

Christ, Our Righteousness

These reflections on the marvelous reality of Christ as our righteousness—that is, Christ Himself being righteousness to the believers for them to be justified by God—are prompted, but only in part, by a statement made in an e-mail addressed to one of our colleagues. The writer, a zealous young religionist, is a self-proclaimed defender of the gospel and, according to his own statements, is ready and willing to label as false brothers and then condemn to eternal perdition those who disagree with his doctrines. After voicing his opinion that we are “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” this young religionist expresses the notion that, unlike him, we may be “unfamiliar with the biblical doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s alien righteousness.” Actually, we were quite familiar with this “biblical doctrine” decades before he was born, and, under the Lord’s mercy and by His grace, we have advanced in our spiritual understanding of redemption, salvation, righteousness, justification, imputation, union with Christ, and—especially—Christ as everything to the believers according to the will of God (Col. 1:9; 3:4, 10-11). The concern of this religionist, as his own words indicate, is focused on doctrine, whereas our emphasis is not primarily on doctrine but mainly on the divine truth in the Word of God as the shining of the divine light and on the genuine experience of Christ as righteousness to us from God and as our life, life supply, and everything according to God’s will, purpose, counsel, and economy for the building up of the church as the organic Body of Christ. Let us ponder, albeit briefly, the elements of “the biblical doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s alien righteousness.”

Biblical doctrine. It is a known fact that this young religionist is a member of a sectarian group that relies heavily on creeds, confessions, and other extra-biblical theological texts. It is therefore reasonable to doubt whether he truly promulgates scriptural truth in a complete and balanced way but instead argues from selected verses read through the “dark glasses” of his preferred systematic theology, thereby purveying not pure biblical truth but selected ideas understood according to “the traditions of men,” according to the doctrinal system that he embraces and by which he judges all matters and persons. At best, what he propounds is an abecedarian notion of God’s righteousness and nothing that remotely resembles the complete divine revelation concerning this in the Word of God.

Imputation is a traditional theological term if there ever was one; nevertheless, it is useful if understood properly. It would be legitimate and adequate to use *imputed* to translate the Greek word for “accounted” in Romans 4:3. This word is *logizomai*, an accounting term, which literally means “to reckon” or “to credit to one’s account.” God credited righteousness to Abraham’s account. In his study Bible, John MacArthur notes that, as used in chapter 4 of Romans, this Greek word “means to take something that belongs to someone and credit to another’s account...God took His own righteousness and credited it to Abraham as if it were actually his” (1699). The righteousness thus accounted or credited or imputed to the believers fulfills the righteous requirements of God, and it is the only ground for our acceptance by God. If *imputation* is understood in this way, we would have no problem with this term.

An imputed righteousness is an *alien righteousness*, a righteousness that is objective to us and that comes from outside of us, instead of being an element within us that we have produced.

It is erroneous to say, however, that it is *Christ’s alien righteousness* that is accounted or imputed to the believers in Christ. In using this expression, our young religionist by no means stands alone, for he is simply continuing a theological tradition which teaches that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers for their justification and acceptance by God. Although examples proliferate in the literature, it is sufficient here to cite only one book. The subtitle of John Piper’s tome *Counted Righteous in Christ* bears the subtitle *Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* In the customary blurbs and accolades on the back cover, we hear this again and again: “Today, as in the sixteenth century, the central issue is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness” (R. C. Sproul). “This is certainly the most solid defense of the imputed righteousness of Christ since the work of John Murray fifty years ago” (John M. Frame). Assuming a positive reply, Wayne Grudem asks, “Does Christ’s life-long record of perfect obedience to God get ‘credited’ to your account when you trust in Christ and are ‘justified’ by God?” These theologians, along with numerous others who are of the same doctrinal tradition, speak in unison about *the righteousness of Christ* being imputed to the

believers. Although this way of speaking may not be deviant, it certainly is mistaken, for even though the New Testament says that righteousness is accounted to us, it never says that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. The issue here is significant because it is the difference between a thing—something called the righteousness of Christ—and a person—the wonderful Christ Himself as our righteousness.

The Difference between the Righteousness of Christ and Christ as Righteousness

Our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the unique righteous One. In His living on earth as the God-man, the complete God and a perfect man, the Lord Jesus was absolutely righteous. Recognizing this, the wife of Pilate sent word to him saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man” (Matt. 27:19). When the centurion saw what happened as the Lord Jesus was dying for our sins on the cross, he glorified God and exclaimed, “Certainly this man was righteous” (Luke 23:47). In Acts 3:14 Peter calls the Lord Jesus the “righteous One,” and in 7:52 Stephen testified to the opposing religionists that their fathers “killed those who announced beforehand concerning the coming of the righteous One.” In 22:14 Ananias told Paul that God had previously appointed him “to know His will and to see the righteous One and to hear the voice from His mouth.” Knowing and experiencing Christ in this way, the apostle John wrote, “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous” (1 John 2:1). He, and He alone, deserves to be called the righteous One and the Righteous. He is the only righteous man who ever lived, and thus only He was qualified to die for our redemption. His righteous act of dying on the cross has resulted in our justification (Rom. 5:18). Christ suffered once for sins, “the Righteous on behalf of the unrighteous,” in order to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

This righteous One, Jesus Christ the Righteous, has His righteousness before God—the righteousness of Christ, the righteousness that was the qualification which He had before God the Father as a man. Second Peter 1:1 is unique in referring to “the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Only this verse speaks of the righteousness of Christ. Watchman Nee is clear about this: “The righteousness of Christ is the good conduct performed by Christ when He lived on the earth as a man. It is the personal virtue of Christ while He lived on earth” (101). The phrase *the righteousness of Christ* refers to His own righteousness, which He alone possesses, which is not accounted to us, and which qualifies Him to be our Savior. Regarding this Watchman Nee goes on to say, “Without the righteousness of Christ, we cannot have a Savior. Christ is the Savior because He is righteous. But His righteousness is only related to Him. The righteousness of Christ qualifies and enables Him to be our Savior” (101).

The righteousness of Christ—His qualification before God to be our Savior—is different from the righteousness which is Christ Himself—Christ given to us by God to be righteousness to us. This is precisely what is revealed in 1 Corinthians 1:30; this verse assures us that God has made Christ, as a person, our righteousness. If we are enlightened to see this, we will realize that instead of imputing to us the righteousness of Christ, He has made Christ Himself our righteousness. What a glorious fact! Our righteousness is not a thing, an attribute that Christ has—our righteousness is Christ Himself. This means that we are justified, declared righteous, in the sight of God not through the righteousness of Christ but through Christ Himself, whom God has made righteousness to us. Oh, may we see from 1 Corinthians 1:30 that it is Christ Himself who has become the believers’ righteousness before God!

It is not something about Christ that has become our righteousness; rather, Christ Himself in His entirety has become our righteousness. Something of Christ can never be as absolute and perfect as Christ Himself. When Christ Himself becomes our righteousness, God receives us. (Nee 101)

The righteousness accounted to us, credited to us, given to us, is not a thing—the righteousness given to us is a wonderful, marvelous living person. Praise Him!

Putting on Christ as the Robe of Righteousness

To receive Christ as our righteousness is to put on Christ (Gal. 3:27), and thus the Christ whom we put on is a robe of righteousness. In order to approach God and to be in His presence, we need to put on this robe of righteousness (Zech. 3:4-5); that is, we need to put on Christ as our righteousness. Those who have been redeemed through the blood of Christ and justified by the grace of God through faith in Christ can rejoice greatly in the Lord and echo these glorious words: “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation / He has wrapped me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10).

In Matthew 9:16 and Luke 5:36 the Lord Jesus indicated that He is the “unfulled cloth” that, through His redemptive death and life-imparting resurrection, has become the “new garment” to cover us as our righteousness before God so that we might be justified by God and be acceptable to Him. This garment is “the best robe” prepared for the returned son (Luke 15:22); this robe, we are pleased to emphasize, is Christ as the God-satisfying righteousness to cover repentant sinners (Jer. 23:6). As the best robe, Christ is our righteousness for us to be justified by God outwardly and objectively.

If, by faith in Christ, we have received Him and have put

Him on as the best robe, our garment of righteousness, we may have the full assurance that we have been justified by God. Seeing us covered with Christ as righteousness, the righteous God can righteously proclaim to the whole universe that we, forgiven sinners, have been justified by Him. Now as Charles Wesley says in his hymn on justification in Christ, “No condemnation now I dread; / Jesus, and all in Him, is mine! / Alive in Him, my living Head, / And clothed in righteousness Divine” (*Hymns*, #296).

This may very well prompt us to sing, with joy in the Lord, Zinzendorf’s hymn on justification, from which we quote some of the precious verses:

God’s Christ, who is my righteousness,
My beauty is, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in this arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head...

Bold can I stand in every way,
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully, by Thee, absolved I am
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years;
No age can change its glorious hue,
Its glory is forever new.

Thou God of power, Thou God of love,
Let all Thy saints Thy mercy prove;
Our beauty is, our glorious dress,
Jesus the Lord, our Righteousness. (*Hymns*, #295)

Yes, God’s Christ is our righteousness, our glorious dress, and because we are clothed with Him as the best robe, the garment of righteousness, we can lift up our head in God’s presence and praise Him. For eternity this spotless robe will remain unchanged, and “its glorious hue” will never fade. “Our glorious dress” is Jesus Christ the Lord, our righteousness.

Salvation Not by a Doctrine but through a Person

It is a sad fact that many who hold to what they regard as “the biblical doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s alien righteousness” have more confidence in a doctrine of imputation than in Christ Himself. They may act, wrongly, as if they are saved by believing in a doctrine—a notion concerning imputation—rather than through believing in a person—Christ, who is our righteousness from God and the robe of righteousness with which we are clothed in the presence of God for our justification. It is altogether possible, therefore, for one to be unregenerate and yet contend for a preferred doctrine concerning righteousness and self-righteously condemn to perdition those who, with ample

scriptural warrant, view the matter differently and who emphasize, as God Himself does in the Bible, that we are saved through faith in Christ and are justified, declared righteous judicially and forensically by God, because we stand before Him in Christ Himself as our righteousness. Surely, no one can be saved, justified, and regenerated by merely holding to and advocating a doctrine, for we are saved not by a doctrine but through a wonderful person—our Savior, the Son of the living God, Jesus Christ our Lord. I personally have known a number of religious persons, some of whom are ordained ministers holding to Lutheran or Reformed doctrines of justification, who believe in doctrines related to imputation and justification but who themselves have never believed into Christ as the Son of God to have eternal life (John 3:15) nor received Him as righteousness from God. Some might even finish their days on earth clinging to their theological notions without ever embracing, or being embraced by, our Savior, the Beloved, in whom we have redemption. Although we would never minimize the importance of accurately teaching the biblical truths related to righteousness, imputation, and justification, we will nevertheless continue to emphasize the fact that we are saved not by believing in the doctrine of imputed righteousness but through believing in and being clothed with the righteous One—Jesus Christ, our righteousness.

“Therefore having been justified out of faith, we have peace toward God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). It is God who justifies (8:33), and we, as objects of His grace, now stand in His presence with peace and joy. When the righteous God looks upon us, His redeemed elect, He sees us covered with Christ as our righteousness—the best robe prepared by Him for us—He is satisfied and happy, and He can joyfully declare, “Bring the fattened calf [Christ for our enjoyment]; slaughter it, and let us eat and be merry” (Luke 15:23). May all who read these words be clothed with Christ as the robe of righteousness and enjoy the blessed divine merriment with all those who are clothed with Christ as the best robe and who are feasting on Christ as the fattened calf in the Father’s house.

by Ron Kangas

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