



# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

FROM SOLA SCRIPTURA PUBLICATIONS

ISSUE 95 (MAY/JUNE 2015)

## THE CRITICAL DOCTRINE OF IMPUTATION

### ROMANS 4:3-5

**I**N OUR LAST TOTT, "THEOLOGY: QUEEN OF THE SCIENCES," we underscored the centrality of Theology, that one's view of God, and the Truth He reveals in Scripture, will dictate everything else a person believes and lives.

In this issue I would like to examine a particular core doctrine of Scripture and demonstrate its critical importance to the Christian Faith, namely, *imputation*. We pick this for two reasons: First, as we will outline, this doctrine is of incalculable importance to the Christian Faith. Without it, in fact, biblical Christianity is damaged beyond repair; second, it has not only been *disputed* in the past but is even being *denied* in our own day by some within evangelical Christianity itself.

This article is meant as a renewed call to the proper understanding of the critical doctrine of imputation in a day when it is becoming more and more shrouded by new developments in theological thought.

#### Definition of Terms

Before we examine *imputation*, we must first understand another key doctrine that is inseparably linked to it: *justification*. So pivotal is *justification* to the Christian Faith that Martin Luther thundered that it is "the chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed" and is "the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines."<sup>1</sup> Luther further insisted that justification "is not simply one doctrine among others but the basic and chief article of faith with which the church stands or falls, and on which its entire doctrine depends."<sup>2</sup> Calvin likewise called justification "the main hinge on which religion turns."<sup>3</sup> The great Puritan Thomas Watson echoed Calvin when he wrote:

Justification is the very hinge and pillar of Christianity. An error about justification is dangerous, like a defect in a foundation. Justification by Christ is a spring of the water of life. To have the poison of corrupt doctrine cast into this spring is damnable. . . . In these latter times, the Arminians and Socinians<sup>4</sup> have cast a dead fly into this box of precious ointment.<sup>5</sup>

Those quotations, and others we could cite, highlight the importance theologians of history have placed on those biblical doctrines. They also make abundantly clear that what we believe about *justification* will dictate what we believe about *salvation*. That is not an overstatement. The Reformation, in fact, focused on *how* a person is justified. On what grounds does God declare us just? Must we first become just by works

before He declares us so, or does He declare us just before we are just? Are we justified by faith *plus* works or by grace through faith *alone*?

What, then, is *justification*? In its bare essence (and contrary to modern views), justification is a *legal* (or *forensic*) term. It means to declare or pronounce righteous and just, not symbolically but actually. Justification does not imply that there is no guilt. On the contrary, we are worthy of death. We who were once under condemnation are now declared righteous because of the finished work of Christ on Calvary. Justification is the declarative act of God, as the Judge, whereby He declares that the demands of justice have been satisfied so that the sinner is no longer condemned. Think of a criminal before the judge; he has been convicted beyond a reasonable doubt and is justly condemned to die, but the judge says, "You are guilty and deserve to die, but I by my mercy and grace declare you righteous. You are no less guilty, but you are no longer condemned. Someone else has volunteered to take your punishment."

But how exactly are we justified? How does God give this righteousness to the ungodly? The answer is found in the doctrine of *imputation*.

The Greek word translated **counted** (Rom. 4:3, 5), **reckoned** (vv. 4, 9, 10), and various forms of "impute" (vv. 6, 8, 11, 22, 23) is *logizomai*, which appears 40 times in the New Testament. Its meaning is clear and straightforward: "to put together with one's mind, to count, to occupy oneself with reckonings or calculations." Therefore, "to count something to somebody means to reckon something to a person, to put to his account."<sup>6</sup>

Simply stated, then, imputation means that Christ's own righteousness is "imputed" (charged) to us so that we are declared righteous before God. James P. Boyce says it well:

[The] meritorious work of Christ, called in the Scriptures "the righteousness of God" [Rom. 3:23; 2 Cor. 5:21] is imputed by God to those whom he justifies, as the ground or cause of their justification. It is reckoned to their account.<sup>7</sup>

It's also essential to understand that the doctrine of *imputation* is the polar opposite of the Roman Catholic *infusion*. The latter teaches that Christ's righteousness is infused into the believer by his cooperation with God's grace through the sacraments (works); so, only to the extent that Christ's righteousness adheres to the believer will God de-

eousness adheres to the believer will God declare that person justified. As the Reformation and the subsequent (reactionary) Council of Trent prove, *sola fide* (“faith alone”) is the most severely attacked doctrine by Rome.

### Declaration of Truth

What must be recognized at the outset of this discussion is that the doctrine of imputation is at the very core of biblical Christianity, as well as Protestant orthodoxy. As Charles Hodge put it, this is “the simple and universally accepted view of the doctrine as held by all Protestants at the Reformation, and by them regarded as the cornerstone of the Gospel.”<sup>8</sup> As we will see, in fact, to deny it, or in any way dilute it, is to abandon the doctrine of *sola fide*, the “material principle” (central teaching) of the Reformation. So interwoven are justification and imputation that Charles Spurgeon observed little difference between the two and, therefore, proclaimed from his Metropolitan Tabernacle pulpit in 1861:

I must give up Justification by Faith if I give up Imputed Righteousness. True Justification by Faith is the surface soil—but then, Imputed Righteousness is the granite rock which lies underneath it; and if you dig down through the great Truth of a sinner’s being justified by faith in Christ, you must, as I believe, inevitably come to the Doctrine of the Imputed Righteousness of Christ as the basis and foundation on which that simple Doctrine rests.<sup>9</sup>

That brings us to our text (Rom. 4:3–5):

**For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.**

Romans 4 has accurately been called “the imputation chapter” because of how often the term is used and how clearly the concept is illustrated. Hodge again comments, “The Apostle argues, in [this chapter] that every assertion or promise of gratuitous forgiveness of sin to be found in the Scriptures involves this doctrine.”<sup>10</sup> Louis Sperry Chafer well adds that in a very real sense

the entire Book of Romans is more or less occupied with setting forth the doctrine respecting the imputed righteous of God [which underscores that this theme is indeed] a most important factor therein. . . . The legal basis for the imputing of God’s righteousness to the believer is . . . being placed in union with Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit, and it is applied by the Holy Spirit through His baptism of the believer into Christ.<sup>11</sup>

In light of Romans 3:10—“There is none righteous, no, not one” (cf. 3:23’ 6:23)—man’s only hope is imputed righteousness. Further, the repeated phrase, “righteousness of God” (1:17; 3:22; 10:3), indicates not just God’s *own* righteousness but also a righteousness that is *from* Him and imparted to those who have none of their own.

Abraham, then, is Paul’s foundational illustration here. While the general rule is that a man works to earn money, which is then charged to his account, Abram did not work for his salvation; not even circumcision was considered his own merit (vv. 9–12). Citing Genesis 15:6, Paul implicitly notes that since Abram had no righteousness, it had to be charged

to his account through the channel of his simple faith in what God said. “Because faith is imputed as righteousness,” Calvin wrote of these verses, “righteousness is therefore not the reward of works but is given unearned.”<sup>12</sup>

So pivotal is this truth that Paul emphasized it to the Galatian believers as well: “Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Gal. 3:6). These believers needed reminding even more than those in Rome, for they had been “bewitched” (v. 1) by the Judaizers who were adding works to the “hinge pin” principle of faith alone.

Coming back to our text, Paul immediately follows up his Abrahamic illustration with another involving David in verses 6–8. Again quoting from the OT (Ps. 32:1–2), Paul states, “God imputeth righteousness without [or ‘apart from,’ *chōris*] works.” He even adds that our sin is never again imputed back to us. This was especially significant for David since this is one of his psalms of confession after his horrific sin with Bathsheba and Uriah.

Another OT reference is one of the most graphic pictures of imputed righteousness in all of Scripture. Isaiah 64:6 is a most pointed statement concerning the quality of man’s righteousness: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” “Rags” is the Hebrew *beqed*, which is the most common OT word for clothing and by itself refers simply to any kind of garment, as in its first appearance in Genesis 24:53, where a servant brought jewels and “raiment” to Rebekah. When coupled with a qualifying word, however, it is used to refer to specific types of garments, from something as common as a widow’s clothing (Gen. 38:14) to the specialized, holy garments of Aaron (Exod. 28:2–4). Our text, therefore, adds a very unique qualifying word to *beqed*. “Filthy” is *ēd*, which appears only here in the OT and refers to a woman’s menstrual period, and therefore, the cloth that accompanies it when coupled with *beqed*. Does this not clearly demonstrate what all our good works are, what any “righteous deed” we might perform really is? *All of them* are as filthy and repulsive as *ēd*.

The answer to the problem, then, is found in 61:10: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.” As Calvin observes here, “He connects ‘righteousness’ with ‘salvation,’ because the one cannot be separated from the other.”<sup>13</sup> As the ancient bride and groom were clothed in special ceremonial clothing, likewise the one who turns to God from sin is clothed in the most regal garment of all, the righteousness of Christ.

If this is not clear enough, consider Jeremiah 23:5–6: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Here is one of those great and glorious “Jehovah-compounds,” *Jehovah-Šidqēnū*. This verse is a messianic prophecy. The background of it appears in 2 Kings 24:8–17. Upon his father Jehoiakim’s death, Jehoiachin took the throne of Judah at a mere 18 years of age, but sadly, like his father, “did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD” (v. 9). After

Jehoiachin had been on the throne for only three months, however, the Babylonians invaded, destroying Jerusalem and taking the people into captivity, just as Jeremiah had foretold (Jer. 1:14, 15; 5:15; 6:22–26). The most devastating result of the deportation of Jehoiachin (also called “Coniah” and “Jeconiah”) was the ending of the Davidic dynasty (22:24–26, 30). It is in 23:5–6, however, that Jeremiah declares that God promises to raise up David again in the form of “a righteous Branch” and “a King,” and this is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. John Gill wonderfully writes here:

Unrighteous man cannot be the author of righteousness; and the righteousness of an angel is of no advantage to man; and indeed neither of the other divine Persons is the Lord our righteousness; for though they are both Jehovah, the Father and the Spirit, yet not our righteousness: the Father appointed and sent Christ to work it out; he approved and accepted of it, when wrought out; and imputes it to his people.<sup>14</sup>

Philippians 3:9 is yet another verse that proclaims imputation: “And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” Because we have no true righteousness, and because obedience to the Law does not produce it, it can come only from God by faith in Christ alone. As the note in the Geneva Bible of the Puritans reads, this verse means “to be in Christ, to be found not in a man’s own righteousness, but clothed with the righteousness of Christ imputed to him.”

In light of their sinful behavior, the Corinthians, too, needed reminding of this doctrine: “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ is the author of all four of these spiritual realities and imparts them to us. Paul also wrote in his second letter, “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus paid for our sins through His death on the Cross so we could become the righteousness of God and live accordingly.

That thought brings us to the practical aspect of imputation, namely, that it involves not only the *negative* of being pardoned from sin but also the *positive* of now living holy in righteous obedience and Christ-likeness of character. Since our righteousness is as “filthy rags,” Christ’s righteousness must be imputed to us not only so we can *be* holy *positionally* but *live* holy *practically*. Galatians 2:20 is the key here: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” The true believer lives a holy life because he is a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17), but he can do so only because the righteousness of Christ has been imputed *to* him and manifested *through* him.

All this, and more we could write, demonstrates the critical importance of this doctrine. *Without the imputed righteousness of Christ, we would have no righteousness.* Sadly, however, such clear teaching is not enough for some.

### **Dangers of Tampering**

It continues to amaze, grieve, and frighten me to witness, on a daily basis, the sheer measure and magnitude of the error that swirls and seethes in Christendom today. Among the

gravest of those errors (both today and yesterday) is a denial of the doctrine of imputation. In his magnificent classic, *The Doctrine of Justification* (my copy was a gift from a dear friend), James Buchanan (1804–70) discerningly observed, “Most of the leading errors on the subject of justification may be traced to obscure or defective views in regard to the nature or import of imputation.”<sup>15</sup> That observation is demonstrably and dramatically accurate.

If we may interject here an observation J. I. Packer makes in his Introduction to the 1961 Banner of Truth reprint of Buchanan’s classic:

It is a fact of ominous significance that Buchanan’s classic volume, now a century old, is the most recent full-scale study of justification by faith that English-speaking Protestantism (to look no further) has produced. . . . If all we knew of the church during the past century was that it had neglected the subject of justification in this way, we should already be in a position to conclude that this has been a century of religious apostasy and decline.

We are now a century-and-a-half from that day and still no major work. Is it any wonder that these doctrines are fading? Worse, does it appear that the majority of evangelicals are even concerned? Worse still, how many evangelicals have even read Buchanan for that matter and are, therefore, prepared to answer those who deny the material principle of the Reformation, not to mention the core doctrines of Scripture concerning how we are saved?

As B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) also observed, “From the time of Augustine (early 5<sup>th</sup>-century), at least, the term ‘imputation’ is found firmly fixed in theological terminology.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, he explains, three acts of imputation were defined and delineated: Adam’s sin was imputed to his posterity; our sin was imputed to Christ; and Christ’s righteousness was imputed to us. But, as Warfield goes on to recount, deviation also came early. The first such aberration was Pelagius, a British monk and theologian, at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century. He believed each person has the same “free will” Adam had and, therefore, is able to choose good or evil for himself. He said that this is possible because each person is created separately and uncontaminated Adam’s sin. Sin, therefore, is a matter of *will*, not *nature*. He and his followers, therefore, “utterly denied that men either suffer harm from Adam’s sin or profit by Christ’s merits.”

More opposition to orthodoxy came with the Socinians, Arminians, and rationalists, all of whom arose in the days of the Reformation itself. By far the most important were the Socinians (who we mentioned earlier). They insisted that it was not possible for one person to bear the punishment due to another” and also cut “deeply into the doctrines of original sin and justification by faith” (Warfield). Buchanan details:

When reduced to its ultimate principle, and stated in its simplest form, it teaches us to rely, not on anything that Christ has done for us, but only on the unchangeable placability of the divine nature, and on that which Christ has taught us to do for ourselves. It is not His work, but our faith, our repentance, our amendment of life, that constitutes the ground and reason of our justification. The radical difference between the Socinian doctrine and that of the Reformers turned on this hinge.<sup>17</sup>

As time went on, Warfield notes, Socinian teaching was of tremendous influence “in the Arminian revolt of the 17<sup>th</sup>-

century and the rationalist defection a hundred years later.”

In light of all this, I want to call our attention to our Arminian brethren. Our desire is to speak the truth in love but at the same time point out the serious error that exists on our topic. The present article was actually sparked while I was reading an excellent biography of John Gill.<sup>18</sup> In it the author recounts what Gill faced in his day. In Article VII of the *1729 Goat Yard Declaration of Faith: A Declaration of the Faith and Practice of the Church of Christ at Horsely-down, under the Pastoral Care of Mr. John Gill, &c.*, Gill wrote:

We believe that the justification of God’s elect is only by the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, without the consideration of any works of righteousness done by them; and that the full and free pardon of all their sins and transgressions, past, present, and to come, is only through the blood of Christ, according to the riches of his grace.

As Gill’s biographer reports, that statement reflected a doctrine that had become the central teaching of the Evangelical Awakening and was fundamental to the preaching of not only Gill but also James Hervey, Augustus Toplady, and George Whitefield. Gill, in fact, had been preaching this 15 years before Hervey and Whitefield, making Gill one of the first pioneers of the Great Awakening in Britain and America.

What was the response to such doctrine? Gill and Hervey came under tremendous criticism by John Wesley who could not accept the term “the imputed righteousness of Christ” as being biblical. He argued instead, like Arminius, that Abraham was saved by his own righteous act of believing, which had nothing to do with Christ’s righteousness. Shortly after Gill’s death, Andrew Fuller took a “middle ground” position between Gill and Wesley by suggesting that Christ’s imputed righteousness should be viewed simply as a metaphor for the moral influence Christ has on the believer. We submit that this wasn’t really the “middle ground” at all, for it is far closer to Wesley than Gill.

Well, if we may be frank, little (no, make that *nothing*) has changed in almost three centuries. As if the preceding errors (which, of course, still exist) were not bad enough, another has arisen in recent years that is more subtle and dangerous, namely, the so-called New Perspective on Paul (NP). Leading the pack of this “newness” (which really isn’t all that new after all) is N. T. Wright, Anglican Bishop of Dunham. While many laud Wright for his scholarly apologetic work—such as defending the historicity and resurrection of Jesus against the Jesus Seminar—I firmly believe that such work pales to insignificance in the shadow of his views on justification and imputation. Let’s be honest, what good does it do to prove Jesus’ historicity if you turn around and deny what His death actually accomplished?

Wright is by no means the first in the modern era to challenge the long-held orthodox definition of these doctrines. He is merely the current activist in a long line of unorthodox (some outright liberal) teachers, including, Albert Schweitzer, W. D. Davies, Ernst Käsemann, E. P. Sanders, and James D. G. Dunn. In fact, only Wright himself can be considered an “evangelical,” although, as we will see, the term must be used very loosely. This “long line” is comprised of men who while scholars were totally ambivalent (even hostile) to many cardinal doctrines, especially the authority of Scripture. The first clue about Wright, in fact, is his well documented denial that

the first three chapters of Genesis are historical. As several evangelicals have observed, if you don’t get the first chapters of Genesis right, you won’t get much of anything else right.

At the root of Wright’s thesis is the passionate insistence that we “old perspective” folks (i.e., evangelicals) have seriously misunderstood first-century Judaism. How so? In his 1997 book, *What Saint Paul Really Said*,<sup>19</sup> he wrote, “We have misjudged early Judaism, especially Pharisaism, if we have thought of it as an early version of Pelagianism” (p. 32). In other words, as he goes on to explain, the Pharisees were not legalists at all because Judaism did not teach works-righteousness. Oh? Why then did the Lord Jesus proclaim in His Sermon on Mount, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20)? Why did Paul unambiguously write, “For they [i.e., Paul’s fellow-countrymen] being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Rom. 10:3)? In verse after verse, the NT underscores the self-righteousness of not only what Judaism had become but all men everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

What, then does Wright do with Galatians, which has always been viewed by true evangelicals as a polemic against the legalism of the Judaizers and a defense of justification by faith? He answers:

Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian or attains to a relationship with God. . . . The problem he addresses is: should ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not? (p. 120)

Obviously, “a long tradition to the contrary” means that centuries of “old perspective” understanding of Romans, Galatians, and other Pauline epistles must be thrown into the furnace in favor of the NP.

By far, Wright’s most serious “newness” is his view of justification by faith. He insists that we have simply been reading Luther and the other Reformers back into Paul because, “What Paul means by justification . . . is not ‘how you become a Christian’, so much as ‘how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family.’ [It] is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences” (p. 122). In other words, *justification is not about salvation at all*; it’s actually about ecumenism, that all the fragmented groups of Christians belong at one table. This is seen again in Wright’s paraphrase of Philipians 3:9. Instead of what the text says—“And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith”—Wright offers: “[Paul] is saying, in effect: I, though possessing covenant membership according to the flesh, did not regard that covenant membership as something to exploit; I emptied myself, sharing the death of the Messiah; wherefore God has given me the membership that really counts, in which I too will share the glory of Christ” (p. 124). Is that *really* what Paul is saying?

Regarding imputation, notice the plain Socinian language Wright adopts: “If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatsoever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys, or otherwise transfers his

righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom" (p. 98). We must shake our heads again at the idea of "faith" in Wright's view:

When Paul speaks of Abraham's faith being "reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5), he means that faith in Jesus Christ . . . is the true badge of covenant membership . . . the badge of the sin-forgiven family. The emphasis of the chapter is therefore that covenant membership is defined not by circumcision (4:9-12), nor by race, but by faith.

So, what is faith according to Wright? It's not a *channel*; it's a *badge* (or sign). But is that what Paul says? Of course not! He says that "faith is reckoned as righteousness," not that "faith is a badge of covenant membership."

Frankly, as heretical as all this (and more) is, what truly bothers me the most (and I am convinced this is a fair assessment) is that if Wright is right, the inescapable conclusion is that practically *everyone else since the 16<sup>th</sup>-century has been wrong*, and that, of course, comprises a very, very long line of godly men. Furthermore, the clear statements in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Westminster standards must be rejected. At every turn, in fact, he repudiates orthodox understanding, saying that it "distorts [Paul's doctrine] at various points" (p. 113). Further, then, if Wright is right, we must take every systematic theology penned by "old perceptive" theologians and throw them in the dumpster. (Ah, let's just read Charles Finney's *Systematic Theology* and call it a day, although it's neither systematic nor theological.) Further still, if Wright is right, he is the first person since Augustine who really "gets" the Apostle Paul and really understands what the New Testament actually means.

No, if I may be so blunt, Wright is wrong! He is wrong biblically, theologically, historically, and practically. Yes, his *credentials* are impeccable, but his *creed* is abominable. There is no mistaking that the entire tenor of his book is a subtle, though well masked, repudiation of the Reformation and its material principle, *sola fide*. We submit that this is not the position of a true evangelical. It's also noteworthy, and not at all surprising, that Rome Catholic theologians actually do not object to the NP. Why would they?

There is one other movement we must mention, namely, the so-called Federal Vision (FV). While there are some similarities between it and the NP, they are still distinct. FV is a very disturbing movement within Reformed circles. While claiming to be Reformed, it departs from that very theology. It is, in fact (thankfully), denounced by most in Reformed circles. The United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) went so far at a 2010 Synod to enter into the record a 60-page report condemning Federal Vision as heresy.<sup>21</sup>

While the FV has raises some legitimate concerns, such as the current low view of both the visible Church and the "sacraments" (or "ordinances"), the problems with it far outweigh those concerns. It is, in fact, a complex, convoluted, and therefore confusing system. At the root of the FV is its hermeneutic (method of biblical interpretation). Flying in the face of the principle that "theology is the queen of the sciences" (TOTT #94) and viewing classic Systematic Theology as "rationalistic," it insists that biblical interpretation should be driven more by intuition than science or method. The potential consequence of this, as history repeatedly demon-

strates, is typology run amuck, even full-blown allegory.

The foundation of the FV is the Covenant (another word for "Federal"), that is, the Covenant of Grace, which they also call the "external covenant." While having earmarks of classic Covenant Theology, FV departs with adjustments like this, as explained by FV advocate Luke Nieuwsma:

To have a Federal Vision is to have an objective view of Christians; you view the word Christian in terms of the covenant relationship a person has with the church. There are two kinds of Christians: A) the faithful, who are baptized people who keep God's laws and live a life of obedience ending in eternal life, and B) the unfaithful, who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, but who fall away and crucify again the Son of God and put Him to shame (Hebrews 6). . . . Now, using this definition, do all "Christians" go to heaven? No. This is because there are faithful Christians and faithless Christians.<sup>22</sup>

Such an "exposition," however, flies in the face of the NT. Nowhere does it declare "two kinds of Christians," one that is faithful and the other that is not. A Christian by definition is one whose life has been transformed from a life of sin to a life of holiness (2 Cor. 5:17; etc.). Such redefining of terms is common in the FV.

The preceding idea gets worse in that not only does the FV teach that there are two kinds of Christians but also two aspects of election. The same writer explains:

There are two kinds of elect Christians which must be distinguished if we are going to use the same language as Scripture. There are those whom God chose to be faithful covenant members (again, not faithful in themselves, but as a gift of God's grace) from before the foundations of the world, and there are those whom God chose to be faithless covenant-breakers from before the foundation of the world. In one sense, you can be an elect Christian and go to hell. What is this kind of person elect to? This person has been predestined to nominal Christianity, to hypocrisy, to be an apostate, a vessel of dishonor. In contrast, all of Christ's true sheep are actually those Christians who have been elected to faithfulness and eternal life.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, everyone is actually part of the family of God even if they are not part of the salvation elect. That is, there is a common election to the church, which involves blessings for obedience and discipline for disobedience, and a special election to salvation, which is a reward for perseverance to the end. The decreed elect (i.e., those God intends to save) will persevere in their faith, while the covenant elect (i.e., all the rest) are predestined to be followers of Christ for a time but are not predestined to persevere in their faith and will eventually fall away. But again, such a concept does *not* "use the same language as Scripture." What is that, in fact, if not rank Arminianism?

Even more troubling is the sacramental system of the FV. It veers drastically from orthodoxy in its teaching about baptism and communion (even paedocommunion). Concerning baptism, Doug Wilson, one of the most respected leaders of the movement, first seems to deny baptismal regeneration: "I believe that the phrase baptismal regeneration, when taken in a wooden *ex opere operato* [from the work worked] sense, has been the source of much rank superstition and idolatry."

Indeed, it has. But he goes on to then write some very shocking statements that clearly imply that very teaching:

9. I believe that there is a sacramental union between the sign (*signum*) and thing signified (*res*) in baptism, so that we are warranted (and required) to think and speak of them together. . . . This sacramental union means that the union between *signum* and *res* cannot be considered as merely linguistic or memorial. . . .

11. We are warranted therefore in saying 'that baptism is the laver of regeneration (Titus 3:5). Baptism now saves us (1 Peter 3:20-21). In baptism we call upon the Lord, washing our sins away (Acts 22:16). I believe in one baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).<sup>24</sup>

The FV view of imputation is, at best, muddled. Concerning the imputation of Christ's active obedience, Peter Leithart, a leading FV teacher, wrote the following in a letter to PCA Pacific Northwest Presbytery in July 2007:

This is an issue I am still thinking about, and on which I don't have a settled position. I affirm that Christ's obedience was necessary for our salvation, and affirm too that Christ's history of obedience becomes the life story of those who are in Christ. I'm not sure that "imputation" is the best way to express this. It's not clear to me that the Westminster Standards require belief in the imputation of Christ's active obedience.<sup>25</sup>

But if we may lovingly ask, should not a leading teacher and minister be "settled" on such a major theological subject? As for what the *Westminster Confession* states (III.1), it seems quite unambiguous: "Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies . . . by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them (Rom. 4:5)." It also seems clear that the divines thought that the term "imputation is the best way to express this" (emphasis added).

To illustrate again the confusion in the FV, we then read what Leithart wrote three years before the above:

In raising Jesus [from the dead], the Father was saying, "I judge My Son to be the one who has obeyed perfectly even unto death; by union with Christ, that verdict is also passed on us. In this construction, there is no "independent" imputation of the active obedience of Christ, nor even of the passive obedience for that matter; we are regarded as righteous, and Christ's righteousness is reckoned as ours, because of our union with Him in His resurrection. What is imputed is the verdict, not the actions of Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

It seems that in 2004 Leithart was "settled" on this issue but later became unsettled. Or did he? Who knows? Such contradictory statements are disconcerting at best.

Still another leader, Rich Lusk, demonstrates that the FV sees believers as being in "union with Christ," by which they mean we are partakers of Christ's resurrection and glorified life rather than getting righteousness credited to us. He writes this clear denial of imputation:

This justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify "righteousness" into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me. . . . Union with Christ is therefore the key. . . . I am not justified by a legal transfer of his "obedience points" to my account . . . there is no imputation, strictly speaking. Rather, there is a real union.<sup>27</sup>

We conclude with this from N. T. Wright: "Justification at the last will be on the basis of performance, not possession."<sup>28</sup> Here it seems that the NP and the FV are on the same page. To say that performance is even part of the basis of justification is false teaching and an abandonment of *sola fide*. We submit that both these movements are such defection. For me, they are just further proof of what I have come to believe strongly: *If it's true, it's not new, and if it's new, it's not true*. If that makes me a dinosaur, just throw me in the tar pit.

Dr. J. D. Watson

Pastor-Teacher, Grace Bible Church  
Director, *Sola Scriptura* Publications

#### NOTES

- 1 Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Edwald M. Plass, Editor (Concordia, 1959), Vol. 2, 702, 715.
- 2 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Shultz (Fortress, 1966), 225.
- 3 *Institutes*, III.11.1 (Battles trans.). Beveridge reads: "'the principle ground on which religion must be supported.'" Robert White's translation of the 1541 French edition reads: "the chief article of the Christian religion" (Banner of Truth, 2014, 351).
- 4 Adherents of a 16th-century Italian sect holding Unitarian views, including the denial of the divinity of Christ and the Trinity.
- 5 Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1992 reprint; originally published, 1692), 226.
- 6 Spiros Zodhiatus, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: NT* (AMG, 1992), entry #G3049.
- 7 James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Founders Press reprint 2006, first published 1887), 399–400.
- 8 *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1989 reprint), Vol. III, 145.
- 9 *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, "Jehovah Tsidkenu: The lord Our Righteousness," sermon #395.
- 10 Hodge, Vol. III, 155.
- 11 Louis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), Vol. VII, 192, 194.
- 12 *Institutes*, III.11.19 (Battles).
- 13 *Calvin's Commentaries*, Isaiah 61:10.
- 14 *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* (public domain), Jer. 23:6.
- 15 James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of its History in the Church and of its Exposition from Scripture* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006; originally published 1867), 323.
- 16 B. B. Warfield, "Imputation" in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (P&R Publishing, 1968), 263–269.
- 17 Buchanan, 162–63.
- 18 George M. Ella, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Go Publications, 1995), 81–82.
- 19 N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
- 20 E.g., Matt. 23:2–5, 23–28; Luke 11:39; 12:1; 16:15; 18:10–14; 20:46–47; Rom. 9:30–32; Gal. 2:16; 3:11; Phil 3:9, etc.
- 21 See that report at:  
[www.urchna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/custom.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=24190](http://www.urchna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/custom.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=24190).
- 22 [www.federal-vision.com/?page\\_id=41](http://www.federal-vision.com/?page_id=41).
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 "Credos: On Baptism," *Credenda* (Canon Press, Vol. 15, No. 5). See also *Mother Kirk* (Canon Press, 2001), 93–96. Vol. 15, No. 5).
- 25 "Letter to the Stated Clerk,"  
[www.leithart.com/archives/003074.php](http://www.leithart.com/archives/003074.php).
- 26 "More from Ward,"  
<http://www.leithart.com/archives/000733.php>
- 27 "The Biblical Plan of Salvation" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*, 142.
- 28 N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans* (Abingdon, 2002), 440.

# BOOKS FOR GOD'S GLORY AND BELIEVER'S GROWTH

📖 NEW RELEASE 📖

## *Salvation Is of the Lord: An Exposition of the Doctrines of Grace By a Former Arminian*

**E**ndorsed by evangelicals such as Steven J. Lawson, Thomas J. Nettles, Joel R. Beeke, John M. Frame, Justin Peters, and others, this is the record of Pastor Watson's journey from an outspoken Arminian to a deeply devoted expositor of the biblical and historical Doctrines of Sovereign Grace. Several years in the making, this 360-page book is unique from others for two reasons: it is from a former passionate Arminian who knows those arguments well, and it treats these doctrines in an expositional manner instead of the usual topical fashion. After laying the all important foundation of how we should approach these doctrines, it then expounds the classic passages of Scripture that present them. A very special chapter, "The Test of History (Jude 3)," carefully traces the history of both Arminianism and Calvinism, demonstrating the consequences of both and the historical orthodoxy of the latter. [1 Copy, \$13.00; 2-3 copies, \$12.00 ea.; 4-5 copies, \$11.00; 6+, \$10.00 ea. Also available on Amazon.com and for Kindle Reader.]

📖 OTHER TITLES 📖

*Please see our blog for more information about all our titles, including more about content, sample chapters, endorsements, and ordering information: <http://SolaScripturaPublications.blogspot.com/>*

- Sovereign Grace Pulpit: The Doctrines of Grace from the Sermons of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*
- Winds of Doctrine: A Survey of Contemporary Theology*
- The Forgotten Tozer: A. W. Tozer's Challenge to Today's Church*
- A Taste of Heaven on Earth: Marriage and Family in Ephesians 5:18-6:4*
- A Light Unto My Path: An Exposition of Psalm 119*
- The Swan Song of the Old Shepherd: An Exposition of Psalm 23*
- Truth on Tough Texts: Expositions of Challenging Scripture Passages*
- Upon This Rock: Studies in Church History and Their Application*
- The Doctrines of Grace from the Lips of Our Lord: A Study in the Gospel of John (Wipf & Stock Publishers)*
- We Preach Christ: The Bible Story (booklet)*

## SOLA SCRIPTURA PUBLICATIONS

P.O. Box 235  
Meeker, CO 81641  
970-878-3228  
970-618-8375  
sspmail1521@gmail.com

### Order Form\*

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**City:** \_\_\_\_\_ **State:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Zip:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email (optional)** \_\_\_\_\_

Qty.	Title	Price Each	Total Price
1	We Preach Christ: The Bible Story	FREE	FREE <sup>†</sup>
<b>Sub-Total</b>			
<b><i>Entirely Optional Shipping Donation</i></b>			
<b>TOTAL<sup>‡</sup></b>			<b>\$</b>

\* PLEASE NOTE: We do not carry a supply of either *A Word for the Day* or *A Hebrew Word for the Day* (AMG Publishers). The best price is on Amazon.com.  
<sup>†</sup> One FREE copy with any order of at least one other book title. Additional copies may be purchased.  
<sup>‡</sup> We apologize, but to keep prices down, we do not accept credit cards at this time. All proceeds go toward publishing other books.

## BLOGS

*Sola Scriptura Publications: Info and ordering* [Sola Scriptura Publications](#)

*Tas Membranas: A Blog for Sound, Solid, and Scriptural Books* [Tas-Membranas.blogspot.com](#)

*Expositing Ephesians: The Christian's Wealth and Walk* [ExpositingEphesians.blogspot.com](#)

### OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

*John Calvin for Today* [JohnCalvinForToday.blogspot.com](#);

*Christ in Community* [ChristInCommunity.org/](#)

## TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

A Ministry of  
Grace Bible Church  
P.O. Box 235  
Meeker, CO 81641  
[www.TheScriptureAlone.com](#)  
[sspmail1521@gmail.com](mailto:sspmail1521@gmail.com)  
A F.I.R.E. Church  
[www.FireFellowship.org](#)

This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so we might address it either in a full length article or in a "Reader Questions" issue. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

This publication is sent free of charge to anyone who requests it. To aid in the ministry, donations will be greatly appreciated, but never demanded. If you know someone you think would enjoy TOTT, please send along their address.