

# JOINED BY FAITH TO CHRIST AS RIGHTEOUSNESS: A BIBLICAL PRESENTATION OF JUSTIFICATION

*Who shall bring a charge against God's chosen ones?*

*It is God who justifies.*

(Paul, *To the Romans*, 8:33)

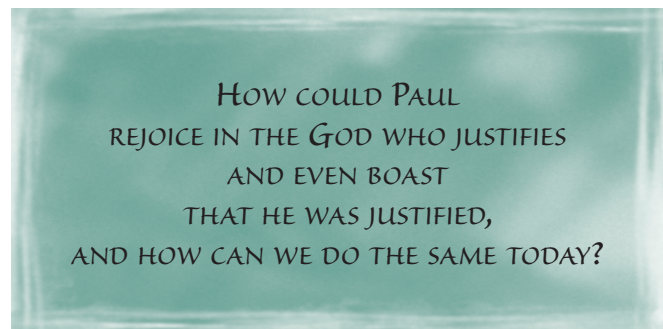
The apostle who trumpeted this truth had discovered the victory of justification, that is, the victory of God the Justifier and of all those justified by Him through faith in Christ. That it is God—and God alone—who justifies stirred the apostle Paul, as it should stir us, to accept, to exult, and to boast in God with all boldness and assurance, for the only One qualified to condemn us, to “bring a charge” against us, has approved us according to His righteousness. Paul was keenly aware that the God who justifies is righteous in all His acts (Psa. 103:6), that righteousness is the foundation of His throne (Psa. 89:14), and that He judges everything according to righteousness. But in reading Romans 8, we get the impression that Paul was not cringing in fearful expectation or wallowing in self-condemnation but rejoicing with exuberance in the righteous God who justifies. How could he rejoice in the God who justifies and even boast that he was justified, and how can we do the same today?

The answer has everything to do with Jesus Christ the Righteous (1 John 2:1), the One who is absolutely righteous in both His divinity and humanity (e.g., Heb. 1:8-9; Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; 1 Pet. 3:18). As God, certainly He is righteous; but as the God-man, He lived a human life of absolute righteousness and suffered death under God’s righteous judgment for our sake, “the Righteous on behalf of the unrighteous” (1 Pet. 3:18), thus satisfying the demand of God’s righteousness and redeeming us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13). This wonderful God-man is the very righteousness of God. God the Father delights in Him (Matt. 3:17) and has approved Him (Rom. 4:24-25). And as incomprehensible as it may seem, God the Father delights in and approves all those who turn from themselves to Jesus Christ and believe into Him, thereby discarding the filthy rags of their own righteousness (Isa. 64:6) and donning Christ Himself as their righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:27). To those who believe into Christ, the Father does something most remarkable

and almost unutterable: He approves the believers as righteous—He justifies them—based on Christ as their righteousness. He makes Christ Himself their righteousness for their justification. One of the wonders of justification, then, is that the believers’ righteousness before God is not a condition or a status that they possess in themselves but a person whom they are joined to, the living Christ Himself. Those who receive Christ are approved by God according to Christ as righteousness. God sees them as righteous, for they have Christ as their righteousness. Their righteousness before God is perfect because the Christ who is their righteousness is perfect, and their righteousness before God is unchanging because the Christ who is their righteousness is unchanging. Those who have laid hold of such a righteousness by laying hold of Christ can surely exult, as the apostle Paul exulted, in the victory of justification and in the God who alone justifies.

Another wonder of justification is that God justifies the believers *through faith in Jesus Christ* (e.g., Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 2:16). This faith is not blind, nor is it a mere assent. The apostles taught that faith in Christ issues in receiving Him through the Spirit (John 1:12; 7:39). Thus, faith ushers those who believe in Christ into an organic union with Him, and God approves them based on their oneness with Christ as righteousness. The Epistles of Paul disclose the relationship between the believers’ union with Christ through faith and their justification in Him, and it is manifest that the apostle’s consideration of justification was enriched and buoyed by his deep knowledge of Christ and of the believers’ union with Him. As his Epistles testify, Paul was intimately familiar with Christ, not in the way of doctrine but in the way of spiritual knowledge and experience. He knew Christ (Phil. 3:8, 10), pursued Christ (Phil. 3:12, 14), aspired to be found in Christ (Phil. 3:9), and even described himself as a man in Christ (2 Cor. 12:2). In Acts 13:39 Paul preaches Christ as the One in whom “everyone who believes is justified.” In 1 Corinthians 1:30 he declares that we who believe are “in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption” and in Romans 8:1 that “there is now then no condemnation to

those who are in Christ Jesus.” Further, in Galatians 2:16-17 he speaks of believing “into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ” and of “seeking to be justified in Christ.” According to the apostle’s profound realization, justification is by faith because faith brings the believers into an organic union with Christ, the righteousness of God. Viewed intrinsically, justification is thus a matter of Christ becoming the believers’ righteousness in their union with Him through faith and of God approving the believers on account of their union with Christ as righteousness. The work of God the Justifier appears all the more wondrous when we realize, as the apostle Paul surely realized, that this work is centrally concerned with bringing fallen but repentant human beings into Christ—through the faith of Jesus Christ—so that in Christ and with Christ as their righteousness they might be approved by the God who “justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).



HOW COULD PAUL  
REJOICE IN THE GOD WHO JUSTIFIES  
AND EVEN BOAST  
THAT HE WAS JUSTIFIED,  
AND HOW CAN WE DO THE SAME TODAY?

The truth concerning God’s justification of the believers by faith is profound and multifaceted. In the presentation that follows we aim to present this truth from the Scriptures as clearly as possible. We will consider several crucial matters related to justification by faith, including the basis and the result of justification, but the heart of our presentation will focus on *how* God justifies the believers. The striking revelation in Scripture is that God justifies the believers “through the faith of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:22), and we will consider in detail how God produces this faith in the believers and why this faith alone justifies them before God (Campbell et al. 1:1-6).

## Justification by Faith as Revealed in the Scriptures

### An Overview

How does God justify those whom He has chosen for salvation? In the way of an overview, we would like to present our understanding of this as completely and yet as succinctly as possible. Then, we can proceed to give in finer detail the biblical motivations for each aspect of this understanding. God’s justification depends on His predestination and His calling. In eternity past He chose some for His glory, and in time He called them to His salvation. But before He could

justify them and in keeping with His own righteousness, He had to deal with the problem of sin with its consequences. Thus, He sent His only begotten Son, and through His Son’s incarnation, human living, and death, God provided propitiation for sins and accomplished the redemption of His chosen ones (though these matters were not the only goal for the sending of His Son). With these as a basis, God, through a multitude of means and in a multitude of ways, calls His chosen ones practically through the preaching of the Word as the gospel. In this preaching He appears to them in the way of glory to attract them to who He is and to what He has done in Christ Jesus. In His appearing He sovereignly illuminates His divine person as the merciful yet righteous God and His divine work to mercifully and righteously forgive the sins of those who believe in His Son. His appearing and their being attracted can be, but need not be, gradual and repeated, but always His glorious shining in the Word of Christ infuses something divine into His chosen ones. Because God shines into them through the Word of Christ, Christ as the Word Himself is infused into them for their appreciation and apprehension. This divine infusion first results in a simple appreciation for Christ as the precious Savior, which grows, often through the further appearing of the God of glory in the repeated Word of the gospel, into belief in and apprehension of God and His work for the believers’ salvation. The Christ who is infused into the believers by the appearing of the God of glory constitutes their believing ability, and thus, the faith infused into them is not a kind of gift that is distinct from God but is Christ Himself as both the source and the object of their believing. Faith is of Jesus Christ and into Jesus Christ. It is not the result of human effort but the action and effect of God in Christ within the believers. This faith substantiates the reality of the Word of the gospel, that is, the Christ given to them from the Father. It is not simply an assent to the truth of the gospel on the part of the believers, though it includes as much, but much more it is the organic union of the believers with Christ by which they possess all that He is for their salvation. God has given Christ as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption to the believers for their full salvation in all its aspects, and of these three, Christ has been given to them as righteousness for their justification. Through God’s infusion into them, the believers are joined to the Christ whom they believe into, and He becomes, among many other things, their righteousness before God. In themselves, apart from Christ, the believers have no righteousness that God can accept for their justification, but through the faith that God has infused into them they are one with the Christ who is righteousness in Himself as both God and man. Since they are inseparable from Christ as righteousness, God accepts the believers in their union with Him and justifies them because they have Him as their righteousness. Thus, justification is God’s accounting Christ as the believers’ righteousness because of their faith, that is, their union with Him.

---

This union, secured by the divine life, the divine power, and the divine promise, is eternal and cannot be dissolved nor will it be revoked, as it is according to God's predestination and calling. While sins have been forgiven, it is not the forgiveness of sins that constitutes their justification. Propitiation and the forgiveness and cleansing of sins take away the barriers to justification but can never be equated with it; otherwise, we would have to admit that human beings are somehow sufficiently righteous in themselves once they are forgiven and cleansed of their sins. The only basis for God's justification of His chosen ones is the righteousness of God Himself, and this must be given by Him and taken hold of by them. He gives Christ as His righteousness to the believers for their justification, and through faith they lay hold of Christ as their righteousness and are accordingly justified by Him. God's justification in its most narrow meaning as that which is objective to the believers—that is, not of themselves but purely because of their union through faith with Christ as righteousness—is complete and once for all. It is the action of God to approve His chosen ones according to the standard of His righteousness through their union with Christ as righteousness. That union will ultimately transform His chosen ones to such an extent that they will eventually fully experience and fully express Christ as their subjective righteousness—that is, as the righteousness of their thoughts, words, and deeds that incorporate Him as the righteousness of God and never apart from Him as such. However, the certain and secure fruition of righteousness as subjective justification is not the basis of God's initial justification objectively, nor does He need to include it in His view as He justifies His chosen ones initially. Christ alone, given as righteousness by God through grace and possessed as righteousness by His chosen ones through faith, is the sole ground and reason for their initial and objective justification by Him (Campbell et al. 1:11-13).

### *Justification by Faith through the Redemption Which Is in Christ Jesus*

Objective justification is God's action of approving people according to His standard of righteousness, and Paul consistently argues that this justification is by faith and not by works. In Romans he says, "We account that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Rom. 3:28). Likewise, in Galatians he writes, "A man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). In his earliest recorded preaching in Acts, Paul had already taught that justification is by faith and not by works (Acts 13:38-39); however, he was forced to contend strongly for this basic truth of the gospel when some began to teach that salvation depends on adherence to the Jewish law (Gal. 2:12-16). Consequently, in his Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans, he needed to demonstrate why works of law cannot justify and why justification is by faith. These two

concerns guide Paul's exposition of justification in Romans 3 and 4, and they will guide the presentation of objective justification offered in this section.

In Romans 3:23-24 Paul identifies both sin and falling short of the glory of God as reasons for the need of justification: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." The thought in these verses is that fallen human beings need to be justified by God not only because they have sinned but also because they cannot meet the requirement of His glory. This requirement of God's glory is made plain in the subsequent verses where Paul draws on the Old Testament image of expiation and shows that justification occurs on Christ as the propitiation place. In verse 25 Christ is the One "whom God set forth as a propitiation place...for the demonstrating of His righteousness." This propitiation place is typified by the expiation cover above the Ark in the tabernacle (Exo. 25:17). According to Exodus 25:22 God met with the high priest, a representative of the Israelites, at the Ark, which contained the law of the Ten Commandments, and spoke with him "from between the two cherubim" on the expiation cover. Hebrews 9:3-5 locates the Ark in the Holy of Holies, a realm of God's holiness, and identifies these cherubim with God's glory when it refers to them as the "cherubim of glory overshadowing the expiation cover." Thus, whenever the high priest came to contact God, he met not only the requirements of God's holiness (indicated by the location of the Ark) and righteousness (embodied in the tablets of law within the Ark) but also the requirement of God's glory (signified by the cherubim overarching the Ark) (Rom. 7:12; Exo. 25:18; Heb. 9:5). This implies that all contact with God was governed by a threefold requirement of righteousness, holiness, and glory. Drawing on this image, Paul in Romans 3 indicates that even if we could fulfill the law, we would not be justified, because we still would not meet the requirement of God's glory, not to mention the requirement of God's own righteousness (Rom. 3:23).

Paul stresses that only God's righteousness can meet the standard of His glory, and he consistently contrasts this righteousness with the righteousness of the law. In Philippians 3 Paul identifies two kinds of righteousness: "my own righteousness which is out of the law" and "the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith" (Phil. 3:9). Paul claims that "as to the righteousness which is in the law," he had, even before his conversion, "become blameless" (Phil. 3:6). Nevertheless, he accounted his attainment in the law as nothing in relation to the righteousness which is out of God. In Romans 10 he again contrasts our own righteousness with God's, this time placing them in opposition. Concerning Israel's attempt to obtain righteousness through works of law, Paul states, "Because they were ignorant of



God's righteousness and sought to establish *their own righteousness*, they were not subject to *the righteousness of God*" (Rom. 10:3; emphasis added). *Their own righteousness* refers to the "righteousness...out of the law," which involves performing human work (Rom. 10:5); *the righteousness of God* refers to the "righteousness...out of faith," which involves receiving a person—the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Christ—through believing (Rom. 10:6-9). Like the Israelites, anyone who seeks to establish human righteousness by keeping the law is not subject to Christ as the righteousness of God and thus misses the way of God's salvation. For it is Christ, the person, with all He is and has accomplished, who meets the requirements of God's glory, and it is only by obtaining Him as righteousness that we can be justified and saved (Rom. 10:11, 13).

In Romans 3 Paul shows more specifically that by meeting God's threefold requirement of righteousness, holiness, and glory, Christ with His redemption is the unique and free provision that enables God to justify us. Romans 3:24 reads, "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." God justifies freely without the requirement of human work. Instead, all that is required for our justification was accomplished by God in Christ and given freely by His grace. In Jesus Christ, God gained a human being who not only knew no sin but also lived a life that fulfilled the requirements of God's righteousness, met the standard of God's holiness, and satisfied the expression of God's glory (2 Cor. 5:21; Acts 3:14; 22:14; 13:35; John 1:14). Such a One was fully qualified to offer Himself as our redemptive sacrifice (1 Pet. 1:18-19; Gal. 3:13; Titus 2:14). Thus, Christ's death on the cross and the eternal redemption that He obtained by His blood serve as the judicial basis for God to justify the believers (Heb. 9:12-14; Rom. 5:18). Moreover, since God was satisfied with Christ's death on behalf of fallen sinners, He raised our Lord Jesus from the dead (Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 3:18). In Romans 4:25 Paul says that Jesus Christ "was delivered for our offenses and was raised for our justification." Christ's resurrection, therefore, is the proof and assurance of our justification.

Justification is by faith because faith receives Christ with all that He is and has accomplished. By faith the believers approve of God, affirm His condemnation of fallen humankind, and receive His gift of grace in Christ (Rom. 3:4; Eph. 2:8). Rather than trying to fulfill God's promise by their own effort, the believers receive God's promise by faith as Abraham learned to do: "He [Abraham] considered his own body as already dead, being about a hundred years old, as well as the deadening of Sarah's womb; but with regard to the promise of God, he did not doubt in unbelief, but was empowered by faith,...being fully persuaded that what He had promised He was able also to do" (Rom. 4:19-21). Abraham had previously attempted to fulfill God's promise by

his own labor (Gen. 16). But he eventually learned to simply believe that God would fulfill what He Himself had promised, and Isaac was born "at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him" (Gen. 21:2). Abraham's experience suggests that faith believes that what we are, what we have, and what we can do are nothing. Only God is, only His speaking will come to pass, and only what He does can fulfill His promise. This is the faith accounted as righteousness, the faith that believes that God is and that we are not (Rom. 4:21-22; cf. Heb. 11:6).

The record of Abraham's faith being accounted as righteousness "was not written for his sake only...but for ours also to whom it is to be accounted, who believe on Him who has raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom. 4:23-24). Thus, Paul applies the example of Abraham to the New Testament believers and draws a parallel between Abraham's faith regarding Isaac and the believers' faith in Christ. In Romans 10 Paul tells us that the only condition for a fallen human being to be justified is to believe and receive Christ:

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart there is believing unto righteousness, and with the mouth there is confession unto salvation. (Rom. 10:9-10)

Justification is by faith, not by works. By works we seek to establish our own righteousness; by faith we are subject to God's righteousness. By works we boast in what we can do; by faith we approve of what God has done (Rom. 4:2; 3:4). By works we offer something to God; by faith we receive God's Christ as our righteousness. The sole condition for a fallen sinner to approach the God of righteousness, holiness, and glory is to believe in the resurrected Christ and to confess that He is Lord (Campbell et al. 1:13-16).

### *Faith Being Produced by the Transfusion of Christ*

Having seen that justification is by faith, it is profitable to ask two questions. First, what is faith? And second, how does a human being come to have faith? Paul's focus on Abraham as the example of justification by faith and Stephen's account of the origin of Abraham's faith suggest that the answers to these questions are evident in Abraham's story. Furthermore, the answers are confirmed and elaborated in Paul's account of the apostles' experiences as described in the New Testament.

Before God accounted Abraham's faith as righteousness, He appeared to Abraham a number of times. In the book of Acts Stephen recounts the history of Israel to his persecutors before they stone him to death, and he includes an important detail in Abraham's experience: "The God of glory

appeared to our father Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran" (Acts 7:2). In Mesopotamia, where he and his family "served other gods" (Josh. 24:2), Abraham lived in ignorance of the true God, but it was there that the God of glory appeared to him and said, "Come out from your land and from your relatives, and come into the land which I will show you" (Acts 7:3). After that appearing, God appeared to Abraham in Haran and at least three more times in Canaan, as narrated in Genesis (Gen. 11:32–12:4, 6-7; 13:14-17; 15:1-7). At the consummation of all those encounters Abraham believed God, and God accounted Abraham's believing as righteousness, as we saw above. Our focus here is to see what happened in God's repeated appearing that caused Abraham to have faith in Him, and why Stephen specifically designated God as the God of *glory* in His appearing to Abraham.

The Bible does not indicate that Abraham was seeking the true God while in Mesopotamia or that he had any capacity in himself to believe in Him; nonetheless, the unsolicited and repeated appearing of the God of glory elicited from Abraham the reaction of faith. The more God appeared to Abraham—in Mesopotamia, in Haran, and in Canaan—the more the shining of God radiated into him. This shining of the God of glory produced the faith by which Abraham responded "by faith...to go out unto a place which he was to receive as an inheritance" and to dwell "as a foreigner in the land of promise as in a foreign land" (Heb. 11:8-9). The issue of God's shining was faith as Abraham's reaction to God's attraction. Faith was not a product of anything in Abraham; rather, it was the result of God radiating Himself into Abraham to become his believing ability.

This experience is not unique to Abraham; it is also evidenced in the experience of the apostles and described by them as the experience of all believers. In the New Testament Paul writes that the apostles experienced the radiating of God: "Because the God who said, Out of darkness light shall shine, is the One who shined in our hearts to illuminate the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). In the context of this verse, Paul makes a comparison between the face of Moses and the face of Jesus Christ. The glory of the old covenant that shined on the face of Moses was a fading glory, and it shined superficially, only on the skin of Moses' face (Exo. 34:29-33; 2 Cor. 3:7, 13); conversely, the glory that radiates in the face of Jesus Christ is an eternal glory, shining in the human heart. The glory of God manifested in the face of Jesus Christ is the God of glory expressed through Jesus Christ, and it is Jesus Christ as the effulgence of God's glory.

As ministers of the new covenant, the apostles lived and preached the gospel of Christ as "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God" (1 Tim. 1:11), the gospel of the One who

called them "by His own glory" (2 Pet. 1:3). Paul asserts that Satan blinds the thoughts of the unbelievers "that the illumination of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, might not shine on them" (2 Cor. 4:4). The apostles' testimony was not that they preached doctrines about Christ but that in their living and preaching they illuminated others with Christ as the One who had shined in their own hearts. Apart from that illumination, the hearers of the gospel cannot contact God, who dwells in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). By that illumination, they receive God in Christ, just as one receives the sun in the heat and light of its rays. Paul understood his ministry to be an enlightening of others (Acts 26:18; Eph. 1:18; 3:9), and our gospel preaching should be the same today—not the mere preaching of doctrines about Christ but the shining forth of Christ Himself, the glory of God, in the living and preaching of genuine new covenant ministers. When unbelievers contact such ministers, they receive the shining, the enlightening, of divine glory, which transfuses them with God as faith to be their ability to believe in His crucified and resurrected Son.

WHAT HAPPENED IN GOD'S  
REPEATED APPEARING THAT CAUSED  
ABRAHAM TO HAVE FAITH IN HIM,  
AND WHY DID STEPHEN SPECIFICALLY  
DESIGNATE GOD AS THE GOD OF GLORY  
IN HIS APPEARING TO ABRAHAM?

In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul writes, "So faith comes out of hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). To hear the word of Christ is not to hear something separate from Christ, for Christ is the Word of God, the definition, explanation, and expression of God (John 1:1, 14, 18; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 19:13). By linking the word, hearing, and faith, Paul identifies a crucial transaction between God and man, even a transmission from God to man, in which Christ as the living Word of God and the reality of faith is conveyed to and infused into hearers through the preaching of the written Word of God, the Bible. It is the glorious commission given to God's redeemed to preach the gospel, that is, to proclaim the Bible's revelation of the beautiful Christ, thereby infusing others with Christ as the source of faith. As Paul writes in Romans 10:14, "How then shall they call upon Him into whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe into Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without one who proclaims Him?" The source of faith, therefore, is not us but Christ, the Word of God imparted through the preaching of the gospel.

We can crystallize the understanding of faith presented here by attending to the much debated phrase *the faith of Jesus (Christ)* in Romans 3:22 and 26 and Galatians 2:16 and 3:22. The Greek phrase πίστις Ἰησοῦ (Χριστοῦ) (*pistis Iēsou [Christou]*) is commonly translated “faith in Jesus (Christ)” in these verses, but Paul elsewhere captures the notion of faith in Christ with the Greek preposition ἐν (*en*, ‘in’) (Gal. 3:26; Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4; 1 Tim. 3:13; 2 Tim. 3:15), suggesting that his use of the genitive case (i.e., ‘of Jesus Christ’ in Greek) in these instances is with a particular and different purpose. Depending on the context, a single instance of the genitive case can imply meanings that include agent, object, and even means and element. But the genitive case can also have an appositive sense (e.g., *city of Antioch* denotes the city that is Antioch), and thus it is legitimate to understand *faith of Jesus Christ* to indicate Jesus Christ as faith, as Paul may have intended. Adolf Deissmann argues that *the faith of Jesus (Christ)* is yet another instance of what he has termed “the mystical genitive” (*Religion* 177-178, 250). The faith of Jesus Christ is, according to Deissmann, “the faith which lives in Paul in the fellowship with the spiritual Christ” (205-207). Taken together, these appositional and mystical senses comport with the understanding of faith that we have presented in this section to convey that Christ is joined to us to become our faith, our believing ability. Our faith, therefore, is not of ourselves. It is the faith of Jesus Christ in this fuller sense of the phrase (Campbell et al. 1:16-19).

### *Faith Ushering the Believers into an Organic Union with Christ*

The faith of the New Testament believers does not have Christ as simply its origin; this faith also has Christ as its destination. Faith is not only produced by the transfusion of Christ into the believers through the preaching of the gospel; faith also ushers the believers into an organic union with Christ. To be a Christian, according to the New Testament, is to be *in Christ*. Paul uses the phrase *in Christ* eighty-two times, and if we include the various related phrases (e.g., *in Him*), that number exceeds one hundred sixty, the vast majority of which speak of the believers being in Christ (Deissmann, *Neutestamentliche Formel* 1-2). The believers have not been metaphorically placed in Christ, as is often supposed. To be “in Christ” is not simply to be under Christ’s reign or to be in covenant with Christ or to be empowered by Christ. Given the way Paul uses this peculiar idiom, we take him to mean that the believers are literally placed by God into Christ as a realm for their existence, life, and service. Paul refers to himself as “a man in Christ” (2 Cor. 12:2). His deepest longing was to be “found in Him” (Phil. 3:9). The believers, too, are “in Christ” (Rom. 16:7), first as infants “in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1), exhorted by Paul to grow up “into Him” (Eph. 4:15), to walk “in Him” (Col. 2:6),

and to live godly “in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:12) until they finally fall asleep “in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:18). Paul was not the first to describe the Christian life as a life in Christ. Shortly before His glorification, the Lord promised His disciples, “In that day,” the day of His resurrection, “you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20). He also told them the way to enter into Him: “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe into God, believe also into Me” (John 14:1).

The New Testament charges us, of course, to believe many things about Christ—that He is (John 8:24); that He is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31); that He came forth from the Father (John 16:27) and was sent by the Father (John 17:21); that He died and rose (1 Thes. 4:14)—but it more often charges us to believe *in* (ἐν, *en*) Him and, more strongly, to believe *into* (εἰς, *eis*) Him. Indeed, the stronger *into* is the preferred utterance for the Lord’s speaking in the Gospel of John, at least as it comes down to us in Greek. While some may be tempted to interpret *believe into* as equivalent to *believe in*, the prominence of each phrase compels us to maintain the distinction and understand the former in its root sense: to believe *into* Christ is to move into, that is, to enter into Christ by believing. With the sole exception of “His name” (John 1:12), the New Testament never speaks of believing *into* anything or anyone other than a divine person (typically Christ, though sometimes “God” more generally), and given the close biblical connection between the divine persons and their names, this should come as no surprise.

Just as the Lord charges us to *believe into* Him, so the apostles speak of *faith into* Christ. The faith of the New Testament believers, then, is not only the faith *of* Christ (πίστις Χριστοῦ, *pistis Christou*), as discussed in the previous section; this faith is also faith *into* (πίστις εἰς, *pistis eis*) Christ (cf. Acts 20:21; 24:24; 26:18; Col. 2:5). Faith is *of* Christ because it has Christ as its source; faith is *into* Christ because it has Christ as its destination. Faith is *of* Christ because it issues forth from the Christ imparted into the believers through the preaching of the gospel; faith is *into* Christ because it ushers the believers into Christ as a realm for their living and service. Faith is *of* Christ because He is infused into the believers; faith is *into* Christ because, by it, the believers are brought into Him. Paul puts these two functions of faith together in Galatians 2:16, which can literally be rendered: “We also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of the faith of Christ.” By means of the faith of Christ—the faith generated by the Christ transfused into us—we believe into Christ; that is, we enter into Him.

The faith of the New Testament believers, then, brings them into a relationship of mutual indwelling with Christ. The



various physical images to which the Lord and the apostles liken this union attest to the realism with which they understood it. According to the Gospel of John, Christ is the vine, and the believers are His branches (John 15:5). According to the Epistles of Paul, He is the Head, and the believers are His members (1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12). According to Peter, He is a living stone, and the believers are living stones being built into a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:4-5). How were the Gentiles grafted into Christ to become branches of the vine? Paul tells us that some in Israel were broken off “because of unbelief” and that the Gentiles were grafted in because they “stand by faith” (Rom. 11:20). How do they come to Him, a living stone, to be built up as living stones into a spiritual house? “For it is contained in Scripture: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a cornerstone, chosen and precious; and he who believes on Him shall by no means be put to shame’” (1 Pet. 2:6). Faith believes many things revealed by God. Faith trusts in God and His promises. But in the deepest sense, faith brings the believers into union with Christ. Given the

THE NEW TESTAMENT  
CHARGES US TO BELIEVE  
MANY THINGS ABOUT CHRIST—  
BUT IT MORE OFTEN CHARGES US  
TO BELIEVE IN HIM AND, MORE STRONGLY,  
TO BELIEVE INTO HIM.

organic images employed by John, Paul, and Peter (i.e., vine, Body, and house of living stones), we can say that faith’s most intrinsic work is to usher the believers into an organic union with Christ. It is this uniting character of faith that supplies the deepest rationale for justification being “by faith.” It is certainly the case that justification involves an accounting, but justification is not by accounting alone. Justification is by faith alone, and it is by faith alone because faith ushers us into an organic union with Christ, the righteous One (1 Pet. 3:18).

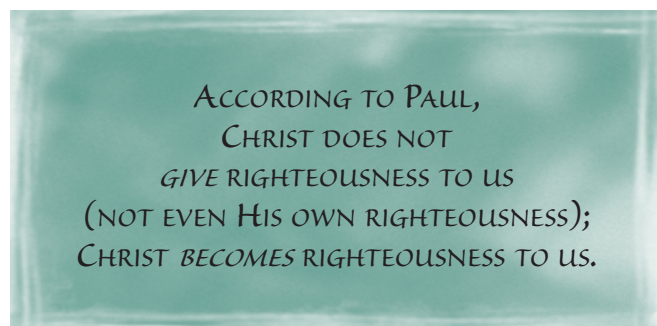
Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that God has given us the righteousness of Christ as something apart from Christ Himself. Instead, it tells us that God has put us in Christ and thus made Christ Himself our righteousness: “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). According to Paul, Christ does not *give* righteousness to us (not even His own righteousness); Christ *becomes* righteousness to us. We are not justified by a righteousness inherent in us that is merely produced by Christ. Neither are we justified by a righteousness external to us that is merely transferred to us before the divine

tribunal. Rather, the righteousness by which we are justified is Christ Himself, the divine and human person with all that He is and has done. Even if God were to make us wholly righteous within and, in addition, transfer Christ’s perfect fulfillment of the law to our account, we would not, thereby, be justified unless the Father, beyond both of these, organically united us with Christ as our righteousness. Conversely, even if God does no more (or, rather, no less) than unite us organically with Christ as righteousness, we have all that we need for our justification before Him. To insist on anything additional as necessary for justification betrays an inadequate appreciation of the significance of our union with Christ. In Christ alone are we approved of the Father. Christ the person and Christ alone is our righteousness for initial, objective justification.

This close relationship between union and justification is helpfully illustrated by a number of Old Testament types. In the Old Testament, salvation is often associated with particular physical locations. On the Day of Expiation the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies to meet with God at the expiation cover on the Ark of the Covenant. As we saw above, Paul tells us that Christ is this place of God’s forgiveness: “Whom God set forth as a propitiation place through faith in His blood” (Rom. 3:25). Only in Christ are God’s forgiveness and justification secured. In a similar vein, Noah and his family were saved by entering into the ark and passing through the flood, which Peter tells us is a type of the baptism that consummates our union with Christ (1 Pet. 3:21). On various other occasions, God requires that His people be in a particular place for forgiveness, justification, and salvation, typifying that the New Testament believers receive these blessings only because they are, by faith, in Christ (e.g., Exo. 12:7; Num. 35:11, 25).

The close connection between union with the person of Christ and the application of the work of Christ is clearly seen in the sacrificial ordinances of Israel. The children of Israel were not only charged to offer sacrifices, which are a clear type of the Christ who would come (Heb. 7:27); they were also instructed repeatedly to lay their hands on the head of these sacrifices (Exo. 29:10, 15, 19; Lev. 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; 8:14, 18, 22; 16:21). The offerer was to do this so that the offering might be “accepted for him, to make expiation for him” (Lev. 1:4). The sacrifice could serve as a substitute because the offerer and the sacrifice had been identified by the laying on of hands. All substitutionary functions of the sacrifices of Israel, in other words, were based on an identification between the offerings and those who offered them. The most detailed account of this, on the negative side, is seen in the ordinances regarding the Day of Expiation (Lev. 16). In this case two goats were involved, the first offered to Jehovah as a sin offering (Lev. 16:9) and the second “sent away for Azazel into the wilderness”

(Lev. 16:10). The identity of Azazel need not detain us here. The important point to note is that, before the second goat was sent away, Aaron laid his hands on its head: "Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them on the head of the goat" (Lev. 16:21). The laying on of hands secured the transfer of sin to the goat. In some other cases in the Old Testament, the offerer not only laid hands on the sacrifice but received the blood of the sacrifice upon him and ate its flesh (Lev. 8:23-31), an even stronger intimation of the organic union between Christ and the believer. Surely, in justification, a transfer of sin and righteousness transpires, but this transfer is not executed at a distance; it is based upon a union of persons.



Perhaps the most consistent biblical theme along these lines is that of covering garments, seen in both the Old and the New Testaments. In the Bible, garments often signify conduct: "All of us became like him who is unclean, and all our righteousnesses are like a soiled garment" (Isa. 64:6). God justifies us not by ignoring our garments, charging us to clean them, or even cleansing them Himself. Instead, God justifies by giving us new garments: "Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and was standing before the Angel. And He answered and spoke to those standing before Him, saying, Remove the filthy garments from him. Then He said to him, See, I hereby make your iniquity pass from you and clothe you with stately robes" (Zech. 3:3-4). Isaiah thus jubilantly declares, "I will rejoice greatly in Jehovah, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10). From the very beginning, after Adam's fall into sin, God came in not simply to forgive but to cover. Adam and Eve covered themselves with leaves, but God came in to cover them with "coats of skin" (Gen. 3:7, 21). The Lord, too, draws on this image of the covering garment. In Luke 15, when the prodigal son returns to his father's house, declaring, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you," the father responds, "Bring out quickly the best robe and put it on him" (Luke 15:21-22). Likewise, Paul tells the Galatians, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ

have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:26-27). The believers are righteous in the sight of God because they have put on Christ as their garment of righteousness by their faith and baptism into Him. Paul was clear that the righteousness with which God clothes His believers is nothing less than God Himself in Christ, and in this he followed the prophets before him: "In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called: Jehovah our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6) (Campbell et al. 1:19-25).

### *The Result of Justification*

God's objective justification of the believers—based on their organic union with Christ as righteousness—produces a number of wonderful results. Here we present three results that we feel are especially precious and essential to the believers in their daily Christian life. As those who have been justified by faith, the believers can experience full peace in their conscience, boast in God with all boldness, and enter into grace for the enjoyment of God in His organic salvation. All three of these results are evident in Romans 5.

One result of our justification by faith is that we can experience full peace in our conscience. This is indicated in Romans 5:1: "Therefore having been justified out of faith, we have peace toward God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The peace mentioned here issues from our justification by faith. It flows from our realization that Christ's death on the cross satisfied all of God's requirements and solved every problem between us and God. In Christ we have been forgiven, washed, and justified by God; reconciled to God; and sanctified unto God. This peace also flows from our recognition that God raised Christ from the dead "for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). Christ's resurrection stills our doubts and proves that we have been justified by God because of Christ's death. The peace that we enjoy is thus a genuine and stable peace, one that follows from our realization that our sins have been forgiven and that we have been approved in Christ.

Our inward sense of peace with God is bolstered by our recognition that the eternal salvation we have received in Christ is certain and secure. The certainty of our salvation is proved by the Spirit's inward witness that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), by the scriptural promise that all who believe into Christ have eternal life (1 John 5:13), and by our love for our fellow believers in Christ (1 John 3:14). We can thus know with full assurance that we are saved. Moreover, we can know that our salvation is eternally secure because it is according to God's unchanging purpose (2 Tim. 1:9), irrevocable calling (Rom. 11:29), eternal love (Jer. 31:3; Rom. 8:38-39) and life (John 10:28), and even His unchanging being (James 1:17; Mal. 3:6). The unchanging



---

character of our eternal salvation thus reflects the unchanging character and purpose of our Savior God. The security of our eternal salvation rests altogether on our unchanging God, not on our inward feeling or even our inward assurance of salvation—both of which tend to fluctuate.

A second result of our justification by faith is that we can boast in God and His approval of us. Romans 5:11 speaks of “boasting in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.” In the context of Romans 5 boasting denotes glorying and exulting with shouting and rejoicing. As those who are in Christ, and are thus partakers of all that He is and has accomplished, how can we refrain from glorying and exulting in God? God has given us Christ Himself as our righteousness! This divine fact should elicit much praise and rejoicing in our daily Christian life. As those clothed with Christ, we should stand before the righteous God with all boldness, not based on our merit, conduct, or feeling but based solely on Christ our righteousness. Our boldness in approaching God derives from our apprehension of who Christ is and who we are in Him. We have no confidence in ourselves apart from Christ, but we have the utmost confidence in Christ and in our union with Him. We thus approach God and boast in Him because we realize, as our brother Paul realized, that of Him we “are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

A third result of our justification by faith is that we are ushered into grace for the enjoyment of God. This result is indicated in Romans 5:1-2, which says, “Having been justified out of faith,...we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.” Through faith we enter into a realm of grace. As we stand in grace, we are saved in Christ’s life (Rom. 5:10) and are thereby ushered into the organic aspect of God’s full salvation. Although justification by faith is not God’s goal, it is the gate through which we enter into the organic aspect of salvation for the accomplishment of God’s goal. Apart from the justification by faith defined and illustrated in Romans 3—4, we could not experience the riches of God’s organic salvation unveiled in the subsequent chapters of Romans. We therefore treasure justification by faith as a foundational truth in the Scriptures. Even more, we treasure our Father God, the One who justifies us (Rom. 8:33), and our Lord Jesus Christ, the One in whom we are justified (Acts 13:39) (Campbell et al. 1:25-27).

### Clarifications on Objective Justification

In the articles to follow we will examine the progress in the understanding of justification throughout the centuries of the Christian church after the time of the apostles. We will find many things that match what we have presented

in this article as the biblical understanding of justification, and we will encounter many things that deviate from this proper understanding. While the details of our historical evaluation must constitute the articles to follow, there are certain general clarifications about our view of justification that should be made in advance. We hope that these general points will help our readers winnow more ably the wheat from the chaff in all that we will present in the following articles. Mainly these are clarifications about what justification is not, offered here in brief after the rather extensive presentation above of what justification is. If there can be one overall evaluation of the entire history that we will trace, it is this: objective justification, as we have termed it here, relates singly, solely, and narrowly to God’s action to render His chosen ones righteous by faith, and any attempt to extend it beyond this understanding has introduced confusion and ultimately deviation. As we wade into the details of development and deviation across the centuries, it is good for our readers to be cognizant of the clarifications we offer below since these clarifications address some misconceptions that have persisted stubbornly for centuries and some that lie as hidden obstacles today (Campbell et al. 1:43-44).

### *Objective Justification is Not Forgiveness of Sins, nor Is It Applied in Baptism*

God justifies the believers solely because by faith they are joined to Christ and possess Christ as their righteousness before Him. Thus, God justifies the believers according to the standard of His own righteousness. But across the centuries many have understood justification as something related simply to sins and have therefore equated justification with the forgiveness of sins. According to this view, if a believer’s sins are forgiven, then that person is righteous before God. Hence, righteousness is the absence of sins. The concept seems logical enough, and it is easy to see how this view came to be adopted even in the earliest centuries after the first apostles and how tenacious it has been even to this day. It is quite natural to think that if a person has never sinned, he or she is righteous before God. And by extension it seems reasonable to assume that if someone sins and then has his or her sins truly forgiven by God, he or she is righteous before God and can be justified by Him. The absence of sins, either in one’s living (though not actually possible) or through God’s forgiveness, certainly suggests itself as righteousness, and we can expect that in human eyes it is. But how human beings view righteousness is not what matters, because “it is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33), and it is not human beings who determine what justifies before God. Thus, the question is, what is the righteousness that satisfies God and gives Him the way to justify human beings in His own eyes and according to His own standard?

The apostle Paul makes this distinction between a righteousness of our own and a righteousness according to God. In Philippians 3:7-11, in what is no doubt the unique passage in his writings (Lee, *Life-study of Philippians* 203-204) concerning his highest aspirations as a believer, he expressed the earnest desire 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 out of God and based on faith” (Phil. 3:9). In his former manner of life as a devout keeper of the Mosaic law, Paul’s standard of righteousness was determined completely by the law. The law through its many ordinances commanded him how to live, and the law through its prescribed sacrifices provided the way for the forgiveness of his failures in keeping the law. But by the mercy of God and through the revelation given to him by God, Paul came to know that the law could give only knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20) and offer a righteousness that is only of itself. Further, by revelation he understood that “the righteousness which is in the law”

AS THOSE WHO ARE IN CHRIST,  
AND ARE THUS PARTAKERS OF  
ALL THAT HE IS AND HAS ACCOMPLISHED,  
HOW CAN WE REFRAIN FROM  
GLORYING AND EXULTING IN GOD?

(Phil. 3:6) is not the righteousness that God accepts; it is not “the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith.” In Philippians 3:9 Paul is directly referring to his aspiration for subjective righteousness, which is God Himself lived out to be righteousness through faith in Christ (Lee, Recovery Version, Phil. 3:9, note 5) and which he had not yet fully attained to (Phil. 3:12). But the principle for the righteousness that God accepts is clearly articulated here and most certainly obtains as well in the experience of objective justification: the righteousness that God accepts cannot be of the law (Gal. 2:21; 3:21); it must be out of God Himself and based on faith in Christ. Even if Paul had been able to keep every commandment of the law, which he was not able to do, and even if he could count himself blameless through the covering of the sacrifices of the law, that is, even if he obtained the forgiveness of his sins against the law, he could not be justified by God according to His own standard. God requires a righteousness that is apart from the law, a righteousness that is in fact His own righteousness embodied in Christ, and only those who believe in Christ and are thereby joined to Christ are justified according to God’s own standard. The forgiveness of sins may bring a person into blamelessness, and this may be righteousness

in our eyes and according to our own satisfaction. However, God is righteous in a unique way, and to be justified by Him requires an answer to His own standard of righteousness. The standard is indeed too high and absolutely unreachable for any human being, whether he or she keeps the law completely (impossible!) or is forgiven for not doing so (what mercy!). Apart from what we may try to do to reach the standard, God instead gives His Christ to us as righteousness when we believe and are brought into an organic union with Him. This far surpasses the human concept about righteousness and is indeed the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30).

This is not to say that justification has nothing to do with forgiveness of sins. The many facets of God’s complete salvation work together in unison, and what is distinctly one facet is always related to what is distinctly another. All facets of God’s salvation are related to the attributes of God (cf. Rom. 3:23), and thus, His operations to save are as intimately related to one another as are His attributes within Him. The writers of the New Testament clearly understood this relational quality among the distinct facets of salvation but certainly not within modern systematic frameworks. Rather, their understanding was derived from the divine revelation that they received and corresponded to the realities that they experienced as ones who were shown mercy to see and experience these things first for the sake of all of us. The revelation they received was complete, and their experience was holistic. Because of this, they easily speak of one facet of salvation in close relation to another, and sometimes from our perspective it is easy to lose sight of the distinctions among the facets.

This seems to be the reason for the identification of forgiveness of sins with justification by some teachers across the centuries. For example, in Romans 5:9 Paul says that we have been “justified in His blood,” and without doubt, the mention of Christ’s blood points to His death for the forgiveness of sins. But we need not see in this compressed statement an equivalence of justification and forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is necessary for our justification, but it is not the essence of it. We do not become righteous, at the standard of God’s righteousness, simply by having our sins forgiven. Rather, because our sins are forgiven through our faith in Christ and His death, we are able to be joined to Christ in that faith and to possess Him as the righteousness that justifies us before God. Thus, certainly we are “justified in His blood” since His death for the forgiveness of our sins opens the way for us to possess Him as our righteousness. Yet it is not forgiveness of sins but faith possessing Christ as righteousness that justifies us before God.

Similarly, in Romans 3:24-26 Paul shows in a very uncom-pressed way that justification, while related to forgiveness

---

of sins, is distinct from it. In verse 24 he says that the believers are “justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” He then explains what God has done to set Christ forth for the propitiation of sins. Some may take Paul to mean here that justification equals forgiveness of sins, but this is not what he is saying. Justification is “through the redemption,” and the propitiation of sins is “for the demonstrating of His righteousness.” In speaking this way, Paul clearly distinguishes between justification and forgiveness. God holds Himself to His own righteousness (as He must according to His own being) when He forgives sins because of the death of His Son, but this does not justify the believer. Rather, it demonstrates that God is righteous; in a sense, it justifies God before the entire universe. But He justifies the believer, that is, He recognizes that the believer is righteous, because the believer is “of the faith of Jesus,” and this faith is not simply assent to Christ but, more intrinsically, union with Him, who is the believer’s righteousness. Justification is certainly through the forgiveness of sins, but it is not identical with it.

Romans 4:6-8 has also been used by some to identify justification with forgiveness of sins. In verse 6 Paul says that David “speaks blessing on the man to whom God accounts righteousness apart from works,” and then in verses 7 and 8 Paul quotes Psalm 32:1-2, which speaks of the forgiveness of sins. Some understand Paul to be saying that when God forgives sins, He accounts righteousness; that is, He justifies. But Paul’s whole point in Romans 4 is that God justifies because of faith apart from works, not because of forgiveness of sins. Abraham is the prime example of one who believed God and whose faith was accounted as righteousness, as Paul relates in this chapter, and in the example of Abraham forgiveness of sins is not involved at all. But Paul also offers David’s psalm as an additional example of the same principle, that is, of God accounting someone’s faith as righteousness. It is not the forgiveness of sins itself that God accounts as righteousness, according to the flow and sense of Paul’s argument here; rather, it is the faith in God who forgives sins that is accounted as righteousness. We must read this citation from David as an additional example of God accounting faith as righteousness and not as God equating forgiveness of sins as righteousness. The blessedness spoken of here relies on the faith that those ones have in God’s forgiveness of their sins, and though David does not mention faith or believing explicitly, the apostle Paul invites us to understand that faith is implicitly present and that David’s words are an additional proof that God accounts faith as righteousness for our justification. To take Paul’s use of David’s words as a proof that forgiveness of sins equals justification is to read too narrowly and to miss the point of Paul’s quotation entirely.

Finally, a brief word should be said about baptism in relation to justification because in many Christian traditions

baptism is also equated with the forgiveness of sins, and that equivalence leads to the mistaken notion that justification occurs in baptism. In the New Testament, baptism is said to be “for forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; cf. Acts 2:38), and based on this, many traditions understand baptism to be the sacramental application of the initial forgiveness of sins. The early church’s misstep concerning infant baptism served only to reinforce this notion. Once the forgiveness of initial sins was closely bound to the sacrament of baptism, it was but a small leap to bind justification to baptism, based again on misunderstanding justification as simply the forgiveness of sins. When the New Testament mentions baptism for forgiveness of sins, it does so in relation to repentance as the condition and forgiveness of sins as the result (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38). While some traditions may be able to forego conscious repentance in the infants whom they baptize and to expect that original sin is effaced in baptism, our consciences will not allow us to believe that sins are forgiven without conscious and deliberate repentance or to say that baptism equals forgiveness. Rather, we are bound to understand that in the most effective preaching of the gospel, as seen in Peter’s preaching in Acts 2, repentance is an inward condition that leads to immediate baptism as an outward testimony, “the appeal of a good conscience unto God” (1 Pet. 3:21). While it is best that one be baptized immediately when he or she believes and repents, we should be careful not to equate baptism with forgiveness of sins (or with regeneration particularly and salvation generally). Taking the matter one step further, we should be careful not to think that baptism is a sacramental application of justification based on the forgiveness of sins, as though we could be justified through some outward action. Again, only faith, as that which joins us to Christ and makes Him our righteousness from God, is what justifies us before God (Campbell et al. 1:44-48).

### *Objective Justification Is Not Subjective Justification*

Two aspects of justification are evident in Scripture: objective justification and subjective justification. Lest some of our readers unwittingly conflate these two aspects or confuse our understanding of the terms *objective justification* and *subjective justification* with the understandings common to other theological traditions, we think it is profitable to explain some of the main distinctions between these two aspects of justification (as we understand them) and to clarify that objective justification is not subjective justification. Objective justification is accomplished once for all when we believe into Christ and are thus brought into an organic union with Him. It is based on a righteousness that is objective to us, which is the Christ whom we receive by faith and put on (Gal. 3:27) as our “robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10). As a judicial matter, objective justification



secures for us a position of righteousness before God, precedes (causally though not temporally) our regeneration by the divine life, and brings us into a righteous condition in which we may receive and enjoy the divine life (Rom. 1:17; 5:17-18, 21; 8:10). In contrast, subjective justification is carried out progressively and organically after our regeneration as we live out Christ as our righteousness and eventually become “the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). It is based on a righteousness that is subjective to us, which is the Christ who dwells in us to live in us a life that is acceptable to God.

Some might ask why we feel the need to distinguish between the objective and subjective aspects of justification, which correspond with an objective righteousness and a subjective righteousness, respectively. Perhaps the simplest reason is that Scripture in its totality requires that we do so. Many recognize an objective aspect of justification but deny a subjective aspect. However, there are many portions of Scripture that reveal that the believers ought to become subjectively righteous in their inward constitution and to manifest righteousness in their living and works. Second Corinthians 5:21 says that Christ, who did not know sin, was “made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” The emphasis here is not on Christ becoming the believers’ righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30) but on the believers becoming the righteousness of God in Christ. Through their gradual and inward transformation by the divine life, the believers become not only righteous but the very righteousness of God. This righteousness is manifested in their righteous living and works. First Peter 2:24 speaks of living “to righteousness,” and Titus 2:12, of living “righteously.” Romans 8:4 speaks of “the righteous requirement of the law” being “fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the spirit.” Matthew 5:20 says that “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of the heavens,” and Matthew 13:43 declares that “the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” Revelation 19:8 reveals that the wife of the Lamb will be “clothed in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteousnesses of the saints.” The righteousness spoken of in these verses is a righteousness that is subjective to the believers, a righteousness that is possessed by them and aptly described as “the righteousnesses of the saints.” It is a righteousness that should characterize their inward being—to the extent that they become not only righteous but the righteousness of God in Christ—and should be manifested in their living. This righteousness is a righteousness of life, for it issues from the divine life and can be practiced only by those who have been regenerated by the divine life. This organic relationship between the believers’ regeneration and their practice of righteousness is evident in 1 John 2:29: “If you know that He is righteous,

you know that everyone who practices righteousness also has been begotten of Him.” As the believers live according to the divine life, their living will issue in the works spoken of in James 2:24 and in the justification by works spoken of in the same verse. God justifies the believers subjectively on the basis of these works.

In light of these verses, some recognize a subjective aspect of justification but deny an objective aspect. However, Scripture clearly speaks of an objective aspect of justification that is not at all related to works—not even to those righteous works that issue from the divine life—but is related only to faith in Christ. The Epistles of Paul speak repeatedly of this aspect of justification, the justification of the ungodly that is not by works but by faith alone and that is accomplished when a person first believes into Christ. Romans 3:28 states clearly that “a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” Romans 4:5 draws a sharp contrast between work and faith when it says, “But to the one who does not

THE BELIEVERS’  
INITIAL JUSTIFICATION  
IS OBJECTIVE TO THEM—  
BUT IT IS NOT  
EXTERNAL TO THEM.

work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted as righteousness.” Galatians 2:16 presents a similar contrast: “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.” That the believers are justified simply by faith in Christ is also made clear in Romans 3:26, which declares that God justifies “him who is of the faith of Jesus,” and in Acts 13:39, which says that “in this One,” the resurrected Christ, “everyone who believes is justified.” This aspect of justification corresponds with the “righteousness which is out of faith” spoken of in Romans 9:30 and 10:6. This is not a righteousness that issues from the divine life but a righteousness that results in life. It is this righteousness that is spoken of in Romans 8:10, which declares that “the spirit is life because of righteousness.” This righteousness is for the believers’ justification by faith, a “justification of life” (Rom. 5:18) that provides the judicial basis for God’s organic work within the believers, beginning with their regeneration by the divine life. This aspect of justification is completed when the believers first receive Christ as their righteousness through faith in Him.

---

God justifies the believers objectively by faith alone; this objective justification is instantaneous, secure, and invariable. Whereas the believers' subjective justification should progress over the full course of their Christian life, their objective justification is accomplished when they first believe into Christ. Those who have been justified by God can thus speak, as the apostle Paul speaks, of "having been justified out of faith" (Rom. 5:1) and of "having now been justified in His blood" (Rom. 5:9). The verses we have cited above are a sampling of the New Testament declarations concerning objective and subjective righteousness. In this light many passages on justification can be placed in one or the other category (or both!), resolving all apparent contradictions concerning the meaning of justification.

God surely intends that all those who receive Christ as their objective righteousness through faith would express Him as their subjective righteousness in their living, but God's objective justification of the believers is not based on their subjective condition, inward transformation, or even their expression of Christ as righteousness. Rather, it is based purely on their organic union with Christ as righteousness, for it is only by means of this union that Christ as the righteousness of God becomes righteousness to the believers (1 Cor. 1:30). God regards this Christ as perfectly sufficient for the believers' objective justification even though they have yet to apply Christ and live Him out as their subjective righteousness. He thus approves the believers—objectively and judicially—because of their oneness with Christ as righteousness through faith without conditioning this approval on the believers' (gradual and future) appropriation of the Christ whom they have received. This means that the believers' objective justification is not based on their being made inwardly righteous in the present or in the future. In this sense God's initial justification of the believers is based on a righteousness that is objective to them. They are not yet the agents of this righteousness, which is Christ Himself received by faith, and this righteousness is not something of themselves or even something produced within them by the divine life.

Our description of the believers' initial justification as something objective should not be taken to mean that this aspect of justification is external to the believers, as traditional Protestant accounts of justification are often accused of holding. We maintain that the believers' initial justification is objective to them but deny that it is external to them. It is objective in the sense that it is based on a righteousness that the believers have received by faith but have yet to apply in their living; it is internal in the sense that it is based on the believers' organic union with Christ as righteousness through faith. Through faith the believers are in Christ, the very righteousness of God, and Christ as God's righteousness is in them as their righteousness. Because of this organic union God justifies the believers, thereby securing their

salvation from eternal perdition and positioning them to participate in the organic aspect of His salvation (Campbell et al. 1:48-51).

### *Objective Justification Is Not to Be Confused with Reward Based on Works*

In speaking of the believers' salvation, the New Testament at times speaks of its gracious, gratuitous nature, but at other times it speaks of requirements on the part of believers and seems to make their full salvation conditional, based on their living and service to the Lord. Because of this, several traditions of Bible interpretation have confused justification by faith with reward based on works. Those of one school insist that justification is based on a kind of merit, bypassing those passages of Scripture that speak of its gratuitous character; those of another school recognize that objective justification is given freely but do so by neglecting those passages that speak of requirement. A proper understanding of the believers' full salvation must account for both sides of the truth. On one side, subjective justification relates to the believers' condition and work, for which the New Testament speaks of a reward. On the other side, objective justification is clearly presented in the New Testament as being a free gift; it is not a reward based on works. Paul states, "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). Objective justification is the free gift of God graciously given through the faith of Christ apart from all works (Rom. 5:15-17; 6:23; 8:32; Eph. 2:8; Heb. 6:4), as Paul says, "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; cf. Rom. 3:20, 26-28; 4:4-6; 11:6; Gal. 3:11; Eph. 2:8-9).

In apparent contrast, however, the New Testament also speaks of a reward for the believers. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great" (Luke 6:35). Paul writes, "If anyone's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward" (1 Cor. 3:14), and he describes God as "a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). The New Testament is rich in its revelation and in its vocabulary related to reward and recompense, offering a variety of terms to express these notions.

In Romans 4:4 Paul gives a working definition of reward: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not accounted according to grace, but according to what is due." Clearly then, a reward is not a free gift; it is "what is due," a wage, a hire, a payment to a laborer for works, deeds, or services rendered. Although the New Testament clearly reveals that justification is a free gift, in certain contexts it frequently applies the language of reward to the believers. The kingdom

of the heavens is a great reward for those who are persecuted (Matt. 5:11-12; Luke 6:23); the workers among God's people will receive a reward according to their labor (1 Cor. 3:8, 14); those who reap in God's field will receive their wages unto eternal life (John 4:36); and at Christ's return He will give His faithful ones the reward, their inheritance from Him as a recompense (Rev. 11:18; Col. 3:24). In many similar passages we are taught that the Father and the Son will repay the believers (Matt. 6:4, 6; Luke 10:35; 14:14), Christ as the Householder will pay them their wages (Matt. 20:8), and the Lord as the righteous Judge will recompense them in judgment both for good and for evil (2 Tim. 4:8, 14; Heb. 10:30).

The truth of the believers' reward, and punishment as well, centers around the judgment seat of Christ. Paul states, "We must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Rom. 14:10). This does not refer to the judgment at the great white throne in Revelation 20:11-12. The latter will take place after the millennium, the thousand-year kingdom set up by Christ at His second coming (Rev. 20:4-7). This will be the judgment of the dead and resurrected unbelievers, whose names are not written in the book of life, resulting in their eternal perdition (Rev. 20:12-15). In contrast to this, the judgment seat of Christ is for the believers and will take place at the resurrection of the righteous when the dead in Christ will rise (Luke 14:14; 1 Thes. 4:16), which will transpire at Christ's coming before the thousand years. At this judgment seat we the believers will render an account to the Lord for our living and service in the church age, and Christ the righteous Judge will give to each one the reward or discipline due to him or her. Thus, the Lord proclaimed to John, who represents all the believers in the church age, "Behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to render to each one as his work is" (Rev. 22:12). Paul tells us that if anyone's work remains, that is, is found approved at the judgment seat, he will receive a reward, but if anyone's work is consumed, "he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Paul draws a distinct contrast between "suffer loss" and "be saved." As to the reward, the unapproved believers will suffer loss, but as to their eternal destiny, they will be saved. These two greatly different phrases—*be saved* and *suffer loss*—clearly distinguish between the believers' eternal salvation, which is based on justification, and the receiving of a reward, which is based on works. Whereas the believer's eternal salvation, issuing from justification, can never be lost, his or her reward can be forfeited; and whereas the believer's objective justification is a matter of grace through faith alone, his or her reward is based on subjective righteousness and works.

Justification by faith and reward or discipline for works

constitute two great aspects of the believers' full salvation, and a proper understanding of them resolves many apparent contradictions and unlocks many puzzles in the New Testament. God gives freely, yet He also recompenses justly; by simple faith we enter the kingdom of God, but believers who practice sin will not inherit the kingdom as a reward in the coming millennial age (John 3:3, 5; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5); everyone who believes into Christ has eternal life, but only those who follow Him absolutely will inherit life as a fuller enjoyment in the age to come (John 3:15; Matt. 19:28-29), that is, in the thousand-year kingdom. Moreover, it is by faith that we are justified for our salvation, yet we still must grow unto salvation and develop in the divine life so that an entrance into the kingdom may be richly supplied to us (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). And very significantly, it was in freely given justification that Paul exulted, but it was with the reward in view that he pursued Christ at all costs if "perhaps" he may attain to the out-resurrection from the dead, the outstanding portion of the coming resurrection that will

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH  
AND REWARD OR DISCIPLINE FOR WORKS  
ARE TWO GREAT ASPECTS OF FULL SALVATION;  
A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF THEM  
RESOLVES MANY APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS  
AND UNLOCKS MANY PUZZLES  
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

be a prize to the overcoming believers (Phil. 3:7-12). Indeed, as of the writing of the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul still claimed to have not already obtained the prize. Only at the end of his course did he proclaim, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, with which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will recompense me in that day" (2 Tim. 4:8). On the one hand, it was through the faith of Jesus Christ that Paul was justified, establishing his eternal salvation before God; on the other hand, it is for his great labor and sacrifice that he will receive a just reward, the recompense due to him, at the Lord's coming. Yet while speaking soberly concerning the believers' reward or discipline for their works done in this age, the New Testament still holds forth justification for our eternal salvation as a gracious gift, a free gift, the heavenly gift, the gift of God given freely (Rom. 5:15-16; 6:23; Eph. 2:8; Heb. 6:4).

The Bible reveals much more on this crucial subject, but here we can offer only a brief hint. This and subsequent articles treat in detail the truth of justification by faith as the entrance into God's full salvation. Nevertheless, it is necessary and healthy to understand our accountability to the Lord



---

for our life and work in this age, which will be judged at Christ's judgment seat when He comes, issuing in a reward or a chastisement in the coming age of the kingdom. This is a very great matter to which all Christians should give diligent heed. As believers, we must cut straight the word of the truth so as never to confuse the two issues of objective justification and reward (Campbell et al. 1:51-54).

### **Objective Justification Is Not Based on Christ's Righteousness but on Christ as Righteousness**

In these articles on justification, we often emphasize our fundamental position that justification is not based on the righteousness of Christ but on Christ as righteousness. A common teaching among Protestants is that justification is accomplished by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, whereby the righteousness that Christ attained in His human living and death is accounted as the believer's righteousness in a purely forensic, external sense. This view suggests that God merely credits an attainment of Christ to the believer rather than acknowledging the believer's union with Christ. Justification, however, is based not on Christ's righteousness—which is related to Him but distinct from Him—but on Christ Himself as the righteousness of God. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 1:30, Watchman Nee (d. 1972) writes:

This verse shows us clearly that Christ has become the righteousness of the believers. It is not something about Christ that has become our righteousness; rather, Christ Himself in His entirety has become our righteousness. Something of Christ can never be as absolute and perfect as Christ Himself. When Christ Himself becomes our righteousness, God receives us. (CWWN 45:1027)

The "something about Christ" that Watchman Nee refers to is the righteousness of Christ, that is, the righteous living that was "the qualification which the Lord had before God when He was a man" and that "has absolutely nothing to do with us" (45:1026). This righteousness, which belongs only to Christ, is not accounted to the believer; rather, through faith the believer is brought into union with Christ Himself as the righteousness of God. Thus, faith denotes the union on account of which God justifies and thereby receives the believer. Apart from this faith-union with Christ, the just One, there can be no justification of the believer.

Furthermore, justification is often presented as an either-or proposition, that is, that a believer in Christ is either declared righteous without any change in his or her actual condition or is actually made righteous in justification. This insistence on one understanding or the other has caused much debate and division in the church. Those in the "declared righteous"

camp see justification as a judicial act in which God declares the believer righteous (based on Christ's righteousness), even though the believer is not actually righteous in his or her inward condition. For adherents of this position, the believer is thus simultaneously righteous and a sinner. Those in the "made righteous" camp reject the notion that God would declare someone righteous who is not actually righteous in an interior, moral sense. Adherents of this position argue that God makes a person inwardly righteous in justification. They contend that in justification God eradicates sin through an infusion of grace, and thus the thought of a person being at one time righteous and inwardly a sinner is rejected. We believe that to frame justification in either-or terms is to miss its intrinsic significance. In our view justification by faith involves both a declaring righteous and a making righteous. It involves a declaring righteous but not a *mere* declaring righteous, since the one declared righteous has truly been made righteous in the eyes of God. It involves a making righteous, not by an infusion of righteousness that expels sin but by union with Christ, the righteousness of God. While justification has both objective and subjective aspects, objective justification is a matter of being righteous because Christ, the One to whom the believer is joined by faith, is righteous. Because God justifies the believers based solely on their union with Christ through faith, nothing in addition to faith is needed for the objective aspect of justification. It is from this perspective and according to this standard that we evaluate, in the articles that follow, the teaching of justification by faith in the major Christian traditions (Campbell et al. 1:54-55).

### **Works Cited**

- CWWN      Nee, Watchman. *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. 62 vols. Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992-1994.
- Campbell, John A., Tony H. Espinosa, Martin H. Fuller, Mitchell J. Kennard, Joel I. Oladele, John-Paul Petrash, and Kerry S. Robichaux. *Challenging the Traditional Interpretations of Justification by Faith*. 2 vols. Anaheim, CA: Living Stream, 2021-2023.
- Deissmann, Adolf. *Die neutestamentliche Formel "in Christo Jesu."* Marburg: N.G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1892.
- . *The Religion of Jesus and the Faith of Paul: The Selly Oak Lectures, 1923, on the Communion of Jesus with God and the Communion of Paul with Christ*. Translated by William E. Wilson. London: Hodder & Stoughton Limited, 1923.
- Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Holy Bible Recovery Version. Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2003.
- . *Life-study of Philippians*. Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1984.