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Imputed Righteousness and Union with Christ

Pauline Participation, Justification, and the Question of Eternal Security

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Abstract

The doctrine of imputed righteousness is often debated as though the central question were whether righteousness comes from God or is received by faith. This essay argues that those points are common ground and that the real dispute concerns the mechanism by which righteousness becomes the believer's: whether Christ's obedience is forensically credited as a permanent possession or whether righteousness is shared through union with Christ. Beginning with Paul's pervasive "in Christ" language, the essay develops a participatory framework in which the believer receives saving benefits by being joined to Christ. It then considers the conditional character of that union in several New Testament warning passages, examines the covenantal sense of "the righteousness of God," and rereads Philippians 3:9, Romans 3:21, and 2 Corinthians 5:21 within that framework. Particular attention is given to the language of being "found in" Christ and "becoming" God's righteousness, as well as to the ministerial context of 2 Corinthians 5. The argument concludes that reckoned righteousness never floats free from union with the Righteous One. This has implications for the relationship between justification and eternal security: assurance is real and present, but it is grounded in the Spirit's witness and an abiding relationship with Christ rather than in a righteous status conceived as independently irreversible.

Keywords: imputed righteousness; union with Christ; Pauline participation; justification; righteousness of God; 2 Corinthians 5:21; apostasy; eternal security

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 edition (NASB 1995).

I

The Doctrine Under Examination

If one doctrine served as a signature of the Reformation, it was the doctrine of imputed righteousness. In its classic form the doctrine holds that Christ's sinless life and perfect obedience to the law of God are credited to the believer's account, as though the believer had rendered that obedience in person. The transaction is characteristically framed in judicial terms. To have Christ's righteousness imputed is to receive a verdict of acquittal: a once-for-all and irreversible change in the believer's legal standing before God.¹

The metaphor that governs the doctrine is the courtroom, and its characteristic image is the ledger. God, in this account, no longer regards the sinner but regards the Son in the sinner's place; the believer's record is treated as though it were Christ's. It is a striking picture, and it is sometimes described as a kind of legal fiction: God reckoning us as having lived a life we did not live.

It is essential to state at the outset what this essay does not dispute. It does not deny that righteousness is God's gift; Scripture says so plainly. It does not deny that this gift is received by faith rather than earned by works; Paul is emphatic that "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3). On the source of righteousness (God) and the instrument of its reception (faith), the whole tradition agrees. The dispute lies elsewhere. It concerns the mechanism—the how of the gift. Is Christ's perfect obedience permanently transferred to the believer's account, or is righteousness shared with the believer through union with the one who is righteous? That difference is not small, and, as we shall see, it decides a great deal more than it first appears to.²

II

Union with Christ as the Framework

To understand imputed righteousness rightly, one must first understand union with Christ, for Paul repeatedly states the benefits of salvation within that framework. One of his most persistent ways of describing salvation is through the phrases "in Christ" and "in him." In a manner both mysterious and real, the believer is joined to Christ—made a member of his body and incorporated into his person.

The motif is among the most common in the Pauline corpus. Believers are said to be crucified with Christ, buried with him, raised with him, seated with him in the heavenly places, hidden with him in God, made alive in him, a new creation in him, blessed with every spiritual blessing in him, redeemed in him, forgiven in him, justified in him, and sanctified in him.³ This is not the vocabulary of ornament. It is the vocabulary of location. Paul does not say that the believer receives a series of detachable benefits; he says that the believer is placed in Christ, and that the benefits follow from the placement.

Jesus himself describes this union in his prayer for his followers:

That they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us . . . I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity. (John 17:21–23)

In this prayer, Jesus places the believer's union with him within the larger communion of Father and Son: "I in them and You in Me." The consistent logic that follows is that every blessing the believer may claim is Christ's first, and the believer's only by participation in him. Christ has been given the inheritance, and "in Him we

¹For representative statements of the classic Reformed doctrine, see the *Westminster Confession of Faith* II.1, which holds that God justifies the elect not by infusing righteousness into them but by pardoning their sins and "accounting and accepting their persons as righteous . . . by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them." See also *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration III; and John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).

²The distinction is important. To treat Christ's active obedience as permanently transferred to the believer's account is to treat righteousness as a possession that can exist apart from the person of Christ. It is precisely this separation that the present essay contests.

³The catena is drawn from, among many others, Rom 6:4–8; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:5–6; Col 3:3; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:3–14. The sheer density of the "in Christ" and "with Christ" language across the corpus is itself an argument: participation is not a peripheral metaphor but the grammar within which Paul states the benefits of salvation.

have obtained an inheritance” (Eph 1:11). Christ has life in himself, and “he who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11–12). The blessing is never possessed in the abstract; it is possessed in a person.

This is the point at which the participatory reading of righteousness finds its most distinguished modern advocate. In a series of studies on what she called “interchange,” Morna Hooker argued that Paul’s soteriology is fundamentally one of participation rather than substitution—not a swapping of places between Christ and the believer, but a sharing of experience in which Christ is identified with us so that, in him, we might come to share in what he is.⁴ Hooker drew the pattern from Irenaeus, for whom the Word “became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”⁵ An early post-apostolic articulation of the exchange, in other words, is transformative and participatory, not forensic; the believer does not acquire a credited status so much as come to share a life.

III

The Conditionality of Union

If righteousness is possessed only in union, then everything turns on whether that union is itself secure and unconditional or living and maintained. Here the New Testament is not ambiguous. The union-with-Christ motif cuts in both directions: the same texts that describe the believer’s incorporation into Christ describe, with equal seriousness, the possibility of being cut off, taken away, or spat out.

Jesus’s image of the vine is the paradigm case: “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away” (John 15:2). The branch in question is a branch in Me—it is joined to the vine before it is removed. Paul presses the same point with the olive tree: the grafted branch remains “if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (Rom 11:22). The conditional is explicit and recurrent. We have become “partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (Heb 3:14); we are presented “holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith” (Col 1:22–23). Even the risen Christ’s threat to the lukewarm—“I will spit you out of My mouth” (Rev 3:16)—presupposes that those so threatened are, at present, in his mouth; one cannot be spat out of a place one was never in.⁶

These warnings share a common structure: they address those presently joined to Christ and condition continued standing upon continued abiding. Whatever righteousness union confers, then, is not a deposit lodged somewhere outside the relationship and immune to its dissolution. It is a reality that endures only as the union endures. We shall return to the force of this in Section VI; for now it is enough to have established that Paul’s participatory language is, on its own terms, conditional language.

IV

The Lexical Case: “The Righteousness of God”

The proof texts marshaled for imputation share a single phrase on which a great deal is made to depend: “the righteousness of God” (*dikaïosynē theou*). The Reformed reading takes this to mean a righteous status, originating with God and credited to the believer—God’s righteousness in the sense of a righteousness from God, deposited in the believer’s account. But this is not the phrase’s native sense, and a growing consensus in Pauline scholarship reads it otherwise.

⁴Morna D. Hooker, “Interchange in Christ,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 22, no. 2 (1971): 349–61; and “Interchange and Atonement,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 60, no. 2 (1978): 462–81; both reprinted in *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Hooker’s governing thesis is that Paul’s soteriology is one of participation rather than substitution—a sharing of experience “in Christ” rather than an exchange of places.

⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, preface, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), 526. Hooker explicitly develops her account of interchange from this patristic pattern; the point here is that this early post-apostolic articulation of the exchange is participatory and transformative, not forensic.

⁶It will not do to answer that these warnings address only rewards or fellowship rather than standing. That reply already presupposes the forensic model it is meant to defend; on a participatory reading the branch that is “taken away” (John 15:2) is severed from the very source of its life, not merely docked its wages.

In the Hebrew Scriptures on which Paul draws, “the righteousness of God” characteristically denotes God’s own covenant faithfulness—his action in keeping his promises by setting things right, rescuing his people, and judging evil. It is God showing up in history to act consistently with his covenant. “My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth” (Isa 51:5); “In Your righteousness deliver me and rescue me” (Ps 71:2). Righteousness and salvation stand in synonymous parallel; the righteousness of God is God’s covenant-keeping intervention.

It is this reading that N. T. Wright has defended most influentially. Paul’s uses of the phrase, Wright argues, refer to a righteousness that is God’s own—God’s covenant faithfulness—rather than a righteousness that God “gives, reckons, imparts, or imputes to human beings.”⁷ The observation is reinforced by a fact easily overlooked: Paul never writes “the righteousness of Christ.” The phrase does not occur. What is imputed in the Reformed scheme is Christ’s righteousness; what Paul actually names is the righteousness of God—and if that phrase means God’s covenant faithfulness unveiled in Christ, then the texts are not describing a transfer of Christ’s moral record at all.⁸

None of this denies that God justifies sinners; it locates justification within this larger saving action, into which the believer is invited to step by faith. The righteousness of God is not a grade handed down from heaven and filed away. It is God’s faithfulness made manifest in Christ—something one enters, not something one is issued.⁹

V

The Proof Texts Reread

With union established as the framework and the covenantal sense of “righteousness of God” in view, the principal proof texts read very differently. In each passage, Paul locates righteousness “in Christ,” and that location determines how the gift is received and possessed.

Philippians 3:9

...and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.

Here Christians of every tradition can affirm much: this righteousness is wholly from God, and it is truly found in Christ. The difference lies not in its source but in its mechanism. Paul does not merely say that righteousness comes from God; he says that he possesses it by being “found in” Christ. The righteousness Paul describes is not stored somewhere outside of Christ and then credited to him. It exists only within the living union—“that which is through faith in Christ.” The surrounding context confirms it: after renouncing his own credentials, Paul longs to “gain Christ and be found in Him,” binding righteousness to knowing him and sharing his life and death (3:8–10). This is relational participation, not a verdict filed once and for all.

Romans 3:21

But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.

This verse turns the argument of Romans. Everything from 1:18 to 3:20 has established universal human unrighteousness; now comes Paul’s great “but now,” the pivot from human failure to divine initiative. What is

⁷N. T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5:21,” in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 2, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 200–208. Wright builds on Ernst Käsemann, “The Righteousness of God’ in Paul,” in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 168–82, and Peter Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus*, 2nd corrected ed., FRLANT 87 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), correcting Käsemann by insisting that the phrase never sheds its covenantal sense.

⁸Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God,” 200–201: the phrase in Paul denotes a righteousness that is God’s own, “rather than a *dikaioynē* that he gives, reckons, imparts, or imputes to human beings.”

⁹So Wright, *passim*; cf. Isa 45:8, 21; 46:13; 51:5–8; 62:1–2; Ps 98:2, where God’s “righteousness” and “salvation” stand in synonymous parallel. The point is not that “justification” is absent from Paul but that the phrase “righteousness of God” carries the covenantal-saving sense first, and any forensic overtones are downstream of it.

revealed is “the righteousness of God.” The Reformed tradition hears this as Christ’s righteous status, originating with God and imputed through faith. But the text says “righteousness of God,” not “righteousness of Christ,” and read against its Old Testament background the phrase means God’s covenant faithfulness now unveiled in history in the person and work of Jesus. Paul does not mean that a new commodity has been imported from outside and posted to our accounts. He means that what the Law and the Prophets long anticipated—God’s own act of putting the world to rights—has at last broken into history. God’s righteousness is his saving faithfulness made visible in Christ, and faith is the way one steps into it.

2 Corinthians 5:21

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Paul’s compact and famously difficult summary rewards patience. Like Philippians 3:9, it locates everything “in Him”—union is again the mechanism. Consider the two clauses in turn.

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.” The language recalls the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, over which the high priest confessed the people’s sins and which then bore them away outside the camp (Lev 16:20–22). Christ so identifies with our sin that he carries it away, and we are forgiven. The clause describes identification and removal, not the penal transfer of a guilt-quantity onto a substitute’s ledger.¹⁰

“So that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Reformed interpreters find here a plain statement of imputation: our sin laid on Christ, his righteousness credited to us. But the wording resists it at two points. First, once again Paul writes “righteousness of God,” not “of Christ.” Second, and decisively, note the verb. Paul does not say we receive righteousness, nor that we are declared righteous; he says we become it. That verb of becoming coheres with the participatory grammar of the whole passage—we are what we are only “in Him.” First Corinthians 1:30 offers a suggestive parallel: Christ “became” for us “righteousness,” while here believers “become the righteousness of God” in him. The correspondence supports Paul’s participatory pattern, even if it does not by itself decide the meaning of either passage.¹¹

Across 2 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly presents his weakness and suffering as the setting in which God’s reconciling power becomes visible through his ministry. There is, additionally, a ministerial dimension to the verse that the immediate context requires. Paul’s aim across these chapters is to describe and defend his apostolic ministry: “God . . . gave us the ministry of reconciliation . . . we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us” (5:18–20). On this reading, to “become the righteousness of God” is, in the first instance, for Paul and his fellow workers to become the visible embodiment of God’s covenant-faithful, reconciling action as they preach—ambassadors who so represent their sovereign that they become the living presence of the one who sends them.¹² This ministerial sense need not compete with the participatory one. The “we” of the verse extends naturally from the apostles to the wider church, which shares in the same ministry of reconciliation; and whether one hears the clause as vocation or as justification, the location is identical—“in Him.” The verse will not yield a righteousness possessed apart from Christ, which is precisely what the forensic model requires.

¹⁰The scapegoat imagery is that of Lev 16:20–22, where the high priest confesses the sins of the people over the live goat, which then “bears” them away outside the camp. Wright and others prefer to hear *hamartia* in 2 Cor 5:21a as “sin offering” (as the term often functions in the Septuagint [LXX]; cf. Rom 8:3). Either way, the first clause describes Christ’s identification with our sin, not a transfer of guilt construed as penal bookkeeping.

¹¹On the participatory force of the verse, see Morna D. Hooker, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God: Another Look at 2 Cor 5:21,” *Novum Testamentum* 50, no. 4 (2008): 358–75, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853608X318466>. First Corinthians 1:30 is offered here as corroboration, not proof. The verse does not use the phrase “righteousness of God,” and nothing in the present argument rests on equating the two; the parallel illustrates Paul’s habit of locating the believer’s righteousness in a person rather than in a ledger.

¹²On the ambassadorial reading of 5:20–21—that Paul, as the covenant ambassador, “becomes” the embodiment of God’s covenant faithfulness in his cruciform ministry—see Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God,” 205–7. The present essay affirms this ministerial dimension; it does not depend on it to establish the participatory point, which the surrounding “in him” language already secures.

VI

Severing the Pipeline: Imputation and Eternal Security

We come now to the point at which the choice of mechanism proves to be anything but academic. In the Reformed system, imputed righteousness is the load-bearing member beneath the doctrine of eternal security —“once saved, always saved.” The inference is clean and, granted its premise, valid: if God has legally credited Christ’s perfect obedience to my account, then my standing before him is treated as a final judgment not open to reversal. Justification, on this view, is irreversible because the judgment is final.³³

The inference is only as secure as its premise. It requires that righteousness be a forensic deposit—a status lodged in an account, capable of existing apart from ongoing relationship, and therefore capable of being permanent. If that premise is rejected, the direct inference from imputation to irreversibility no longer follows. If, as the preceding sections have argued, the New Testament presents righteousness as a reality shared in union—a life participated in, not a status possessed in the abstract—then the permanence of one’s standing depends not on an abstract legal deposit but on remaining in the one who is our righteousness (John 15:1–6; Col 1:21–23). The pipeline from imputation to irreversibility runs only if righteousness can float free of Christ. Once union is central, it cannot, and the pipeline is severed.

The practical divergence is stark. On a strict imputation-as-transfer model, present sin cannot affect one’s standing before God; it can touch only one’s fellowship or one’s reward. On the union model, sin is not an accounting irregularity external to one’s standing but a threat to the communion in which that standing consists. The believer can grieve and quench the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 5:19; Eph 4:30). The call to holiness, on this account, is not decorative and not merely motivational; it is existential—a matter of remaining joined to the source of life. “The one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil” (1 John 3:7–8).³⁴

Nothing in this argument denies that Scripture speaks of righteousness being reckoned to believers. The claim is that such reckoning never floats free from union with Christ.

To reject the inference to irreversibility is not, however, to leave the believer without assurance. The two must be distinguished. Scripture teaches that we may know we are in Christ—not by inferring it from a past transaction, but by the Spirit’s present witness and the evidence of a life that continues to abide. “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” (2 Cor 13:5); “We know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (1 John 4:13); “whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2:5). Assurance so understood is neither presumption nor anxiety. It is the confidence proper to a living relationship—real, present, and grounded in the Spirit, rather than deduced from a verdict once entered and thereafter assumed.³⁵

³³This is the Reformed logic being summarized here: justification is irreversible because the judgment has already been rendered. The analogy is only as strong as the premise that righteousness is a rendered verdict rather than a shared life. If that premise is rejected, this direct *res judicata* inference no longer follows.

³⁴This is the decisive practical divergence. On a strict imputation-as-transfer model, present sin cannot touch one’s standing before God, only one’s fellowship or reward. On the union model, sin is not a bookkeeping irregularity external to one’s standing but a threat to the communion in which that standing consists: one can grieve and quench the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 5:19; Eph 4:30).

³⁵The distinction between assurance and irreversibility is easily blurred and worth stating plainly: to deny that justification is metaphysically irrevocable is not to deny that a believer may have well-grounded present confidence. Assurance on this account is the Spirit’s present witness (Rom 8:16) together with the observable evidence of a life that continues to abide (1 John 2:3–5; 3:24), not the inference from a past transaction.

VII

Conclusion

The question dividing the traditions has never been whether righteousness is God's gift or whether it comes by faith. On both, the tradition speaks with one voice. The question is how God gives it: by crediting Christ's moral record to a ledger that can then stand on its own, or by joining the believer to Christ so that his righteousness is shared as a life is shared. The Pauline texts, read within the "in Christ" framework that Paul himself supplies, favor the latter. To be found in him is to have his standing, his life, his Spirit, and his inheritance—including eternal life—none of it possessed apart from him.

If that is right, then the doctrine of imputed righteousness, in its strict forensic form, mistakes the mechanism of a gift it otherwise rightly prizes, and the direct inference from that mechanism to eternal security loses its foundation. What remains is not less than the tradition hoped for but more: not a verdict to be claimed and thereafter presumed upon, but a Person to be abided in. The church's task is not to rest in a past declaration of righteousness. It is to remain in the Righteous One.

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