

Chapter 44

JUSTIFICATION

THE MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

The Definition

Justification is an act of God by which He judicially constitutes and declares a sinner to be perfectly righteous and forever treats him as such. A. H. Strong well defines it: “By justification we mean that judicial act of God by which, on account of Christ, to whom the sinner is united by faith, he declares that sinner to be no longer exposed to the penalty of the law, but to be restored to his favor.”¹

Old Testament Terms

Tsadeq

Tsadeq is a denominative verb whose root carries the fundamental idea of *conforming to an ethical standard or norm*.² This is exemplified, for instance, in one of the civil rubrics of the Law of Moses: “If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked” (Deut 25:1).

Tsedeq

This means *justice, righteousness, rightness, conformity to a proper norm or standard*. David prays, “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness” (Ps 4:1).

Tsadiq

This means *just, lawful or righteous*: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time” (Gen 6:9).

¹ *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), p. 849.

² This word and its grammatical relatives *tsedeq* and *tsadiq* are analyzed in *TWOT*, s.v. “*tsadeq*,” by Harold G. Stigers, 2:752–55.

New Testament Terms

The New Testament terms carry the same theological meaning and weight as the Old Testament terms.

Dikaioo

This word means *to declare righteous, to justify*. The believer is “justified by faith” (Rom 5:1).

Dikaiois

This means *righteous, being right, in conformity to a proper norm*. “The righteous man shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17).

Dikaioisune

This means *the state of one justified; righteousness, acquittal*: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3).

Other words are *dikaiosis* which stresses the process or the act of declaring a man righteous: “[Christ] was raised because of our justification” (Rom 4:25; cf. 5:18), and *dikaioima* which stresses the declaration of righteousness as something already accomplished: “The free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification” (Rom 5:16). All of these Hebrew and Greek words come down to basic theological synonymy.

The Definition Amplified

Justification Does Not Mean to Make Righteous

The biblical doctrine of justification fundamentally means to declare righteous on the basis of being judicially constituted as righteous by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ the Son, which He earned by perfect obedience to the divine, eternal moral law of the Father. Justification is objective, forensic, legal or positional, not subjective or experiential; it does *not* mean to make righteous. Elihu understood this judicial or declarative meaning of justification. He was angry at Job “because he justified himself before God” (Job 32:2). In this complaint, Job was not being accused of making himself subjectively righteous, but rather saying or declaring that he was righteous before God when in fact, in Elihu’s opinion, he was not.

Proverbs says, “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them are an abomination to the Lord” (Prov 17:15). Here the abomination consists in declaring a wicked man to be righteous when he is not. Who would condemn one who could “make righteous” a wicked person?

When the people and tax collectors heard Jesus' explanation of John the Baptist's ministry, "They *acknowledged God's justice*, having been baptized by John" (Luke 7:29). These people did not make God righteous but "justified" (κἰν) Him, declared Him to be right, or acquitted Him of any wrongdoing in their minds.

Roman Catholicism teaches that justification is an *infusion of grace*, a subjective experience equated with sanctification.³ Roman Catholicism breeds extreme pessimism about one's eternal destiny because of its failure to comprehend positional truth on this and other doctrines (n.b. the description of the dying of some of the popes, as recounted by Loraine Boettner⁴).

Justification Is Judicial Not Experiential

Justification is declarative, as distinguished from efficient. It is external to the sinner as over against a work on his internal nature. Justification is the opposite of condemnation. This is clearly seen in the antithetical parallelism of the apostle Paul: "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" (Rom 5:18; 8:33, 34). Condemnation is a judicial declaration of guilt, a pronouncement of the liability to the deserved punishment for the breach of morality. Justification is a declaration of perfect righteousness. Justification stresses *relation* more than condition (i.e., the objective status of one relative to God's moral law rather than one's own personal, subjective moral condition).

The judges in ancient Israel who justified the righteous (Deut 25:1) simply pronounced verdicts based on the defendant's relationship to the Law of Moses. It was not a mere declaration of innocence, a negative concept, an assessment that the defendant owed nothing to the requirements of the Law, but the finding of a positive right moral standing vis-à-vis the legal requirements. On the same basis the wicked was declared guilty or liable; he was condemned to the fate prescribed by the Law on the matter. In either case the constitutional standing of the individual was the basis, not his own personal morality.

In like manner, Solomon's prayer at the temple dedication observed the same legal or forensic principles with regard to one's relationship to the divine

³ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch, ed. James Canon Bastible (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1954), p. 250. Ott speaks of the "attributes of the state of grace" which run from "uncertainty" (no one can know in this life if he is justified), to "inequality" (there are degrees of justification among the just), to the "possibility of loss" (justifying/sanctifying grace can be lost by a grievous sin) (pp. 262–63). See also the explanation of the Catholic view of justification by Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1987), pp. 126–29.

⁴ *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964), pp. 268–69.

moral law as expressed in the Mosaic prescriptions. “If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath . . . then hear in heaven and act and judge Your servants, *condemning the wicked* by bringing his way on his own head and *justifying the righteousness* according to his righteousness” (1 Kgs 8:31–32). The pronouncement in either case was based on the objective standing of the person to the law. He was not subjectively infused with moral pollution in the one case, nor infused with grace/righteousness in the other.

At the incident of the unpardonable sin, Christ proclaims the eternal consequences of “careless” words because one will give an account of his words in the day of judgment (Matt 12:36). These words will be judged by the standard of eternal righteousness, and conformity or lack of conformity to it will determine if one will be justified—pronounced righteous—or condemned—declared guilty (Matt 12:37). Subjective elements are not the criteria.

The legal aspect of justification can also be seen in usages where it appears in contexts of forensic judgment.⁵ Understanding this, David prays, “And do not enter into judgment with your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous” (Ps 143:2). “Is righteous” is *tsadig*, to be justified. The Psalmist knew that on his own he did not have the requisite moral standing before his God to be declared righteous.

Likewise, the apostle Paul understood and taught the forensic or declarative nature of justification in contexts of divine judgment. “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:19–20). “Accountable” (*hupodikos*) means *answerable, liable to judgment, or liable to punishment*.⁶ Objective liability, not personal moral pollution, is the issue.

Paul taught the perfect, eternal safety in the face of any liability of the one whom God justified. “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies” (Rom 8:33). The question is rhetorical, demanding the obvious negative answer: “No one.” And, the basis is God’s declaration of righteousness that will instantly refute any charge of continuing liability to punishment for the believer’s sin. This is because, as will be seen, God has legally credited each believer with the perfect righteousness of Christ. This judicial credit of righteousness is the merit that the Savior earned and the payment that He made in His atonement by means of His active and passive obedience to God’s eternal moral law.

⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 744.

⁶ BDAG, s.v. “*hupodikos*,” p. 1037.

A further evidence of the forensic or legal nature of justification is the *vindication* or *acquittal* that non-salvific justification entails in ordinary human relationships. For example, Jesus notes that “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matt 11:19). In reply to the crafty lawyer who wanted to subject Jesus to the test of the former’s own apostate standard, the Lord gives the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 11:25ff.). Seeing himself as one of the derelicts who refused to give the despised Samaritan any help, the lawyer begs off by declaring himself vindicated of any obligation to the miserable victim. Luke’s record states, “But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (Luke 11:29).

The same principle is seen in Luke 16:15: “And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of man, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.’” The issue here is the objective standard or norm to which conformity or rightness is declared. Man’s norm brings a manmade pronouncement of high estimation; God’s standard declares such to be detestable. In neither case is someone *made*, or personally infused, with anything. Objective standing, not personal state, is the determining factor.

THE BASIS OF JUSTIFICATION

The Great Moral Problem

Job poses the ancient moral dilemma when he asks, “How can a man be in the right before God?” (Job 9:2). Bildad likewise asks, “How then can a man be just with God” (Job 25:4)? The real question is, how can a *sinful* man be right with a *righteous and holy* God (cf. Pss 130:3; 143:2)? There are several moral and ethical factors surrounding this great problem:

- (1) The sinfulness of man as described in great detail in Romans 3:21–23. How can one who has offended the moral standard of the infinitely righteous God in about every conceivable way ever be declared righteous? It is no problem for God to justify an upright person, but how can He justify an ungodly person (Rom 4:5)?
- (2) The irrevocable moral law of God’s holiness. God’s standard of morality is eternally objective, fixed and unmovable. It admits of no degrees and one either does or does not perfectly conform to it. And, there are eternal consequences in either case. Conformity to the divine norm yields God’s approbation of rightness or rectitude (i.e., justification). Non-conformity brings the sentence of legal liability (i.e., condemnation; Rom 2:12–13; cf. Exod 23:7).

- (3) The holy and righteous character of God. God's inflexible moral nature insures that His justice is irrevocable. God is intrinsically righteous because His actions conform to Himself, and anyone else who would be pronounced righteous must be in absolute and perfect conformity to the same divine norm. Habakkuk found himself in the moral dilemma of how God could use pagans to judge and chastise the covenant community. To the prophet, God's immutable righteousness and holiness precluded such a scenario: "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor" (Hab 1:13).

There must, therefore, be a way for God to be just and the justifier of the ungodly. The ungodly must be given a right standing before God. He must be credited with a righteousness alien to himself. This is to say that any mitigation of sin or any favorable disposition to sinners must have an eternally perfect ethical basis or the whole plan of salvation will suffer eternal moral collapse. The biblical idea of justification makes the believing sinner eternally saved and safe.

Negatively

Man's Character

The basis of justification is not the character of a person. For that to be the case his character would have to be perfect, in absolute conformity to God's moral law in every respect, all of the time and with perfect motives. That of course is impossible for sinners. No one possesses a righteous moral character on which basis God can declare him righteous. David acknowledges, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Ps 130:3). Again, David prays, "And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous" (Ps 143:2). Solomon similarly says, "Indeed, there is not a righteous man who continually does good and who never sins" (Eccl 7:20).

Man's Works

Good deeds, morally acceptable behavior, moral self-discipline, and the like can never provide a platform for God's judicial acceptance and commendation. For one, God explicitly states that this is the case: "But to him who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom 4:5). Furthermore, in light of the preceding point, given human depravity and inability, no one is capable of performing the kind of meritorious works necessary to be declared righteous (Isa 64:6; Hag 2:14).

If nothing else, impure, not-for-the-glory-of-God motives sully every word, thought, intention and deed of sinners.

Man's Faith

A quasi-Arminian explanation of justification has arisen in evangelicalism that does not hold to the imputation of Christ's merit or righteousness. Robert Gundry, for one, has expressed the view that God credits or counts the believer's faith as righteousness and forgives him on that basis.⁷ Gundry's load-bearing data is Genesis 15:6 ("[Abram] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness") and its citation in Galatians 3:6 and Romans 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 22–24. His proposal has been analyzed ably by others and does not warrant an extended treatment in this space beyond that of presenting the positive basis of justification in short order.⁸

This recent position does not identify saving faith as a meritorious work of any sort; faith is simply counted as righteousness by God. By means of somewhat pedantic exegesis that does not appreciate the contributions of the analogy of faith, especially those contributions of systematic theology, the distinction is drawn between God's righteousness and Christ's righteousness in various New Testament contexts. Gundry's idea is that *God* is righteous when He, not Christ, counts the believer's faith as righteousness, even though He does not account the righteousness of Christ to the believer. The righteousness of *Christ* is His obedient act of propitiating God by His death. On that basis God can righteously pronounce the sinner's non-meritorious faith as righteousness.⁹

The above essentially is the basis for a denial of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believing sinner. This in turn undercuts a truly ethical basis for the forgiveness and restoration to divine favor that are necessary to stand before God presently and in the final judgment.

⁷ "Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration' . . . even though I wasn't asked to," *Books and Culture Magazine* 7 (Jan–Feb 2001); see also his "The Non-Imputation of Christ's Righteousness," in *Justification: What's At Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 17–45.

⁸ See, e.g., D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 46–78; also John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002). The doctrine itself is set forth exegetically and theologically in near classic form by John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, 2 vols. (Eerdmans, 1965), 1:336–62 (Appendix A).

⁹ "The Non-Imputation of Christ's Righteousness," pp. 39, 41, 44.

Man's Observance of the Law and Religious Rites

Paul's message to Israel, who had known the Law for fifteen centuries, is, "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom 3:20). To the Galatians who had great difficulty in making the transition from Law to Grace, Paul is bluntly clear: "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'The righteous man shall live by faith.' However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'He who practices them shall live by them'" (Gal 3:11–12).

There is no merit in observing the Levitical ritual. The Levitical forms, such as circumcision, the offerings and feasts, and the like, were an integral part of the Law of Moses. But justification was not based on circumcision, for instance, as Abraham's experience attested. He was justified by God before the Law was ever given (Rom 4:9–11). The same applies to any legalistic observance of laws of conduct or any practice of religious rites or ordinances. These have always been and continue to be totally lifeless in and of themselves. No material object or external practice has ever in itself conveyed spiritual good to anyone.

Positively

The Merit and Payment of Christ

The basis of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to the sinner's account. This ethical transaction is wholly unilateral, gratuitous and sovereign on the part of God. God judicially *constitutes* the sinner righteous by the imputation to the sinner of Christ's righteousness so that He can then *declare* him righteous and forever treat him as such on that basis. The biblical affirmation of this is copious and explicit texts are legion.

The righteousness involved in the judicial imputation to the believer is not an impartation or some kind of sharing in Christ's divine attribute of righteousness as the God-man. No attribute of God can be shared because it cannot be diminished, increased or transferred in any fashion without stripping Him of deity. The righteousness of Christ in justification is an ethical righteousness that came about through Christ's satisfaction of the divine moral law by His obedience to the Father. It is a divinely meritorious righteousness, which He earned by fulfilling perfectly all the positive requirements of God (i.e., active obedience) and by paying all the penal sanctions that accrued because of offended holiness (i.e., passive obedience). This obedience is generically or collectively termed the "one act of righteousness" that results in the justification of believers (Rom 5:18). It is the "objective God-righteousness of Jesus Christ" that is credited to the believer in a judicially constitutive act of God at the time

of saving faith.¹⁰ It occurs at initial faith because a person can be justified *only* through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 4:9–13).

Paul speaks of that very constitutive act when he says that many are “made righteous” by the obedience of Christ: “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. 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*” (Rom 5:18–19). “Made” is not a personal, subjective sinful pollution in the first case, nor is it a personal, subjective infusion of grace in the other. The verb in both is *kathistemi*, here meaning *to appoint, reckon, stand*.¹¹ It denotes positional truth, a divine reckoning of the guilt of the first sin of Adam, in the case of the condemned, and a divine reckoning or crediting of the meritorious obedience of Christ, in the case of the justified.

1 Corinthians 1:30

It is in the above manner that 1 Corinthians 1:30 is to be understood. Paul says that Christ Jesus “became” (*ginomai*) to believers “wisdom from God, and *righteousness* and sanctification, and redemption.” This is speaking of the imputed righteousness of Christ by which the believer is given a perfect ethical standing before God. It is the warp and woof of the active and passive obedience of Christ that cloaks the believer in a righteousness not his own in an eternal moral acceptance before the infinitely holy and just God. Only stuffy, myopic exegesis driven by an agenda alien to the biblical idea of justification could deny the imputation of the righteousness of *Christ* in this text simply because the apostle said it is “from *God*.”

Further, it is not required that all the benefits of Christ from God be applied in exactly the same manner. If sanctification, for example, is subjective, it is a non-sequitur to require the righteousness from God to be subjective, as though it is an infusion of grace or goodness into the human soul. It particularly does not suggest the non-imputation of the righteousness of Christ from God to the believer. The same could be said about the wisdom and redemption mentioned. The distinctions of what each means and how each is applied to the believer are generously explained in other parts of Scripture.

2 Corinthians 5:21

2 Corinthians 5:21 is quite clear on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” “Made” (*poieo*) has

¹⁰ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, p. 746.

¹¹ NIDNTT, s.v. “*kathistemi*,” by S. Wibbing, 1:471–72.

a judicially constitutive force; Christ was never polluted by sin in any fashion, but He was imputed with the sins of His people. Likewise “become” (*ginomai*) is constitutive in meaning and cannot be a subjective impartation of goodness because it is parallel to the previous clause. The idea of the one is correlative to the other; both are linked together by the preposition of purpose *hina*. For Christ to be made sin judicially is for the believer to become judicially the righteousness of God in Him. Just as the sinless Christ was imputed with alien guilt, the believing sinner is imputed with alien righteousness. The former is the basis of Christ’s being declared as a condemned sin-bearer in order that the believer can be declared righteous in Christ. Both declarations are according to the eternal standards of holy justice because both are the judicial work of the infinitely righteous God.

Philippians 3:8–9

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.

Here Paul’s hope was that he would be found clothed with a righteousness not his own; it was alien to him but was sourced in God and connected to him by his faith in Jesus Christ. Humanly and legalistically, he could boast of a rather impressive list of good works and an imposing accumulation of meritorious deeds (vv. 4–6). But these were rubbish and actually soul-damning by divine standards, and his eye of faith in Jesus Christ and His imputed righteousness saw through all of it. The strong adversative “but” (*alla*) indicates an abandonment of all self-produced righteousness to an appropriation from God of the imputed perfections of Christ’s obedience by the instrumentality of saving faith.

The righteousness from God cannot be construed to actually *consist* of the apostle’s faith in Christ, which God simply reckons as righteousness as if by divine fiat. This is perilously close to the legal fiction by which forensic justification

through Christ's righteousness is denied.¹² This approach undermines a truly ethical basis for Christ's atonement and the believer's eternal safety. There is no genuine satisfaction of divine *justice* in such reckoning.

Romans 10:4

Again, the need for alien righteousness and its availability only by faith in Christ is made clear: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Whether "end" (*telos*) means terminus or goal has been debated for a long while, but the context is clear that Israel attempted to gain merit-righteousness by law-keeping and failed to obtain it because they stumbled over Jesus of Nazareth (Rom 9:31–33). Conversely, the Gentiles, considered to be hopelessly apostate, found a righteousness acceptable to God because of faith in Him (Rom 9:30). The Gentiles were connected to a Christ-righteousness through faith while the Jews pursued law-righteousness and did not find it. Thus, unbelieving Israel was bereft of a basis for the divine approbation necessary for eternal life, leading to Paul's plaintive desire for their salvation (Rom 10:1).

In this context faith in God and law-keeping are set in contrast as the instrumentality for a divine declaration of moral perfection (i.e., justification). This is not to suggest that there was no justifying faith before the coming of the Christ, even during the dispensation of Law. Israel knew that her righteousness ultimately came from God (Isa 45:25; 54:17). Nor does it imply that believers before the advent of Jesus Christ consciously believed on *Him* as the conscious object of their faith. Old Testament saints believed in *God* as the conscious object of their faith, but the content of their faith depended on the revelation God had given on how to approach Him. This unfolding redemptive light was cumulative and it terminated in, or on, Jesus Christ. And, over Him the Jews apostatized through law-keeping and the Gentiles found justification through Christ-righteousness credited to them by faith. The Gentiles understood Christ to be their perfection in that He is the end of the Law for righteousness to believers.

¹² *Legal fiction* is a negative term used against the forensic or positional nature of justification wherein God objectively declares a believing sinner as perfectly and eternally righteous when subjectively he has a sin nature and still sins. This objection is based on the assumption (of Roman Catholicism) that God must infuse righteousness or grace into the soul for one justly to be pronounced righteous. The converse assumption is that certain sins can diminish and even *destroy* the soul's grace and thus require a re-justification process. It is also assumed that righteousness once obtained can be *increased* by the various means of grace and works of merit.

Romans 10:10

In the same context of the preceding, Paul sums up the matter by plainly identifying faith as the connecting instrument to the righteousness of Christ—a morally perfect standing before God by the imputation of the obedience of Christ to the sinner’s account. “For with the heart a person believes, *resulting in righteousness*, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” “Resulting” is the preposition *eis*. The preposition here is not in apposition to the verb, i.e., a believing which *is or consists of* righteousness, anymore than confession consists of salvation in the next clause. The preposition has a wide semantic range depending on context and theology, but it can be used “with the result of an action indicated *into, to, so that*”¹³ The idea is believing so as to receive righteousness. From other clear considerations, this is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to the believing sinner.

Faith Credited as Righteousness

There still remains the problem of interpreting the clauses where Abram’s faith was “reckoned to him as righteousness” by God (Gen 15:6) and “faith is credited as righteousness” for all believers (Rom 4:5; Jas 2:23). Apart from any other considerations (i.e., the analogy of faith or Scripture interpreting Scripture), a surface reading of these could indicate faith as a meritorious work which God considers or counts as justifying righteousness or possibly as a non-meritorious work that God simply reckons to the believer as righteousness. Since the Bible is clear that these proposals cannot be true, the interpreter is required to exercise some hermeneutically-routine correlation of biblical truth. If there is but one unified, non-contradictory network of biblical truth, indeed of all truth, due to the eternal self-consistency of the self-contained tri-unity of the God of all truth, it follows that there must be an honest attempt to resolve difficulties within the Scripture. One simply does not have the luxury of rejoicing in biblical antinomies and ultimate unintelligibility, due to the majesty and other-worldliness of the Bible and the finiteness of human understanding. Scripture was given in human languages to be understood by human beings and carries an essential and indigenous perspicuity. There is a unitary authorship between God and the human authors that has resulted in a Bible that conveys infinite divine truth through purely human beings and their languages with their linguistic categories. Both the writers and their first readers/hearers understood the essence of God’s message and were not caught up in an impenetrable fog of linguistic opaqueness.

¹³ BDAG, s.v. “*eis*,” p. 290.

When all is said and done, faith credited as righteousness means *faith in God who credits the believer with the righteousness of Christ*.¹⁴ That much has been shown from the few verses explained above. There is no theological difference to be drawn between the righteousness of *Christ*, the righteousness of *God*, and the righteousness of *faith* in the matter of justification. God-righteousness, faith-righteousness and Christ-righteousness are correlative; in fact they are synonymous. It is a righteousness that has divine property.¹⁵ It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, which He earned by obedience, that comes from God by imputation to the sinner, and is appropriated by faith. John Piper sums up by saying: “Would not the wording of [Rom 10:4] tell us that in Paul’s mind ‘faith credited for righteousness’ is shorthand for faith being the way an external righteousness is received as credited to us by God—namely, not by *working* but by *trusting* him who justifies the ungodly?”¹⁶

EXCURSUS: THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

During the last years of the 20th century, principally among professing evangelical theologians, the traditional, Reformation doctrine of forensic justification came under heavy criticism. It would be well beyond the purposes of the present section to state and critique this new development in any significant depth, for several reasons.

One, there are excellent books and articles devoted to an exegetical/theological analysis and refutation of the new thought on justification. The reader will be directed to some of these shortly. Two, while the field on this subject has certain points of agreement, there is still a sizable variation of proposals that would require more analysis than is needed here. Three, since the new perspective is of rather recent *evangelical* vintage, its shelf-life is of unknown duration at this point. It may come and go in a relatively short period and thus soon become a historical footnote. Other creative proposals and controversial ideas in the last thirty or forty years have met a similar fate in the leftward trajectory of certain elements within evangelicalism. Or the controversy and division it is already generating may well lead to even more ecclesiastical separations into new denominations and fellowships than it already has. Those who are committed to the historic, biblical, Reformed faith on justification cannot pull together with those who deny these truths. Four, any analysis made here would be sourced in and prejudiced by the biblical, Reformation doctrine already presented above.

¹⁴ See Carson, “The Vindication of Justification,” pp. 55–68.

¹⁵ Murray, *Romans*, 1:356.

¹⁶ *Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 57.

The basic substance of the new perspective has several names or titles, depending on the theological motif of what is being propounded or the nomenclature of the individual analysis. It has been called Neo-legalism, the New Perspective on Paul, Federal Vision, Neo-nomism, Covenant Nomism, Hyper-Covenantalism, the Auburn Avenue Theology, and Covenant Formalism, among others. A short list of analytical sources is here given. Therein are referenced the primary sources and some of the current journal articles and other relevant literature that is available on the subject.¹⁷

General Tenets

Six summary tenets of the New Perspective, under its various local expressions, are extracted by Jeffrey Smith in a well-written analysis.¹⁸

Second Temple Judaism

It is held that the Judaism of the 1st century A.D. was not a legal works-righteousness system but was in the main a religion of grace. In other words, Jesus and Paul were not contending with an apostate theology that believed in salvation by works.

¹⁷ *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), esp. the article referenced above by D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation"; Mark Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: the 'Lutheran' Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), and idem, *The Future of Justification* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Carl F. H. Henry, "Justification: A Doctrine in Crisis," *JETS* 38 (Mar 1995): 57–65; Jeffrey Smith, "An Overview and Critique of the New Perspective on Paul's Doctrine of Justification: Part 1," *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 3 (Jan 2006): 77–108; idem, "An Overview and Critique of the New Perspective on Paul's Doctrine of Justification: Part 2—The New Perspective Critiqued (1)," *Reformed Theological Review* 3 (July 2006): 118–33; Robert L. Reymond, "The Sanders/Dunn 'Fork in the Road' in the Current Controversy over the Pauline Doctrine of Justification by Faith," n.p. [cited 2 August 2006]. Online: http://www.knoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/KnoxPulpit/rreymond_sanders-dunn-htm; David Engelsma, "Federal Vision," n.p. [cited 6 January 2006]. Online: <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=221>; Andrew J. Webb, "Justification Vindicated," n.p. [cited 2 August 2006]. Online: http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?1098; Sinclair Ferguson, review of John H. Skilton, ed., *The New Testament Student and Theology, The Banner of Truth* 166–67 (July–Aug 1977): 59–63.

¹⁸ "An Overview and Critique," pp. 92–94.

Jewish Prejudice

Accordingly, in light of the first point, the Pauline doctrine of justification was designed to address the inclusion of Gentiles into the covenant community without prejudice. It was not about the basis of a sinner's acceptance before God but about the fact that faith in Christ leveled the ecclesiastical and ethical playing field (i.e., the Jews had no special status and claim to God's grace in Christ).

The “Works of the Law”

By this phrase is understood Paul's reference to certain Jewish customs and practices that were thought to give standing in the new covenant community, some of which were Sabbath-keeping, circumcision and food laws. These laws were established, so it is reasoned, as boundary markers of justification (i.e., those who practiced these things showed they were among the justified). Of course, this limited justification to Jews and thereby excluded Gentiles. But the issue here is covenant membership and not an ethical standing before God. In effect, Gentiles were being told (erroneously) to become Jews in order to be justified (i.e., ecclesiology, not soteriology, was at stake).

The “Righteousness” Involved

The righteousness of the new approach was to be a loyal member of the new community. God's righteousness is His faithfulness to the covenant, and for one to be divinely declared righteous meant that he as well exhibited fidelity to the covenant and, therefore, had good standing among the people of God.

Faith

Faith is not simply a personal trust in the God of the covenant for forgiveness of sin but is faithfulness to covenant requirements. Faith in that sense was the certificate of membership in the people of God, that which identified one as belonging to the covenant community.

Imputation

The new approach to Paul plainly denies any thought of a forensic imputation of an earned righteousness of Jesus Christ to the repentant/believing sinner in any Reformation understanding.

Problems

As patently observable, many deep-seated and serious problems arise out of these new proposals. One, faith itself has been subjectively redefined (i.e., as faithfulness), so as to blur the clear distinction between it and works.

A dichotomous tension has been created between faith and faithfulness in the biblical idea of justification by faith. Two, the lack of a forensic footing for justification undercuts a truly ethical basis of atonement and inserts a controlling subjective element (i.e., covenant faithfulness). Three, bereft of a genuine moral foundation of atonement, the eternal security of the believer is called into question. Four, the positional nature of justification has been transmuted into a relational one. Justification no longer concerns how to “get in” the people of God but rather how one is to “stay in” or maintain his relationship or community standing to God. Justification becomes the ongoing staying power of the Christian experience through the believer’s faithful obedience to the covenant. Five, in this scenario, “getting in” the covenant community is sacramentally structured by water baptism, which unites a person to Christ covenantally. Six, a “Christian” is defined and identified objectively and corporately, instead of subjectively and individually. Seven, consistency would seem to dictate, and does so for some, that a non-elect person may be united to Christ in baptism and later apostatize for lack of obedience. (This is incredibly problematic.) Eight, justification is not the way into a right relationship with God but is *itself* the relationship.

Many theological difficulties and conundrums (if not heresies) lurk in and around the new perspective. Space simply does not permit a full discussion of these (e.g., the relationship of law and grace, law and gospel, Israel and the church, the Kingdom of God and the *ekklesia*, faith and works, the covenant faithfulness of God and of the obedience/faithfulness of a believer vis-à-vis the active and passive obedience of Christ, and how a denial of the forensic imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers interacts with the legal imputation of Adamic guilt to humans, and especially the forensic imputation of creatures’ sin to Christ).

THE RESULTS OF JUSTIFICATION

Pardon and Forgiveness

Pardon and forgiveness come as a result of Christ’s suffering the penalty of God’s moral law—His passive obedience. These involve release from penalty, the remission of punishment—acquittal. This is not a pronouncement of innocence, but a declaration of satisfaction that God’s holy demands against sin

are met. Both pardon and forgiveness emphasize grace, which operates in the realm of *guilt*. Pardon sees it from the standpoint of a judge, forgiveness from that of a father.

In Roman Catholicism, remission of the guilt of sin really amounts to the displacement of guilt by the infusion of grace and, hence, its removal or remission. Pardon is a *consequence* of sanctification and is not a result of the satisfaction of justice. In Romanism there is no real satisfaction of justice, and guilt is more or less ignored rather than actually paid for in an ethical atonement.¹⁹

Arminianism fares little better. For instance, John Miley *equates* justification with forgiveness and has no use for a “forensic view of justification.”²⁰ His idea of justification is that it is simply the absence of guilt, the non-imputation of guilt (i.e., justification is merely *innocence*). There is no thought of the imputation of another’s righteousness. Thus Miley does not ground justification in the penal satisfaction of Christ’s atonement whereby His righteousness is imputed to the believer and on that basis God declares him righteous.²¹ He does not believe in “an imputation of any personal act of another.”²² His view of atonement is of the “moral government” variety with a “provisory substitute for penalty, so that sin might actually be forgiven.”²³ In his view, the atonement of Christ is a provisory substitution “in suffering without the penal element.”²⁴

In Arminianism divine justice is acknowledged in a public way by Christ’s death, making justification *consonant* with God’s moral government. But justice is not *satisfied* in this scheme; there is no retributive justice involved. Retribution for sin is only dealt with indirectly, provisionally and imperfectly. Arminianism, as does Catholicism, lacks an ethical basis of atonement and, thereby, jeopardizes the eternal safety of the believer.

It may be asked, how many of the believer’s sins are pardoned in justification? In truth, all of them—past, present and future. Justification results in the sinner’s exemption from the deserved penalty of God’s moral law.²⁵ Anthony

¹⁹ See the explanation by Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), pp. 350–53.

²⁰ *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 2:309.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2:314.

²² *Ibid.*, 2:319.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2:317.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:156. For more analysis of the Arminian position on justification, see Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, pp. 353–55, and Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3:131–32.

²⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint of 1887 ed., London: James Clarke, 1960), 3:163–64; also Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), pp. 514–15.

Hoekema says, “From the believer’s point of view, I believe it is better to say that justification means the forgiveness of all past and present sins, and the judicial ground for the forgiveness of future sins.”²⁶ He notes that confession of sins by a believer does not result in renewed justification but a renewed application of our justification.²⁷ This results in a sense of peace with God and a consciousness of forgiveness. Unconfessed sins do not invalidate one’s justification, however.

Herman Bavinck has a biblically/theologically credible, and, perhaps, better understanding of the sins of believers and their justification.²⁸ He notes that Catholic theology leaves these (venial) sins unexpiated and the person is left to care for these shortfalls himself (i. e., through the merit of the sacramental system). The other extreme, which he calls “antinomianism,” seeks to give fuller weight to the grace of divine forgiveness and thus maintains that Christians have no need to confess or pray for forgiveness at all.

Bavinck makes the distinction that while divine forgiveness removes all “actual liability” for sin, the fact that a believer’s sin *deserves* punishment remains, something he calls “potential liability.” This brings with it (to a conscientious believer) a sense of pain, remorse, regret and alienation from God. Confession in this case is certainly not for pardon and forgiveness again, but for the need of the “consolation of forgiveness,” that is, a prayer of faith as “[a child] of the Father who is in heaven.” The knowledge and impact of sin in the life of a real Christian causes the “consciousness of forgiveness [to go] into hiding,” and confession is thus appropriate and necessary.

Bavinck further teaches that if a Christian were “perfectly positioned in faith,” which means he would also be perfectly “positioned above sin,” he would never question or reflect negatively on his divine forgiveness. Since that is not the case, confession and repentance are always in order.

Treatment as if We Had Never Sinned

This means restoration to favor. The stigma of condemnation is replaced with favor. This comes from the rewards of Christ’s keeping of God’s infinite moral law perfectly—His active obedience. “In justification, there is not only acquittal, but approval; not only pardon, but promotion.”²⁹ Paul’s language on this result of justification is, “That we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). Called by Paul, “the requirement of the law” (Rom 8:4), it encompasses all the morality that God requires according to His infinitely

²⁶ *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 180.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁸ *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–08): 4:224–26.

²⁹ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 857.

moral and ethical being. This has been fulfilled by the obedience of Christ to the Father. This obedience has been credited by faith to the sinner so that he too is reckoned by God as having fulfilled all righteousness. Christ condemned sin through His atoning sacrifice “so that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:3–4). The believer, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, is beyond the ken of the accusatory and condemnatory power of God’s everlasting moral law. As such God sees and treats the believer as if he had never sinned, just as God sees and treats the sinless and morally perfect Christ, His Son, who in actuality never has sinned.

Peace and Other Blessings of Salvation

Paul asserts, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). In Romans 8:33–34, Paul teaches that no one can lay any charge to the elect because of justification. He is at peace with God’s absolute moral law. This is not the subjective peace *of* God that comes with sanctification. This is the objective peace *with* God that operates in the dimension of an infinite Judge and His absolute, eternal, and perfect moral order.

