

UNION WITH CHRIST THROUGH FAITH FOR JUSTIFICATION: A HISTORICAL PRESENTATION

As we pointed out in the biblical presentation article (3-17 in this issue) and wish to reiterate here, justification is God's accounting Christ as the believers' righteousness because of their faith, that is, their organic union with Him. Through God's infusion of faith into them, the believers are joined to the Christ whom they believe into, and He becomes their righteousness before God (1 Cor. 1:30). Since they are inseparable from Christ as righteousness, God accepts the believers in their organic union with Him and justifies them because they have Him as their righteousness. This intimate relation between the believers' union with Christ through faith and their justification by God is revealed in Galatians 2:16 (among other verses), which says that "we also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ." Commenting on the expression *out of faith in Christ* in his *Life-study of Galatians*, Witness Lee (d. 1997) helpfully explains that "this faith creates an organic union in which we and Christ are one. Therefore, the expression *out of faith in Christ* actually denotes an organic union accomplished by believing in Christ" (1:69). He continues by emphasizing that the believers' organic union with Christ as righteousness is the basis of their justification by God:

How could Christ be our righteousness if we were not organically united to Him? It is by means of our organic union with Christ that God can reckon Christ as our righteousness. Because we and Christ are one, whatever belongs to Him is ours. This is the basis upon which God counts Christ as our righteousness. (1:70)

Given the importance of the believers' union with Christ for their justification by God, we wish to let our readers hear from select theologians who have recognized this importance, albeit to varying degrees, in their own accounts of justification. While the quotations below are spread throughout the tradition-specific chapters of *Challenging the Traditional Interpretations of Justification by Faith* (and some appear elsewhere in this issue), we felt compelled to gather them together here to highlight the range of theologians across the centuries who have given considered attention to union with Christ as it relates to justification, sometimes against the grain of their own theological traditions. Whatever the

limitations of their respective understandings of justification may be, we find their emphasis on union with Christ commendable, especially in light of how often this union has been ignored or slighted in the numerous notions of justification offered throughout the history of Christian thought. We expect that these quotations from this cloud of witnesses will greatly strengthen those who are already convinced that the believers are justified by their union with Christ and by this union alone. Moreover, we hope that these quotations will prod those who are not yet convinced to reconsider this foundational truth.

Union in the Medieval West

The patristic writers often connected faith with justification and often connected faith with the believer's union with Christ but did not often connect justification and union directly. During the medieval period, the connection between union and justification became much more prominent. Before we turn to the medieval writers, we should note that for most if not all of them faith is not the only thing required for union with Christ in justification. Love also is required. In many of the quotations below, faith and love (or charity), loving faith, faith formed by love, or faith operating through love are identified as what unites the believers to Christ for justification. As we indicated in the Patristic through Luther article (18-33 in this issue), it is a great mistake to suggest that justification is obtained by faith *and* love rather than by faith alone. But because our primary task in this section is to trace the medieval understanding of the relationship between union with Christ and justification, we will pass over an evaluation of the view that love justifies and trust that our reader will not interpret this silence as an implicit affirmation.

The connection between union and justification appears repeatedly in Bernard of Clairvaux's (d. 1153) sermons on the Song of Songs, a book that he reads as an allegory of the believer's union with Christ. One of the benefits of salvation that the believers receive by virtue of their union with Christ, Bernard says, is their justification in Him: "It was to unite them with Himself that He was Himself made sin,