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## IMPUTATION IN PAULINE THEOLOGY: CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS OR A JUSTIFIED STATUS?

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A foundational assumption in much of evangelical theology is that the imputation of Christ's righteousness provides the basis on which God justifies or acquits the sinner. Thus, for example, in 1999 a confessional statement, 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration', was produced with a view to unifying evangelicals around common essentials. It contains three strongly worded affirmations of the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis for justification, e.g. 'We affirm that the doctrine of the imputation ... both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us...is essential to the biblical Gospel (2 Cor. 5:19-21).'<sup>1</sup>

This approach to conceptualizing the process of justification was first introduced by Martin Luther and then developed by Melancthon and John Calvin.<sup>2</sup> In his *Institutes*, Calvin writes that '...justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.'<sup>3</sup> The concept of imputed righteousness as

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,' *Christianity Today* (June 14, 1999), pp. 51-6. Available online at: <http://www.thiswebelieve.com/statement.htm#gospel>. Cf. also Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), pp. 968-72; Wayne Grudem, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 726-9.

<sup>2</sup> Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), vol. 1, pp. 182-87; vol. 2, pp. 1-39. For a popular treatment cf. Alister McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 47-72.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xi.2. Other formulations of the concept: 'From this it is also evident that we are justified before God solely by the intercession of Christ's righteousness. This is equivalent to saying that man is not righteous in himself but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation....' (III.xi.23); '...the Father embraces us in Christ when he clothes us with the innocence of Christ and accepts it as ours that by the benefit of it he may hold us holy, pure, and innocent. For Christ's righteousness, which as it alone is perfect alone can bear the sight of God, must appear in court on our behalf, and stand surety in judgment. Furnished with this righteousness, we obtain continual forgiveness of sins in faith. Covered with this purity, the sordidness and uncleanness of our imperfections are not ascribed to us but are hidden as if buried....' (III.xiv.12).

the basis for justification has been axiomatic in Reformed theology since the time of Luther and Calvin. In the tradition of Arminian and Wesleyan theology there has been a general acceptance of this construct but with some dissenters.<sup>4</sup> Arminius himself clearly stated that the imputation of Christ's righteousness was the basis for justification.<sup>5</sup> Philip Limborch was the first to implicitly reject the concept.<sup>6</sup> John Wesley was criticized for abandoning the concept of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. This at least suggests that he was expressing himself in ways that those in the Reformed tradition found problematic. In his sermon *Christ, Our Righteousness*, John Wesley defends himself against this criticism and states that he has always affirmed a theology of the imputation of Christ's righteousness.<sup>7</sup> However his definition is hardly a traditional one: 'But in what sense is this righteousness imputed to believers? In this: all believers are forgiven and accepted, not for the sake of anything in them, or of anything that ever was, that is, or ever can be done by them, but wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for them.' He is essentially saying that the imputation of Christ's righteousness means that we are justified on the basis of what Christ has done for us. In Reformed theology the imputation of Christ's righteousness meant much more than this so it is not surprising that Wesley was criticized on this point. Wesley also expressed concern that the idea that believers are clothed in Christ's righteousness was commonly used as a rationale for an antinomian ethical stance.<sup>8</sup> There was a division in later Wesleyan theo-

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp. 202–20, has an excellent survey of Arminian/Wesleyan perspectives. Olson himself strongly affirms the traditional imputation construct but argues that it should not be a test of orthodoxy (220).

<sup>5</sup> *Private Disputation XLVIII.5*: '...God bestows Christ on us for righteousness, and imputes his righteousness and obedience to us' (also paragraphs 2, 4, 8). Cf. *Apology Against Thirty-One Theological Articles*, XXIV (IV), in which Arminius refutes the accusation that he denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis for justification.

<sup>6</sup> Olson, *Arminian Theology*, pp. 208–9.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 206–11, brings together the key texts from Wesley's writings on this topic. Oden argues that Wesley affirmed the traditional construct of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, pp. 211–13, supports Oden's conclusions. While Wesley endorsed the language of imputed righteousness, I suspect that he understood the concept very differently from Calvin and the Reformed tradition.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Oden, *Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*, pp. 210–11.

gians, with some affirming and others denying the imputation of Christ's righteousness construct in formulating their theology of justification.<sup>9</sup>

The approach of most contemporary Pauline scholars is to interpret Paul's theology of justification without any reference to the imputation of Christ's righteousness.<sup>10</sup> The imputation construct is neither discussed nor critiqued but simply ignored. This tendency to set aside the imputation construct has prompted some rigorous defenses.<sup>11</sup> However it is noteworthy that for the most part it is not New Testament scholars but theologians in the Reformed tradition who are coming to the defense of this theological construct.

### EXAMINING THE PAULINE TEXTS

Advocates of the imputation construct appeal to a number of Pauline texts as the exegetical basis for this theology (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9; Rom. 4:3–8).<sup>12</sup> The common denominator in these texts is the term *dikaïosunē*

<sup>9</sup> Olson, *Arminian Theology*, pp. 213–20.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Gundry, 'Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration',' *Books and Culture* 7/1 (January-February 2001), pp. 6–9, writes that 'It is no accident, then, that in New Testament theologians' recent and current treatments of justification, you would be hard-pressed to find any discussion of an imputation of Christ's righteousness. (I have in mind treatments by Mark Seifrid, Tom Wright, James Dunn, Chris Beker, and John Reumann, among others.) The notion is passe, neither because of Roman Catholic influence nor because of theological liberalism, but because of fidelity to the relevant biblical texts' (p. 9). Robert Gundry, 'The Nonimputation of Christ's Righteousness,' in *Justification: What is at Stake in the Current Debates* (ed. M. Husbands and D. Treier; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 17–45, critiques the imputation construct with a different approach to the Pauline texts than the one proposed here.

<sup>11</sup> John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), are the fullest recent defenses of the imputation construct. Michael Bird, 'Incorporated Righteousness: A Response to Recent Evangelical Discussion Concerning the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness in Justification,' *JETS* 47/2 (2004), p. 258, cites other defenders such as R.C. Sproul, Wayne Grudem, James White and Philip Eveson.

<sup>12</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous*, pp. 90–114, cites the following texts as providing the strongest support for the imputation construct: 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9; 1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 9:30–10:4; 5:12–19. George Ladd, *New Testament Theology* (Rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 491, argues that while Paul never explicitly says that Christ's moral righteousness is imputed to us, this construct is assumed in 2 Cor. 5:21 and Rom. 4:3–8.

which describes a gift given to or received by the one who has faith in Jesus.

The consensus view in contemporary scholarship is that Paul uses the term *dikaiosunē* in at least two quite different ways: moral righteousness (e.g. Rom. 6:13, 18–20; 14:7), and a soteriological status (e.g. Gal. 2:21; 3:21; 5:5).<sup>13</sup> Definitions of soteriological status described by the term vary: a right relationship, a right standing and a justified or acquitted status. It is possible that the term is a multifaceted one conveying all these nuances, with emphasis on one shade of meaning or another depending on the context. However the contextual evidence strongly suggests that the forensic meaning of a justified or acquitted status is the primary meaning of the word *dikaiosunē* when used in a soteriological sense.<sup>14</sup> However this conclusion is not essential to the present argument. The *dikaiosunē* texts to which advocates of imputation appeal are all those which have a soteriological status in view. Thus while there are differences of opinion as to how to define the status, the point remains that what is credited or given the believer is not ‘moral righteousness’ but a ‘soteriological standing’ before God.<sup>15</sup> Once this is recognized then an exegetical basis for the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as the basis for justification evaporates. These points can be seen in a summary review of the main texts where Paul uses the term *dikaiosunē* to describe a soteriological status.

In Romans 5:16–18 Paul develops an Adam-Christ comparison. Adam’s sin resulted in condemnation (*katakrima*) and death for all humanity. Christ’s obedience resulted in justification (*dikaiosunē*, *dikaiōma*, *dikaiōsis*) and life for all humanity. The context indicates that the three Greek nouns (*dikaiosunē*, *dikaiōma*, *dikaiōsis*) are used synonymously and that they point to a reality that is the opposite of condemnation (*katakrima*), i.e. justified or acquitted status.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 261–96, for a clear presentation of the different uses of this term in Paul. Douglas Moo, *Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 87–8, also distinguishes the moral and forensic uses of the noun.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Westerholm, *Perspectives*, pp. 273–84, argues that when describing a soteriological status *dikaiosunē* refers to a justified or acquitted status.

<sup>15</sup> N.T. Wright, *Justification* (Leicester/Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 92, summarizes the main point of this article when in his critique of John Piper he points out that in the texts to which Piper appeals the word *dikaiosunē* means not ‘moral righteousness’ but has in view the forensic status of one whom the court has vindicated, i.e. an acquitted status.

Piper argues that the imputation construct is necessarily implied in Romans 5:12–19 by the parallel between Adam and Christ.<sup>16</sup> The argument is that just as Adam's sin is imputed to all of his heirs as the basis for their condemnation so Christ's righteousness is imputed to all believers as the basis for their justification. There are two flaws with this argument: 1. Paul does not explicitly say that Adam's sin is imputed to all humanity as the ground of their condemnation; 2. this paragraph focuses on the *fact* that Adam and Christ have impacted humanity in different ways, not the mechanics of how the impact was expressed.<sup>17</sup> One could only argue that Paul is working with an imputation construct in Romans 5:12–19 if there was clear evidence for this in the total context of Pauline theology.

2 Corinthians 3:9 provides further contextual support for this understanding of *dikaiosunē*. Paul contrasts the ministry based on the Mosaic Covenant/Law which brought condemnation (*katakrisis*) with the ministry based on Christ/the Spirit which brings justification/acquittal (*dikaiosunē*).<sup>18</sup>

It is also significant that Paul uses the noun *dikaiosunē* in contexts where he is using the verb *dikaioō*. While the nuancing of the verb is debated, contextual evidence again points to the forensic understanding of justification. Thus, for example, in Romans 8:33ff. Paul says, 'Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies/acquits (*dikaioō*). Who is to condemn (*katakrinō*)?'

The point is that when Paul has been repeatedly using the verb *dikaioō* to describe the forensic reality of justification and then uses the noun

<sup>16</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous*, pp. 90–114. Vickers, *Righteousness*, pp. 113–57, also relies heavily on this text to make his case.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1975), vol. 1, pp. 269–95, for an excellent discussion of these issues.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 185, writes that the term *dikaiosunē* '...must in this context carry a forensic meaning like forgiveness, acquittal or vindication'. David Garland, *2 Corinthians* (NAC, Vol 29; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), p. 176, writes that 'Righteousness must be the opposite of condemnation and refer in this instance to acquittal (see also 1 Cor 1:30; 4:4; 6:11; 2 Cor 5:21)'. Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 287–8, rejects the view that *dikaiosunē* means justification or acquittal and argues instead that *dikaiosunē* '...is a relational rather than an ethical term, denoting a right standing before God, given by God ... the status of being "in the right" before the court of heaven. God's approval, not his commendation, rests on those who are "in Christ"'. The context favors the forensic emphasis but does not exclude other nuances suggested by Harris.

*dikaïosunē* in the same context, the natural assumption is that the noun is describing the same reality as the verb. Thus, for example, in Galatians 2:15ff., Paul uses the verb *dikaioō* to explore the options of justification by works of the law or faith in Christ. In his concluding statement he says, 'I do not nullify the grace of God, for if *dikaïosunē* came through the law, Christ died in vain.' The noun must be describing the same reality described by the verb in 2:15–17, and that is forensic justification. The same argument applies to the interpretation of Galatians 3:21: 'Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then *dikaïosunē* (justification) would certainly have come by the law.'

This evidence suggests that Paul can use the noun *dikaïosunē* to refer to a justified or acquitted status before God.<sup>19</sup> Paul uses this noun to describe the gift which we receive from God. In Romans 5:17 he speaks of the gift of *dikaïosunē*. In the context of Galatians 2:15–21, the *dikaïosunē* in v. 21 refers to justified status that is received by faith in Jesus rather than works of the law (also true for Gal. 3:21). In Philippians 3:9 Paul states that he wants to be found in Christ, not having a justified status (*dikaïosunē*) of his own which would come through obedience to the Law, but the justified status (*dikaïosunē*) which comes from God. This gift is received through faith in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995), p. 326, acknowledges that this is the majority view but then disputes it. He argues that the noun *dikaïosunē* is not synonymous with *dikaïōsis* and that Paul only uses the latter term for the concept of justification. Several points can be made in response: 1. evidence surveyed to this point suggests that *dikaïosunē* can mean 'justification'; 2. in Romans 5:16–18 the three nouns *dikaïosunē*, *dikaïōma*, *dikaïōsis* are clearly being used synonymously; 3. in Romans 4, the word *dikaïosunē* is used repeatedly to speak of justification and then in the final statement Paul varies his wording by using *dikaïōsis* (Rom. 4:25); 4. if Fee is correct, then while Paul frequently used the verb *dikaioō* to speak of justification, he only used a noun to speak of justification on two occasions (*dikaïōsis*, Rom. 4:25; 5:18). Fee himself argues that the noun *dikaïosunē* simply means 'right relationship' (p. 322). For the purposes of this discussion the difference is inconsequential since what is given the believer as a gift is a soteriological status, not moral righteousness.

<sup>20</sup> John Piper, 'Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ' (Crossway Lecture, November 2007; <http://bit.ly/PiperETS2007>), sets forth a passionate defense of the imputation construct in which he focuses on Philippians 3:9 as clear evidence for the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis for justification. The key to his argument is the assertion that *dikaïosunē* must always mean moral righteousness, never simply a soteriological status. This enables him to argue that the gift of *dikaïosunē* (= moral righteousness) which

In each of these texts Paul speaks of *dikaiosunē* (soteriological status) as a gift coming from God and given to the one who believes. It is noteworthy that he does not use imputation imagery in the texts surveyed to this point. However, imputation imagery does occur in the two places where Paul uses Genesis 15:6 as Torah support for his theology of justification: Galatians 3:6 and Romans 4.

Paul's point in Romans 4 is to demonstrate that his theology upholds/affirms the Law (Rom. 3:31) since the Torah itself enshrines the principle of justification by faith. He does this with the examples of Abraham and David. Paul begins by excluding the possibility that Abraham was justified (*dikaioō*) by works (Rom. 4:2). He then quotes the LXX version of Genesis 15:6: 'Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for *dikaiosunē*' (4:3). When interpreted in the context of Paul's linguistic usage, this can only mean that God responded to Abraham's faith by crediting/imputing the gift of a soteriological status, i.e. justification. This is not the clearest way of expressing this idea but the syntax of the statement is determined by the LXX translation of the Genesis text. Paul then uses that Greek phrase to express his theology of justification. That this is what Paul means is supported by Romans 4:4: 'But to the one who does not work but believes the one who justifies (*dikaioō*) the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for *dikaiosunē*', i.e. God responds to the person's faith with the gift of a justified or acquitted status. The 'justification of the ungodly' and having '*dikaiosunē* credited' are two ways of saying the same thing.

This interpretation is reinforced by Paul's use of the example of David (Rom. 4:6–7): 'thus David speaks of the blessedness of the person to whom God credits/imputes *dikaiosunē* apart from works.' Again what is given/imputed to the one who believes is a justified or acquitted status. Paul then quotes Psalm 31:1 which provides images illuminating his understanding of *dikaiosunē*: 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one to whom the Lord will not reckon their sin.' Justification conveys the ideas of forgiveness of sins and of God not holding our sins against us. Furthermore, it seems clear that within this context the verb *dikaioō* and noun *dikaiosunē* refer to the same reality: justification/acquittal. Nothing suggests that while the verb refers to fo-

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comes from God must be Christ's righteousness. One gets the impression that this unwillingness to distinguish the ethical and soteriological status uses of *dikaiosunē* undergirds his argument in his book *Counted Righteous*. It is noteworthy that he does not cite any New Testament scholar who takes this idiosyncratic approach to understanding *dikaiosunē* terminology in Paul. In reality what Piper describes as an anomalous interpretation (*dikaiosunē* = a soteriological status) is the consensus view in New Testament scholarship.



rensic justification, the noun refers to an imputed moral righteousness which is the basis for justification.

In Romans 4:9–12 Paul excludes the possibility that justification by faith is only for the circumcised, i.e. the Jew, on the grounds that according to Genesis 15:6 Abraham was justified by faith prior to being circumcised. In v. 11 he states that Abraham received circumcision as a seal of the *dikaioṣunē* which he had by faith while still uncircumcised. This enables Abraham to be the father of Gentile and Jewish Christians who receive justification on the basis of faith.

The idea that *dikaioṣunē* (a soteriological status) is a gift appropriated by faith is also expressed in a cryptic, shorthand expression in the next paragraph when Paul says that Abraham received the promised blessing from God not through obedience to the Law but ‘through the *dikaioṣunē* which comes by faith’ (Rom. 4:13).

In Romans 4:17–22 Paul explores the character of Abraham’s faith and, using the language of Genesis 15:6, concludes by saying that God responded to his faith by ‘crediting *dikaioṣunē* (a soteriological status) to him’. Paul goes on to say that this was written for us so that ‘it will be credited/imputed to us who believe in him that raised Jesus from the dead’ (v. 23). What is credited/imputed is the gift of *dikaioṣunē* (a justified status). This is confirmed by the concluding statement of this section: ‘who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification/*dikaiōsis*’ (v. 25).

In Romans 9:30–10:4 Paul explores Jewish unbelief and Gentile responsiveness with extensive use of *dikaioṣunē* terminology and once again the noun refers to a soteriological standing before God.<sup>21</sup> He states that while Jews were pursuing *dikaioṣunē* while Gentiles were not, in light of Christ’s coming it was Gentiles who found *dikaioṣunē* while Jews missed out. He concludes by saying that Christ brought to an end the era of the Mosaic Law in order that there may be *dikaioṣunē* (a soteriological status) for all who believe.

In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul again uses the term *dikaioṣunē* in a forensic sense: ‘It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our justification, sanctification and redemption.’ This understanding is confirmed by the related statement in 1 Corinthians 6:11 where Paul uses the verb to describe justification: ‘But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.’ The point is that union with Christ is the basis for receiving the fullness of salvation and a justi-

<sup>21</sup> Moo, *Romans*, p. 88 n. 41, also takes the view that all uses of *dikaioṣunē* in Romans 4 have a soteriological (forensic) status in view.

fied or acquitted status is one of the three soteriological metaphors used here.<sup>22</sup>

2 Corinthians 5:21 is often thought to provide clear support for the view that Paul works with a theology of Christ's righteousness being imputed to us: 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, in order that in him we might become the *dikaïosunē* of God.' Here one finds the familiar Pauline ideas that Christ's redemptive work is the basis for salvation and that 'union with Christ' (in him) is the basis for benefiting from what He has done. The question is what he means by the phrase 'in him we become the *dikaïosunē* of God'. This is an example of Paul's use of cryptic, shorthand expressions which need to be unpacked in order to render them intelligible. The unpacking of these shorthand expressions needs to be done in light of how Paul expresses himself elsewhere on the subject of forensic *dikaïosunē*. The texts surveyed to this point suggest that this cryptic phrase means 'that in him we might have a justified or acquitted status which comes from God [or, a justified status before God]'.<sup>23</sup> This interpretation is confirmed by the immediate and wider literary context. In 5:19 Paul says that God reconciles the world to himself and this is done by 'not counting their trespasses against them.' This is similar the way Paul defines justification in Romans 4:7-8. Furthermore the use of the term *dikaïosunē* at 2 Corinthians 3:9 to describe a justified or acquitted status strengthens the case for giving *dikaïosunē* the same meaning in 5:21. One could only unpack the shorthand expression 'becoming the *dikaïosunē* of God' by referencing an imputation of Christ's moral righteousness if this concept could be clearly established as part of Paul's theology of justification.

To summarize, in the texts surveyed to this point the noun *dikaïosunē* consistently refers to the gift of a soteriological status and the contextual evidence suggests that this status is one of being justified or acquitted.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 86, here states that *dikaïosunē* = justification and defines it as 'the believer's undeserved stance of right standing before God'.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 314f.; Murray Harris, *Second Corinthians*, pp. 455f.; Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 129f.; Margaret Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 442-4, all interpret this statement along the lines proposed here. Harris denies that one can find the idea of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in this statement even though he believes that this concept was part of Paul's theology (p. 445 n. 207).

This gift of a justified status is given to the person who has faith in Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

## SIX OBSERVATIONS

Having reviewed the most important texts, I would like to make a number of observations.

First, most English translations, whether literal or dynamic equivalent, have done the church a significant disservice by failing to distinguish in translation between the uses of the term *dikaïosunē* to describe ethical conduct (righteousness) and to describe a soteriological status (an acquitted status, right standing).<sup>25</sup> When one consistently reads the soteriological uses of the word *dikaïosunē* translated as 'righteousness', it is easier to believe that Paul is expressing himself within a framework of imputed moral righteousness. How is the reader untrained in Greek to know that the English word 'righteousness' in translations of Paul's writings can refer not only to moral righteousness but to a soteriological status?

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<sup>24</sup> How one defines 'justification' in Paul could potentially make some difference. If the concept is interpreted to mean that God declares the believer to be righteous or regards them as righteous, then one could follow Calvin and argue that this is only possible if Christ's righteousness is so imputed to the one who has faith in Jesus so that the believer 'appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man'. This would not be a necessary inference from this understanding of justification language, but one can see how the jump could be made. However if justification language signifies God's forgiveness of sins, his not counting our sins against us, his releasing the believer from condemnation and God's establishing us in relationship with himself, then it is much harder to argue that the justification texts assume the imputation of Christ's righteousness as providing the basis for justification. Those texts which speak of Christ's taking upon himself God's judgment against sin provide a fully adequate basis for justification understood in this latter manner.

<sup>25</sup> Commendable exceptions are the Good News Bible and the New Century Bible. However they understand the language more relationally than forensically, i.e. being made right with God. The New Living Translation is extremely inconsistent in its translation of the soteriological status uses of *dikaïosunē*. In the majority of instances the NLT works with the concept of 'being made right with God'. However in Romans 4 the translators lapse into righteousness terminology and in reality fail to adopt a consistent approach: accepted (Rom. 4:2, 11a), declared righteous (Rom. 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11a, 22, 23, 24), made right (Rom. 4:11a), new relationship (Rom. 4:13). In other contexts the NLT can interpret the soteriological status uses of *dikaïosunē* with a variety of other terms: righteousness (Rom. 5:17; Gal. 5:5), right standing with God (e.g. Rom. 5:23), become righteous (Phil. 3:9).

Second, Paul only uses the imagery of imputation (crediting) when he is using Genesis 15:6 as a framework for expressing his theology of justification (Rom. 4:3–8, 11, 21–25 and Gal. 3:6). In other cases he describes the ‘acquitted status’ as something coming ‘from God’, either with the use of a preposition (Phil. 3:9; Rom. 9:30) or the simple genitive of source (Rom. 4:11, 13; 2 Cor. 5:21)<sup>26</sup>. Paul can also describe *dikaïosunē* as a gift (Rom. 5:17). In many cases he simply speaks of *dikaïosunē* as justification/acquittal without any of these qualifiers (Rom. 5:21; 6:16; 8:10; 9:30–10:6; Gal. 2:21; 5:5; 1 Cor. 1:30; 3:9).

Third, it is noteworthy that when Paul uses the term *dikaïosunē* in the sense of moral righteousness, it never refers to Christ’s own moral righteousness. This is not what one would expect if Paul believed that the imputation of Christ’s moral righteousness was the basis for justification.

Fourth, if Paul did believe that the imputation of Christ’s moral righteousness played a role in justification, then he would in reality have a theology of double imputation. Christ’s moral righteousness is first imputed to the believer and then, as a next step, a justified status is imputed. As has been argued, Paul’s linguistic usage clearly supports the imputation/gifting of a justified status. However there is a lack of evidence suggesting that for Paul the imputation of Christ’s righteousness plays a role in justification.

Fifth, if Paul believed that the imputation of Christ’s moral righteousness was central to the mechanics of justification then one would expect this to find clear expression somewhere. By contrast, Paul clearly articulates those elements which he regards as essential to justification: Christ’s redemptive work as the foundation, union with Christ as the basis for receiving all the gifts of God’s grace, and faith as the means whereby one is united with Christ and receives the gift of a justified status. However Paul does not link the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to justification.

It is noteworthy that contemporary New Testament scholars in the Reformed tradition who themselves subscribe to imputation can exegete the key texts and provide a coherent account of Paul’s theology of justification without any reference to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Thus, for example, neither Douglas Moo nor Thomas Schreiner interpret the *dikaïosunē* language in Romans 3:21–4:25 by arguing that the imputa-

<sup>26</sup> I am inclined to the view that in Romans 1:17 and 3:21 the phrase *dikaïosunē theou* is a genitive of source and refers to the gift of a justified or acquitted status which comes from God. Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1975), vol. 1, pp. 95–9.

tion of Christ's righteousness is the basis for justification.<sup>27</sup> It is especially striking that in Schreiner's book on Pauline theology, the word imputation is not in the index and his admirable presentation of Paul's theology of justification makes no reference to the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis for justification.<sup>28</sup> If Paul did work with the imputation construct then it should be impossible to provide a coherent account of Paul's theology of justification without reference to the imputation of Christ's righteousness. The fact that it is possible to do this suggests that the imputation construct is grounded in the tradition of Reformed theology rather than in Pauline theology.

Finally, it is methodologically problematic simply to postulate the assumption that for Paul the imputation of Christ's righteousness is the basis for justification without exegetical evidence to support the assumption. D. A. Carson appears to make this mistake. He argues that while Paul never explicitly says that our sins are imputed to Christ, most evangelical theologians believe that this concept is central to Paul's understanding of the work of Christ. He argues that by analogy the same is true for the imputation of Christ's moral righteousness, i.e. while Paul never explicitly speaks of the imputation of Christ's moral righteousness, the concept is necessarily implied.<sup>29</sup> This is not an appropriate comparison. Paul speaks of Christ's redemptive work in ways which clearly assume that he takes upon himself our sin and thereby God's judgment on it (e.g. Rom. 3:25; 8:3; Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21; Col. 2:14). However in speaking about the justification/acquittal of the sinner, Paul says nothing which necessarily implies that

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Moo, *Romans*, pp. 218–90; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 178–249. While the word *imputation* does not occur in the index of Moo's commentary, he subscribes to it in his comments on Romans 8:4 (pp. 483f.). The only affirmation of the imputation of Christ's righteousness that I can find in Schreiner's *Romans* commentary is a brief comment in the discussion of 5:15–19 (p. 290).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Leicester/Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 188–217. George Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 478–91, has an extended discussion of Paul's theology of justification. It is only in a brief statement on the last page that he introduces the assertion that the imputation of Christ's righteousness is assumed in Paul. If this were the case then it should have been integrated into the treatment of the relevant texts.

<sup>29</sup> D. A. Carson, 'The Vindication of Imputation', in: *Justification*, pp. 77–8. It could be pointed out that the reason Paul does not use 'imputation/crediting' language when speaking of Christ taking upon himself our sin is that there was no text like Genesis 15:6 which would require Paul to use this terminology. As already noted, Paul only uses crediting or imputation imagery when appealing to Genesis 15:6 where that language is part of the LXX text.

the gift of Christ's moral righteousness plays a role in the process of justification. Paul's use of *dikaïosunē* language is consistent with the way he uses a variety of soteriological metaphors; it is as believers are 'in Christ' that the benefits of his redemptive work are applied to them. It is as the believer is 'in Christ' that they receive the gifts of adoption, redemption, sanctification, reconciliation, being a new creation, transfer to the realm of Christ/the Spirit, and justification. Injecting the concept of the imputation of Christ's moral righteousness as the basis for one of these gifts, viz. justification, lacks contextual support in the texts where Paul develops his theology of justification.

### CONCLUSION

It is often argued that giving up the concept of the imputation of Christ's righteousness means a serious dilution of the Gospel. This cannot be logically true if the concept itself lacks exegetical support. But one can also argue that the grace and mercy of God shine all the more brightly without the imputation of Christ's righteousness. God sees our sin with utter clarity, in no way diminished or obscured by our being 'clothed in Christ's righteousness'. The good news is that he chooses to forgive us, not to count our sins against us, to enter into relationship with sinners, and to engage the messy, life long process of enabling sinners to grow in righteousness. Foundational to the life of the believer is the truth that from the moment of their being connected to Jesus until the day of their death, God justifies or acquits the ungodly even as he seeks to transform them into the image of Christ.