

IMPUTED OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW THROUGH UNION WITH CHRIST: JUSTIFICATION IN THE REFORMED TRADITION AND ITS HEIRS

While Martin Luther (d. 1546) and his followers were carrying out the work of reform in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli (d. 1531) and his contemporaries were engaged in their own work of ecclesiastical and civic reform in Switzerland. These Swiss reformers inherited Luther's recovery of justification by faith and, like Luther, prioritized the Scriptures over tradition and affirmed the priesthood of all believers. But they differed from Luther on some key points, disagreeing with him most famously over the presence of Christ in the bread at the Lord's table. Their teaching thus heralded the beginnings of what would come to be known as a Reformed, as distinct from Lutheran, interpretation of the Scriptures within Protestantism. Their labors also anticipated the reforming efforts of a French lawyer whose piercing intellect, theological acuity, and organizational acumen would shape the contours of Reformed theology and practice for generations to come.

For some of our readers, the terms *Reformed* and *Reformed theology* will immediately bring to mind the name of John Calvin (d. 1564) and the teaching that bears his name, Calvinism. The association is not wrong, for Calvin and Calvinism are the most influential part of the Reformed tradition and are inseparable from it. But neither is the association fully accurate, for Reformed theology is broader than the teaching of Calvin embodied most notably in his masterwork *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Reformed hallmark of predestination, for example, is not as prominent in Calvin's teaching as it is in some later Reformed expositors. Some Reformed versions of predestination may not even qualify as strictly Calvinist. Reformed theology, therefore, manifests some variation among the many groups claiming a Reformed identity, some of which are more Calvinist than others. Nonetheless, the emphases in Reformed theology are consistent across Reformed denominational boundaries. Thus, we can speak of a distinctly Reformed theology with the understanding that the term is not monolithic, as the misapplication of the term *Calvinism* may at one time have suggested (Campbell et al. 2:65-66).

Justification in the Reformed Tradition

We can discern in this theology a distinctive understanding of justification by faith. In their efforts to define justification, the Reformed have made positive contributions to a proper understanding of the doctrine but also, in our estimation, have erred with particular consequence. On the positive side, Reformed theology stresses that justification is the first effect of faith and that it flows out of the believers' mystical union with Christ; therefore, union is logically (not temporally) prior to justification and is necessary for justification. Moreover, the Reformed were the first to recover the truth concerning the security of salvation—a welcome advance over traditions that have taught that believers remain in perpetual danger of losing their salvation. But Reformed theology also teaches that although believers are mystically united to Christ prior to justification, that union is not the immediate ground of justification. Rather, justification for the Reformed is a purely forensic matter in which God imputes to the believers Christ's righteous obedience to the law. God therefore reckons the believers righteous on account of Christ's imputed righteousness, not on account of the believers' union with Christ as righteousness. We see this as a serious misunderstanding that has regrettably become a mainstay in Protestant theology. In what follows we first offer an overview of justification by faith in Reformed theology. We then narrow our focus to three features of the Reformed teaching concerning justification that we consider distinctive to the tradition and most worthy of evaluation: the role of faith and union in justification, the ground of justification, and the security of salvation (Campbell et al. 2:69-70).

Overview of Justification by Faith in Reformed Theology

Reformed theologians have long contended that the main or exclusive sense of the term *to justify* (and its variants)

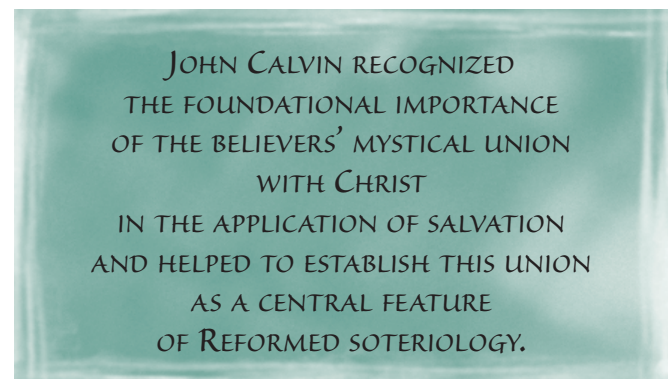
in the Scriptures is forensic. To be justified is to be pronounced righteous by God in His court of law. This legal pronouncement does not make sinners righteous in their internal state or condition; rather, it accounts them righteous in their external status before God's law. The most distinctive feature of the Reformed understanding of justification concerns the ground of justification, which the Reformed claim to be Christ's perfect righteousness imputed to the believers for their justification. This imputed righteousness refers to the obedience that Christ exercised in His human living and crucifixion to fulfill the law on behalf of His people and in their stead. The Reformed contend that only Christ's perfect righteousness can satisfy the demands of God's law, which they take as the standard of justification. It is this righteousness alone that constitutes the ground of justification. Although the ground of justification is Christ's imputed righteousness, not our faith, faith is integral to justification because it is only by faith that we can receive Christ's imputed righteousness. The Reformed thus deny that faith is the righteousness on account of which we are justified while affirming that faith is indispensable to justification. In the Reformed understanding, then, justification is a judicial act in which God declares a person righteous on account of Christ's imputed righteousness; this act is motivated by God's free grace, grounded upon Christ's work of redemption, and received by faith alone. According to the prevailing view in Reformed theology, those whom God justifies are not only forgiven of their sins but also counted (in a strictly legal sense) as perfectly righteous according to God's law. Consequently, they are entitled to the reward of eternal life promised to those who keep this law.

Two final points will round out our presentation of the Reformed understanding of justification by faith. First, the Reformed tradition stresses that justification and sanctification are distinct but inseparable items in God's salvation. In justification, God imputes righteousness to believers so that they might stand in a proper legal relationship with God. In sanctification, God infuses righteousness into believers so that they might be inwardly sanctified and renewed after the image of Christ. Although God infuses righteousness into believers in the same instant that He imputes righteousness to them, this infused righteousness—which is the principle of sanctification—is never the ground of justification and does not factor into justification. Second, the Reformed tradition affirms the security (i.e., preservation) and assurance (i.e., certainty) of the believers' salvation, which includes their justification. Against both Catholics and Lutherans, the Reformed contend that the salvation of the believers is eternally secure and can never be lost. According to His unchanging purpose, God causes all the elect to persevere in grace in the present age that they might

be glorified in the age to come. As a corollary of the security of salvation, the Reformed also maintain that the believers can and should have the assurance, or certainty, that they are saved and will persevere in their salvation (Campbell et al. 2:70-79).

Faith and Union with Christ in Reformed Theology

From the Reformation period onward, countless Reformed theologians have contended that faith ushers the believers into a mystical union with Christ and that this mystical union is necessary for the believers' justification, for it is only by being mystically united with Christ through faith that the believers can receive the benefit of Christ's righteousness and thereby be justified by God. The believers are justified *by faith* because faith unites them with Christ, and the believers are justified *in Christ* because it is only



by being in Christ that they can have communion with His righteous obedience to the law, which God graciously imputes to them for their justification. Thus, in the Reformed understanding, faith and mystical union are intimately related to justification and pivotal to it in the application of salvation.

In this section we focus on three common and interwoven strands that can be readily discerned in Reformed teaching: that the believers' union with Christ is foundational to their justification; that this union is mystical, spiritual, and most intimate; and that faith justifies by bringing the believers into mystical union with Christ. In what follows we will consider these three strands as they appear in the writings of John Calvin, with the understanding that these three strands are also evident in the writings of some of the most authoritative theologians within the Reformed tradition after Calvin.

Calvin recognized the foundational importance of the believers' mystical union with Christ in the application of

salvation and helped to establish this union as a central feature of Reformed soteriology. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he describes the believers' union with Christ in terms of their being joined to Christ as members of His Body, putting on Christ, and being indwelt by Christ. He argues that all the benefits of salvation issue from union with Christ and indicates that Christ dwelling within the believers is a prerequisite for salvation:

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. (1:537)

Here Calvin speaks of the believers' obtaining the benefits of salvation through Christ's dwelling within them.

In a later portion of his *Institutes*, Calvin identifies the believers' union with Christ as a mystical union and highlights its importance in the imputation of Christ's righteousness (i.e., His righteous obedience to the law) to the believers:

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him. (1:737)

To Calvin, the believers' union with Christ is a mystical union; it is a spiritual and holy union in which Christ dwells in the believers' hearts and is joined to them as their Head. Moreover, it is a union in which the believers put Him on, are grafted into Him, and are made one with Him. Any benefit of Christ to be enjoyed by the believers in Christ, whether justification, regeneration, or any other aspect of God's salvation, must of necessity come through union with Christ. Thus, Calvin asserts that such a union is accorded "the highest degree of importance."

Moreover, in his *Institutes* Calvin draws a close connection between the believers' union with Christ and their faith in Christ. The Christ to whom the believers are joined is "grasped and possessed...in faith" (1:725), and the benefits that the believers possess in their union with Christ are

obtained "by faith" (1:537). In Calvin's understanding, faith may be likened to a vessel that receives Christ:

We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ's grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ. From this it is to be inferred that, in teaching that before his righteousness is received Christ is received in faith, we do not take the power of justifying away from Christ. (1:733)

To Calvin, faith functions as an instrument, as "a kind of vessel," to receive Christ. Only after Christ is deposited into, possessed by, and grasped by faith can there be a receiving of Christ's righteousness for the believers' justification.

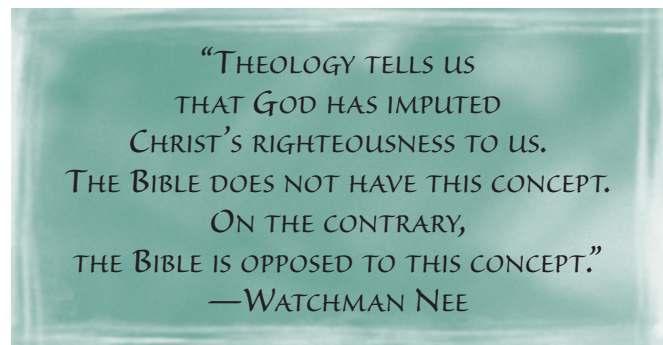
Following Calvin, many Reformed theologians throughout the centuries—including standard-bearers such as John Owen (d. 1683), Francis Turretin (d. 1687), Jonathan Edwards (d. 1758), Charles Hodge (d. 1878), and Herman Bavinck (d. 1921)—have affirmed that justification is based on the believers' mystical union with Christ enacted through faith and have developed Calvin's understanding of this union. The Reformed understanding of the mystical union with Christ that undergirds justification is, in our estimation, the tradition's primary contribution to the discussion of justification by faith (Campbell et al. 2:79-105).

An Evaluation of the Ground of Justification

As we have seen, Reformed theologians have often perceived a close connection between faith, union with Christ, and justification and have treated faith and union with Christ as prerequisites for justification. Reformed theologians stress, however, that in the heavenly court God justifies the ungodly only on account of Christ's righteous obedience to the law, which is extrinsic to the believers but is graciously imputed (i.e., reckoned) to them by faith. This means that God does not justify the ungodly on account of their faith or their union with Christ, although both are necessary for justification and are closely related to it. According to the Reformed, the righteous God cannot judge a person as righteous in His sight unless that person is righteous according to the standard of God's law. The perfect righteousness demanded by God's law can be found only in Jesus Christ and, more specifically, in His perfect righteousness, which consists of His active and passive obedience to God's law. In His active obedience Christ completely fulfilled God's law, thereby earning the reward of eternal life promised to those who fulfill the law. In His passive obedience Christ became a curse on the cross and

endured the penal sanction of the law, thereby making satisfaction for sin. In the Reformed understanding, it is this righteousness (i.e., obedience)—and only this righteousness—that constitutes the ground of justification. God justifies the ungodly not by infusing Christ’s righteousness into them but by reckoning it to them such that, in their legal standing before God, they are clothed with Christ’s perfect righteousness and are thereby accounted righteous (Campbell et al. 2:105-109).

Although we can agree with the Reformed claim that justification demands a perfect righteousness, we cannot agree with the derivative claim that God justifies the ungodly by imputing to them Christ’s righteous obedience to the law. According to Reformed theology, God justifies us on account of a property (i.e., righteousness) that belongs to Christ and is reckoned to us in a purely forensic manner. But we stress, as we believe the Bible does, that God jus-



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tifies us on account of our organic union with Christ, who is our righteousness. In the Reformed understanding, something of Christ is accounted to us forensically for our justification; in our understanding Christ Himself is given to us organically for our justification. We find the Reformed contention that Christ’s imputed obedience to the law is the ground of justification especially dissatisfying in light of Reformed theologians’ robust accounts of the believers’ mystical union with Christ, which is essential to justification (and to salvation generally). Reformed theologians have stressed that justification presupposes mystical union with Christ and have often described this union in the most intimate and organic terms. But, to our disappointment, this mystical union is largely absent from Reformed accounts of the ground of justification. In the Reformed understanding, union with Christ is necessary because it is only by being in Christ that we can have communion with His benefits (including His righteousness). But union is not sufficient, because what is really needed for our justification is Christ’s righteous obedience to the law, which can become ours only through a forensic imputation. This imputation is a strictly legal transaction, although it is made possible (in an

instrumental sense) by a mystical union with Christ through faith. To the Reformed, then, mystical union with Christ functions as a delivery mechanism for justification but is not itself the ground of justification.

This view of justification falls short of, and even distorts, the much higher view of justification revealed in the Scriptures. In the understanding of this higher view, offered in the biblical presentation article (3-17 in this issue), we find it most striking that God gives us Christ Himself as our righteousness for our justification and that He makes Christ our righteousness not by imputation but by transfusion and organic union. That is, God makes Christ our righteousness not by imputing Christ’s obedience to us but by transfusing Christ as faith into us so that, through “the faith of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:22), we might be brought into an organic union with Christ Himself, the righteous One. It is in this most precious union that Christ becomes our righteousness, and it is based upon our union with Christ that God approves us according to His standard of righteousness. Our organic union with Christ through faith is not merely instrumental to our justification, as Reformed theology mistakenly holds. Rather, it is central to our justification and can even be considered the ground of our justification before God. We do not deny that there is an accounting of righteousness to the believers, but we are persuaded that such an accounting is not a mere outward application of a property of Christ. In an incisive passage that might shock some of our readers, Watchman Nee (d. 1972) writes:

Christian theology says that God has made the righteousness of the Lord Jesus ours. God has transferred the Lord’s righteousness to us in the same way that banks transfer money from one account to another. The Lord kept the law for us. We have disobeyed the law. But the obedience of the Lord Jesus has earned us God’s satisfaction. But let me ask emphatically: Has the Bible ever mentioned the “righteousness of the Lord Jesus”? Who can find a place in the New Testament that speaks of “the righteousness of the Lord Jesus”? If you read the entire New Testament, including the Greek text, you will discover that the New Testament never mentions the words *the righteousness of Christ*. One place seems to say this [2 Pet. 1:1], but it does not refer to Christ’s own personal righteousness...Theology tells us that God has imputed Christ’s righteousness to us. The Bible does not have this concept. On the contrary, the Bible is opposed to this concept. The righteousness of Jesus of Nazareth is His own righteousness. It is indeed righteousness, but it is the righteousness of Jesus of Nazareth. This righteousness qualifies Him to die for us and be our Savior, but God has no intention to transfer the righteousness of Jesus to us. (CWWN 28:113-114)

Elsewhere Watchman Nee helpfully distinguishes between Christ's righteousness and Christ as righteousness:

Once I was talking to a theological student. I said, "The Bible does not say that we have put on the righteous garment of Christ. It only says that we have put on Christ." Galatians 3:27 says that we have put on Christ. Today we have not put on the righteousness of Christ, but Christ Himself. The righteousness of Christ is something that is in Christ Himself, and it is history. Today Christians come to God through putting on Christ. Christ Himself has become our righteousness, and we can come to God at any time because Christ lives forever. (CWWN 45:1026)

Although God's act of accounting righteousness to the believers in objective justification is itself a judicial matter, we maintain that it is grounded upon the believers' organic union with Christ as righteousness rather than upon the "alien righteousness" of Christ (Campbell et al. 2:109-116).

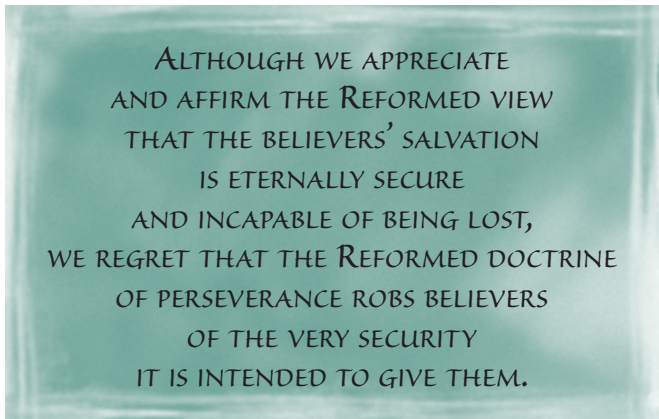
The Security of Salvation

While we strongly believe that Reformed theologians have misaimed concerning the ground of justification, we gratefully acknowledge that they have made an important contribution to biblical interpretation by affirming the security of salvation based on God's predestination of the elect. The Reformed have long argued that the believers' salvation, including their justification, is eternally secure and can never be lost, and they have marshaled convincing support for their position concerning the security of salvation, including the certainty of election, the eternal nature of the life received through regeneration, and the permanence of the union that makes believers members of the Body of Christ. However, we must point out that Reformed understandings of the security of salvation are often interlaced with—and sometimes subsumed by—what we feel is a problematic notion: the perseverance of the saints. Although the Reformed rightly argue that the believers' salvation is eternally secure and can never be lost, they perpetrate a serious error by contending that a person is only a true believer if he or she perseveres unto the end.

The crux of Reformed teaching concerning perseverance is that true believers will persevere to the end by God's grace and will not fall away from the inheritance of eternal life. Perseverance, therefore, becomes the evidence of salvation. If one perseveres to the end, then he or she is clearly saved and proven to be one of the elect. Conversely, if one dies in a backslidden, defeated state, then he or she, as Reformed reasoning goes, must never have been truly saved and therefore must never have been among the elect. Concerning the necessity of perseverance as evidence of having been born again, the influential Reformed theologian Wayne Grudem (1948-) writes:

This doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, if rightly understood, should cause genuine worry, and even fear, in the hearts of any who are "backsliding" or straying from Christ. Such persons must clearly be warned that only those who persevere to the end have been truly born again. If they fall away from their profession of faith in Christ and life of obedience to him, they may not really be saved—in fact, the *evidence* that they are giving is *that they are not saved*, and they never really were saved. Once they stop trusting in Christ and obeying him (I am speaking in terms of outward evidence), they have no genuine assurance of salvation, and they should consider themselves unsaved, and turn to Christ in repentance and ask him for forgiveness of their sins. (989)

Believers who struggle with sin or a lack of faith may thus conclude that they are not actually saved and that the salvation they thought they had experienced was in fact a deception. We firmly reject the Reformed error concerning perseverance and the consequent torment that it causes genuine believers in Christ to needlessly suffer.



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The Reformed doctrine of perseverance betrays a lack of clarity concerning the distinction between eternal salvation and dispensational reward or punishment. In their zeal to counter Arminianism, which wrongly teaches that a person's eternal salvation is contingent upon how he or she lives in this age, Reformed theologians have gone to the opposite extreme by teaching that the elect can do nothing to incur loss on the pathway toward full salvation. The reason for these extremes is that Reformed and Arminian teachers do not recognize that God has ordained the kingdom of a thousand years as an incentive to the believers in Christ to live faithfully in this age (Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12; 20:4, 6). Understanding the kingdom as a reward to the faithful believers resolves difficult New Testament verses that seem to suggest that a believer can lose his or her salvation. For example, when the apostle Paul wrote, "I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest perhaps having

preached to others, I myself may become disapproved” (1 Cor. 9:27), he did not fear that he would lose his eternal salvation but that he would suffer the loss of the kingdom reward. Other seemingly problematic verses (e.g., Matt. 7:21-23; John 15:2, 6; Rom. 11:22; Gal. 5:4; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-27) do not indicate that unfaithful believers can lose their salvation or were never saved to begin with. They convey, rather, that unfaithful believers will forfeit the opportunity to reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom and will instead incur the Lord’s discipline, yet their eternal salvation remains secure (1 Cor. 3:15). It would take theologians in England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to recover the matter of the kingdom reward and bring balance to the extremes of Reformed and Arminian theologies, as Witness Lee (d. 1997) explains:

You must also be familiar with what Calvin saw concerning the revelation of predestination. He asserted that God chose and predestinated us in eternity past to be saved once for all (Eph. 1:4-5). Although this revelation is correct, the Arminians oppose this view. They believe that even though our salvation is by God’s grace, if we do not fulfill our responsibility after being saved, we will lose our salvation. Therefore, in their view salvation is not once for all; after being saved we still may perish. But if we repent, we can be saved again. This concept totally emphasizes man’s responsibility, and it is therefore called the doctrine of human responsibility. Of these two schools, we accept the former totally and reject the latter entirely. Then how can we resolve the dispute between these two schools? How can they be balanced? According to the history of theology, after Calvin and Arminius, another group of theologians emerged, beginning from [Robert] Govett, then [D. M.] Panton, and then [G. H.] Pember. Their school has formed a line concerning the truth of the kingdom in the New Testament. They saw that once a person is saved, he will not perish forever (John 10:28). However, in order to encourage those who follow Him faithfully after salvation, God has set up a kingdom full of requirements to be their reward. If one is faithful, he will be rewarded (Matt. 24:45-47; 25:19-23). If one is not faithful, he will be punished and will lose the kingdom, but he himself will still be saved (24:48-51; 25:24-30; 1 Cor. 3:10, 12-15). This is called the truth of the kingdom reward and punishment. (CWWL, 1985 4:172-173)

Apart from the kingdom truth, Christians may be led to believe that they can lose their salvation or that difficult verses indicating that believers can suffer loss actually refer to those who were never saved. Both misunderstandings are perilous to believers and rob them of the incentive that God has graciously offered to encourage them to follow Christ faithfully in this age. Although we appreciate and affirm the Reformed view that the believers’ salvation is eternally secure and incapable of being lost, we regret that

the Reformed doctrine of perseverance robs believers of the very security it is intended to give them (Campbell et al. 2:117-123).

Reformed Teaching on Justification: A Concluding Word

The Reformed tradition, like the Lutheran tradition, strongly affirms that justification is by faith, but contrary to the Lutherans, the Reformed rightly emphasize that the believers’ mystical union with Christ through faith is a prerequisite to justification. The notion that all the benefits of salvation (including justification) flow out of the believers’ union with Christ was enunciated from the tradition’s inception, and this notion quickly achieved axiomatic status within Reformed theology. In Reformed accounts of justification by faith, then, we find ample consideration and commendation of the fact that the believers are justified in Christ, that is, in union with Him.

But despite their positive emphasis on union with Christ through faith, the Reformed have diverged from God’s economy by seeking justification not in the person of Christ but in the righteousness of the law. In the Reformed mind, justification is the answer to the vexing question of how fallen sinners, wholly incapable of keeping the law, can obtain the works of righteousness demanded by God’s law, not only to avoid punishment for violating the law but also to secure the right to eternal life promised to those who fully keep the law. Since fallen sinners cannot satisfy the law’s demands, they stand in need of someone who can perform these works on their behalf, and this is precisely what Christ accomplished for them through His perfect obedience to God’s law in His human living and death. This perfect obedience is legally imputed to the believers through their faith in Christ so that, in God’s estimation, they can stand before His law as those who have perfectly fulfilled its demands and are thereby entitled to eternal life. Or so the Reformed story goes. Thus, in Reformed teaching, the righteousness required for justification is the righteousness of the law, a righteousness that is wrought by perfect obedience to the law. It is this conception of righteousness that suffuses Reformed teaching concerning justification.

In the light of God’s economy to make Christ everything to the believers (not least their righteousness) through their union with Him, this conception proves to be a grave misconception by aiming at the wrong kind of righteousness for justification. God’s economy is centered not on the law but on Christ, and God’s intention in His economy is that the believers would gain not the righteousness out of the

law but the righteousness that is out of God, which is Christ Himself as righteousness given to the believers for their justification. In seeking to lay hold of Christ's obedience to the law, rather than Christ Himself, as their righteousness before God, the Reformed have misaimed. In so doing, they have shown themselves ignorant of the righteousness of God manifested in the New Testament "apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21) and have reduced the believers' union with Christ through faith to a gracious means of gaining, by imputation, the perfect obedience that satisfies the law (Campbell et al. 2:306-307).

Justification in the Baptist and Evangelical Traditions

In this section we evaluate the teaching of justification by two groups that defy strict definition but whose enduring influence on Christian thought and practice since the Reformation is undeniable: Baptists and evangelicals¹. The two groups are related but distinct. While Baptists represent a denominational tradition with a majority of members identifying as evangelical, evangelicals represent an ideological movement that includes adherents from many denominational traditions. Both are heirs of the Reformation, and thus there is much theological commonality between them. On the matter of justification, Baptist teaching is essentially Reformed and thus emphasizes that justification is by faith alone and that it is based solely upon the forensic imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience to the believer. Like the Baptist teaching on justification, the evangelical teaching closely resembles and is largely derived from Reformed understandings. It follows that, in the main, our assessment of the latter can be applied to Baptist/evangelical understandings.

In this article we make the perhaps surprising argument that there have been evangelical theologians—and we appeal primarily to evangelical Baptists in what follows—who have improved on the Reformed understanding of justification, particularly on the critical matters of union with Christ in justification and the security of the believers' salvation. Although these theologians are respected but little considered today, we feel that their contributions are significant, and we hope their insights will receive renewed attention. The story of the Baptist/evangelical understanding of justification is therefore marked by both promising development and disappointing decline (Campbell et al. 2:237-241).

¹Evangelicalism is a broad movement within Christendom and not a strictly defined ecclesial tradition; therefore, we use the lowercase *e* to denote evangelicals and the evangelical movement. Because we include evangelical Baptists and non-Baptist evangelicals in this article, we refer to "Baptists and evangelicals" when referring to the people themselves. When referring to a teaching or understanding that Baptists and evangelicals hold in common, we designate it as "Baptist/evangelical."

Union with Christ in Baptist/Evangelical Accounts of Justification

In general, Baptist/evangelical understandings of how the believers' union with Christ factors into their justification resemble Reformed understandings. The predominant understanding among Baptist and evangelical theologians is that the believers' justification presupposes their union with Christ, such that the former is impossible apart from the latter. The believers' union with Christ is thus necessary for, and logically prior to, their justification. Among those theologians who share this basic understanding, however, several different approaches can be discerned. One approach gives at least some attention to the believers' union with Christ and its general soteriological significance but gives little to no attention to the bearing that this union has on the believers' justification specifically. This approach is evident in the systematic theologies of contemporary Baptist theologians James Leo Garrett Jr. (d. 2020) and Wayne Grudem (1948-). A second approach gives some attention to the bearing that the believers' union with Christ has on their justification but ultimately leaves this matter underexplored. That is, the exposition of justification includes explicit reference to union, but union does not feature prominently and is often treated only cursorily or nominally. An early exemplar of this approach can be found in the writings of Baptist theologian John L. Dagg (d. 1884). A more recent exemplar can be found in the writings of dispensationalist theologian Charles Ryrie (d. 2016). A third approach, which is a significant improvement over the first two approaches, depicts the believers' union with Christ as something central (rather than peripheral) to their justification and gives sustained attention to how this union factors into justification. This approach is evident in the expositions of justification presented by Baptist theologian Augustus H. Strong (d. 1921) and dispensationalist theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer (d. 1952), among others. These expositions are enriched by their elucidation of the vital, organic character of the believers' union with Christ and their insistence that this vital and organic union—rather than a legal or metaphorical one—grounds the believers' justification by God. It is in the accounts of justification offered by these theologians that we can discern genuine progress in the understanding of the truth concerning justification (Campbell et al. 2:241-244).

Augustus H. Strong wanted believers to know Christ as the Savior within, and the key to knowing Him as such was to know the truth concerning the believers' union with Him. For Strong, this union is unlike any other because it is

a union of life, in which the human spirit, while then most truly possessing its own individuality and personal distinctness, is interpenetrated and energized by the Spirit

of Christ, is made inscrutably but indissolubly one with him, and so becomes a member and partaker of that regenerated, believing, and justified humanity of which he is the head. (*Systematic Theology* 3:795)

It is on the basis of this union that the sinner is justified. Regrettably, Strong maintains, like the Reformed, that the standard of justification is God's law and that sinners can therefore be justified only by the imputation of Christ's obedience to the law. It is nonetheless significant that he views the mystical union with Christ as the basis for the imputation. He writes:

Imputation is grounded in union, not union in imputation. Because I am one with Christ, and Christ's life has become my life, God can attribute to me whatever Christ is, and whatever Christ has done. (What Shall I Believe 91)

Moreover, the believer's participation in Christ by virtue of the union with Him, which the believer is brought into by faith, precludes the imputation from being a mere legal fiction. Strong's key contribution to a theology of justification, then, is his emphasis on the union of life between Christ and the believer, which serves as the basis of imputation. It is lamentable that such a robust view of union with Christ has largely receded from Baptist/evangelical accounts of justification. But before the decline set in, the crucial role of union in justification found further expression in the theology of Lewis Sperry Chafer (Campbell et al. 2:244-247).

In his theological writings Lewis Sperry Chafer, cofounder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, offers ample consideration of how the believers' union with Christ factors into their justification. Chafer perceives an intimate, causal relationship between the believers' union with Christ and their being made righteous and justified. Perhaps more strikingly, he stresses both that Christ Himself as the righteousness of God becomes the believers' righteousness through their organic union with Him and that God's declaration of the believers as righteous (i.e., His justification of the believers) is based upon this union. What he does not stress or even acknowledge as valid is the pervasive (and problematic) Protestant notion that justification involves the forensic imputation of Christ's alien righteousness, a righteousness that is external to the believers but is reckoned to them in a legal sense. How Chafer came to be unshackled from this notion we do not know. What we do know is that Chafer's account of justification is enhanced by his attentiveness to the biblical revelation that the believers' righteousness is not Christ's (imputed) obedience to the law but Christ Himself as righteousness and

that Christ becomes righteousness to the believers through their union with Him.

Throughout his effusive writings on the union between Christ and the believers, Chafer consistently characterizes this union as organic and vital in nature. The oft-used New Testament phrase *in Christ* indicates, according to Chafer, an organic union with Christ. Moreover, Chafer repeatedly identifies imputed righteousness with Christ as the righteousness of God and stresses that the believers' righteousness is actually Christ Himself. By repeatedly tying imputed righteousness to the believers' union with Christ, Chafer stresses that the believers' righteousness before God has everything to do with the fact that they are in Christ. God accounts (i.e., imputes) righteousness to the believers because they are in Christ, the righteousness of God, and are thus partakers of what Christ is.

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In Chafer's understanding, the believers' justification logically follows both their union with Christ and their being made righteous—by divine imputation—in Him. Justification “is the divine acknowledgment and declaration that the one who is in Christ is righteous” (3:128). It is thus an acknowledgment and declaration of a divinely accomplished fact: the believers have been made righteous through their union with Christ, the righteousness of God. God pronounces the believers righteous (i.e., He justifies them) because they have been made righteous in Christ. Hence, according to Chafer, justification is “not the creation and bestowment of righteousness which is secured only through the believer's relation to Christ, but rather the official divine *recognition* of that righteousness” (2:276).

Whereas the predominant, though often implicit, view among Baptist and evangelical theologians seems to be that the believers' union with Christ is necessary but not sufficient for their justification, Chafer's view seems to be that the

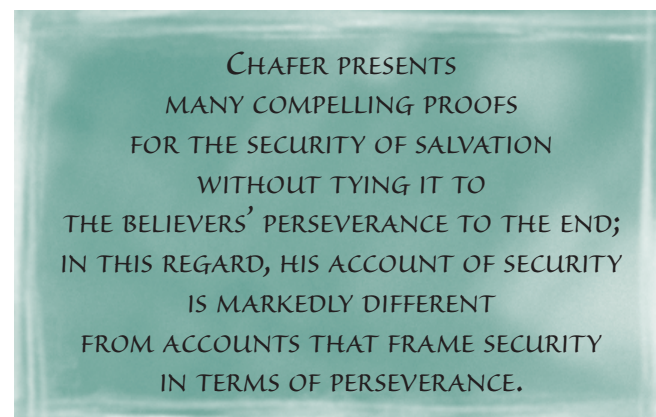
believers' union with Christ is not only necessary but also sufficient for their justification. There is, in Chafer's view, no need for God to reckon Christ's righteousness (i.e., His active and passive obedience to the law) to the believers in order to justify them, for by faith the believers have been organically and vitally joined to Christ, who is Himself the righteousness of God. By virtue of their union with Christ, the believers are made righteous—even the righteousness of God. And based upon the divinely wrought fact of their being made righteous in Christ, the believers are subsequently justified by God; that is, their righteous standing in Christ is recognized and proclaimed by God. Chafer's shift in emphasis from Christ's imputed righteousness to Christ Himself as righteousness is, in our estimation, a commendable feature of his account of justification, as is his unmistakable emphasis on the believers' organic union with Christ as the ground of their being made righteous by God. Sadly, these commendable features seem to have had little to no effect on Baptist/evangelical theology generally, and Chafer's account of justification thus stands, it seems, as a noteworthy but largely neglected departure from more common Baptist/evangelical accounts (Campbell et al. 2:247-252).

The Security of Salvation

Although many Baptists and evangelicals affirm that the salvation of true believers is secure and cannot be lost, there is no single view of the security of salvation that is shared by all Baptists and evangelicals. One view—derived from Reformed theology and popular among Baptists and evangelicals with Reformed sensibilities—maintains that all true believers will persevere unto final salvation. According to this view, it is impossible for those who have been genuinely saved to lose their salvation. The grace they have received for salvation cannot be lost, and God causes them to persevere in their salvation unto the end. It follows that those who do not persevere unto the end were never truly regenerated. Like the first view, a second view—popular among dispensationalists—maintains that those who have been genuinely saved cannot lose their salvation. However, this view focuses less on the believers' continued perseverance and more on their initial conversion through faith in Christ. Relatedly, the preferred idiom of this view is eternal security rather than perseverance or preservation. According to this view, the salvation of all those who have been genuinely converted is eternally secure irrespective of whether they persevere to the end. A third view—more common among Baptists and evangelicals who espouse Arminianism—maintains that genuine believers can lose their salvation. According to this view, it is possible for genuine

believers to lapse from faith, and those who do lapse from faith are at risk of losing their salvation. It follows that salvation is not unconditionally secure. We have evaluated the first of these views—the Reformed understanding of perseverance—earlier in this article, where we expressed our disagreement with the teaching that those who fail to persevere to the end were never regenerated to begin with. We can set aside the third view—the Arminian understanding—by simply but emphatically stating that we reject any notion that believers can forfeit their eternal salvation. Our focus in what follows will be to evaluate the second view, for which we turn to Chafer and Ryrie.

In volume 3 of his *Systematic Theology*, Chafer presents many compelling proofs for the security of salvation without tying it to the believers' perseverance to the end, and in this regard, his account of security is markedly different



from accounts that frame security in terms of perseverance. One of the most compelling proofs that Chafer offers concerns a sinner's regeneration, which occurs at the moment that he or she believes into Christ. Chafer understands that the believer is regenerated by the Holy Spirit to become a new creation and a partaker of the divine nature, which nature is eternal and therefore endures eternally. Because the nature that the child of God receives through regeneration is eternal, "the truth of eternal security is inherent in the nature of salvation itself" (3:272). Therefore, one who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit through faith can never be lost, for regeneration secures the believer's immutable status as a child of God. Although many of the proofs offered by Chafer in his affirmation of eternal security are also used by proponents of the perseverance of the saints, Chafer's account of eternal security does not rely upon the troubling notion, endemic to the doctrine of perseverance, that only those who persevere to the end are genuine believers. That is, Chafer presents a compelling affirmation of the security of salvation without insisting

that only those who persevere to the end have been truly regenerated.

Chafer's influence is evident in the teaching of his student Ryrie, whose writings affirm Chafer's position on eternal security. Like Chafer, Ryrie rightly contends that belief in Christ initiates the Spirit's indwelling of the believer and makes him or her a child of God by virtue of the divine birth. The believer's status as a regenerated child of God and his or her salvation are thus eternally secure as a result of the divine indwelling. Ryrie writes: "Scripture gives no hint that a Christian can lose the new birth, or that he can be disindwelt, or that he can be removed from the body of Christ (thus maiming His body) or be unsealed. Salvation is eternal and completely secured to all who believe" (384). For Ryrie, the divine birth is immutable, and disobedience or weakness cannot affect the eternal salvation of the believer that is predicated on that birth. Ryrie did recognize, however, that believers can suffer consequences for failing to mature spiritually, even though they will not lose their eternal salvation. The consequence for unfaithful living and spiritual immaturity is a loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ. According to Ryrie, those unfaithful believers, who have forfeited some reward, will nonetheless participate in the kingdom of a thousand years with the Lord's approbation. What Ryrie does not see is that the millennial kingdom is a reward to only the faithful believers, not to all believers in Christ. Those believers who fail to live faithfully in the present age will forfeit the reward of the kingdom and will suffer the Lord's discipline in the coming kingdom age, although their eternal salvation will remain secure (Campbell et al. 2:252-259).

Baptist/Evangelical Teaching on Justification: A Concluding Word

The contributions of Strong and Chafer in particular represent a high watermark in Baptist/evangelical teaching on justification by faith, but these gains did not make a lasting impact and seem to have been, in the main, lost among subsequent expositors. But there does seem to be a budding resurgence of interest in the role that an organic union plays in the justification of the believer. For example, Marcus Peter Johnson of Moody Bible Institute writes:

Our saving union with Christ is a participation in him, through whom we share in his relation to the Father through the Spirit. This union is the most real and personal of all unions, a union described in the most intimate ways in Scripture, and which we justly describe as vital, organic, personal, and profoundly real. It is through this union, which eclipses merely legal and moral descriptions,

that we enjoy any of that which Christ has accomplished in our flesh for our salvation. Thus, to be justified before God, we must be united to Christ in this way, and this union must precede our justification in terms of causal priority. This is how the Reformers spoke of the relationship between union with Christ and justification—as a mysterious but nevertheless profoundly real “cementing, ingrafting, implanting, conjoining, flesh-union” with/into Christ, who is the reality of which justification is an inevitable consequence. (95)

Perhaps the insights of Strong and Chafer can yet be recovered among Baptists and evangelicals as scholars like Johnson probe for more satisfying accounts of justification by faith. Although Baptist/evangelical teaching on this crucial matter can fairly be described as still in a state of decline, there is at least a glimmer of hope that fresh explorations may be on the rise (Campbell et al. 2:259-261).

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