

## **“Getting Perspective on Justification”**

**By Reggie M. Kidd**

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We Reformed people have always thought we’ve understood at least one part of the New Testament pretty well: Paul’s teaching on justification.

Calvin and Luther found a much-needed antidote for the “works righteousness” sickness in the church of their day in Augustine’s writing, who in turn had reclaimed Paul’s teaching for his day. Following generations have found “Christ’s righteousness for our unrighteousness” strong medicine for the same ailment.

During the past thirty years some New Testament scholars have intensely reassessed Paul the apostle.<sup>1</sup> One of a host of notions (that together are often referred to as the “new perspective on Paul”) that have emerged is this: by “justification by faith,” Paul was not as interested in helping individuals find a relationship with God, as in demonstrating that the “people of God” consists of all who belong to Christ. Rather than teaching a “righteousness from God” that comes to individuals, justification by faith is about the “righteousness of God” in keeping covenant with Abraham for the “creation of a single worldwide family, composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles alike,” as N.T. Wright, Anglican bishop and leading advocate of a “fresh reading” of Paul, puts it.<sup>2</sup>

Some in the Reformed community welcome the newer idea of a more corporate conception of justification. They see it as truer to the way the story of Israel pervades Paul’s theology. They think it offers Reformed Christians a corrective for Protestantism’s flirtation with Western individualism.

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<sup>1</sup> The emerging conversation on the “new perspective on Paul” covers a wide range of issues; for example, how one understands the Judaism of Paul’s day, how much continuity and discontinuity exist between the old covenant and the new, what the sacraments signify and what they accomplish, whether election is covenantal and corporate or decretive and individual, how perseverance can be essential to our assurance of salvation without leaving us to trust in our perseverance. Each issue is worthy of full consideration. However, for the sake of time and space, I focus on Paul’s language of “righteousness” and “justification” in this article. Nor will I attempt in this article to provide a history of the “new perspective,” its advocates and opponents. For an appreciative (though at points critical) assessment, see PCA teaching elder Frank Thielman’s *Paul and the Law* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), and for a more critical assessment, see PCA teaching elder Guy Prentiss Walter’s *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul* (P & R Publishing, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Romans: New Interpreter’s Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume X (Abingdon, 2002), 465. Bishop Wright is a prolific and engaging writer, and a bold champion of doctrines precious to the evangelical cause. In his writings on Jesus, he stalwartly defends the historicity of the Jesus of the gospels. Concerning Paul, he brilliantly demonstrates Paul’s robust trinitarianism; he clearly affirms the need for a substitutionary atonement, and the fact that our union with Christ accesses all that is Christ’s: his wisdom and sanctification and righteousness. (For this last point, see the interview in *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11:1 [Winter 2002], 129). However, he is reticent about the classical Reformed understanding of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness — I find myself hoping for greater room in his writing for an appreciation of how our union with Christ does indeed put us in possession of a righteousness that is, via Christ, a gift of God himself.

Others in the Reformed community see a dangerous turning back of the clock, a return to the very sort of self-redemption that Paul opposed in Galatia, and that Augustine and Luther and Calvin opposed in their time.

Before the older and newer readings of Paul get too quickly set against each other, however, we need to see how the language of “righteousness” and “justification” (in Greek, the same word serves for “justification” and “righteousness”) actually works. When it comes to the apostle Paul, we’ll find that a logic of “not only, but also” helps us much better than one of “not that, but this.”

It is profound that Paul calls God “just and justifier” (Romans 3:26). Paul means both that God is himself righteous in his dealings with us and that God is himself the only source of a righteousness he gives us in Christ. So when Paul talks about “justification” he means two things: First, how a “righteousness from God” comes to us in Christ, which qualifies us to stand before God “righteous.” Second, how “God’s own righteousness” is demonstrated — God keeping covenant with Abraham by making one worldwide family of forgiven sinners. Some of us are Abraham’s offspring by physical descent and others by “grafting in” — but we all belong together.

### **Righteousness from God**

“I know I can’t be accepted by God because of my works, but I also can’t believe it’s by virtue of some mechanical transaction at the cross either.” This was the way my dad explained his rejection of the idea that he needed a righteousness from God. The apostle Paul would want my dad to know that what happened for him on the cross was so much more than “some mechanical transaction” — it was God’s Son identifying himself with us in our sin so he could raise us up to new life.

Justification by faith, as classically formulated in Reformed theology, is far from a cold piece of ledger-keeping. Nonetheless, our justification requires some sort of transaction. Paul assumes that we need to be “right before God” (Romans 2:13; 3:20) — and that none of us can achieve that, whatever our pedigree, whatever our virtue.

For us to be found “right before God,” we require a righteousness that comes from God himself, as Paul put it in Philippians 3:9. Why? It has to do with what happened to us in Adam, whose work the “Last Adam” — Christ — came to repair (see 1 Corinthians 15:45). Adam was made to bear God’s image. As part of his image-bearing, he was given, under God, dominion over the rest of creation, and so he rightly named the animals. His relationships with God and with his help-mate Eve were right. His character was in perfect—but not perfected—congruity with God’s character. All this is to say that he was created with a positive righteousness.

Faithful obedience from Adam in the Garden would have confirmed him and us in the righteousness with which he was created,<sup>3</sup> but Adam chose a different path. A warp was introduced into the whole of creation, which became subject to corruption. Creation was still God's and still good, but it was no longer "right." It was broken. We were no longer right, either—with others, within ourselves, or before God.

As a result, the obedience God originally required of Adam has to come from Another, from the Second Adam who obeyed, not in a garden and not out of satedness, but in a wilderness and in the throes of hunger (Luke 4:1-13). Where Adam proved faithless, Christ proved faithful. That's what Paul appears to have in mind when he says he lives "because of the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20, as rendered in the New English Translation).<sup>4</sup> Several times in his letters Paul writes of the "faith (or faithfulness) of Jesus." I, and an increasing number of New Testament scholars, believe that this phrase is Paul's way of talking about Christ's own faithful obedience to the Father—shorthand for the mission Paul outlines more fully in places like Philippians 2:6-11 and Romans 5:12-21.<sup>5</sup>

Christ's faithful obedience became ours because he became "the mercy seat" (Romans 3:25), the place where God exercised "righteous judgment" (Romans 2:5) against our sin. In the past, says Paul, God had merely "passed over" people's sins (Romans 3:25). When Christ offered himself, he placed himself between God's wrath and us. God punished our sins in him. The horror of the cross! The glory of the cross! Paul treats all the Old Testament sacrifices as being like a friendly mayor's taking our parking tickets and sticking them in a drawer — they're removed from sight, but never paid for. With Christ's sacrifice, payment is made; the tickets go into the shredder.

Thus Paul calls God both "just and justifier" (Romans 3:26). What the Father had not found in Adam, he has found in the whole course of Christ's obedience, "unto death — even death on a cross," as Paul puts it (Philippians 2:8).

### **Right about one thing**

Now, my dad was correct about justification not being by works. Not by "works of Torah" (circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, dietary laws, etc.) Not by "works of merit," if we understand them in terms of medieval Catholicism. Not by works of "the Kantian imperative" if we understand them in terms of traditional Western liberalism, whether a liberalism as sophisticated as Kant's or as simple as Sesame Street's. Not by any works.

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<sup>3</sup> First the "natural body," then the "spiritual body," as Paul puts it (1 Corinthians 15:44). There is an ongoing discussion in the Reformed community about whether Adam's pre-fall situation was grace-based or law-based, and whether Adam was to obey "as employee" or "as son." The Westminster Confession of Faith envisions a "covenant of works." One can accept this language, it seems to me, and still recognize all the gracious provisions surrounding Adam (beginning with creation itself!) and affirm that the "works" looked for in Adam were a matter of the faith-filled obedience of a son of God (Luke 3:38).

<sup>4</sup> Besides Galatians 2:20, see also Galatians 2:16; 3:22; Romans 3:22,26; Philippians 3:9.

<sup>5</sup> See, principally, Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2002).

Well, save by one: Christ's work on the cross. To access that, we access him. To access him, we reach out with empty hands and take hold. That is what Paul calls the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Judaism's Torah makes no more fundamental demand than this, "Hear, O Israel ... Love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). We obey that command, believes Paul, when we trust that Christ died for our sins according to Scripture. By virtue of that faith, we are accounted righteous in the now. This is what it is to be justified by faith: it is to receive the gift of Christ's righteousness because, guilty though we were, we have been found to be "in him" (Philippians 3:9).

For those who do trust Christ, God's program of reclamation of what was lost in Adam begins. Adam and Eve's fig leaves are replaced with new clothes: Christ himself. "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ," says Paul, "have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Elsewhere he calls it "putting on the new man who has been created in God's image — in righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). Ultimately, this righteousness will prove itself in what Paul calls "glory" — a final vindication of a verdict that is already in. For, he says, "whom God justified, these he has glorified" (Romans 8:30) — the former is done, the latter is as good as done. "You can take that to the bank," the saying goes.

Moreover, when we see all of God's creation transformed and transfigured, when it all comes into its liberation from the corruption which Adam triggered through his horrific misstep in the Garden — when we see that, we will not even be able to compare our present sufferings to that glory (Romans 8:18).

How Christ's obedience becomes ours is not the mechanical transaction my father feared. But "getting it" isn't so easy, either. For Paul to "get it," Jesus himself had to show up alive from the dead. Before that, Paul thought Jesus was a messianic pretender whose death was deserved and whose ongoing "presence" among his followers was scandalous nonsense. After that, Paul understood that all of Israel's story had been about this One. This One, whose dying had been "a giving over for transgressions" that Isaiah had forecast and whose rising was "for our justification" (compare Romans 4:25 with Isaiah 53:6,11). Before that, Paul thought he was fine, "as to righteousness based on the law blameless" (Philippians 3:6). After that, Paul understood how right Isaiah had been about our righteousness being as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Paul went even further than Isaiah: our own righteousness is dung (to translate Paul's word *skubala* at Philippians 3:8 as politely as possible). It tells of a monumental revolution within Paul.

My dad did eventually "get it," but not before being reduced by Alzheimer's disease to a childlike simplicity of mind. He had to come to a point at which all he could do was cry out, "God, I want you in my life." He was pretty much beyond being able to understand the "transaction." But he was able to understand what was behind the transaction: Union with Christ. Jesus had come to take his place in his sinfulness, die for his punishment, and rise to befriend him in his loneliness. What my dad intuited in his senile dementia, the Westminster framers had sagely perceived when they listed justification as one of the benefits that flows from our union with Christ (WLC 69). Justification is not a dispassionate calculation, but part of what comes in God's gracious gift of Christ himself.

## **God's own righteousness**

Justification by faith, though it is a profoundly personal thing, is far from a private matter. And though it is the story of how a "righteousness from God" comes to us, it is also a drama of "God's own righteousness," unfolding across the stage of history as he sets the world to rights through his Son.

Thus far, this article has been more or less an outline of the aspects of Paul's view of justification that Reformed theology has classically affirmed. The rest involves themes that are not inconsistent with historic Reformed theology, and in fact are an enrichment of it.

N.T. Wright has called for closer attention to the way that for Paul, God's character is at issue in his dealings with Israel. And though Wright often distances himself from Reformed theology, he wants Christians to see how their own story is but the continuation of Israel's. This is altogether consonant with Reformed concerns.

Paul, in Romans, wrestles with the problem of God's faithfulness to Israel. Has God been righteous in his dealings with her? In the overall biblical picture, it is through Abraham and his line that God is ultimately to fix Adam's mess. However, Paul finds that most followers of Christ then did not come from the line of Abraham, but are, rather, Gentiles. This creates a delicate pastoral situation.

Take Rome, for example. This is a church that had been founded by "Jews and proselytes" who had been in Jerusalem during the first Pentecost (Acts 2:10). For nearly twenty years Christianity had developed in Rome under Jewish leadership. However, all the Jews of Rome were kicked out around A.D. 49 until sometime shortly before Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans in A.D. 57. Roman Jews like Priscilla and Aquila, for instance, were exiled to Corinth where they befriended Paul during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:2), only to resurface in Rome toward the end of his third missionary journey (Romans 16:3). That means that for seven years or so, what Christian presence there was in Rome was Gentile.

When Paul writes to the Romans, Jewish Christians are returning to a hostile environment — hostile not because of pagans, but because of Gentile believers who have refashioned the faith around the absence of Jews. When folks like Priscilla and Aquila come back to their home church, they barely recognize it. Gentile Christians have gotten uppity about the fact that so few Jews have come to trust Christ, concluding, apparently, that God had written off the Jews (Romans 11:18,20). As a result, Gentile Christians are running roughshod over Jewish Christian scruples concerning matters of "food and drink" and "honoring of days" (Romans 14). The situation is a mess.

So that Gentile believers would have a more tender regard for their returning Jewish brothers and sisters, Paul eagerly points out that Abraham is the father of all those who believe, Jew and Gentile alike (Romans 4:11,12). Abraham is not just an example of the

principle of faith. Gentile believers have been incorporated into *his family*— that’s why Paul calls him *father* to all who share his faith (4:16). God shows himself righteous (that is, true to his promises) by enlarging Abraham’s family. Gentile believers, if you will, are guests, and need to be more polite.

The first eight chapters of Romans aren’t an aloof disposition on the relationship between “justification” and “sanctification.” They tell, in thrilling style, how Gentile and Jewish believers are now swept up together into the new phase of Israel’s story. Christ has inaugurated a new exodus. We’ve been “redeemed” from the Egypt of sin (3:21-26, especially verse 24). We’ve crossed the waters of death through baptism (chapter 6). We’ve received God’s Law (chapter 7). We journey through the wilderness of the “sufferings of this present time” on the way to our future inheritance (8:18-19). Only this time we don’t stumble, because we have not just figures and types of God’s presence. Christ’s very Spirit empowers us for the “walk” (8:4).<sup>6</sup> God has shown himself righteous by continuing Israel’s story: Gentile and Jewish believers should rejoice in their journey together.

Although Reformed interpreters have tended to see the first eight chapters of Romans as Paul’s “good stuff,” his pastoral thrust lies in the final chapters. In the first part of Romans, Paul shows how Christ’s sacrifice for sin has allowed “God’s own righteousness” to be maintained while he “justifies” ungodly sinners. Now in the second part, Paul shows how “God’s own righteousness” still stands despite Israel’s apparent rejection: true Israel was never about mere physical descent (chapter 9), God still wants Jews to hear the gospel and to be saved (chapter 10), and God is cultivating his own “olive tree” in his own way and in his own time — in the end, we will all marvel at the mystery of how his mercy and faithfulness work out (chapter 11). The pastoral bottom line: Gentile believers had better not be snooty just because they seem to be where the action is (11:18-20); instead, they need to love the historically “elect” (11:28).

Chapters 12-13 are a description of what the Last Adam’s united humanity is to look like — and as such, these chapters are a prelude to Paul’s appeal in chapters 14-15 that believers learn to get along. The “weak in faith” are to be welcomed — and not just so they can be argued with! The “strong in faith” are not to be judged (compare 14:1 with 14:3). Here’s where we come to understand why Paul keeps repeating that the gospel is for “Jew and Gentile” alike (for instance, 1:14; 2:9,10; 3:9,22,29-30). Jew and Gentile oneness is part of the power of the gospel. Nowhere is God’s power for salvation put on display more graphically than in our learning to privilege one another over ourselves for the sake of Christ.



Perhaps there are some lessons to draw here as we Reformed brothers and sisters nuance the profoundly rich doctrine of “justification by faith.” The God who showed his love by

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<sup>6</sup> See the instructive essay by N. T. Wright, “New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Structure of Romans 3-8,” in Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright, *Romans and the People of God* (Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 26-35.

sending his Son to die for his enemies calls us to a common life that fully appreciates each other's backgrounds, preferences, and "issues."

On the one hand, we cannot afford to displace what we have learned with what we are discovering. It's not as though a fresh appreciation of God's righteous covenant-keeping with father Abraham can be set against the tenured Reformed understanding that God must count Christ's righteousness as our own when he makes us children of Abraham. Our heritage embodies a wise suspicion of "works righteousness." It will not do to assert that justification by faith is simply the truth that all who name Jesus' name belong together and that the centuries-old argument as to whether the righteousness we receive "from God" is infused (as in Catholicism) or imputed (as in Protestantism) is irrelevant. We know that in the final accounting we stand or fall on the basis of whose righteousness clothes us. Our own or somebody else's? God help us if we don't answer, "Not my own, but Christ's."

On the other hand, isn't it possible that we Presbyterians could learn more about Paul's heart for a larger, more unified church family? Presbyterian church history can be written under the title *The Split P's*. Our churches are more Gentile than Jewish in makeup. Beyond that, it may be fair to observe that we are more white than not, more middle class than not. The "righteousness of God" may come to fuller embodiment as we reach out more earnestly to people who don't look, or talk, or think like we do.

We need at least to refuse to assume the worst about each other. When it comes to considering the newer and the older readings of Paul, perhaps the braver readers among us could be more deferential and the more cautious readers could be more charitable. It's too easy to draw the worst possible conclusion from someone else's starting point and to insist that that's where he or she has to land.

We can fully expect that our respective readings of the sickness of the day (where I see moralism as a greater plague, you may see individualism) are going to make different dimensions of Paul's teaching more attractive (God answers moralism with that righteousness that can come only from him; God answers individualism through his own faithfulness to that covenant by which he promised to unify the human race through the line of Abraham). That's why we need a logic of "not only, but also," instead of "not this, but that," just because we're talking about the power of God for salvation, to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

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