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Reformation
REVIVAL
JOURNAL

THE OBEDIENCE
OF FAITH

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

VOLUME 12 · NUMBER 4 · FALL 2003

*A Response to
Don Garlington on Imputation*



John Piper

It may be most helpful to begin by going straight to Romans 4:3-6 to show why I believe in the imputation of divine righteousness to the ungodly through faith alone apart from any works. In verse 3 Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'" (ESV). Garlington argues from the Old Testament use of "was counted to him" (*elogisthe auto eis dikaiosune*) that this does not mean God credited anything to Abraham which he didn't have, but that he regarded him as what he was. "The point of Genesis 15:6, as taken up by Romans 4, is that Abraham was regarded as a righteous, that is, covenant keeping, person when he continued to place his trust in God's promise of a seed." In other words, Abraham's faith is his real personal righteousness (by grace), not his link to God's righteousness which is credited to Abraham's account in spite of his ungodliness.

The meaning of imputation does not hang on whether *elogisthe auto eis dikaiosune* means "regard as" instead of "credit to." The reason is that you can regard something as what it is in itself or what it is not. These phrases are used this way in the Old Testament and the New Testament. If you regard someone as something he is not, and if you are God, you have, in effect done what is historically meant by "imputation." You have, in fact, "credited" something to someone that

they didn't have by "regarding" him that way.

Paul's own explanation of Genesis 15:6 which follows in Romans 4:4-6 points away from Garlington's interpretation toward historic "imputation." He says, "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due." Paul immediately takes up the word "counted" from verse 3 and interprets it in a business context where wages are credited to someone's account. It can happen in two ways: if you work, your wages are credited to your account according to debt; if you don't work, but still get "wages" credited to your account, it is according to grace. This does not fit with Garlington's insistence that the words, "it was counted to him as righteousness" must mean "Abraham was regarded as [what he was, namely] righteous, or covenant-keeping." Rather it implies that Abraham got something credited to him which he did not have.

This is made explicit in verse 5 which is Paul's description of how Abraham was justified by faith: "And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." Garlington says, "While 4:4 may be a reflection on a well-known principle of business practice, 4:5 returns to the idiom of *logizomai eis*: the believer's faith is considered to be his righteousness." This will not do. Verse 5 is emphatically *not* a turning from the business analogy. There is an unbroken parallel between the two verses: "To the one who works (verse 4) . . . but to the one who does not work . . . (verse 5). Verse 5 is part of the business analogy.

So there are two ways to have something counted or credited to your account: you can work, or you can not work but trust. Notice carefully: the "wage," which is credited, is something *distinct* from working or trusting. It is credited to the one who works "according to debt," and it is credited to the one who trusts "according to grace." What is this "it" which is credited to the worker as debt and to the believer as a gift?

The answer is clear in verse 6. It is "righteousness." Paul extends and clarifies verse 5 with a comparison in verse 6: "Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts [or credits] righteousness apart from works." Here

we have Paul's business analogy filled out with a "just as" clause. What is the "wage" that is credited to the one who works according to debt and to the one who trusts according to grace? And who is the one who does the crediting? Answer: God does the crediting. And what he credits is righteousness. That is what verse 6 says.

What then does Paul mean in verse 5 when he says concerning "the one who trusts" that "his *faith* is counted as righteousness"? I take my main clue from the closest evidence, namely, the "just as" clause that follows and explains these words: "Just as . . . God counts righteousness apart from works." The clause, "faith is counted for righteousness," is explained by Paul as "God counts righteousness without works." In the analogy which Paul has developed, this naturally means: God looks at faith and for the sake of this faith credits righteousness to the believer. "Faith is credited as righteousness" means God credits (imputes) righteousness to the one who has faith. The faith is not the "wage" that is credited. Faith is the abandonment of all claims to be righteous, and, instead, is trust in him who counts the ungodly to be righteous.

It might be helpful here to reproduce an analogy I gave in *Counted Righteous in Christ* that would explain how the words "faith is counted for righteousness" can carry the meaning, "faith receives the gift of imputed righteousness." Don't press the following analogy in all its details. It is not an allegory.

Suppose I say to Barnabas, my teenage son, "Clean up your room before you go to school. You must have a clean room, or you won't be able to go watch the game tonight." Suppose he plans poorly and leaves for school without cleaning the room. And suppose I discover the messy room and clean it. His afternoon fills up and he gets home just before it's time to leave for the game and realizes what he has done and feels terrible. He apologizes and humbly accepts the consequences—no game.

To which I say, "Barnabas, I am going to credit the clean room to your account because of your apology and submission. Before you left for school this morning I said, 'You must have a clean room, or you won't be able to go watch the game

tonight. Well, your room is clean. So you can go to the game."

That's one way to say it, which corresponds to the language of Romans 4:6. Or I could say, "I credit your apology for a clean room," which would correspond to the language of Romans 4:3 and 5. What I mean when I say, "I credit your apology for a clean room," is *not* that the apology is the clean room; nor that the clean room *consists of* the apology; nor that he really cleaned his room. *I* cleaned it. It was pure grace. All I mean is that, in my way of reckoning—in my grace—his apology connects him with the promise given for a clean room. The clean room is *his* clean room.

You can say it either way. Paul said it both ways: "Faith is counted for righteousness" (4:3, 5, 9) and "God credits (or imputes) righteousness to us [by faith]" (4:6, 11). The reality intended in both cases is: I cleaned the room; he now has a cleaned room; he did not clean the room; he apologized for failure; in pure grace I counted his apology as connecting him with a fulfilled command that I fulfilled for him; he received the imputed obedience as a gift.

Therefore I am not persuaded by Garlington's thesis that "exegesis will steer us away from imputation to union with Christ." I remain convinced that "union with Christ," far from being an alternative to imputation, is the way it comes about. As I said in *Counted Righteous in Christ*, "The saving work of Christ includes not only his bearing the penalty for our sins, but also becoming a perfect righteousness for us which is imputed to us through our union with him" (51). "Our union with him connects us with the divine righteousness. . . . The redemptive union between the believer and Christ . . . closes the gap between the imputed righteousness of God and the imputed righteousness of Christ" (84).

Why does Garlington insist that union with Christ is an alternative to imputation rather than the ground of it? Why does he say, "The free gift of righteousness comes our way by virtue of union with Christ, not imputation as classically defined"? One reason is that he means something very different by "alien righteousness" than is usually meant in the history of exegesis.

Garlington says, "The *intention* of the doctrine of imputation is not to be disputed: *our righteousness comes from Christ and is for that reason an "alien righteousness."* But this is misleading. The intention of the doctrine of imputation is to say that the righteousness we have by justification is "alien" precisely because it is imputed and not imparted. But Garlington does not agree with this historic Protestant view. He is using the language of "alien righteousness" in different way.

When he says, "The righteousness of the Christian believer comes from Christ and Christ alone" he does not mean by imputation but by impartation. Or, to use his word, "dissemination." He says, "Paul . . . does not contemplate the obedience of Christ as an end in itself, because it is *through* the one man that obedience has been disseminated to all." In other words, Christ's obedience, or righteousness, becomes ours when by faith we are conformed in practice to Christ. Garlington sees no difference between the righteousness that we have by justification and the righteousness that we have by sanctification: "No support can be found for distinguishing between the righteousness of the beginning and the righteousness of the end, between the 'righteousness of faith' and the 'righteousness of life.'"

It will continue to make the debate confusing if Garlington and others go on using the historic language of "alien righteousness" to describe what comes about in justification, when they mean: a divinely imparted obedience—a "righteousness of life."

Garlington is clear that for him justification is "the power of Christ taking over our life, so that justification is seen to be coextensive with new creation." In other words, justification includes sanctification. Or to use his language, their relationship is "the mutual interpenetration of the concepts, as illustrated by overlapping circles." In reference to the title of my book, his "plea would be that instead of 'counted righteous in Christ,' we are 'made righteous in Christ.'" That is what justification means for him. For, he argues, there is "copious exegetical warrant for construing justification in such a way as to include liberation from sin's mastery"—liberation not just in

the sense of being bought and declared free, but in the sense of actual transformation in overcoming sinful behavior.

Therefore, he says, "The time has come to stop letting the conflict with Rome dictate the agenda of exegesis and allow Pauline texts such as Romans 2:1-16 speak to us in their intended meaning and with all their power. If it is 'the doers of the law who will be justified' (2:13), then Paul means just that." Just what? There is more than one way to construe the fact that justified people are obedient people. Historic reformation teaching has always said they are. But I take Garlington to mean that the Roman Catholic way of viewing Romans 2:13 is correct, and we should accept it, not for dogmatic reasons, because it has been vindicated by the newer biblical-theological approach to justification.

But I cannot see it. In principle, biblical theology is the exegetical, contextually sensitive, historically nuanced watchdog against the careless way systematic theologians may use texts to bolster their systems. There is a catch. Biblical theologians have systems. They are just as complex. And they exert just as much control. And, like dogmatic systems, they may be helpful or harmful. The fact that a paradigm comes from one part of the Bible does not mean it produces correct interpretations in other parts of the Bible.

One of the reasons I wrote *Counted Righteous in Christ* was to try (that is all I can claim) to do careful contextual exegesis. As I watch what happens to the Pauline context when broad definitions of terms are brought from ostensible Old Testament paradigms, I am unimpressed with the illuminating power of the new perspective.

For example, with regard to the word "redemption" in Romans 3:24 ("justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"), Garlington says, "Redemption has to do with the motif of new exodus/return from exile." In this way he makes liberation from sinning (=progressive sanctification) a constituent part of justification. But I would turn to the parallel in Ephesians 1:7 for a Pauline definition of "redemption" in a very similar context: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses"

(also Colossians 1:14). Forgiveness is not yet liberation. Nor is justification yet sanctification. I am not persuaded that the "motif of exodus/return from exile" controls what Paul had in mind here.

Other examples would be Garlington's treatment of "the righteousness of God" as his "saving activity." Or his treatment of "justify" (*dikaioō*) to include "liberate." The former is too broad and neglects aspects of divine righteousness in both testaments. The latter is too broad and puts a construction on the word that goes against its basic meaning and is not demanded by any of the New Testament texts.

Finally, I rejoice when Garlington writes, "One most certainly agrees with Piper that the glory of Christ is the most precious reality in the universe." And I am happy to say with him, "It is precisely Paul's doctrine of union with Christ that underscores this, because the focus is on *Christ himself*, not most prominently a transaction performed by him." What is misleading about this sentence is that it implies that emphasizing a doctrine of imputation distracts from Christ himself. It might. We are duly warned. But something is more distracting than "a transaction performed by him," namely, a transaction performed by us—even if by the power of Christ. On exegetical and doxological grounds, I remain persuaded that the imputation of Christ's righteousness is not an alternative to union with Christ, but the result of it.

Author

Dr. John Piper has been the preaching pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota since 1980. John is a graduate of Wheaton College (B.A.) and Fuller Theological Seminary (M. Div.). John completed doctoral work in New Testament studies at the University of Munich, Munich, West Germany (1974). John is the author numerous books, including the best-seller *Desiring God*. John and Noël have four sons, a daughter, and two grandchildren.

Editor's Note

Our editorial objective in publishing two critiques of

John Piper's work on righteousness and imputation is to foster an honest debate and a helpful discussion of a most important subject for thoughtful evangelical leaders. To this end we presented critiques of John Piper's *Counted Righteous* to Dr. Piper and asked him to respond for this issue. I am profoundly grateful to Dr. Piper for this kind response. He is to be commended for his cordial acceptance of this invitation.

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