

Justification: The Make or Break Doctrine

Whether or not Martin Luther actually said, in precise terms, that ‘justification is the article by which the church stands and falls’,³⁸ the sentiment is right. And it is because I am convinced that it is right, and because I am further convinced that justification by faith alone on the basis of grace is under attack – both heavy and insidious – today, that I publish yet again on this subject.³⁹

Justification is a declaration or pronouncement that someone is righteous; for example, in court after due trial (Deut. 25:1). Such declarations are made in everyday life, also. For instance, when the tax collectors ‘justified God’ (Luke 7:29), they declared him righteous. Justification, I repeat, is a declaration. To ‘justify’ does *not* mean ‘to *make* righteous’. This is most important. Judges do not *make* defendants righteous or wicked – they *declare* them so (Deut. 25:1). The Spirit did not *make* Christ righteous – he *declared*, demonstrated him righteous (1 Tim. 3:16). The crowd did not *make* God righteous – they *declared* him righteous (Luke 7:29). Of course, if a human court could *make* the guilty righteous, it would be highly commended, to say the least – but that is an utter impossibility, and not what we are talking about. Likewise, condemnation – the opposite of

³⁸ See Justin Taylor: ‘Luther’s Saying: “Justification Is the Article by Which the Church Stands and Falls”’. Taylor: ‘From what I’ve been able to find, the first use of this exact phrase was by Lutheran theologian Balthasar Meisner who said that it was a “proverb of Luther” (1615)... In 1618 Reformed theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted wrote: “The article of justification is said to be the article by which the church stands or falls”... Luther: “If this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses”’.

³⁹ This article is a lightly edited version of the chapter ‘Justification’ in my *Eternal* pp17-29. For more, see, for instance, my *Four; Conversion; Hinge*.

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justification – is a pronouncement or declaration. To condemn a man does not make him guilty; it declares him guilty.

But what about the gospel? What about justification in gospel terms? God, in the gospel, speaks of ‘justification’, and he speaks of it – he always speaks of it – in its forensic or legal sense, as a declaration. And, as in everyday life, justification in a gospel sense is the opposite of condemnation (2 Chron. 6:22-23; Prov. 17:15; John 5:24; Rom. 5:16,18; 8:1,33-34; *etc.*).

No human legal system can adequately illustrate every aspect of gospel justification, however. In fact, there are major dissimilarities – indeed, striking contradictions – between the two. In particular, in the gospel, God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). This is an utter impossibility in a human court (Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15) – or ought to be! Remember, justification is a declaration. So, in the gospel, God declares the ungodly righteous! Now if a human court *declares* the blameworthy righteous, it is an abomination (Prov. 17:15; 24:24-25; Isa. 5:23; Matt. 27:4), as it is if men condemn the righteous (Ps. 94:21). Rational people want the courts to condemn the wicked, and justify the righteous, do they not (1 Kings 8:32)? Well, then, God himself will not, cannot, justify the wicked under such a system (Ex. 23:6-7). Yet, in the gospel, he does justify the ungodly. Yes, he does! What is more, he does it justly (Rom. 3:26)!

That is to say, under certain circumstances, God, by his grace (Tit. 3:7), does justify sinners. In other words, he declares them righteous in his sight. He does this in a most remarkable way – but not by ignoring their sin and guilt, or by *making* them righteous. Let me say it again. In justifying sinners in the gospel, God declares them righteous – he does not make them so. Certainly not! *That* is one of the cardinal errors of Rome. Rome teaches that, in justification, God imparts righteousness to sinners, infusing it into them, making them righteous.⁴⁰ All sorts of dreadful consequences flow from this mistake.⁴¹

⁴⁰ In short, Rome confuses and confounds justification and sanctification: ‘Justification itself, which is not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man,

No. In justifying sinners, God graciously pronounces them righteous by *constituting* them righteous in union with or ‘in Christ’ (Rom. 6:1-5; 8:1; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Tim. 1:9). What does this mean? In his grace, God regards the sinner in question as united with Christ so that Christ’s obedience is reckoned to the sinner, imputed to the sinner – the sinner’s sin having been reckoned to the Saviour (Rom. 5:9,12-21; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; 1 Pet. 3:18). Imputation, putting to the account of, crediting with – like the deposit of credit in someone’s bank account, say – is one of the great principles of the gospel.

Leaving aside all illustration, just as Christ bore the sin and guilt of the sinner (Gal. 3:13) – all having been laid by God to Christ’s account – so the sinner is accounted righteous by God because God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the sinner. And all is brought about in the experience of the sinner by his believing, trusting God in Christ for salvation. As he believes, as he trusts God in Christ, the sinner receives his justification. This is what the Bible means by being justified by faith (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:20-31; 4:1-25; 5:1; Gal. 2:16-21; 3:8-14; 5:1-5; for instance). The sinner is accounted righteous because he is clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ (Gal. 3:26-27).

I have just introduced two major topics – ‘the righteousness of Christ’ and ‘union with Christ’. I must pause to say a little more about each of them.

The righteousness of Christ

This phrase, or its equivalent, ‘Christ’s righteousness’, appears repeatedly in countless books, hymns, sermons, Confessions of Faith, *etc.*, yet, remarkably, ‘the righteousness of Christ’, as a

through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just, and of an enemy a friend, that so he may be an heir according to hope of life everlasting’ (Council of Trent).

⁴¹ Although almost all versions translate Rom. 5:19 as ‘by one man’s obedience many will be *made* righteous’, this is not the best translation. ‘Constituted’ is far better: *kathistēmi*, ‘to set down as, constitute, to declare, show to be’ (Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Ninth Printing 1991).

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phrase, never once appears in Scripture. As may be imagined, many have held strong opinions about this expression, what it means, and whether or not it is right to use it. Needless to say, nobody – among those I am talking about – questions the sinlessness of Christ; *that* is not the point at issue. Rather, what righteousness, precisely, does God account to his elect when they believe?

Here we come face to face with the much-debated topic of Christ's so-called active and passive obedience. While I do not wish to open a lengthy discussion on this subject here – having done so at length elsewhere⁴² – and while I have some reservations about using the two words themselves,⁴³ let me explain the terms: Christ's *active* obedience is his entire life of obedience to the law; his *passive* obedience is his death on the cross under the curse of the law. I take 'the righteousness of Christ' to encompass both. Let me briefly say why.

The righteousness of Christ, that which is accounted to the believing sinner, is not Christ's intrinsic righteousness. No! I am talking about Christ's obedience to the law, culminating in his sacrifice on the cross, all of which was vindicated by his resurrection. Christ was born under the law (Gal. 4:4). Christ, in his life, was fully obedient to the commands of the law, and, in his death, suffered its penalty, curse and condemnation, and so established that righteousness which would justify the elect. God the Father demonstrated his total satisfaction – pleasure – in, by and with this completed work of his Son, and his full acceptance of it, by raising him from the dead, receiving him back in exaltation into glory, crowned in triumph (Ps. 24:7-10; Is. 52:13; 53:12; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Tim. 3:16).

Christ *himself* is the believer's righteousness (Jer. 23:6; 33:16; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Pet. 1:1) – Christ and his work, his obedience to the law and his death under the law. Take Philippians 3:8-11. Paul, speaking passionately of his love of 'the righteousness which is from God by faith', explained:

⁴² See my *Christ's Obedience Imputed*.

⁴³ Christ was active, not only in his life, but in his death. He positively laid down his life (John 10:18).

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‘Righteousness... which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him [Christ]...’. This is what the apostle was referring to. It can be summed up in a word: Christ! Christ is the believer’s righteousness.

Now there is no question but that the weight of Scripture comes down heavily on Christ’s blood-sacrifice as God’s justifying act (Rom. 3:24-26; 5:6,8-10; 6:1-10; 7:6; 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 9:12-15,28; 10:1-14; 13:12; 1 Pet. 3:18; and scores of others). As Paul told us, this is at the heart of the Lord’s supper: ‘For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till he comes’ (1 Cor. 11:26). Above all, we have the cardinal text: ‘Through one man’s righteous act, the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life’ (Rom. 5:18). That ‘one righteous act’ can only be Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, the shedding of his blood. Scripture always lays massive emphasis on the death of Christ, under the curse of the law, as the justifying righteousness which God accounts to the believer.

But this does not mean that Christ’s life of obedience under the law had no place in establishing this justifying righteousness. After all, justification is more than forgiveness, more than pardon; it is God accounting righteousness to the one to be justified. There is a negative aspect – the removal of sin, its guilt, condemnation and power, but there is also a positive aspect – the reckoning of righteousness. True, the penalty of the law was death, but the way of righteousness under the law was: ‘Do and live’ (Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 20:11,13,21; Rom. 10:5); as Moses declared to the Israelites: ‘It will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us’ (Deut. 6:25). For this very reason, Christ was born under the law (Gal. 4:4). This means far more than that he was a Jew. He was, of course, but he was born under the law in order to obey it so that he might redeem his people (Gal. 4:5). And this he did perfectly, without sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26), thus earning salvation for his people – his entire obedience culminating in the offering of himself a perfect,

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spotless sacrifice on the cross. The law's regulations fully typified this – the sacrificial beast had to be without blemish (Ex. 12:5; 29:1; and scores more) – and Christ, fulfilling the law in every aspect, was without blemish (1 Pet. 1:19). His obedience under the law fitted him to be the perfect sacrifice (Heb. 5:9).

But there is more to it even than that. He became a man for the very purpose of living a life of obedience to the law, which culminated in the offering of his body on the cross. And he underwent all this in order to establish the righteousness that would justify his people. He became, therefore, the perfect Saviour for sinners for ever (Heb. 2:10; 5:9; 7:28).

So, although Scripture lays heavy stress on the death of Christ, the shedding of his blood in atoning sacrifice, as the justifying act, it also speaks of his obedience (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8-9; 10:5-14,19-20). 'By one man's obedience many will be made [constituted] righteous' (Rom. 5:19). Without question, this obedience, as I said, culminated in his death (Matt. 26:39; John 10:18; Rom. 5:18-19; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8; 10:10), for 'Christ... offered himself without spot' – 'without blemish' (NASB); 'unblemished' (NIV) – 'to God' (Heb. 9:14). Nevertheless, his entire existence as a man leading up to the cross is also a vital and integral part of this 'righteousness of Christ'. Hence:

Mary... will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:20-21). The word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Jesus Christ... was born of the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law... (Gal. 4:4-5). Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the

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cross... (Phil. 2:5-8). God was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same [their humanity – NIV], that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Heb. 2:14-15). When he came into the world, he said: ‘... a body you have prepared for me... “Behold, I have come... to do your will, O God”...’... By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:5-10).

When he was twelve, Jesus told his parents that he must be ‘about [his] Father’s business’ (Luke 2:49). And when he came to John to be baptised, he spoke of fulfilling ‘all righteousness’ (Matt. 3:15). While we must avoid speculation, we may surely say that, right from his baptism, the Lord Jesus was on that path of public obedience which would lead him inexorably to the cross. And in the years following his baptism, right up to his crucifixion, how often he spoke of the will of his Father, of his doing that will, of his finishing the work his Father had given him to do (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 9:4; 17:4), all culminating in his triumphant cry on the cross: ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30). Truly, as his Father’s ‘servant’ (Is. 42:1; 52:13), he kept his vow to him (Ps. 40:6–8; Heb. 10:5-9).

In short, I agree with Augustus Toplady:

*A debtor to mercy alone,
Of covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with thy righteousness on,
My person and off’ring to bring;
The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Saviour’s obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.*

And with John Gill, citing William Ames:

The righteousness by which we are justified... is not to be sought for in different operations of Christ, but arises from his whole obedience, both active and passive; which is both satisfactory and meritorious, and frees from condemnation and death, and adjudges and entitles to eternal life; even as one and

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the same disobedience of Adam, stripped us of original righteousness, and rendered us obnoxious to condemnation.⁴⁴

Mention of Adam reminds us that Christ is ‘the last Adam’ (1 Cor. 15:45). The first Adam failed to obey God, and therefore died, bringing all men down with him. Christ, ‘the last Adam’, lived a life of perfect obedience to God his Father, and then offered that perfect life in sacrificial death to atone for the elect, thus uniting his active and passive obedience.

And, as I have said, Christ’s entire obedience of life unto death was completely vindicated by his resurrection:

Righteousness... shall be imputed to us who believe in him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification (Rom. 4:22-25; see also 1 Cor. 15:17; 2 Cor. 5:15). Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name... (Phil. 2:5-9).

In this way, Christ’s *entire* work in his obedient life, culminating in his atoning sacrifice, leading to his vindication by the resurrection, all combined to weave that robe of righteousness which justifyingly clothes the believer in the sight of God (Isa. 61:10; Zech. 3:4). Moreover, as the apostle declared – and note the double ‘much more’ – ‘much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life’ (Rom. 5:9-10).

Consider: ‘Christ also has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma’

⁴⁴ John Gill: *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity...*, W.Winterbotham, London, 1796, Vol.2 p247.

(Eph. 5:2). Without doubt, the apostle is referring to the sacrificial death of Christ at Calvary. Now look at the context – both immediate and extended (Eph. 4:17 – 6:24). Once again, there is no question; the context is progressive sanctification.⁴⁵ Let me quote the verse *in full*: ‘And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma’. ‘Walk’ is a word of progressive sanctification. The apostle is commanding believers to live a life of love, not only *because* Christ loved them and gave himself for them, but *as – even as, just as* – he loved them and gave himself for them. In light of the point I am making, this tells me that Christ’s obedience, while it was supremely his sacrificial *death*, also comprised his sacrificial *life*. In other words, ‘the righteousness of Christ’, which is accounted to the believer for justification, embraces Christ’s obedience – both in life and death.

Finally, while I am, myself, convinced that ‘the faith *of* Christ’ (Rom. 3:22,26; Gal. 2:16, twice; 3:22; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 3:9; all in the Greek) should be thought of as ‘faith *in* Christ’ (as NKJV, NIV, NASB – but see NASB margin in Rom. 3:26; Eph. 3:12), and not ‘the faith *of* Christ’ (AV – except Rom. 3:26), I realise that the point has been debated for centuries, and is still fervently contested today. If the ‘of’ is right – and, as I say, I am not persuaded it is – then perhaps ‘the faith of Christ’ could be thought of as ‘the faithfulness of Christ’. As such, it would lend even more weight to the claim for justification by Christ’s obedience in life, as well as his obedience in death.

Be that as it may, it is my conviction that Christ’s life of obedience, culminating in his sacrificial death, all under the law, constitutes the justifying righteousness for believers – ‘the righteousness of Christ’.

And when the sinner believes – trusts Christ – he receives this perfect righteousness of Christ. It is imputed to him. It is

⁴⁵ Sanctification is both positional and progressive. In his positional sanctification in Christ, the believer is perfectly separated unto God. The believer’s progressive sanctification is the lifelong working out of his positional sanctification in practical godliness under the law of Christ. See my *Fivefold*.

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reckoned to him. It is credited to his account. He receives it at once. Upon his believing, he is absolutely justified. This righteousness, being Christ's perfect and unchangeable and unchanging righteousness, never wanes, never alters. It is fixed, absolute, complete, and knows no variation. The perfect righteousness of Christ clothes the sinner, and the sinner, therefore, is for ever, from the instant he is justified, perfect beyond all condemnation in the sight of God. God sees no sin in the believer. I am not for a moment suggesting that the believer is sinless. I am not talking about progressive sanctification! I am concerned here with justification. I am not talking about the sinner's lifestyle, but his standing before God.⁴⁶ As the sinner believes, he is at once and for ever free of condemnation, whoever might accuse him, and whatever offence they might accuse him of (Rom. 8:1,33-34). *Christ* is his righteousness!

Gill:

It is an individual act, done at once, and admits of no degrees; the sins of God's elect were altogether and at once laid on Christ, and satisfaction for them was made by him at once; he removed the iniquity of his people in one day, and by one sacrifice put away [their] sin for ever; all [their] sins were pardoned at once, upon this sacrifice offered, and satisfaction made; and the righteousness of Christ was accepted of, and imputed to his people, at once.⁴⁷

Thus the gospel can truly be said to 'establish the law' (Rom. 3:31). All the law's commands were fully met by Christ. All the law's penalties were fully paid by Christ. All the Father's will was accomplished (John 19:30) by Christ who fulfilled the

⁴⁶ I am not saying, I hasten to add, that there is no connection between the two. Sanctification is an inevitable consequence of justification. See Eph. 2:8-10, for example. See also Col. 1:22-23. No sanctification? No justification (Heb. 12:14)! See my 'Progressive Sanctification: A Matter of Eternal Life or Death'.

⁴⁷ Gill pp251-252. Gill was saying this of God's decree and Christ's death. He changed his tune radically when he moved immediately to 'justification by faith'. See my *Eternal*. The point here is that, as Scripture makes plain, Gill's words (though he himself would have profoundly disagreed) apply to justification at the point of faith.

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prophet's words: 'The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will exalt the law and make it honourable' (Isa. 42:21).

And this is what I mean by 'the righteousness of Christ'.

Now for the second of those two topics I mentioned.

Union with Christ

As we have seen, God, because of his grace, on the basis of his grace, justifies, declares righteous in his sight, all those sinners who trust the merits, the person and the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, in the gospel, God does not merely declare the sinner righteous, arbitrarily, simply by decree. He certainly does not declare the sinner righteous contrary to fact. If he did that, he would be breaking his own law. No. God declares the sinner righteous by taking steps to ensure that the sinner *is* righteous, constituting him righteous – not in himself, needless to say, but in Christ. That is, God reckons and regards the sinner as righteous as Christ – not in himself, but in Christ. He does this by putting the righteousness of Christ to the sinner's account.

How can this be? Union with Christ. That is the answer. Union with Christ. This, it goes without saying, is a breathtaking thought, far beyond our ability to grasp. So much so, if it had not been revealed to us by God, we should never have dreamed of it ourselves; we could never have dreamed of it. Having dealt with the matter at some length in other books,⁴⁸ I will be brief.

'God... made [Christ] who knew no sin, to be sin [or a sin offering, NIV footnote] for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor. 5:20-21). By Christ's righteous act, 'by one man's obedience', God constitutes, declares many righteous (Rom. 5:17-19). But this speaks of more than God reckoning the sin of his elect to Christ, and reckoning Christ's righteousness to them. Rather, Christ and the elect are one (Rom. 6:1-11, for instance). 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?... He who is joined to the

⁴⁸ See my *Christ's Obedience Imputed; Amyraut; Infant; Baptist Sacramentalism*.

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Lord is one spirit with him' (1 Cor. 6:15-17). Believers are 'in Christ'. This phrase is no makeweight: it appears nearly 250 times in the New Testament, so important is the concept.⁴⁹ Nor am I forgetting the corresponding 'Christ in you' (John 17:23; Rom. 8:10; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27). To put it as plainly as I can: As Christ is to God, so are the believing elect.⁵⁰ What Christ accomplished on their behalf, God declares to be fully theirs.

In short, in gospel justification by faith through union with Christ, we come up against something absolutely unique and astonishing. The sinner who is justified can say: 'Christ is mine, and I am his. We are one. All that he is to God, I am. All that he has, is mine. He took all my sin. By his righteousness, I am accounted righteous. God sees me only in and through his Son. As God the Father regards his Son, so he regards me'. It is amazing. Truly! No wonder the hymn-writers, in describing it, have used expressions such as 'amazing grace', 'I stand all amazed', 'the grace of God amazes me', 'grace – 'tis a charming sound', 'how free, how glorious is the grace', 'how wonderful the sovereign love', 'I am his, and he is mine', and so on. Amazing! This is the very word to use when thinking of God's plan for the justification of his elect through their union with Christ.

John Newton:

*Great God! From thee there's nought concealed,
Thou seest my inward frame;
To thee I always stand revealed
Exactly as I am!*

⁴⁹ The GNB translates 'in Christ' as 'in union with Christ'. Excellent!

⁵⁰ In saying this, I am most decidedly not going down the 'deification' route adopted by the Finnish/Orthodox school (see James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy (eds): *Justification: Five Views*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2011). For Calvin's rebuttal of Osiander on this, see John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, James Clarke and Co., Limited, London, 1957. Vol.2 pp40-51.

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*Since I can hardly therefore bear
What in myself I see,
How vile and dark must I appear
Most holy God, to thee!*

*But since my Saviour stands between
In garments dyed in blood,
'Tis he, instead of me, is seen,
When I approach to God.*

*Thus, though a sinner, I am safe;
He pleads before the throne
His life and death in my behalf,
And calls my sins his own.*

*What wondrous love, what mysteries
In this appointment shine!
My breaches of the law are his,
And his obedience mine.*

The 1644 Particular Baptist Confession:

Those who have union with Christ are justified from all their sins, past, present and to come, by the blood of Christ; which justification we conceive to be a gracious and free acquittal of a guilty, sinful creature, from all sin, by God, through the satisfaction that Christ has made by his death; and this applied in the manifestation⁵¹ of it through faith.⁵²

The Westminster documents:

The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and

⁵¹ 'Manifestation' figures heavily in eternal justification. Read it as 'display, revelation, exhibition, appearance, materialisation, something obvious, visible, apparent, brought to light, observed or discerned'. I am convinced the 1644 Particular Baptists, by 'justification... [is] applied in the manifestation of it through faith', meant that the sinner receives his actual justification in experience through faith. Note the 'applied'. Hyper-Calvinists, however, use 'manifestation' in a very different way. See my *Eternal*.

⁵² William L. Lumpkin: *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 1989, p164.

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husband; which is done in their effectual calling... Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.⁵³

So much for the second topic. The believing sinner is accounted righteous because he is 'in Christ', and, therefore, all Christ's obedience is reckoned his. He is forever beyond condemnation, clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Now let me make a vital point: *this must not be weakened, allowed to shrivel*. Justification is a legal declaration, yes, but the New Testament could not be more explicit about the believer's actual standing, his real standing, before God:

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man's obedience many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:19).

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

Christ... loved the church and gave himself for her, that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water⁵⁴ by the word, that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

For by one offering he has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:14).

These statements must be allowed to speak with their full voice. They must not be muted, or mentally postponed to eternity to come. Every believer, the moment he believes, the moment he trusts Christ, is perfectly righteous in God's sight, made so, constituted so, appointed so, declared so, by God washing away

⁵³ Westminster documents in *The Confession of Faith, The Larger and Shorter Catechisms...*, The Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, pp160-161,163.

⁵⁴ This does not refer to water baptism. See my *Baptist Sacramentalism*.

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all his sin in the blood of his Son, and clothing him with his Son's perfect righteousness. From that moment on, and for ever, God sees no sin whatsoever in his saints, viewing them as he does, in and through Christ. *This* is the biblical doctrine of justification.

Justification is, indeed, the article by which the church stands and falls. Nothing must be allowed to impinge on it. If I am a believer, I am one with Christ, and God sees me as perfect as his Son. This is what justification by faith means. The sinner is justified by union with Christ the moment he trusts the Redeemer, and is so for ever. And it is all through faith alone on the basis of God's free and sovereign grace. Glory to his name!