

## Justification

During the past several years, there has been a great deal of theological discussion, even intense debate, concerning the crucial biblical doctrine of justification by faith. The literature is vast and increasing, and the opinions are varied and proliferating. Without entering into the debate, I would like nevertheless to reflect upon certain crucial matters related to the basic biblical truth of justification by faith.

### The Definition of Justification

Understandably, numerous definitions have been offered, with varying degrees of merit and helpfulness. A succinct definition is found in Zondervan's *Dictionary of Bible and Theology Words*: "Justification: God's pronouncement of a believer as righteous (Rom. 4:25; 5:16, 18)" (127). Cairns regards justification as the "establishment of a sinner in a righteous standing before God" (201). A fuller definition is offered by Earle, quoting Cremer, justification "denotes nothing else than the *judicial act* of God, whereby man is pronounced free from guilt and punishment" (Earle 152). According to *The Theological Wordbook*, "Justification is the act of God by which a sinner who believes in Christ is declared righteous on the basis of what Christ has done for him or her on the cross" (201). For Sproul, justification "refers to a legal action" by which God "declares a person just in his sight. The Protestant view is often described as 'forensic justification,' meaning that justification is a 'legal declaration' made by God" (12). Packer defines justification as "a judicial act of God pardoning sinners (wicked and ungodly persons, Rom. 4:5; 3:9-24), accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with himself" (*Concise* 164). Noting that *justification* is "a legal word, borrowed from the law courts, and the opposite of condemnation," Stott says, "When God justifies sinners, he declares a verdict, in anticipation of the last day, that he has not only forgiven all their sins but has also granted them a righteous standing of acceptance in his sight" (77). In *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* we are told that as a

forensic (legal) term related to the idea of acquittal, *justification* refers to the divine act whereby God makes humans, who are sinful and therefore worthy of condemnation, acceptable before a God who is holy and righteous. (69)

Commenting on the Greek word for *justify*, McGrath observes,

The verb denotes God's powerful, cosmic and universal action in effecting a change in the situation between sinful humanity and God, by which God is able to acquit and vindicate believers, setting them in a right and faithful relation to himself. (518)

Two defective definitions are offered, respectively, by Miethe and Erickson. "In theology, [justification denotes] God's pardoning sinners and restoring them to a state of righteousness" (Miethe 122). Erickson claims that *justification* refers to "the declaration that the human has been restored to a state of righteousness in God's sight," and *justification by faith* is the declaration that "the person has been restored to a state of righteousness on the basis of belief and trust in the work of Christ rather than on the basis of one's own accomplishment" (108). Problematic and troublesome in these definitions is the use of *restoring* and *restored*, words which clearly refer to some prior condition of righteousness to which one is supposedly recovered through God's justification. When a sinner believes into Christ and is justified by faith, he or she is not restored to a primeval state of original righteousness; rather, the believer receives Christ as righteousness, thereby gaining Christ Himself as righteousness, a righteousness and a standing in righteousness never possessed before.

In the Scriptures, justification means that God, according to His righteousness, declares a person righteous in His sight. When God justifies a believer in Christ, He approves him or her as righteous before Him according to the standard of His righteousness. Therefore, justification is God's action in declaring us righteous and approving us according to His righteousness, which is actually God Himself as righteousness.

Central to this understanding of justification is God's action. God, and God alone, is the One who justifies. God is "righteous and the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). The one who is justified by God is the one who "believes on Him who justifies the ungodly" (4:5). "Who shall bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who justifies" (8:33). Justification,

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therefore, is an action performed by the righteous God Himself.

For us to be justified by God means that we are approved by Him, that is, we correspond to Him and are declared righteous by Him in His sight. God can approve us because we stand before Him not in our own righteousness but clothed with Christ as our righteousness, and thus we can declare, “He has wrapped me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10). This glorious fact was appreciated by both Zinzendorf and Charles Wesley and expressed by them wonderfully in hymns. “God’s Christ, who is my righteousness, / My beauty is, my glorious dress... / Our beauty this, our glorious dress, / Jesus the Lord, our Righteousness” (Zinzendorf, *Hymns*, #295). “No condemnation now I dread; / Jesus, and all in Him, is mine! / Alive in Him, my living Head, / And clothed in righteousness Divine” (Wesley, *Hymns*, #296).

God approves us according to the standard of His own righteousness. Whereas holiness is related to God’s nature inwardly, righteousness is related to God’s ways and actions outwardly. “Great and wonderful are Your works, Lord God the Almighty! Righteous and true are Your ways, O King of the nations!” (Rev. 15:3). The righteousness of God refers to what God is in His action with respect to justice and righteousness. God is required neither to love us nor to show us mercy and grace; however, God is required by His own character to be righteous and to act righteously in all things. Righteousness is the foundation of His throne (Psa. 89:14). Furthermore, all that God is with respect to righteousness is not something apart from Himself; the righteousness of God is God Himself. If we realize this, we will see that when God justifies those who believe in Christ, approving them according to the standard of His righteousness, He actually approves them according to Himself, according to who and what He is.

### The Need for Justification

Our need for justification can be stated simply and directly: We are all sinners under the righteous judgment of God. We need to be justified by God because He is righteous, and we are unrighteous and have no way of making ourselves righteous in His sight according to His standard. Apart from God’s justifying us, our situation would be hopeless, and, like all sinners, we would remain under the righteous judgment of God, destined for eternal perdition. God would have no way, righteously, to forgive us, and we would have no way to be forgiven by Him. The line from a sentimental song popular in the 1950s is a lie: “Although it makes Him sad to see the way we live, / He’ll always say, ‘I forgive.’” But God cannot forgive us of our sins unless the righteous requirement of the law of God has been fulfilled, and according to this

requirement, the one who sins must die. We praise the Lord that, in God’s gracious provision, the Righteous died on behalf of the unrighteous (1 Pet. 3:18), bearing up “our sins in His body on the tree” (2:24). God’s forgiveness is based upon His righteousness, and apart from the righteousness of God manifested in the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17) and apart from God’s action in approving us according to the standard of His righteousness, there would be no forgiveness of sins and no reconciliation to God. But since Christ died for our sins and since God has demonstrated His acceptance of Christ’s vicarious death by raising Him from the dead (4:24-25), God is bound by His righteousness to justify and forgive everyone who believes in the resurrected Christ (10:9-10).

In a very real sense, the need for justification is twofold. For our salvation, we need to be justified by God, and for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose, God needs to justify us so that He may then impart Himself into us as eternal life (5:18; 8:10; John 3:15). If God had not justified His chosen and redeemed people, He would have had to sentence us, under His righteous judgment, to the lake of fire, thereby nullifying the purpose for which He created humankind in His image. Hence, justification is necessary not only for our salvation but for God’s purpose. God in Christ has justified us for His own sake and for the sake of the desire of His heart, His good pleasure.

### The Importance of Justification

For Luther, and for many theologians today, especially among Lutherans and Calvinists, justification is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. Some regard justification not only as the heart of the gospel but even as the gospel itself. Stott points out that Luther called justification by faith “the principal article of all Christian doctrine, which maketh true Christians indeed” (77). To be sure, the doctrine of justification is one of the most crucial doctrines in the New Testament.

### Justification and the Gospel of God

Although it would be hyperbolic to say, as Packer does, that the gospel of God is “the gospel of justification by faith” (Essay 7), it is nonetheless true that if there were no justification by faith, there would be no gospel. This is revealed in the book of Romans. The subject of this Epistle is the gospel of God—the gospel “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” (1:3-4). The central thought of Romans is that through the gospel—a gospel that is in fact a gospel of sonship—God is making sinners into sons of God to constitute the Body of Christ, which is expressed as local churches. If sinners are to become sons of God,

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they must first be justified by God, and for this reason Paul devotes a section of this Epistle to justification (3:21—5:11), including the definition of justification (3:21-31), an example of justification (4:1-25), and the result of justification (5:1-11). Apart from such a marvelous justification, there could not be sons of God born of God to express God; on the contrary, there would only be sinners under the righteous judgment of God. Christ, the Son of God, is the center of the gospel, but justification is the foundation of the gospel. The gospel “is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes,” for “the righteousness of God is revealed in it” (1:16-17). Without the revelation of God’s righteousness and without the justification of sinners by faith, there could be neither the gospel of God nor the sons of God.

The principle is the same in Galatians, where the word *gospel* is used numerous times. It is appropriate to claim that the purpose of the book of Galatians was to cause its recipients to know that the gospel preached by the apostle Paul was from God’s revelation (1:11-12). Because Christ, a living person, was the focal point of Paul’s gospel, Paul could speak of the gospel as the gospel of Christ (v. 7) and could testify that God revealed the Son in him so that he might preach Him as the gospel (v. 16). As in Romans, the goal of the gospel is to produce sons of God (Gal. 3:26), and once again the gospel is presented as a gospel concerning sonship. However, apart from the truth concerning justification by faith, there is no gospel, and the sons of God cannot be produced. An essential component of “the truth of the gospel” (2:5, 14) is justification by faith. Regarding this, Galatians 2:16 is crucial: “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 and not out of the works of law, because out of the works of law no flesh will be justified.” The law functions as “our child-conductor unto Christ that we might be justified out of faith” (3:24). Only through such a justification are we all “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (v. 26). Therefore, it is no exaggeration to assert that apart from the foundational matter of justification by faith, there would be no gospel of God and no sons of God. This underscores the importance of justification by faith.

Justification by faith is important also because it is intrinsically related to eternal life, to the believers’ experience of Christ, and to the eternal purpose of God.

### *Justification and Eternal Life*

Justification is related to our receiving eternal life. In Romans 5:18 Paul uses a remarkable expression—*justification of life*. Justification is a necessary judicial procedure enabling God to impart His life into redeemed sinners and to qualify forgiven sinners to receive eternal life. Whereas

justification is the procedure, life—the divine, eternal life (John 3:15)—is the goal, for this life is the element by which God fulfills His purpose to have a corporate expression of Himself with His chosen and redeemed people (Gen. 1:26; 2:9). Justification, therefore, is not an end in itself; justification is for life and is “of life,” unto life. “Through justification we have come up to the standard of God’s righteousness and correspond with it, so that now He can impart His life to us” (Recovery Version, Rom. 5:18, note 2). It is because of righteousness, and only because of righteousness, that our spirit is life (8:10). “In God’s justification we have received righteousness...This righteousness results in life (5:18, 21); hence, our spirit has now become life” (Recovery Version, 8:10, note 7).

### *Justification and the Experience of Christ*

Justification by faith is also the foundation of the believers’ experience of Christ, which by its nature is personal and subjective. This is portrayed in Luke 15. It was extreme hunger that motivated the repentant prodigal to return to the house of his father, where there was an abundance of bread (vv. 16-17). The father ran, fell on his son’s neck, and kissed him affectionately, and afterward, before feeding his son, he said to his slaves, “Bring out quickly the best robe and put it on him” (v. 22). Only then did the father say, “Bring the fattened calf; slaughter it, and let us eat and be merry” (v. 23). The robe signifies Christ the Son as the God-satisfying righteousness—the righteousness received in justification—and the fattened calf signifies the rich Christ (Eph. 3:8), slain on the cross that we might enjoy Him as our God-given portion. Only after the prodigal had been covered by the robe objectively could he enjoy the calf subjectively. This is a picture of objective justification as the basis for our subjective experience of Christ. Once we have believed into Christ to be justified by faith and we have been clothed with Christ as our righteousness, we are positioned and qualified to experience Christ subjectively in His unsearchable riches. Only by having the robe can we experience the calf.

### *Justification and God’s Purpose*

Justification by faith is important especially because it is necessary for the fulfillment of God’s purpose. Justification, the gospel, eternal life, and experience of Christ—all of these are for God’s eternal purpose. Far from being an end in itself, justification is for God’s purpose. We have an indication of this in Genesis 15 and a revelation of it in Romans 4. In Genesis 15 God made a covenant with Abraham concerning the seed. Abraham said to Him, “I go childless” (v. 2), and “You have given me no seed” (v. 3). After the Lord promised Abraham that “he who will come out from your own body shall be your heir” (v. 4), He said, “Look now toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then He said to

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Abraham, “So shall your seed be” (v. 5). These verses make it emphatically clear that the issue between Abraham and God here was the promised seed. Receiving God’s word, “he believed Jehovah, and He accounted it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). We must attend to the crucial matter here: Abraham believed God’s word concerning the promised seed, and God accounted it to Abraham as righteousness. The point here is that Abraham

believed that God was able to work something into him to bring forth a seed out of his own being for the fulfillment of God’s purpose. This kind of faith is precious to God and is accounted by Him as righteousness. Abraham was justified by such a faith. (Recovery Version, Gen. 15:6, note 1)

**I**n Romans 4 Paul presents Abraham as an example of justification by faith, and this presentation, considered in the context of the book of Romans as a whole, is related to God’s purpose. Verse 3 is a quotation of Genesis 15:6. In verse 12 Paul goes on to say that we, the believers in Christ, should “walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham.” Verse 13 continues, “For it was not through the law that the promise was made to Abraham or to his seed that he would be the heir of the world, but through the righteousness of faith.” The phrase *heir of the world* indicates that justification is for God’s chosen and redeemed people to inherit the world so that they may exercise God’s dominion on earth. This is a matter of the kingdom for the fulfillment of God’s purpose (14:17; 8:28-29). Here we see the importance of justification.

### Justification by Grace

Romans 3:24 tells that us that we, the believers in Christ, have been justified “freely by His [God’s] grace.” Grace, as the expression of God’s love, is something freely given to us by God and done by God on our behalf. Because God has freely justified us by His grace, justification is a free gift, a gift from God to us. According to the grace of God, Christ once for all paid the price for our sins and in His redemption fulfilled all God’s requirements on us. Therefore, God, in His righteousness, can, and actually must, justify us freely. This indicates clearly that justification is not by our works but by the grace of God.

Because of our inherent sinfulness and weakness, no one can be justified by works, that is, by feeble human attempts to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law of God in order to be approved by God. God’s righteousness is perfect, supreme, and absolute, and justification by the works of the law requires us to be perfect, a condition that is impossible for anyone to fulfill. Thus, we cannot be justified by our works, the works of law, and Paul makes this emphatically clear. “Because out of the works of the law no flesh shall be justified before Him” (3:20). “Knowing

that a man is not justified out of works of law” (Gal. 2:16).

Although we cannot be justified before God by works of the law, we have been justified by the grace of God. In the words of Titus 3:7, we have been “justified by His grace.” In His grace God in Christ has done everything necessary to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law on our behalf, and He desires to justify us freely by His grace, offering justification as a gift. There is no need for us to work, for grace eliminates work. “If by grace, it is no longer out of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Rom. 11:6). Neither is there a requirement for us to do anything or to engage in self-effort or to pay some kind of price. God’s justification is by grace and by grace alone. What we could not obtain by law—God’s declaration that we are righteous in His sight—we have obtained through grace.

### Justification through the Redemption of Christ

God can justify us freely because we are justified “through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (3:24). Apart from redemption, God could not, righteously, justify us by grace, for His righteousness would have not allowed Him to do so. If the Lord Jesus had not shed His redeeming blood on the cross and if He had not accomplished redemption for us to satisfy all the requirements of God’s righteousness for us, God would not have the ground to justify us. This means that apart from the redemption which is in Christ, the grace by which God justifies us cannot reach us. But there is good news: We have “been justified in His blood” (5:9). Because the Lord Jesus shed His blood to satisfy the requirements of God’s righteousness, God can justify us by His grace according to His righteousness.

**W**e have emphasized that justification is God’s action to declare us righteous and to approve us according to the standard of His righteousness, which is actually God Himself. The basis for such a justification is the redemption of Christ:

To redeem is to purchase back at a cost. We originally belonged to God but became lost through sin. The requirements of God’s holiness, righteousness, and glory were so great upon us that it was impossible for us to fulfill them. However, God paid the price for us through Christ, repossessing us at a tremendous cost. (Recovery Version, Rom. 3:24, note 3)

In 3:24 Paul says, “Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” That Christ died on the cross for our redemption is revealed clearly in the New Testament. In the fullness of time, “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem those under law” (Gal.



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4:4-5). Christ the Son redeemed us by dying for us, thereby fulfilling on our behalf the righteous requirements of God's law. "Christ has redeemed us out of the curse of the law, having become a curse on our behalf; because it is written, 'Cursed is everyone hanging on a tree'" (3:13). He "gave Himself for us that He might redeem us" (Titus 2:14), and His blood obtained eternal redemption for us (1 Pet. 1:18-19; Heb. 9:12).

**G**od can justify us, approving us according to the standing of His righteousness, because God's justification is based upon Christ's redemption. When the redemption of Christ is applied to us, we are justified freely by God's grace. If there were no redemption, there would be no justification, for it would be impossible for us to be justified by the righteous God. According to Romans 3:24 we are justified through Christ's redemption and by God's grace:

This means that because God is righteous, He must have a proper ground to justify us by His grace. Apart from Christ's redemption, God would not have the ground to justify us. For this reason, Christ's redemption is needed. God's love caused Him to have grace on us, and His righteousness caused Him to accomplish redemption for us through Christ. Therefore, our being justified is a matter both of God's grace bestowed on us and God's righteousness accomplished for us...

On God's side justification is by His righteousness; on our side justification is by His free grace as compared with justification by the work of the law. To be justified by the work of the law we need to work, but to be justified by the redemption in Christ there is no need of our work, for it is freely given by His grace. (Lee 1390)

### Justified by Faith

The justification that is by grace and through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus is also the justification that is by faith. That this is the clear and evident revelation of Scripture cannot reasonably be denied. "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" (Acts 13:39). "That He might be righteous and the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). "We account that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (v. 28). "God is one, who will justify the circumcision out of faith and the uncircumcision through faith" (v. 30).

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 and not out of the works of law, because out of the works of law no flesh will be justified. (Gal. 2:16)

*Out of the works* indicates relying on our own effort, but *out of faith* indicates trusting in Christ and in what He has done for us. By faith we, without effort, simply receive and obtain God's justification and thereby are declared righteous before Him and approved by Him according to Himself as righteousness.

**B**y faith we appropriate what Christ has done on our behalf for our justification. Christ died for our sins, pouring out His blood to accomplish redemption and to satisfy God's righteous demands so that God could justify us freely by His grace and according to His righteousness. However, if we do not believe in Christ, and also into Him (John 3:15), the Lord Jesus and what He has done cannot be applied to us. The grace of God and the redemption in Christ Jesus are on God's side, but faith in Christ is on our side. By His grace and through Christ's redemption, God can justify us, and He desires to do this, yet if we are to be justified by God actually and experientially, we need to exercise faith in Jesus Christ. Only through such faith can we partake of Christ and of all that He has done for us and be justified by God in Him.

We would hasten to add that this justifying faith does not originate with us, for in ourselves we do not have the ability to believe in Christ for our justification. It is not possible for us simply, as an act of will, to choose on our own to believe in the Lord. Rather, faith—the capacity to believe in Christ and thereby receive Him and the benefits of His redemptive work—is a gift from God. The source of faith is the Lord, not ourselves. For this reason, Hebrews 12:2 speaks of Christ as "the Author and Perfecter of our faith." "This faith is not of ourselves but of Him who imparts Himself as the believing element into us that He may believe for us" (Recovery Version, Heb. 12:2, note 3). This means that for our justification by God, we believe in Jesus Christ through Him as our faith. Paul, therefore, speaks of "the faith of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 3:22):

This faith refers to the faith of Jesus Christ in us, which has become the faith by which we believe in Him...

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...

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

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in Him and of Him (Heb. 12:2). (Recovery Version, Rom. 3:22, note 1)

We would emphasize the fact that to believe in Christ is actually to believe into Him (John 3:15-16, 18, 36). When we believe in the Lord Jesus, we believe *into* Him. By believing into Him, we enter into Him to be one with Him, to partake of Him, and to participate in all that He has accomplished for us. By believing into Him, we are identified with Him in all that He is and in all that He has passed through, accomplished, attained, and obtained (1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 3:1). Christ is the righteousness of God, and, by God's grace, He is righteousness to us from God. By believing into Him with the God-given faith, we enter into Him and are one with Him as the One who is our righteousness. As a result of believing into Christ with the faith that is both of Christ and in Christ, we are justified by God—declared righteous in His sight and approved by Him according to the standard of His righteousness. This is because when God sees us, He sees us in Christ, even He sees just Christ.

### Justification in the Organic Union with Christ

Faith in Christ brings us into an organic union with Christ, and it is in this union that we are justified by God. If we would be justified by grace, by faith, and through the redemption which is in Christ, we must be *in Christ*, that is, we must be in Him as a realm, a sphere. Commenting on the sphere of justification, Stott says, "We are 'justified in Christ' (Gal. 2:17). This is a neglected phrase. It means that we are justified only when we are united to Christ" (78).

Paul places great emphasis on justification in Christ. Acts 13:38 and 39 say, "Through this One forgiveness of sins is announced to you; and 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." *This One* is Christ, the Son of God in the eternal Godhead and the Son of Man in incarnation, who, according to Paul's quotation of Psalm 2:7 in verse 33 and his word in Romans 1:3-4, was begotten by God in His resurrection to be the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29)—the Son of God both in His divinity and in His humanity. To be justified by God, we not only must believe Him or believe in Him—we must be in Him as the One who was resurrected to be our Savior. Apart from being in Christ—in *this One*—we cannot be justified. Moreover, the One in whom we are justified is Christ Himself in resurrection as our justification.

In Galatians 2:17 Paul speaks of "seeking to be justified in Christ" and in the previous verse, of our having "believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ." These verses reveal that justification is not only a matter of faith in Christ but also of being in Christ

through believing into Him. We have pointed out that according to the Lord's own word in John 3, we need to believe into Him and thus enter into Him. Paul continues this thought by explaining that justification is not merely a matter of believing in an objective Christ in a doctrinal way; justification also requires that we be in Christ—that we enter into Christ by believing into Him. Now that we are in Him, we enjoy a spiritual, organic union with Him, and in this union God reckons Christ as righteousness to us. Only in this way can we be justified by God.

This understanding of justification in union with Christ is supported by Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 1:30: "Of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption." What we are and have in Christ is of God, not of ourselves, for God is the source and the cause of our being in Christ Jesus. The precious phrase *in Christ Jesus* points to our union with the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit (15:45), with whom we have been joined to be one spirit (6:17). Because we enjoy such a union with Christ and are thereby in Him, Christ becomes righteousness to us, and we are justified in Him.

It is significant that two recent articles address this relation of justification and the believers' union with Christ. The first article, written by Michael F. Bird, bears a lengthy title: "Incorporated Righteousness: A Response to Recent Evangelical Discussion concerning the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness in Justification." His thesis is related to our union with Christ:

What is set out below is that believers are *incorporated into the righteousness of Christ*. The matrix for understanding justification is union with Christ. It is the contention of this study that several passages in the Pauline corpus support this perspective. (261)

Central to the development of his argument is that through faith "believers are incorporated or identified with the risen and justified Messiah, and they are justified by virtue of their participation in him (cf. Col. 2:12; 1 Cor. 15:17)" (267). According to Bird's understanding, for Paul "being 'in Christ' means identifying with Christ's death and resurrection where union with him is in the sphere or realm of justification" (273). With this in view, Bird speaks of "*incorporated righteousness*, for the righteousness that clothes believers is not that which is somehow abstracted from Christ and projected onto them, but is located exclusively in Christ as the glorified incarnation of God's righteousness" (274). This leads to the following conclusion: "Justification cannot be played off against union with Christ, since justification transpires in Christ" (275). In his essay "Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper," Don Garlington is concerned with the modality of justification. "It is the contention of this paper," he

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informs us, “that the free gift of righteousness comes our way by virtue of *union with Christ*” (1). Asserting that some theologians overlook “the most obvious factor”—union with Christ—Garlington claims that “faith justifies because we are united to Christ and are ‘found in Him’ (Philippians 3:9)” (9). “Paul points us to the ‘in Christ’ experience as the source of our righteousness” (30), and everything is “explained by his doctrine of union with Christ, and one need look no further for a rationale or elucidation” (31). The following remark may rightly be regarded as a summary and conclusion of Garlington’s thesis: “As throughout, my contention is that Christ has become our righteousness by virtue of union with himself, plain and simple” (34).

The appearance of seminal articles such as these indicates that we are not alone in asserting, according to the Scriptures, that justification is predicated upon and takes place in our spiritual, organic union with Christ.

### **The Result of Justification**

In conclusion, I need comment only on the result, or the issue or outcome, of our justification in Christ.

### ***Christ as Our Righteousness***

For centuries theologians have claimed that in justification the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. The question of imputation I prefer to leave for another occasion, but the matter of the righteousness of Christ being reckoned, or accounted, to us needs both clarification and correction. It is not accurate to say, as Lutheran and Reformed writers usually do, that the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to our account. We do not have something called “the righteousness of Christ”; rather, as those who have entered into an organic union with the Lord by believing into Him, we have Christ Himself, the person, as our righteousness. God does not intend to give us things, not even divine attributes, apart from Christ. On the contrary, God’s desire is to give us Christ as everything by placing us into Him and Him into us. Just as we do not have eternal life as an element apart from the Son but have life by having the Son (1 John 5:11-12), so we do not have justification or righteousness apart from the person of Christ. Thus, God does not give us the righteousness of Christ—He gives us Christ as our righteousness. In Christ we are justified by God, and in Christ we have Christ as our righteousness, as righteousness to us from God. The difference here is important, for it is the difference between having an attribute—righteousness—or having a person—Christ Jesus.

### ***Eternal Life***

The justification revealed in the New Testament is, in the words of Paul, a “justification of life” (Rom. 5:18).

Justification is unto eternal life and for eternal life. We have Christ as our righteousness so that we may have Christ as our life (Col. 3:4). Because of righteousness, our spirit has become life itself, as Paul tells us plainly in Romans 8:10. Therefore, God justifies us, declaring us righteous in Christ, in order that He may have the ground righteously to dispense Himself into us as eternal life (vv. 2, 6, 11).

To regard justification as an end in itself is to mistake the goal for the procedure, an error that every careful student of the Word should be exercised to avoid. God’s eternal purpose to have a corporate man in His image to express Him with His glory and to represent Him with His authority is fulfilled not by justification but by life. For this reason, God placed the man created by Him in front of the tree of life, which signifies God in Christ as the divine life, desiring that the man would receive eternal life by partaking of the fruit of the tree of life and thereby be born of God to become a son of God. Because of the fall, humankind was cut off from the tree of life, access to which was prevented by God’s righteousness, holiness, and glory. Through His death on the cross for our redemption, Christ fulfilled the requirements of God’s righteousness, holiness, and glory and opened the way to the tree of life. Now, based upon God’s justification in Christ, we, the believers in Christ, have the right to partake of the tree of life (Rev. 22:14) for the carrying out of God’s original purpose in creating us. This is the far-reaching significance of justification being of life, unto life, and for life.

### ***Access to the Triune God as Grace***

Romans 5:1-2 say, “Therefore having been justified out of faith, we have peace toward God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.” Here grace is a realm, and this realm is the Triune God Himself. Grace is not a mere thing, such as unmerited favor. Grace is God Himself in Christ to be everything to us for our experience and enjoyment of Him. The following note is enlightening:

Grace is the Triune God Himself, processed that we may enter into Him and enjoy Him. Grace here, in the deepest sense, is the Triune God as our enjoyment. It is more than unmerited favor and more than mere outward blessing. We are not merely under God’s blessing; we are in His grace. (Recovery Version, v. 2, note 2)

Because we have been justified by God in Christ, grace is with our spirit (Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23), and we are in the realm of grace.

### ***The Foundation for the Experience of Christ***

The subject of Philippians is the experience of Christ, and

everything in this book should be understood in this light. God intends that we experience and enjoy Christ for the building up of the Body of Christ. However, the genuine experience of Christ, the experience portrayed in Philippians, must have a foundation, and this foundation is our justification by God by His grace and our faith. A verse in chapter 3 indicates this. Paul desired to “be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is out of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God and based on faith” (v. 9). Paul aspired to be found in Christ, having a righteousness which had its source in God and was based on faith. “Paul lived in a condition of having not his own righteousness but the righteousness that is out of God, in order to know (experience) Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings” (Recovery Version, v. 10, note 1). Like Paul, we have been justified by God, and also like Paul, we have a foundation for our experience of Christ.

### Brought Back to God’s Original Purpose

Although justification by grace and by faith is an indispensable truth, it is not in itself God’s eternal purpose. Rather, justification should be interpreted and understood in the light of God’s purpose and not the other way around. Regarding this, the following remark surely misses the mark: “The Bible teaches that God elected men in eternity in order that in due time they might be justified through faith” (Packer, Essay 2-3). On the contrary, Ephesians 1:4 and 5 say, “Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of world to be holy and without blemish before Him in love, predestinating us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.” God’s purpose is to have many sons produced by His life for His corporate expression, which initially is the church, the Body of Christ, and consummately is the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. The ones chosen by God to be holy and predestinated unto sonship all became fallen and sinful, alienated from the life of God and thus unable to participate in God’s eternal intention. However, for the sake of His original purpose, God has redeemed and justified His chosen people and has placed them in a position where He, righteously, can impart Himself into them as life to make them holy, glorious sons for His expression. Justification, although neither God’s purpose nor the center of God’s purpose, is a necessary judicial procedure to bring God’s elect back to Himself and into His eternal purpose. In the mercy and grace of God, we, through justification, have Christ as our righteousness, the right to enjoy eternal life, access into the Triune God as a realm of grace, and the foundation for the experience of Christ. Furthermore, based upon justification unto eternal life, we, in Christ, are one with God for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose

according to the good pleasure of His will, the desire of His heart.

by Ron Kangas

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