

Establishing the Gospel of the All-Inclusive Christ

by John Fester

Longing to visit the believers in Rome so that he could establish them according to the full content of the gospel of God, but being detained in God's providential arrangement, Paul delivered the form of his teaching in his letter to the Romans, and the essence of Christian truth was recorded. Struggling to understand how sinful humans could be reconciled with certainty to a righteous God, but being burdened by centuries of misunderstanding and darkness, Martin Luther received solace in the clarion call of the gospel of God in Romans 1:17, and the judicial basis of our Christian life was recovered. Building upon Luther's fundamental insights, but being weighed down by its narrow emphasis on the judicial aspect of God's salvation, Reformation exegetes, in contrast, have deprived Christians of access to the organic content of Paul's gospel, and the full expression of God's glory in the believers has been constrained. Within the very verse of Luther's enlightenment, however, there is a clear enunciation of the structure of the gospel that can establish and build up the Body of Christ through its experience of and organic incorporation into the all-inclusive Christ.

From the beginning to the end of the Epistle to the Romans, Paul is motivated by a persistent burden to establish the believers in the truth of the gospel of God, which was promised "through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who came out of the seed of David

according to the flesh, who was designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:2-4). Despite his unceasing prayer for them, his beseeching of God to be prospered in His will to come to them, and his longing to see them, Paul's desire to personally establish the believers through the impartation of some spiritual gift, that is, through his announcement of the gospel, was frustrated (vv. 9-11, 15). Following the mere mention of his desire to announce the gospel in verse 15, Paul's heart seemingly opened and the full contents of the gospel of God came forth, and he immediately began to announce the gospel in verse 16. At the end of his discourse in chapter sixteen, Paul commends the believers to "Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel, that is, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages but has now been manifested" (vv. 25-26).

Within the gospel there is the power to establish every believer through the manifestation of the mystery that was kept in silence prior to the advent of God's new testament economy. From the beginning to the end of his Epistle to the Romans, Paul's goal is to establish the believers by moving them beyond the rudiments of the beginning of the oracles of God (Heb. 5:12). In order for us to be fully

*Within the very verse of Luther's enlightenment,
there is a clear enunciation of the structure of the gospel
that can establish and build up the Body of Christ
through its experience of and organic incorporation
into the all-inclusive Christ.*

established in the content of the gospel, the full content of Paul's Epistle to the Romans must be comprehended and realized in our experience. The early church had a limited comprehension of this teaching and quickly departed from the form of Paul's teaching. The ability to be established in the gospel requires a foundational understanding of the judicial basis of salvation which anchors our souls against the onslaught of subjective doubts that can arise when we partake of God's salvation by faith alone. During the Reformation the church regained its footing upon this foundation when Luther recovered the truth of justification by faith alone rather than by works. The consummate establishment of the contents of the gospel, however, depends upon more than our judicial justification; it depends upon the divine life of God operating in the spiritual union of the Spirit of life with our spirit which serves as the basis for our incorporation into Christ, who is our righteousness, life, and faith. The codified theology of the Reformation is deficient in this respect. God's consummating work cannot be fulfilled merely by returning to the table talks of the Reformation. Its work is not complete. In fact, it hinders the believers' progress when it should be pointing the way toward the realities of the divine life that issue forth from our justification (Rom. 5:18).

Paul's Gospel

Today the church must progress in its understanding and experience of the truth by focusing on the central point and structure of Paul's gospel. We have to return to Paul's vision of an all-inclusive Christ, complete with the judicial satisfaction of God's righteous requirement on our behalf and the impartation and operation of His organic life through our practical faith.

The Center of the Gospel—Christ, the God-man

The center of the gospel is the God-man, Jesus Christ.¹ Contrary to much of the thought in Christianity, the gospel is as much about the person of Christ as it is about the work of Christ. Paul begins by stating that the gospel of God concerns "His Son," and in his subsequent description, the person of Christ bears as much prominence as His work, even though the work of Christ is central to the transformation of His person (1:3). In His person He "came out of the seed of David according to the flesh [and] was designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead" (vv. 3-4). In these verses Paul speaks of the humanity of Christ and the designation of His humanity. As to the flesh He came out of the seed of David, indicating His intrinsic relationship to the old creation through His incarnation. Being in the likeness of the flesh of sin (8:3) and as a consequence of His human obedience unto death (Phil. 2:8), He has fully dealt with the old creation, Satan, sin, and the world.

He was delivered unto death for our offenses, and He was raised for our justification, signifying that His death has fully satisfied God's righteous requirement on our behalf (Rom. 4:25). In resurrection He was designated the Son of God in power. Few will argue that Christ was not the Son of God already. He is eternally the Son. Designation, however, involves the person of Christ in His status as the unique God-man, and it is central to the gospel of God, given its prominence in Paul's introduction. By linking designation to the process of incarnation and resurrection, Paul clearly signals that designation is not related to Christ's eternal sonship, but rather to His unique status as the God-man, possessing both divinity and humanity.

Before His incarnation Christ, the divine One, already was the Son of God (John 1:18; Rom. 8:3). By incarnation He put on an element, the human flesh, which had nothing to do with divinity; that part of Him needed to be sanctified and uplifted by passing through death and resurrection. By resurrection His human nature was sanctified, uplifted, and transformed. Hence, by resurrection He was designated the Son of God with His humanity (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5). His resurrection was His designation. Now, as the Son of God, He possesses humanity as well as divinity. By incarnation He brought God into man; by resurrection He brought man into God, that is, He brought His humanity into the divine sonship. In this way the only begotten Son of God was made the firstborn Son of God, possessing both divinity and humanity. God is using such a Christ, the firstborn Son, who possesses both divinity and humanity, as the producer and as the prototype, the model, to produce His many sons (8:29-30)—we who have believed in and received His Son. We too will be designated and revealed as the sons of God, as He was in the glory of His resurrection (8:19, 21), and with Him we will express God. (Recovery Version, Rom. 1:4, note 1)

The designation of the humanity of Christ is the issue and the focus of His work, involving incarnation, death, and resurrection. Incarnation makes Christ's redemptive death for us possible, and His resurrection is the proof of our justification. The goal of the gospel can be seen in the person of Christ: As the only begotten Son, He possessed divinity; as the incarnated Christ, He possessed divinity and humanity, but His humanity had yet to be designated God. His life of true human obedience, His physical death on the cross, and His bodily resurrection formed the basis for the designation of His humanity as God. In the person of Christ, humanity has been incorporated into the Triune God. The goal of the gospel, in which the power of God is displayed to the uttermost, ultimately involves our incorporation into the Triune God through our incorporation into Christ, the God-man. God's goal is more than the forgiveness of sins; it is more than our reconciliation to Him; it is more than His judicial pronouncement of our

justification—He desires many sons who are conformed to the image of His Son through their incorporation into Christ. Our conformation is our progressive designation.

*The Structure of the Gospel—
Christ as Our Righteousness, Life, and Faith*

This progressive designation is according to the structure of the gospel, which is Christ as our righteousness, life, and faith. Romans 1:17 presents this structure, saying, “For the righteousness of God is revealed in it out of faith to faith, as it is written, ‘But the righteous shall have life and live by faith.’” In this one verse Paul references *righteousness, life, and faith*. In the context of Romans, God’s *righteousness* relates primarily to the judicial aspect of His complete salvation. It is the foundation of our reconciliation, the surety of our redemption, and the source of our justification. God’s justification is based upon His righteous acceptance of Christ’s propitiating death on the cross on our behalf. The operation of His righteousness, however, cannot be separated from His life, which we have access to as the result of our transfer out of Adam into Christ and our transfer out of the flesh into the Spirit. In this transfer we have been terminated through the death of Christ and germinated with the divine life to live and walk in the newness of this life. “We have been buried therefore with Him through baptism into His death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so also we might walk in newness of life” (6:4). This walk is a walk of faith, an organic faith, which is nothing less than the living Christ as grace. Christ, who is the righteousness of God, is our life in the realm of faith. He is our righteousness, our life, and our faith. Paul did not replace God’s righteousness with the law; he did not neglect God’s life in his presentation of righteousness; and he did not ignore the union of faith that issues forth from the operation of the divine life in the believers. Rather, he presented Christ as our organic portion in each of these aspects.

The structure of the gospel begins with righteousness. Righteousness is the way God acts, and God’s actions are the basis for our deserved condemnation, our judicial redemption, and our organic salvation. Due to the fall, we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God

(3:23). Paul presents a litany of our unrighteousness in 1:18—3:20. We are all sinful. “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks out God. All have turned aside; together they have become useless; there is none who does good; there is not so much as one” (3:10-12). Due to our constitution of sin, we are incapable of works that will satisfy God’s righteousness. The fall of Adam, our forefather, involved more than just disobedience; it brought the sinful nature of Satan into humanity. “Through the disobedience of one man the many were constituted sinners” (5:19).

Through his fall Adam received an element that was not created by God. This was the satanic nature, which became the constituting essence and main element of fallen man. It is this constituting essence and element that constituted all men sinners. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. Whether we do good or evil, in Adam we have been constituted sinners. This is due to our inward element, not our outward actions. (Recovery Version, Rom. 5:19, note 1)

Despite this inward constitution and the effects of the fall, the sinful condition of man is not readily apparent to his darkened understanding and disapproved mind (1:21, 28). In this condition, there was a need for the law to expose man’s sinful condition by expressing the righteousness of God and thus pointing him toward Christ. In respect to exposing our sinful nature, the law is spiritual. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy and righteous and good....But sin [was] shown to be sin by working out death in me through that which is good, that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful” (7:12-13). Given our sinful constitution, no amount of works will satisfy the righteous requirement of God, “because out of the works of the law no flesh shall be justified before Him; for through the law is the clear knowledge of sin” (3:20).

God’s righteousness can be satisfied only with death. The righteous judgment of God upon our sinful nature and acts is death (1:32). Since the wages of sin are death and since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (6:23; 3:23), there is no place in God’s economy for a salvation by

*The goal of the gospel, in which the power of God is displayed,
ultimately involves our incorporation into the Triune God
through our incorporation into Christ, the God-man.
He desires many sons who are conformed to the image of His Son
through their incorporation into Christ.*

works. The satisfaction of God's righteousness requires death. As such, there is a place in God's economy only for the all-inclusive Christ, who came as the seed of David in His humanity to redeem us "out of the curse of the law, having become a curse on our behalf" (Gal. 3:13). God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself, not accounting our offenses to us (2 Cor. 5:19). The death of Christ on the cross established the judicial base for God's righteousness to be extended to all who through faith are joined to this God-satisfying God-man.

In God's salvation He fulfills all the requirements for Himself so that He can pass on His salvation to us. He made this matter absolutely lawful. This was judicial according to His righteous requirements. Hence, it is the key to the gospel of God being powerful, dynamic (Rom. 1:16-17). The gospel of God is powerful to save every one who believes, because it is based upon God's righteousness....God's justification by His righteousness in the judicial way is the procedure to fulfill God's righteous requirement that God could justify the sinners righteously. (Lee 50-51)

Without a judicial base for our salvation, a base that is anchored in the righteousness of God that binds even God Himself to justify us, we would have no basis to stand before God. Our reconciliation would be in doubt, and our status as enemies would not be beyond the point of dispute. However, because we have believed into the righteous Christ, God is bound in His actions toward us. He can no longer condemn; He can only justify.

Justification is not the goal of the gospel; it is the base. Romans 1:17 continues, saying, "The righteous shall have life and live by faith." The death of Christ not only righteously nullifies death; it also brings life and incorruption to light (2 Tim. 1:10). As a base Paul covers the judicial aspect of God's salvation in the first four chapters of Romans, but in chapter five he begins to focus on the organic aspect of God's salvation.

With righteousness as its base, the structure of the gospel leads to life. The purpose of justification is life. The righteous have life. This is not a new life in the sense of a change of perspective or even an increased desire to obey the commandments of God. It is as Paul says, "His life." Having been judicially reconciled to God through the death of Christ, we are no longer enemies; instead, we are positioned upon God's judicial base of righteousness to be saved in His life. (Rom. 5:10). Life is mentioned prominently in nine verses in Romans, all of which occur after Paul has established the judicial base of the gospel. The first is Romans 5:10, and it clearly signals Paul's change in emphasis from righteousness to life. Next, *life* is used three times in 5:17 through 21:

For if by the offense 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. So then as it was through one offense unto condemnation to all men, so also it was through one righteous act unto justification of *life* to all men. For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were constituted sinners, so also through the obedience of the One the many will be constituted righteous. And the law entered in alongside that the offense might abound; but where sin abounded, grace has superabounded, in order that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness unto eternal *life* through Jesus Christ our Lord. (emphasis added)

These verses are replete with references to God's judicial and organic salvation. Through receiving the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness, there is reigning in life through the One. Through Christ's righteous act, there is justification of life. Through the obedience of the One, many will be constituted righteous in life and nature, just as many were constituted sinners in life and nature through the disobedience of the one man. And through righteousness grace reigns unto eternal life, indicating that there is a consummation of the eternal life. In these verses there is also the matter of our incorporation into Christ. Prior to our union with Christ through faith, nothing but sin and death was possible because of our incorporation into the one man, Adam. Having been justified, there is nothing but righteousness and grace available to those who have been incorporated into Jesus Christ our Lord.

The next occurrence of the word *life* in Romans provides the means for our incorporation into Christ. "We have been buried therefore with Him through baptism into His death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so also we might walk in newness of life" (6:4). The termination of the old creation, including Satan, sin, sins, and death, through Christ's death on the cross was our termination as well. The old man, Adam, was terminated by the last Adam, Christ, and all that we were in this old creation was buried with Christ through baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead, we can walk in newness of life, His life.

The final four instances of the word *life* in Romans in chapter eight present the consummation of the gospel—many sons being conformed to the image of the Firstborn (v. 29). These four verses show us the application and issues of life. The application of this life is in the operation of the law of the Spirit of life in verse 2. The Spirit is of life, and the law of the Spirit of life is the spontaneous operation of the Spirit according to life. Just as we lived and moved according to the spontaneous operation of the law of sin and of death, we can live and move

according to the spontaneous operation of the law of the Spirit of life. When this life operates, there are distinct issues. First, our spirit is life because of righteousness (v. 10). This reinforces Paul's teaching that the judicial aspect of God's salvation, the base of His righteousness, is for the organic aspect of His salvation, the experience, growth, and establishment of the believers in the life of the Triune God. In verse 6 the mind is life, and in verse 11 life is given to our mortal bodies. The operation of the law of the Spirit of life applies to every aspect of our tripartite being. In chapter eight Paul shows us that life is an essential element of the structure of the gospel: Life is so linked with God's righteousness that the righteous requirement of the law is spontaneously fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit of life. In this walk life is dispensed from the mingled human spirit to the mind and ultimately to our mortal bodies. According to 8:14-27 this life makes us heirs of glory. The movement from children of God to sons of God to heirs of God is a walk that is in faith (vv. 16, 14, 17).

Faith is the final element of the structure of the gospel: "The righteous shall have life and live by faith" (1:17). In the New Testament faith involves not only the objective contents of what we believe (Eph. 4:13; 1 Tim. 1:19b; 2 Tim. 4:7) but also the subjective aspect of believing itself (Gal. 2:20). In Romans Paul almost exclusively addresses the subjective aspect of faith. The righteousness of God is revealed out of faith to faith (1:17); righteousness is manifested through the faith of Christ (3:22); Christ is our propitiation place through faith (v. 25); those who are justified are of the faith of Jesus and are justified by faith (vv. 26, 28); we obtain access by faith into grace (5:2); faith comes out of hearing (10:17); we stand by faith (11:20); God has apportioned to each of us a measure of faith (12:3); the proper receiving of the believers is an indication of faith (14:22-23); and finally, the manifestation of the mystery issues in an obedience of faith (16:26).

The faith by which we walk in the organic union of life, based on Christ as our righteousness, is not initiated by us. We are justified by faith alone, not by an act of "faith" on our part. Faith alone means that we can do nothing to initiate our salvation. Given our constitution of sin, whatever we do is unacceptable to God. Gerhard O. Forde

comments on the great leveling of human endeavors in *Justification by Faith*:

The "nothing," the *sola fide*, dislodges everyone from the saddle, Jew and Greek, publican and pharisee, harlot and homemaker, sinner and righteous, liberal and orthodox, religious and non-religious, minimalist and maximalist, and shakes the whole human enterprise to the roots. It strikes at the very understanding of life which has become so ingrained in us, the understanding in terms of the legal metaphor, the law, merit and moral progress. (23)

The view of the human enterprise as a move toward some standard of morality is meaningless in the light of the gospel. Nicodemus "believed" in God, even the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but he still needed the life of God that comes as the issue of justification by faith, the faith of Jesus Christ. This distinction is lost on many Christians who have been conditioned to regard faith as an act of will and reason. Johnnie C. Godwin illustrates the tendency to present "faith" as a "work" in *What It Means to Be Born Again*: "The way to eternal life—a new quality of life that is unending—is to openly admit that you have gone against God's will and to openly commit yourself to God's will. Then he can make you a new creation—give you new life and make you born again" (30). With such a teaching, there is little need for the saving Christ: All that is needed is a clever argument and compelling rhetoric. While the power of the gospel is conveyed through the word of Christ, the dynamics of justifying faith do not depend upon us but upon the all-inclusive Christ. The righteousness of God being made available to us through the faith of Christ is clearly presented in a footnote to Romans 3:22 in the Recovery Version of the New Testament.

Faith has an object, and it issues from its object. This object is Jesus, who is God incarnate. When man hears Him, knows Him, appreciates Him, and treasures Him, He causes faith to be generated in man, enabling man to believe in Him. Thus, He becomes the faith in man by which man believes in Him. Hence, this faith becomes the faith in Him, and it is also the faith that belongs to Him.

In God's New Testament economy, God desires that man

The view of the human enterprise as a move toward some standard of morality is meaningless in the light of the gospel. Nicodemus "believed" in God, even the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but he still needed the life of God that comes as the issue of justification by faith, the faith of Jesus Christ.

believe in Jesus, who is God incarnate. If man does not believe in Him, he commits the unique sin before God (John 16:9). However, if man believes in Him, he is righteous to the uttermost before God, and God reckons this faith as his righteousness. At the same time, this faith brings its object, that is, this One who is God incarnate, into those who believe in Him. He is God's righteousness, and God has given Him as righteousness to those who are indwelt by Him (Jer. 23:6). All this is out of, and depends on, the faith that is in Him and of Him (Heb. 12:2). (Note 1)

This view is amplified in a footnote to Galatians 2:16 which speaks of the faith in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus Christ denotes an organic union with Him through believing. This is related to the believers' appreciation of the person of the Son of God as the most precious One. The believers are infused with the preciousness of Christ through the gospel preached to them. This Christ becomes in them the faith by which they believe and the capacity to believe through their appreciation of Him. This faith creates an organic union in which they and Christ are one. (Recovery Version, note 1)

The faith which justifies us and the faith by which we walk is just Christ. In the structure of the gospel, "the righteousness of God, the life of Christ, and the faith of the believers, become the all-inclusive Christ. Hence, this all-inclusive Christ is not only the center but also the structure of the dynamic salvation of God" (Lee 71). We have no righteousness apart from our union and incorporation into Christ; we have no life and no living in the divine and mystical realm of God's new creation apart from being grafted into the living Christ (Rom. 11:17-24), which allows His life to conform us to His image through the mingling of the Spirit of life with our spirit; and we have no faith apart from a living and vital union with Christ, who cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13).

In the light of God's economy, the mystery kept in silence in the times of the ages, justification by faith alone implies both the judicial and organic aspects of God's salvation. Justification is judicial, and faith is organic. Herein lies the power of the gospel: Having been judicially justified, the divine life of God is available to man through the One, Jesus Christ. In order for us to fully participate in the all-inclusive Christ, we have to be established in a gospel that is centered on Christ and structured on our experience of Christ as our righteousness, life, and faith. God's complete salvation is founded on His judicial righteousness and His organic life. Forde also argues for the necessity of this dual perspective.

Justification *sola fide* cannot be understood or its explosive power captured in terms of the legal metaphor alone. One always seems to have to back down from that exclusive

sola. For what does *sola fide* mean when you come right down to it? It means precisely not some sort of legal transaction but, according to the New Testament, a death and a resurrection. *Sola fide* pushes you to that critical point. What did Paul do when he was confronted by the questions that buzz about like angry flies whenever the legitimacy of such faith is at stake? He didn't backtrack and hedge and qualify it to death. He sailed right ahead and raised the questions himself (Romans 5)...And what is the answer? It is certainly not that faith must be formed by love, or completed by works, or that you must become more sincere, *really* sincere, or *really* repent, or that there is after all the law or the "third use of the law," so you had better mind your p's and q's just in case. No, the answer comes in terms of death and resurrection. (10-11)

Forde clearly sees the judicial and organic aspects of God's salvation, referring to the latter in terms of death and life, and he also sees the overemphasis on the judicial aspect that plagues much of Reformation theology today. He clearly associates these dual aspects of our salvation with Paul's gospel:

There are two basic metaphors (they are something more than metaphors but we will skip that for the moment) at the root of Pauline/Reformation theology. One we can call the moral or legal metaphor, which speaks in terms of law, morality, justice, and justification. The other is the death-life metaphor, which speaks in terms of mortality, dying to the old and rising to the new life in Christ and the Spirit. (3)

Despite the clarity of Paul's gospel, much of this light was quickly lost in the church's degradation in the first century. As a result, the church has yet to be established according to the revelation of the mystery. The record of the New Testament reveals that this gospel never took firm root. Paul continually had to deal with the influence of the Judaizers who failed to see that Christ was the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), and even Peter acknowledged that Paul's words were hard to understand and easily twisted (2 Pet. 3:15-16). In 2 Timothy 1:15 Paul indicated that all the churches in Asia had departed from his ministry. And so the church declined and ultimately entered into a period of prolonged darkness because the truth of the gospel was effectively shut up. Not only was the truth of the organic aspect of God's salvation lost; even the judicial aspect was lost. Despite this darkness, God began a recovery with Luther, recovering the judicial base of our salvation according to the sequence of the structure of the gospel as delineated in Romans 1:17.

Luther's Gospel

What gross darkness there must have been for a doctrine such as justification by works to have taken hold on the

human mind. It is the height of folly to pursue outward acts in order to please God when it is our sinful constitution that is an abomination to Him. God's judgment upon sin and sins, in accordance with His righteous nature, is deserved and unequivocal. The judgment is death, either personally or sacrificially. Just prior to the advent of the Reformation, Luther gained no comfort from acknowledging God's righteousness; instead, he experienced only fear, trepidation, and even anger. In *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, Heiko A. Oberman presents Luther's understanding of the righteousness of God prior to receiving light from God:

The expression "righteousness of God," said D. Martinus, used to hit my heart as a thunderbolt. For when under the papacy I read: "Deliver me in thy righteousness [Psalm 31.1], item: "in thy truth," I immediately thought righteousness was the grim wrath of God, with which he punished sin. I hated St. Paul with all my heart when I read: "the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel." But afterward, when I saw how it went on, that it is written: "The just shall live by faith," and also consulted St. Augustine on the passage, then I became glad, for I learned and saw that the righteousness of God is His mercy through which he regards us and keeps us just. Thus was I comforted. (153-154, quoting *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden 4*, no. 4007; 73, 15-24)

The focal point of Luther's reform centered on the distinction between justification by works and justification by faith alone. When one focuses on works, there is no certainty of salvation, because one's limited "successes" at "good" works can never offset the besetting and enslaving nature of sin and sins. In contrast, there is only a certainty of punishment: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold down the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). The anxiety arising from the tension between one's conditional works and the unconditionality of God's punishment on sins must have been palpable on the eve of the Reformation. The responsiveness of the masses to the papal practice of selling indulgences, which offered expiation for a multitude of various sins, was surely an indication of such anxiety.

This anxiety haunted Luther, but when he saw that the same righteousness which bound God to condemn man also bound Him to justify those who are of faith, the age changed, and the judicial aspect of God's salvation was recovered. David G. Hagopian describes the essence of our justification based on Christ's satisfaction of the righteous requirement of God through His sacrificial death on the cross:

Justification, then, has a decidedly judicial ring to it...It refers to the one-time act by which God, as judge, freely and graciously imputes or credits our sin to Christ and imputes His righteousness to us. He pardons our sin and judicially declares us righteous in Him. Simply put, when God justifies the sinner, He judicially declares that all of the claims or demands of the law are satisfied with respect to the sinner on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the sinner's behalf. (219)

Oberman succinctly captures the essence of the Reformation thrust and its impact on society, especially those who would take up the Reformation banner:

Luther's discovery was not only new, it was unheard-of; it rent the very fabric of Christian ethics. Reward and merit, so long undisputed as the basic motivation for all human action, were robbed of their efficacy. Good works, which Church doctrine maintained as indispensable, were deprived of their basis in Scripture. This turnaround touched on more than individual faith and righteousness; the totality of life was affected and thus had to be reconsidered. Throughout the coming years of confrontation and conflict, there was only one objective: to unfold the implications of this discovery and to see to it that they gained a wide hearing. (154)

In the light of the Reformation, all of Scripture had to be reconsidered, and a new hermeneutic which accounted for God's judicial justification had to be developed. Although Forde argues that Luther's theology of the cross accounted for an organic aspect (the death-life component), he is equally clear that this component has been utterly eclipsed by the judicial emphasis present in the Law-Gospel hermeneutic: "The explosive character of the Reformation's confessional message can

Despite the clarity of Paul's gospel, much of this light was quickly lost in the church's degradation in the first century. As a result, the church has yet to be established according to the revelation of the mystery. The record of the New Testament reveals that this gospel never took firm root.

come to light once again if the death-life language is recovered and restored to its proper place. When such language and the reality it represents is revived and made complementary to the legal language, the theological explosion can take place once again” (3). Perhaps Forde unnecessarily overstates Luther’s organic insights, especially given the paramount necessity at that time of recovering the judicial aspect of God’s salvation. Oberman, however, identifies an interesting influence on many of Luther’s followers that may have led to an imbalance in the Reformation’s emphasis on a judicial hermeneutic: “Many of the urban Reformers, from Luther’s older Wittenberg colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt to John Calvin, a member of the second generation of the Evangelical movement, had legal training. They applied the new methods that accompanied the renaissance of jurisprudence to theology” (221).

There is an essential element of incompleteness associated with Reformation theology. It simply cannot account for God’s organic salvation. While it acknowledges and attempts to account for many of the organic terms² in the Bible, it cannot break out of its theological straitjacket. It is time for the church to move on, especially in view of the fact that large cracks are developing in the Reformation bulwark which are the issue of its overemphasis upon a judicial and objective relationship between the Triune God and the believers. Even the Reformation’s understanding of the “Great Exchange,” that is, the imputation of our sin to Christ and His imputation of righteousness to us, is decidedly objective, even though our judicial justification is possible only through our organic identification with the living Christ. One consequence of these teachings, as Forde laments, is a loss of the dynamic power of the gospel. There are more pernicious influences, however: One is a return to the law³ as the standard of Christian life, and another is an emphasis on imitating Christ.

Lacking a living contact with the all-inclusive Christ, many seeking Christians realize that their walk of faith is directionless. In their anxiety, there is a willingness to unconsciously and sometimes even consciously return to the law as the standard of Christian faith. In *Foundations of the Christian Faith* James Montgomery Boice illustrates this tendency: “Through our identification with Christ in his death the power of sin over us is broken and we are set free to obey God and grow in holiness” (392). When obedience to God becomes an end in itself, the Bible can easily be viewed as a book of commandments, and the Christian life can be viewed as a life of keeping these commandments. Forde identifies the subtlety of this tendency: “When one does not make the move to death-life language it is hardly much of an advance for the church to brand antinomianism as a desperately dangerous heresy in order to allow *nomism* silently to solidify its position” (47).

Even if a believer looks beyond the law as the standard of faith, he often looks only to his own subjective perceptions of what an objective Christ would do. In *Transformed by His Glory*, Charles C. Ryrie stresses this practice: “Always be aiming for Christlikeness. God leads us in paths of righteousness, never in paths of unrighteousness (Psalm 23:3). It is always important to ask, ‘What would Christ do in this situation?’ Answering that question may not always give conclusive direction, but it may well eliminate some of the options” (41). In *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age* James Montgomery Boice provides a refined but hollow example of this practice.

It is possible to think Christianly about even the most mundane matters. Blamires suggests how we might do this at a gasoline station while we are waiting for our tank to be filled. We might be reflecting on how a mechanized world with cars and other machines tends to make God seem unnecessary, or how a speeded-up world in which we use planes or cars to race from one appointment to another makes it difficult to think deeply about people or even care for them. Even further, we might be wondering, Do material things like cars really serve us, or are we enslaved to them? Do they cause us to covet and therefore break the Tenth Commandment? And what about engine exhausts and other pollutants? Don’t they threaten the environment over which God has made us stewards? And if they do, what can be done about it? (99)

The dilemma facing Reformation theology is the ultimate irony. Having established the truth of God’s judicial justification, separating it from the teaching that salvation is by works, its objective emphasis has stranded many Christians and hindered them from advancing on the way toward God’s complete salvation. And in their failure to make progress in knowing and living according to the all-inclusive, indwelling Christ, they resort to objective standards that are nothing more than thinly disguised works. Keeping the law certainly is a work, and seeking to imitate Christ also is a work. There is no judicial justification in these efforts, and there is no organic salvation in them either. They are refuse that keep us from gaining Christ (Phil. 3:8). Let us abandon these misguided efforts by building upon the foundation of God’s righteousness and developing our organic union in life with Christ, rather than expanding the judicial base beyond its biblical measure.

The biblical measure of our salvation is the all-inclusive Christ, who is our righteousness, life, and faith. This salvation has a judicial and an organic aspect. With only the judicial aspect, there is only a foundation, but not the organic building up of the Body of Christ. With only the organic aspect, there is not a firm foundation for reconciliation between God and man. Both aspects are needed,

and both aspects are present in the form of Paul's teaching. This is the gospel that will establish the church according to the revelation of the mystery, and this is the gospel that will consummate God's economy. Luther recovered the judicial aspect of this establishing gospel, but the organic aspect must be recovered by the Body of Christ in its experience, and this is happening now. It is an exciting time to be a Christian. **A&C**

Notes

¹The central organizing principles of this article, including the language utilized in the description of God's organic salvation, are derived from *Crystallization-study of the Epistle to the Romans* and outlines from *The Complete Salvation of God in Romans*, both by Witness Lee.

²In its extreme stress on the judicial aspect of God's salvation, Reformation theology views even such intrinsically organic items like our union with Christ and our nature of sin in judicial terms. For example, consider James Montgomery Boice's description of how we are united with Christ.

At this point some may be asking, "But *how* am I united to Christ? In what sense have I actually died with him? It all just seems like theological word games." ...The Bible has already provided much to assist our inquiry, especially in illustrations....What kind of union exists within a good marriage? Obviously, it is a union of love involving a harmony of minds, souls and wills....It is possible, however, to conceive of a union of minds, hearts and souls apart from marriage. What makes marriage unique is the new set of legal and social relationships it creates. (*Foundations* 393)

David G. Hagopian views our association with Adam and sin through this same judicial perspective. As such, the basis of our condemnation is merely through the imputation of Adam's sin to us as his legal heirs.

Adam's sin was imputed (credited) to us for the simple reason that he acted as our covenant head or legal representative.

When a legislator votes in favor of a particular bill, for example, he acts on behalf of his constituents at home. In a similar way, Adam's sin was a sin on behalf of his constituents, his heirs. He represented us all. Thus, what he did we were counted to have done through him (Rom. 5:12, 16-19). While we did not personally eat of the forbidden fruit ourselves, we were counted sinners as Adam's offspring and bear the sinful nature, depravity, and corruption that flow from his sin. (218)

³This tendency is examined further in the article "From Reformation to Regression" in this issue of *A & C*.

Works Cited

- Back to Basics: Rediscovering the Richness of the Reformed Faith*. Ed. David G. Hagopian. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1996.
- Boice, James Montgomery. *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1986.
- . *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age: Preparing to Think and Act Biblically*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993.
- Forde, Gerhard O. *Justification by Faith—A Matter of Death and Life*. Ramsey: Sigler Press, 1990.
- Godwin, Johnnie C. *What It Means to Be Born Again*. Uhrichsville: Barbour and Company, n.d.
- Lee, Witness. *Crystallization-study of the Epistle to the Romans, Messages 1-17*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1994.
- Oberman, Heiko A. *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*. Trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Recovery Version of the New Testament. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991.
- Ryrie, Charles C. *Transformed by His Glory*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990.

The dilemma facing Reformation theology is the ultimate irony. Having established the truth of God's judicial justification, separating it from the teaching that salvation is by works, its objective emphasis has stranded many Christians and hindered them from advancing on the way toward God's complete salvation.