

**FROM BIRMINGHAM, WITH LOVE:
“FEDERAL VISION”¹ POSTCARDS**

By Rich Lusk

The book *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry (CJPM)* is yet another frontal assault in the latest Reformed Civil War. According to the editor, Scott Clark, there is “open disagreement within Reformed and Presbyterian churches over the most basic elements of the doctrine of justification” (3). According to David VanDrunen, the Reformed doctrine of justification is “under attack” – “even in the name of Reformed theology itself” (48).² It is my hunch that the issues at stake in the current fracas are not worth the amount of time and energy they have already consumed. That is not say the issues that have caused the impasse are unimportant. But the high-stakes rhetoric is very one sided, full of distortion, and reflects the ghettoizing of the Reformed church into an ingrown sect. The critics of the so-called “Federal Vision” really believe the gospel and the Reformed faith are being openly denied by the “Federal Vision.”³ On the “Federal

¹ I despise the use of theological labels to segregate the church into various parties and factions. In this case, I have only used the “Federal Vision” label because it crops up so frequently in the book to which this present volume of essays is responding. The “Federal Vision” is essentially a *conversation* among Reformed catholic Christians, who see a retrieval and maturation of Reformed biblical theology and ecclesial practice as the need of the hour. The “Federal Vision” is not a monolith or a fixed target, though I do not doubt that a “Federal Vision” theology (of sorts) could be identified. Readers should note that the “Federal Vision” is not uniform, and the views expressed here are my own, not necessarily those of another person who has been assigned the “Federal Vision” label.

² My assigned task in this essay is to respond primarily to the first two chapters of the *CJPM* volume, edited by R. Scott Clark. My reply will be more indirect than direct; I am aiming more at description and defense than full scale critique. Space will not permit taking up each major assertion made by authors Clark and David VanDrunen, since these chapters are introductory summations. Instead of individual counter-arguments, I will (mostly) engage in painting counter-portraits (“postcards”) of different aspects of the doctrine of justification. Of course, the two composite pictures, when placed side by side, are not contrary at every point, but I will generally pass over areas of overlap to focus on areas of disagreement.

³ It is almost impossible to give a comprehensive overview of the issues involved in the current Reformed discussion. The issues are wide ranging, and yet the differences among various positions are often very subtle and nuanced. Certainly justification is at the heart of the discussion as the *CJPM* volume shows. Ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and covenantal conditionality (e.g., the possibility of apostasy) are also central. Less attention has been given to other, equally important matters, such as hermeneutics

Vision” side, the issues are seen as an intra-mural Reformed discussion which should be conducted in a brotherly manner since those things we hold in common outweigh our differences. That imbalance is very significant. The issue is not only the doctrines over which we disagree, but also the way in which those disagreements are communicated.

This contribution cannot even begin to canvas all the theological territory in dispute. While the sections of this meandering essay would not actually fit on a series of postcards, as the title suggests, it is my aim to break the massive discussion of justification down into several bite-sized, digestible pieces. The progression of “postcard” pictures I present will unpack the way I view key issues raised in the *CJPM* book: the righteousness of God, the nature of justification and justifying faith, imputation, and union with Christ. In another essay in this book, I will take up the topic of future justification. My aim is to give a brief overview of the doctrine of justification as it’s understood on this side of the controversy, in such a way that the doors to further dialogue and discussion are left open. I am not trying to break any new ground here; rather, I want to gather up, summarize, and clarify what has already been said, so that we can press forward. My essay is not intending to be the last word, but hopefully a helpful word on the way to better understanding of each other and of Scripture.

I will limit myself primarily to biblical considerations (and primarily to Paul’s epistles, at that), though I think it could be easily demonstrated that the doctrine of justification articulated here is within the boundaries of historic Reformed confessional

(especially the role of narrative and typology in interpretation), eschatology, the finer points of Trinitarian doctrine and theology proper, the relationship of biblical to systematic theology, the relationship of Reformed denominations to the church catholic, and the legitimacy of a Christian social order (Christendom). At the same time, these differences should not obscure major swaths of agreement on issues such as divine monergism in salvation, the ultimate authority of the Scriptures, the primacy of faith, etc. All parties to the present debate are cut from the same Reformed cloth, even if they are flowing down different currents in the Reformed stream.

orthodoxy (and I will gesture in that direction at points). It is important that we consider the teaching of the Reformed confessions and catechisms, the writings of great Reformers like John Calvin, and the works of contemporary scholars like Norman Shepherd, Richard Muller, and N. T. Wright. But the bottom line question for all Protestant Christians must be, “*What does Scripture teach?*” and so that will be the focus. Obviously, this paper is entering into an ongoing discussion; the uninitiated may want to consult the various works cited in the footnotes to get up to speed.⁴ *Kyrie eleison* as we proceed.

The Righteousness of God

Our first postcard sketches a picture of God’s righteousness. Paul launches the argument of Romans from the base of “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:16-17).⁵ But Paul did not invent this theological foundation. The OT already offered a very thick description of God’s righteousness, from which the apostle draws. Consider some texts:

- Oh, continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You,

And Your righteousness to the upright in heart (Ps. 36:10)

- The LORD has made known His salvation;

His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations (Ps. 98:2)

⁴ My own key contributions, related to this present essay include “Rome Won’t Have Me,” “Blurring the Federal Vision,” “A Response to Bryan Chappell,” “A Response to the 2006 OPC Justification Report (Parts 1-3),” “The PCA and the NPP,” “Christ Church Ministerial Conference: The Life of Justification (Lecture Notes),” “Miscellanies on the ‘New Perspective’ and Pauline Biblical Theology,” “Bombing the Theologians Playground: An Extended Review of N. T. Wright’s *NIB* Romans Commentary,” and “Theologians in Pajamas” (forthcoming). All of these are (or will be) available at <http://www.trinity-pres.net/pastor.php>.

⁵ The bibliography on “God’s righteousness” has grown too massive to survey here. A succinct, helpful summary may be found in Michael Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), ch. 2. In *CJPM*, VanDrunen explores the meaning of God’s righteousness mainly in connection with his summarizing the views of “New Perspective on Paul” scholars (41ff).

- But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
 On those who fear Him,
 And His righteousness to children's children (Ps. 103:17)
- I bring My righteousness near, it shall not be far off;
 My salvation shall not linger (Isa. 46:13)
- But My salvation will be forever,
 And My righteousness will not be abolished...
 But My righteousness will be forever,
 And My salvation from generation to generation (Isa. 51:6, 8)

Obviously, these passages are stripped of their full context here. But the key point should still be evident. In these texts, God's righteousness is clearly a *divine attribute* revealed in *divine action*. God's righteousness is his integrity, which manifests itself in history as fidelity to his covenant promises, which in turn manifests itself in the salvation of his people and the destruction of their enemies. God's righteousness is his character, reflected in his actions, vindicating true Israel and condemning the wicked. God's righteousness is his power, exercised on behalf of his people, to rescue them from sin through his Son.

God's righteousness is not just something to fear; it is also the ground of our hope of redemption. Note that repeatedly in these texts above "righteousness" is put in poetic parallel with "lovingkindness" (or "covenant love") and "salvation." God shows his righteousness when he keeps his covenant of love with his people, achieving their salvation. Yes, righteousness condemns, as we might expect. But it also saves. God's

righteousness has two sides to it: When God acts in righteousness (covenant loyalty) to rescue his people, he also acts to destroy their enemies as well (e.g., the exodus).

There can be no doubt this is the understanding of divine righteousness Paul employs in Romans 1. This is the righteousness manifested in the gospel. The OT provides the framework within which Paul develops his argument that the righteousness of God has *now* (eschatologically) been revealed. The righteousness of God includes dark shades of wrath (1:18ff), but also the bright light of grace (3:21ff). Early in Romans 3, Paul uses God's "righteousness" and "faithfulness" interchangeably (3:3, 5). Later in chapter 3, Paul shows how God has overcome human unrighteousness (described in 3:9-20) and demonstrated his own righteousness in setting forth Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice (3:21ff), which Paul explains by alluding to the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant (*hilasterion* in 3:25). What happened symbolically in secret in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement has now happened in reality in public on Good Friday. The cross proves and enacts the righteousness of God, for through the cross God upholds both his character and his covenant promises.⁶ Israel's unfaithfulness has not caused God's word to fail; God has maintained his integrity even though Israel has failed to uphold her end of the covenant.

Why does Paul locate the righteous of God in the faithful death of Jesus Christ (3:21-25)? On the one hand, the cross shows that God, as the Holy One, must pour wrath

⁶ Romans 3:21ff explicates 1:16-17. Some have suggested that 1:17 should be translated "righteousness *from* God" but that does not make a huge difference. The reading "righteousness *of* God" emphasizes righteousness as God's *character*; the very Godness of God is found in his integrity and faithfulness. The reading "righteousness *from* God" emphasizes that God has *acted* in righteousness to keep his covenant promises in Jesus Christ and give salvation (righteousness) to his people. The phrase "from faith to faith" probably means the gospel moves from divine faithfulness to human faithfulness; that is, from God's powerful, saving action in Christ, to the human response of the obedience of faith. Alternatively, it could refer to the fact that the Christian life proceeds from the initial act of faith to persevering faithfulness (cf. Rom. 1:5; Gal. 3:2-3; Col. 1:22-25; Heb. 12:1-4).

out upon sin. That wrath takes the shape of an execution (Gen. 2:17; 3:19), as Jesus endures the curse for the sake of his people. On the other hand, the cross shows God keeps his gracious promises, fulfilling the covenant pledge he made to redeem his people and form the global family of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; cf. Rom. 4:13) through Jesus and the Spirit (cf. Gal. 3:1-14). Hence, Paul describes God as just and the justifier of those who share in the faith of Jesus (Rom. 3:26). Romans 1:16-17, filled in by the rest of the letter, shows us that God's righteousness is defined as his powerful and saving self-revelation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁷ In Christ, God has proven that he is trustworthy and has made good on the covenant promises. God's righteousness is his covenant faithfulness embodied and enacted in the person and work of Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Man, overcoming human unrighteousness/unfaithfulness.⁸

The Victory of Righteousness

⁷ In other words, the "righteousness of God" in Romans is more or less synonymous with the gospel narrative, announced at the very beginning of the letter in 1:1-6 as "the gospel of God." The gospel is "good news" precisely because it contains and reveals the righteousness of God. Jesus fits into the righteousness of God as the one in whom the divine promises have been fulfilled (1:2), as well as the one in whom the royal vocation of Israel as has been fulfilled (1:3; note Jesus' identity as the "seed of David").

⁸ We need to be careful to do justice to the simplicity of God here, lest we set God against himself. God is not schizophrenic, with his holiness and love internally warring against each other. All of God is involved in all that God does. All of his attributes are equally ultimate. It is a distortion of the divine being to speak of justice as being more basic than love. There is a tension to be found within the Bible's storyline, to be sure, but it is not a tension within the life of God. Rather, it is a tension between God and sin. That tension is resolved into perfect harmony at the cross, where the Triune God, in absolute holiness and love, achieves our salvation and defeats sin.

Further (while I am on this topic), we should be careful how we understand propitiation in Romans 3:25. We must dispense with the notion that the loving Son came (merely) to appease the wrath of an angry Father, or to persuade the Father to love us, or to acquire merits that would leverage the Father's favor towards us. After all, the Father's love for us sent the Son in the first place (John 3:16); even if we choose to speak of the Son's obedience "meriting" the Father's mercy to us (as John Calvin did), we still have to ask what merited the sending of the Son in the first place. The gospel, like creation itself, has its origins in the unmerited, unbounded love of God. The only alternative is to fall into an infinite regress. Yes, the Father's wrath against sin must be propitiated, but the Father himself provides the sacrifice that accomplishes this propitiation. He is not propitiated so that he can love sinners; rather, he loves sinners, and therefore sets forth his Son as propitiation for them.

Also, note that the Son is wrathful against sin every bit as much as the Father, such that his wrath must be propitiated as well. In that sense, the cross is the Son's self-propitiation. Our whole redemption is the project of the Triune God, from beginning to end. Each person of the Godhead has a unique work in the economy of redemption, yet those distinct roles interpenetrate one another as the persons act in perfect concert with one another.

Paul's picture of divine righteousness in Romans is a picture of divine triumph. But that is not immediately apparent. Paul's stance in Romans is largely (if not essentially) apologetic. Paul argues his case that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God precisely because historical events (specifically, the story of Israel) have called that righteousness into question. Why haven't the promises been fulfilled as expected? What are we to make of the fact that the covenant people, Israel, have rejected their Messiah and been cut off? Is this God really trustworthy if his own people do not seem to be sharing in his blessings? The heart and climax of Romans demonstrate that God is indeed true to his word, even in the case of Israel (Rom. 9-11; 15-16).⁹ He can be trusted. History is unfolding according to plan, even if appearances sometimes veil God's work, such that victories are cleverly disguised as defeats. Israel's covenant breaking leaves her with no grounds for hope, yet still God remains faithful and gracious. God has demonstrated his righteousness once and for all in the death of his Son, fulfilling the law and the prophets and bringing in the new covenant. The whole of history will ultimately serve God's glory and the whole cosmos (minus reprobate angels and humans) will share in the bounties of his goodness. All questions about God's covenant loyalty to his creation and his people are answered at Calvary. God's righteousness means that forgiveness, redemption, and renewal can only come through death. But on the other side of death lies resurrection.

To say God is righteous is to say God is *committed* – committed to restoring creation to peace and bringing his project for the world to its mature glory. God's righteousness is his unswerving purpose to glorify himself through keeping covenant

⁹ Note that the programmatic quotation in Romans 1:17 comes from Habakkuk, which is also an apologetic work of theodicy. Paul, like Habakkuk, has to wrestle with the issue of God's faithfulness in relation to Israel's unfaithfulness. How will the righteous God keep covenant with an unrighteous people? What happens when covenant promises collide with human rebellion? For more on this line of thought in Romans, see Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), ch. 2.

with his people, and behind that, with his creation. The gospel – the good news about what God has done in Jesus’ death and resurrection – is the announcement of God’s cosmic and restorative righteousness. The creation’s cries will be answered at last (Rom. 8:18ff).

So God’s righteousness is the hub of the wheel; the blessings we receive in Christ radiate out from God’s righteousness like so many spokes. The rest of the NT fills out this understanding of divine righteousness. Consider a couple examples:

- Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Tim. 4:8)
- If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)

In these texts, the righteousness of God is clearly his covenant faithfulness. As in the OT, it includes the legal, but also the relational, aspects of the covenant. His righteousness (or justice) is a comfort because it assures us of our present forgiveness and final vindication; it is the ground of our hope. This is the same view of God’s righteousness found in Romans. God’s righteousness is his total gift of salvation to believers and his fitting punishment of those who reject him. God is true to himself and to his people. The righteousness of God is ultimately Christ himself; he is the gift that brings justification and life. God is righteous – meaning he has won the victory over sin and death, just as he promised he would.

What Is Justification?

In many ways, our respective pictures of justification are similar. Everyone on both sides of the controversy agrees that justification is a forensic, lawcourt category. To be justified is the opposite of being condemned. Justification is a judicial declaration. “To justify” is to *declare righteous* in a legal context, not to *make righteous* by way of moral transformation. To be justified is to be declared in the right with God. No one desires to sideline or minimize the Bible’s robust judicial theology.¹⁰

Justification is found *in Christ* (Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:30). As the Son of God and Son of Man, he lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins as the spotless Lamb of God, and rose again in victory and vindication. By faith, we are united to him; by faith everything that is his becomes ours. Union with Christ is the matrix of our justification (and every other salvific blessing). As we trust him, we are united to him; in union with him, we participate in the vindicating verdict the Father passed over him and share in his righteous status.¹¹

Paul gives a wonderful summary of how God justifies us in Romans 4:25. He firmly anchors justification in the death and resurrection of Christ. Our sin was the basis of his death; his resurrection is the basis of our acquittal. Jesus died that we might be forgiven. His death is our death, as he bears the curse we deserve. By his blood, our transgressions are washed away. Further, his resurrection was *his* justification, and

¹⁰ This is the case even with regard to those like Peter Leithart who wish to point out the full breadth of the forensic category in the Scriptures. Leithart has demonstrated that justification includes a definitive deliverance from sin’s power, as well as release from sin’s condemnation (cf. Rom. 6:7). But this enriched, enlarged notion of justification is still fully forensic. See Leithart, “Judge Me, O God,” in *The Federal Vision*, edited by Duane Garner and Steve Wilkins (Monroe, LA; Athanasius Press, 2004), 203-235, and my own essay, “Justification: Ecclesial, Cosmic, and Divine,” available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/justification_ecclesial_cosmic_and_divine.htm.

¹¹ Obviously, then, justification is *by faith*. Faith’s unique function is unitive; we believe “into” Christ, as the NT often puts it. Faith justifies precisely because it embraces and receives Christ. The seminal work on our union with the risen Christ, especially as it relates to our justification, is Richard Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978). Gaffin would certainly not endorse everything in this essay, but many of his insights cohere well with my argument.

therefore *our* justification as well, since we share in the verdict the Father declares over him. Had Jesus remained dead, he would have remained under the condemnation and power of sin. An unjustified Christ cannot justify anyone else. So Paul rightly says that Christ was raised *with a view to* our justification. This prospective, causal reading of Romans 4:25b is ably defended by Michael Bird.¹² Bird points out that standing behind this Pauline text is Isaiah's pre-announcement of the gospel in 53:11, where the Suffering Servant "justifies many" because he has "borne their iniquities" (a reference to the cross) and has now seen "the light" and is "satisfied" (a reference to the resurrection). I will not produce Bird's full argumentation here, but his summary is very apt:

[U]nion with Christ is union with the justified Messiah and the now Righteous One. Jesus by fact of his resurrection is the locus of righteousness and redemption (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 1:17) and believers are justified only because they have been united with the justified Messiah. Whereas believers formerly shared the verdict of condemnation pronounced on Adam, now they partake of the verdict of justification pronounced of Christ...It is union with Christ in his death *and resurrection* that constitutes the material cause of justification.

Bird then quotes John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (3.11.8):

For though God alone is the fountain of righteousness, and the only way in which *we are righteous is by participation in him*, yet as by our unhappy revolt we are alienated from his righteousness, it is necessary to descend to this lower remedy, *that Christ may justify us by the power of his death and resurrection.*¹³

The resurrection is a fitting paradigm for justification. Resurrection, taken in its many facets, is the core of our salvation. The resurrection is both a judicial and transformative event; and as such, it reveals the inseparability of these different aspects of our salvation. Moreover, Scripture attests that Jesus was not active in his resurrection. The typical way of describing the resurrection in the NT (aside from perhaps John 10:17-18) is to say the Father and/or Spirit enlivened Jesus from the grave (Acts 2:24; Rom. 8:11;

¹² Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, 50ff, 76f.

¹³ Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, 56 (emphasis his).

etc.). Jesus did not “rise” from the dead so much as he “was raised.” In the same way, our justification is not our own work; rather, we are recipients of the acquitting, enlivening verdict of God, even as Jesus was. Romans 4:25 captures this dynamic: via our union with the risen Christ, we share in both his new judicial status and his new life. As we share in his resurrection, we are delivered from sin in all its consequences and ramifications, including death itself ultimately.

Paul further unfolds the meaning of justification in Romans 5:12-21, in which Adam and Christ represent not only two families, but two ages. This passage looks at humanity from the vantage point of covenant headship. Every person is found either in union with the first Adam (sharing in his disobedience, condemnation, and death) or the last Adam (sharing in obedience, justification, and life). Christ secured justification for his people by his one act of obedience (on the tree of the cross), answering to the one act of disobedience committed by the first Adam (which also took place at a tree). In the key verses, 5:18-19, it is “one man’s righteous act” (note: not his entire life of obedience, but his singular act of obedience unto death as the unique *culmination* of that lifelong obedience) that has brought justification. This is contrasted with the “one man’s offense” that brought sin and death.¹⁴

By the time we get to the end of Romans 8, Paul has shown the pastoral comfort that justification gives us. No charge can be brought against us. It is God who justifies – and he did not spare his own Son, but rather freely gave him up for our sakes. Surely he

¹⁴ Again, Bird’s exegetical discussion in *The Saving Righteousness of God* hits on all the right nuances. Bird says that the obedience in view is not Christ’s whole life, but specifically his obedience unto death (78). That is the best way to preserve the parallel with the first Adam. Further, he chastises John Piper for reading imputation into the text, when participation makes better sense (79).

will give us everything else we could possibly need (8:32-33). All legal/judicial threats against us are answered by the death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ (8:34).¹⁵

This is not to deny a future dimension of justification still to come. But that future aspect of justification is still a legal verdict (not a process of moral renewal), and in a very real sense is based upon our initial justification, as described here.

Justifying Faith: Living or Dead?

How should we picture justifying faith? In *CJPM*, Clark asserts that the “Federal Vision” group believes that faith derives its justifying power from its moral qualities. He writes: “To conclude that in justification faith justifies because it obeys...has the most serious implications for the historic (and confessional) doctrine of justification” (4).

VanDrunen echoes Clark’s objection, focusing the problem on Norman Shepherd: “In his book, Shepherd repeatedly stresses that justifying faith is an active, living, obedient faith. Given the context of debates over justification, such language is inherently ambiguous” (49).

But Clark’s view is a misreading of those he opposes and, contra VanDrunen, there is nothing ambiguous about Shepherd’s “living faith” formula. This is actually quite simple: We are either justified by a *living faith* or a *dead faith*. Clark and VanDrunen apparently want to argue that a dead faith justifies. Doing my best impersonation of the apostle James, I want to ask (rhetorically, of course), “*Can such a faith save?*” When our theological formulations directly contradict the apostles, we need to back up and try again.¹⁶ As James says, a dead faith does not profit (2:14). As Paul says, the only faith

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Paul’s beautiful summary of Christ’s glorious justifying work at the end of Romans 8 does not say a word about his “active obedience.” More on that below.

¹⁶ The *CJPM* men are also contradicting Protestant doctrinal standards. Consider WLC 73 says, “other grace do *always* accompany” justifying faith, and WCF 11.2, which says faith is “not alone in the

that avails for justification is a faith that works through love (Gal. 5:5-6). Believers receive and rest upon Jesus for justification in the same act of faith that also clings to him for moral transformation. Faith is faith; faith cannot be divided into two types, “justifying faith” and “sanctifying faith.” Saving faith is an integrated whole, and can no more be divided than Christ himself.

These claims by Clark and VanDrunen are part of a larger presupposition the *CJPM* authors share. They believe the gospel must *sound* antinomian if it to be kept pure of legalism. Indeed, sounding antinomian is a test of orthodoxy. In chapter 9, Robert Godfrey, following Martyn Lloyd-Jones, says “If no one ever comes to you after you preach the gospel and asks ‘So should we sin so that grace may abound?’ you have probably never preached the gospel” (280).¹⁷

Aside from the fact that all of the “Federal Vision” men have been accused of preaching antinomianism at one time or another (and thus pass this test), the Godfrey/Lloyd-Jones point is really an exercise in missing the point. The objection of Romans 6:1 (“Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?”) is not raised *after* the gospel has been preached; it is raised *in the middle* of preaching the gospel. In other

person justified, but is *ever* accompanied with all other saving graces” (emphasis added). The Lutheran teaching in the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration, 3.41) quotes Luther to the same effect: “it is faith alone that lays hold of blessing, apart from works, and yet *it is never, ever alone*” (emphasis added). Faith does not come alive *after* justification; the faith that lays hold of Christ for justification is *already* a living, loving, virtuous faith. Any other kind of faith is dead, and such faith cannot bring a share in the life of Christ. It has always been standard Protestant teaching to apply the “alone” in the formula “justification is by faith alone” to “justification” and not “faith,” precisely because faith is never alone.

¹⁷ See also *CJPM*, 208-9. I’ve always wondered what this test does for those who *don’t* object to the antinomian presentation of the gospel, but instead simply draw the conclusion that the gospel *is* in fact an antinomian message, and go their merry way. In case the *CJPM* authors haven’t noticed, not every totally depraved person is looking for rules to keep in order to earn God’s favor; many (especially in a postmodern context) are looking for ways to escape any kind of rules whatsoever, while still being able to feel good about themselves. Antinomianism is (and always has been) every bit the danger that raw legalism is. For every sinner who tries to earn his way to God, there is another sinner turning grace into license. Some sinners are even skilled at doing both! This is why we need to focus *not* on sounding as antinomian as possible, but presenting a full-orbed gospel that includes both forgiveness and renewal as gracious gifts of God in Christ.

words, the antinomian objection is not a sign that you have preached the gospel; rather, it is a sign that you have *not yet finished* preaching the gospel. Paul's presentation of the gospel does not end in Romans 5:21; Romans 6 is pure gospel as well. Thus, the gospel is not preached in full if union with Christ in his death to sin and rising to new life are ignored (Rom. 6:2ff). The gospel is not preached in full unless a call for obedience to all of Christ's commands is issued (Matt. 28:20). The gospel is not preached unless the promised gift of the Spirit, given to enable us to put to death the misdeeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), is included in the offer. The gospel is not preached unless there has been a summons to repent (Acts 17:30).

The pure grace of the gospel is not threatened by a call to obedience. Indeed, the gospel, properly preached, understood, and embraced, demands *and promises* obedience. In the Scriptures, heralds of the gospel essentially interchange faith and repentance as appropriate responses to the message (cf. Acts 2:38 and 16:34). In other places, Scripture speaks of "the obedience of faith" and calls hearers to "obey the gospel" (Rom. 1:5; 2 Thess. 1:8). In still other texts, faith and obedience (cf. Rom. 10:16) as well unbelief and disobedience (Heb. 3:18-19) are interchangeable. The basic gospel confession is, "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 9; 1 Cor. 12:3) – which is to say, "He has given himself for me, and I now owe him my allegiance." In the gospel, we find that God's righteous requirements are not legalistic impositions, but gracious gifts he promises to work in us (cf. Rom. 8:1-4).

The only kind of faith that justifies is a faith that lives – that is to say, a faith that loves, obeys, repents, calls, and seeks. Thus, faith can be *seen* (cf. Mark 2:5) and *demonstrated* (Jas. 2:18); it is embodied and embedded in outward action. True, at the moment of initial justification, faith has not yet done good works. But *the kind of faith*

that lays hold of Christ for justification is a faith that will issue forth in obedience, not because something will be added to that faith a nanosecond after its conception (as if faith had to be “formed” by additional virtues, ala Roman Catholic teaching), but because that faith already carries within itself the seeds of every virtue.¹⁸ The faith God works in us, in order that we might be justified by faith, simultaneously begins the process of transformation by faith. Faith never exists on its own, even at its inception. The kind of faith God gives his elect is a living, working, penitent, persevering faith. It is a faith that is inseparable from repentance and obedience. When faith grasps Christ, it grasps the whole Christ, so that he simultaneously becomes Savior and Lord. Indeed, given that faith is a gift of God, its presence in us is proof that the Spirit has already begun his work of transforming us.

Works, then, are the public manifestation of faith. When Paul describes the life of faith, in union with Christ, he immediately turns to how we re-pattern the use of our bodies (Rom. 6:12-13). Faith redirects and reorients the way we use the body. We put to death the body’s misdeeds and begin to embody future resurrection life even in this present mortal existence (Rom. 8:1-17). While faith is certainly a matter of the heart, and renews the mind (Rom. 12:1-2), it has an inescapable communal, even political/cultural, dimension as well. The person acting in faith offers his body as an instrument of righteousness (Rom. 6:13); he becomes a holistic slave of God, even as he was previously a slave to sin (Rom. 6:19). Faith gives us a new posture, a new way of “leaning” into all of life.

¹⁸ How could good works be regarded as the “fruit” (cf. WCF 16.2) of faith unless faith contains the *seeds* of those works from the outset?

The faith/obedience nexus is a critical aspect of biblical theology. The key thing to note here is that the gospel is bigger than merely the offer/promise of forgiveness; it is also the offer/promise of a changed life. God accepts us as we are, but he doesn't let us stay that way. The necessity of obedience is not bad news tacked onto an otherwise antinomian gospel message. People need (and should want) transformation and freedom from sin's enslavement, every bit as much as they want pardon and release from the burden of sin's guilt. A gospel that did not ultimately aim at and guarantee the complete destruction of sin in our lives and the complete renovation of our humanity would actually be mediocre news at best, not the good news of Jesus Christ. Every demand God makes is also a promised gift in the economy of grace. It is good news to hear that God not only desires to clear us from sin's penalty, but also re-humanize us so that we can begin to enjoy the kind of life we were designed to live.

Contra Clark's assumptions, none of that is to say that faith justifies *because* it obeys. Faith justifies because it lays hold of Christ, the Just One. Rather, the point here is that justifying faith has certain qualities. The same faith that receives the gift of justification receives the gift of transformation. It's a package deal.

The Meaning of Imputation

The eye of the storm in the present controversy is Paul's doctrine of imputation. Here the picture is a little cloudier. There is no question Paul uses imputation (*logizomai*) language to explicate his gospel. But the questions are: What does this language mean? How does it work? How does imputation relate to justification and the rest of our salvation in Christ?¹⁹

¹⁹ In *The Saving Righteousness of God*, Bird perceptively points out that many theologians who have replaced the scholastic *ordo salutis* model of salvation with a union-with-Christ model (e.g., Sinclair

The exegetical issue is somewhat complicated by the fact that the term “imputation” took on a life of its own in Reformed systematic theology. The Reformed polemic against Rome was structured in terms of a debate between those who believed in justification by imputed righteousness vs. those who believed in justification by infused righteousness. In Reformed systematic theology, the notion of “imputation” took on a great deal more theological freight than it carries in the Pauline epistles. Over time, it became the defining mark of Protestant theology, or, as Bird puts it, a “boundary marker” for the Reformed faith. For some, imputation has become synonymous with the gospel itself.²⁰

But the role of imputation in Paul and the role of imputation in Reformed theology are not necessarily identical. Failure to notice the slippage between biblical and systematic terminologies is a major culprit in the present controversy. Terms have to be understood in light of their context. While theologians are certainly free to use terms in

Ferguson, Anthony Hoekema, Gaffin, etc.) have not accounted for the relationship of imputation to union. For example, Bird shows that Gaffin rightly perceives “the overarching significance of union with Christ” in Paul’s soteriology, yet Gaffin “fails to explicate the relationship between an imputed righteousness and participative righteousness” (47; cf. 2, 60, etc.). It is precisely this relationship between union and imputation that we must explore.

²⁰ The *prima facie* problem with such a claim is that imputation does not show up in *any* of the noteworthy gospel summaries of the NT (e.g., Acts 2:15-39; Rom. 1:3-4; 1 Cor. 15:3-8; 1 Tim. 3:16, 2 Tim. 2:8, etc.). Paul preached “Christ crucified,” not “Christ actively obedient” (1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 3:1). For a very reasonable assessment of the place of imputation in biblical theology, see Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, ch. 3. Bird notes:

[T]here is no text in the New Testament which categorically states that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to believers...though imputed righteousness is not ‘true’ at the exegetical level, in the theatre of Systematic Theology it can hold its own...[A]t the exegetical level union with Christ rather than imputation is the most useful way of articulating Paul’s ideas about justification...Furthermore, the notion of imputation fails to grapple with Paul’s in-Christ language that gravitates more towards the concepts of incorporation, substitution, and representation. Given the supremely Christocentric ingredient in Paul’s formulation of justification, it is far more appropriate to speak of *incorporated righteousness* for the righteousness that clothes believers is not that which is somehow abstracted from Christ and projected onto them, but is located exclusively in Christ as the glorified incarnation of God’s righteousness (2-3, 5, 85; see also 70, 87, 182, 184ff).

Bird rightly notes that Reformed theology’s overemphasis on imputation has led our theologians to all too often overlook the soteric significance of the resurrection and the forensic dimension of union with Christ (85f).

stipulated, shorthand ways, we also need to keep in view the distinctive biblical sense(s) a given term may have as well. This is not an attack on doing systematic theology (which is inescapable), but an endorsement of doing biblical exegesis (a burden we have all too often escaped).

Popularly understood, imputation describes a *transfer* of righteousness. The model looks something like this: Through his active and passive obedience, Jesus accumulated merits in his account. Those merits are imputed to our accounts when we trust him. Because the merits of Christ have been transferred to us, God declares us justified. When the Scripture says, “faith is counted for righteousness,” it really means that by faith, God transfers Christ’s righteousness to us in order to declare us just. Justification is a consequence of this imputation; God’s act of justification is based on his (logically prior) act of imputation.²¹

²¹ For example, consider R. C. Sproul’s summary in *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 64:

The Reformers insisted that the sole ground of our justification is the righteousness of Christ wrought for us in his life of perfect obedience. This is done by imputation. This means that God transfers to our account the righteousness of Christ wrought in his own person and that this righteousness is “counted” or “reckoned” to us by imputation.

In Sproul’s explanation, the “active obedience” of Jesus comes to the foreground, while the cross and especially the resurrection recede to the background. This is just the opposite of the NT emphasis. Further, imputation is treated as a discrete action of God which in turn leads to justification. Imputation is explicitly defined as a transfer.

But is this order of things really reflected in the biblical descriptions of justification? Does Paul view imputation as an isolated, transitive event that produces the verdict of justification? Does he ever suggest that God justifies us by counting righteousness to us by imputation, which then provides the ground for the verdict? Against Sproul, I will argue that justification is the imputative, forensic *aspect* of union with Christ. Apparently, this option is not on Sproul’s theological map.

Another example of “imputation” being used taken as “transfer” language is the recent paper “The PCA Federal Vision Study Committee Report,” found at http://www.byfaithonline.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID323422%7CCHID664014%7CCIID2326076,00.html. This document assumes that “imputation” must mean “transfer,” but without offering any argumentation from the Westminster Standards or the Scriptures, and without any interaction with alternative views. See pages 2224-2225.

For a complete overview of my own view of imputation see my essay “A Response to the 2006 OPC Justification Report,” Part 1.

Obviously, such a model is true insofar as it preserves the free, forensic, gracious, and christological character of our justification. It is also attractive in making a sharp, tidy contrast with the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification on the basis of personal moral transformation or infused righteousness.²² But this is not *exactly* what Paul means when he speaks of imputation.²³

In Paul, imputation language describes how God *counts* or *regards* the believer *in view of his union with Christ*. Imputation does not describe a *transfer* of righteousness from Christ's account to ours; rather it is how God *reckons* us, or *considers* us, in union with Christ.²⁴ The key text is Romans 4, since this the place imputation language is most heavily concentrated. We cannot do a complete exegesis or linguistic analysis, but a few notes on the passage should establish the point.

Paul's concern in Romans 4 is twofold: *Who* are the children of Abraham – the true people of God? And *how* are they justified – by faith or by works of Torah?²⁵ Paul

²² Although, ironically, it shares a “treasury of merit” concept with Rome!

²³ Note that does not mean that Paul's doctrine is Roman either, as though imputation (as transfer) and infusion are the only options. There is a third way, an alternative to both imputation (as transfer) and infusion, namely, incorporation. Of course, incorporation includes both imputative (declarative) and transformational aspects. This will be developed below.

²⁴ I will not provide a full scale analysis of the problems (exegetical, theological, philosophical, linguistic) with the “transfer” view. My aim is simply to point out that the standard prooftexts for the “transfer” doctrine of imputation say something slightly different and that the “transfer” model ends up distorting Paul's meaning. “Imputation” (*logizomai*) language is never used in Paul's writings to describe the transfer of something from one party to another.

Some Reformed theologians have tried to maintain a focus on union with Christ, while simultaneously holding on the concept of transferred righteousness. But this adds an unnecessary and artificial step to the application of salvation. It is much more Pauline to integrate imputation into union rather than to treat it as an independent aspect of salvation. God's act of imputing us as righteous in Christ is essentially identical to his act of declaring us justified in Christ.

²⁵ Both of these questions flow out of the immediately preceding context, Romans 3:21-31. In those verses, Paul has twined together justification as it relates to sin (3:22-26) and ethnicity (3:27-30). In chapter 4, Paul is working with both threads, continually weaving them into a single coherent argument in favor of justification by faith. Paul has just shown how God forgives sin through the cross (3:25). He also said “there is one God” (3:30) — which monotheism entails a single (Abrahamic) family. Thus, as the argument unfolds in Romans 4, Abraham emerges as a typological “father figure” (4:1), representing the ungodly who trust in God (4:2-8), as well as both Jewish believers and Gentile believers (4:9-12). In other words, the multiple facets of Abraham's life narrative (e.g., the timing of his circumcision in relation to his

argues that Abraham's faith-ancestry, not merely his flesh-ancestry, is the decisive issue. Abraham was put right by faith, not works, lest he have something to boast in; the same must be true of his children (Rom. 4:1-3). But what is entailed in becoming righteous like Abraham?

The apostle uses the language of imputation throughout Romans 4, notably in 4:3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24. In *none* of these instances does imputation mean that the righteousness of Christ is *transferred* to believers.²⁶ Instead, we will find that imputation is used in a way roughly synonymous with justification itself. To say "faith is accounted for righteousness" is to say God reckons, or counts, the believer to be righteous *in Christ*. This is just another way of saying God justifies us (that is, declares us just) by faith. Faith does not *consist in* righteousness as such (as though it were meritorious), but faith is reckoned as righteousness by God because of faith's object (the God who raised Christ; cf. 4:22-25).

In Romans 4:4-5, we find that God did not declare Abraham righteous in Genesis 15:6 because Abraham had been obedient. To be sure, Abraham had been obeying God for quite some time by that point. He walked with the Lord by faith when he moved out

faith) allow him to be the paradigm for how God justifies sinners by faith alone *and* how justification in Christ draws together disparate people groups into a single new family.

²⁶ In 4:3, 5, faith is imputed for righteousness, which is to say God regarded Abraham's faith as the token of his covenant membership and accordingly reckoned him as righteous. To take "imputation" in the sense of a "transfer" makes no sense here. How can a person's own faith be "transferred" to him? In fact, if we look at imputation language elsewhere in Paul, we find the same thing (though English translations often obscure this). For example, in Romans 2:26, 3:28 and 6:11, imputation language clearly means "consider" or "reckon." It has *no* overtones of transfer. Thus, Romans 4 does not indicate God transfers righteousness to us any more than 2:26 means circumcision is transferred from one person to another, or 6:11 means we transfer death to sin from Christ to ourselves. In Romans 4, imputation concerns how God regards us in Christ; in 6:11, it concerns how we regard ourselves in Christ.

Outside of Romans, we find the same kind of usage. In Philippians 4:17, Paul uses imputation language in a financial rather than forensic context, but still no transfer is involved. The Philippians' sacrificial deeds will be "imputed" (or "counted," or "marked") to *their own* account. There is obviously no transaction. 2 Timothy 4:16 uses imputation in a similar way: Paul hopes that the misdeed of those who forsook him will not be imputed ("charged" or "counted") against them. Obviously, there is no transfer involved; Paul is hoping for the non-imputation of sin ala Romans 4:8.

of his homeland some years previous (cf. Gen. 12; Heb. 11:8). But those works of Abraham (e.g., rescuing Lot in Genesis 14) did not put God in his debt; even at this midpoint in Abraham's growth as a believer, he is declared righteous by grace through faith. Abraham did not view himself as an employee, serving God for wages; rather, he viewed himself as someone still in need of God's grace, and so he continued clinging to the promise of a coming seed. God considered this faithful response to be the true fulfillment of the covenant, and as a result declared Abraham to be a right-standing covenant member. Abraham's life story shows that in a very deep sense, faith is the *sole condition* of the covenant *from beginning to end*.²⁷

Romans 4:6-8 explain the nature of imputed righteousness. To have righteousness imputed means that sins are forgiven -- or, to put the same reality another way, it means that God does not count (impute) a man's sin against him. When God refuses to reckon sin (4:8, quoting Ps. 32:2), it means he "covers" our sin (4:7, quoting Ps. 32:1). It means he has cast our sins away (Isa. 38:17), removed them (Ps. 103:12), blotted them out (Isa. 43:25, 44:22), and forgotten them (Isa. 43:25). The non-imputation of sin means God is not pressing charges against us; instead, he is accounting us as in the right. So we have this equation: "righteousness imputed" = "sins forgiven/covered" = "sins not imputed."

Note that it is *impossible* for imputation language to describe a transfer in verse 8 since a

²⁷ The fact that the declaration of Genesis 15:6 does not come at the beginning of Abraham's life of faith has baffled commentators, and I admit to being somewhat baffled myself. Nevertheless, at the very least, the quotation seems very apt for Paul's purposes in Romans 4 (as well as Galatians 3, where he also employs it). If the declaration came at the very beginning of Abraham's encounter with God, there might have been room for later Jews to conclude that Abraham started in faith, but had to finish in his own strength (cf. Rom. 4:19-25; Gal. 3:1-9). But the fact that Genesis 15:6 is placed in the narrative a long time after Abraham initially came to faith (and presumably received some sort of initial justification/acceptance) indicates that faith is *always* the means of justification. God continued to accept Abraham because Abraham continued to trust in the promise of a coming seed, even though the odds grew longer and longer against the promise ever coming true. In my companion article in this volume I demonstrate how this *sola fide* theology is still consistent with a final judgment/justification according to works.

person's *own* sin is in view. (How could a person's own sin be transferred to him?) But that means that it will take some pretty strong argumentation to prove imputation terminology should be read as transfer language elsewhere in the passage.

Verses 9-10 ask if the blessing of imputed righteousness (defined as forgiveness in the immediate context) is only for Jews (the circumcised). Verse 11 answers the question. Paul says God counts the uncircumcised as righteous by faith as well as the circumcised (cf. Rom. 2:25-29). In other words, the uncircumcised can have the same status as the circumcised *by faith* -- as the 2-stage life experience (pre-circumcision/post-circumcision) of Abraham demonstrates (4:10-12). Abraham was justified as a Gentile, before he was circumcised – a point with obvious typological implications for Gentile believers in the new covenant, since it proves them to be children of the patriarch, along with believing Jews. This reinforces the thought of 3:28: If justification was by works of Torah, it would only be available to the circumcised. But the case of Abraham refutes that notion. It is impossible to circumscribe the bounds of Abraham's family with circumcision or the Torah.

Romans 4:12-18 further reinforce the same point. Abraham is to be heir of *the world*, not just one nation among many; thus, the salvation promised in the Abrahamic covenant must be for Gentiles as well. In 3:29-30, Paul used monotheism to establish the point that there must be one covenant family composed of Jew and Gentile. Now Paul says there must be one "father of us" – which, again, suggests one covenant family (4:16). Those who are "of circumcision," or "of the law," are saved by faith. But those without circumcision or the law are saved in the same way. If the promise was only to the circumcised, it would appear to be a matter of ethnicity/race, rather than faith and

grace. But Paul will have none of that. Abraham is destined to be the father of *many* faithful nations, all rolled into one covenant community.

Paul finally wraps up this phase of his argument in 4:19-25, a text we have already touched on above. Abraham's faith was justifying because it was resurrection faith (4:19-21). Christian believers follow in Abraham's footsteps, as their faith is directed towards the God who raised Christ (here, hinted at as the new Isaac) from the dead (4:22-25), bringing life out of death, justification out of condemnation, birth out of barrenness, and family out of enmity. Abraham's faith gives glory to God (4:20) – answering to the very problem with fallen humanity Paul identified in 1:21ff and 3:23. Through Christ, God has created a new humanity that escapes the wrath revealed from heaven and brings him glory.

Sharing Resurrection Status

Now we can sketch a fuller picture of justification. For Paul, this is how justification works: God (through the Torah) curses Christ and condemns him as a sin offering on Good Friday (Rom. 8:1-3); he then reverses that sentence, and justifies him as the Righteous One on Easter Sunday (1 Tim. 3:16). Thus, the condemnation of sin on the cross and the resurrection of Christ from the grave form the ground of our justification. Standing in the background of Paul is Isaiah 53 (among other texts), where the execution/vindication pattern is already woven into the heart of biblical Christology. When we are united to Christ, our sin is taken care of by his cross and we share in his resurrection verdict. This justification is (obviously) fully forensic and christological.

To sum up:

1. Christ *is* our righteousness; we are righteous *in him* (Rom. 4:22-25; cf. Rom. 5:12-21; 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:30).

2. Faith is imputed as righteousness = justification by faith (Rom. 4:3ff). To “impute” in this context is to “declare” or “reckon.” It is not a transfer.

3. God imputes faith as righteousness because it is by faith that we are united to Christ, the Righteous One. Faith’s key function in justification is unitive, though this cannot be severed from faith’s other functions.

“Justification by faith” is theological shorthand for saying we are united to Christ by faith, and in Christ there is no condemnation. For the sake of exegetical purity, I do not think we should speak of Christ’s righteousness (or merit) being imputed (transferred) to believers. That’s not how Paul puts it; that’s not how he uses imputation as a category. Rather, we should say things like,

“God imputes/declares/regards as righteous those who, by faith, are united to the crucified and risen Christ,”

or

“God imputes faith as righteousness because faith unites us to Christ, the Righteous One,”

or

“God does not impute sin against those who are united to Christ by faith, but rather imputes them as righteous.”

This is the “grammar of the gospel,” so to speak, as I see it. These are better summaries of the heart of Paul’s theology than those that focus on the ostensible transfer of Christ’s active obedience or merit to our accounts. Again, there is *no text* in Scripture where imputation language is used to describe a transfer of Christ’s righteousness from his account to ours. Instead Scripture says he *is* our righteousness; thus, we are righteous *in him*. Imputation simply means God counts us as we are in Christ. If I already have

Christ by way of union, what can be added to me by way of transfer?²⁸ Imputation is not transitive but declarative.

It is clear, then, that union with Christ is the key that unlocks the doctrine of justification. The centrality of union with Christ in the Protestant tradition (Calvin, Westminster) is well documented elsewhere, and I shall not repeat that work here. One Luther quote is enough to sum up the matter: “The moment I consider Christ and myself as two, I am gone.”²⁹ Indeed.

Why does it matter that we conceive of imputation in terms of union? Union with Christ makes imputed righteousness *a matter of fact*, rather than *legal fiction*. It makes justification a judgment according to truth, rather than a bare legal fiat with no grounding in reality. We actually are what God declares us to be in Christ; we do have not some “deeper identity” outside of union with Christ, or impervious to God’s declaration over us. We are who God says we are in Christ; to say otherwise about ourselves is to quarrel with God in unbelief. God’s act of justification does not merely *recognize* who we are; it *determines* who are. Our righteous status is not a matter of God doing mental tricks or

²⁸ This is why I suggested the transfer formulation is actually *redundant* in my essay “A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*, edited by E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale, FL : Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 142. Because that language has been misunderstood and the cause of controversy, I have subsequently clarified and retracted it in Part 1 of my “A Response to the 2006 OPC Justification Report.” My intention was to echo the view of Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 282:

In plain view of statement like these [in Romans 4] it seems impossible to hold that Paul found no place for the imputation of righteousness to believers. On the other hand he never says in so many words that the righteousness *of Christ* was imputed to believers, and it may fairly be doubted whether he had this in mind in his treatment of justification, although it may be held to be a corollary from his doctrine of identification of the believer with Christ.

While I admit my own lack of clarity in that essay, critics were too quick to judge my work by their own sloganized formulations to understand my argument. This paper intends to help correct those problems. For more, see Joel Garver’s fine assessment of my “redundancy” remark, posted at <http://sacradocctrina.blogspot.com/2007/06/pca-report-on-nppfv-some-concerns-4.html>.

²⁹ Quoted in Ralph Wood, *Contending for the Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 171. For more on union with Christ, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), and Mark Horne, “Justification by Union with Christ,” available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/justification_by_union_according_to_calvin_and_we_stminster.htm.

shuffling righteousness around heavenly ledgers; it is a matter of our concrete, personal relationship with Christ himself. More on this below.

The Imputation of Christ's Active Obedience and Inclusive Substitution

In the picture drawn in the *CJPM* volume the imputation of Christ's active obedience is necessary to a truly Reformed doctrine of justification (cf. ch. 8). Why doesn't my picture include this element in the same way? What is *required* in an orthodox formulation of justification? Is the imputation of Christ's active obedience a systematically fundamental doctrine in the Reformed system? Questions about theological constructs, like whether or not Christ's "active obedience" (or Torah-keeping) is imputed, are interesting, but not *essential* to an articulation of the gospel.³⁰ Indeed, if such is essential to the gospel, where did Jesus (in the gospels) or the apostles (in their sermons in the book of Acts) *ever* preach the gospel? Their message is much simpler and sleeker, focusing on how God forgives us and renews us in and through the death and resurrection of Christ, as we respond with faith and repentance.³¹

³⁰ The main impetus behind the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience is the meritorious covenant of works, which is itself a highly dubious theological construction. When the *CJPM* authors point to Reformed antecedents for the meritorious covenant of works (e.g., 208, 335), they do not accomplish their aim because these historical precedents are too ambiguous to establish the *key features* of their doctrine over against the "Federal Vision" side. On the problems with the meritorious covenant of works, see the classic study by Cornelius van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia: Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990).

³¹ In light of Romans 4:25, I have asked the question in several places: Why would it be better, soteriologically speaking, to have Christ's active obedience imputed to us than to have a share in the forensic verdict passed over him at his resurrection? So far, none of the critics of the "Federal Vision" have provided anything like an adequate answer. If anything, we could even make a case that getting the resurrection verdict implicitly includes getting the pre-cross obedience that led up to it. But it should be noted that Paul never locates our justification in Christ's Torah-keeping as such, and in fact, openly denies that the Torah was given for the purpose of justification.

For an exegetical critique of the imputation of the active obedience formulation, see Daniel Kirk's work, "Nothing but the Blood: The Cruciform Matrix of Justification," available at <http://www.act3online.com/act3reviewArticlesDetail.asp?id=288>. Kirk makes a very solid case for viewing our justification as grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ, rather than his obedience to the Torah. Kirk shows that those who insist on the imputation of Christ's active obedience run the risk of making Christ's blood *insufficient* for salvation, which is surely at odds with Scripture.

The importance of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience has been overblown in contemporary debate. Paul *never* says Christ's Torah-keeping is imputed to us; rather when he unfolds the substance of imputed righteousness, he *always* turns to Christ's death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 4:22-25; 8:32-34; 14:9). If the doctrine of imputed active obedience is so important, surely Paul would have mentioned it more explicitly, or given it greater prominence. The emphasis of the *CJPM* authors does not match that of the apostle.

To be clear, I am *not* questioning the active obedience of Christ to the Torah as such. He had to be sinless in order to qualify as the sin bearer on the cross. Nor am I denying our union with Christ in every phase of his life-long obedience. Nor am I denying that Jesus is the True Adam and True Israel, fulfilling God's original plan for humanity. To be sure, he does fulfill the Adamic covenant (as well as every other covenant). What I *am* suggesting is that the NT locates our justification not in his active obedience as such, but in his death and resurrection, or in his "blood" and (resurrection) "life," as Paul puts in Romans 5:9-10.

One of the strongest arguments against the imputation of the active obedience is found in the sacrificial system of the OT. This system, of course, was given to serve as a blueprint of Christ's work. A worshipper would bring a spotless animal to the tabernacle or temple. The cleanness of the animal obviously represented Christ's perfect obedience. The worshipper would lay hands on the animal, *incorporating* himself into the sacrifice, and setting the animal apart to the "office" of representative substitute. But the reverse action was never performed; never did the animal lay its hooves on the worshipper, never was anything *transferred* from the animal to the worshipper. After the worshipper is united to the animal, the animal must die for the sin of the one he represents. Thus, the animal is killed and its blood presented for propitiation – pointing forward to the cross. Afterwards, the animal carries the worshipper into the Spirit-fire of the altar, and ascends before the Lord's throne as a sweet smelling aroma. This entire pattern corresponds to cross-resurrection-ascension-glorification. Thus, the sacrifices provided a comprehensive preview of the whole work of Christ. The matrix for the entire model is union, not transfer, as the worshipper participates in the movement of the animal through death into God's glorifying presence. The worshipper is "in" the animal and therefore shares in its death to sin and subsequent nearness to God (resurrection). But nothing in the Levitical rites corresponds to the *imputation* of Christ's *active obedience*. For a fuller account of how the sacrifices worked, see Peter Leithart, *A House For My Name* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000), 87-95.

The same point can be made regarding the sacraments of the new covenant, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Neither sacrament symbolizes or enacts a *transfer* of merits or active obedience; instead, they focus on *union and communion* with the risen and glorified Christ.

Many critics of the “Federal Vision” are wrong at just this point, and have caused the church a great deal of unrest by insisting on arcane, over-wrought, debatable formulations as tests of orthodoxy. This is a recent and unfortunate development within the Reformed world. For example, in *CJPM*, Scott Clark says one side in the present controversy teaches “the imputation of Jesus’ passive obedience only” and he perceives this to be an attack on the gospel (5). Clark insists vociferously on the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, in addition to his passive obedience; anything less is a departure from Reformational orthodoxy and compromises grace. But when he critiques the passive-obedience only view, he never examines what those men put in the place of the active obedience (namely, the resurrection; cf. *CJPM*, 241-243, where Clark briefly summarizes my view but does not engage the core arguments).

Thankfully, a rising generation of scholars is questioning the usefulness of holding to the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, at least at the level of exegesis, if not systematics. Of course, in doing so, they are not only developing a sound biblical theology, but following the lead of a wide range of early Reformed theologians as well (an historical point that Clark recognizes but refuses to reckon with). The doctrine of imputed active obedience has not always had the prominence that it holds today; for several generations of Protestants, it was a secondary doctrine, over which there could be legitimate differences. Simon Gathercole is representative of today’s trend back to the classic Reformed view:

The Reformed tradition’s most common way of explicating the christological character of justification...has recently aroused considerable controversy. This is the doctrine of the imputation of *Christ’s* righteousness (as opposed to imputed righteousness understood in some other way)...[I]t should be said that there is a great deal of diversity of opinion on the matter. This is, of course, not sufficient in itself to let discretion take the better part of valor. But in this case, the diversity

seems to arise out of the complexity of the New Testament evidence, not because one side is particularly hidebound to tradition and the other wallowing in the desire for novelty or for a doctrine that is more amenable to culture...[B]ecause of the complexity of this issue, I would propose that the requirement that it is specifically Christ's righteousness that is imputed to believers should not feature in evangelical statements of faith. To make such a finely balanced point an article of faith seems a dangerous strategy. Nonetheless, it is very clear that justification is still christological through and through. Both the cross and the present action of Christ are the vital grounds of justification.³²

³² Simon Gathercole, "The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond: Some Proposals," in *Justification in Perspective*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 222f. Gathercole specifically has in view the position of Robert Gundry. Though my view is significantly different than Gundry's, it falls well within the parameters of Reformed orthodoxy as Gathercole lays them out.

Gathercole's view should be compared to that of Mark Seifrid, in *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 174-5. Seifrid expresses some uneasiness about the "imputed active obedience" formula: "It is worth observing that Paul never speaks of Christ's righteousness as imputed to believers, as became standard in Protestantism." He goes on to argue that this formulation is redundant, as it "multiplies entities within 'justification.'" There is no need to add the imputation of Christ's active righteousness to the forgiveness of sins. See 174ff and 120-121n for more of Seifrid's insightful analysis.

D. A. Carson at least acknowledges that the imputation of Christ's active obedience is a "second order doctrine," at most teased out of Paul's letters rather than explicitly stated. While he argues vigorously for the imputation of Christ's active obedience, this is still a significant admission. See Carson's article "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields" in *Justification: What at Stake in the Current Debates?*, edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treiers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

A number of earlier Reformed theologians, including the venerable John Owen, did not consider the imputation of Christ's active obedience to be *essential* to the Reformed doctrine of justification. Owen believed in the imputation of Christ's active obedience, but was wise enough to know that other orthodox Reformed theologians did not use that formulation. In his work *The Doctrine of Justification in The Works of John Owen: Volume 5*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 62-63, Owen says, "But as to the way and manner of the declaration of this doctrine among Protestants themselves, there ever was some *variety* and difference in expressions." This variety "among persons who agree in the substance of the doctrine" included "the righteousness of Christ that is said to be imputed to us. For some would have this to be only his suffering of death..." In other words, Owen did not regard the debate over the imputation of Christ's active obedience to be a debate over the "substance" of the doctrine of justification!

William Cunningham, in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989 reprint), 404, questioned whether or not John Calvin would have accepted an active obedience/passive obedience construct at all:

As to the distinction between the passive and the active righteousness of Christ...this does not appear to be formally brought out in the writings of John Calvin. It is to be traced to which the doctrine of justification was afterwards subjected; and though the distinction is quite in accordance with the analogy of faith, and may be of use in aiding the formation of distinct and definitive conceptions,—it is not of any great practical importance and need not be much pressed or insisted on, if men heartily and intelligently ascribe their forgiveness and acceptance wholly to what Christ has done and suffered in their room and stead. There is no ground in anything Calvin has written for asserting, that he would have denied or rejected this distinction, if it had been presented to him. But it was perhaps more in accordance with the cautious and reverential spirit in which he usually conducted his investigations into divine things, to abstain from any minute and definite statements regarding it.

A solid historical case can be made that the Westminster divines did not require imputation to be understood in the sense of a transfer, rather than a declarative reckoning. Nor did they require belief in the

Thus, Gathercole carefully refrains from making the “imputed active obedience” formulation a test of orthodoxy since it is exegetically dubious.

As I see things, the imputation/transfer of the active obedience of Christ, as usually expressed today, never really finds a home in Paul’s description of salvation. For example, in Romans 8:29-30, Paul gets as close as anywhere to a dogmatic *ordo salutis* (“order of salvation”). Paul moves from *calling* (the work of the Spirit, bringing us to faith, and thereby uniting us to Christ) to *justification* (being declared righteous in Christ) to *glorification* (mature life in the Spirit of Christ). There is no separate step of “imputation” in the sequence. Paul does not say, “Whom he called, to them he transferred Christ’s righteousness, and on that basis declared them justified.”³³

Why make an issue of these things? God’s justification of his people is not a matter of doing a calculation in his head. It is not a bookkeeping event, in which righteousness is treated like electronic currency and shuffled around in heavenly bank accounts. Rather, justification is an aspect of our concrete union with the Savior. It is intensely and thoroughly personal. It is not an abstract transaction, but a personal participation. It’s not a business deal but a marriage. (Remember, marriages are covenanted relationships, but they have a legal dimension included within the relationship.)

Personal union is at the core of biblical theology. Going back to the OT, Messiah’s job description includes doing *for* his people and *as* his people what they

imputation of Christ’s active obedience. It is fair to conclude that in the 1640s, believing that the passive of obedience of Christ is sufficient to justify would have been adequate to sit on the Westminster Assembly and subscribe to the Westminster Standards. To claim anything else is historical revisionism.

³³ It seems to me that treating imputation as a transfer of Christ’s righteousness/merits, and therefore as a discrete step in the *ordo*, causes insuperable problems. Does this transfer come *before* union with Christ? If so, we have the oddity of being righteous outside of Christ, contra Romans 8:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:30. Does it come *after* union with Christ? In that case, we have to ask what the transfer adds since if we already have Christ, we have righteousness and every other blessing.

cannot achieve for themselves. That's just how messiahship works. As N. T. Wright has pointed out in various places, "messiahship" (or "Christology") is, in the very nature of the case, an incorporative concept.³⁴ Take an example from the OT. How did the Israelites share in David's victory over Goliath (1 Sam. 17)? That victory was not transferred to each individual Israelite. Rather, David stood in the place of the people as their anointed (Messianic) representative (1 Sam. 16). His victory was counted as their victory because he was their covenant head. David, prefiguring Jesus, is no mere individual; he was a *corporate person*, bearing Israel on his shoulders. The nation was lodged in David's very person, by means of covenant union, so that when he cast the sling, Israel cast the sling. The nation defeated Goliath in him and as him, as he stood as their representative champion.

So it is with Jesus. As Messiah/Christ, he bears his people in himself. We share in his legal status because we are in him. He does not transfer righteousness or merits to our accounts; rather, he incorporates us into himself, making his account a joint account. All that he possesses is freely shared with us. If the head is justified, how could the body be condemned? If the husband is one flesh with the bride, how can she fail to share in all that he possesses? He has "married" us to himself precisely so he can own our liability and so we can share in his status. The old saying goes: As the Savior, so the saved. Or: As the Christ, so the church. He is the Righteous One (cf. Isa. 53:11; Acts 3:14, 7:52, 22:14; 1 John 2:1); as we are identified with him, we are righteous as well.

Reformed theologians have sometimes subtly slipped off of this point. For example, it is not uncommon to hear talk of being clothed with Christ's righteousness as

³⁴ This is why the whole people (*totus Christus*) can be named "Christ" in texts such as 1 Corinthians 12:12 and Galatians 3:16.

a way of explaining imputation (cf. Zech. 3:1-5). But the reality is that we are clothed with *Christ himself* (cf. Gal. 3:27)! The Lord does not transfer righteousness to us, as if the Giver and his gift could be pried apart; rather, he *is* our righteousness (Jer. 33:16). In 1 Corinthians 1:30, Paul does not say Christ's righteousness is our righteousness; he says *Christ* is our righteousness. Righteousness inheres in him as a property of his person as the crucified-and-risen God-man; we access and possess that righteousness not by means of a transfer (as if Christ could separated from his righteousness) but by means of personal union (as a man and woman come into possession of one another's goods upon getting married). 2 Corinthians 5:21 does not say anything about a transfer of righteousness from Christ to us; rather it describes the status that is ours *in Christ*. The only imputation in this text is the non-imputation of sins which, as we have seen in our discussion of Romans, is equivalent to the forgiveness of sins. Becoming God's righteousness happens via union, as we share in the death and resurrection of Christ.³⁵ In Philippians 3:9, Paul expresses his desire to have a righteousness (right standing/status) not from the law, but from God. But in the surrounding context, it is very evident that this gift of divine righteousness is found only through union with Christ, as we *share* in his sufferings and resurrection by faith. The passage no more teaches the imputation of God's righteousness to us than it teaches the imputation of the law's righteousness.³⁶

The view being articulated here – that there are no benefits apart from or outside of union with the Benefactor -- has been called “inclusive substitution.” The point is that Christ and his people are so conjoined and incorporated into one another that when he died on the cross, he not only died *for* us, but *as* us. He bears our sin and liability because

³⁵ See Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, 82ff.

³⁶ See Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, 81.

we have been grafted into him. Note Paul's language in 2 Corinthians 5:14: "If One died for all, then *all* died." Christ's people died with and in him on the cross. In other words, Christ was not some third party standing between us and God. He *is* his people. He is one flesh with them (Eph. 5:31-32). His death is their death; his life is their life. He represents humanity as the Last Adam, the Truly Human One.³⁷

Even so, at the same time, Christ is God. After all, "*God was in Christ* reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). So we were in Christ when he died – but God was in Christ as well. The incarnate Son was acting as both True Man and True God when he gave himself unto death. Again, he was not a third party representing God, but God himself in human form. Thus: All that he did, we did. All that he did, God did. Christ stands on our side, a sinless substitute for sinful humanity. But he also stands on God's

³⁷ "Inclusive substitution" is the surest defense against the charge that the Protestant view of justification is a legal fiction. So far from giving way to Rome, my formulations actually fortify our anti-Roman defenses! See Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Volf, ch. 4, contrasts "inclusive" and "exclusive" substitution in terms that end up sounding a lot like classic (e.g., John Williamson Nevin vs. Charles Hodge) and current debates. Volf argues that Christ did not so much die *for* us, setting us free from having to die, as he died *as* us, so that what happened to him has actually happened to us. Christ's doing and dying and rising counts as ours because of the deep personal bond that exists between himself and his people. As Volf says (149), Christ's life is not "an alien life, imposed on us from the outside." It is not "like a Mickey Mouse figure that waves at kids at the entrance of Disneyland – a mere costume..." Rather, "united with Christ, we live in God and God lives in us." Volf (150f; cf. 200), following Luther, argues at length that imputation is a judicial effect of union:

To describe the imputation of Christ's righteousness, Luther used a metaphor from the world of personal relations. Following the apostle Paul, he likened the soul's union with Christ to marriage. Christ is the bridegroom, and the soul is the "poor, wicked, harlot" who becomes his bride. Since they are one flesh, he takes from her all her failings and incapacities and gives her all his uprightness and power. He "suffered, died, descended into hell that he might overcome" all her sins. "Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast of as her own and confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell."...Because we are one, Christ's life is our life. Because we are one, Christ's qualities are our qualities. Because we are one, we have died in Christ's death, and our sins are no longer ours but are "swallowed up" by Christ.

The marriage illustration is useful in this discussion because it situates the legal within a covenant relationship, instead of leaving it abstract.

side, as the wronged-yet-forgiving God who deals with his own wrath on the cross.³⁸ He is the embodiment of God's faithfulness and human faithfulness at one and the same time, satisfying both sides of the covenant relationship.

A Modified Version of the Imputation of Christ's Active Obedience?

Before moving ahead, it might be helpful to clarify one aspect of the picture just drawn. As some have analyzed my view of union and imputation, they have concluded that I am not *really* rejecting the imputation of Christ's active obedience (as my writings have claimed), but merely *modifying* (and perhaps expanding) what it means. After all, I *do* affirm that we are united to Christ in the fullness of his work, so that his "story" is now our "story," and I do believe Christ was actively obedient to his Father for the whole of his life.

All that is well and good. I am happy to admit that I hold to a "modified" version of the popular doctrine. But I would throw in four important caveats to qualify what that might mean and to show where I would still criticize what has become the standard model of "the imputation of Christ's active obedience."

First, to say that we are united to Christ in his pre-cross obedience is not the same as saying that that pre-cross obedience is justifying. After all, his pre-cross life could not deliver us from our death sentence/condemnation, which is what justification is all about. In addition, I would rather say that Christ's *righteousness* (in the sense of his judicial his right-standing before the Father as the Risen One) is *shared* with us, rather than saying

³⁸ Again, the best contemporary statement of this view of Christ's work is found in Volf, *Free of Charge*, ch. 4. Volf argues that moral liability as such cannot be transferred. God can only separate sinners from their sin – he can only condemn the deed while forgiving the doer -- by becoming one with humanity in Christ's very person, and dying humanity's death. *Only death separates the sin from the sinner*. At the same time, Christ is one with God – such that God has placed human sin onto himself so that he can bear away its curse. The divine judge judges against himself. Christ is not a third party, inserted between God and man; he is the obedient man and the wronged God in one divine-human person.

his *active obedience* (his thirty-three years of law-keeping) is *imputed* to us. I can understand how a verdict can be shared via union, as God makes the same declaration over us that he made over his Son. It is not as clear to me that his life of obedience can be imputed, given the way Paul uses imputation language (see the above discussion). If Christ's righteousness is understood as his resurrection verdict, rather than his life of obedience prior to the resurrection, we actually get more of what Christ possesses, rather than less.

What role, then, does the pre-cross active obedience play? As stated above, Paul always seems to ground our justification specifically in the death and resurrection of Christ. His law-keeping is important, but remains in the background. It might be best to say that Christ's obedience is the ground of his own justification/resurrection, and his justification/resurrection (that is, his righteous status) then becomes ours. So, we move backwards from our justification on the basis his resurrection, to the basis of his resurrection, which is his obedience. The active obedience explains why death could not hold him, why he had to be vindicated against death, why the verdict of justification was sure. Thus, we get his active obedience indirectly, as we share in the judicial verdict that obedience brought about in the resurrection. This is not how the "imputation of Christ's active obedience" doctrine usually works in contemporary Reformed theology, but it is another way of getting to the same result. But note that the place of the active obedience in our justification is never on the surface of the biblical texts; we have to dig down deep to find its role. It is not the centerpiece in Pauline theology the way it has become such in some versions of Reformed theology.

Second, the view of the imputation of Christ's active obedience I have been critical of presupposes and is correlative to a meritorious covenant of works. The imputed active obedience doctrine, as it is presently espoused in Reformed circles, was created to satisfy the requirements of a particular view of the Adamic covenant, in which Adam was called to earn eschatological life through his works. But that view is highly suspect. There is no doctrine of merit to be found in Genesis 1-2. Everything in the text indicates that Adam was graced with gift upon gift, all unearned. His glorious starting position was a free blessing; the mature, eschatological life he was implicitly promised upon condition of perfect, faithful obedience would have been a gift as well. He was a favored son awaiting an inheritance, not an employee seeking an earned wage. But if the first Adam was not required to earn merit through works, then the active obedience of the last Adam need not be regarded as meritorious either.³⁹

The idea is sometimes set forth that the cross removes the curse, and thus brings us back to "neutral ground" (e.g. Ian Duguid in *CJPM*, 83). The active obedience, then, earns the blessings God had promised in his covenants to covenant keepers. But this is a tragic devaluation of the cross and simply does not square with anything in the Scriptures. There is no such thing as "neutral ground" before God. Adam was created not in a state of neutrality but righteousness and blessing. So the model of Duguid is flawed from the outset. Moreover, the biblical witness never says that the cross simply returns us to a neutral position before God. Instead, it ascribes our whole redemption to his blood

³⁹ For a more complete analysis of the Adamic covenant, see Peter Leithart's contribution to this volume, "Adam the Catholic," as well as my essay "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation'" in Beisner, *The Auburn Avenue Theology*. If "merit" simply refers to Christ overcoming the demerit of the Adamic situation, or the infinite worth of his finished work, then it is not problematic (except for the confusion the term itself brings). But when a doctrine of merit is rooted in the Adamic covenant itself, it becomes a distortion of the filial nature of the Bible's covenant theology.

(Rom. 3:24-25; 5:9). In addition, there are no biblical texts that describe Jesus' pre-cross obedience in terms of "earning." In fact, *there are no specific redemptive benefits attributed to his pre-cross obedience*. Scripture does not ever present the pre-cross work of Christ as a discrete step in his achievement of redemption. If the "imputation of Christ's active obedience" is paired with a "meritorious covenant of works" we may end up with a logically tight theological system, but it will not rest on a solid exegetical base.

There are other problems we could identify here. If we have the forgiveness of sins in his cross and justification in his resurrection, what more could we want? How can forgiveness be equated with mere neutrality? Doesn't forgiveness presuppose and include reconciliation and acceptance? What can the active obedience add that would not already be included in the death (removing the curse) and resurrection (bringing legal vindication and new life)? What further blessings are there to earn or merit?

Third, whereas as the active obedience formula found in *CJPM* emphasizes how Jesus *kept* the law, the version of active obedience advocated in my writings emphasizes how Jesus *fulfilled* the law. Yes, Jesus lived the truly obedient human life that Israel, as a new Adamite nation, should have rendered. But this wasn't a matter of obeying a set of discrete commands in order to earn justification. Rather, it was a matter of *typologically fulfilling Israel's whole history in order to bring in the eschatological era*. Certainly that included keeping the commands of the Torah, by which old covenant life was maintained (Lev. 18:5). But it also included much more – ultimately bringing in a new covenant. The gospels were written in such a way as to focus on Jesus not merely as keeping the righteous demands of the law, but especially to show Jesus bearing and fulfilling Israel's national identity and vocation. Jesus succeeds precisely where Adam and Israel failed, in

essence rewriting their unfaithful histories with his own life of faithfulness. But that faithfulness is more than his sinlessness; it is his recapitulating and completing the covenant story that began to be told in the Hebrew Scriptures. The problem with the active obedience formula in *CJPM* is that it is too thin; it does not give wide enough scope to the fullness of Christ's work.⁴⁰

Fourth, the "imputation of Christ's active obedience" formula, as usually espoused today, works with a flawed understanding of "imputation." This has already been demonstrated above, and there is no need to rehash the arguments. In short, the model of "imputation" I am critiquing (as found in *CJPM* and elsewhere) assumes that the purpose of Jesus' obedience was to acquire merit which would then be transferred over to his people. But this is off point, as far as the biblical writers are concerned. Jesus did not obey in order to acquire merits. He obeyed in order that he might be the sinless sacrifice for sin, thereby bringing Adamic humanity to full glory and maturity through his resurrection. We get the benefits of his work not by means of a bookkeeping event (transferring merits from his account to ours), but by virtue of our personal union with him. When the Spirit unites us to the Son by faith, the Father's righteous verdict over him is pronounced over us as well. To be true to Scripture's use of imputation language, we should speak of being united to Christ in his obedient life, so that his resurrection status is

⁴⁰ See my "Christ Church Ministerial Conference: The Life of Justification (Lecture Notes)" for more details. At points, *CJPM* approximates what I am arguing for here, in terms of a typological understanding of Christ's active obedience, even though it is not where they usually put the accent. See, e.g., Ian Duguid's overview of the exile/exodus pattern and Matthew's gospel on pages 82-85. See also VanDrunen and Clark's discussion of Philippians 2:9 and New Adam Christology on pages 183-184. The irony, of course, is that these authors are leaning heavily on the insights of N. T. Wright in those sections. For an exemplary overview of how Jesus' life fulfills Israel's history from within the narrative of Matthew's gospel, see Peter Leithart's essay "Jesus as Israel: The Typological Structure of Matthew's Gospel," available at <http://www.leithart.com/pdf/jesus-as-israel-the-typological-structure-of-matthew-s-gospel.pdf>. Leithart proves Matthew's gospel is written to show that Jesus "does Israel right" from beginning to end. Obviously if we are united to Christ, that whole history is regarded as ours.

imputed as ours, rather than having his active obedience (or merits) imputed to us as a distinct part of his work.

Union, Imputation, and Legal Fiction

How, then, should we picture union with Christ in relation to imputation and justification? How do we fit imputation into union? We already touched on this, but it might be helpful to paint a more detailed picture at this point. My own journey into these issues began when I was a newbie Bible study teacher years ago. I was teaching a group of kids a lesson on justification and used a familiar illustration that went something like this:

Imagine that you have to a test on quantum physics. You are clueless, completely unable to answer any of the questions correctly. You write in answers, but all of them are wrong. You are bound to fail. But then Someone comes and offers to take the test for you. He erases all your wrong answers and writes in perfectly correct answers. He then hands in the test with your name on it.

After giving the illustration, I asked the kids, “What would you call that?” I was expecting an answer that pointed to the graciousness of the arrangement. I was expecting them to note that erasing the wrong answers corresponded to Christ’s blood; writing in the right answers corresponded to Christ’s life of perfect obedience. Instead, a rather precocious junior high boy blurted out “Cheating!” I knew right then that I was going to have to rework the way I presented the doctrine. My homely illustration (which I had heard used multiple times by preachers over the years in various forms) was open to the “legal fiction” charge. In that moment, I suddenly understood more fully why scholars like Richard Gaffin and Anthony Hoekema put such emphasis on union with Christ. I understood what Gaffin meant when he called union with Christ the “central motif” in Paul’s view of salvation applied and denied

that imputation could have a “discrete structure of its own.”⁴¹ I understood in a fresh way what one of the Puritans meant when he said union with Christ is “the sole fountain of blessedness.”

The only way to properly ground imputation (and other attendant doctrines, like the “great exchange,” and penal substitution) is with a rich, thick doctrine of union with Christ. There has to be some relational framework which makes it “legal” for Christ to act in our stead, and for us to share in what is his.⁴² Focusing on union with Christ as the sum and substance of salvation does not mean the various aspects of salvation are blurred or confused, any more than the light and heat of the sun are indistinct. Within the *one gift* of salvation in Christ, there are *manifold particular gifts*. We can still speak of justification, regeneration, adoption, sanctification, etc. as distinct blessings, like so many colors refracted through a prism from one beam of light. But all of those blessings are ours by virtue of union with the Savior. That is to say, the gift of Christ is the Gift of gifts because he contains all other gifts in his glorified person.

The book of Philemon gives a helpful illustration of the relationship between union and imputation, even though it is not about justification per se. Philemon 18 is the closest we come to imputation-as-transfer in Pauline corpus, but it also shows that

⁴¹ Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 132. Gaffin’s book masterfully demonstrates the exegetical and theological problems with conceiving of imputation as an extrinsic transfer of righteousness. Gaffin’s work rightly locates our justification in the resurrection of Christ, which becomes ours via union. He says, “the act of being raised with Christ in its constitutive transforming character is at the same time judicially declarative; that is, the act of being joined to Christ is conceived imputatively. In this sense the enlivening action of resurrection (incorporation) is itself a forensically constitutive declaration.”

⁴² For a contrary view, see Scott Clark’s comments in *CJPM*, 258-9 and his blog post at <http://www.oceansideurc.org/the-heidelblog/2007/2/13/what-is-your-only-comfort-5.html>. Clark admits that he has changed how he views the relationship of union to imputation over the years. But he has ended up with a view that essentially caves in to the legal fiction charge. Because he has severed forensic imputation from organic union, all he can say is that God gives us Christ’s righteousness by a bare divine fiat. Thanks to Jonathan Barlow for pressing the issue with Clark and exposing the implications of his approach.

imputation of *any* sort only works within a framework of relational union. Paul tells Philemon to charge to him whatever Onesimus owes. Note that this is a different term than the one found in Romans 4. Paul uses *logizomai* in Romans 4; *ellego* is used in Philemon. Terminological differences are important, but the overall shape of things in Philemon still meshes well with what we have seen in Romans. The underlying rationale for Paul assuming Onesimus' debts is their relational bond, described in terms of regenerative/adoptive sonship (Phlm. 10) and brotherhood (Phlm. 16). Paul considers Onesimus one with himself (Phlm. 17; cf. Phlm. 10, 12). Paul making Onesimus' debt his own presupposes their brotherly union with one another "in the Lord" (Phlm. 16). They are in partnership, which indicates a common life and shared goods (Phlm. 17). Paul is imitating Christ in bearing the burden of his brother in Christ and paying his debts (cf. Gal. 6:2). But note: here, as elsewhere, union provides the matrix for imputation. Or, to put it another way, imputation (Paul being charged with Onesimus' debts) is the financial aspect of their union with one another (their brotherly partnership), just as imputed righteousness is the forensic aspect of the believer's union with Christ. Paul shares in Onesimus' debts and Onesimus shares in Paul's resources via their incorporation into one another in Christ. The analogies with our salvation are easy to detect. Obviously, Paul is playing Jesus to Onesimus and acting in Onesimus' stead as his representative substitute. Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul, in the same way that the Father receives the believer as if he were Jesus.

The overarching point of our rather extended discussion, then, is that Paul *always* situates imputation in the framework of union. Imputation is not a transfer but

a reckoning in view of a covenanted relationship. Thus, Paul *never* uses imputation language to describe the extrinsic transfer of merit or righteousness from Christ to the believer. That's just not the way the language works. Instead, imputation describes God's declaration or reckoning of us as righteous *in Christ*. Imputation does not point primarily to a bookkeeping metaphor but to God's judicial reckoning of our new relationship with him through Christ. Union with Christ is the broad, all-encompassing framework in which the application of redemption is worked out, including its imputative element. Those who speak in terms of imputation as a transfer of righteousness are not compromising the gospel in any serious way (obviously), but they are blurring the Pauline picture in a significant way. Justification is not something that happens outside of or in abstraction from union with Christ, but is found within the gift of Christ himself

When we situate justification (and the related doctrine of imputation) within the framework of union with Christ, we are able to keep justification firmly connected to the church, sacraments, and moral transformation. Union with Christ has a declarative (imputative), judicial aspect, along with other aspects. Union with Christ integrates the forensic and the transformative, the individual and the corporate, the experiential and the ecclesial/sacramental.⁴³ Union with Christ holds together those blessings that tend to drift apart in alternative approaches to applied soteriology.

⁴³ Contrary to the theological intuitions of some, I would argue that union with Christ is experiential *precisely because* it is ecclesial and sacramental. It is in the life of the church (including participation in the sacraments) that we come to experience the grace of Christ in a personalized way. This essay does not address the relation of the sacraments to justification, but see Peter Leithart's web entries, "Justification by Faith," <http://www.leithart.com/archives/003081.php>, and "Justification and Sacramental Theology," <http://www.leithart.com/archives/000818.php> for the connection between a robust view of baptismal efficacy, union with Christ, and *sola fide*. See also my essay, "Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?" available at <http://www.trinity-pres.net/liturgy.php>. This is a topic "Federal Vision" writings have treated rather extensively, so I will not broach it any further here.

My continual impression with critics of the view I have been depicting, such as those in the *CJPM* volume, is that they take “salvation” to be basically synonymous with “forensic justification.” “Sanctification” is then tacked on, as extrinsic proof that justification has taken place. Justification and sanctification derive from independent principles (e.g., distinct legal and mystical unions with Christ) and do not really form a united, organic whole. Union with Christ as outlined here is the answer to this kind of disjointed, amalgamated soteriology.⁴⁴

Justification, Legalism, and Corporate Identities

Both the “Federal Vision” and the “New Perspective on Paul” have been tarred and feathered with the charge that they make justification more social than salvific. But in a union with Christ model, there is no dichotomy. Salvation is for the one and the many; union with Christ is an intrinsically communal concept, but it applies soteriologically to individuals as well. Individuals are saved, but not individually; salvation is always a corollary of incorporation into *totus Christus*. As Bird puts it, “Paul’s notion of God’s saving righteousness includes *both* a declaration that those who profess faith in Christ have been graciously granted a right-standing in a right relationship with God, and also that they are thereby constituted as full equal members of God’s covenant people.”⁴⁵ In other words, Paul’s in-Christ theology answers to both works-righteousness and race-righteousness, both merit theology and

⁴⁴ Clark ends up talking about two different kinds of union with Christ (legal and vital) in *CJPM*, 262. But is there some higher kind of union that holds these two sorts of union together? How do legal and vital unions relate? For Clark, these are unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions.

In that same context, Clark takes me to task for implying that “we retain that union partly by cooperating with grace,” thus turning “gospel” into “law.” But this is a flawed argument. I certainly acknowledge the indicative (we *are* united to Christ) as the basis of the imperative (we *must remain* united to Christ). While remaining united to Christ is a matter of persevering faith (cf. Jn. 15), it is not something we do in our own strength, but as the Spirit enables (as I have always made clear). Clark’s critique amounts to a cheap shot.

⁴⁵ Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, 113. See also 4-5, 33-35.

Jewish nationalism, both individual pride and corporate pride. Justification in Christ is a basis for both assurance of forgiveness and table fellowship with other believers. Justification not only issues us into a new relationship with God; it also constitutes a new, cosmopolitan community. There is no need to dichotomize individual salvation and corporate identity.⁴⁶

Paul argues Israel's pursuit of justification in Torah is flawed not only because it abuses the Torah and thus misses the true *telos* of the Torah, not only because it promotes prideful self-reliance, but also because it excludes Gentiles (Rom. 9:30-10:21; cf. Gal. 2:11-21). But these really resolve into a single problem. Indeed, from an ultimate point of view (as I have argued elsewhere),⁴⁷ nationalism is just another form of legalism. Though nationalism/racism is typically a corporate idol and Pelagianism/self-salvation is typically an individual idol, both are simply primal manifestations of human pride and unbelief. The answer to both is union with Christ and justification by faith. In Christ, our attempts to earn God's favor are shown to be bankrupt. Our hope must be pinned to the death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah and not our own efforts or abilities. At the same time, our desire to belong to a "new humanity" is redirected to the church catholic, which offers an equal share in redemption to every tribe, nation, people, and tongue. Union with Christ binds

⁴⁶ It is hard for me to see what is gained by continuing to screen out the Jew/Gentile issue from the doctrine of justification. My guess is that the larger issue here derives from a rejection of the flow of redemptive history, which goes hand in hand with the transmutation of the "law" in Paul from the Mosaic Torah to a timeless system of moral principles. The scandal of particularity rears its head all over the NT.

⁴⁷ See my essay "The PCA and the NPP" as well as my "N. T. Wright and Reformed Theology: Friends or Foes," *Reformation and Revival Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 47-48n6. Self-salvation and sectarian exclusivism feed off of one another, in the same way that justification by faith through grace brings together reconciliation with God and fellowship with his people. Those with the deepest understanding of justification should also have the strongest commitment to Christian community and ecumenicity.

together the social and soteriological as two sides of the same coin; in Christ we are reconciled to God and to one another as part of a single, integrated work of salvation.

Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Galatians. In this epistle, Paul uses the doctrine of justification to resolve Jew/Gentile tensions over Torah observance in the new age inaugurated by Christ. The Jewish “agitators” were using the badges of Torah to construct a false identity. Paul deconstructs that identity by showing that Torah does not do what they think it does, and moreover, the Torah-covenant has been eschatologically superseded by Christ and the Spirit, a point they should grasp if they are attuned to the flow of the biblical metanarrative. For example, the Torah’s built-in obsolescence, compared to the Abrahamic covenant, is demonstrated in 3:15-4:31). God is one, and thus must have one family in the end. But the Torah cannot mediate the one family, so it cannot be a part of the final, eschatological form of the covenant. Like a gallon of milk, it is good for a while, but after its expiration date, turns sour. The Torah focused the curse on Israel, but once Jesus (as the True Israel) exhausted that curse on the cross, the Torah covenant had fulfilled its historical purpose and it is no longer in force.⁴⁸

It is important to note how justification *functions* in Paul’s letter to Galatians. It is not just an answer to the question, “How do I get saved?” Paul is doing a lot more than refuting Pelagianism in the epistle. The whole redemptive-historical backdrop to the letter would be unnecessary if that was the entire agenda. Instead, Paul uses the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works of the law/Torah to

⁴⁸ Obviously the old covenant revelation remains authoritative Scripture for us, and thus we find Paul appealing to it to establish various doctrinal and ethical points. But the Mosaic covenant is not our covenant; it can only be useful to us as it is interpreted and applied in light of Christ’s death and resurrection.

demarcate the bounds of table fellowship and to specify the identity of Abraham's covenant family. In other words, the doctrine of justification answers questions about fellowship and church life. It provides structure and shape for the covenant community. It is a sociological doctrine (though not in a way that weakens its soteriological force).

What does Paul mean by "works of the law" in Galatians? No one involved in the "Federal Vision" that I am aware of argues that the phrase "works of the law" refers to the law exclusively in its "boundary marker" function.⁴⁹ Rather, it describes life under the Mosaic covenant as a whole (especially as that form of life took shape in the second temple period). Thus, "works of the law" refers to the whole of life God gave to Israel, indeed, to the whole of the Torah's legislation, not merely the symbolic/ceremonial "boundary marker" elements. The phrase "works of the law" describes Jewish life and culture; the phrase sums up the Jewish mode of life as it existed under the old covenant order.

That being said, when Jews intermixed with pagans in the wider world (especially in the post-exile situation), those covenant "boundary markers" became especially important ways of maintaining and manifesting Jewish identity – "acid tests" of loyalty to the covenant, as Don Garlington has put it. Thus, it is not surprising to see circumcision, dietary regulations, and calendrical observances rise to the surface in the discussion in Galatians. But we should keep in mind Paul is always

⁴⁹ When Michael Horton claims otherwise (without any proof), he shows he is quite ignorant of the positions he is supposedly critiquing (*CJPM*, 211). Horton's entire thesis in *CJPM* chapter 7 rests on a totally misguided attempt to collapse the "Federal Vision," the "New Perspective on Paul," the "covenant nomism" of second temple Judaism, and medieval Catholicism into one another. Horton's overly ambitious project fails at virtually every turn, as I demonstrated in "Blurring the Federal Vision." There are wide differences in these various movements and perspectives; Horton's article is only able to advance his agenda by distorting, ignoring, and glossing over these distinctions.

dealing with the Torah as unit, an integrated whole, a covenantal system. His target is those who are insisting that one must become a Jew in order to be a Christian (cf. Acts 15:1), so he has to take up the place of old covenant law in the new creation situation. Because that law created social/sacral boundaries between people, he has show why those are no longer in force.

Is this a “New Perspective” reading of Galatians? In some ways, yes. But Paul’s polemic against seeking justification in “works of the law” is actually a place where the “old” and “new” readings of Paul can converge quite nicely. If distinctively Jewish “works of the law,” prescribed by Torah, could not serve to justify humanity before God, then it makes no sense to say Gentiles must come under Torah and do its works to be justified. If works of the law were ineffectual to justify Jews, they are unnecessary for Gentiles. If the “works of the law” program doesn't justify those who have the law “by nature,” it won’t work for those who don’t have the law “by nature” (cf. Gal. 2:15) either. *No flesh* can be justified by “works of the law.” This is true whether considered from the standpoint of human sin (which is impotent to please God in itself) or from the standpoint of why God gave Torah in the first place (which was never to provide a way of self-justification, but to set aside Israel as the bearer of his redemptive program for a time).

Here is the key point: This polemic against specifically Jewish “works of the law” (the view of the “New Perspective”) feeds quite easily into a polemic against *any* form of moralistic, Pelagian works (the view of the “Old Perspective”). If no Jewish works can justify, then neither can any Gentile works (however understood). If not even the God-ordained Torah can serve as an instrument of justification, then no Gentile code of ethics (natural law, Kant’s categorical imperative, Fletcher’s situational ethics, Aristotle’s

golden mean, or whatever) can. If Moses cannot justify, neither can Plato or Mill or Sartre. In other words, the “New Perspective” reading, focused on Paul’s polemic against Torah, can actually serve *to reinforce and strengthen* the chief application of the “Old Perspective” reading! The “New Perspective” interpretation, in all its redemptive-historical specificity, aimed at apostate Judaizers, actually undergirds the more generalized reading offered by traditional Protestants, aimed at human hubris in whatever form it appears. So Paul’s soteriology (justification by faith) and sociology (Jew and Gentile believers formed into one new humanity) mutually reinforce one another; we cannot advocate one without also advocating the other. And by reading the text in its first century context, we actually lose none of the applications we want to make to the church and world in our own day; indeed, the applications are only enriched and enlivened.

The same points ultimately hold true in Romans. We cannot build the exegetical case here, but it seems fitting that the closing chapters (15-16) should be viewed as the summit of the letter. In his final words, Paul calls Jews and Gentiles to blend together (with their lips and their lives) into one song of praise to the Lord (15:1-13). Paul’s goal is that a unified Christian community in Rome would embody and fulfill the prophetic hope, described in the chain of quotations in 15:9-12. The greeting list Paul gives in chapter 16, then, is not just a sign apostolic friendliness; it is an embodiment of the gospel message Paul has been declaring in the letter, as he turns “justification by faith” into “fellowship by faith.” For Paul, justification apart from works of the law inevitably gives rise to a new family and new way of life. This

is a main thread of his gospel, one he has woven into the heart of the letter again and again.⁵⁰

Conclusion: Forging Ahead in the Reformed Tradition

Our series of “postcards” are now complete.⁵¹ We can stand back and compare the composite pictures of the “Federal Vision,” and contributors to *CJPM*. The uniqueness of the “Federal Vision,” over against the authors of *CJPM*, is that it tries to account for *all* that the Bible teaches about justification, instead of filtering out portions of Scripture that do not fit with a preconceived dogmatic structure. The “Federal Vision” ends up with a considerably thicker, richer doctrine of justification. At the same, the “Federal Vision” is probably less concerned with making particular mechanics of justification a test of orthodoxy (e.g., the imputation of Christ’s active obedience), and more concerned with relating justification (and other applied aspects of our union with Christ) to the overall flow of covenant history.

But this is not just a conflict over who has the better, fuller understanding of justification. It is really a conflict between “catholic” and “sectarian” versions of the

⁵⁰ For a helpful study of the connection between Paul’s doctrine of justification and his eschatological ethics, see Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁵¹ Obviously, I have left out some key issues. In particular, readers may wonder how the “Federal Vision” view of apostasy fits into the pictures of justification drawn here. Is it possible for someone to be justified initially but fail to reach final justification? Though I do believe apostasy is a reality, that’s not quite the way I would put it. Whatever “justification” a covenant member can receive by virtue of church membership or temporary faith (e.g., Matt. 18:21-35; 2 Pet. 2:1) must be distinguished from the justification that a persevering, elect individual receives. If nothing else, the “justification” received by the one who will apostatize is not an anticipation of the verdict he will receive at the last day, as it is in the case of the one who will persevere. God knows this because he decreed it, and that undoubtedly colors his attitude (in some way) towards the one who will apostatize, even before that apostasy takes place. Without going into more detail, I would point to the language of the Belgic Confession, Article 22 which sums up the matter nicely by calling faith “the instrument that *keeps us* in communion with him [Christ] and with all his benefits” (emphasis added). Whatever conclusions we may draw about apostasy and the temporary benefits that covenant breakers possess before they fall away, it must be insisted that faith is the means by which the elect are *kept* in union with Christ, and therefore the means by which they *remain* in a state of justification. If faith dies, union with Christ is lost, as well as the corresponding benefits.

Reformed faith. The *CJPM* authors would be content to remain ensconced in a Reformed ghetto, maintaining denominational and institutional status quo. They only venture out of their Reformed bunker to fire a few shots at Christians from other traditions now and then. The “Federal Vision,” on the other hand, would like to learn from and share with other traditions within Christendom, trusting that God will continue to bring his church to greater confessional maturity and unity in the time to come.⁵² Those involved in the “Federal Vision” are not looking for heretics hiding behind every bush. Ecumenical interaction certainly poses certain risks, but it is a calling we are commanded to undertake, as we pursue oneness with all of God’s people (John 17:2-26; Eph. 4:1-16). In other words, the problem is that the “Federal Vision” appears to be messing with supposedly fixed boundary markers. It tampers with Reformed identity, by its openness to the Bible, other traditions, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the church.⁵³ In the spirit of *semper reformanda*, those on the “Federal Vision” side are not so much “reformed” as “reforming.” The “Federal Vision” refuses to treat cherished theological

⁵² Predictably, Clark accepts the notion of doctrinal development/maturation up until the writing of his favorite Reformed confession (333f). Then everything freezes. So, for example, law/gospel confusion in the church fathers does not make them unorthodox, but when the same “error” crops up in the “Federal Vision,” it’s considered an “attack” on the gospel because it occurs sometime after 1517. The arbitrariness of Clark’s understanding of historical theology should be obvious. Clark also illegitimately narrows the breadth of the historic Reformed tradition, but we cannot explore that here.

⁵³ It is telling that Clark spends a good portion of his introductory chapter wrestling with the issue of Reformed identity, taking pains to distance the Reformed faith as much as possible from every other identifiable tradition in Christendom, including evangelicalism (6ff). Clark attempts to give a sociological explanation for the rise of the “Federal Vision.” However accurate he may be with regard to the blending of confessional Reformed churches into broad evangelicalism (and much of what he says is undoubtedly correct), I think he has misconstrued the origins, agenda, and placement of the “Federal Vision.”

Even more telling is Clark’s blog post claiming that (his version of) Reformed theology is a perfected system (<http://www.oceansideurc.org/the-heidelblog/2007/2/2/wilson-is-right-2.html>). He says of the “Federal Vision” men, “They are like kids taking apart a Hamilton 992B (a fine railroad watch). They don’t know what they’re doing. The pieces are all over the floor. Who gave them the authority to play with the watch in the first place? It was running perfectly.” So much for *semper reformanda*! The “Federal Vision” conversation is obviously going to be a challenge to anyone who thinks Reformed theology is already “running perfectly.”

positions as finished products; there is always more to learn, new questions to ask, new insights to discover.

However, at the same time, the “Federal Vision” is a radically conservative movement, going back behind Enlightenment rationalism and American revivalism, in an effort to recover the original, full orbed vision the Reformers. The “Federal Vision” has largely been fueled by a rediscovery of the high ecclesiology of Calvin and Bucer. The “Federal Vision” has largely been driven by a renewed movement back to the original sources of the Protestant Reformation. “Federal Vision” writings very often play out in dialogue with classic Reformational works. It is something of a Reformed *ressourcement* movement.

So there is a “treasures old, treasures new” dynamic at work in the “Federal Vision.” It is forging ahead, even as it seeks to retrieve the past. It seeks to learn something new and fresh, even as it seeks to relearn the old and proven. The critics, however, do not seem to like *either* aspect of the “Federal Vision.” But thus far, they have done little more than demonstrate that the “Federal Vision” makes them uncomfortable; they have not offered compelling answers to the kinds of questions (cutting-edge biblical-theological and confessional/historical) that the “Federal Vision” has been asking. There are several reasons why those involved in the “Federal Vision” conversation are unlikely to be moved by the essays in *CJPM*.

The *CJPM* book as a whole is pervaded by a certain sloppiness. I have already brought attention to some of that sloppiness above, but a few more examples might be helpful. There is most certainly a terminological sloppiness. The *CJPM* authors repeatedly fail to define key terms, the definitions of which are *everything* in the current

debate. For example, the index shows that the term “merit” appears on over 25 pages. But not *once* do they offer something like a working definition of “merit” that is exegetically defensible! This is remarkable, given how important they make merit out to be. If merit is so important to orthodoxy, surely it isn’t that hard to define or prove from the text of Scripture. A lot of Latin gets thrown around, but at the end of the various discussions, *none* of the really crucial objections to merit theology have been answered. Surely the *CJPM* authors are aware of the fact that the meaning and (especially) the exegetical foundation of merit theology is hotly contested in the current (and historic) discussions. It is not something that can be taken for granted.⁵⁴

The same is true with regard to the term “imputation.” From the beginning of the “Federal Vision” controversy, the main issue here has been the meaning of this term. Is it a matter of how God reckons and regards us in Christ? Or is it an extrinsic transfer of righteousness from Christ’s account to ours? But the *CJPM* book, while harping on the imputed righteousness of Christ as the *sine qua non* of orthodoxy, never engages in the work of defining and debating what “imputation” actually means. The result is that *CJPM* ends up failing to grapple with the concerns that are at stake in the “Federal Vision” conversation. The core issues are dodged and the driving questions remain unanswered.

The authors of *CJPM* are also quite sloppy in matters of historical theology. With remarkable audacity, Clark essentially calls everyone who does not share in his particular version of Reformed theology a “revisionist” (3; cf. 24, where he speaks as though the

⁵⁴ My own discussion of merit is found in “Rome Won’t Have Me.” I wrote there that, “In interacting with other Reformed theologians over the issue of merit in the aftermath of the colloquium, I have found a wide variety of views on merit, some of which I could easily live with (I don’t just want to fight over words, after all).” See also Part 3 of my “A Response to the 2006 OPC Justification Report.” In that essay, I raise a number of questions about the theological coherence of merit. I also deal extensively with Philippians 2:9, a key proof-text. My discussion should be compared with *CJPM*, 183-4 and 202. Ultimately, the issue is not the word “merit,” but how the category is defined, how it functions, and whether or not there is a better way to express what needs to be said.

CJPM book represents the only perspective within authentic Calvinism). But Clark and colleagues have revised the Reformed faith themselves in all kinds of idiosyncratic ways.⁵⁵ Oft course, they are able to pull off the plausibility of their claims by setting themselves up as a magisterium that will interpret the Reformers and their confessions for the rest of us.

In reality, Clark repeatedly presses traditional Reformed theology into a mold that suits him. For example, as a way of buttressing his law/gospel hermeneutic, Clark and VanDrunen, following Godfrey, make the claim that the Reformed and Lutheran confessions share a common doctrine of justification (5n3, 56). But how plausible is that claim? If nothing else, it is very clear that the authors of *CJPM* do not give baptism the same role in justification that the Lutherans do. Indeed, on this point, the “Federal Vision” is much closer to Lutheranism!⁵⁶

⁵⁵ For example, Clark has dismissed the teaching of the early Reformers and classic confessions on the issue of creation/Genesis 1. He has rejected the theocratic social order that all the magisterial Reformers presupposed, as reflected in the original confessions. And in many areas where there was diversity in the early Reformation period (e.g., the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, which was disputed at least up through the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s) and in more recent eras (e.g., the structure of covenant theology in the John Murray/Meredith Kline debates), Clark has insisted that one particular strand within Reformed theology become an absolute, non-negotiable boundary marker for orthodoxy. Essentially, the authors of *CJPM* gerrymander the boundaries of the Reformed faith around their own feet. But Reformed orthodoxy has always been a field, with plenty of room to play and discuss, not a pinpoint, in which there is no room carved out for legitimate diversity or growth in exegetical maturity. Clark’s claims to a monolithic Reformed tradition become even more suspect when one remembers that many of the Reformed confessions were compromise documents to begin with, drawn up with a built-in latitude on a number of doctrines. They were never meant to be the last word, and are undoubtedly historically and culturally conditioned. They are wonderful testimonies of our faith, but they do not settle every issue before the church today. For a succinct overview of Reformed confessionalism, see John Leith, *The Assembly at Westminster* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973).

⁵⁶ For example, Lutheran Johann Gerhard wrote, “the word and sacraments are instrumental causes [of justification] on the part of God, faith is the instrumental cause on God’s part.” Quoted in Lane, *Justification By Faith in Protestant-Catholic Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment*, (New York: T and T Clark, 2002), 70n. This is standard Lutheran theology, but probably isn’t compatible with the views set forth in *CJPM*. It would be very hard to imagine Lutherans writing a 465 page treatise on justification that only mentioned baptism on 3 pages! See also David Scaer, *Baptism* (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 1999). Scaer writes, “The [Lutheran] Small Catechism lists the benefits of Baptism as effecting the forgiveness of sins, delivering from death and the devil, and granting eternal salvation...Basic to the Lutheran understanding of Baptism’s effects is its bestowal of the forgiveness of sins, which assumes the presence of all of God’s other benefits” (41).

The *CJPM* authors are sloppy dealing with the work of those they critique. By lumping the “Federal Vision” in with a variety of clearly aberrant movements, they create an aura of “guilt by association.” In several instances, they simply sidestep the challenges that the “Federal Vision” poses to their particular version of Reformed theology. For example, Michael Horton’s essay in chapter 7 is substantially a republication of his article “Déjà Vu All Over Again?” from the July/August 2004, issue of *Modern Reformation* (pages 23-30). I already responded to that piece a few years ago in my article “Blurring the Federal Vision.”⁵⁷ But Horton’s contribution to the *CJPM* does not even acknowledge the existence of my response, much less interact with its arguments and clarifications. That kind of irresponsible, half-baked scholarship pervades the whole book. The *CJPM* men have tried to make their critical task too easy by creating straw men and distorting the positions of those they oppose. If they really want to refute the supposed challenge of the “Federal Vision,” they need to understand what it is and deal with it at its best. Most, if not all, of their significant objections have already been answered many times over. Their book is essentially a huge waste of time for those who would actually like to see the discussion over these issues move forward.

Another example: Clark suggests that some in the Reformed church are teaching that faith justifies *because* it obeys (5). But *no one* in the current context has offered that formulation (even if Richard Baxter did). If anything, the “Federal Vision” has said that faith justifies because it unites us to Christ (as this essay, once again, demonstrates). Clark’s critique has confused the qualities of justification’s instrument with the causal ground of justification. On the same page, Clark describes the “Federal Vision” as a

⁵⁷ Reading *CJPM* chapter 7 was definitely a “déjà vu” experience for me – but not a pleasant one!

“monocovenantal” theology. But, again, no one on the “Federal Vision” side is advocating anything like that.⁵⁸ So Clark’s claim creates a horribly false impression.

Anyone who thinks the “Federal Vision” promotes works-righteousness is in the grip of a schismatic agenda and is not seeking the peace and purity of the church. That does not automatically make the “Federal Vision” right in every detail – all of our theologies remain deeply flawed if measured by the divine standard of inspired Scripture. But if we are always *simul iustus et peccator* in this life, that applies to theology as much as any to any other human endeavor. The logic of the gospel requires us to cut one another slack when it comes to nuanced, detailed theological discussions. Many of the points at issue in today’s debate have been up for grabs for centuries within the Reformed church. Why should anyone want to suddenly cut off debate, unless they are protecting vested interests in some form or fashion? In reality, there should not be a “Federal Vision” *controversy* at all; rather, there should be an ongoing “Federal Vision” *conversation*. And that conversation should not be aimed at proving one “party” or “subculture” in the Reformed church as standing in the right all the way down the line. Rather, it should be aimed at lovingly edifying the brethren in our mutual pursuit of understanding and applying Scripture more faithfully in the life of the church and the world.

In the end the *CJPM* volume ends up revealing more about the weaknesses of present day Reformed culture than it does the problems with the “Federal Vision.” A. T.

⁵⁸ “The “Federal Vision” certainly acknowledges key differences between the Adamic covenantal administration and Christ’s covenantal administration. A detailed assessment of the bizarre “monocovenantal” charge is in “Rome Won’t Have Me.” See also one of the formative theological works in the rise of “Federal Vision” theology, James B. Jordan’s *Through New Eyes* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988), which is certainly not “monocovenantal.” Ironically, since the authors of *CJPM* subject both Adam and Christ to the *same* covenant of works, they are actually much closer to a monocovenantal schema than the “Federal Vision”!

B. McGowan has captured the ongoing dynamic in this particular controversy, and points the way forward:

In some circles today, when anyone seeks to explore a new idea or restate an old one in new words, there is an immediate rush to judgment. Often this approach amounts to theological bullying and oppression, leading to a situation where scholars do not feel free to go where they believe God through his Word is leading them, for fear that they will be declared heretics before they have even had time to explore the matter properly. In some situations, people run to the church courts and demand an ecclesiastical 'trial,' where the more sensible approach would be to take a good long time to think and pray and study God's Word. Sometimes the pressure is more subtle, with younger scholars being advised to avoid certain issues or certain positions 'for the sake of their career.' This is a deeply regrettable and unfortunate situation. Evangelical scholars must have the courage of their convictions and be prepared to challenge (where necessary) the Creeds, Confessions and practices of the churches.⁵⁹

My hope for the Reformed wing of the church is that we would learn to do our theologizing and conversing with one another in way more befitting of the glorious gospel of grace we are all seeking to uphold. *Kyrie elieson* as we proceed.

⁵⁹ A. T. B. McGowan, editor, *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 16.