

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

ST. PAUL'S CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

VIII. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.

THE idea expressed by the phrase "the righteousness of God" occupies the central place in St. Paul's theology, and contains his answer to the question, What was the great boon which came into the world by Jesus Christ. That the Christian *summum bonum* should assume this aspect to his mind was to be expected in the case of one who even in the pre-Christian period of his life had been animated by an intense though misguided passion for righteousness. Righteousness had always appeared the chief good to this man; he had sought it long in vain, and when at length he found it he gave to it a name expressive of its infinite worth to his heart: the righteousness of *God*. It is a name which he has deliberately chosen and to which he steadfastly adheres, using it in all his epistles when opportunity occurs,¹ a fact all the more noteworthy that he is not, like the scholastic theologian, the slave of a phrase, or unable or unwilling to vary the mode of expression. He speaks now of the righteousness of faith,² anon of being justified by faith,³ at another time of faith being imputed for righteousness,⁴ and in all these cases the idea he wishes to express is essentially the same.

The righteousness of God, as the apostle conceives it, is something which belongs to the Christian man, yet is not his personal righteousness. It is a thing revealed⁵ and to which a man submits.⁶ It also belongs to God, yet is not His personal righteousness. It is a "gift"⁷ from God to

¹ *Rom.* i. 17; iii. 21, 22; x. 3; ² *Cor.* v. 21; *Phil.* iii. 9.

² *Phil.* iii. 9. ³ *Rom.* v. 1. ⁴ *iv.* 24. ⁵ *i.* 17. ⁶ *x.* 3. ⁷ *v.* 17.

men. It is divine credit for being righteous bestowed on a man when he believes in or trusts God. God accounts one who believes in His grace righteous, He reckons his faith for righteousness. So the apostle puts the matter in *Romans* iv.

This is the Pauline doctrine in its simplest, most elementary, undeveloped form. It gives, it will be observed, great prominence and importance to *faith*. Why may appear on further enquiry, but meantime it may be worth while to lay to heart the fact, and to weigh the significance of St. Paul's doctrine in its most general and fundamental aspect.

1. The doctrine is in the first place the very antithesis of Judaism. The watchword of Judaistic righteousness was "works," individual acts of conformity to law; that of the new evangelic righteousness is faith, trust in the living, loving God. "Do" said the one, "believe" says the other.

2. Obviously the change in the watchword implies *an altered idea of God*. For Saul the legalist God was an exacting taskmaster, for Paul the Christian God has become the God of Jesus, a benignant gracious giver. What a revolution! No wonder the term "grace," *χάρις*, is of frequent occurrence in St. Paul's pages, and also faith, *πίστις*, its counterpart; for to grace in God answers faith, reciprocity, in man. And of what perennial value is the doctrine that man is justified by *faith* and not by works, and that God is such a Being that justification by faith is possible and *alone* possible! It is the charter of Christian liberty for all time: of emancipation from legalism with its treadmill service, and fear, and gloom, and uncertainty; from laborious self-salvation whether by religious ceremonial, or by orthodox opinions, or by the magic power of sacraments.¹

¹ On this *vide* J. Freeman Clarke's *The Ideas of the Apostle Paul translated into their modern equivalents* (1884) chapter v.

3. We may be sure that for Paul the ex-legalist, the intense hungerer after righteousness, who had abandoned Judaism because he had discovered its righteousness to be a vanity and vexation of spirit, the new-found righteousness of God is a great reality. "Faith imputed for righteousness" may sound artificial, and provoke the reflection, What men need is not to be reckoned righteous, but to be made actually righteous; but we may be sure that something real and valuable lurks under the phrase. For one thing pardon of sin is covered by it. This appears from *Romans* iv. 6, 7, where the non-imputation of sin is represented as the equivalent of the imputation of righteousness without works. It also appears from the notable text *2 Corinthians* v. 21, where it is said that Christ was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. This is one of a group of texts through which the principle runs that sanctifier and sanctified are all of one: Christ becoming what we are and we becoming what He is. He comes under a curse, that we may become exempt from the curse; He comes under law, that we may be set free from law. On the same principle Christ the sinless becomes or is made sin, that we the sinful may become sinless. That is to say, "the righteousness of God" is equivalent to the pardon or non-imputation of sin. Surely a solid boon to all who know what an accusing conscience is.

4. It is not likely that for Paul the ex-legalist the imputation of faith for righteousness will bear a sense which implies any notion of merit in faith, or turn faith into a new form of works. On the contrary he takes pains to inform us that he has no sympathy with such a thought. "Where then," he asks, "is the boasting? It is excluded. By what sort of a law? of works? Nay, but by the law of faith."¹ That is to say, the spirit of self-complacency and

¹ *Rom.* iii. 27.

that on which it feeds, self-righteousness, are incompatible with the very nature of faith. This is sound wholesome teaching, but to maintain it it is not necessary to hold that faith has no moral contents or value. The contrary is undoubtedly the fact. To believe in God, to trust in His grace, is emphatically a righteous act. It is to do justice to God, to His character, to His spirit; to think right thoughts about Him, and to cherish a becoming attitude and feeling towards Him. It is the fundamental act of true righteousness. It is the only form of righteousness possible for sinners; it is a form of righteousness possible for the greatest sinner; nay which is not only possible for him, but which he of all men can best exhibit, for the greater the sinner the greater honour done to God by trust in His grace. He who having sinned much trusts in Divine grace is "strong in faith, giving glory to God."¹ But there is no ground for boasting in that fact. Boasting is excluded by the nature of the case. A great sinner trusting in God's grace is simply one who humbly yet trustfully confesses his deep need of forgiveness. Such an one may, as Jesus taught, be exalted by God, but he cannot possibly exalt himself. The denizens of the slums do not think themselves very virtuous in accepting the invitation to a free breakfast; they simply eat ravenously and thankfully.

The foregoing observations help us to see that the crude elementary form of the Pauline doctrine of Justification is by no means to be despised or neglected as unimportant. It is indeed as little to be despised as the foundation of a house. For it is the religious foundation, and all beyond is theological superstructure, though we in our familiarity with developed doctrines are very apt to forget the fact. On this foundation rested the salvation of many who lived before the Christian era, Abraham included. Abraham be-

¹ iv. 20.

lieved God and it was accounted unto him for righteousness, but he knew nothing of St. Paul's developed doctrine of Justification. Similar was the case of devout souls even in the days of our Lord. The faith of the publican in the parable is still of the Old Testament type, expressing itself in a prayer which echoes the 130th Psalm: "God be merciful to me the sinner." Yet he went down to his house "justified."¹ Even now, in the Christian era, there are men who feel compelled to fall back on the ultimate religious truth that a sinner's hope is in the mercy and grace of God as the only thing they are able to grasp. It is not for us to say that such men cannot go down to their house justified. The words of Jesus: "he that humbleth himself shall be exalted"² express a universal law in the moral order of the world.

Let us proceed now to consider the apostle's specific doctrine of justification. Insight into it may be gained by a careful study of his statements concerning the nature and functions of faith. We are justified by faith, he teaches; what then is the faith that justifies?

1. An important light is thrown on this question by *Romans* iii. 21-26 which may in one aspect be viewed as a definition or description of justifying faith. There faith is in the first place defined with reference to its personal object as the *faith of Christ*, which means not the faith that Jesus is the Christ, but rather faith in Christ as the embodiment of Divine grace. It is further indicated that in Christ on which the eye of faith is chiefly fixed is the redemption achieved by His death, wherein the grace of God to the sinful manifests itself. According to this passage, therefore, the faith that justifies is not simply faith in God, or faith in God's grace, or faith in the truth that Jesus is the Christ, but faith in Jesus as one who gave Himself to death for man's redemption and so became the

¹ *Luke* xviii. 14, *δεδικαιωμένος*.

² xviii. 14.

channel through which, God's grace flows to sinners. Following out this idea of faith justification might be defined as a judicial act whereby God regards as righteous those who trust in His grace as manifested in the atoning death of Christ. This account of the matter might serve all practical purposes, and even be preferable to more highly differentiated definitions, especially for the purpose of catechetical instruction in the elements of the Christian religion.

2. But St. Paul has more to say concerning faith. In certain texts he seems to conceive of faith as grasping and appropriating to itself the ideal righteousness as realised in the conduct of Christ. So for example in the words: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."¹ Sinful in Adam, righteous in Christ, such seems to be the apostle's thought. Faith is indeed not mentioned in this place, but it may be held to be implied as the condition of becoming righteous in Christ. What faith can appropriate God may impute. Introducing this new idea of the imputation of Christ's righteousness we get a more developed definition of Justification, such as that in the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism, according to which it is "an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." This definition may be regarded as a fair inference from Pauline texts, such as that above cited,² though it must be admitted that it lacks support in express Pauline phraseology. The apostle nowhere speaks of the righteousness of Christ being imputed, nor does he anywhere identify the righteousness of God given to faith with the righteousness of Christ, even in places where he might have been ex-

¹ *Rom.* v. 19.

² To which may be added *1 Cor.* i. 26 and *2 Cor.* v. 21.

pected to do so, assuming that his way of thinking on the subject was similar to that of the theologians who compiled the Shorter Catechism, *e.g.* in *Philippians* iii. 9.¹ On this ground so conservative a theologian as Weiss maintains that the idea that God imputes to men the righteousness of Christ does not belong to the Pauline system of thought.²

3. The apostle conceives of faith as performing yet another function in reference to Christ's righteousness,—as not only appropriating it as a ground of pardon, but as establishing such a relation between Christ and a believer as guarantees that the ideal objective righteousness without shall eventually become a real righteousness within. So in these words, forming a part of the famous Antioch remonstrance: "I am crucified with Christ, yet I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me, and gave Himself up for me." Is this function of faith included in the faith that justifies? If so, then our formula will be: God regards as righteous all whose faith in Christ not only lays claim to His righteousness as its own, but contains in itself the guarantee for the ultimate reproduction of a kindred righteousness in the character of the believer. But here the theological ways part. There have always been two tendencies at work in the church, one to restrict and minimise the function of faith in justification, the other to make it as comprehensive as possible. For those who follow the former tendency faith is simply a hand laying hold of an external benefit, a garment of righteousness to cover spiritual nakedness; for the patrons

¹ Where instead of *τὴν διὰ πίστεως χριστοῦ* might have stood *τὴν δικαιοσύνην χριστοῦ*, more especially as faith is mentioned in the next clause.

² *Vide* his *Lehrbuch der Biblischen Theologie des N.T.*, § 82 *b*, note 2: Pfeiderer in his *Urchristenthum*, p. 250, and in the second edition of his *Paulinismus* (1890), p. 184, inclines to the same view. He remarks that the non-use by St. Paul of the expression "the imputation of Christ's righteousness" is the more remarkable as the imputation of the merits of the fathers and of saints was a feature in the theology of the Jewish synagogue.

of the latter, faith is the fruitful germ of all true righteousness, containing the promise and potency of a new Christ-like life. Both parties are animated by a genuine religious interest, the one by a desire to exclude a new form of legalism coming in under the wing of faith, the other by a desire to make sure that the righteousness of God given to faith shall be something real and Godworthy, not something shadowy, formal and artificial. Yet it is possible that in their antagonism to each other these two parties may both err in opposite directions.

As is well known, the Protestant theological tradition has very decidedly leant to the side of minimising faith's function. The great doctors of the Lutheran and Reformed confessions emptied faith of all moral contents that no pretext might remain for ascribing to it justifying virtue, and assigned to it simply the humble service of claiming an interest in the foreign righteousness of Christ. They even went the length of setting aside the scriptural idea of the imputation of faith and substituting for it the idea of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, keeping themselves right with St. Paul by the ingenious device of taking faith, in the texts where it is said to be imputed, *objectively*, so bringing out the meaning that not the act of believing, but the object believed in, the righteousness of Christ, is imputed. This manner of handling the *locus* of justification is very open to criticism. In the first place it is unfortunate that the Protestant doctors, in their laudable zeal against neo-legalism should have found it necessary to become un-Pauline in their terminology, banishing from their theological vocabulary the imputation of faith as not only inexact but even heretical,¹ and employing exclusively a phrase which, however legitimate as an inference from Scripture

¹ This attitude is reflected in the *Westminster Confession*, chapter xi., where among the false ways of justification that "by imputing faith itself" is specified.

texts, has no express Scriptural warrant. This fact is an index that somehow they had got into the wrong track, and had fallen into one-sidedness in their way of thinking. Then in the second place the justifying faith of this very controversial, extremely anti-Romish, theology, is an abstraction. A faith which is no more than a mere hand to lay hold of an external righteousness has no existence except in the brain of a scholastic theologian. Faith, if it deserve the name, is always very much more than this. The more the better. Faith cannot have too much moral contents; the more it has, the better it will serve us from the beginning to the end of our Christian career. At the very least true faith is always a humble trust in the grace of God, and that is a thing of real moral value. Then it lies in the very nature of true faith to open the soul to the influence of Christ, so that from the day we believe in Him He becomes a renovating power in our life. Lastly, the scrupulous anxiety to shut out legalism in the form of the imputation of faith, as the germ of a personal Christian righteousness, may readily defeat itself by introducing unawares legalism under another guise. We do not get rid of legalism by careful theological definitions designed to exclude it. We may introduce thereby a dogmatic legalism as blighting in its influence on the Christian life as the Judaism of the Apostolic age, or the Sacramentarianism of Rome. It cannot be good for the health of our piety that we should be constantly taking care that our faith in the God of all grace shall be as destitute as possible of moral contents, lest perchance we fall into the mistake of finding in an ethically rich faith a ground of boasting.

But on the other hand it may be well for the health of Christian piety that we should think of God as imputing faith for righteousness only in respect of its objective function. It is perfectly true that from the Divine point of view the distinctions we make between the different stages

in the process of salvation are evanescent. To the Divine eye, contemplating all things *sub specie æternitatis*, the whole drama of salvation in its five acts: fore-knowledge, fore-ordination, calling, justification, sanctification,¹ is one. Yet, from the human point of view, it may be important to distinguish between the stages, especially between the two last named. It may be advantageous in order to the consummation devoutly to be wished—conformity to the image of Christ—that we should conceive of God as justifying us on purely objective grounds, without reference to the work of grace He is to accomplish in us. It may give us a powerful initial impetus onwards towards the goal to be told that God pardons our sins, and accepts us as righteous, on account of the moral ideal realised in Christ the object of our trust. It may start us on our way with a peace, joy, and hope impossible to one who is constantly thinking of the uncertainties of the future. So Jesus dealt with penitents. With cheerful, hope-inspiring tone He said unconditionally: “thy faith hath saved thee, go into peace,” while perfectly aware that there were risks ahead, and that peace could not last unless sin were finally forsaken.

Is it not thus that St. Paul also conceives God as dealing with men in the matter of justification? In answering this question in the affirmative, I do not lay much stress on the verbal interpretation of the Pauline words *δικαιοῦν* and *δικαίωσις*. The controversy as to the meaning of these words is now as good as ended. It is admitted on all hands by theologians of the most diverse schools that in the apostle's use they bear a judicial or forensic sense. Dr. Newman in England in 1838 taught that justification in the abstract, and as such, is an imputation and a counting righteous,² and Dr. Lipsius in Germany in 1853 taught that *δικαιοῦν* never means *justum facere*, but always *justum*

¹ *Rom.* viii. 29, 30.

² *Vide his Lectures on Justification*, p. 70.

habere. But both strenuously opposed the purely forensic conception of justification. Dr. Newman held that while in the abstract it is a counting righteous, in the concrete it is a making righteous, and Dr. Lipsius maintained that in so far as it is a judicial sentence pronounced at the commencement of the Christian life, it is simply the pre-announcement of a real inward righteousness which God intends by His grace to make forthcoming.¹ In effect the position taken up by both is that God justifies because He intends to sanctify.

Was that the apostle's position? I think not, though in saying so, I do not for a moment doubt that what the apostle desired for himself and for all Christians, was a real personal inward righteousness, and that he would think nothing had been gained unless that were gained. Neither do I doubt that in his view God aimed at this result, even that believers should be conformed to the image of His Son. But two considerations lead me to believe that St. Paul did not conceive of future sanctification as the ground of initial justification. The first is what he says in 2 *Corinthians* v. 17 about "God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." These words suggest the idea of a general justification of mankind, in the form of a non-imputation of sins, on the purely objective ground of God's satisfaction with the merits of Jesus Christ. Individual justification on that view will naturally mean entering by faith into the state of grace in which God for Christ's sake is pleased to place the world. Doubtless this is but the beginning of salvation, but it is a momentous beginning, which one who, like St. Paul, had tried to reach salvation by the legal method was not likely to undervalue. No wonder he appropriates to it the title, *the righteousness of God*, as if it were the principal thing or even everything. This does not mean that he undervalues what follows. It

¹ Vide *Die Paul. Rechtfertigungslehre*, p. 17.

means that he has a due sense of the infinite importance of being at last *on the right road*. It indicates also, probably, his desire to give prominence to objective justification as a *great, public, world-wide fact*: God reconciling the world to Himself in Christ. Finally, it means giving the place of honour to that feature in the Pauline conception of Christianity, at which the antagonism between it and legalism is most conspicuous. The quest of personal righteousness was common to the two systems; in their attitude towards the righteousness of God, they were diametrically opposed.

The other consideration that weighs much with me is this: that St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans does not refer to the subjective aspect of faith as a renewing power till he has finished his exposition of the doctrine of justification. He takes up faith's function in establishing a vital union with Christ in the sixth chapter, continuing the theme to the end of chapter viii. But already he has said in exultant tone: "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God, and joy in hope of glory, in tribulation, and in God Himself." Does not this amount to the exclusion of faith's sanctifying function from the grounds of justification? To the end of chapter v. the apostle seems to be treating of an objective righteousness, and from that point onwards to the end of chapter viii. of a righteousness that is subjective. How the two aspects were related in his mind will be a subject of enquiry hereafter; meantime the important matter is to be satisfied in our own minds that there are two aspects to be frankly recognised.

4. There remain to be noticed two other statements in the Pauline epistles respecting faith's functions which appear to have a bearing on the subject of justification. I refer to *Romans* iv. 25, and x. 9, in both of which faith seems to be viewed as having for its proper object the *resurrection* of Christ, and faith in Christ's resurrection seems to be regarded as the ground of justification. How are these

texts to be understood? The suggestion that when St. Paul represents Christ as raised *διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν* he uses the term *δικαίωσις* in the sense of sanctification, is justly put aside on the ground that this interpretation is not in accordance with Pauline usage, or in keeping with the connection of thought in which the word here occurs. More acceptable is the explanation offered by the majority of commentators that the apostle in these passages means to represent Christ's resurrection as [the ground not of our justification but of our faith in the atoning character of His death. "The resurrection of the sacrificed One was required to produce in men the faith through which alone the objective fact of the atoning offering of Jesus could have the effect of *δικαίωσις* subjectively."¹ But M. Ménégos has propounded a new theory, which, because of the ability, freshness, and real value of his contribution to the elucidation of the Pauline system of thought, claims respectful consideration. Briefly it is this; that the resurrection of Christ was necessary in the first place for His own justification, and that through faith in that resurrection we become partakers of Christ's justification. The author of *Le Péché et la Rédemption* finds in *Phil.* iii. 8-10 the most precise statement of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith which he thinks no theologian has perfectly understood. "The key of the system," in his view, "is on the one hand the notion of the justification of Christ by death and resurrection, and on the other hand the notion of the identification of the individual with the person of Christ by faith."² "That which is peculiar to Paul is the mystic notion of the identification of man with Jesus Christ by faith, and the appropriation by that means of the justification of Christ."³ The idea of Christ needing to be justified by resurrection may appear strange, but the author quoted is quite in

¹ Meyer *in loco*.

² *Le Péché*, etc., p. 270.

³ *Le Péché*, etc. 271.

earnest in broaching it. Its presuppositions in the Pauline system, as he understands it, are these:—Death is the punishment of sin; He that has paid the penalty of transgression has satisfied justice and is entitled to go free. The thief when his term of imprisonment is at an end must be set at liberty. In like manner Christ who died for our sins had by death squared accounts with justice and was entitled to return to life. If it be asked, would it not have sufficed that the crucified One should continue to live on in the spirit without a physical resurrection? our author replies that according to the Pauline system, death is the destruction of life, and death in that sense, not the endurance of eternal pain, is the penalty of sin. Paul was a monist, a man for him was an animated body, and the destruction of the body by death was the destruction of life. Therefore it is not by accident that nowhere in his writings can we find a trace of a resurrection for the wicked. Hence also it follows that had Jesus not risen it would have meant that he had perished with the wicked.

Space will not admit of a detailed criticism of this theory on all sides, and especially in connection with its anthropological and eschatological presuppositions. A few remarks only can be offered here. It certainly has the merit of assigning a strong reason for the resurrection of Christ in viewing it as what was due to One who had borne the full penalty of sin. Nor can we object to the theory that it leaves no room for an objective justification of sinners; inasmuch as, while the author certainly seems to lay chief stress on subjective justification by the mystic power of faith, he might quite legitimately regard the resurrection of Christ as a general justification of the world. But this novel and ingenious explanation of the apostle's doctrine is at fault in other directions. In the first place, under it justification bears two different senses, in reference to Christ on the one hand, and to believers on the other.

In reference to us, it means either, according to one school, accounting those righteous who are not yet really righteous, or making them righteous by a gradual process, according to a different understanding of the apostle's meaning. In reference to Christ it means neither of these things, but acknowledging that the Just One had vicariously paid the full penalty of sin so that sin had no more right over him : He was *justified from sin*.¹ Then, secondly, a double meaning lurks under the word death also, as applied to Christ and to sinners. If death be the wages of sin, and Christ died in the capacity of a sinner, why should He rise any more than any other man who dies as a criminal? If one by death can be justified from sin so as to be entitled to rise again, why not all? Obviously in the case of Christ death is not taken in the sense of destruction, which it is held to bear in reference to the wicked, but simply in the sense of death's *pain*. The propounder of the theory now under consideration, admits that this double sense of death is involved, but he charges it as a fault against the apostle's system of thought, not against his own interpretation of it. Finally, it is strange that this view, if really held by St. Paul, has left so little trace in his vocabulary. He is rich in words expressing co-partnership between the believer and Christ. There is a co-crucifixion, a co-dying, a co-burial, a co-rising, a co-living, a co-suffering, a co-glorification. The diapason would be complete if a co-justification found its place among these joint-experiences. But it is not forthcoming. If the apostle meant to teach the doctrine M. Ménégoz ascribes to him, he has not been happy in his language.²

A. B. BRUCE.

¹ *Rom.* vi. 7.

² In the new Edition of *Der Paulinismus*, Pfeleiderer, while not adopting the theory of Ménégoz, speaks very favourably of it, as reasonable in itself and consistent with Pauline texts. *Vide* p. 160.