Scripture itself. Of course, any [Evangelical](#) teacher would *deny* giving the [Reformers](#) (or more recent hymn writers) such importance, but when appeal is made to these authorities in lieu of explicit scriptural support for a given tenet, the practice belies the disavowal, and tragically the practice does not go unnoticed by Christians in the pews. Over time, Church people learn to imitate their teachers, and now many

³⁰⁷ I'm a Johnny-come-lately to this concern that Alien Righteousness teaching undermines sanctification. Gundry notes “the longstanding complaint that despite protestations to the contrary, the classic Protestant doctrine of double imputation tends to shortchange sanctification...” Robert H. Gundry, “The Nonimputation Of Christ’s Righteousness,” in *Justification: What’s At Stake In The Current Debate* edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), pp. 44-45.

Evangelical leaders have raised up a generation of Christians with a syncretistic faith, based partly on the Bible and partly on their denomination's favorite systematic theology (or worse). Nothing but the biblical gospel, however, "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1.16); every detraction from *and addition to* the scriptural gospel weakens the Church for which Jesus gave Himself up. Sadly, Alien Righteousness proponents have not just clouded the gospel itself, but by their over-zealous devotion to past theologians they have also obscured what the Bible says about God, His Messiah, and our own calling to the ministry of reconciliation. They have forced dogmatic interpretations upon diverse Scripture passages, rather than allowing those passages to speak in their own contexts. Any such exegesis based upon a theological system is a *grievous problem*. Granted, it is a problem not limited to any one theological school, nor solely to the debates surrounding justification, but for those who subscribe to the motto of *sola scriptura*, it is a problem that must be recognized and repented of.

Why has the doctrine of Alien Righteousness persisted?

If, as I contend, the current doctrine of Alien Righteousness is an extraneous addition to the gospel, and is founded more upon the theology of the Reformers than upon the authority of Scripture, *how then has it so persisted and spread in the Church for the last 500 years?* What has given this doctrine its impetus, if not the Bible? It's an intriguing question! The surprising answer (at least with regard to the more strictly Reformed traditions) is that the idea of the imputed righteousness of Christ is a necessary corollary and buttress to the idea of the imputed sin of Adam, which idea in turn (with its related theories of original sin) provides the historical rationale for the practice of *infant baptism* (aka, paedobaptism). An intact doctrine of the imputation of sin and righteousness from one person to another is necessary for the doctrine of infant baptism. It will be very difficult for any thinking pastor to drop the imputed "righteousness of Christ" from his theology, and yet continue to justify the baptism of infants.³⁰⁸ That pastor's temptation will be to not rock the baptismal font, and continue teaching Alien Righteousness more or less as the Reformers did.³⁰⁹

I hope better things for my friends, though. In this crucial moment of history, we must not allow the testimony of Jesus to be diminished and

³⁰⁸ For a thorough treatment of this theological issue, I refer the reader to my upcoming book entitled, *Magic Baptism And The Invention Of Original Sin*.

³⁰⁹ As to why non-paedobaptist Evangelical groups have also held tightly to the imputation of Christ's righteousness, I have multiple guesses, but they are only guesses.

obscured by a slavish loyalty to denominational tradition and famous theologians. Instead, let us return, to the “pure spiritual milk, so that by it [we] may grow up in [our] salvation” (1Pe 2.2^{NIV}), and rightly represent Him Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Glossary

Alien Righteousness (Iustitia Aliena)

A term (possibly coined by Luther) which refers to “the righteousness of Christ,” a righteousness which is extrinsic to the redeemed but imputed to them as they appropriate it by faith. It is generally synonymous to [Imputed Righteousness](#).

Anathema, Anathematize

Anathema is a Grk noun that has come to mean a *curse*, or something to be loathed, denounced and banned, an abomination. *Anathema* also takes on a verbal or adjectival sense to mean *accursed*. The verb, *anathematize*, means to pronounce an anathema upon something, i.e., to curse or execrate something or someone.

Antecedent, Antecedently

An antecedent is something that precedes or goes before. Grammatically, *antecedent* often refers to the preceding word or phrase to which a later pronoun refers. More generally, an antecedent is any preceding word, idea, event or condition that is important for what follows. In biblical interpretation, to say that a word or idea occurred *antecedently*, is to say that it occurred earlier in the text and has significance for what follows in the text.

Aorist, Aorist Tense

The aorist is a verb form in NT Grk that is often translated into English with the simple past tense. However, the aorist does not inherently denote the time of occurrence, but only the simple fact of occurrence without reference to the action’s completeness, duration or repetition. It can therefore refer to an action that occurred over a period of time (e.g., “the man drove his car”), or to something that happened in a moment (e.g., “he hit the brake”).

Ascetic

This adjective describes an austere manner of conduct or of religious observance that involves strict self-denial.

Calvinism

The theological system named for [John Calvin](#). Though based on his works, the system has been modified somewhat by his theological heirs. Nevertheless, Calvinism continues to emphasize the sovereignty of God, along with the depravity of man, and the principle of election.

Cessationist

In theology, a cessationist is one who believes that all, or some combination of, miracles and spiritual gifts ceased with the death of the apostles or shortly thereafter.

Covenant Theology

See [Federalism](#), [Federal Theology](#).

Discrete

This adjective describes a thing as constituting a distinct and separate entity, as opposed to things that are blended, fused, merged or mingled. It is not to be confused with its homophone, *discreet*.

Eisegesis

Eisegesis is the fallacious reading of one's own ideas into a text. Cf. [Exegesis](#).

Eschatology, Eschatological

The [Grk](#) word *eschaton* means *last*. *Eschatology*, therefore, is properly the study of “last things,” referring to what the Bible reveals about the end of this age, i.e., the climax of history when Christ returns and restores all things (Act 3.21). The adjective, *eschatological*, describes something as having to do with events that will occur in and around the time of Christ's return. Eschatological events include the resurrection, judgment, restoration, etc.

Ethical, Ethical Righteousness

The adjective *ethical* describes something as pertaining to right and wrong conduct, *or* as conforming to the rules or standards for right conduct. Theologically, then, ethical righteousness is a righteousness based upon actual conduct (performance) as evaluated against an authoritative standard like God's law.

Evangelical, Evangelicalism

In this work I use the term *Evangelicalism* to designate the transdenominational and multiethnic *non-Roman Catholic* movement that emphasizes the divine authority of Scripture, proclamation of the gospel and the need of all to experience personal salvation through new birth and faith in Christ. An Evangelical is an adherent to this movement. While historic Protestant denominations would once have been part of Evangelicalism as I've defined it, some Protestant churches have become non-Evangelical in practice as they have adopted a more liberal and critical view of the Bible's inspiration. Evangelicalism has also been inclined historically to exclude non-Reformed or non-Calvinistic adherents from its associations, but has not succeeded in doing so in the unbridled theological milieu of the last century. In recent times, attempts have been made to narrow the definition of the term *Evangelical* by insisting that Evangelicals must believe in certain specific dogmas like the imputation of "the righteousness of Christ."

Exegesis

Exegesis is the extraction of meaning inherent in a text, i.e., it is the explanation or interpretation of what the author meant by the text. Cf. [Eisegesis](#).

Faith (Belief)

In biblical usage, faith is a conscious state of dependent reliance upon God rather than self (Mar 11.22), with a trust in the verity of all God's promises. This reliance and trust is a gracious gift from God (Eph 2.8; 2Pe 1.1; Act 3.16), and is inevitably evidenced by a God-honoring life. In [justification](#), faith focuses upon the atoning work of God in Christ (Rom 3.24-26).

Fathers (Early Church Fathers)

In theological discussion, "the Fathers" or "early Church Fathers" refers to those non-canonical Christian writers who were esteemed as witnesses, teachers and apologists in the early centuries of Christianity. Though the Fathers can be sorted into different categories according to their geographical area of influence, or language of writing, or particular theological burdens, they are most often categorized chronologically as the Apostolic, Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. The combined time periods of these Fathers stretches from about AD 100 to about AD 600.

Federal (Covenantal)

In theology, and especially in what is known as [*Federal Theology*](#), the adjective *federal* refers to the covenantal aspect of something. When theologians speak of Christ as our “federal head,” they refer to Him as our covenantal representative, i.e., our legal “point man,” in all mediation before God’s throne.

Federalism, Federal Theology

Also called covenant theology, federalism is a theological system that emerged in large part from the work of [Johannes Cocceius](#), although [John Calvin](#), J. H. Bullinger (1504-1575), Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587), and others are thought of as Reformation-era forerunners of the theology. Federalism teaches that God entered into a covenant (Latin *foedus*) with Adam, and made Adam the covenantal representative (federal head) of all his posterity. Therefore, when Adam sinned, God held both him *and those he represented* as guilty. According to this system, the solution for humanity is to attach themselves to a new federal head, i.e., Jesus Christ “the second Adam,” by faith. The Westminster Confession (completed in 1646) codified principles of federalism which then gained important standing in the theology of Scotland and New England.

Forensic, Forensically

This adjective and adverb describe something as having to do with discussion, debate or declaration in a public forum, and thus an announced verdict or other declaration in a courtroom is a forensic pronouncement. In theological formulations, *forensic* generally means that the thing in view has to do with *a judicial declaration*.

Hebraic

This adjective describes something as having to do with the culture and worldview of the Jewish people. The culture of Jesus, the apostles and the first Christians was *Hebraic*.

Hermeneutics, Hermeneutic

Hermeneutics is the science of (or study of) interpretation. In theological discussion it generally refers to principles for interpreting Scripture. A hermeneutic, then, is the particular principle or set of principles (including cultural) that one uses to interpret Scripture (or some other text).

Infused Righteousness (Iustitia Infusa)

Infused righteousness is that gift of righteousness which, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, is infused into the sinner by grace through the sacraments of the church, such that the recipient is eventually justified by this intrinsic righteousness.

Impute, Imputation

The verb *to impute* simply means to credit something to someone, and *imputation* is the act or event of that crediting. What is credited can be something already possessed, or, alternatively, something not possessed until a person in authority acts as though it is, possibly at a cost to himself.

Imputed Righteousness (Iustitia Imputata)

Imputed righteousness, according to current Reformed and Evangelical theology, is the entire record of Christ's righteous life which is credited to believers upon faith.

Indulgence

An indulgence is a remission of punishment due for sins, and theoretically provides a shortening of one's time in purgatory. The Roman Catholic Church has sold indulgences, generally in the form of a certified document, for cash or services rendered to the Church.

Iustitia

The Latin word used in the Vulgate Bible for the Grk (δικαιοσύνη, thē-kě-ō-'sē-nē). Both the Grk word and its Latin equivalent can mean either *righteousness* or *justice*.

Iustitia Dei

Latin for "righteousness [or justice] of God."

Justification, Justify

In theological discussion, *to justify* generally means to make right or acknowledge as right, and *justification* refers to the act of God, or the means, by which He reconciles the once estranged sinner to Himself.

Legalism

Legalism is a **polyvalent** term, but it generally refers to any attempt to placate God, gain salvation or retain God's favor by adherence to or observance of the Mosaic Law or to some other manmade code of conduct.

Levitical

This adjective describes something as having to do with the Jewish priesthood, its laws and ceremonies. Only descendants of the patriarch, Levi, qualify to serve in this priesthood.

Merit

The Bible never speaks in terms of "merit." (The **NAU** only uses the word *merit* one time to translate *righteousness* in Dan 9.18.) Theologically, the word *merit* refers to a quality or virtue in man that obligates God to bless the creature who possesses it. At the close of the Middle Ages, the **Reformers** vigorously denounced the theology of merit while the Roman Catholic scholars continued to refine their doctrine of merit as the foundation for their dogmas of penance and purgatory, the doctrines that in turn provided the basis for the lucrative sale of indulgences. Ironically, while the Reformers renounced the idea that man can have or accrue merit by his own effort, they unconsciously retained the medieval ideas that justification is by merit, and that merit is transferrable (as in the Roman Catholic idea of vicarious penance and in the sale of indulgences).

Monasticism

A way of life involving some combination of celibacy, communal living and worship, poverty, silence and contemplation. Engaged in particularly by members of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, monasticism has too often been seen as a way of escape from the world and its corrupting influences.

Nominative Case

Greek and other inflected languages identify the subject in a sentence, i.e., the person or thing performing the action, by putting the appropriate noun (or word functioning as a noun) in the nominative case. This is done by putting a certain ending on the noun. The Greek word order in John 3.16 reads literally, "So for loved the God the world ..." However, the word *God* is

written with the nominative case ending, clearly identifying God as the one who did the loving.

Ontology, Ontological

Ontology is the study of the nature of being and existence. The adjective *ontological* describes something as within the category of essential reality, as opposed to only within the category of belief or perception (cf. [Phenomenological, Phenomenologically](#)). To speak of an “ontological meaning” is to speak of a meaning that has to do with essential nature or literal reality. If we were to take 2Co 5.21 ontologically, “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf,” would mean that God literally turned Jesus in sin!

Pelagianism

The teaching, attributed to the British monk Pelagius (c. 354-415), that the human volition survived the fall (of man into sin) and that it is therefore possible for humans to merit salvation by their own effort without the need of divine grace. In his writings, Augustine vigorously opposed the teachings of Pelagius.

Perfectionism

While there is a legitimate pursuit of “perfectionism” in the sense of striving for spiritual maturity and wholeness (Mat 5.48), generally perfectionism is a negative term referring to the belief that the religious person can arrive at a sinless or at least superior level of spirituality by means of special knowledge, a special experience, or a special (or especially rigorous) engagement in certain spiritual disciplines.

Phenomenological, Phenomenologically

To describe something as phenomenological is to say that it is within the category of belief and perception, rather than in the category of essential nature or literal reality (cf. [Ontology, Ontological](#)). We describe the daily appearance and disappearance of the sun phenomenologically when we say the sun “rose” or the sun “set.” The sun did not literally go up or down, but that is how we perceive its appearance and disappearance.

Polyvalent

With regard to words, this adjective describes a term that can have different meanings or connotations, depending on the context in which it is used. Cf. *univalent*.

Prolepsis, Proleptic, Proleptically

A prolepsis is a speaking beforehand of an anticipated event as though it were already accomplished.

Propitiation

Propitiation is understood in two ways: as the expiation (covering or canceling) of sin, and as the turning away of God's wrath that had been directed against sin. Scripture seems to indicate that Jesus Christ provided both (Rom 3.25; Heb 2.17; 1Jo 2.2; 4.10).

Reformation, Reformers

The Reformation was the massive break from Roman Catholicism in the 16th century by individuals and groups who had hoped to improve the Catholic church from within, but who were forced to form other fellowships, which became the Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc.. In retrospect, we refer to those intrepid challengers of the religious status quo as Reformers.

Reformed Theology, Reformed Tradition

Historical and current Reformed theology derived primarily from the teachings of [John Calvin](#) and Ulrich Zwingli, and is related to but distinct from Lutheran theology. Reformed theology itself divides into distinct streams of religious tradition (e.g., into Dutch Reformed or Scottish Presbyterian churches), but all share a high view of God's sovereignty and prioritize the glory of God in their theological reflection. In addition, A. T. B. McGowan tells us that "any understanding of justification that fails to maintain a forensic notion of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ cannot claim to be Reformed."

Regeneration

Regeneration is what Jesus called being "born again" and being "born of the Spirit" (Joh 3.3-7). It is the supernatural coming to life of the human spirit that occurs in salvation, and is brought about by the agency of God's Holy Spirit.

Relational, Relational Righteousness

The word *relational* is a general term which simply speaks of the reciprocal attitude or interaction that two or more persons have toward or with one another. Relational righteousness, then, is the state of being rightly related to someone according to the rules of the particular relationship.

Righteousness Of Christ

Since the Reformation, theologians have used the phrase “the righteousness of Christ” to refer to the cumulative total of all Christ’s righteous deeds (together with their merit) which He accomplished during His earthly life. The earlier scholastics provided a foundation for this way of thinking about Christ’s righteousness by their discussions of the *obedientia activa* and *obedientia passiva* of Jesus, in which they distinguished, however, between Christ’s active obedience to God from birth to crucifixion and His passive obedience in submitting to the cross.

Romanization

This verb refers to the making of something *Roman* or *Roman Catholic* in character. The Romanization of the Church accelerated after the second Jewish-Roman war of AD 135, as Christianity became almost completely separated from its Jewish roots. It is important to realize that, since Roman culture was greatly influenced by the Greek, Romanization involves injecting a great deal of Greek perspective into the individual, institution or idea being Romanized.

Sacrament, Sacramentalism

Generally a sacrament is simply a sacred practice of the Church, like baptism. Historically, however, various religious streams have imbued sacraments with mystical power such that a person is believed not to be fully saved or sanctified without participation in the sacraments. Sacramentalism is a sometimes pejorative term referring to those churches or religious organizations that make the sacraments the all important essence of Christianity or the requisite means of salvation. In an attempt to move away from sacramentalism, some Christian denominations reduce the sacred practices of the Church to two, baptism and the Lord’s supper (communion), and prefer to call these two rites *ordinances*.

Scholastics, Scholasticism

Scholasticism is (very generally speaking) the theology and philosophy, *and the method* of philosophical and theological reflection, of the medieval schools that flourished from the 11th to the 14th centuries. Scholastics were the teachers and practitioners of Scholasticism, of whom Anselm of Canterbury was the first and [Thomas Aquinas](#) the greatest.

Sinaitic Law

This phrase refers to the ten commandments and additional laws given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai during the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

Socinians

Socinians, named after Lelio Sozzini (1525-1562), were anti-Trinitarian forerunners of modern Unitarians.

Sola Fide

Latin for “only faith.” *Sola Fide* was a [Reformation](#) motto expressing the conviction that justification (and thus salvation) occurs by faith alone, not by the added merit of participation in sacraments, nor by the doing of good works.

Sola Scriptura

Latin for “only Scripture.” *Sola Scriptura* was a [Reformation](#) motto expressing the conviction that the canonical Scriptures alone are the supreme earthly authority for Christian faith and practice, standing above the authority of the papacy and church tradition.

Soteriology

Soteriology is the study of salvation, i.e., the study of all that has to do with the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in bringing redemption to fallen man. Soteriology, then, can refer to that branch of theology or of biblical teaching that deals with the manifold facets of Christ’s saving work and the application of that work to man.

Univalent

With regard to words, this adjective means that a word has only one meaning, regardless of context. Cf. [polyvalent](#).

Vulgate

Short for *vulgata editio/versio* (common edition *or* version), the Vulgate was the Latin translation of the Bible completed by Jerome (c. AD 347-420) which became the official Bible for the Roman Catholic Church. The Vulgate remained the official Roman-rite Bible for the Catholic Church, going through various editions, until it was replaced by the Nova Vulgata in 1979.

Westminster Confession and Catechisms

The Westminster Confession is an extensive [Reformed](#) doctrinal statement completed in England in 1646. It was intended for the Church of England, but was adopted primarily by British and American Presbyterian denominations. The (Larger and Shorter) Westminster Catechisms arrange the theological propositions of the Confession into question-and-answer format for doctrinal teaching.

Biographical Notes

Albright, William F. (1891-1971)

William Foxwell Albright was an American archaeologist, biblical scholar, and philologist. He was the acknowledged founder of the Biblical Archaeology movement.

Andrew of Caesarea (early 6th century)

Andrew served as bishop in Caesarea in Cappadocia. He defended the divine inspiration of the book of Revelation, and wrote one of the earliest Greek commentaries on it.

Aristotle (384- 322 BC)

A student of Plato who developed divergent views from his teacher and became a famous philosopher in his own right, Aristotle is of particular importance to us for having invented logic as a formal discipline. He also wrote on topics as diverse as ethics and (what we would today call) biology and physics. Though Aristotle believed the world to have always existed and did not believe in personal immortality, his approach to reasoning out truth nevertheless had a great influence on Catholic scholars (like Thomas Aquinas) after the rediscovery of some of his works in the late 11th century.

Aquinas, Thomas (1224-1274)

The Italian Aquinas has been called the greatest philosopher and theologian of the medieval church, and was surely the greatest of the Catholic [scholastics](#). Aquinas is best known for his theological magnum opus, *Summa Theologica*, but his enormous literary output also includes *Summa contra Gentiles* (a doctrinal and apologetical work intended to help missionaries), along with commentaries on Scripture and on [Aristotle](#). Though a Catholic theologian, Aquinas has influenced Protestant thinkers as well, in part because he himself was influenced by [Augustine](#), the earlier theologian prized by both Catholics and Protestants.

Augustine Of Hippo (354-430)

Aurelius Augustinus was a philosopher, and rhetorician, who, eventually convicted of his immorality by Rom 13.13-14, became a Neoplatonist Catholic. He was pressed into the priesthood while visiting Hippo, and so pursued a

deeper biblical knowledge which eventually displaced some of his Neoplatonic views regarding man and history. His voluminous Christian writings have deeply influenced Catholic and Protestant theology to the present time.

Barackman, Floyd H. (d. 2007)

A Baptist pastor and author, Barackman served as a professor at Practical Bible Training School in New York.

Beale, G. K. (b. 1949)

Gregory Beale currently serves as Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. He is a conservative biblical interpreter who has contributed insight into the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament. He served as the president of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2004.

Berkhof, Louis (1873-1957)

A [Reformed](#) systematic theologian, Berkhof's many writings have been influential in seminaries and Bible colleges in the United States and Canada throughout the 20th century. He taught at Calvin Theological Seminary for almost four decades.

Bird, Michael F.

Bird is a New Testament scholar. He serves as lecturer in theology and Bible at Crossway College in Queensland, Australia. He credits N. T. Wright and D. A. Carson as major influences in his own scholarly development.

Boyce, James Petigru (1827–1888)

Boyce was a Southern Baptist pastor, theologian, author, and seminary professor. He had studied at Princeton Theological Seminary under [Charles Hodge](#), and himself went on to found the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and serve as its first president. He taught theology there from 1859 until his death.

Brauch, Manfred T.

Writer M. T. Brauch is the author of *Hard Sayings Of Paul* and *Abusing Scripture: The Consequences Of Misreading The Bible*.

Brondos, David A.

An ordained Lutheran minister, Brondos is Professor of Theology at the Theological Community of Mexico, an ecumenical consortium of seminaries in Mexico City.

Buchanan, James (1804–1870)

Not to be confused with the 15th president of the United States, this James Buchanan was a minister in the Church of Scotland, and a professor in Edinburgh where he taught apologetics and systematic theology.

Calvin, John (1509-1564)

Within two decades of [Luther's](#) world-shaking protest, the French lawyer, John Calvin came under Protestant influences and himself began to work for the Protestant cause. From 1536 to 1559, Calvin worked on his magnum opus, the *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*. This four-volume work laid the groundwork for much of Protestant theology down to the present time.

Carson, D. A. (b. 1946)

Canadian-born pastor, author and theologian, Carson is a research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL.

Cocceius, Johannes aka Koch, Johann (1603-1669)

Cocceius (pronounced: cōc-'say-əs), laid the foundations of Covenant Theology, or [Federal Theology](#) as it is now known. A German-born scholar of OT languages and of rabbinical literature, and a prolific author, he taught in Bremen, Franeker and Leiden. His covenant-based theology, most fully expressed in his work, *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamento Dei* (*Doctrines of the Covenant and Testament of God*), provided the framework for much of the [Reformed theology](#) that followed.

Cottrell, Jack

Jack Cottrell is a theologian and author associated with the Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. He has served as a professor of theology at Cincinnati Christian University since 1967. As one who believes that baptism by immersion is the point at which one's sins are forgiven, Cottrell has understandably been critical of Calvinism. Nevertheless, he has absorbed some of Calvinism's presuppositions regarding imputation.

Dunn, James (“Jimmy”) D. G. (b. 1939)

A Methodist preacher and a leading British NT scholar, Dunn served for many years as a theology professor at the University of Durham.

Edersheim, Alfred (1825-1889)

A Jewish Presbyterian Bible scholar, he served for three years as missionary to the Jews at Jassy, Rumania. He then continued to minister in the Presbyterian church until he took orders in the Church of England and served as vicar of Loders, Dorset.

Edwards, Jonathan (1703-1758)

Once called “the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene,” Congregationalist minister, Jonathan Edwards, may still be the greatest American intellect ever. It was under Edwards’ pastoral influence that the Great Awakening broke out in 1734 and a geographically more extensive revival continued in 1740-1741. Among Edwards’ important works are *Freedom Of The Will* and his book in answer to John Taylor on *Original Sin*.

Erickson, Millard J. (b. 1932)

A Baptist minister, Erickson currently serves as Distinguished Professor of Theology at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

Ferguson, Sinclair (b. 1948)

A Scottish theologian and author of Reformed persuasion, Ferguson, currently teaches at Redeemer Seminary in Dallas.

France, R. T. (b. 1938)

Richard (Dick) Thomas France is a New Testament scholar and a retired Anglican cleric who lives in Wales. He was Principal of Wycliffe Hall Oxford from 1989 to 1995. He has also worked for the London School of Theology.

Fuller, Andrew (1754-1815)

Fuller was an English farmer’s son, a self-taught theologian and a Baptist minister who helped found the Baptist Missionary Society. Though a staunch Calvinist, his book *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, 1785, sought to reemphasize the sinner’s responsibility to respond to the gospel, and the minister’s obligation to call sinners to repentance.

George, Timothy

An ordained minister and a teacher of Church History, George serves as executive editor for Christianity Today. He has authored more than 20 books, including an important textbook on the theology of the [Reformers](#).

Gill, John (1697-1771)

Born in England, Gill was a Baptist pastor and theologian, and an almost hyper-Calvinist. He is credited with being the first Baptist to develop a complete systematic theology, and the first to write a verse-by-verse commentary on the whole Bible. His extensive writings earned him the nickname, “Dr. Voluminous.” His younger contemporary, [Andrew Fuller](#), sought to develop a more balanced Calvinism than he saw in Gill, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of Gill’s pastoral successors also addressed some of Gill’s perceived imbalance, though Spurgeon held Gill in high esteem.

Gregory I (The Great) (540-604)

Born in Rome, Gregory was the pope from 590 until his death, and is considered one of the four great doctors of the Roman Catholic Church in moral theology. His writings were highly influential during the Middle Ages.

Grudem, Wayne (b. 1948)

Calvinistic theologian and author, Grudem served on the committee overseeing the *English Standard Version* translation of the Bible, and from 2005 to 2008 he served as General Editor for the ESV Study Bible.

Gundry, Robert H.

Bible Scholar Robert Horton Gundry has long taught at Westmont College in CA. In 1982 he published a controversial commentary on Matthew’s gospel, and in 2001 stirred up the Evangelical world again with a document entitled, “Why I Didn’t Endorse *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration*.” In this latter document, Gundry affirms the doctrine of justification by faith alone through Christ alone, but questions the biblical basis for the idea that Christ’s life of good works is imputed to the believer.

Hartley, John E.

Distinguished professor of Old Testament in C.P. Haggard Graduate School of Theology, Hartley has served at Azusa Pacific University for 36 years. He

is widely published, and has varied areas of expertise, including OT poetry and methods of interpreting Scripture.

Heidland, Hans Wolfgang (1912-1992)

Heidland was a Lutheran theologian and bishop of the Evangelical Church in Baden. He served as a professor of practical theology at the University of Heidelberg and contributed to volumes 3, 4 and 5 of *The Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*.

Hendriksen, William (1900-1982)

An [Evangelical](#) scholar and minister in the Christian Reformed Church, Hendriksen authored commentaries on half of the New Testament's books, and also translated the book of Revelation for the [NIVO](#).

Henry, Matthew (1662-1714)

An English Presbyterian minister, Matthew Henry is famous for his practical and devotional commentary of the whole Bible.

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-368)

Hilary was elected bishop of his home town in west central France, and soon found himself embroiled in the Church debates of the time regarding the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Hilary vigorously defended the orthodoxy of both, and as a consequence suffered banishment to Phrygia by the non-Trinitarian Emperor Constantius.

Hodge, Charles (1797-1878)

An American Presbyterian theologian, Hodge had a long career as a professor at Princeton. He was a strong defender of Calvinism, particularly the tenets of man's depravity, of God's sovereignty in salvation, *and* of the idea of the imputed righteousness of Christ, though he seems to have articulated the latter in somewhat more biblical terms than more recent proponents.

Kreeft, Peter (b. 1937)

An evangelical Catholic, Peter Kreeft is an apologist, theologian and philosopher. He teaches philosophy at Boston College and The King's College.

Ladd, George Eldon (1911-1982)

Born in Alberta, Canada, and raised in New England, Ladd became a Christian at age 18. Ordained a Baptist minister in 1933, he later became professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. A specialist in eschatology, Ladd did not follow the popular dispensational thinking of his day, but taught Historic Premillennialism. His writings regarding the Kingdom of God have widely influenced the Kingdom theology of our generation.

Leo X (1475-1521)

Born Giovanni de' Medici, Leo became pope in 1513. He loved the arts and renewed the sale of indulgences to support the building of St. Peter's cathedral. This latter act eventually inflamed [Martin Luther](#) and led to the Protestant [Reformation](#).

Luther, Martin

Justification was the subject of the theological breakthrough which Martin Luther, the German Catholic priest and professor, experienced around the year 1515. Having wrestled deeply with the meaning of "the righteousness of God" in Rom 1.17 (the *iustitia Dei* in the Latin Bible), it finally dawned on Luther that the phrase did not refer to God's *punitive justice*, but rather to a righteousness conferred upon man by God as a gift through faith. Having made this personal rediscovery of the principle of "justification by faith," Luther realized that the Roman Catholic Church had sold the world a bill of goods. This realization led him to spark the Protestant Reformation, on October 31, 1517, by issuing his *Ninety-five Theses* protest against the Church's sale of [indulgences](#).

Mann, C. S.

C. S. Mann was dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology, St. Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore and has authored a commentary on Mark as well as having co-authored one on Matthew with [W. F. Albright](#).

McClintock, John (1814-1870)

An American Methodist and first president of Drew Theological Seminary, McClintock collaborated with James Strong (of *Concordance* fame) to edit the ten-volume *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*.

McGrath, Alister E. (b. 1953)

Irishman McGrath is an Anglican priest, theologian, and Christian apologist. He currently serves as Professor of Theology, Ministry, and Education at Kings College London and as Head of the Centre for Theology, Religion and Culture. He has authored works on historical, systematic, and scientific theology, as well as on apologetics.

Melanchthon, Philip (1497-1560)

A disciple of [Martin Luther](#), Melanchthon authored the first systematic treatment of Lutheran theology (1521), as well as the Augsburg Confession (1530).

Miley, John (1813-1895)

A pastor and an influential Methodist theologian, Miley served as one of the leading professors of Drew University for decades. He revered Wesley's theology and endeavored to update it in his own *Systematic Theology* of 1892.

Mounce, Robert H. (b. 1922)

Author and expositor, Robert H. Mounce, is president emeritus of Whitworth College, and was involved in the translation of the [NIVO](#), [NLT](#), [NIrV](#), and especially the [ESV](#).

Murray, John (1898-1975)

Scottish Presbyterian and highly respected theologian, John Murray, brought together in his thought the influences of [Calvin](#), the Puritans, [Charles Hodge](#), B. B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos, among others. Murray taught at Princeton Seminary and then at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.

Onesti, Karen L.

K. L. Onesti is a United Methodist minister.

Origen (c. 185-c. 254)

Origenes Adamantius (originally of Alexandria, and then later laboring in Caesarea) was a scholar, exegete of Scripture and a prolific author. In his writing and teaching he emphasized the allegorical and typological meanings of the biblical text. That emphasis led to debates during his time and beyond about the orthodoxy of his beliefs, but he is respected to this day as a great early Christian scholar.

Owen, John (1616-1683)

Owen was an English Puritan church leader, theologian, and academic administrator at the University of Oxford. Owen's works, including multiple volumes on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, continue to influence [Reformed](#) thinkers to this day.

Piper, John (b. 1946)

Pastor, teacher and author, John Piper taught biblical studies at Bethel University and Seminary in St. Paul, MN (1974-1980), and currently serves at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN.

Preus, Robert David (1924-1995)

Preus was a Lutheran teacher and author.

Reymond, Robert L.

Reymond served as a professor of systematic theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri and at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. After resigning from Knox in 2008, he went on to preach at Holy Trinity Presbyterian Church, a new congregation in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Teaching and writing from a [Reformed](#) perspective, he published his own *Systematic Theology* in 1998.

Snaith, Norman Henry (1898-1982)

An author of biblical commentaries, Snaith was Tutor in Old Testament Languages and Literature at Wesley College, Headingley, Leeds.

Sproul, R. C. (b. 1939)

American [Reformed](#) theologian and author, Sproul is the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries. Currently, he serves as Senior Minister of Preaching and Teaching at Saint Andrew's in Sanford, Florida. He was ordained in the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, but left that denomination because of its liberalism and joined the Presbyterian Church in America.

Walvoord, John F. (1910-2002)

Walvoord was a prominent dispensationalist who taught systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, and eventually replaced the late Lewis Sperry Chafer as the seminary's president in 1952, serving in that capacity

until he retired in 1986. Walvoord also assumed Chafer's role as editor of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, from 1952 to 1985.

Wilkins, Michael J.

Author Wilkins is Distinguished Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, and Dean of the Faculty at Talbot School of Theology.

Wright, Nicholas Thomas (b. 1948)

Tom Wright is a NT scholar and the former Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. Traditional and conservative, he retired from the See of Durham in 2010 to become Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Scripture Index

Gen 2.16-17	105	Jdg 20.6.....	47
Gen 6.9.....	61, 108, 125	Rut 3.9-14.....	51
Gen 7.1.....	125	Rut 3.13.....	52
Gen 15.1-6.....	104	Rut 4.3.....	52
Gen 15.6	17, 27, 44, 61, 63, 64, 86, 93	Rut 4.10.....	52
Gen 17.1	108	Rut 4.14.....	52
Gen 18.23-32.....	125	Rut 4.16-22.....	52
Gen 21.12.....	47, 48	1Sa 1.13.....	27
Gen 31.15.....	27	1Sa 12.24.....	139
Gen 49.7	47	1Sa 24.17.....	63
Exo 12.23-27.....	49	2Sa 20.1.....	47
Exo 23.7.....	105	1Ki 10.21	27
Exo 33.18.....	139	1Ki 12.16	47
Exo 34.8.....	139	2Ch 20.7	53, 63
Lev 11.44	21	Neh 4.5.....	56
Lev 14.53	56	Neh 9.7-8	65
Lev 16.16-20.....	56	Job 1.1	108
Lev 16.33	56	Job 1.8.....	58
Lev 19.2.....	108	Job 2.3	108
Lev 22.9.....	81	Job 15.14-16.....	124
Lev 22.19-21.....	117	Job 29.14.....	126
Lev 24.15-16.....	81	Job 29.14-17.....	36
Num 1.45	47	Job 31.28.....	6
Num 3.13	47	Job 34.37.....	6, 83
Num 18.22.....	81	Psa 1.5-6	125
Num 18.26-31.....	27	Psa 5.12.....	58
Deu 18.13	108	Psa 7.8-9	125
Deu 25.1	103	Psa 9.7-8	65
Deu 25.4.....	67	Psa 14.1-3.....	124
Deu 32.4.....	65	Psa 14.2-3.....	124
Deu 32.43	56	Psa 19.9.....	139
Jos 7.....	135	Psa 22.1	84, 85
Jos 7.15	47		
Jos 24.14	139		

Psa 22.19-21	84	Pro 24.12	62
Psa 22.31	104	Ecc 7.20	124
Psa 23.3	100	Isa 3.10-11	125
Psa 24.5	100	Isa 6.3	105
Psa 31.5	139	Isa 41.8	53, 63
Psa 32.1	56	Isa 43.3	39
Psa 32.1-2	83	Isa 48.8-10	65
Psa 32.2	27	Isa 53.3-4	27
Psa 32.2-5	130	Isa 53.4	82
Psa 34.15-16	125	Isa 53.6	11, 25, 82
Psa 35.28	104	Isa 53.10	13
Psa 36.10	65	Isa 53.11	91, 92
Psa 40.11	139	Isa 53.12	11, 25, 27, 81, 82, 120
Psa 44.22	27	Isa 55.1-2	39
Psa 51.5	124	Isa 55.7	62
Psa 53.1-3	124	Isa 56.1	127
Psa 62.12	62	Isa 59.2	105
Psa 65.4-5	65	Isa 59.16-17	37, 38
Psa 71.1-2	65	Isa 59.17	56
Psa 71.19	126	Isa 61.1	37
Psa 78.5	47	Isa 61.1-2	37
Psa 78.38-39	109	Isa 61.3-11	37
Psa 85.1-13	65	Isa 61.10	36, 37, 38, 56
Psa 85.2	56	Isa 61.11	37
Psa 98.2	127	Isa 64.6	62, 66, 126
Psa 98.2-3	65	Isa 64.7	127
Psa 99.4	47	Jer 5.5-6	129
Psa 101.2	108	Jer 23.5-6	57
Psa 112	126	Eze 16.8	19
Psa 117.2	139	Eze 16.36	39
Psa 119.123	100	Eze 18.5	69
Psa 119.144	100	Eze 18.5-9	126
Psa 119.160	100	Eze 18.20	81
Psa 119.172	100	Eze 23.29	39
Psa 141.5	xi	Dan 7.9	38
Psa 143.1	65	Dan 9.7	65
Psa 143.2	125	Dan 9.14	126
Pro 2.21	108	Dan 9.18	150
Pro 3.33	125		
Pro 10.6-7	125		
Pro 11.5	126		
Pro 17.28	27		
Pro 20.7	58, 69		

Mic 6.6.....	106
Mic 6.8.....	106
Nah 3.5.....	39
Hab 1.13.....	84, 105
Zep 3.5	65
Zec 3.1-5.....	29, 55
Mat 1.19	126
Mat 5.6.....	62
Mat 5.16	62
Mat 5.17	45
Mat 5.20.....	43, 62, 108
Mat 5.45	62, 125
Mat 5.48	21, 108, 151
Mat 6.1.....	66
Mat 6.1-6.....	62, 67, 129
Mat 6.17-18	67
Mat 6.33	31, 58, 62, 69, 129
Mat 10.10.....	67
Mat 10.41.....	62
Mat 10.41-42.....	67
Mat 12.27.....	47
Mat 12.35-37.....	129
Mat 12.36-37.....	99
Mat 12.37.....	66
Mat 16.27.....	99, 129, 141
Mat 22.1-14	29, 42
Mat 24.41-43.....	125
Mat 25.14-27.....	68
Mat 27.46.....	84
Mat 28.3	38
Mar 1.15.....	132
Mar 2.17	130
Mar 6.20.....	126
Mar 9.41.....	67
Mar 10.18.....	66, 125
Mar 11.22	6, 147
Mar 14.36.....	85
Mar 15.34	84, 85

Mar 16.5.....	38
Luk 1.5-6.....	63, 126
Luk 1.6	58, 62
Luk 2.25	62, 126
Luk 4.16-21	37
Luk 6.35	129
Luk 6.45	64
Luk 11.15-19.....	47
Luk 14.13-14.....	67, 129
Luk 15	70
Luk 15.11-24.....	106
Luk 18.9-14	62, 130
Luk 18.13-14.....	104, 106
Luk 18.19.....	125
Luk 19.12-26.....	68
Luk 23.50.....	62, 69
Joh (Gospel of).....	132
Joh 1.12-13	50
Joh 2.20	45
Joh 3.3-7.....	152
Joh 3.16	180
Joh 3.17	91
Joh 4.24	139
Joh 5.22	99
Joh 6.4	48
Joh 6.51-52	49
Joh 6.53	49
Joh 6.53-57	48
Joh 6.60	49
Joh 12.44.....	132
Joh 12.48.....	99
Joh 14.23.....	50
Joh 15.8	141
Joh 20.12.....	38
Act 1.10	38
Act 3.14	126
Act 3.16	6, 147
Act 3.21	146
Act 4.12	128
Act 7.52	126
Act 10.22.....	62, 126

Act 10.36.....	89	Rom 3.28.....	62, 86, 88, 90, 91, 98, 132
Act 10.42.....	99	Rom 3.30.....	91
Act 10.43.....	132, 133	Rom 4.....	27, 128
Act 13.39.....	91, 92	Rom 4.3.....	27, 86, 93, 104, 132
Act 15.7.....	132	Rom 4.3-8.....	133
Act 15.9.....	91, 130	Rom 4.5.....	62, 64, 86, 91, 93, 104, 128, 130, 132, 133
Act 15.11.....	91	Rom 4.6.....	32, 62, 131
Act 16.31.....	132	Rom 4.6-8.....	130, 133
Act 17.31.....	99	Rom 4.8.....	27
Act 19.27.....	27	Rom 4.9.....	93, 104, 128, 132
Act 22.14.....	126	Rom 4.11.....	131
Act 26.18.....	91	Rom 4.13.....	62
Rom (book of).....	132	Rom 4.16-17.....	50
Rom 1.16.....	132, 143	Rom 4.20-22.....	132
Rom 1.16-17.....	127	Rom 4.22.....	104
Rom 1.17.....	60, 62, 75, 77, 78, 91, 98, 127, 132, 163	Rom 4.24.....	131, 132
Rom 1.18.....	140	Rom 5.....	30, 31, 46
Rom 2.5.....	127	Rom 5.1.....	62, 86, 89, 91, 93, 98, 131, 133, 182
Rom 2.5-6.....	99	Rom 5.2.....	71
Rom 2.5-16.....	130	Rom 5.8.....	25
Rom 2.6.....	67, 141	Rom 5.9.....	73, 90, 91, 98, 128, 130, 131, 133
Rom 2.13.....	62, 66	Rom 5.10.....	100, 141
Rom 2.16.....	99	Rom 5.10-11.....	89
Rom 2.26.....	27	Rom 5.11.....	53, 133
Rom 3.1-2.....	132	Rom 5.12.....	44, 45, 46, 123, 125
Rom 3.5.....	127	Rom 5.12-19.....	1, 2, 30, 44, 45, 46, 47
Rom 3.9.....	124, 132	Rom 5.12-22.....	30
Rom 3.10.....	62, 66	Rom 5.15.....	30
Rom 3.20.....	62	Rom 5.15-19.....	133
Rom 3.21-22.....	32, 35, 64, 127	Rom 5.16-18.....	103
Rom 3.21-24.....	128	Rom 5.17.....	30, 65, 128
Rom 3.21-26.....	74	Rom 5.17-19.....	133
Rom 3.21-28.....	62	Rom 5.18.....	30, 45, 127
Rom 3.22.....	28, 62, 98, 133	Rom 5.19.....	30, 44, 73, 90, 91, 98, 123, 124, 128
Rom 3.23-26.....	35	Rom 6.12-19.....	129
Rom 3.24.....	28, 47, 64, 73, 91, 128, 133	Rom 6.13.....	36
Rom 3.24-25.....	133	Rom 6.18.....	100
Rom 3.24-26.....	6, 62, 64, 65, 147	Rom 6.19.....	62, 64
Rom 3.25.....	152	Rom 6.22.....	100
Rom 3.25-26.....	35, 105, 127	Rom 6.23.....	28, 47, 64
Rom 3.26.....	130	Rom 7.18.....	126
Rom 3.27-28.....	133	Rom 8.1.....	73
		Rom 8.29-30.....	182

Rom 8.30.....	91	2Co 5.21.....	31, 32, 35, 36, 73, 79, 82, 83, 113, 129, 133
Rom 8.32.....	25	2Co 9.9-10.....	126
Rom 8.32-34.....	103	2Co 9.10.....	66
Rom 8.33.....	88, 91, 92, 130, 183	2Co 12.6.....	6
Rom 9.7.....	48		
Rom 9.8.....	27	Gal 2.10.....	42
Rom 9.30.....	62, 91	Gal 2.16.....	62, 86, 91, 98, 132, 133
Rom 10.3.....	28, 65, 127, 128	Gal 2.17.....	91, 92, 105
Rom 10.4.....	73	Gal 2.21.....	62
Rom 10.6.....	91	Gal 3.6.....	86
Rom 10.10.....	62, 65, 95	Gal 3.6-9.....	27
Rom 11.2.....	47	Gal 3.8.....	91, 105
Rom 11.15.....	53	Gal 3.11.....	132
Rom 12.5.....	28	Gal 3.12.....	98
Rom 13.13-14.....	157	Gal 3.24.....	86, 91
Rom 13.14.....	29, 55, 56	Gal 3.26.....	8, 56
Rom 14.1.....	70	Gal 4.4-7.....	50
Rom 14.10.....	62, 64, 99	Gal 5.5.....	64
Rom 14.10-12.....	130		
		Eph 1.3.....	28
1Co 1.2.....	28, 47	Eph 1.5.....	50
1Co 1.30.....	26, 57, 62, 73, 77, 129	Eph 1.7.....	133
1Co 3.12-15.....	67	Eph 1.13.....	132
1Co 4.7.....	66	Eph 1.20-23.....	46
1Co 5.6-8.....	48	Eph 2.8.....	6, 88, 91, 94, 129, 138, 147
1Co 6.11.....	73, 91	Eph 2.8-9.....	126, 132, 135
1Co 11.3-10.....	46	Eph 2.8-10.....	42, 62, 133
1Co 11.31-32.....	70	Eph 2.10.....	138
1Co 13.5.....	6	Eph 2.14-18.....	89
1Co 13.10.....	72	Eph 2.16.....	53, 141
1Co 15.1-5.....	132	Eph 4.15-16.....	46
1Co 15.2.....	132	Eph 4.24.....	56
1Co 15.3.....	13, 99, 105	Eph 5.23.....	46
1Co 15.21-22.....	123, 125	Eph 6.8.....	99
1Co 15.22.....	46		
		Phil 2.12-13.....	66, 109
2Co 1.20.....	48	Phil 2.13.....	138
2Co 5.10.....	62, 64, 99, 130, 141	Phil 3.6.....	63, 64
2Co 5.14.....	136	Phil 3.6-9.....	62
2Co 5.18-19.....	83, 89	Phil 3.8-11.....	28
2Co 5.18-21.....	53, 82, 100	Phil 3.9.....	28, 62, 63, 64, 65, 73, 75, 91, 128, 133
2Co 5.19.....	6, 83, 112, 133, 180	Phil 4.13.....	109
2Co 5.19-21.....	12		

Col 1.18.....	46
Col 1.19-22.....	89
Col 1.19-23.....	100
Col 1.20.....	89
Col 1.20-22.....	53, 141
Col 2.10.....	46
Col 2.19.....	46
Col 3.10.....	56
Col 3.23-24.....	67
1Th 2.13.....	132
1Th 5.9-10.....	25
1Ti 1.2-3.....	68
1Ti 3.15.....	140
1Ti 5.18.....	67
1Ti 6.11.....	58, 62, 64, 68, 129
1Ti 6.17-19.....	68
2Ti 2.22.....	58, 62, 129
2Ti 3.16.....	129
2Ti 4.8.....	62, 67, 99, 126, 129
2Ti 4.16.....	6, 83
Tit 2.13-14.....	25
Tit 3.5.....	62, 126, 133
Tit 3.5-7.....	131, 133
Tit 3.7.....	62, 64, 91, 133
Phm 1.18.....	82
Heb 2.17.....	152
Heb 4.7.....	47
Heb 9.14.....	116, 117, 119
Heb 9.24-28.....	131, 133
Heb 9.28.....	25
Heb 10.14.....	141
Heb 10.16-17.....	23
Heb 10.19.....	141
Heb 10.24.....	142
Heb 11.4.....	62, 126
Heb 11.6.....	67, 106
Heb 11.18.....	48
Heb 11.33.....	62

Heb 11.33-36.....	42
Heb 12.5-11.....	70
Heb 12.14.....	21
Heb 12.23.....	66
Jam 1.19-20.....	129
Jam 1.20.....	36
Jam 2.10.....	105, 117, 118
Jam 2.14-26.....	62
Jam 2.17.....	133
Jam 2.21.....	91
Jam 2.22.....	63, 64, 133
Jam 2.23.....	53, 63, 64
Jam 2.24.....	63, 132
Jam 2.24-25.....	91
Jam 5.9.....	99
Jam 5.16.....	58, 62, 68, 126
1Pe 1.17.....	62, 64
1Pe 1.17-19.....	105
1Pe 1.19.....	116, 117, 118
1Pe 1.20-21.....	132
1Pe 2.2.....	144
1Pe 2.24.....	25, 81, 131, 133
1Pe 3.18.....	75, 119, 131, 133, 136
1Pe 4.17.....	70, 109
2Pe 1.1.....	7, 65, 88
2Pe 1.4.....	50
2Pe 2.1.....	6, 147
2Pe 2.7-8.....	62, 125
1Jo 2.2.....	13, 136, 152
1Jo 2.29.....	62, 100
1Jo 3.7.....	62, 64, 69, 126
1Jo 3.12.....	126
1Jo 3.16.....	25
1Jo 4.10.....	152
1Jo 5.4.....	137
1Jo 5.11-12.....	72
1Jo 5.12.....	54
2Jo 1.8.....	68

Rev 3.2	38	Rev 19.7-8	42, 68
Rev 3.4-5	38, 39	Rev 19.7-16	38
Rev 3.19	39, 70	Rev 19.8	i, 62, 126, 138
Rev 3.20	39	Rev 19.11	38
Rev 4	40	Rev 19.14	41, 42
Rev 4.4	40	Rev 20.12	64
Rev 5.9-10	54	Rev 20.12-13	99, 141
Rev 6	40	Rev 22.11	62, 126
Rev 6.9-11	40	Rev 22.12	67, 141
Rev 7	41		
Rev 7.9-17	40	Sir 24.8	47
Rev 8.3-4	40		
Rev 15.4	127		
Rev 16.7	139		

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Appendix 1: Interview of Rick Warren By John Piper

The following is an excerpt transcribed from an interview dated May 1, 2011, and found at:

<http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/john-piper-interviews-rick-warren-on-doctrine?md5=3f9104cfb65f418ace3d0edcea0b44fc>

I include this excerpt as a further example of how current proponents of Alien Righteousness are insisting that the imputation of Christ's righteousness is "at the core of the gospel," claiming that imputation is supported by 2Co 5.19, and grieving that challengers are departing from "historic Protestant and biblical teaching."

Rick Warren: I believe in the five Solas, 100% believe in the five Solas, and I am to those of you who know what this ... I'm a modernist. I don't call myself a Calvinist, I don't call myself ... but I am a modernist, in that I believe it is not of my works, it's one-sided.

John Piper: Right, do you dislike the name Calvinism because of key doctrines that are wrong or because of the connotations it would carry?

RW: Only the connotations. I say this in true love, but I wish that those who believe in the doctrines of grace would be more gracious. That's all I'd say.

JP: So you don't have a problem saying "I embrace the doctrines of grace, but I'd rather not be connected with some people who ..."

RW: Again, I don't call myself ... you know my background is Baptist, and I'm proud of that, but I don't go around calling myself a Baptist all the time either. I'm a John 3.16 Christian, I'm an Evangelical, uh, you know, I believe the doctrines of grace.

JP: And justification, we've touched on, imputation matters to you, it's right at the core of the gospel.

RW: Absolutely, it is the core of the gospel.

JP: So you don't, you ...

RW: "Him who knew no sin became sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God."

JP: 2Co 5.19 is right at the core, and I just want to underline it because *today*, uh, I think even in Evangelicalism, um ...

RW: They're wishy-washy on that.

JP: Well it's not only wishy-washy, it's [they're saying] it's not in the Bible, that imputation is not there. I could name names of people you know and I know that are breaking my heart, that they have departed from what we always thought was historic Protestant and biblical teaching, to say, "What you need is forgiveness of sins, and for the imputation of your sins to go onto Jesus; you don't need the imputation of His righteousness to go onto you."

RW: Yes, yeah, and I will say this, there obviously, there have been historically many different theories of the atonement and I think each of them has a part, but I think fundamentally it is the substitutionary understanding, that God, Jesus took our payment and you can't understand ... yes, He did defeat the works of the devil, yes, He is an example of love and sacri[fice], and I believe all of these are pictures, but the fundamental one that was my problem ... I just tweeted it this morning, I just literally tweeted it this morning, that said, "The reason Jesus came to earth is because the Law could not do what we needed it to do." And only Jesus could do it.

JP: So substitution is right at the heart, and ... say a word about propitiation, and uh, meaning, was God angry at all human beings because of their sin, and, and wrath rested upon us and He love us enough so that He would insert, intrude His Son between His own wrath and us so that He became a curse for us, and, and the wrath is diverted onto the Son from us. Is what I've just described ...

RW: You just said it perfectly. ... You cannot understand, "... My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," without propitiation. The Bible says, uh, at that point, God looks down on His own Son, and He says, "Son, you know I have said in Numbers, 'I will by no means clear the guilty, not even You. Not even You.'" And so He took that wrath on Himself, and at that moment He said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and if you understand it you don't understand how much God loves you."

Appendix 2: The Six Causes Of Justification

CAUSE	DESCRIPTION	IN JUSTIFICATION
EFFICIENT	That <i>by which</i> we are justified.	God (Rom 8.33).
INSTRUMENTAL	That <i>through which</i> we are justified.	Jesus, grace, faith, etc. (see Figure 6).
FINAL	That <i>for which</i> we are justified.	That the Son might have suitable siblings (Rom 8.29-30).
FORMAL	The essence <i>of which</i> justification partakes.	Personal relationship.
MATERIAL	That <i>out of which</i> justification consists.	Peace with God (Rom 5.1).
EXEMPLAR	That <i>after the pattern of which</i> justification is effected.	Ancient redemption law.

Evangelicals generally agree that God is the efficient cause, and *faith* is the (or an) instrumental cause of justification³¹⁰ (though Reformed theologians have also taught that faith is the formal cause of it³¹¹). The material cause of justification is the sticking point in earlier and contemporary debates. What we understand the material cause of justification to be will depend upon our definition of justification, and vice versa. What we understand to be the final, formal and exemplar causes of justification will also depend upon what we believe the material cause to be.

³¹⁰ Anthony N. S. Lane reports that the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1546-1547), speaking of Aristotelian-like causes for justification, conflated faith and baptism and said in effect that the instrumental cause of justification is “the sacrament of baptism, which is the sacrament of faith....” See Anthony N. S. Lane, “A Tale Of Two Imperial Cities: Justification At Regensburg (1541) And Trent (1546-1547),” in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 136.

³¹¹ See A. T. B. McGowan, “Justification And The *Ordo Salutis*,” in *Justification In Perspective: Historical Developments And Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 154.

I offer this diagram only as a bare outline of how I understand these interrelated causes in justification. Were I presenting these ideas in narrative form, other aspects of the formal and final causes could be emphasized, and I would take the time to defend my belief that OT redemption law, rather than the courtroom, is the exemplar for justification. For now, I provide this diagram only as a starting point for the reader who wishes to explore his or her own understanding of how what the Bible teaches about justification might fit into these Aristotelian-style categories.

About The Author



Roderick Graciano is an ordained pastor and the founding director of Timothy Ministries in Tacoma, WA. Married since 1974, Roderick and his wife Kaaren Joy have three daughters, two sons-in-law, and seven grandchildren.

Roderick says that he “feels God’s pleasure” when he teaches. He believes that biblical teaching is much more than a transfer of information, and that it should facilitate a life-giving learning experience.

He endeavors to connect the biblical principles in his lessons to the real challenges faced by a contemporary audience, and happily shares the personal insights learned through the failures and successes of his own life. Roderick makes all of his teaching services available free of charge. His daily theological and philosophical thoughts can be seen on Twitter.com by following **Theophilo7**.

Besides research, writing and teaching, Roderick is dedicated to city transformation and to the eradication of human trafficking and slavery.

Roderick’s sports of choice are tennis, archery and both urban and alpine hiking.