

Justified in Christ

In the book of Galatians the apostle Paul twice uses the expression *the truth of the gospel*. Concerning “false brothers” (2:4), who spied out the believers’ freedom in Christ Jesus in order to bring them into slavery, Paul says, “To them we yielded with the subjection demanded not even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might remain with you” (v. 5). Later, when Peter and others practiced hypocrisy in Antioch by separating themselves from the Gentiles because “some came from James” (v. 12), Paul realized that “they were not walking in a straightforward way in relation to the truth of the gospel” (v. 14). Clearly, Paul was burdened about and committed to the truth, the reality, of the gospel, saying, “I make known to you, brothers, concerning the gospel announced by me, that it is not according to man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation by Jesus Christ” (1:11-12). To depart from the truth of the gospel, therefore, is to depart from the gospel that came to Paul “through a revelation by Jesus Christ,” and such a departure, such an apostasy, is to remove oneself “from Him who has called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel” (v. 6). To turn from the gospel is to turn not merely from a system of doctrine but to turn from a person—“from Him,” that is from “the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins that He might rescue us out of the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father” (vv. 3-4).

Two Crucial Aspects of the Truth of the Gospel

All genuine believers in Christ, who have Christ as their God-given righteousness and who have been born of God to be children of God possessing the life and nature of God, for the most part have a basic understanding of two crucial aspects of the truth of the gospel. The first aspect of the truth of the gospel is that fallen human beings cannot be justified by works of law. According to the New Testament, justification means that God, according to His righteousness, declares one to be righteous. To be justified, declared righteous, is to be approved by God according to His standard of righteousness. By works of law—that is, by self-effort, works of the flesh—no one can be justified. It is utterly impossible for fallen persons to be justified by works. God’s righteousness is perfect and supreme, but no one is perfectly righteous in works before God. “Out of the works of the law no flesh shall be justified before

Him” (Rom. 3:20). “A man is not justified out of works of law...because out of the works of law no flesh will be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Our self-made righteousness simply cannot stand before the righteous God, for such righteousnesses are like a soiled garment (Isa. 64:6), altogether unable to match the requirement of God’s righteousness or to qualify us to be justified before the righteous God. Therefore, fallen humankind can never be justified by works before God.

The second crucial aspect of the truth of the gospel is that the believers in Christ are justified by faith in Christ, that is, by believing in Christ. Regarding this, the apostle Paul is emphatically clear. God is “the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus” (Rom 3:26). This involves what Paul designates as “the law of faith” (v. 7). “For we account that man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (v. 28). To have faith is to testify that God is everything and has done everything in Christ for our redemption and justification, and it is to confess that in ourselves we are nothing, we have nothing, and we can do nothing. God is, and we are not; God has, and we have not; God can, and we cannot; God does, and we do not. All is of the unique, righteous God. “God is one, who will justify the circumcision out of faith and the uncircumcision through faith” (v. 30). Although Christ died to accomplish redemption and God has the ground to justify us and is ready to forgive us, we cannot be justified unless we believe in Christ. By faith, by the action of believing, we need to receive all that God has prepared for our justification, and we receive this by believing in Christ. By faith we believe in Christ and His redemption, and we receive Christ and His redemption. This is to be justified by faith in Christ. “We also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ and not out of the works of law” (Gal. 2:16).

Union with Christ by Believing into Christ

If our grasp of the truth of the gospel is limited to these two basic matters, as it is with those who actually identify the gospel with imputation, we will have a shallow understanding of justification by faith. Sadly, many Christians have a puerile and mere doctrinal understanding of justification by faith. According to their concept, Christ is the just One, the righteous One, on the throne in

the heavens. When we believe in Him and in His redemptive work on our behalf, God then reckons Christ to be our righteousness (although most follow the traditional, mistaken notion that it is Christ's righteousness, not Christ Himself as righteousness, that is reckoned, or imputed, to us). In order to advance beyond this superficial and incomplete idea of justification, we need to see that the believers' justification by faith in Christ takes place in an organic union with Christ and that it is by means of such a union with Christ that God can reckon Christ to be our righteousness.

As believers, we are justified in Christ, that is, in a spiritual and organic union with Christ in the mingled spirit, the regenerated human spirit indwelt by and mingled with the divine Spirit to be one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17; 2 Tim. 4:22; Rom. 8:16). The fact that we must be in Christ—one with Him in spirit—in order to be justified is stated emphatically in Acts 13:39, where Paul, in a marvelous gospel message, declares, "From all the things from which you were not able to be justified by the law of Moses, in this One everyone who believes is justified." Those who believe are justified "in this One," in the resurrected and ascended Christ to whom they are joined by faith. In the words of Galatians 2:17 this is "to be justified in Christ." If we are apart from Christ and outside of Christ, we cannot be justified, even if we ardently believe in the so-called "alien righteousness of Christ imputed to us." To be sure, Christ as righteousness is imputed, reckoned, accounted, to us, but this is possible only if we are truly and experientially in Christ, one with Him not only in position but also in life. Only by means of our organic union with Christ can God reckon Christ as our righteousness. Because we and Christ are one, whatever belongs to Him is ours. This is the basis upon which God counts Christ as our righteousness. John Calvin wrote about this in a wonderful way:

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes

us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. (3:11:10)

We enter into such a spiritual union not merely by believing Christ or believing in Christ but by believing *into* Him. To believe into Christ, the Son of God, is to receive Him into us and to be united with Him as one (John 1:12), a spiritual phenomenon emphasized by both John and Paul. "Everyone who believes into Him may have eternal life" (3:15). "Everyone who believes into Him would not perish, but would have eternal life" (v. 16). "He who believes into Him is not condemned" (v. 18). "He who believes into the Son has eternal life" (v. 36). Central to our reflections on justification in Christ is Galatians 2:16: "Knowing that a man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, we also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ." What we have here is a spiritual union with Christ through believing into Him. As believers in Christ, we have an organic union with Christ through believing into Him, and in this union we are justified in Christ. If we realize this, we will see that justification by faith is not merely a matter of objective imputation; justification takes place in a vital union with Christ into which we have entered by believing into Christ. Those who have genuinely believed into Christ may experience and enjoy a marvelous organic union with Christ, and in this union Christ becomes righteousness to them from God, and they are declared righteous before God, being approved by Him according to the standard of His righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). This is to be justified in Christ.

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Works Cited

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. *The Library of Christian Classics*. Ed. John T. McNeill. Vol. 20. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both **righteousness** and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

righteousness: Christ became wisdom to us from God as three vital things in God's salvation: (1) righteousness (for our past), by which we have been justified by God, that we might be reborn in our spirit to receive the divine life (Rom. 5:18); (2) sanctification (for our present), by which we are being sanctified in our soul, i.e., transformed in our mind, emotion, and will, with His divine life (Rom. 6:19, 22); and (3) redemption (for our future), i.e., the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23), by which we will be transfigured in our body with His divine life to have His glorious likeness (Phil. 3:21).