

COUNTED
RIGHTEOUS
IN
CHRIST

*Should We Abandon the Imputation of
Christ's Righteousness?*

JOHN PIPER

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“With the heart of a pastor and the skill of an accomplished exegete, John Piper offers refreshing insight into the practical as well as theoretical importance of the doctrine of justification. It’s essential reading at a time when this marvelous gospel is under increasing attack.”

MICHAEL S. HORTON
Associate Professor of Historical Theology and Apologetics
Westminster Theological Seminary in California

“I share the concern of John Piper as he not only sounds the alarm but also rushes to the rescue of all who are tempted to abandon a truly biblical perspective on the issue of imputation.”

ALISTAIR BEGG
Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland

“Although I have been a Christian for a long time, I became aware of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s active righteousness only fairly recently. Yet in the years since I have become aware of the ‘Blessed Exchange’—my sin for Christ’s righteousness—I doubt that a day has gone by without my feasting on this core truth of biblical faith. Consequently, I am deeply grateful to John Piper for his careful articulation and defense of this, the ‘leading edge’ of Christianity’s Good News. Piper also shows how our faithfully embracing this liberating truth should radically affect our daily Christian lives. As Augustine heard the child chant, ‘Take and read.’”

MARK R. TALBOT
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Wheaton College
Executive Editor, *Modern Reformation* magazine

“This is a superb work, wonderful in its clarity, remarkable for its faithful, thorough treatment of the biblical texts, and powerful in the force of its argument. Dr. Piper’s simple, potent answer to the recent attacks on the historic Protestant understanding of justification by faith will cure a host of theological ills. This is surely one of the finest and most important books to be published in many years.”

JOHN MACARTHUR
Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California
President, The Master’s College

“John Piper’s book on Christ’s imputed righteousness is exactly what the current debate over this issue needs. Dr. Piper demonstrates through a precise and persuasive exegesis of the relevant passages that this doctrine is both biblical and important. He argues passionately that understanding the doctrine is spiritually edifying and pastorally helpful. He does all this, moreover, in a charitable, irenic tone suitable for a teaching that is such good news.”

FRANK THIELMAN
Presbyterian Professor of Divinity
Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“Now I know something of the shock Augustine must have felt when he initially read Pelagius. My heart is pained that the cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith is called nonsense and passé by friends. Without imputed righteousness Christianity is not Christian, divine justice is made a folly, and sin is required by mere human sincerity. It is too much to surrender the wonderfully comforting, biblically clear truth that we stand before a holy God clothed and complete in the righteousness of His Son. I thank God that someone has spoken out!”

JOHN D. HANNAH
Department Chairman, Distinguished Professor of Historical Theology
Dallas Theological Seminary

“This is certainly the most solid defense of the imputed righteousness of Christ since the work of John Murray fifty years ago. I’m delighted that Dr. Piper has established that important doctrine, not as a mere article from the confessional tradition, but on the solid foundation of God’s Word.”

JOHN M. FRAME
Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“Does Christ’s lifelong record of perfect obedience to God get ‘credited’ to your account when you trust in Christ and are ‘justified’ by God? This has been the historic Protestant understanding of the ‘imputation of Christ’s righteousness,’ but John Piper warns that we are in danger of losing this doctrine today because of attacks by scholars within the evangelical camp. In response, Piper shows, in careful treatment of passage after passage, that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers is clearly the teaching of the Bible, and if we abandon this doctrine we will also lose justification by faith alone. I am thankful to God for John Piper’s defense of this crucial doctrine.”

WAYNE GRUDEM
Research Professor of Theology and Bible
Phoenix Seminary

“With John Piper, I think that as the doctrine of justification by faith alone is a vital means to the church’s health, so the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ is a vital element in stating that doctrine. Therefore I gladly welcome Dr. Piper’s carefully argued reassertion of it.”

J. I. PACKER
Board of Governors Professor of Theology
Regent College

“This book may be short, but it is clear, to the point, and illuminating on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to sinners, without which there is no biblical doctrine of justification and without which the church would certainly fall.”

DAVID WELLS
Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical & Systematic Theology
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“The Gospel must be defended in every generation. Today, as in the sixteenth century, the central issue is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. John Piper clearly and powerfully proves this is the view of the Bible and not merely of orthodox Protestant theology. The church must say ‘No!’ to those who declare that imputation is passé. If imputation is passé, then so is the Gospel.”

R. C. SPROUL
President, Ligonier Ministries
Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics
Knox Theological Seminary

“I am thankful for John Piper’s zeal for the glory of Christ and the good of the church, and for his careful exegesis of the relevant texts. For myself 2 Corinthians 5:21 is enough, affirming the glorious exchange that the sinless Christ was made sin (by imputation) with our sins, in order that in Christ we might become righteous (by imputation) with his righteousness. In consequence Christ has no sin but ours, and we have no righteousness but his.”

JOHN STOTT

“With a mind deeply saturated in God’s word, a heart longing for the church’s purity and confidence, and a passion that Christ be honored in all and above all, John Piper writes *Counted Righteous in Christ* to guide a new generation of Christians into the glorious truth of our justification by faith alone, in Christ alone. One cannot help but marvel at and rejoice in the care with which Piper treats relevant passages. Often countering popular and novel proposals, he gives clear and compelling reasons for seeing justification as, centrally, the crediting of Christ’s very own and perfect righteousness to the one who trusts in God alone for his salvation. No doctrine is more basic to God’s salvation plan and hence more central in understanding the Christian’s new identity; yet today these truths are widely ignored or misunderstood. Believer, I commend you to read this book with justified hopes of entering more fully into the liberating freedom of your full and certain righteous standing before the God who justifies the ungodly (marvel!) through faith in the merits of his Son’s righteous life and substitutionary death.”

BRUCE A. WARE
Senior Associate Dean, School of Theology
Professor of Theology
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is a timely and important work. Four times in the past four days I have been shocked to read of well-known evangelicals challenging some aspect of the historic, Reformation view of justification. As an eroding tide of evangelical opinion rises against it, may the Lord use John’s book to reinforce the theological retaining wall around the lighthouse doctrine of justification.”

DON WHITNEY
Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The unraveling of evangelical commitment seems always to have a new chapter. In *Counted Righteous in Christ*, Dr. John Piper has isolated the newest retreat on the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ. This book restates in powerful terms the necessity of Christ’s righteousness becoming our own.”

PAIGE PATTERSON
President, Professor of Theology
Southeastern Theological Baptist Seminary

“Dr. Piper writes not only with his customary verve and enthusiasm but also with the courtesy and charity we have come to expect of him, as he robustly defends the traditional doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Those who think that this teaching is neither biblical nor essential to the Christian faith, and can therefore be quietly dropped, will need to weigh Dr. Piper’s arguments carefully, particularly his exposition of the Pauline teaching on righteousness and justification.”

PETER T. O’BRIEN
Senior Research Fellow in New Testament and Vice Principal
Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia

“Piper provides a passionate, well-informed, and convincing exposition of the centrality of the imputed righteousness of Christ for the justification of sinners. In response to a growing number of scholars and church leaders who have questioned the traditional Protestant understanding of justification, Piper offers a lucid and compelling examination of the biblical evidence in support of that understanding. His many fresh insights and practical applications will challenge the complacent, comfort the afflicted, and inspire lives of grateful praise on the part of those who are the beneficiaries of Christ’s redeeming work.”

THE REV. GORDON P. HUGENBERGER
Senior Minister, Park Street Church, Boston
Adjunct Professor of Old Testament, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Largely a result of the emergence in recent decades of the ‘new perspective’ on Paul is the growing denial today that the apostle teaches the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. *Counted Righteous in Christ* is such an important book because it confronts this denial head-on and counters the charge that the heart of the Reformation doctrine of justification rests on a misunderstanding of Scripture. Written in the author’s typically spirited and winsome fashion, it provides what is most urgently needed in the face of this charge: a clear and convincing *exegetical* case for the gospel truth affirmed in its title. The broader church is deeply indebted to John Piper for what it has been given to him to produce in the midst of the already overly full demands of a busy pastorate.”

RICHARD B. GAFFIN, JR.
Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“John Piper’s defense of the Reformation’s traditional interpretation of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness deserves to be taken very seriously. Expert biblical scholars must, in the end, judge the details of his exegesis, but all careful readers should be able to see that he has presented a telling account of the practical spiritual value of the doctrine, its centrality in the church’s most enduring hymnody, and its critical importance in the theology of the New Testament.”

MARK A. NOLL
McManis Chair of Christian Thought
Wheaton College

“In this exegetical study John Piper carefully demonstrates the importance and the biblical basis of the doctrine of imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer. This is important reading in light of recent challenges to the traditional understanding of justification.”

MILLARD J. ERICKSON
Distinguished Professor of Theology
Truett Seminary, Baylor University

“While the biblical doctrine of justification is about more than imputation, it does not involve less. John Piper has written a vigorous and timely book on this neglected and yet critically important theme. From the historic Protestant perspective, the doctrine of imputation underscores the radical character of divine grace, and John makes this point with clarity, passion, and insight.”

TIMOTHY GEORGE
Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University
Executive Editor, *Christianity Today*

“While evangelicals sleep, people we once trusted have been sowing seeds of false doctrine in the church. Responding to the latest departure from the faith, John Piper challenges those who have abandoned the pivotal doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. What is at stake here is nothing less than the integrity of the Gospel.”

RONALD H. NASH
Professor of Philosophy
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Counted Righteous in Christ

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PREFACE

As I have preached through the first eight chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans in the last four years, I have found my mind and heart moving toward Luther's estimation of the doctrine of justification, and particularly the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the precious foundation of our full acceptance and everlasting inheritance of life and joy.

[Justification is] the chief article of Christian doctrine. To him who understands how great its usefulness and majesty are, everything else will seem slight and turn to nothing. For what is Peter? What is Paul? What is an angel from heaven? What are all creatures in comparison with the article of justification? For if we know this article, we are in the clearest light; if we do not know it, we dwell in the densest darkness. Therefore if you see this article impugned or imperiled, do not hesitate to resist Peter or an angel from heaven; for it cannot be sufficiently extolled.¹

I do believe that the article is "impugned [and] imperiled" in our day. And while I would rather glory in it than argue for it, sometimes resistance is a form of rejoicing. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up . . . a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak . . . a time

¹ From his exposition of Galatians 2:11 in *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 2, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 705, entry 2200. Luther clarifies the nature of justification in terms of imputation of Christ's righteousness: "Christ is promised, who is your perfect and everlasting Righteousness" (p. 668, entry 2071). "If we believe in Christ, we are considered absolutely just for His sake, in faith. Later, after the death of his flesh, in the other life, we shall attain perfect righteousness and have within us the absolute righteousness which we now have only by imputation through the merit of Christ. . ."

for war, and a time for peace” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, ESV). A time to delight in the truth and a time to defend the truth. For the sake of delight.

Chapter One will explain why I have invested so much energy in this controversy. For now, I would simply say that the glory of Christ is the most precious reality in the universe, and it is obscured when the doctrine of justification is lost or blurred for the people of God and the mission of the church. I pray that this small effort will help preserve the “usefulness and majesty” of this truth. I offer it as a fallible act of worship in the hope that “Christ for righteousness” (Romans 10:4) will be more “sufficiently extolled.”

I hope that thinking laypeople, pastors, and scholars will read this book. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are, I believe, readable and hope-giving to the ordinary layperson. Chapter 3 is a rigorous and demanding exegetical argument. But disciplined minds can follow the argument without advanced theological training or foreign languages. In fact I would encourage the effort. Raking is easy, but all you get is leaves. Digging is hard, but you might find gold.

I have dedicated the book to the first class of The Bethlehem Institute because their questions for two years drove me back to the texts again and again to see things more clearly. I thank God for my comrade Tom Steller, whose challenges focused my energies on the crucial issues. I thank God for the Council of Elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church who freed me at least three times to do this work, because they really believe that it matters for the church and the cause of Christ in the world. And I thank God for the partnership of Lane Dennis and the team at Crossway Books for sharing the burden I have in this book.

Justin Taylor and Matt Perman deserve special thanks because of the extraordinary assistance they gave in helping conceive and assemble this final version of the book. Matt also provided the subject index, and Carol Steinbach, with her usual

excellence, provided the text and person indexes. As always, my wife Noël read it all, and caught mistakes that others didn't. Finally, thanks to Robert Gundry for his perhaps unwitting assistance in bringing it all to a crisis for me, so that my thinking moved from brain to book. He graciously read my exegetical arguments against his view and allowed me to quote his correspondence. He is not persuaded. May God give us light and move all his people toward the fullest understanding and enjoyment of Christ, our righteousness.

THE SETTING IN FAMILY, CHURCH, CULTURE, AND NATIONS

Why would a pressured pastor with a family to care for, a flock to shepherd, weekly messages to prepare, a personal concern for wayward children, a love for biblical counseling, a burden for racial justice, a commitment to see abortion become unthinkable, a zeal for world evangelization, a focus on local church planting, and a life-goal of spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ devote so much time and energy to the controversy over the imputation of Christ's righteousness?¹ And why should schoolteachers, engineers, accountants, firemen, computer programmers, and homemakers take the time to work through a book like this?

MY LIMITS

I will try to answer that question in this chapter. My answer moves from the general to the specific. That is, from reasons for caring about doctrine to reasons for caring about justification by faith to reasons for caring about the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Implicit in my question is a disclaimer. I do not

¹ For a definition of these terms see Chapter Two, §1.

have the time or the heart to read as widely as scholars in academia do and should. So my focus is limited²—but, I hope, not shallow or exegetically flimsy. A fuller treatment of the breadth and variety of issues surrounding the doctrine of justification today can be found in many places.³ With that said, I ask again, Why does a pastor—or why should you—take up a complex doctrinal controversy on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness?

GROWING A CHURCH WITHOUT A HEART FOR DOCTRINE

To begin with, the older I get, the less impressed I am with flashy successes and enthusiasms that are not truth-based. Everybody knows that with the right personality, the right music, the right location, and the right schedule you can grow a church without anybody really knowing what doctrinal commitments sustain it, if any. Church-planting specialists generally downplay biblical doctrine in the core values of what makes a church “successful.” The long-term effect of this ethos is a weakening of the church that is concealed as long as the crowds are large, the band is loud, the tragedies are few, and persecution is still at the level of preferences.

But more and more this doctrinally-diluted brew of music, drama, life-tips, and marketing seems out of touch with real life in this world—not to mention the next. It tastes like watered-down gruel, not a nourishing meal. It simply isn’t serious enough. It’s too playful and chatty and casual. Its joy just doesn’t feel deep enough or heartbroken or well-rooted. The injustice and perse-

² See Chapter Two, §2.3 for a description and explanation of the scope of this book.

³ For representative literature from the voluminous literature on the gospel and law debate in the last twenty-five years, see Douglas J. Moo, “Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 287-307; Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1988); Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993); Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Colin G. Kruse, *Paul, the Law, and Justification* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997); Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity*, Companions to the New Testament Series (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1999); A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001); Veronica Koperski, *What Are They Saying about Paul and the Law?* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 2001).

cution and suffering and hellish realities in the world today are so many and so large and so close that I can't help but think that, deep inside, people are longing for something weighty and massive and rooted and stable and eternal. So it seems to me that the trifling with silly little sketches and breezy welcome-to-the-den styles on Sunday morning are just out of touch with what matters in life.

Of course, it works. Sort of. Because, in the name of felt needs, it resonates with people's impulse to run from what is most serious and weighty and what makes them most human and what might open the depths of God to their souls. The design is noble. Silliness is a stepping-stone to substance. But it's an odd path. And evidence is not ample that many are willing to move beyond fun and simplicity. So the price of minimizing truth-based joy and maximizing atmosphere-based comfort is high. More and more, it seems to me, the end might be in view. I doubt that a religious ethos with such a feel of entertainment can really survive as Christian for too many more decades. Crises reveal the cracks.

WHAT SEPTEMBER 11 REVEALED

The terrorism of September 11, 2001, released a brief tidal wave of compassion and cowardice in the Christian Church. It brought out the tender love of thousands and the terrible loss of theological nerve. "Ground Zero" became a place of agonizing comfort as Christians wept with those who wept, while radio talk shows and Muslim-Christian ecumenical gatherings became places of compromise as leaders minimized Christ and clouded the nature of Islam with vague words about "one God."

The tension between strong Christian love and weak Christological cowardice will not survive indefinitely. If the root is cut, the fruit will die—sooner or later. The reluctance to pray publicly in the majestic name of Jesus Christ; the disinclination to make clear distinctions between Allah and the God and Father

of our Lord Jesus Christ;⁴ the fear of drawing attention to the fact that Islam consciously rejects the entire foundation of Christian salvation, namely, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus⁵—this loss of conviction and courage will in the end undermine the very love and joy it aims to advance.

A DIAGNOSIS FROM WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

What we saw more clearly in the brief moment of realism following September 11 was the hidden habit of doctrinal indifference and the sad exposure of triumphant pragmatism. Surprisingly a British, evangelical politician from two hundred years ago analyzed our situation well and has helped me get my bearings in this new century. William Wilberforce is famous for his lifelong, and finally successful, battle against the African slave

⁴ There were, thankfully, exceptions. For example, Timothy George asked, “Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?” Then he answered, “Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that the Father of Jesus is the only God there is. He is the Creator and Sovereign Lord of Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, of every person who has ever lived. He is the one before whom all shall one day bow (Phil. 2:5-11). Christians and Muslims can together affirm many important truths about this great God—his oneness, eternity, power, majesty. As the Qur’an puts it, he is ‘the Living, the Everlasting, the All-High, the All-Glorious’ (2:256).

“But the answer is also No, for Muslim theology rejects the divinity of Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit—both essential components of the Christian understanding of God. No devout Muslim can call the God of Muhammad ‘Father,’ for this, to their mind, would compromise divine transcendence.” Quoted from “Is the God of Muhammad the Father of Jesus?” *Christianity Today*, February 4, 2002, Vol. 46, No. 2, p. 34, which is an excerpt from George’s book, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

⁵ Thus one Sunni Muslim says, “Muslims believe that Allah saved the Messiah from the ignominy of crucifixion much as Allah saved the Seal of the Prophets from ignominy following Hijra.” Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *Islam and Christianity: A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Nairobi: Usima Press, 1980), p. 141. Hijra refers to the flight of Muhammad from Mecca in A.D. 622. It comes through Medieval Latin, from Arabic *hijrah*, literally, flight. The portion of the Qur’an that provides the basis for this denial of the crucifixion and resurrection says, “. . . and for their [the Jews’] saying: ‘We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God’—yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that [*shubihah lahum*] was shown to them. Those regarding him; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of surmise; and they slew him not of a certainty—no indeed; God raised him up to Him; God is All-mighty, All-wise” (4:157/156-157). Quoted from, J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1989), p.165. Another Muslim witness adds, “We honor him [Jesus] more than you do. . . . Do we not honor him more than you do when we refuse to believe that God would permit him to suffer death on the cross? Rather, we believe that God took him to heaven.” Quoted from a 1951 article in *The Muslim World* in J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, p. 164. Similar things are being said by Muslim clerics in the early years of this century as well. Thus one said in a church gathering soon after 9-11-01, “We believe in Jesus, more than you do in fact.”

trade. It stunned me, when I recently read his one major book, *A Practical View of Christianity*, that his diagnosis of the moral weakness of Britain was doctrinal.

The fatal habit of considering Christian morals as distinct from Christian doctrines insensibly gained strength. Thus the peculiar doctrines of Christianity went more and more out of sight, and as might naturally have been expected, the moral system itself also began to wither and decay, being robbed of that which should have supplied it with life and nutriment.⁶

Even more stunning was the fact that Wilberforce made the doctrine of justification the linchpin in his plea for moral reform in the nation. He said that all the spiritual and practical errors of the nominal Christians of his age . . .

. . . RESULT FROM THE MISTAKEN CONCEPTION ENTERTAINED OF THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIANITY. They consider not that Christianity is a scheme “for justifying *the ungodly*” [Romans 4:5], by Christ’s dying for them “*when yet sinners*” [Romans 5:6-8], a scheme “for reconciling us to God—*when enemies*” [Romans 5:10]; and for making the fruits of holiness *the effects, not the cause*, of our being justified and reconciled.⁷

It is a remarkable thing that a politician, and a man with no formal theological education, should not only *know* the workings of God in justification and sanctification, but *consider them utterly essential* for Christian piety and public virtue. Many public people *say* that changing society requires changing people, but few show the depth of understanding Wilberforce does concerning *how* that comes about. For him the right grasp of the central doctrine of justification and its relation to sanctification—an

⁶ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), p. 198.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64. The SMALL CAPS is his emphasis.

emerging Christlikeness in private and public—were essential for the reformation of the morals of England.⁸

WITHOUT PASTORAL STUDY, WE LIVE ON BORROWED FAITH

If Wilberforce is right—I think he is profoundly right—it will be less of a mystery why a pastor with a burden for racial justice and the sanctity of life⁹ and the moral transformation of our cultural landscape would be gripped by the doctrine of justification by faith. There are deeper and more connections than most of us realize between the grasp of doctrine and the good of people and churches and societies. The book of Romans is not prominent in the Bible for nothing. Its massive arguments are to be labored over until understood. And not just by scholars. What a tragedy that that this labor is regarded as wasted effort by so many who are giving trusted counsel in the church today.

Thousands are living on borrowed faith. We are living off the dividends, as it were, of intellectual and doctrinal investments made by pastors and church leaders from centuries ago. But the “central bank” of the Bible was not meant to fund future generations merely on the investments of the past. They are precious, and I draw on them daily. Everyone does, even those who don’t know it. But without our own investments of energy in the task of understanding, the Bank will close—as it has in many churches. I had lunch with a pastor not long ago—of one of the most liberal churches in Minnesota (as he described it)—who remarked that his people would be happy if he took his text from Emily Dickinson.

⁸ This material on Wilberforce is taken from John Piper, “‘Peculiar Doctrines,’ Spiritual Delight, and the Politics of Slavery,” in *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).

⁹ Abortion was a nonissue in Wilberforce’s England, but frivolous death sentences were a huge issue for him; and dueling, which risked life for arrogant honor, was to him a social blight. “In the session of parliament of 1786 Wilberforce moved a bill to oppose the burning of women. In that year 20,000 people had watched the burning of Phoebe Harris outside Newgate. Wilberforce was known as a strong advocate for humanizing the penal law. Women could still be burned, after hanging for petty or high treason.” John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable, 1977), p. 41. On dueling, see *ibid.*, p. 162.

**ANSWERING THE DETAILS OF THE FIRST QUESTION:
WHY DEFEND JUSTIFICATION?**

So what about all those other burdens and longings I expressed in the first sentence of this chapter? Why would a pastor with all those devote so much attention to the doctrine of justification?

FOR THE SAKE OF MY FAMILY: MARRIAGE

I have a family to care for. The marriage must survive and thrive for the good of the children and the glory of Christ. God designed marriage to display the holy mercy of Christ and the happy submission of his church (Ephesians 5:21-25). My own experience has been that the doctrine of justification by faith, and the imputed righteousness of Christ, is a great marriage saver and sweetener.

What makes marriage almost impossible at times is that both partners feel so self-justified in their expectations that are not being fulfilled. There is a horrible emotional dead-end street in the words, “But it’s just plain wrong for you to act that way,” followed by, “That’s your perfectionistic perspective,” or “Do you think you do everything right?,” or hopeless, resigned silence. The cycle of self-justified self-pity and anger seems unbreakable.

But what if one or both of the partners becomes overwhelmed with the truth of justification by faith alone, and with the particular truth that in Christ Jesus God credits me, for Christ’s sake, as fulfilling all his expectations? What would happen if this doctrine so mastered our souls that we began to bend it from the vertical to the horizontal? What if we applied it to our marriages?

In our own imperfect efforts in this regard, there have been breakthroughs that seemed at times impossible. It is possible, for Christ’s sake, to simply say, “I will no longer think merely in terms of whether my expectations are met in practice. I will, for Christ’s sake, regard my wife (or husband) the way God regards me—complete and accepted in Christ—and to be helped and blessed and nurtured and cherished, even if in practice there are

shortcomings.” I know my wife treats me this way. And surely this is part of what Paul was calling for when he said that we should forgive “one another . . . as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32, ESV). I believe there is more healing for marriage in the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness than many of us have even begun to discover.

FOR THE SAKE OF MY FAMILY: CHILDREN

Then there are the children. Four sons are grown and out of the house. But they are not out of our lives. In person and on the phone every week there are major personal, relational, vocational, theological issues to deal with. In every case the root issue comes back to: What are the great truths revealed in Scripture that can give stability and guidance here? Listening and affection are crucial. But if my words lack biblical *substance*, my counsel is hollow. Touchy-feely affirmation won’t cut it. Too much is at stake. These young men want rock under their feet.

My daughter, Talitha, is six years old. Recently she and my wife and I were reading through Romans together. This was her choice after we finished Acts. She is just learning to read, and I was putting my finger on each word. She stopped me in mid-sentence at the beginning of chapter 5 and asked, “What does ‘justified’ mean?” What do you say to a six-year-old? Do you say, “There are more important things to think about, so just trust Jesus and be a good girl”? Or do you say that it is very complex and even adults are not able to understand it fully, so you can wait and deal with it when you are older? Or do we say that it simply means that Jesus died in our place so that all our sins might be forgiven?

Or do we tell a story (which is what I did), made up on the spot, about two accused criminals, one guilty and one not guilty (one did the bad thing, and one did not do it)? The one who did not do the bad thing is shown, by all those who saw the crime, to be innocent. So the judge “justifies” him; that is, he tells him

he is a law-abiding person and did not do the crime and can go free. But the other accused criminal, who really did the bad thing, is shown to be guilty, because all the people who saw the crime saw *him* do it. But then, guess what! The judge “justifies” him too and says, “I regard you as a law-abiding citizen with full rights in our country” (not just a forgiven criminal who may not be trusted or fully free in the country). At this point Talitha looks at me puzzled.

She does not know how to put her finger on the problem but senses that something is wrong here. So I say, “That’s a problem, isn’t it? How can a person who really did break the law and did the bad thing be told by the judge that he is a law-keeper, a righteous person, with full rights to the freedoms of the country, and doesn’t have to go to jail or be punished?” She shakes her head. Then I go back to Romans 4:5 and show her that God “justifies the ungodly.” Her brow is furrowed. I show her that she has sinned and I have sinned and we are all like this second criminal. And when God “justifies” us he knows we are sinners and “ungodly” and “lawbreakers.” And I ask her, “What did God do so that it’s right for him say to us sinners: you are not guilty, you are law-keepers in my eyes, you are righteous, and you are free to enjoy all that this country has to offer?”

She knows it has something to do with Jesus and his coming and dying in our place. That much she has learned. But what more do I tell her now? The answer to this question will depend on whether Mom and Dad have been faithfully taught about the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Will they tell her that Jesus was the perfect law-keeper and never sinned, but did everything the judge and his country expected of him? And will they tell her that when he lived and died, he not only took her place as a punishment-bearer but also stood in her place as a law-keeper? Will they say that he *was punished* for her and he *obeyed the law* for her? And if she will trust Jesus, God the Judge will let Jesus’ punishment and Jesus’ righteousness count

for hers. So when God “justifies” her—says that she is forgiven and righteous (even though she was not punished and did not keep the law)—he does it because of Jesus. Jesus is her righteousness, and Jesus is her punishment. Trusting Jesus makes Jesus so much her Lord and Savior that he is her perfect goodness and her perfect punishment.

There are thousands of Christian families in the world who never have conversations like this. Not at six or sixteen. I don’t think we have to look far then for the weakness of the church and the fun-oriented superficiality of many youth ministries and the stunning fall-out rate after high school. But how shall parents teach their children if the message they get week in and week out from the pulpit is that doctrine is unimportant? So, yes, I have a family to care for. And therefore I must understand the central doctrines of my faith—understand them so well that they can be translated for all the different ages of my children. As G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “It ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest people.”¹⁰

AND THERE ARE WEEKLY MESSAGES TO PREPARE

Which also answers why this issue matters to me when I have weekly messages to prepare and a flock to shepherd. The messages need to be saturated with biblical truth—brimming with radical relevance for the hard things in life—and helping my people be able to preach the Gospel to themselves and their children day and night. The full, rich, biblical Gospel, as it is unfolded in the New Testament and foreshadowed in the Old Testament, not as it is quickly and simply summed up in a pamphlet.¹¹ My people need to grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.¹²

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994; orig., 1910), p. 143.

¹¹ And I do believe in writing pamphlets for evangelism. See *Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths* at www.DesiringGod.org, Topic Index, Missions and Evangelism, Quest for Joy.

¹² 2 Peter 3:18, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”

In this way they will have strong roots for radical living, sweet comfort in times of trouble, and serious answers for their children.

JUSTIFICATION AND PRODIGALS

Then I mentioned in the first sentence of this chapter, “a personal concern for wayward children.” I do not believe that even perfect parenting could prevent all wilderness wanderings of our children. Mainly because of what God said in Isaiah 1:2: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: ‘Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me’” (ESV). But how do you survive and press on when a child has left the fold of God? What truth keeps you on your face in hope-full prayers and on your way to minister to others with needs as great as your own? No truth other than “the justification of the ungodly” gives as much hope for parents of a prodigal. Not only because our son or daughter may yet awaken to the hope that Christ is willing to be his or her righteousness—no matter what he or she has done—but also because the viperous guilt of failed parenting is defanged by the justification of the ungodly. Dad and Mom find a way to press on because their perfection is Christ.

JUSTIFICATION AND BIBLICAL COUNSELING

I spoke of a “love for biblical counseling.” There is so much brokenness. So much sin that seems intransigently woven together with forms of failing family life and distorted personal perspectives. And it doesn’t yield to quick remedies. After several decades of watching the mental health care system at work from the inside and outside, I am less hopeful about the effectiveness of (even Christian) psychotherapy than I used to be. I don’t see any one strategy of helping people possessing a corner on all wisdom. But more than ever I believe the essential foundation of all healing and all Christ-exalting wholeness is a soul-penetrating grasp of the glorious truth of justification by faith, distinct from and

grounding the battle for healthy, loving relationships. Good counseling patiently builds the “whole counsel” of God (Acts 20:27) into the head and heart of sinful and wounded people. And at the center of it is Christ our righteousness.

JUSTIFICATION AND A PASSION FOR WORLD EVANGELIZATION

Why devote so much time to defending the imputation of Christ’s righteousness when there are so many unreached people groups and millions of people who have no access to the Gospel? I will mention two things. One is that over the past twenty years of leading a missions-mobilizing church I have seen with increasing clarity that teacher-based church planting and not just friendship-based church planting is crucial among peoples with no Christian history. In other words, doctrinal instruction becomes utterly crucial in planting the church.

This is not surprising, since embedded in the Great Commission is the command, “*teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20), and since Paul planted the church in Ephesus by *reasoning daily* in the hall of Tyrannus for two years, “so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). In other words, it is more clear to me now that doing missions without deep doctrinal transfer through patient teaching will not only wreck on the vast reefs of ignorance but will, at best, produce weak and ever-dependent churches. Therefore, pastors who care about building, sending, and going churches must give themselves to building sending bases that breed doctrinally-deep people who are not given to emotional dependency on fads but know how to feed themselves on Christ-centered truth.

The second thing I would say about the doctrine of justification and missions is that Paul develops this doctrine in the book of Romans in a way that shows it is absolutely universal in its relevance. It crosses every culture. It is not a tribal concept. He

does this by building part of the doctrine out of the connection between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21. For example, take only verse 19: “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were appointed sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be appointed righteous.” This, along with the whole context, shows that what Christ came to do in his obedience was universal in its scope and significance. It is not just for the posterity of Abraham, but for the posterity of Adam—namely, everyone.

The problem Jesus came to solve was a problem unleashed by the first man, leading to condemnation and corruption for all people everywhere in all cultures and all times. This is a stunning discovery for many people. The diagnosis of what needs to be remedied is the same in all cultures because it stems from Adam, the father of all cultures. Therefore the work of Christ to provide a “free gift of righteousness” (Romans 5:17, ESV) to all who will “receive” it is absolutely sufficient and necessary for every person in every culture everywhere in the world. And thus the doctrine of justification becomes a warrant for the universal claim of Christian missions.

TRUTH-TREASURING, BIBLE-SATURATED CHURCH PLANTING

I mentioned not only world missions but also local church planting. If I want to see churches planted out from our church and others, why invest so much time and energy in defending and explaining the historic Protestant vision of justification as the imputation of Christ’s righteousness? I have answered this already but will say again, I think we have enough churches being planted by means of music, drama, creative scheduling, sprightly narrative, and marketing savvy. And there are too few that are God-centered, truth-treasuring, Bible-saturated, Christ-exalting, cross-focused, Spirit-dependent, prayer-soaked, soul-winning, justice-pursuing congregations with a wartime mindset ready to lay down their lives for the salvation of the nations and the neighborhoods. There is a blood-earnest joy that sustains a church like

this, and it comes only by embracing Christ-crucified as our righteousness. As William Wilberforce said:

If we would . . . rejoice in [Christ] as triumphantly as the first Christians did; we must learn, like them to repose our entire trust in him and to adopt the language of the apostle, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Jesus Christ” [Galatians 6:14], “who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” [1 Corinthians 1:30].¹³

A PASSION FOR GOD’S SUPREMACY IN ALL THINGS

Finally, I mentioned that, as a pastor and Christian, my overarching life-goal is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. More specifically, the older I get, the more I want my life to count in the long term for the glory of Christ. That is, I want people and churches and ministries and schools to break free from the modern preoccupation with being made much of as the key to happiness and motivation and mental health and missions and almost everything else. In its place I long to see our joy—and the joy of the nations—rooted in God’s wonderful work of freeing us to make much of Christ forever. There is an almost universal bondage in America to the mindset that we can only feel loved when we are made much of. The truth is, we are loved most deeply when we are helped to be free from that bondage and to find our joy in treasuring Christ and making much of him. This was Paul’s passion in Philippians 1:20, “It is my eager expectation and hope that . . . now as always Christ will be honored (*megalunqhvsetai*, *megalunthsetai*) in my body, whether by life or by death.”

This is my passion, and I pray it will be till I die. Which means that I am jealous for Christ to get all the glory he deserves in the work of justification. My concern is that in the more recent challenge to this doctrine that I am about to address he is robbed of

¹³ Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, p. 66.

a great part of his glory in becoming for us not only our pardon but our perfection; not only our redemption but our righteousness; not only the punishment for our disobedience but also the performer and provider of our perfect obedience. The new challenge to justification obscures (not to put it too harshly) half of Christ's glory in the work of justification.¹⁴ It denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness and claims that there is no such teaching in the Bible.

THE TRUTH THAT MAKES THE CHURCH SING

The question must finally be answered exegetically from biblical texts, not historical precedent. That is what the major part of this book attempts. But we would be myopic not to notice that the abandonment of imputation would be a massive revision of Protestant theology and the worship of Christ. One way to illustrate this is to point out that the overthrow of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness would involve the elimination of a great theme from our worship of Christ in song. I don't say this as an argument for the accuracy of historic exegesis, of course. I bring it in to clarify the issue and show the magnitude of it, not to settle it.

The imputed righteousness of Christ has been a great cause of joyful worship over the centuries and has informed many hymns and worship songs. The theme has cut across Calvinist-Arminian, Lutheran-Reformed, and Baptist-Presbyterian divides. As we look at some examples of hymns and worship songs, I admit that it is possible to put a different, newer meaning on some of these words, but they were not written with the newer

¹⁴ "This tends to the greater glory of Christ and to our richer consolation, which they obscure and lessen not a little who detract from the price of our salvation a part of his most perfect righteousness and obedience and thus rend his seamless tunic." (Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 2, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company], p. 452.)

"To suppose that all Christ does is only to make atonement for us by suffering, is to make him our Savior but in part. It is to rob him of half his glory as Savior." Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 638.

meaning, and, as a people, we would be dishonest to treat them as if they carried the new meaning.

“AND CAN IT BE”

(CHARLES WESLEY)

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown through Christ my own.*

“THE SOLID ROCK”

(EDWARD MOTE)

*When he shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in him be found,
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.*

“WE TRUST IN YOU, OUR SHIELD”

(EDITH CHERRY)

*We trust in you, O Captain of salvation—
In your dear name, all other names above:
Jesus our righteousness, our sure foundation,
Our prince of glory and our king of love.*

“O MYSTERY OF LOVE DIVINE”

(THOMAS GILL)

*Our load of sin and misery
Didst thou, the Sinless, bear?
Thy spotless robe of purity
Do we the sinners wear?*

“THY WORKS, NOT MINE, O CHRIST”

(ISAAC WATTS)

*Thy righteousness, O Christ,
Alone can cover me:*

*No righteousness avails
Save that which is of thee.*

“BEFORE THE THRONE OF GOD”
(CHARITIE LEES SMITH BANCROFT)
*Behold Him there, the Risen Lamb
My perfect spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I am . . .*

“I WILL GLORY IN MY REDEEMER”
(STEVE AND VIKKI COOK)
*I will glory in my Redeemer
Who crushed the power of sin and death;
My only Savior before the holy Judge,
The Lamb Who is my righteousness.*

“KNOWING YOU”
(GRAHAM KENDRICK)
*Knowing you, Jesus,
Knowing you, there is no greater thing.
You’re my all, you’re the best,
You’re my joy, my righteousness
And I love you, Lord.*

We may take John Wesley for an example to support our claim that these songs are built on the historic understanding of Christ’s imputed righteousness, rather than on more recent reinterpretations. Wesley himself was passionate about this doctrine, and probably more so than anywhere else in his sermon titled “The Lord Our Righteousness” (1765). He is defending himself against attacks that he did not believe this doctrine. Part of his defense is to refer to the hymns he has published. He translated Nicolaus L. Von Zinzendorf’s hymn “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness” and commented on it and the others he had published like this:

The Hymns . . . republished several times, (a clear testimony that my judgment was still the same,) speak full to the same purpose [of my belief in the imputed righteousness of Christ]. . . . Take one for all—

*Jesu, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress:
'Midst flaming worlds in these array'd,
With joy shall I lift up my head.*

“The whole hymn,” he says, “expresses the same sentiment, from the beginning to the end.” He goes on in this sermon to make clear what his hymns and essays mean: “To all believers the righteousness of Christ is imputed; to unbelievers it is not.”¹⁵

From these few examples, we can see that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness has not been experienced as marginal or minor in the worship of Christ. It has been explosive with revival power,¹⁶ personal comfort,¹⁷ and deep, biblically-rooted joy in worship.

¹⁵ John Wesley’s Sermons, Sermon #20, “The Lord Our Righteousness” (text from 1872 edition), preached at the Chapel in West-Street, Seven Dials, on Sunday, November 24, 1765. This quote was copied from <http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/serm-020.stm#1>, accessed on 3-2-02. Then, to make things as clear as possible, he quotes from his own Treatise on Justification published a year earlier (1764): “If we take the phrase of imputing Christ’s righteousness, for the bestowing (as it were) the righteousness of Christ, including his obedience, as well passive as active, in the return of it, that is, in the privileges, blessings, and benefits purchased it; so a believer may be said to be justified by the righteousness of Christ imputed. The meaning is, God justifies the believer for the sake of Christ’s righteousness, and not for any righteousness of his own.” Further, “. . . the righteousness of Christ, both his active and passive righteousness, is the meritorious cause of our justification, and has procured for us at God’s hand, that, upon our believing, we should be accounted righteous by him.” Wesley’s view developed over the years on this issue, but he seems to have landed in the traditional Protestant position on imputation in the latter half of his ministry, as evidenced by the sermon “The Lord Our Righteousness” (cited above) and “The Wedding Garment” (1790). For a chronological account of Wesley’s view on this, see Ted M. Dorman, “Forgiveness of Past Sins: John Wesley on Justification, A Case Study Approach,” *Pro Ecclesia* X/3 (Summer 2001), pp. 275-294. See also Thomas J. Nettles, “John Wesley’s Contention with Calvinism: Interactions Then and Now,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, Vol. 2., eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), pp. 308-309.

¹⁶ See Chapter Two, note 2 with references to Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield.

¹⁷ See John Bunyan’s testimony in Chapter Four, note 9.

LET CHRIST RECEIVE ALL HIS GLORY!

To magnify the glory of Christ in the fullness of his redeeming work is my aim in this book. I do not believe for a moment that any of those who represent the challenge I am opposing aim to dishonor Christ. I believe they love him and want to honor him and his Word. And I believe the mistake they are making will have the opposite effect. So for the glory of Christ and for all the reasons I have given in this chapter, I will try now to answer the arguments against the imputation of Christ's righteousness and to show from Scripture that this is part of the glory of his redeeming work.