

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,

who did no sin, that the body of sin might be destroyed in which sinners had once been incorporated, and that they might become righteousness in Him, being justified freely by His grace" (*LWSB* 4:439). No sin, Bernard argues, is so great that it cannot be covered by the merits of Christ of whose Body we are members:

Thus it plainly appears how greatly that man erred who said, "My iniquity is greater than I can bear" (Gen. iv. 13). Except that he was not among the members of Christ, nor did the merits of Christ pertain to him, so that he could have a dependence upon them, or say, as a member asserting an interest in that which belongs to His Head, that they were his. (4:367-368)

In the thirteenth century, Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) insisted that no works of any kind can justify us because works do not in any sense unite us to Christ. Faith is what unites us to Christ, and therefore it is faith alone that justifies:

By works of law no one at any time is justified or can be justified, for He justifies only the faith of Christ whether before the law, under the law, or in the time of grace. For only the passion of the Son of God in the assumed flesh was able to satisfy for the sin of the human race...

Since, therefore, this offering alone is able to be satisfaction for sin, no one is rightly absolved from sin unless so united to this offering and this sacrifice, so that he is one with Him, offering the same sacrifice in that offering. This union, moreover, cannot be except through loving faith in this offering and sacrifice; through which faith all who are united with Him are one Christ...Therefore no works of law, nor even other works, namely moral, justify a sinner. (*CCCM* 130:62-64)

In the fifteenth century, Jean Gerson (d. 1429) argued that the grace of justification is given through Christ to those "incorporated into Him":

God does not give and will not give grace to anyone except through the medium of the Mediator of God and man, which grace He merited for everyone in sufficient measure, but only in efficacious measure for those incorporated into Him either through the virtue of faith, as in the case of children, or through both the acts and the virtue of faith which operates steadfastly through love. (*JGO* 9:196-197)

Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) teaches perhaps more clearly and consistently than any other medieval writer that justification is by faith because faith brings the believer into union with Christ as righteousness:

Abraham was *just*, because God's justice was in him. Christ is the true Justice that justifies everyone who is just. Thus, in every believer who is justified by faith it is necessary that Christ be present, who alone is the justification of those who are just. This justification is received when one takes account of the merit of the suffering by

means of which when [Christ] obeyed the Father He merited eternal life for all those who accept Him by faith. Because they believe Christ, Christ makes them to be sharers of the merit of Him who justifies everyone who is justified. (190)

The theme continues well into the sixteenth century. Luther often quotes Bernard on union with Christ, but he would have just as easily encountered the theme in Johann von Staupitz (d. 1524), his mentor and superior among the Augustinian friars in Erfurt. Staupitz affirms that in justification the merits of Christ are transferred to the believers by virtue of their union with Christ:

The contract between Christ and the Church is consummated thus: "I accept you as Mine, I accept you as My concern, I accept you into Myself." And conversely the Church, or the soul, says to Christ, "I accept You as mine, You are my concern, I accept You into myself." In other words Christ says, "The Christian is My possession, the Christian is My concern, the Christian is I"; so the spouse responds, "Christ is my possession, Christ is my concern, Christ is I." (Oberman 187)

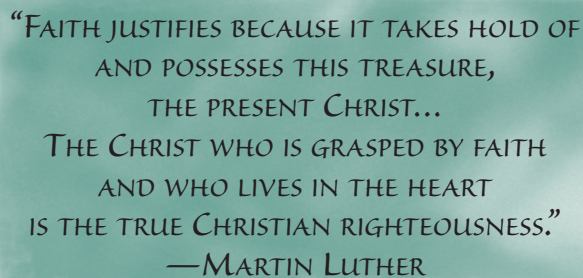
For the medieval writers discussed in this section, justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins executed at a distance in a court of law. Rather, God justifies because He sees Christ in the believers and because He sees them in Christ. He justifies the believers because, as Grosseteste suggests above, He sees them in and together with Christ as "one Christ," one corporate Christ sharing all that He is, has, and has done. The medieval church witnessed many regrettable developments (see pages 21-24 in the Patristic through Luther article of this issue), but that history should not discount the fact that many medieval writers saw that justification is by faith because faith brings the believers into union with Christ (Campbell et al. 1:157-163).

Union in the Lutheran Tradition

At least on occasion, the medieval theme of justification by union with Christ appears in the writings of Martin Luther (d. 1546): "Faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ...The Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life" (*LW* 26:129-130). But Luther was ultimately convinced that justification is by extrinsic imputation rather than by inward union with Christ. Andreas Osiander (d. 1552) picked up the theme of justification by union and fought vigorously for it, but his teaching was ultimately condemned in the Formula of Concord of 1577. Post-Concord Lutherans did not stop talking about union with Christ, but the Formula of Concord resulted in a general suspicion among Lutherans of basing justification on union with Christ. The Formula of Concord identifies divine indwelling as a result, not the basis, of justification, and many Lutherans have taken this to imply that

union with Christ is likewise a result of justification and not its basis.

Despite the predominantly forensic character of justification as understood and taught in the Lutheran tradition, prominent Lutheran theologians have on occasion emphasized the importance of union with Christ for justification, and we present a sampling of these authors in this section. We should note, though, that even for the writers here cited, union does not play a prominent role in justification in most cases. These passages generally represent flashes of insight that do not bear much weight in the larger accounts of justification offered by these theologians, and these passages are often explicitly contradicted by other statements made by the same authors. While the light of the truth occasionally breaks forth in the writings of some Lutheran theologians, union with Christ has never displaced the more common ways of thinking about justification by faith in a distinctively Lutheran way.



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We begin with one of the most respected and authoritative representatives of the entire Lutheran tradition—Johann Gerhard (d. 1637). Gerhard’s account of justification is classically forensic, but even he affirms on occasion the importance of union with Christ for justification:

Just as divine and human things are predicated about Christ because of the personal union of the two natures in Christ, so also through the spiritual union God and the faithful soul, and Christ and the Church, become one mystical thing, “one spirit” (1 Cor. 6:17), about which both human and divine things are predicated...

Through this mystical exchange, Christ transfers our sins to Himself and grants His righteousness to us through faith. “He became sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). This is not a bare and verbal predication but a most effective and, so to speak, most real imputation. Christ took our sins into Himself (Isa. 53:12; John 1:29; 1 Pet. 2:24)...In turn, Christ grants His righteousness to believers, and the heavenly Father imputes it to believers (Rom. 4:5), on account of which they are called “righteousness,” that is, perfectly righteous in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). (E4:187)

Statius Buscher (d. 1641) likewise understands union with

Christ to be central to justification. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Buscher argues that the believers’ union with the Triune God in Christ is the basis of the believers’ justification rather than its effect:

Through and on account of this union [with Christ], God attributes to Himself what is of man, and the believing man attributes to himself what is of God. Thus, God attributes to Himself our sin in Christ “who was made sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21)...So also, through the same union, man attributes to himself what is of God: the righteousness of Christ. (461-463)

Wilhelm Leyser (d. 1649) has an even stronger account of union as the basis of justification:

For through faith Christ unites and joins that person to Himself, and that person thus gains Christ, and Christ is made the believer’s. And in this way he has the righteousness of Christ, not indeed from himself originatively, not through himself essentially, not in himself subjectively, but nevertheless in such a way that the perfection of Christ is communicated to us through imputation and our cohesion with Christ. (1559)

This is not merely an occasional statement of Leyser; union with Christ plays a major role in his account of justification. At the beginning of his section on imputation, Leyser lists eight propositions that constitute the essence of his understanding of imputation, the seventh of which reads: “The basis [of imputation] is the present union with the Mediator through faith” (1545).

Jesper Brochmand (d. 1652), one of the most important Danish Lutheran theologians, urges his reader not to understand justification in a purely external way:

We ought to most diligently avoid thinking that by the righteousness of Christ imputed to us we are made righteous by nothing more than a certain external denomination. Since we, who acquire our righteousness from Christ by faith, are united with Christ in a way more intimate than we are with ourselves. (2:180)

David Hollaz (d. 1713), the eminent Lutheran orthodox theologian, maintains the standard position that mystical union is an effect of justification, but he is at least willing to concede some kind of union in justification itself, speaking of a “formal union of faith”:

Although mystical union, by which God inhabits the soul as in a temple, comes after justification in the order of nature according to our way of understanding; nevertheless, it ought to be confessed that the formal union of faith, by which Christ is apprehended, put on, and united with us as the mediator and procuring source of grace and the forgiveness of sins, is prior to justification...See Rom. 8:1: “There is no condemnation for those who are

in Christ Jesus.” The righteousness of Christ is the chief spiritual benefit accounted to the believers who are most closely united with Him, who are found to be just as members in Him (Phil. 3:9). (933)

Hollaz is convinced that the Scriptures teach a union with Christ preceding justification as its basis. In his attempt to be faithful both to the Lutheran tradition and to the Scriptures, Hollaz coined a new term, identifying a “formal union of faith” as the basis of justification, a distinct union from the mystical union that follows justification.

Union with Christ can also be found in a number of nineteenth-century Lutheran theologians. Ernst Wilhelm Christian Sartorius (d. 1859) argues that the righteousness of Christ becomes the believers’ through their union with Him:

As appropriating (as putting on, Gal. iii. 27) Christ, justification places the sinner in the closest communion with Him, and receives him into the fellowship of His sufferings, as well as into the glory that is to follow...As what was ours became His—for He bore our sins and shame—so does what is His—His righteousness and glory—becomes ours, for He is Himself ours, has united Himself with us as the head with the members. (CFTL n.s.18:227-228)

Union was likewise important for justification according to Fredrik Hedberg (d. 1893), one of the most important Christian leaders and writers in the history of Finland:

For me to be righteous before God, then, Christ and I must become united in the most intimate manner, so that He lives in me and I in Him. It follows that, if you separate yourself and Christ, you are already under the Law and you are no longer living in Christ.

Christ has loved His Church, and has given Himself for it so that we would become united with Him into one body, own Him completely and have for ourselves everything that He has. (109)

In the twentieth century also, some Lutheran theologians continued to appeal to union with Christ in their accounts of justification. Wolfhart Pannenberg (d. 2014) is a good example:

Ecstatic fellowship with Christ, to whom believers entrust themselves, forms the basis of Luther’s understanding of justification. He starts here with his view of the act of faith that takes believers out of themselves and sets them in Christ...Luther stated in his Galatians lectures, with reference to the basis of the Pauline thesis that we are righteous by faith in Christ (Gal. 2:16), that those who believe in Christ are one with him by faith. (3:215-216)

Finally, Carl Braaten (d. 2023) has perhaps the strongest account of union in justification among recent Lutheran theologians:

Those are justified who are in Christ, and those are condemned who are in Adam. The question whether they are in Christ because they are justified, or whether they are justified because they are in Christ, would have no meaning for Luther. Christ *is* our justification. He *is* our righteousness. Justification is not a transaction going on between God in heaven and the individual on earth *on the condition* that the individual first does some necessary things as a result of which he or she acquires the righteousness of Christ. Christ is not a means to justification, nor is justification a means to Christ. They are one and the same—objectively. Justification is by Christ alone. (23)

We should emphasize again that these attestations to the importance of union with Christ in justification, significant though they are, do not represent a prevalent tendency in the Lutheran tradition. They do not even represent a prevalent tendency in most of the authors quoted in this section. It is worth noting, in addition, that in many of the passages quoted in this section, Luther is explicitly mentioned either in the quotation itself or in the near context. Lutheran accounts of justification, in other words, are more likely to feature union with Christ the more closely they attend to the writings of Luther. The light that Luther received thus continues to flicker here and there in the Lutheran tradition. The fact that it did not more thoroughly penetrate the teaching of Luther’s followers is one of the great tragedies in the history of the church’s teaching concerning justification by faith. At least one younger Lutheran theologian has urged his tradition to restore union with Christ to its rightful position at the center of the Lutheran understanding of justification (Cooper *Union*). We can only hope that these efforts will bear fruit in the years to come (Campbell et al. 2:34-41).

Union in the Reformed Tradition

Countless Reformed theologians from the Reformation period onward 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. This prominent notion in Reformed theology—that justification is dependent on mystical union with Christ—is clearly expressed in the following quotations, selected from the writings of notable Reformed theologians and representative of the general understanding within the Reformed tradition.

The pioneering Reformed theologian John Calvin (d. 1564) argues in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 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)

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 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, 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 faith and union with Christ. Thus, Calvin asserts that such a union is accorded "the highest degree of importance."

In his *Confession of Christian Religion*, the Reformed scholastic Girolamo Zanchi (d. 1590) stresses that salvation and eternal life are in Christ alone; hence, it is only by being joined and united with Christ that believers can partake of salvation and eternal life. Zanchi describes the "true and real" nature of this union in this way:

For even as the branch can draw no lively sap from the vine, nor the bough from the tree, nor the members any motion, sense, or life from the head, unless they be joined to the vine and tree and these to the head; even so cannot men receive any salvation or life from Christ (in whom only it consisteth), unless they be grafted into him and coupled in a true and real union and being coupled do abide in him. (1:233)

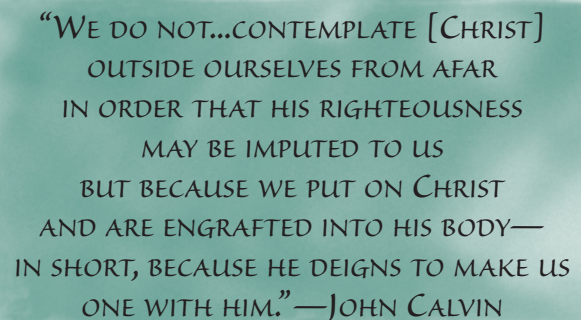
Like Zanchi, the Reformed scholastic Francis Turretin (d. 1687) treats the believers' mystical union with Christ as essential to their participation in all the benefits of salvation. In one of his richer descriptions of the believers' mystical union with Christ, Turretin writes:

The nature of the union of believers with Christ (as of the members with the head)...is not only intimate and most strict intensively, but also incapable of being dissolved (*adialytos*) extensively and of perpetual duration. Thus nothing can break the bond, or separate us from him (Rom. 8:38) because "he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit with him" (1 Cor. 6:17) and from him has not only an influx of regenerating grace, but also of strengthening

and preserving grace...And as from the natural body of Christ now glorified it is impossible that one member can be torn away, thus from his mystical body no believer can be torn away. Hence believers planted in Christ by true faith may be said both as to the past to have now passed from death to life, and as to the present to have eternal life, and as to the future that they will not come into condemnation, nor will they perish forever (Jn. 5:24; 10:28). (2:600)

Turretin's conception of union with Christ is closely related to his conception of justifying faith. He describes the "formal and principal act" of faith as

the act of reception of Christ or of adhesion and union, by which we not only seek Christ through a desire of the soul and fly to him, but apprehend and receive him offered, embrace him found, apply him to ourselves and adhere to and unite ourselves to him...And because the soul thus apprehending Christ reclines upon him and rests upon him and cleaves to him, faith is also sometimes described



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as an act of "reclining" (Ps. 71:5; Is. 10:20; 48:2; 50:10; Mic. 3:11); as also an act of adhesion and binding closely, and of the most strict union by which we are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh and one with him; and Christ himself dwells in us (Eph. 3:17) and we in him (Jn. 15:5). From this union of persons arises the participation in the blessings of Christ, to which (by union with him) we acquire a right (to wit, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification). (2:562-563)

The principal act of faith, then, is to receive Christ and to unite us to Christ such that He dwells in us and we dwell in Him. All the blessings of salvation, including justification, flow out of this union with Christ, which is realized in the principal act of justifying faith.

In his treatise *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, the Puritan theologian John Owen (d. 1683) understands the mystical union between the believers and Christ to be the basis upon which the sins of the believers are imputed to Christ and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believers; thus, the union is logically, though not temporally, prior to imputation. The nature of that union is both

spiritual and, we may say, personal; that is, it is a union in which the Holy Spirit joins the believers to Christ in order to make them one mystical person, the Head with the Body:

The principal foundation hereof is,—that *Christ and the church*, in this design, were one *mystical person*; which state they do actually coalesce into, through the *uniting efficacy* of the Holy Spirit. He is the head, and believers are the members of that one person, as the apostle declares, 1 Cor. xii. 12, 13. Hence, as what he did is imputed unto them, as if done by them; so what they deserved on the account of sin was charged upon him. (WJO 5:176)

The foundation of the *imputation* asserted is union. Hereof there are many grounds and causes, as hath been declared; but that which we have immediate respect unto, as the foundation of this imputation, is that whereby the Lord Christ and believers do actually *coalesce into one mystical person*. This is by the Holy Spirit inhabiting in him as the head of the church in all fulness, and in all believers according to their measure, whereby they become members of his mystical body. That there is such a union between Christ and believers is the faith of the catholic church, and hath been so in all ages. (5:209)

The Scottish Presbyterian theologian Thomas Boston (d. 1732) continues the emphasis on union with Christ and its relation to justification as exemplified in the Puritan tradition. He observes that it is by faith that the believer receives Christ Himself and that the soul of the believer is thus “married to Christ”:

Faith unites us to Christ in the way of the spiritual marriage-covenant, Eph. ii. 17. Being united to him, we have a communion with him in all the benefits of his purchase, and so in his righteousness, which is one of the chief of them. He himself is ours by faith; and so all that is his is ours for our good. This union being most real, the communion is so too...Not that faith is our righteousness; for our righteousness is not our faith, but we get it by faith, Phil. iii. 9. We are justified by it instrumentally, as we say one is enriched by a marriage, when by it he gets what makes him rich. So that faith is that whereby the soul is married to Christ; and being married to him, has communion with him in his righteousness, which justifies the person before God. (WWTB 1:597-598)

As Boston sees it, the believer has the righteousness of Christ because he or she has Christ Himself by faith. He further relates that it is when the believer has Christ through union with Him that the righteousness of Christ is then imputed to the believer:

For a believer is by faith united to Christ. Having this union with him, we have a communion with him in his righteousness, which is ours, since we are one with him, and being ours, must be imputed to us, or reckoned ours on the most solid ground. (1:551-552)

Having Christ with His righteousness in reality through union

with Him, the righteousness of Christ is then imputed to the believer for his or her justification.

In his *Systematic Theology*, the Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge (d. 1878) counters the argument that justification consists only of pardon from sin and highlights the vitality of the mystical union that makes the believers so one with Christ that they partake of His life, participate in His experiences, and are, within their measure, what He is:

The theory which reduces justification to pardon and its consequences, is inconsistent with what is revealed concerning our union with Christ. That union is mystical, supernatural, representative, and vital. We were in Him before the foundation of the world (Eph. i. 4); we are in Him as we were in Adam (Rom. v. 12, 21; 1 Cor. xv. 22); we are in Him as the members of the body are in the head (Eph. i. 23, iv. 16; 1 Cor. xii. 12, 27, and often); we are in Him as the branches are in the vine (John xv. 1-12). We are in Him in such a sense that his death is our death, we were crucified with Him (Gal. ii. 20; Rom. vi. 1-8); we are so united with Him that we rose with Him, and sit with Him in heavenly places. (Eph. ii. 1-6.) In virtue of this union we are (in our measure) what He is. We are the sons of God in Him. And what He did, we did. His righteousness is our righteousness. His life is our life. His exaltation is our exaltation. (3:127)

Hodge thus places great stress on the crucial role of union in justification.

The Dutch American Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof (d. 1957) offers a clear and crisp characterization of the believers’ mystical union with Christ in his *Systematic Theology*. While acknowledging that, in Reformed theology, the term *mystical union* sometimes encompasses all aspects of the believers’ union with Christ, Berkhof indicates that the term refers more pointedly to the subjective union of life between Christ and the believers that is realized by the Spirit’s operation. He defines this union as “that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation” (449). Berkhof identifies six main characteristics of the believers’ subjective union with Christ: it is an “organic union,” a “vital union,” a “union mediated by the Holy Spirit,” a “union that implies reciprocal action,” a “personal union,” and a “transforming union” (450-451). Concerning the organic character of the believers’ union with Christ, Berkhof remarks that “Christ and the believers form one body” and references John 15:5 and Ephesians 4:15-16, among other verses, as support. Concerning the vital characteristic of this union, Berkhof explains that “Christ is the vitalizing and dominating principle of the whole body of believers” and that it is “the life of Christ that indwells and animates believers.” Like many of his Reformed forebears, Berkhof maintains that the believers’ mystical union with Christ “logically precedes” their justification by faith, for the believers are justified “only in Christ” (450).

The Reformed tradition has largely remained consistent in recognizing that the benefits of salvation, including justification by faith, flow to the believers by means of their mystical union with Christ. As we have shown, some of the most authoritative Reformed theologians describe the believers' mystical union with Christ as real, not metaphorical; spiritual, not material; supernatural, not natural; and even vital, that is, a union in and of life. They rightly argue that apart from such a living and real union with Christ there can be no justification. This rich understanding of the mystical union with Christ that undergirds justification is, in our estimation, the Reformed tradition's primary contribution to the discussion of justification by faith. Despite their positive emphasis on the believers' union with Christ, however, the Reformed err by treating this union as insufficient for the believers' justification (see the Reformed article [44-50 in this issue]). They wrongly claim that justification demands something beyond union with Christ—namely, Christ's imputed obedience to the law (Campbell et al. 2:79-105).

Union in the Roman Catholic Tradition

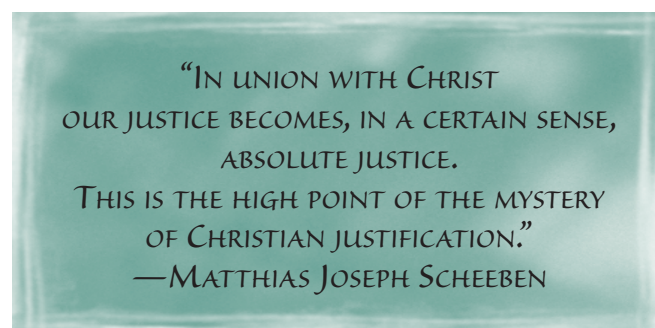
As we point out in the Roman Catholic article (54-62 in this issue), union features prominently in the writings of several Catholic theologians writing before and during the Council of Trent (1545-1563), and many wanted union to play a central role in the definition of justification at the Council. According to Gasparo Contarini (d. 1542), "With the Spirit of Christ, [the Father] gives us Christ Himself and freely, out of His mercy, makes all of His righteousness ours and imputes it to us who have put on Christ" (CC 7:27). According to Girolamo Seripando (d. 1563), "We are designated righteous because we are something of Christ, namely His members, participants in the righteousness of Him who alone is righteous truly and simply" (CT 12:669). Perhaps the strongest among the pre-Tridentine Catholic writers is Albert Pighius (d. 1542):

In Him, therefore, we are justified before God, not in ourselves—not by our but by His righteousness, which is imputed to us who now commune with Him. Destitute of any righteousness of our own, we are taught to seek a righteousness beyond ourselves in Him. He, it is said, who knew no sin, for us was made sin—that is, a sacrifice for the expiation of sin—so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. We are made righteous in Christ, not by our own but by the righteousness of God. By what right?...by being grafted into, cemented together with (*conglutinatis*), and united with Christ...Just as Jacob, although he was not the firstborn, hidden within the garment of his brother and having clothed himself with a blanket that breathed of noble scent, snuck himself in before his father and so received the blessing of the firstborn within an alien person. So also, it is necessary for us, within Christ, the Father's firstborn, to hide in precious purity, to smell of His good odor, of His perfection, to bury and conceal our vice as well; to thus throw ourselves

on the affection of the Father so as to acquire from Him the blessing of righteousness. (48-49)

In contrast to the "double righteousness" championed by these authors—in which the believers are justified by an infusion of righteous virtue and by union with Christ—the Council of Trent regrettably decided that an inherent righteousness infused into the believers suffices for their justification without any reference to their union with Christ. According to the authoritative teaching of Trent, the "single formal cause" of justification is "the justice that we have as a gift from him and by which we are spiritually renewed" (Denzinger §1529).

While this rejection of "double righteousness" resulted in a general wariness of appealing to union with Christ for justification among Catholic theologians after the Council of Trent, a close connection between union and justification



can still be found in some of the most prominent post-Tridentine Catholic theologians. Francisco Suárez (d. 1617), arguably the most significant representative of early modern Catholic theology, argues that even though the believers are justified through inherent gifts of grace, these inherent gifts are infused into them so that they might be brought into union with Christ:

Although men who are justified through Christ are pleasing to God on account of intrinsic gifts, insofar as they participate in these [gifts] so that through them they are united in a special way to Christ—who is loved by the Father in a nobler and singular way—they too are more pleasing to the Father. (FSO 10:119)

Suárez affirms the standard (and mistaken) idea that the believers are justified by the infusion of love and other virtues ("intrinsic gifts") and are thus rendered pleasing to God. But he insists here that the believers are made "more pleasing" to the Father by their union with Christ secured through those same intrinsic gifts. In their union with Christ—the Father's Beloved—the believers become more pleasing to the Father than they are merely by virtue of the intrinsic gifts infused for that union. Suárez's condensed argument would later be made much more extensively by Matthias Joseph Scheeben (d. 1888).

Scheeben, often identified as one of the most preeminent nineteenth-century Catholic theologians, provides perhaps the best account of union's role in justification available in the Catholic tradition. Scheeben, like all post-Tridentine Catholic theologians, argues that the righteousness infused into the believers in baptism or penance suffices in and of itself for justification. But Scheeben is convinced that this is far too short an account of justification. In a section called "High Point of Christian Justice" in his influential *The Mysteries of Christianity*, Scheeben argues that the righteousness infused into the believers in their justification is supplemented and, indeed, far overshadowed by the righteousness that they obtain in virtue of their union with Christ. His account is worth quoting at length:

Thus described [i.e., as an infusion of righteousness], the mysterious nature of Christian justification and of the state it engenders might appear to have reached the peak of its perfection. But in line with the doctrine we have previously set forth, concerning the significance of the Incarnation and its relations to grace, we must add, for a complete clarification of the specifically Christian character of justification, that we are justified not only by regeneration, but by our incorporation into the God-man as His members. Justification makes us living members of Christ's body, and justifying grace flows into us from this source. But as living members of Christ we have a higher dignity, a greater sanctity, and a more glorious power of pleasing God, our real union with the God-man must also invest the justice we receive through the grace of Christ with a greater power and a higher value.

Because God beholds His only-begotten Son linked to us in living union, He can no longer look upon our sin, any more than He can perceive His own Son separated from Him thereby. Further, because God's only-begotten Son Himself lives in us, His members, we are enabled to do more than render honor to the infinite Majesty of God in our feeble human way. We can do so perfectly, as far as this is possible at all, seeing that in union with Christ we offer to the divine Majesty a glory corresponding to His greatness. In union with Christ our justice becomes, in a certain sense, absolute justice.

This is the high point of the mystery of Christian justification. This is the point at which the organism established in mankind by the Incarnation reaches its summit here on earth. (625)

While John Henry Newman's (d. 1890) *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* was first published prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Newman published the final edition of the work nearly thirty years after his conversion, assuring his reader, "Unless the Author held in substance in 1874 what he published in 1838, he would not at this time be reprinting what he wrote as an Anglican" (ix). The basic thesis of his series of lectures is admirably and simply stated:

Christ then is our Righteousness by dwelling in us by the Spirit: He justifies us by entering into us, He continues

to justify us by remaining in us. *This* is really and truly our justification, not faith, not holiness, not (much less) a mere imputation; but through God's mercy, the very Presence of Christ. (150)

The light that justification is secured by union with Christ has thus never been fully extinguished in the Catholic tradition. It shines with particular brightness in a number of post-Tridentine theologians. We suspect that these and similar accounts of justification are little more than a revival of the "double righteousness" account rejected at the Council of Trent and thus that these accounts are more likely to be freshly condemned than to be fully embraced. Even if they were embraced, the Catholic view of justification would still fall short of the truth as we understand it, for as we have repeatedly stressed, union with Christ suffices for justification without the infusion of righteousness. Still, we happily commend these Catholic theologians who identify union with Christ as central in justification, and we thank the Lord that the light of the truth continues to shine forth even in the tradition that rejected the truth of justification as recovered by Martin Luther (Campbell et al. 2:131-136, 155-163).

Union in the Anglican Tradition

Anglican theologians have varied views of the role of union in justification by faith. Many Anglicans of the Reformed persuasion (see p. 65 in this issue) have a high appreciation for union with Christ in justification, and this should come as no surprise. As seen earlier, the Reformed have one of the highest estimations of union with Christ in justification among all the Christian traditions. What might be more surprising, as we will see later in this section, is that some Anglicans outside the Reformed tradition likewise have much to say regarding union in justification.

We begin with several Reformed Anglicans who emphasize the need of union in justification by faith while espousing a typically Reformed understanding of the topic. In *A Learned Discourse on Justification*, Richard Hooker (d. 1600) writes:

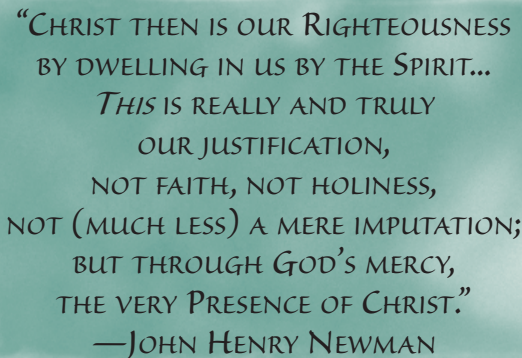
The righteousness wherein we must be found if we will be justified, is not our own, therefore we cannot be justified by any inherent quality. Christ hath merited righteousness for as many as are *found in him*. In him God findeth us if we be faithful for by faith we are incorporated into him. (FLE 5:112)

John Davenant (d. 1641) employs the language of imputation, but he stresses that it is not the imputation of Christ's righteousness alone that justifies a believer. According to Davenant, God "regards all who believe and are united into one person with Christ, as become truly partakers of his righteousness and obedience" (1:177). Later in the same work Davenant says:

For we do not suppose that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, as we are considered out of Christ, or dis-united from Christ our head, but considered as incorporated into him, and members under him as our head. (1:244-245)

The Apostle here [in Phil. 3:9] teaches what that righteousness is, upon which we must rely before God; namely that which is apprehended by faith. But this is imputed righteousness. He also shews the cause why it is made *ours* by right; namely, because we are Christ's, and are found in Christ. Because then we are engrafted into his body, and are united with him into one person, therefore his righteousness is reckoned *ours*. (1:246)

While continuing to use the language of imputation in his work *The Two Covenants*, Ezekiel Hopkins (d. 1690) notes that Christ's righteousness becomes the believers' through faith, a faith that is a "Bond of that Mystical Union" between Christ and His believers (*WEH* 2:212). This union makes the believers and the Lord one spirit. Furthermore, this union is so close that, in a sense, the church is called Christ:



"CHRIST THEN IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS
BY DWELLING IN US BY THE SPIRIT...
THIS IS REALLY AND TRULY
OUR JUSTIFICATION,
NOT FAITH, NOT HOLINESS,
NOT (MUCH LESS) A MERE IMPUTATION;
BUT THROUGH GOD'S MERCY,
THE VERY PRESENCE OF CHRIST."
—JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

Now if we can but apprehend how faith makes the righteousness of Christ to be ours, it will be very easy and obvious to apprehend the way and manner how we are justified.

To clear up this, therefore, faith makes the righteousness of Christ's satisfaction and obedience to be ours, as it is the Bond of that Mystical Union, that there is between Christ and the believing soul.

If Christ and the believer be one, the righteousness of Christ may well be reckoned as the righteousness of the believer. Nay, mutual imputation flows from mystical union: the sins of believers are imputed to Christ, and the righteousness of Christ to them; and both justly, because being united each to other by mutual consent (which consent on our part is faith) God considers them but as one person. As it is in marriage, the husband stands liable to the wife's debts, and the wife stands interested in the husband's possessions; so it is here: faith is the marriage-band and tie between Christ and a believer; and, therefore, all the debts of a believer are chargeable upon Christ, and the righteousness of Christ is instated upon

the believer: so that, upon the account of this marriage-union, he hath a legal right and title to the purchase made by it. Indeed this union is a high and inscrutable mystery; yet plain it is, that there is such close, spiritual, and real union between Christ and a believer: the Scripture often both expressly affirms it, 1 Cor. vi. 17; "He, that is joined unto the Lord, is one spirit"; and also lively illustrates it by several resemblances. It is likewise plain, that the band of this union, on the believer's part, is faith: consult Rom. chap. xi. ver. 17, compared with the 20th verse. And, therefore, from the nearness of this union, there follows a communication of interests and concerns: insomuch, that the Church is called Christ, 1 Cor. xii. 12; "So also is Christ." (2:212-213)

Interestingly, the idea of union in the believers' justification was a hallmark of not only Reformed Anglicans' understanding but also that of many Anglo-Catholics (on this designation, see p. 65 in this issue), one of whom was John Henry Newman. Newman saw union not merely as a factor in justification but as the essence of justification itself:

Christ then is our Righteousness by dwelling in us by the Spirit: He justifies us by entering into us, He continues to justify us by remaining in us. *This* is really and truly our justification, not faith, not holiness, not (much less) a mere imputation; but through God's mercy, the very Presence of Christ. (150)

Now, turning to the gospel we shall find that such a gift is actually promised to us by our Lord; a gift which must of necessity be at once our justification and our sanctification, for it is nothing short of the indwelling in us of God the Father and the Word Incarnate through the Holy Ghost. If this be so, we have found what we sought: *This* is to be justified, to receive the Divine Presence within us, and be made a Temple of the Holy Ghost. (144)

This, I repeat, is our justification, our ascent through Christ to God, or God's descent through Christ to us; we may call it either of the two; we ascend into Him, He descends into us; we are in Him, He in us; Christ being the One Mediator, the way, the truth, and the life, joining earth with heaven. And this is our true Righteousness,—not the mere name of righteousness, not only forgiveness or favour as an act of the Divine Mind, not only sanctification within (great indeed as these blessings would be, yet it is somewhat more),—it implies the one, it involves the other, it is the indwelling of our glorified Lord. (219)

More recently, Thomas Holtzen (1968-) has argued that union is crucial in the understanding of justification:

In speaking of justification through union with Christ by the Spirit, no attempt is being made to displace the Reformation slogans nor is any attempt being made to substitute it for any other official Church teaching, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. Rather, in speaking of justification through union with Christ by the Spirit what

is being argued is that justification cannot be abstracted as the theological idea apart from salvation “in Christ” as though one could understand justification through a forensic or transformative metaphor apart from the living Christ. Such an abstraction can only lead to a stale theology that does not seriously consider the human being as one who is ever before God and in relation to God. Justification cannot be described apart from the divine-human relationship that exists “in Christ.” (4)

These quotations in no way demonstrate an official Anglican position on the subject. However, they do demonstrate that the idea of justification through union with Christ remains alive up to the present in Anglican theology (Campbell et al. 2:194-200).

Union in the Plymouth Brethren Tradition

The Plymouth Brethren, although numerically less prominent among the traditions considered in this issue of *A&C*, greatly advanced beyond the understanding of justification in those traditions. Brethren thought on this subject was, in large part, shaped by John Nelson Darby (d. 1882). Darby disagreed with the imputation of Christ’s active righteousness, a hallmark of Reformed teaching, because the idea depends upon the fulfillment of the law for justification as opposed to the believer being in Christ. The law, Darby argues, is related to the old man, whom God set aside. Now the believer is not in the old man, who is finished, but in the new man, the “second Adam,” Christ:

It is an entire setting aside the old man, his whole condition and existence before God, by which we get our place before God: not a keeping the law for the old man. Then you must keep him alive. God forbid! I live by the second Adam only, with whom I have been crucified: nevertheless live not I, but Christ in me. But then, in the new man I am not under law, so there is no question of fulfilling it for me, because I am already accepted and have life. There can be no Do this and live. I am, as even Luther expresses it, Christ before God. If righteousness come by law, then Christ is dead in vain. But if Christ has fulfilled the law for me, it does come by law, and Christ is dead in vain. Law applies to flesh, is weak through it, sets up, if it could, the righteousness of the first man. But I am not in the flesh at all—I am in Christ. (*CWJND* 7:440)

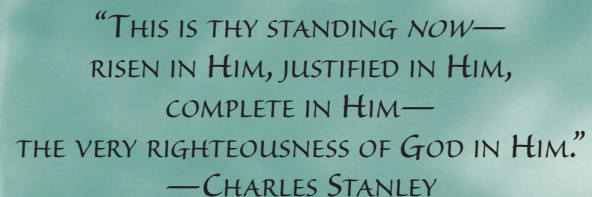
The whole of the system on which I am now commenting, and which places man on the ground of legal obedience flows from not apprehending the truth of being in Christ. (7:415)

According to Darby, the basis of our being approved as righteous in God’s eyes is not Christ’s keeping the law and imputing that to us, which would involve the imputation of something belonging to Christ yet apart from Him. Instead, the basis of our being made righteous is actually our being placed into the One who is righteousness itself:

Hence Christ was, in sovereign grace, made sin for me and died, not to build up the old man again, after death, when it was dead, and confer righteousness on it, but to put me in a wholly new position in the heavenly man, who is my righteousness; to set me in the righteousness of God, seated in heavenly places in Him. (7:410)

Like Darby, Charles Stanley (d. 1890) disagreed with the Reformed notion of justification, arguing instead that union with Christ is the basis for a believer’s being made the righteousness of God:

Oh, say they, you are under it, and break it; but Christ kept the law for you in His life, and this is imputed to you for righteousness. I would say, in answer to many enquiries on this solemn subject, I cannot find this doctrine in Scripture: it cannot be the ancient doctrine of God’s church. The basis is wrong—to refer to the illustration, on the wrong side of the river. Justification is not



“THIS IS THY STANDING NOW—
RISEN IN HIM, JUSTIFIED IN HIM,
COMPLETE IN HIM—
THE VERY RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM.”
—CHARLES STANLEY

on the principle of law at all. “The righteousness of God without law is manifested.” “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”...But does Scripture ever say that Christ kept the law for us for justifying righteousness? I am not aware of a single text. And yet, if it were so, there are many places where it should say so. (*CST* 2:4-5)

It is thus risen in Him, one with Him, we are made “the righteousness of God *in him*.” (2:6)

Oh! My reader, if you are dead with Christ, are you not justified from all sin? If you are risen with Him, are you not righteous in Him? (2:7)

This is thy standing *now*—risen in Him, justified in Him, complete in Him—the very righteousness of God in Him. (2:13)

William Kelly (d. 1906) concurred with Darby and Stanley, arguing that a believer is justified completely apart from the law by being brought into union with Christ:

They say, you need righteousness besides; and for this God needs Christ to obey the law for you. And what does scripture say? It gives the life of Christ, but life on

the other side; not Christ keeping for me the law on the earth, but Christ risen. It is life in resurrection. In point of fact there is no such thing as identification with Christ as a living man here below; which is, without intending it, a virtual denial of Christianity. We are not Jews. Union is not with the blessed Lord as under the law, but with Him risen and exalted on high. (28)

Law-righteousness differs from that of God. Law promises earth and living long thereon to those who keep it. Grace gives Christ to suffer for our sins, the Just for the unjust, raises Him for our justifying, glorifies Him in heaven, and makes us God's righteousness in Him there. (50)

The Brethren rightly unfolded the truth of justification by explaining that those who believe into Christ—who is righteousness itself—are brought into union with Him. Then, in God's eyes the believer is approved as righteous in union with Christ (Campbell et al. 2:229-235).

Union in the Baptist and Evangelical Traditions

In the main, Baptist and evangelical understandings of how the believers' union with Christ factors into their justification follow Reformed interpretations. The principal realization among Baptist and evangelical theologians is that the believers' justification by God requires their union with Christ. Union, then, is both logically prior to and necessary for the believers' justification. As we demonstrated in the "Imputed Obedience" article (44-53 in this issue), different theologians apply different emphases when expositing this basic understanding, but the approach that we find most helpful is that which depicts the believers' union with Christ as something central to their justification and focuses on how this union factors into justification. This approach is evident in the expositions of justification presented by Augustus H. Strong (d. 1921) and Lewis Sperry Chafer (d. 1952), among others. These expositions provide great insight into the vital, organic nature of the union with Christ and insist that this vital and organic union—rather than a legal or metaphorical one—grounds the believers' justification by God. In these accounts of justification we perceive genuine progress in the understanding of the truth concerning justification by faith.

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)

In the same context, Strong cautions against regarding the scriptural representations, or "figures," of this union as mere metaphors, arguing instead that the believer is in Christ, that is, in union with Him, to such a degree that Christ constitutes the believer's very breath:

The fact of the believer's union with Christ is asserted in the most direct and prosaic manner. John 14:20—"ye in me"; Rom. 6:11—"alive unto God in Christ Jesus"; 8:1—"no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus"; 2 Cor. 5:17—"if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature"; Eph. 1:4—"chose us in him before the foundation of the world"; 2:13—"now in Christ Jesus ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Christ." Thus the believer is said to be "in Christ," as the element or atmosphere which surrounds him with its perpetual presence and which constitutes his vital breath; in fact, this phrase "in Christ," always meaning "in union with Christ," is the very key to Paul's epistles, and to the whole New Testament. (3:797)

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)

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.

In Chafer's extensive ruminations on justification by faith, the organic union between Christ and the believers is one of several prominent matters. He writes,

The believer is righteous because he is in Christ, and he is justified because he is righteous. God could not be just Himself and do otherwise than to justify the one who, being in Christ, is made the righteousness of God. (*Systematic Theology* 5:143)

Although Chafer has many striking things to say about the believers' organic union with Christ, our immediate concern is with the direct and unambiguous relationship he perceives between the believers' union with Christ and their being made righteous. This relationship is elucidated in numerous passages. In a passage on the imputed righteousness of God, for instance, Chafer remarks,

Through that vital union to Christ by the Spirit, the believer becomes related to Christ as a member in His body (1 Cor. 12:13) and as a branch in the True Vine (John

15:1, 5). Because of the reality of this union, God sees the believer as a living part of His own Son. He therefore loves him as He loves His Son (John 17:23), He accepts him as He accepts His own Son (Eph. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:5), and He accounts him to be what His own Son is—the righteousness of God (Rom. 3:22; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Christ is the righteousness of God, therefore those who are saved are *made* the righteousness of God by being *in Him* (2 Cor. 5:21). (*Bible Themes* 199)

In another passage, in which Chafer identifies the believers' union with Christ as the only ground for imputed righteousness, he writes that "to be in Christ is to be possessed with the righteousness of God which Christ is and which answers every need for such a character both in this life and in that which is to come," adding that "it is impossible that any should be in Christ and not partake of what Christ is, He who is the righteousness of God" (*Systematic Theology* 6:155). The thrust of Chafer's account of justification, then,

"THE BELIEVER IS RIGHTEOUS BECAUSE HE IS IN CHRIST, AND HE IS JUSTIFIED BECAUSE HE IS RIGHTEOUS. GOD COULD NOT BE JUST HIMSELF AND DO OTHERWISE THAN TO JUSTIFY THE ONE WHO, BEING IN CHRIST, IS MADE THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD."
—LEWIS SPERRY CHAFER

seems to be that God's justification of the believers is ultimately based upon their vital union with Christ as the righteousness of God. In championing this view, Chafer cuts against the erroneous and centuries-old view, propounded by many Protestant theologians, that God's justification of the believers is based upon His forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to them. What is prominent in Chafer's view is not the forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believers but the organic identification of the believers with Christ Himself, who becomes righteousness to them not by forensic imputation but by organic union. In God's estimation the believers are righteous solely by virtue of their union with Christ, not by virtue of an additional imputation of Christ's righteousness. 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 (Campbell et al. 2:241-252).

Conclusion

The quotes presented in this article span nine centuries and

seven traditions to make the point that theologians from diverse historical periods and theological persuasions have seen an important relationship between union with Christ and justification. Although their contributions come with varying emphases and levels of insight, we believe that their respective observations warrant the attention we have given them here. At a minimum, these writers recognized that apart from union with Christ, there can be no justification. While most did not tap into the full and proper implications of that notion, they nonetheless heralded a foundational truth that stands in need of fresh appreciation today.

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