

# RETROSPECTIVE

Having traced the millennia of consideration and debate concerning justification in the various Christian traditions, we feel that it is worthwhile to take a large step back and reflect on our evaluation as well as on our evaluative standard in a comprehensive way.

Justification, of course, is related to righteousness, and the divergent understandings of justification that have arisen through the centuries can largely be traced to differences in the understanding of righteousness. Thus, we should first answer the question, What is righteousness, and more precisely, what is the righteousness that God requires for our justification? The common and natural answer to this question is that human beings should somehow be free from sins. We need not define this precisely; here it is necessary only to point out that the common assumption is that righteousness before God is related to somehow negating sins. This assumption is evident in many of the traditions that we have evaluated. But we believe that this assumption is mistaken, and because it is mistaken, many of the traditions have misunderstood justification before God.

In our view, being right before God relates directly to God's original intention in creating human beings, and thus, we appeal to the words of God's counsel in that creation: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion" (Gen. 1:26). To be right before God, to be right according to God, is to fulfill His intention in creating us, that is, to bear His image and likeness and exercise His dominion. These are, we would say, the finer characteristics of what the Bible elsewhere refers to as glorifying God. The right thing for a human being to do is to glorify God by expressing His image and likeness and exercising His dominion, not simply to be free from sin or to behave sinlessly. This, we submit, is the righteousness that God desires and requires. The sad fact of the fall of humankind, with the introduction of sin and death, neither changes God's original intention for human beings nor alters what is fundamentally the right thing for human beings to be and do. Thus, the issue that righteousness addresses is not simply sin but, more importantly, glory, which is God expressed. When we read what Paul writes, "All have sinned and fall

short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), we take him to mean that there are two separate issues with human beings that require attention: sin and glory. For sin there is the forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ, which we all must accept in faith. But glory refers to that original intention of God in creating human beings, which precedes the fall, and to that which is fundamentally right for all human beings to do: to express God in His image according to His likeness and to represent God with His dominion.

If we concede that the righteousness that God desires and requires for justification is related only to somehow negating sins, then we must also admit that human beings could be righteous in themselves before God if sin had not come in or once the problem of sin has been properly addressed. This we cannot accept. Paul makes a very clear distinction between a righteousness that is related to the law (and therefore to sin, which is exposed by the law and acts through the law [Rom. 3:20; 5:13, 20; 7:5, 7; 1 Cor. 15:56]) and a righteousness that is according to God (Rom. 1:17; 3:21; 10:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). Many of the traditions equate the righteousness according to God with forgiveness of sins. But to us that equation makes Paul's distinction meaningless. If the righteousness that God requires were related mainly to the forgiveness of sins, then the righteousness that is according to God would be a righteousness that is of the law, and the distinction of the apostle would dissolve. To uphold Paul's distinction, there must be a righteousness that is purely according to God, distinct from that which is obtainable through the law with its relationship to sin. Further, this righteousness cannot be one that is based only on what human beings are apart from sin, for that would be a righteousness that is according to human beings, not according to God.

The righteousness that is according to God must be a righteousness that is of God Himself, and according to Paul this righteousness is given to us by God as a gift (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 5:17) through faith. Many believe that this righteousness, given as a gift for our justification, is the righteousness of Christ, applied to us in some forensic and purely declarative sense. But nowhere in the Bible is this actually said, and

so we must reject this view. Rather, in accordance with the Scriptures, we understand that Christ is the very righteousness of God, whom we possess by faith, and He becomes righteousness to us for our initial and objective justification. Of course, we believe and confess that Christ was fully righteous in His human living, that He fully fulfilled the law and was without sin, and that His death on the cross fully met all the righteous demands of the law. But these constitute His own righteousness before God, which satisfied God for the forgiveness of our sins. And even if Christ's perfect fulfillment of the law could be credited to our account, that would still amount to a righteousness of the law, and therefore not that righteousness which is according to God and apart from the law. The greater righteousness that meets God's original intention for human beings to express God can be grounded only in Christ Himself because He alone, as the image of God in both His divinity and His humanity (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), expresses and glorifies God. Being such, He is the righteousness of God, and only those who are joined to Him through faith genuinely obtain and possess this kind of righteousness, the true righteousness that is according to God's intention for human beings in the first place.

Before the Reformation justification was generally thought to be based on something that God initially works into a human being, something that gives a human being a real condition of righteousness within, which God can justify. The Reformation broke with that understanding and maintained that there need not be any real righteousness within a human being for justification, because God, being God, can and simply does declare a believer righteous by imputing to the believer what Christ has righteously done apart from and external to the believer. The notion that righteousness within a believer must serve as the basis for God's justification was feared by many Reformers because they equated the innerness of that kind of righteousness with something subjective on the part of the believer and thus either a work in itself (which justification cannot be based on, according to Paul) or prone to doubt (which is the antithesis of the faith that justifies). But throughout this study we have maintained that there can indeed be a genuine righteousness within the believers, which God takes account of for justification and views not as that which is already lived out but only as that which is genuinely obtained and possessed by faith. By faith we lay hold of Christ, who has been given to us as the righteousness of God, and by faith we are united to Him as the righteousness for our justification. By faith we, of course, believe that our sins are forgiven through the righteous work of Christ, but that is not what justifies us before God. Christ Himself, as our possession by our union with Him through faith, is our righteousness before God and the sole basis of our justification by God. There is no need for Christ's righteous past to be reckoned to us, and there is no need for us to show forth some evidence of righteousness in love. Christ alone is sufficient as righteousness before God, and we who are joined to Him by faith are counted righteous by

God and have all the evidence He needs to justify us. This, we say, is the gospel. We who believe are truly, genuinely, and even essentially righteous before God, not at all by virtue of what we are or do by ourselves, but by virtue of what Christ, who is in us through faith, is in Himself. Our justification depends on Christ in us, not on Christ outside of us, and is as sure and eternal as He is.

Our view of justification, presented in this issue, adheres to what we feel are important overarching principles in God's economy and particularly in salvation as part of His economy: Christ as the centrality of all that God does in His economy, union as the characteristic of our relationship with Christ in God's economy, and righteousness as the base and expression of everything in God's economy. Our strong conviction is, first, that everything that God does in the whole

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procession of His economy He does in Christ His Son, taking Christ His Son as the sphere, element, and means of His economy. God created in the Son, He spoke of old in the Son, He came to humankind in the Son, He accomplished redemption and the forgiveness of sins in the Son, He brought the church into existence in the Son and as the Body of His Son, and He will be glorified in the Son in the ages to come. The same should be true of His justification: we should not understand that, out of step with everything else that He does, He applies the righteousness of Christ in His life and death to the believers as some external, forensic, and purely judicial declaration of righteousness. This would make Christ merely instrumental in this step of His economy for salvation and not actual righteousness within the believers. Rather, we should understand that God makes Christ actual righteousness within the believers for their justification. Thus, they are righteous not because of what Christ was and did in the past but because of what He is within them by their organic union with Him through faith. They possess true righteousness because they truly possess Christ.

Second, union with Christ is the characteristic of every aspect of our experience of God. "I am the vine; you are the

branches. He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). This union is the true significance of Paul’s signature expression *in Christ* (and all the variants thereof). We the believers have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ: we were chosen in Christ, we died in Christ, we have been made alive in Christ, we have been raised in Christ, we are seated in the heavens in Christ, we are redeemed in Christ, we are made one Body in Christ...The list is too great to easily commit to writing here, and we expect that some of our readers will make our point by remembering many of the other aspects that we have not mentioned. Thus, the overwhelming evidence in the apostles’ teaching is that all that we obtain, attain, possess, and enjoy in God’s complete salvation is by virtue of our organic union with Christ. Thus, union must be the characteristic of our justification as part of that salvation. It cannot be the case that God makes justification an exception to His own rule and accomplishes it outside of our union with Christ in a way that is external, forensic, and merely judicially declarative. We protest against this as being contrary to the whole character of God’s economy and salvation. We were united to Righteousness Himself by our union with Him, and because of that—or rather, because of Him—we were justified by God.

Third, it can almost go without saying that righteousness, the element that defines justification, is a characteristic of every aspect of God’s economy. As the way of His acts (Psa. 103:6-7), righteousness is the power of God’s salvation (Rom. 1:16-17), the means for Him to impart grace into the believers (Rom. 5:21), and much else besides. In fact, righteousness is so important in His economy that God requires both objective justification for entry into His judicial redemption and subjective justification for the fulfillment of His organic salvation. And the only righteousness that avails before God is His own righteousness, a fact that the apostle Paul was fully cognizant of. In Philippians 3:9 he expresses his great desire: to “be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is out of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith.” Thus, according to Paul, to be found in Christ is to have the righteousness that is of God, not the righteousness in one’s self or out of the law. Certainly, in this passage Paul has subjective righteousness in view, that is, that which is lived out as righteousness by faith. But the principle must apply to all aspects of righteousness in God’s full salvation, even that which serves as the base of objective justification: it must be of God and found in Christ. Because of this, we understand that the righteousness that justifies us, which is the righteousness of God, is Christ Himself applied to us directly through our union with Him. This righteousness, given to us by God in Christ, is the ground of our objective justification and becomes the expression in our subjective justification (Campbell et al. 2:297-302).

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We opened this issue of *A&C* (p. 3) by quoting the apostle Paul, and we feel that it is appropriate to end this issue by repeating his exuberant challenge: “Who shall bring a charge against God’s chosen ones? It is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33). Many words have been expended over the past two millennia concerning justification, but we should be ever mindful of the reality that it is God who justifies and not we ourselves or the various traditions that characterize us. We believe that, for the most part, the consideration and wrangling over the past two thousand years have been motivated by a genuine desire to come to the full knowledge of this important blessing in God’s economy. And we suspect that God mostly smiles on all our good hearts to do so. But it is also true that sometimes the discussion has gone beyond the limits of true love and strayed into discord and divisiveness, and for that we all must ask God to be merciful to us. Even for our own writing in this issue we seek His mercy, and we ask Him as well as our readers to forgive us if we too have gone beyond a proper Christian love for all the believers; it was not our intent to do so. In the end, we realize that He alone justifies according to His good pleasure and His own way, even sometimes in spite of what we think or know. The squabbings of theologians here on earth below do not at all change the designs of God in heaven above. Knowing exactly how He justifies does not change the fact that He justifies; it simply changes how much we can appreciate and enter into the experiential benefits of His justification. This, of course, is important, and this is why we have added to the history of the discussion the two volumes that we summarize in this issue. But even though we find some fault in many of the traditions concerning the understanding of how exactly God justifies human beings, we firmly believe and even exult that those in all the traditions who genuinely believe in Christ, from the early patristic period to the modern era, are genuinely justified by God, and even beyond the protestations of most of them, their objective justification is secure eternally. We know that many will disagree and never give up the fight for their understandings of justification, and we know that some of this zeal will have detrimental effects on others (as the history of justification has shown). We lament this and can take comfort only in the realization and satisfaction that nevertheless it is God who justifies. But beyond this, if what we have presented here has helped anyone enter into the victory and even the boast of justification and into the full assurance and peaceful security of justification, then we count our work to have served its purpose, and we thank the Lord for making us sufficient for these particular things. All praise, honor, glory, and blessing be to Him who justifies those whom He has chosen for His wonderful salvation (Campbell et al. 2:313-314)!