

Introduction

Since ‘the imputed righteousness of Christ’ is still a matter of warm debate in some circles, I have produced this book by taking my articles on the subject, editing them only very lightly while leaving them in their chronological order of original publication. This will make it easier for those who want to have my views on the question, and it will also make the material more permanent.

‘Imputed righteousness’? While the phrase does not appear in Scripture, almost all believers use it. In any case, as long as we bear in mind that ‘counted’ or ‘credited’ is what is meant by ‘imputed’, these passages, on their own, are conclusive:

Abraham believed God, and it was *counted* to him *as righteousness*. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is *counted as righteousness*, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God *counts righteousness* apart from works... [God’s] purpose was to make [Abraham] the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that *righteousness* would be *counted* to them as well... His faith was *counted* to him *as righteousness* (Rom. 4:3-6,11,22).

Abraham believed God, and it was *counted* to him *as righteousness* (Jas. 2:23).

As for Christ’s part in this, we have Paul’s words to the believers at Corinth. In his first letter he told them the amazing truth that Christ himself (Christ himself, please note, not ‘merely’ his work) is – has been made – their righteousness though their union with him:

Introduction

You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us... righteousness... (1 Cor. 1:30).¹

In his second letter, the apostle took this further, explaining that this was accomplished by God in a glorious exchange² between Christ and his elect:

For our sake he [that is, God the Father] made him [that is, Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Centuries before, in the days of the old covenant, Jeremiah had prophesied it:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness' (Jer. 23:5-6; see also Jer. 33:15-16).

As Paul experienced and testified of himself, his desire was:

...that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:8-9).

Very well. We have 'imputed righteousness', and this righteousness – *which is Christ himself* – is imputed at the point of faith to the believer in Christ, as a consequence of his union with the Redeemer. This is the justification by faith that Paul preached:

By [Christ] everyone who believes is justified from everything from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses (Acts 13:39).

But what, specifically, is this 'righteousness' which is imputed to the believing sinner? I am convinced that it is

¹ Once again we see that 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11).

² See my 'The Glorious Exchange'.

Introduction

Christ's life-long obedience under the law of God, the law given to Israel on Sinai through Moses. This is imputed to the sinner the moment he trusts Christ and is thus united to him.

I admit at once that there is no text which states as much. If this is a clinching argument, then, of course, end of story! But is it the clinching argument? If it is, then we will have problems with, say, justification by faith alone, since there is no text which states that doctrine.³ Despite this lack of a single text, I still believe both. Both, to my mind, are revealed plainly in Scripture, even though no single text categorically states either.

Let me tackle an objection. What I have just said does *not* mean that I am starting with my theology or a Confession and coming to a conclusion; nor am I arguing that a theological system trumps the text of Scripture. Too often, I readily admit, these things happen.⁴ But this is not what I am doing. No!⁵ Rather, I am claiming that Scripture itself, *taken as a whole*, inevitably leads to one conclusion on both topics; namely, that though they lack a single textual statement, both are scriptural.

If I may be permitted to make an objection of my own to the objector: it seems to me that some approach imputed righteousness rather as Little Jack Horner got stuck into his pie; they like to pull out a few plums from Scripture, and thus announce their doctrine. The right thing to do, however, is to devour the whole pie, down to the last crumb of the crust. I mean, of course, that to get a real grasp of the

³ I can understand why Martin Luther felt the need to insert 'alone' in his German translation of Rom. 3:28, but he did it without the warrant of the Greek text.

⁴ See my 'The Law and the Confessions'; 'A Must-See Debate'; 'No Confession? Nothing to Debate!'; 'Misleading, Sad, Revealing: "Relevant Today" by Jeremy Brooks'; 'Has it Really Come to This? Comments on a Banner Article: Part 1'; 'A Must-Listen Podcast'.

⁵ To avoid this accusation, I have deliberately not given scores and scores of excellent extracts from Reformed authors.

Introduction

righteousness which is imputed to the believer, we need to look at the big picture of Scripture, including the old covenant, and not confine ourselves to isolated passages, let alone texts, of the New Testament. I know I take a risk in saying this. I fully accept that it is ‘to the law and to the testimony’ (Isa. 8:20). And Acts 17:11 is still paramount. But this is the point! In both cases, it is the scrutiny of the entire Scripture, not isolated texts, that is commended as essential. ‘What does the Scripture say?’ (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 4:30). And when Christ spoke of searching the Scriptures (John 5:39), I am sure he did not intend us to grasp at verses, and miss the big picture.

Having said that, let me immediately add that my concern in writing on these matters is not confined to the text of Scripture. Please hear me out! I have a pastoral concern. Just as with justification by faith alone, so with the imputed righteousness of Christ: both carry huge consequences. The fact is, in each case I am concerned with the text of Scripture *and* the souls of men and women. Just as when the ‘alone’ is left out of ‘justification by faith alone’ the door is left ajar for, say, baptismal regeneration, so, without the imputed righteousness of Christ in the sense of his life-long obedience under the law, believers are bereft of massive scriptural comfort and assurance. What I am trying to say is that I am not engaging in an arid debate along the lines of cramming angels on pinheads. Rather, I am thinking of real people who have real needs, both in life and death, and trying to help them to come to a right understanding of Scripture.

To deny the imputation of Christ’s life-long obedience under the law to the believer, and reducing justification to pardon, leaves us with what I can only describe as a one-legged gospel: the believer is washed from his sin, yes, but he is not clothed with righteousness. Righteousness! That’s the word! So important is the concept, I must say a little more about it.

I start with a negative. Righteousness is not mere pardon; it is far more than that. Of the countless scriptural examples

Introduction

to make the point, consider the book of Proverbs. On my count, 'righteous' or 'righteousness' appears in seventy-five verses, and when words (and their derivatives) such as 'uprightness', 'integrity', 'godliness', and so on, are taken into account, the list grows rapidly. And the picture we are given of righteousness is always one of positive, practical living, not mere pardon. What is more, take some verses from just two consecutive chapters in the book of Proverbs – Proverbs 13:9,21,22,25; 14:9,11,19,32,34. These verses speak of a contrast, a clear – even stark – contrast between the righteous and the wicked (or their equivalents). The contrast is not between the righteous and the unpardoned, but between the righteous and the ungodly, the wicked, the sinful. Nothing could be clearer: righteousness is far more than pardon. And that comes from just two chapters in the book! On my reckoning, this contrast between the righteous and the wicked appears in over fifty verses throughout Proverbs. And if all the equivalents for 'righteous' and 'wicked' are taken into account, that number rises, I might almost say, exponentially.⁶

My point is that by saying that justification is pardon – by claiming that the righteousness imputed to the believer is mere pardon – we end up with a deformed, inadequate gospel. A believer, being justified, is pardoned, yes, but he is also positively righteous. David spoke of a man's sins being both pardoned and covered (Ps. 32:1; Rom. 4:7). 'Covered' is not a tautology, a mere repeat of 'pardon'. The Bible has a good deal to say on the subject of covering in this respect (see Job 29:14; Ps. 132:9; Isa. 11:5; 59:17; 61:10; 64:6; Zech. 3:4; Rev. 3:4; 19:8). The Greek in Romans 4:7 is *epikaluptō*, literally 'upon or over to hide, to veil', 'to cover over so as not to come to view'. See 1 Peter 2:6, where *epikalumma* is a cloak. Hence 'the wedding garment' (Matt. 22:11-14). I contend that the covering in question for the

⁶ While 'pardon' and 'forgiveness' (and equivalents) are massive biblical concepts, the words themselves are not frequent in Scripture.

Introduction

believer is nothing less than the robe of Christ's righteousness.

John Gill spoke of those:

...whom God justifies by imputing the righteousness of his Son to them, he removes their iniquities from them... such whom he clothes with the robe of righteousness, and garments of salvation (Isa. 61:10), 'their sins are covered' from the eye of divine justice, and shall never be seen [any] more, or be brought against them to their condemnation, and therefore [they] must be happy persons.

Again, to deny the imputation of Christ's life-long obedience under the law to the believer, leaves God's demand in the old covenant – 'Do this and live' (Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 18:9; 20:11,13,21; Luke 10:26-28; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12) – hanging in the air, unfulfilled. And this contradicts Matthew 5:17-18. Christ left nothing undone. He fully met God's just demands, keeping his commands to the jot and tittle. He came specifically to do his Father's will. His Father's law was in his heart (Ps. 40:7-8; Heb. 10:7,9). As he explained to the woman at the well, throughout his lifetime the Lord Jesus never forgot that he was about his Father's work and accomplishing it (John 4:34; see also John 5:30; 12:27; 17:4; 19:28). As he said: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). Yes, the culmination of his obedience was, without doubt, his *tetelestai* on the cross: 'It is finished' or 'It is accomplished' (John 19:30). But what was finished or accomplished? Not just his work on the cross!

I am convinced that the full glory of free justification lies in the fact that the life-long obedience of the Redeemer under the law is imputed to the believer. For this means that the believer, being united to Christ, has fully met all God's demands in his Saviour, and is therefore totally free of accusation, let alone condemnation (Rom. 8:1-4,33-34). He is fully pardoned and accounted perfectly righteousness in God's sight: 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present

Introduction

the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:25-27). 'You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him' (Col. 1:21-22; see also Rom. 7:4).⁷ Yes, the believer is washed in Christ's blood and therefore pardoned (Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:9), but he is also clothed in splendour, he is 'redeemed and purified' (Tit. 2:14; Heb. 1:3). In short, in Christ the saints are God's holy people (1 Pet. 2:9). In Christ they have completely satisfied the terms God laid out for Israel at Sinai:

If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5-6).

Without the imputed righteousness of Christ – his life-long obedience under the law – none of this would have been possible.

Indeed, it is only by stressing that the entire work of Christ in his life and death is the righteousness imputed to the believer, that Christ is given his full glory:

Christ Jesus... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:3-11).

And so on...

⁷ See my *Four*.

Introduction

But I must not forget that this is supposed to be only the Introduction! So I will call a halt, and leave you to get on with the book.

Just a final caution, however: I began this Introduction by speaking of warmth, warmth in discussion since not all believers agree on this topic. It is gratifying when that warmth comes from hearts full of love, and not hot heads. After all, if we cannot in love discuss, of all subjects, the imputation of the work of Christ to the believer as the believer's righteousness, what hope is there for us?