

THE OUTLOOK

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Devoted to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The One Who Rules

Not so long ago, I had a discussion with an individual who claimed: "Satan is at the helm and is now pushing all of humanity into an immorality and darkness that will lead to our total destruction." I am so thankful that his assertion is wrong. We have Christ's ascension as proof. Jesus is at the helm, not Satan.

Satan has been led away captive. Although he still does a great deal of mischief in this world, he is not only under the absolute control of heaven's King, but all the damage he does is made to work together for the good of them that have been called according to the purposes of God.

The author of Psalm 68 declares that when Jesus ascended on high He "led away captives" (Psalm 68:10). The reference of the Psalmist is to the ancient custom of victorious generals to bind their captives and have them trail behind their chariots. Paul alludes to this when he writes about having been led in triumph by Christ. Our Lord led away the captives when He returned in triumph to the homeland of His Father in heaven.

Four mighty enemies had blocked the road which led from the manger to the house with many mansions: Satan, Hell, Death, and World. They disputed His right to pass.

But, indeed, He did pass. Satan was vanquished in the desert; Hell and the World were conquered on the cross; Death was robbed of its power when Christ rose victoriously from the grave on the third day. These enemies were not only vanquished but led away as captives. They are now used by Christ to do His bidding. He employs them, contrary to their own will, to promote His glory and the welfare of the Church.

The four conquered enemies trailed behind the risen Christ as He climbed the steep ascent into heaven. Since His ascension, Christ uses all the powers of hell and all the evil plotting of the devil to bring about the ultimate victory of His Church. For example, all the



Volume 54, No. 5 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) "And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, 'The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon'" (Judges 7:20).

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Inside Fly Rule

violent attacks of unbelief on the Word of God, despite the devastating influence they have exerted, have compelled the Church to study the Bible with exceptional earnestness; and the result is that its divine character is established more firmly than ever before. As to the world, Christ said to His disciples, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). As to death, it has been changed into the Christian's friend, the gateway to heaven.

Jesus is at the helm. Unto Him has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Let this thought comfort us in the days of stress and darkness. We must not shut our eyes to the calamities which the Lord is sending us; nor should we fail to recognize the sinister forces which are aiming to destroy the very foundations of the kingdom of God.

At the same time, however, be assured they will fail. They have been conquered by the risen and ascended Christ. We are now to cultivate that precious optimism which befits the Christian in times of affliction as well as in days of prosperity and peace. The truth of God is marching on. The kingdom of His Son is advancing. The world is being made ready for judgment and the Church is daily coming nearer to the day of ultimate victory and eternal glory.

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"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

The score was seven to five in the bottom of the final inning. The team sponsored by the grocery store, in the heinous yellow jerseys, was trailing once again this week to the undefeated team with an insurance agency logo on their chests. This was no surprise really, for the team had lost all of their first ten games.

On this sticky, mosquito filled evening, however, the team had managed to keep it close. Now they were within three runs of victory. The first batter had raked a single to right, the next flied out to center, and the third had walked. The tying runs were on board with one out.

Just as some of the crowd began to get excited, others remembered who was coming up to bat. And everyone looked up to see him take the long lonely steps to the batter's box. They called him "Little One". He was the shortest child in his grade, and in the grade below him, and the grade below that. As he walked, the jersey that was two sizes too big, and the dirty, wrinkled baseball pants that ended under his tennis shoes made the boy look even more unimpressive. When he played, he played a deep right field, deep enough so that he wouldn't get in the way, and when he batted, which by league rule meant at least one at bat per game, he was batting .100, a single, gift wrapped for him

by a clumsy catcher on a full-swing bunt three games back. But now it was up to him, the little one, to deliver the team's first win.

Paul rejoiced in the opportunity to write a letter to the churches in Ephesus. Of all the churches that Paul wrote to, this is a letter full of encouragement and exhortation to action. But Paul knew something. He knew that the Ephesians had a pretty good understanding of the works that needed to accompany the Christian life of faith. These people did the right stuff, the religious things, but they needed to be reminded to believe in the One who had given them the grace to be able to do the stuff, even Jesus Christ. For all the faith and love they had shown, at the end of the day, they were still sinners, still dead and in darkness apart from the light of God's grace, love, mercy, and peace, as seen in the blessings that were theirs: election, redemption, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

The little one dug into the batters box, and then stepped out to knock the dirt out of his treadless sneakers. He looked up and one emotion emanated from the boy's face for the whole world to see. Fear. After the last walk, the opposing coach had brought in his ace to close it out. This twelve year old was enormous, a freak of nature, a monster accentuated by the blood red jersey with

black trim. He was wild, he threw hard, and he instilled fear in the hearts and faces of all the kids in the ugly yellow jerseys. But then, the little one began to dig in again, and he looked up with renewed determination.

Perhaps, the Ephesians were puzzled by the tenor of Paul's exhortation. At first, it seems Paul is praising their works, and the next minute, he is in a sense devaluing them. But Paul had been at that place one time in his life as well. Paul did all the right stuff: Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, zealous for the Law, a persecutor of the church. He did what was right. He looked the part. But he did not believe. What needed to change him was not doing more works. It was believing and marveling in the grace secured for him by Jesus Christ. Grace, not just works, was the quality that needed to set these believers apart.

The boy's knuckles were white as he gripped the bat while the monster unleashed his first offering. Strike one! The boy couldn't swing or even react. He didn't even see the ball. Beads of sweat ran down his face mixing with the dust created by his nervous feet shuffling. He dug in with yet more resolve. Strike two! The second pitch had whizzed by so fast, you could hear the seams tearing apart the thick, moist air. The situation was bleak, 0 and 2, one out, and the freak of nature laughing on the mound.

The boy could hardly move. He simply stood there and waited for his usual walk back to the end of the bench after another strike out. He saw the wind-up, and the pitch. And at that moment, everything

froze, the world stopped, and there was a moment of clarity. When the earth began its revolutions again, the boy extended his arms and bat as the heater approached, and his frozen slumber was rudely awakened by a 68 mph fastball striking his aluminum bat with a resounding "ping".

The little one had never had this feeling before. He had connected. The sounds came rushing into his head like a flood: the instruction to run from his agitated coach, the

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cheers from his team and the crowd. He tossed the bat aside and began to run, picking up speed, the joy of knowing that he would get on base and that his batting average would jump exponentially!

Then he committed the cardinal sin of Little League. He looked for the ball. It was a high fly ball on the infield, second base side. Out of nowhere, it seemed, the umpire cried out, "Infield fly, batters out" followed by the sound of the ball dropping and hitting the dirt at the feet of the second baseman.

The little boy stopped, and as the second baseman scurried to collect the ball, the runners scampered back to their bases. The boy could not fathom what had just transpired.

As he began to walk back to his spot at the end of the bench the tears began to flow uncontrollably. The coaches tried to console the boy but the questioning had begun. "But I hit the ball. I got a hit off the monster. The second baseman missed the ball. Why am I out? Why am I out?" he blubbered over and over.

The Ephesians had done so much well. And it would have been easy for them to take comfort in the accomplishments of their hands. And when we are pious, when we are an example of holiness before brothers and sisters, we too can become conceited. Look at me God! Look at all I have done! Surely, You will bless me for the works of my hands. Yes, a lot of people know all about works, but there needs to be more. Paul's cry resounds before the Ephesians, and before us, "Not of works so that no one can boast".

The little one had been done in by the infield fly rule. When there are less than two outs with runners on second and first, a pop fly in the infield will be ruled an automatic out to protect the offense from a "cheap" double play. Yes, the boy hit the ball, but because of the rules the hit was never a hit, it was meaningless, and the boy was reduced to a dripping mess of tears.

Even though the Ephesians had produced good works, even though they knew love and faith, their works by themselves in the end, according to the law, produced death.

After some of the hubbub had died down, the next batter came to the plate. The terror on the mound was



filled with rage. How could that little one pop me up? No one touches my heat. The huge beast reached deep down and unleashed all his sound and fury in a cannon blast toward home plate. The batter had no time to do anything but shut his eyes as the heat-seeking missile of a pitch exploded into the side of his helmet. The batter fell to the ground, gathered himself, and tried to make it to first base. But with each step the ringing got louder, and the disorientation was enough to knock the boy out of the game.

The little one stood up, forgetting his own misery and peering through the chain link fence, hoping his teammate would be okay. As he was watching, his coach came over and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. He told the little one that he would need to run for the hit batter. He told him to remember that boy as he ran the bases, to remember the chance that was now his because of the sacrifice of another. And so the boy, after checking on his teammate, ran out to first base, beaming with this new chance to run.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. For the Ephesians and for us to come before God, to truly love Him and worship Him and serve Him as we should, we needed to be saved through a sacrifice. His name is Christ the Lord. He is the one that allowed Himself to be hit with all the fury of our sin and the rejection of His own Father. He sacrificed Himself so that the Ephesians, that we might have life, and have it abundantly. This life did not come because of something we have done. No, our works pronounce us guilty,

pronounce us out. Yet Christ's sacrifice renews and restores us, so that through the gift of grace through faith, we may glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

The little one took his lead off first. The ogre had been removed from the game. Bases loaded, down by two, last of the seventh. The count had quickly run to 2 and 1. The new pitcher, feeling the nerves, hung a curveball that never curved. The batter crushed a long fly ball to left field. The fielder tried to dive for the

Christ is the one that allowed Himself to be hit with all the fury of our sin and the rejection of His own Father.

ball in his desperation, but he came up empty. The ball rolled all the way to the fence. One run scored as the boy reached second base and made the turn for third, the center fielder now trying desperately to corral the ball.

As the boy reached third the second run had scored, and the coach was flailing his arms wildly as he waved the runner home. The boy looked down at home plate for the first time all season. The center fielder finally grasped the ball and fired it into his cutoff man. The boy was halfway there, running with all the might a person of his stature could muster. The shortstop wheeled around and gunned the ball into the catcher. The boy began his slide as

the catcher looked to block the plate. The dust swelled up and shielded the play from view. The silence was surreal.

The catcher had bobbled the ball as a tiny foot crossed the corner of the plate. The team had won and the little one had scored the winning run. Much celebration ensued as the team went out for ice cream. But the boy never forgot the reason that he got to score that run. The team finished the season 1-11, but after that day, it didn't really matter. The little one and the boy who got hit became friends and they talked about that day often. But the conversation would always end with the little one telling the other boy, "Wasn't it great when you scored that winning run!"

So that no one can boast. Christ's sacrifice for us is the reason that in our gratitude we desire to do the stuff, to work good in His name, and to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We must come to Him and say, remember when You died for my sins, and secured the victory forever. May we remember the infield fly rule, but more, let us remember the sacrifice of our Savior.

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Judgment According to Works

The Crux of the Today's Dispute [Part 2]

Rightly, we individually and corporately confess what Scripture teaches after a careful, exegetical study and elucidation of the text of Scripture, not because it is the view of our Reformed forebears. Having reflected upon the text of Scripture, we may or may not agree with the teachings of historic, confessional Reformed dogmatics. It is the case that I write in defense of traditional covenant theology. Minor differences aside, I remain persuaded that our tradition has rightly interpreted the biblical doctrine of justification, election, and the covenants. Not all within the Reformed camp today assume this same posture. What stands as our chief disagreement? What causes divisions within our camp? Unity in the faith requires conformity to teachings of the Word of God. Let Scripture be our guide, our standard of truth.

The apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians declares that we shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, in order that we might be judged according to our works, whether good or bad (5:10). This judgment includes believers. Similarly, in Romans, the apostle writes in the same vein: God will render to each “according to his deeds” (2:6). Paul proceeds to demarcate two classes of people – those who obey God and keep covenant with Him, and those who dis-

obey and fall under divine condemnation. It is a minor disagreement among biblical commentators whether or not the class of individuals who keep the law is actual or hypothetical in this passage of Romans (2:6-13). I maintain that the apostle Paul instructs his readers here concerning the twofold classification of humankind, covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers. Those keeping covenant with God obey His commandments. They are the “doers of the law” (2:13). Paul is not telling his readers at this point in his argument *how* sinners become “doers of the law.” Nor is Paul suggesting that the “doers of the law” are justified by works, *i.e.*, constituted righteous in God’s sight on grounds of the “obedience of faith” (1:5). That would flatly contradict what Paul explains later in this letter and elsewhere in his writings. In summary, we affirm, in light of Scripture’s teaching, that judgment is according to works, but not on the basis of works. There is no conflict between the doctrine of judgment according to works and the doctrine of justification by faith (apart from “good works”).

Modern-day revisionists contend that the very notion of “meritorious” reward is unscriptural. These expositors, having imbibed – to one degree or another – the neoorthodox interpretation of Karl

Barth, insist that the traditional Protestant-Reformed contrast between the “Law” and the “Gospel” is entirely speculative. God’s covenantal commitment to humankind, so they reason, is all of grace, never a matter of human “works” (*i.e.*, works antithetical to faith). Many of these revisionists conclude that the relationship between the Father and the Son in the eternal covenant (or pact) is purely gracious, not legal. What is accented here is the paternal love and grace of God, not the just requirement of Christ’s satisfaction of divine law necessary for bringing closure to the period of probationary testing (what pertains to the First and Second Adams in their representative capacities as federal heads of humanity). The idea of a legal requirement associated with God’s covenant is jettisoned altogether. Accordingly, Christ’s obedience is not meritorious of the Father’s favor and reward.

Other revisionists inconsistently (and superficially) hold to the meritorious work of Christ in making satisfaction for the righteous demands of the law of God, while denying the prospect of meritorious reward for the First Adam, had he passed his time of probation. Unlike Barth’s speculative theologizing, Reformed interpreters have correctly assessed and weighed in their system of doctrine the explicit parallel drawn by the apostle between the “one act of righteousness” of the Second Adam and the “one act of disobedience” of the First Adam (see Romans 5:12-21). Were the First Adam not in a position to merit the reward of the covenant (*viz.*, the Covenant of Works established at creation), then it is



utterly meaningless to speak of the necessity of Christ's substitutionary satisfaction of the legal requirement associated with this covenant at creation and reinstated under Moses (the legal covenant made in Eden was reinstated *in part* with Israel at Sinai for pedagogical, typological purposes). The principle of inheritance in the Covenant of Works is that of works; the principle of inheritance in the Covenant of Grace is that of faith (*i.e.*, grace, *gospel-grace*). When all is said and done, the classic Protestant-Reformed antithesis between the "Law" and the "Gospel" is absolutely essential to the biblical and evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone.

To be sure, there is room for further clarification and explanation of the role of faith and works in justification and final judgment (judgment according to works). The current controversy in the church has afforded biblical interpreters yet another opportunity to reassess and reevaluate the teachings of confessional orthodox Protestantism, and Reformed orthodoxy in particular. The centerpiece in recent discussion and debate is the relation between Paul and James on justification. We do not have space to give full account of the arguments advanced on both sides of the theological dispute. What follows is a summary restatement of the biblical doctrine, which reflects the positive contributions which have been made in the church's ongoing, polemical defense of the truth of Scripture.

There is only one divine act – not two – with respect to the justification of sinners re clothed in the righ-

teousness of Christ. Soteric justification is twofold in signification, constitutive and demonstrative (so Paul and James). In speaking of justification by works James is not contemplating a different justification from that taught by Paul. (The Protestant reformer Martin Bucer, for example, mistakenly spoke of a "double" justification.) Nor is James introducing good works as the meritorious grounds or instrument in the justification of the ungodly. Rather, James brings into view the demonstrative aspect of God's justifying

The principle of inheritance in the Covenant of Works is that of works; the principle of inheritance in the Covenant of Grace is that of faith.

act in the salvation of the elect. Good works are demonstrative (*i.e.*, evidential) of God's saving grace in the lives of believers. As such, they are necessary in the Christian life. But they are not the meritorious grounds of salvation. These two aspects of justification, the constitutive and the demonstrative, must never be confused or confounded. They are distinct, though inseparable, in the divine act of justification. Believers are constituted righteous on the grounds of Christ's meritorious obedience imputed through saving faith, faith being the sole instrument receiving the righteousness of Christ. We are justifi-

fied by faith alone, on the exclusive grounds of Christ's active and passive obedience. Nevertheless, good works are evidential of true, saving faith. "Justification by works" (as taught by James) brings into view the role of good works as evidential of our righteous standing in Christ. Those united to Christ by faith are "the doers of the law."

Similarly, there is only one divine act – not two – with respect to the sanctification of sinners, those remade in the image of Jesus Christ. It was John Murray, longtime professor of systematics at Westminster Seminary, who carefully and convincingly explained the biblical doctrine of sanctification in its twofold aspects, definitive and progressive. Union with Christ at the moment of spiritual regeneration not only places the sinner in right-relationship with God (by means of justification on grounds of the imputed righteousness of Christ), but union with Christ also sets the sinner apart unto God as wholly sanctified (see Romans 6 and 8).

To be sure, the emphasis in Scripture falls upon the progressive aspect of God's sanctifying power at work in those regenerated and renewed in Christ. But this teaching must not obscure the aspect of the believer's definitive sanctification. Only in terms of this teaching can we understand and heed the biblical admonition to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). To be sure, we are not yet what we shall be. But the final glorification of the saints of God has *already* been secured through the redemptive work of Christ (Romans 8:28-30). We are pilgrims on the way to the Eternal City. What

the Spirit of God begins in the life of His children He will see to completion. Perseverance in the faith is the outworking of God's grace in the lives of the saints.

Renewed interest and appreciation for the biblical, Reformed doctrine of eschatology in the twentieth century has served to advance Scripture's teaching on the topic of "realized" eschatology, or more specifically, recognition of the biblical distinction between the "already" and the "not yet" of eschatological life in the Spirit. The Day of Pentecost marks the birth of the New Testament church (the church was already present since the days of the establishment of the Covenant of Grace after Adam's fall into sin); it also marks the eschatological age of the Spirit (or more accurately, the *semi*-eschatological age of the Spirit appearing between the two advents of Christ). Christians live in a period of tension between Christ's accomplishment of redemption and the Consummation (final glorification of the saints) at the close of history, and between what has already been realized in their own life-experience and what is yet to be realized in the eternal kingdom of God. It is the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of redemption fully achieved by Christ on the cross; it is the mystery of the believer's union with Christ in his death and resurrection and his existential

union with Christ by means of the regenerating work of the Spirit of God in anticipation of the Consummation (*i.e.*, Glorification). Final judgment includes not only the just condemnation of the ungodly, but also the *vindication* of the saints of God, those who have glorified Him in true righteousness and holiness. Good works, evidential of justifying faith, will "prove" the efficacy and power of God's saving grace in the lives of the faithful. Final judgment will be according to works, but not on the ground of works. The decisive verdict of guiltlessness has already been declared, settled in heaven for time and eternity, for those trusting in Christ.

There are some modern-day revisionists who maintain that a proper understanding of the biblical doctrine of justification – set in the context of semi-realized eschatology – yields a new, revised (or improved) understanding of what it means to be justified by faith alone. They speak of justification as something "already" declared, and "not yet" declared in consummate finality – a contradiction of grave consequence. Justification, we are told, is maintained only in the exercise of persevering faith and good works (the "obedience of faith"). Since these revisionists have jettisoned the traditional Protestant-Reformed contrast between "Law" and "Gospel" – and along with that the allegedly speculative

notion of "meritorious" reward with respect to human, creaturely works – they are comfortable (re)asserting the necessity of good works in justification (somewhat after the pattern of Roman Catholic teaching). Thinking they have disposed themselves of the charge of reintroducing "works" in the article of justification, *viz.*, works as meritorious ground of life (in the order of creation) or of salvation (in the order of recreation), they are quite confident affirming the necessity of faith and works in justification. This modern-day heresy, judged in the light of Scripture and Reformation orthodoxy, undermines the Gospel of grace, the only gospel that saves sinners from God's just recompense for disobedience and coming wrath. In the midst of the present, raging controversy it is our fervent prayer that the Lord will enable the evangelical church to reclaim the teaching of our Protestant-Reformed forebears, to the extent it accurately conveys the teaching of Scripture.

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Final judgment includes not only the just condemnation of the ungodly, but also the vindication of the saints of God, those who have glorified Him in true righteousness and holiness.



We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 13: Of the Providence of God

Learning about God's providence over my entire life, from before the foundation of the earth, through birth, to second birth, and throughout my life turned my world upside down. When I first became a Calvinist (believing the "Five Points") my world no longer fit together nice and neat. My future career choice went from accountant to counselor to teacher to pastor. My zeal for Christ cost me many friends. My new theology strained family relationships. And the only thing that gave me confidence and consolation was knowing that God was in control – not just over my salvation, but over every minute detail of my life. All of us know that providence is no mere doctrine, it is our life. It is not just known intellectually, but experientially.

Here in Article 13 of the Belgic Confession we are taught what providence is intellectually and experientially. Here we confess to believe that the God who is our Creator (Art. 12) is also our Father who cares for everything. This providence extends to every atom, corner, and creature in the universe. And because He cares for us especially, we receive great practical benefit from knowing and experiencing this.

The Nature of Providence

Article 13 opens with a brief description of what providence is, saying:

We believe that the same good God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will... And therefore we reject that damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing but leaves all things to chance.

To begin with, providence is not fortune or chance. God did not give creation over to wind down according to natural laws outside of His will and concern. Instead, providence is God's rule and governance of all things in accordance with His will. We see an example of this taught in Hebrews 1:3, which says that the Father made all things through the Son, and by that same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, "upholds the universe by the word of His power." The words that God spoke in the beginning to create, are the same words that continue to care for creation. Thus God is described in Scripture as our Maker (Psalm 95:6), our Potter (Isaiah. 64:8), and our Knitter (Psalm 139:13).

This is totally contrary to the "damnable error of the Epicureans" mentioned at the end of Article 13. Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher who founded a school of philosophy in Athens that taught that the purpose of life was

pleasure – sensual pleasure. And when it came to "god," he taught that "god," what he called "the All," was not concerned with the affairs of men because "he" too was a supreme Epicurean, living in eternal pleasure. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

The Extent of Providence

Thus, in contrast to Epicureanism, the our Confession summarizes the Scriptures in teaching that

... nothing happens in this world without His appointment; nevertheless, God neither is the Author of nor can be charged with the sins which are committed. For His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly.

Beloved, this teaching is so important, so revolutionary, so world-changing to so many people, that the Reformed faith is flourishing in a pleasure-filled place like Southern California. Don't take this for granted. Treasure it. For most Christians do not hear about this sovereign God in their churches.

We believe that God is absolutely sovereign, as the Psalmist says, "Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases" (Psalm 115:3). And in His sovereignty He has been pleased to ordain everything that comes to pass: "In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined *according to the purpose of Him who works*

all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11; emphasis mine).

Yet, although He is in control of everything and He ordains everything, we confess that God “neither is the Author of nor can be charged with the sins which are committed.” So while Scripture clearly teaches that God “works all things according to the counsel of His will,” it also clearly teaches that God is not the author of sin or can He be found guilty for sin (e.g., James. 1:13; 1 John 2:16; Acts 4:27-28).

We see this demonstrated most clearly in the death of Christ. In Acts 2:23 we read

this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

Notice what we learn here. First, Jesus Christ was predestined to die (“the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”). Second, those who killed Jesus Christ are responsible (“you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”). God predestined the death of Christ, yet man is charged with sin. How can this be? Because sovereignty and providence mean that God ordains not only the end (Christ is killed) but also the means (man naturally is sinful, Jesus incited them to hate Him, there was an ungodly government in Israel in those days, etc.). Thus the Confession says that God’s ordination of all things is done “in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly.” This is also echoed by Theodore Beza

(1519-1605), who said

Nothing happens by chance, or without a very righteous decree of God (Ephesians 1:11; Matthew 10:29; Proverbs 16:4). Nevertheless, God is not the Author of, or culpable for, any evil which takes place. For His power and goodness are so incomprehensible, that even when, in order to do something, He makes use of the devil or wicked men, whom He

Reverence and humility are two virtues that we need to cultivate in our flippant, feel-good society – especially amongst professing Christians.

then justly punishes, yet He does not fail to decree and to do well and righteously His holy work (Acts 2:23; 4:27; Romans 9:19-20).

Our Attitude to Providence

As with all doctrines in Scripture, we are to respond in a fitting way. When it comes to God’s providence over everything, heaven and hell, sin and salvation, “herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 27), we are to respond in this way:

And as to what He does surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous judgments of God, which are hid from us, contenting ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, to learn only those things which He has revealed to us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.

Reverence and humility. These are two virtues that we need to cultivate in our flippant, feel-good society – especially amongst professing Christians. We are reminded that “the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Our Confession follows the classic Protestant distinction, both Lutheran and Reformed, between God hidden and God revealed. There are things that we will never know such as how exactly did God ordain Adam’s fall into sin and why exactly tragedy occurs in our lives. But we do know that what God has done or what He permits is for His glory and our good. We need not inquire into the hidden mind of God, but only to adore His revealed truth to us and our children.

Experiencing Providence

So what comfort does knowing God’s providence give us?

This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby



that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father; who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that He so restrains the devil and all our enemies that without His will and permission they cannot hurt us.

Providence is experienced as we are comforted to know that since nothing comes upon us by chance our heavenly Father is always watching “over us with a paternal care” so that not even a hair can fall from our heads without His will, without His knowledge, without His care.

Providence also is experienced as knowing that God is in control gives us something, or someone, in whom to “entirely trust.” He is our Father and we can rely and lean upon Him even more so than our earthly fathers, whether they are good or bad fathers.

The author of our Confession, Guido de Brès, experienced providence in these two ways as well. He was no mere speculative theologian, giving us teaching which he himself had not experienced, but he was intimately acquainted with the Lord’s providence. In a letter dated April 12, 1567, he wrote to his wife from prison, looking at imminent death

at the hands of enemies of the Gospel:

My very dear Catherine Ramon, my precious and most loved wife and sister in our Lord Jesus Christ ... You know well enough that when you married me, you married a mortal man whose life was not sure for a single minute. Yet it has pleased our good God to give us about seven years together, and five children. If the Lord had wanted us to live together longer, He has the means to make it happen. But it is not His pleasure; so, His will be done and that be sufficient to you. Remember too, that it was not by chance that I fell into the hands of my enemies, but through the providence of my God...My God, You have let me be born at a time and hour determined by You, and through all the time of my life You have preserved and protected me in the face of unimaginable dangers, and You have fully delivered. And now, if that the hour has come in which I must leave this life in order to go to You, Your will be done...Especially forget not

the honor which God has shown to you by having given you a man who was not only a minister of the Son of God, but also a man so esteemed and privileged by God that He honored him with the crown of martyrdom. I am joyful and my heart rejoices. I lack nothing in all my troubles. I am filled with the over-flowing riches of my God...I had never thought that God would be so merciful to a poor creature as I am ... Adieu, Catherine, my dear good friend ... Amen.

Rev. Daniel R. Hyde is the Pastor of the Oceanside United Reformed Church in Oceanside, California.

The author suggests the following resources for further study on providence: Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1994); Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprinted 1994); and Jerome Zanchius, *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination*, trans. Augustus M. Toplady (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1977).

Questions for Further Study

1. Can you think of any examples of Epicureans in our day?
2. What is the opposite of providence? (cf. HC 27)
3. How much is controlled by God’s providence? (Ephesians 1:11)
4. Was Adam’s fall predestined?
5. If so, was he responsible for his fall into sin? How about Esau? Pharaoh? Judas?

Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

*The Church in the Midst of the World:
In the Face of Persecution
Revelation 2:8-11*

From the first coming of Christ until the day of His return, the kingdom of Satan grows in strength and number. The hostility, opposition, persecution, and hatred of Satan against the Christ and His church grows increasingly horrific in nature. Satan knows that he cannot defeat Christ, and so all of his efforts are directed towards the church. He is, even now, persecuting the church. He is, even now, opposing the work of the church. He is, even now, amassing his armies against the church. These things will continue until Christ comes again. Persecution will increase so severely that Christ Himself has said, "Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:22).

This is the picture that is given to us throughout the book of Revelation. It is also the picture that is given to us in Revelation 2:8-11. We have maintained that the book of Revelation is divided into seven parallel sections - each spanning the time from Christ's first coming to His second coming. Although these seven sections are parallel, they are progressive - there is movement, there is progress, there is an intensifying of the action - as the warfare between Christ and Satan - between the kingdom of Christ and

the kingdom of Satan - becomes all the more hostile. The first section, Chapters 1-3, present us with a composite picture of the Church in the World from the first coming of Christ to the second coming of Christ. In Revelation 2:8-11, we find that the church in the world is a persecuted church.

Background and History

We give our attention, then, to the church in Smyrna. William Hendriksen has described the city as follows: "This city, located on an arm of the Aegean Sea, was a rival of Ephesus. It claimed to be the 'First City of Asia in beauty and size.' A gloriously picturesque city, it sloped up from the sea, and its splendid public buildings on the rounded top of the hill Pagos formed what was known as the 'crown of Smyrna.' The westerly breeze...comes from the sea and blows through every part of the city rendering it fresh and cool even during the summer. From the very beginning of Rome's rise to power, even before its days of greatness, Smyrna was its loyal ally and was recognized as such by Rome. The faithfulness and loyalty of the Smyrnians became proverbial."

The Commendation

While the city of Smyrna was faithful to Rome, the Christian Church in Smyrna was faithful to Christ.

Consider the commendation Christ gives in verse 9, "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." The church in Smyrna is set before us as one of only two churches in Revelation that does not receive a rebuke from the Lord. The other church is Philadelphia. Smyrna, then, is one of the healthiest churches addressed. There is no rebuke; there is only commendation! The church of Smyrna was a faithful church.

A Persecuted Church

That faithfulness, however, comes at a price. Though the church was rich in the Lord, she was poor in the world. She was in poverty, in large measure due to the rise of the imperial cult. The Roman Emperor was considered a god, and it was the duty and the responsibility of all the inhabitants of the Roman Empire to bow down and worship the emperor as the god of gods, king of kings, and lord of lords. They were even required to offer sacrifices to the Emperor.

G..K. Beale has described the situation in rather vivid terms: "The imperial cult permeated virtually every aspect of city and often even village life in Asia Minor, so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult. Citizens of both upper and lower classes were required by local law to sacrifice to the emperor City officials were so dedicated to the cult that they even distributed money to citizens from public funds to pay for



The church in Smyrna is set before us as one of only two churches in Revelation that does not receive a rebuke from the Lord.

sacrifices to the emperor. It was almost impossible to have a share in a city's public life without also having a part in some aspect of the imperial cult. Pressure on Christians to conform to such participation would have increased during Domitian's reign. Those refusing to participate were seen as politically disloyal and unpatriotic."

Persecution came not only from the Gentiles, but also from the Jews. Christ says to the Christians, "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." The Jews were quick to report the followers of Christ to the Roman authorities. Thus the faithful church in Smyrna lived in the face of persecution.

A Faithful Church

Do you want to know what the faithful church looks like? Read the letter to the church in Smyrna! The church in the world that is faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ endures tribulation, poverty, suffering, imprisonment, testing, and death. That is the picture of the faithful church in the world! She is a persecuted church.

It is, of course, no coincidence that the faithful church in the world is a persecuted church. Satan is wise enough to "let sleeping dogs lie." Lukewarm churches are not persecuted. Indifferent churches are not

persecuted. Churches who have compromised with the world are not persecuted. Faithful churches are persecuted - churches that refuse to be lukewarm - churches that refuse to be indifferent - churches that refuse to compromise with the world - these are the churches that are persecuted.

To the faithful church Christ comes and says: "I am aware of all these things!" "I know what you are enduring!" "I know what you are up against!" "I know what you are facing!" "I know that you are persecuted!" Christ is well aware of the persecution His church faces.

Christ's Response to the Persecution

Given His knowledge of that persecution (recall His words to Saul on the road to Damascus: "Why do you persecute Me?!"), the words which He speaks next may well catch us off-guard. Verse 10, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested..." We might have expected Him to say, "I know that you are persecuted now! I know what you are enduring! I know what you are up against! I know what you are facing! Don't worry! I will remove it - I will take the persecution away!" But He says no such thing!

In fact He says the opposite: the persecution will become greater!

As the book of Revelation continues to unfold, we see how great that persecution becomes! You might read Revelation 6:9-11; 10:8-11; 11:7-10; 12:17; 13:5-7, 15-17; 17:6; and 20:7-9a.

Persecution awaits us! Yes, it awaits *us*! Recall that these things are descriptive of the church in the world from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His return. That means these things are descriptive of us. Satan brings his hostilities against us; his hatred is directed toward us. He takes his stand against us. We are not mere spectators sitting in the stands watching the events unfold. We are brought into the arena and we ourselves participate in the action described for us here! We too face persecution, and that in increasing measure!

But Christ speaks to us, even as He spoke to the church in Smyrna, "Fear not! I am in control! I am the King! I am the Lord! I am the One who bound the strongman! I am the One who crushed the head of the serpent! I am the One who has slain the dragon! Satan is under My control!"

Why then does Christ allow His church to be persecuted? He tells us: "that you may be tested..." Even Satan serves the purposes of Christ. We are refined through such persecution. The church is purified through such persecution. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Persecution forces us to consider the cost. Those who are false Christians, and those who are false churches, quickly fall away in the face of persecution. But the true Church of Jesus Christ grows stronger!

Those who are false Christians, and those who are false churches, quickly fall away in the face of persecution.

And there is an end in sight. Such persecution, Christ says, shall last for ten days. To be sure, persecution shall reach its fullness, but the time is ordained by God. Indeed, it shall be cut short that, by the grace of God, the elect may endure.

A Word to the Faithful

In light of these things Christ says, "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." He alone has the right and the ability to do so, for He is the One who is the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life... (2:8). It is His own life that He gives to those who die for the faith. That is why we have the promise of verse 11, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt at all by the second death."

In the passages referenced above, we read of the great persecution that is already now being brought against the church and that shall continue to grow against the church until the coming of Christ. As great as that persecution is, how much greater is the judgment that comes upon Satan and his kingdom! "The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever....The sea gave up

the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (20:10, 13-15).

The second death - eternal torment under the wrath of a holy God - is far worse than any persecution we could ever endure on the face of the earth! And that is the end of those who repent not of their sins. That is the end of those who persecute the church. That is the end of those who belong to the kingdom of Satan.

But it is not the end of those who overcome in Christ. We shall not be hurt by the second death! And why not?! Consider Revelation 1:18, "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and Death." The second death cannot hurt us who are in Christ - it cannot touch us who are in Christ - because Christ has undergone that judgment for us!! How great is our salvation!

These are serious times in which we live. Persecution is great; it will only increase. The persecutions we face now are harbingers of the great persecution that is coming. In the face of such things,

we come back to the One who stands in the midst of the lampstands. He is our guard. He is our refuge. He is our strength. He is the First. He is the Last. He holds the keys of Hades. He holds the keys of death. He was dead. But now He lives forevermore! May God grant us ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches!

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Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (11)

“Justification and the ‘Imputation’ of Christ’s Righteousness” (Part One)

Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart. (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 60)

Though it is not always adequately appreciated, the principal difference between the classic Protestant and Roman Catholic views of justification relates to their respective understanding of the *ground* of the believer’s justification. The longstanding conflict between reformational and Roman Catholic teaching was never primarily about the *nature* of the justifying verdict.¹ While it is generally acknowledged today that justification is a forensic act, which involves God’s pronouncing a verdict, the historic disagreement of the sixteenth century emerges at the point of the basis or ground for this

verdict. Does God justify sinners partly on the basis of His grace in Christ and partly on the basis of their own works performed in cooperation with His grace? Or does God justify sinners wholly on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, which is freely granted and imputed to believers?

The nub of the issue can be stated in terms of the question: does the believer’s justification depend wholly and entirely upon an imputed righteousness? Or does it partly depend upon an infused righteousness, namely, the believer’s own works of obedience that stem from the prior working of God’s grace by his Spirit?

The Only Ground

No matter how one evaluates the older disputes between Protestant and Roman Catholic on the doctrine of justification, it is readily apparent that the issue of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer was *the critical bone of contention*. Whether one speaks of faith as the *exclusive instrument* of justification (*sola fide*) or of Christ’s mediatorial work as the *exclusive basis* for justification (*solo Christo*), the essential point remains the same: God’s righteousness in Christ is the gracious and only ground upon which the sinner can stand justified before God.

The righteousness by which sinners are justified is not their own but an

alien or external righteousness. Only on account of Christ’s obedience to the requirements of the law and His substitutionary endurance of its liability (His so-called “active” and “passive” obedience) can the sinner find favor with God. Justification through faith on account of the work of Christ requires a gracious transaction, a granting and imputing of the righteousness of Christ to believers so that it becomes theirs as much as His. Only by way of a participation or union with Christ through faith, so that the saving work of Christ becomes beneficial to the believer, can anyone find acceptance or favor with God. In the traditional Protestant understanding, this participation is precisely what is effected by way of imputation.

Considering the principal importance of the doctrine of imputation to the historic dispute regarding the subject of the sinner’s justification, it is noteworthy that among authors of the new perspective on Paul, the doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers is generally neglected or openly repudiated.²

In a characteristic passage, N. T. Wright, for example, dismisses the idea of imputation as incompatible with the way the language of justification functions within Judaism:

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a sub-

stance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.³

According to Wright and others, since Paul's understanding of justification was informed by the typical understanding of the way the law court functions in Judaism, Paul does not employ the idea of imputation as an essential part of what occurs when God justifies the believer. Though Wright affirms that justification is forensic—it relates to a person's status in the judgment of the court—he rejects the idea that it involves an act whereby righteousness is granted and imputed to the justified person.

Due to the pivotal importance of the idea of imputation to the historic reformation view of justification, the dismissal of imputation by the new perspective requires our attention.⁴ Just as we considered previously the new perspective's claims regarding the language of the "righteousness of God" and of "justification," we need also to consider whether its dismissal of the idea of imputation is biblically warranted. Does the doctrine of imputation enjoy the kind of Scriptural warrant that the historic symbols of the Reformation claim for it?⁵

In our treatment of this subject, we will begin with a relatively brief examination of several key passages that teach the doctrine of imputation. After treating these passages, we will conclude by noting several theological corollaries, which are integrally related to the biblical understanding of imputation.

An Examination of Several Key Passages

A number of key passages have

played a critical role in the classic Protestant understanding of justification on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Though any one of these passages deserves far more extensive treatment than we are able to give them in this brief article, we will simply identify them and provide a short account of their bearing upon the point at issue.

Romans 4:2-6 (Genesis 15:6)

The first passage that is of special importance for the doctrine of imputation is Romans 4:2-6.

Does the doctrine of imputation enjoy the kind of Scriptural warrant that the historic symbols of the Reformation claim for it?

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for 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 trusts 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.

In this passage, the apostle Paul directly links justification with imputation. In order to illustrate that Abraham's (and, therefore, the believer's) justification was not "by works," the apostle appeals to Genesis 15:6 where Abraham's faith is said to be "counted (*logizetai*) to him for righteousness."⁶ Because God's justification of Abraham involved his act of "crediting" or "accounting" Abraham's faith for righteousness, he justified Abraham "apart from works."

Though this passage places the idea of imputation in the center of Paul's understanding of justification, it presents an immediate problem. When Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, "it [that is, faith] was counted to him for righteousness," he seems to treat faith as though it were Abraham's righteousness before God. On this reading of the text, Paul could be teaching that Abraham's righteousness *consisted of his faith*. If that were the sense of the text, then the conclusion seems unavoidable that Paul understood justification to be based, not upon Abraham's works (of obedience) but upon his faith, which stands in lieu of his works. This reading would mean that the righteousness that was the ground or basis for Abraham's justification was not something external to him, but his own act of believing God. Even though imputation is central to Paul's understanding of justification, the righteousness imputed so far as this text is concerned is not the righteousness of Christ, as in the historic Protestant view. Rather, it is a kind of subjective righteousness, a righteousness that is equivalent to Abraham's act of believing God. In this understanding, we might say that Abraham was justified not only



“by” but “on account of” his faith.⁷

There are several reasons, however, that decisively count against this understanding of Paul’s language and use of Genesis 15:6.⁸

First, it should be noted that the expression Paul uses, “counted *for* righteousness,” contains a preposition (*eis*) that is best rendered “with a view to” or “in order to.” If we were to render Paul’s language in literal, albeit clumsy English, we would read the expression to say that Abraham’s faith “was counted *with a view to* righteousness.” This is different than saying that Abraham’s faith “was counted *in the stead of* righteousness,” an expression that would suggest that his faith was his righteousness before God. In Romans 10:10, Paul uses the same preposition in a way that clarifies its meaning, when he says that “with the heart one believes *unto* (*eis*) righteousness.” In this passage faith is that which moves toward and lays hold of Christ himself as our righteousness. As J. I. Packer puts it, commenting on Romans 4:2,

When Paul paraphrases this verse [Genesis 15:6] as teaching that Abraham’s faith was reckoned for righteousness (Romans 4:5, 9, 22), all he intends us to understand is that faith—decisive, whole-hearted reliance on God’s gracious promise (vss. 18ff.)—was *the occa-*

sion and means of righteousness being imputed to him. There is no suggestion here that faith is the ground of justification.⁹ (emphasis mine)

Second, in the context of Paul’s appeal to Genesis 15:6, he utilizes the connection between wages and debts to illustrate how the imputation that is central to justification occurs, not in the manner of wages earned but as a free gift. “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 trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (vv. 4-5).

The point of this illustration is to draw a sharp contrast between wages that are accounted to a wage-earner, and the gracious gift that is accounted to a non-wage-earner (one who does not work). When God accounts or reckons Abraham’s faith for righteousness, it is equivalent to his granting Abraham a free, unearned gift. This emphasis and understanding of God’s act of imputation in justification does not fit with the idea that the righteousness imputed to Abraham consists of his (subjective) faith. Though faith may be the occasion and instrument for the reception of this righteousness, it can hardly be the righteousness that is the ground of Abraham’s justification. If that were the case, the point Paul is making—that the im-

putation of Abraham’s faith for righteousness is like the free gift that is accounted to someone who has not worked for it—would be undermined.¹⁰

And third, there are several indications from the broader context of Paul’s argument in Romans 3-4 that the righteousness of faith is an *external* righteousness that is granted and imputed to believers, not a subjective righteousness. In Romans 4:16, for example, the apostle sets forth the great reason justification is “by faith” and not “according to works”: “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his [Abraham’s] offspring—not only the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham.”

Faith is instrumental to receiving the gift of justification precisely because it looks outside of itself to God’s gracious promise in Christ. The apostle also insists that, because justification is an act toward the *ungodly*, it must occur *apart from works* (Romans 4:5). It requires a positive imputation of righteousness to the believer. Immediately after his appeal to the language of Genesis 15:6, therefore, he cites David as an Old Testament example of the way God “counts righteousness apart from works.”

Though David was a sinner, the Lord did not count his sins against him (v. 8, quoting Psalm 32), but accounted him righteous. The language Paul uses to speak of David’s justification, “counted him righteous,” is equivalent to his earlier language, “to justify the ungodly.” It is also equivalent to the language of Romans 3:28, “For we hold

When God accounts or reckons Abraham’s faith for righteousness, it is equivalent to his granting Abraham a free, unearned gift.

that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” The point of all these expressions is to exclude any thought of an inherent righteousness as the basis for God’s free justification. Justification involves a free and positive granting or imputing of righteousness to the believer, which is received by but does not and cannot consist in faith.

Admittedly, in these passages Paul does not explicitly identify the righteousness that God imputes to the believer as the righteousness of Christ. However, as we shall see in other passages yet to be considered, this is the obvious implication of Paul’s teaching. How could it be otherwise, when the faith by which sinners receive God’s gift of righteousness trusts “in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:24-25)? The object of faith is the crucified and risen Christ, who is the believer’s righteousness from God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30).

Endnotes

¹ Though the traditional Roman Catholic view confuses justification and sanctification, the Council of Trent’s definition of justification includes an emphasis upon the sinner’s “reputation” and acceptance with God: “... we are not only reputed, but are truly called, and are just, receive justice within us, each one according to his own measure” (Sixth Session, chapter 7; quoted from *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. by Philip Schaff, vol. 1: *The Greek and Latin Creeds* [Grand Rapids: Baker reprint, 1985 (1931)], p. 95. Cf. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 13: “Justification is the forgiveness of sins ..., liberation from the dominating power of sin and

death (Rom. 5:12-21) and from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10-14).”

² See e.g. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1977; and James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Neither Sanders nor Dunn make any significant use of the idea of imputation in their explanation of Paul’s understanding of justification. When the “righteousness of God” is viewed principally as God’s covenant faithfulness in action, as is the case for writers of the new perspective, it can hardly be viewed as a gift that is freely granted or imputed to believers. The idea of imputation is a corollary of the idea of Christ’s work as *substitutionary*. Since Dunn insists that Christ’s work is “representative” but not “substitutionary” (that would leave us with a “legal fiction”), it is not surprising that he does not affirm the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 386.

³ *What Saint Paul Really Said. Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 98. Not only does this comment present something of a caricature of the Protestant view, but it also misstates it. The Protestant view is not that the Judge (God) transfers His righteousness to us, but that He provides His Son as a substitute and surety whose righteousness becomes ours through imputation. Wright’s statement suggests that he regards imputation to be a kind of “infusion” (or “transfusion”?) of grace. The Protestant view, however, is that imputation is a judicial act in which God credits or accounts the righteousness of Christ to the person who believes in Him.

⁴ It should be noted that the diminishment of the importance of imputation is widespread and extends beyond the orbit of the new perspective. For example, in the recent documents, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” and “The Gift of Salvation,” which purport to give a consensus statement of the doctrine of justification by

evangelical and Catholic authors, the doctrine of imputation receives shortshrift. In the first of these statements, the subject of imputation is omitted, and in the second, it is mentioned as an item about which no consensus was reached. For a summary and critical treatment of these two statements, see R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); and *idem*, *Getting the Gospel Straight: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). For a recent defense of the doctrine of imputation against its contemporary critics, see John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002).

⁵ The Reformed confessions uniformly affirm that the justification of believers is upon the ground of the righteousness of Christ, which is granted and imputed to them from God and received by the hand of faith. See e.g. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 59; Belgic Confession, Art. 22-23; Westminster Confession of Faith, 11.1; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. & A. 70-73, 77; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. & A. 33.

⁶ For a treatment of the Old Testament background to the use of “to count” or “to reckon” in Genesis 15:6, see O. Palmer Robertson, “Genesis 15:6: New Covenant Exposition of an Old Testament Text,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1980): 259-289; and James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), pp. 111-117.

⁷ This language and distinction was expressed by the older Protestant writers on justification in the following dictum: *fides iustificat non propter se, ut est in homine qualitas, sed propter Christum, quem apprehendit* (“faith justifies not because of itself, insofar as it is a quality in man, but on account of Christ, of whom faith lays hold”).



⁸ For a more extensive argument against the view that the believer's righteousness "consists of" his faith, see John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, vol. 5 of *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965 [1850-1853]); and John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 353-359. Though Murray holds the view that Genesis 15:6 takes Abraham's faith for his righteousness (incorrectly, in my judgment, as I shall shortly argue), he argues that this cannot mean that Paul regarded faith as the ground or basis for the believer's justification.

⁹ "Justification," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 596. Cf. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 262: "The language ['counting Abraham's faith for righteousness'] could suggest that his faith is considered as the 'equivalent' of righteousness—that God sees Abraham's faith as itself a 'righteous' act, well pleasing to him. But if we compare other verses in which the same grammatical construction as is used in Gen. 15:6 occurs, we arrive at a different conclusion. These parallels suggest that the 'reckoning' of Abraham's faith as righteousness means 'to account to him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him.'"

¹⁰ Cf. John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 57: "Would not the wording of verse 4 rather tell us that in Paul's mind 'faith being credited for righteousness' is shorthand for faith being the way an external righteousness is received as credited to us by God—namely, not by *working* but by *trusting* him who justifies the ungodly."

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The Omnipotence of God

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:26, 27)

In Jeremiah 32, God says, "I am Jehovah, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for Me?" In this verse, the fact of God's almighty power is stated in the form of a challenge. We are asked to see if there is anything we can find that God cannot do. Certainly there are things God cannot do. He cannot do anything that is inconsistent with His nature. For example: God cannot lie; He cannot deny Himself; He cannot go back on His promises. In the Old Testament, God makes various promises and in many of those promises God swears an oath by His own name that He will keep those promises. If God were to go back on those promises, He would no longer be God. He cannot and will not go back on His word.

It does not take very long before you realize that there are certain things that are just impossible for us to do as human beings. When we are in our teens we think that we are invincible. Nothing is going to get in our way as we attempt to conquer the world around us. By the time we hit forty or fifty, we begin to realize how limited we are. Work in the garden takes longer to accomplish, cleaning the garage used to be easier. Let's face it, as we get older we have to admit that it takes us twice as long to do the things we used to do in half the time.

When we approach God's throne,

however, we come into the presence of a God who is omnipotent. His power has no limit.

God's Power of Creation

The first thing that we confess in the Apostles' Creed is that God the Father Almighty is the Maker of heaven and earth. That means that the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ created out of nothing the heavens and the earth and everything that is in them. The prophet Jeremiah writes: "God made the earth by His power. He founded the world by His wisdom and stretched out the heavens by His understanding" (Jeremiah 10:12).

If we are willing to admit that our God has infinite power, that He is almighty and omnipotent, able to create out of nothing this vast universe and all that it contains, as the Bible teaches; then all this talk about evolution and the earth being billions of years old is really nothing more than a bunch of nonsense. They are nothing more than foolish thoughts by foolish people who really do not understand God nor His power.

I would be the very first to admit that God could have taken a billion years to create everything that exists if He had wanted to do it that way. He could have started with the dust of the earth and made little amoebas who became more developed life forms and then developed into even more advanced life forms

Q *What do you believe when you say: I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?*

A *That the eternal Father, who out of nothing made heaven and earth, like wise upholds and governs the same.*

until primates begat Man and God breathed life into him as some people teach. Certainly God could have done it that way if He had wanted to do it that way.

God could also have taken six seconds to make all things, if He had wanted to create in that way. For that matter, God could have created everything just five minutes ago and implanted the idea into our minds that I wrote this article and that you have read it thus far. And there are some philosophers that believe that to be true. How can you prove them wrong? God could have done it that way if He had wanted to do it that way. The power certainly is His.

But He didn't.

How do I know? Because in the Bible, the only witness to creation, God Himself, says: "In six days I created the heavens and the earth." Not a million years; not six seconds; but in six twenty-four hour days God created the heavens and the earth because that is how long He chose to create the heavens and the earth. Remember, God has the power and the strength to do all things the way He wants to do them. Remember also that it is impossible for God to lie.

God's Power in Providence

Not only did God create the heavens and the earth, but q/a 26 of the Heidelberg Catechism teaches us that He "still upholds them and rules them by His eternal counsel and providence." Not only is the power of creation a marvelous display of God's almighty power, but so is the power necessary to hold all of this creation together. The Book of Hebrews reminds us that God "sustains all things by His powerful word."

Everything is in God's hands. Lord's Day 10 of the Catechism reminds us that "The almighty and everywhere present God upholds the heaven, earth, and all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand." This Lord's Day is explained elsewhere in this issue by Rev. Hyde in his article on the Belgic Confession.

God's Power in Nature

In His providence, God is in control of all of nature. He provides the rain and the sunshine that causes the crops to grow. He provides the food that we eat every day. He

also provides the hurricanes and tornados.

As we look at this planet and see the beauty of nature we must recognize that this is only one tiny planet of the nine in our solar system. Only one planet of the millions that must exist with the millions of stars in the galaxies. And God holds them all in His wisdom and His power. As you look under the microscope at the tiniest of cells you also see His wisdom and power.

In addition, nothing can so much as move without His express will. In the providence of God, all things remain under His complete control. We cannot even lift this issue of *The Outlook* without it being God's will.

Everyday, God's power in creation and providence shout out as to the incredible power of God. So much so, that Paul writes in Romans 1 that those who want to deny God need just look at nature. All their theories about evolution and chance are ludicrous and they are left without excuse.

God's Power in History

The almighty power of God has been demonstrated for us over and over again in the Bible. Moses and the Israelites had this power revealed to them time and time again. God delivered them from the bonds of Egypt, He fed them daily in the wilderness, and brought them into the promised land. Moses exclaimed: "O sovereign Lord, you have begun to show your greatness and your strong hand. For what God is there in heaven and on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do?" (Deuteronomy 3:24).



We have witnessed God's power in a way far greater than the Israelites could ever have dreamed. The greatest evidence of the omnipotent power of God is displayed in the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead. Through His resurrection there is victory over death, hell, Satan, and sin. It is the power and the victory that brings to us the forgiveness of our sins.

God's Power in Faith

God has made His power available to all those who believe in His Son. This power will not only save you from destruction; it will not only turn all things to your good; it will not only free you from bondage to Satan, but it will keep you free! Peter writes in his first epistle: "Through faith we are shielded by God's power."

You may be saved today, but what about tomorrow? Is there a way that you can lose your salvation? That is not what the Bible teaches! We have a blessed Savior who not only saves us, but, by His omnipotent power He keeps us saved! What a great comfort that should be to us. We are kept safe not by our own power, but by the power of the Almighty God.

A year ago, we committed my father's body to the grave. We took his body and put it in a hole in the ground. That sounds morbid and horrible. I am certain that many who read this article have done the same with their loved ones. We rest assured, however, that those bodies will not stay in the ground. Paul writes, "By His power God raised the Lord from the dead and He will raise us also" (I Corinthians 6:14).

That is God's promise to all those who believe in Jesus Christ and God is faithful to His promises or He would not be God. That our mortal bodies could become immortal and that our sinful selves could be made holy requires an omnipotent power. We need the Almighty God to make us holy! The God who has the power to create our bodies from the dust of the earth has the power to recreate them into new and perfect bodies that will join Him in glory.

When God makes a promise, whether it is to uphold the earth in His providential care; or to forgive our sins through His Son; or to keep us safe, you can know that His promise will be fulfilled because He is the Almighty God.

Rev. Wybren Oord is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan and editor of *The Outlook*.

Sound Bites 1984

January 1984

"If ecclesiastical assemblies make decisions which are contrary to the Word of God or the Church Order and still consider such decisions settled and binding, they become dictatorships! This may never be allowed in the Church of Christ.

Settled and Binding
Henry Vander Kam

February 1984

"What the church needs today is a profound understanding of the doctrines contained in Scripture and a fearless proclamation of them."

* * * * *

"Preaching, in the Reformed tradition, is never a brief essay by a minister or on some religious topic. Preaching is the exposition and application of the Word of God. It is the chief means in the congregation for accomplishing the building up of the saints and the conversion of sinners. For that reason there can be no compromise with modern replacements and alternatives to the Word of God preached."

*What Is Reformed
Ministry Today?*
Anthony R. Dallison

April 1984

"Recently, a young man who is a graduate of a Reformed seminary on the East Coast conducted our morning worship service. As the vice-president of our consistory escorted the guest exhorter to the pulpit he said to him, "Our congregation is not accustomed to being

greeted with a good morning.” The recent graduate replied, “Of course not, the greeting must come from God, not from man.”

Whose Greeting?
Arthur Besteman

June 1984

“When ministers are trained in sound doctrine the effect of their ministry will be felt in the land. Eternal vigilance is the price of sound orthodoxy and of wholesome Scripture proclamations.”

*How to Choose
a Seminary Professor*
Marten H. Woudstra

July/August 1984

“In Reformed theology we correctly make much of the balanced triad: sin, salvation, and service, and we believe there should be a balance in the presentation of these great truths of salvation. However, today there seems to be an over-stress on service, with only whispers about sin.”

As to Preaching
John H. Sietsema

“What makes these days terrible is the fact that men want to belong to the church but will not listen obediently to the Word of God.”

“One of the saddest aspects of church life today is the decline in the study of God’s Word and with it a decline in the reading of upbuilding Christian books and papers.”

NOT Enough Malcontents
Cecil W. Tuininga

September 1984

“Apostasy within a denomination does not happen overnight but rather, slowly, a little thing here, another decision there, more gradual tolerance of sin, until

there are very few persons left who remain faithful to Scripture.”

Fight or Switch
Roger Key

October 1984

“Children at the Lord’s Supper. If it isn’t an issue at present, it will become one...”

Children at the Lord’s Supper
Jelle Tuininga

“The modern world clamors for, and, sorry to say, has been offered a Jesus that seems to conform to their demands.”

“Jesus IS Lord. He has been made Lord by God the Father. We were not consulted as to the propriety of such an exaltation nor can we alter it, protest as we might. It is humanity’s task to submit to the King, not redefine Him according to prevailing vagaries or preferences, as if the Holy One of Israel were one of Rorschach’s inkblots!”

Jesus and Rorschach
Steve M. Schlissel

“Isn’t it quite significant that this ‘Women in Office’ issue should occur at a time when America is suffering severely from the effects of broken homes?”

Letter to the Editor
Nellie Barehead

November 1984

“The successful effort to override the Biblical prohibitions of women in church office may now be followed by a comparable effort to break down the churches’ traditional and Biblical opposition to homosexuality.”

The Next Crusade?
Peter De Jong

December 1984

“The Bible never speaks of ‘open minds’ or ‘closed minds’. When the gospel goes forth it does not go forth as a plea to keep an ‘open, ‘ or uncommitted mind about certain truths or teachings. Rather, it calls us to have a changed and different mind.”

“The mind of Christ is neither an open or closed mind, but an obedient mind.”

An Open Mind About the Bible
Richard J. Blauw.

“For many today, to question everything in the Word of God is equated with reformation, and so they question instead of preach and defend the Scriptures. The signs of the ‘falling away’ and the apostate church appear in all denominations, including the CRC. Man of God, rise up.”

Women in Office
Peter J. Sluys



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Looking Out and About

• Classis East of the Protestant Reformed Churches have accepted into their fellowship the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church of Wingham, Ontario. The PRC had been providing pulpit supply for the congregation for quite some time.

• J. Cameron Fraser, who had served the Christian Reformed Church in Burdett Alberta since 1995, has accepted the call to the First Christian Reformed Church in Lethbridge, Alberta.

• Over 100 women attended the Eighth Annual Women's Conference at the Cornerstone United Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan. The main speaker, Sharon Betters, spoke on the topic "Will You sing at Midnight".

Churches are invited to email news about events their church to wyb.kath@juno.com

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