

The Forensic and Transformational Aspects of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright and John Piper¹

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Introduction: N. T. Wright Versus John Piper on Justification

The noted British New Testament scholar Bishop N. T. Wright rejects the idea that justification includes spiritual transformation of the believer.² Emphasizing the covenant and law-court motif, Wright argues

¹ Unless otherwise stated, the Bible passages quoted are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

² “The point is that the word ‘justification’ does not itself *denote* the process whereby, or the event in which, a person is brought by grace from unbelief, idolatry and sin into faith, true worship and renewal of life. Paul, clearly, and unambiguously, uses a different word for that, the word ‘call’. The word ‘justification’, despite centuries of Christian misuse, is used by Paul to denote that which happens immediately after the ‘call’: ‘those God called, he also justified’ (Romans 8:30). In other words, those who hear the gospel and respond to it in faith are *then* declared by God to be his people, his elect, ‘the circumcision’, ‘the Jews’, ‘the Israel of God’. They are given the status *dikaïos*, ‘righteous’, ‘within the covenant’.

But the word ‘call’ itself, and the fact that ‘justification’ is not about ‘how I get saved’ but ‘how I am declared to be a member of God’s people’, must always have an eye to the larger purposes of the covenant” (N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005], 121, 122).

“The doctrine of justification by faith, from Galatians through Philippians to Romans, was never about how people were to be converted, how someone might become a Christian, but about how one could *tell*, in the present, who God’s true people were—and hence who one’s family were, who were the people with whom one should, as a matter of family love and loyalty, sit down and eat. This question was central to much of Judaism of the time, with different groups defining themselves this way and that, in particular by various interpretations of the Torah” (Ibid., 159).

“It is ironic that some within the ‘old perspective’ on Paul, by continuing to promote the wrong view of justification as conversion, as the moment of personal salvation and coming

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that justification is a change of status, by which the believer is now declared to be a true member of God's covenant family.³ The covenant was and is God's "single-plan-through-Israel-for-the world," the Abrahamic covenant that meets its fulfillment in Christ, the faithful Jew who brought the hopes of the Jewish nation to fruition.⁴ Wright rejects as nonsense the idea that the judge in a law court could transfer moral uprightness to a defendant. "When the judge in the law court justifies someone, he does not give that person his own particular 'righteousness.' He *creates* the status the vindicated defendant now possesses, by an act of *declaration*, a 'speech-act' in our contemporary jargon."⁵

Following to some extent the so-called new perspective on Paul, without agreeing with all its defenders,⁶ Wright rejects the view that Paul was reacting to the works-righteousness of contemporary Judaism. Rather, Paul was attempting to correct the exclusivist attitudes of the Jews, by which they denied to Gentiles inclusion in the covenant family. "God's purpose in calling Abraham was to bless the whole world, to call out a people from Gentiles as well as Jews. This purpose has now been accomplished through the faithfulness of the Messiah, and all who believe in him constitute this fulfilled-family-of-Abraham."⁷

Wright writes eloquently of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.⁸ But he separates justification from the work of the Spirit, who enables believers to obey God's law. In his view, the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with justification. The latter is a change of status for the believer; the work of the Spirit is a separate transforming work.

Without in any way detracting from the enormous importance of the everlasting covenant experience for the believer, and without depreciating the work of the Spirit as described by Wright, I wish to demonstrate that his definition of justification does not adequately do justice to Paul's meaning. Despite Wright's rejection of the basic

to faith rather than God's declaration *about* faith, have reinforced as well a polarization between Jesus and Paul which a more historically grounded and theologically astute reading can and must avoid" (Ibid, 159, 160).

³ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 90, 91.

⁴ Ibid., 95-99.

⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷ Ibid., 118.

⁸ Ibid., 107; cf. *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 97-101.

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understanding of Luther and Calvin that justification includes both a legal transaction and also an aspect of spiritual transformation in the sense of God-given reorientation that makes sanctification possible, it is my contention that their understanding of justification was thoroughly biblical.

Before presenting my own interpretation, it is helpful to briefly consider John Piper's critique of Wright. In his work, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*, Piper debates with Wright by presenting the traditional Protestant view of imputed righteousness, which counts the believer to be morally righteous even though, in fact, he is not. Piper writes:

The omniscient Judge does not merely show clemency or forgiveness and assign us a *status* of 'righteous'; he finds *in our favor* precisely because he counts us as having the moral righteousness that we in fact do not have in ourselves. When the charge against us is read ('You do not have moral righteousness') and the verdict of the Judge is rendered ('I declare you are not guilty as charged but *do* indeed have moral righteousness'), the righteousness in view in this declaration is real moral righteousness. I will argue later that this is the righteousness of Christ imputed to the guilty through faith alone. The declaration of justification in the law-court of God is not merely forgiveness; it is not merely the status of acquitted; it is counting the defendant as morally righteous though in himself he is not."⁹

Piper's definition of justification (imputation) seems to be no more satisfactory than Wright's view of justification as merely a change in legal *status*. Ultimately, Piper's view also boils down to justification merely as a legal change in status, a forensic declaration without any real moral transformation. Believers are counted to be that which they are really not. In an effort to avoid the Roman Catholic doctrine of infused righteousness, traditional Protestants such as Piper have denied the

⁹ John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 78; cf. Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R. Publishing, 2004), 178, 179. On the question of imputation, Waters agrees with Piper.

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spiritually transformative reality of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).¹⁰

In the following sections of this paper, I will identify four overlapping aspects of spiritual transformation in Paul’s delineation of justification as (1) forgiveness, (2) imputation of righteousness, (3) the “new birth,” and (4) union with Christ. Then I will briefly show how Luther and Calvin departed from Catholic theology to agree with Paul.

Forgiveness

Paul speaks of justification as forgiveness in Acts 13:38-39, a literal translation of which reads as follows: “Therefore let it be known to you, men, brethren, that through this man to you forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed; from all things from which you were not able by the law of Moses to be justified, by this man all who believe are justified.”¹¹ Similarly, in Romans 4:1-8, Paul equates justification with imputation of righteousness and identifies it as forgiveness, as shown by the way he quotes Psalm 32:1, 2: “David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven’” (vv. 6, 7).

There is an important legal aspect to forgiveness: Sinners are acquitted when they seek God’s forgiveness by virtue of the fact that Christ suffered the punishment for their sins. But forgiveness is not only a forensic matter. Paul specifically refers to forgiveness as spiritual transformation: “And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses” (Col. 2:13; NRSV). Thus the NRSV translates the aorist, middle participle *χαρισάμενος* as a temporal, adverbial participle. Just as legitimately, it may be regarded as a causal participle to be translated: “because (or since) he forgave us all our

¹⁰ Speaking of the distinctive positions of Lutheran and Reformed Orthodoxy on justification, Alister McGrath writes: “Both confessions understand justification to be the forensic declaratory act of God . . . subsequent to vocation and prior to sanctification.” He speaks of “a corresponding weakness” in both systems “with justification tending to be treated as a legal fiction. . . . Justification is thus conceived analogically, as the remission of sins and imputation of righteousness by a purely verbal decree *in foro divino*, without any change in the sinner having taken place with reference to which this verdict could be supported” (*Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2:44, 45. On the Tridentine view of justification, including the doctrine of infused righteousness, see McGrath, *ibid.*, 68-86.

¹¹ My translation.

trespasses.”¹² Either way the force of the passage is that God’s forgiveness made the Colossians alive with Christ from spiritual death.¹³ Not only did this forgiveness forensically erase the record of sin with its legal demands for punishment (v. 14); it also gave new life when the believer was spiritually circumcised “by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ” (v. 11), buried with him in baptism, and raised to new life with him “through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (v. 12; NRSV). This new life initially received from Christ at the time of conversion is not only new in the sense of forensic freedom from condemnation, as shown by the preceding context: In verses 6-7, Paul exhorts: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (NRSV). Spiritual transformation of life established by initially receiving Christ, when the experience of forgiveness occurred (v. 13), is to continue in spiritual life.

The use of ἄφεσις in the New Testament underlines the concept that forgiveness involves spiritual transformation. According to Arndt and Gingrich, the word means “release from captivity” as well as “pardon, cancellation of an obligation, a punishment, or guilt. . . . The Forgiveness of Sins. . . . Forgiveness and Reconciliation.”¹⁴ Significantly, the word ἄφεσις is used twice in Luke 4:18: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent

¹² H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey refer to “The Causal Participle. The participle may denote that which is the ground of the action of the main verb. Here it functions in the same general relation as a causal clause introduced by *because* or *since*.” They cite as examples the Greek of John 4:45, Matt. 3:6, and 1 Tim. 4:8 (*A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [New York: Macmillan, 1927, 1960], 227).

¹³ The context of Col 2:13 supports this conclusion. The Colossians “were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ” (v. 11). They were “buried with him in baptism” and “raised with him through faith in the power of God” (v. 12). This spiritual resurrection happened “when or because he forgave us all our trespasses.” The main verb in verse 13 is “made alive” (συνεζωοποίησεν). The participle χαρισάμενος, “when he forgave,” provides the ground of the action of the main verb. Christ made this transformation by forgiveness possible by “erasing the record” of our guilt, “nailing it to the cross” (v. 14). We were not forgiven at the cross, but when we accepted Christ as Savior. At the cross, Christ rendered possible the transformation of forgiveness by “erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands” (v. 14).

¹⁴ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957, 1967), 124.

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me to proclaim release [ἄφεσιν] to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” [. . . ἀποστεῖλαι τεθραυσμένους ἐν ἀφέσει: literally, “to send forth the oppressed in release”]. Jesus did not go around liberating people from literal jails. Rather, he provided spiritual release, i.e., forgiveness, and freedom to people held captive and oppressed by sin and Satan (cf. Acts 10:38). This freedom is associated with “recovery of sight,” so Christ provided not only legal freedom from guilt, but also a change of spiritual perspective.

Paul was reiterating the teaching of the Old Testament. The Psalmist wrote of God, “who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit” (Ps. 103:3, 4;). That this forgiveness, healing, and redemption involves spiritual transformation is suggested by the following words: “. . . who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.” (vv. 4, 5).

When David sought forgiveness for his sin with Bathsheba he asked for spiritual cleansing: “Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:1, 2, 7, 10).¹⁵

God’s legal act of abolishing the repentant sinner’s guilt involves the gift of spiritual cleansing that transforms the human attitude and relationship to him. Christ’s forgiveness brings us into loving fellowship with him that replaces guilt and condemnation, making long-term spiritual renewal possible.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ellen White expressed it in harmony with the biblical evidence: “God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness *for* sin, but reclaiming *from* sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me’ (Psalm 51:10).” (*Thoughts From The Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1896, 1956), 114.

¹⁶ In the light of this discussion, the use of καὶ in 1 John 1:9 may be regarded as expegetical or an example of hendiadys, so that the verse may be translated: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins *that is to say* to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” On the New Testament uses of καὶ, see F. Blass and A. Debrunner (transl. Robert W. Funk), *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 227-229.

Forgiveness is justification; forgiveness is both a forensic and a transforming divine act; therefore justification is both forensic and transformational.

Imputation of Righteousness

John Piper states the traditional post-Reformation view of imputation when he asserts that God “counts us as having the moral righteousness that we in fact do not have in ourselves.”¹⁷ It is my view that this conclusion is unwarranted by the biblical facts. Rather the evidence points to the conclusion that God’s imputation of righteousness to believers is a legal declaration of a simultaneous change of status and a change of spiritual orientation resulting from bestowal of righteousness upon them by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

To demonstrate that Abraham was justified by faith, not by works, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6. “For what does the Scripture say? ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’” (Rom. 4:3). Abraham’s believing (Hebrew Hiph. of אמן) was reckoned/counted/imputed (Qal of חשב; LXX and NT λογίζομαι) to him as righteousness, which meant that through belief he gained possession of it as a gift. Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the verb אמן, “believe”: “To respond to a spoken sentence with *’aman* does not only mean to declare it to be true, but to give yourself up to the truth expressed in the sentence, to make it your own, and to vow to allow yourself to be guided by it.”¹⁸

In the Old Testament, belief in God involves not merely acceptance of ideas, doctrines, or propositions, but acceptance of God into the life, resulting in practical commitment to a lifestyle that is stipulated by Yahweh as appropriate to the everlasting covenant relationship (cf. Ps. 31:23; 78:7, 8; Isa. 1:21, 26). Speaking of Abraham, Nehemiah wrote: “You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him a covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite” (Neh. 9:8). Faith is related to righteousness, obedience, and ethical goodness. We might say that belief (faith) is union with God that affects all of a person’s attitudes and actions. No wonder God considered (counted/reckoned/imputed) Abraham righteous (Gen. 15:6). He considered it so because, in view of

¹⁷ John Piper, *The Future of Justification; A Response to N. T. Wright*, 78.

¹⁸ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (London: Isaac Levy, 1959, 1963), 1: 273, 274.

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Abraham's faith, the patriarch shared the righteousness of God. His righteousness was God's righteousness, but because of his faith union with God it was also his. Abraham experienced righteousness by faith and, insofar as he retained his faith union with God, his life demonstrated genuine faithfulness.

This interpretation of Abraham's experience is supported by examination of the semantic range of the verb *חשב* in the Hebrew Old Testament, which is followed by that of *λογίζομαι*, its Greek equivalent in the Septuagint. These words cover a wide semantic range, depending on the contexts in which they occur:

1. At times they refer to things or persons that are regarded as *what they are not*. Rachel and Leah complained that Laban regarded (*חשב* > *λογίζομαι*) them as foreigners (Gen. 31:15), although they were not. Judah thought (*חשב*) Tamar to be a harlot even though she was not (Gen. 38:15). Leviticus 25:31 legislates: "But the houses of the villages which have no wall around them shall be reckoned (*חשב*) with [i.e., regarded as if they were, although they are really not] the fields of the country; they may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee." Eli supposed (*חשב*) that Hannah was drunk, but she was sober (1 Sam. 1:13). Job thought (*חשב*) God counted him as his enemy, but he did not (Job 13:24; 19:11).

2. On the other hand, the verb *חשב* can refer to people or things being regarded as *what they in fact are*. The Emim were regarded (*חשב* > *λογίζομαι*) as giants because of their great size (Deut. 2:11, 20). Job regarded (*חשב*) his comforters as stupid because they were (Job 18:3). Phinehas was counted (*חשב*) as righteous because his actions revealed that he was (Ps. 106:30, 31; cf. Num 25:10-13). Nehemiah's treasurers were "counted (*חשב*) faithful" because they were (Neh. 13:13). Joshua 13:3 mentions land "reckoned (*חשב*) as Canaanite" because the Canaanites possessed it at the time.

Second Samuel 4:2 refers to the fact that the village of Beeroth was "reckoned (*חשב*) to Benjamin," i.e., owned by Benjamin, the tribe to which it had been deeded in the distribution of the Promised Land at the time of Joshua (Josh. 9:17; 18:21-25). So in this context, *חשב* refers to the actual result of a transfer that was a gift from God. This real ownership was, of course, under God's overall ownership of the land (Lev. 25). Therefore, it was conditional on maintenance of the covenant. If the people broke the covenant, they would lose the land and go into exile (Lev. 26). So, by analogy, the fact that we have the real gift of

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justification doesn't remove its conditionality. It's not once-saved-always-saved.

The legislation of Numbers 18:26-31 establishes an actual transfer of agricultural tithes that were to be "imputed" (כּשַׁן) to the Levites. The tithes constituted a tangible gift that was actually possessed by the Levites, as shown by the fact that they and members of their households were to eat of this food (v. 31).

The traditional post-Reformation understanding of imputation in Romans 4 acknowledges only one of the Old Testament connotations of כּשַׁן and λογίζομαι. Imputation of righteousness is said to be only God legally counting that which is not actually so in the lives of believers. But Paul's use of λογίζομαι draws on another part of its semantic range. In Romans 4:4 he notes, "Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned [λογίζεται] as a gift but as something due." Here a worker's wages are reckoned as what they actually are: something due. Paul goes on to say: "But to the one who without works trusts Him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned [λογίζεται] as righteousness" (v. 5). The contrast in this passage is between one who works and one who does not work. In both cases, a transfer is reckoned/imputed: wages to a worker and righteousness to a believer. There is no indication that there is another contrast here between regarding something that actually belongs to a person ("wages"; v. 4; meaning 2. of כּשַׁן > λογίζομαι, above), and that which does not ("righteousness"; v. 5; meaning 1., above). Like payment of wages, the gift of righteousness is not only a legal accounting; it is an actual transfer. The difference is that righteousness is a gift; it is not earned.

Abraham received the gift of righteousness before he was given the "sign of circumcision" (Rom 4:10). Circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11)¹⁹ Paul doesn't say that the righteousness Abraham had by faith was only a legal declaration. Following his use of λογίζομαι in verses 4 and 5, the conclusion is warranted that God declared that which he simultaneously bestowed upon Abraham: the gift of His

¹⁹ All translations fill in the ellipsis with the verb "to have." For a discussion of ellipsis in the Greek NT, see Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar*, 253-255.

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righteousness. According to Paul, this same gift may belong to all believers (Rom. 4:22-25).²⁰

The New Birth

Titus 3:5-7 literally reads:

Not by works in righteousness which we did but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of rebirth [παλιγγενεσίας] and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which He poured out [ἐξέχεεν] upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified [δικαιωθέντες] by His grace we might be heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Here God saved us through the new birth experience by pouring his Spirit upon us (cf. Acts 2:17, 18, 33). In Titus 3:5-7, we are heirs as a result (ἵνα) of God's saving (ἔσωσεν), washing (λουτροῦ), pouring (ἐξέχεεν), justifying (δικαιωθέντες) act. Elsewhere, Paul emphasizes that it is justification, the gift of righteousness, that makes us heirs (Rom. 4:13, 14; Gal. 3:29; 4:1, 6, 7). According to Romans 8:13-17, it is the Holy Spirit who conveys this heirship to us.

In Titus 3:7, the action of the first aorist, passive participle precedes the action of the main verb in the sentence. The main verb is γενηθῶμεν, "we might become." We were justified prior to becoming heirs, so that we might become heirs. God's saving act in this passage is identified with his justifying act, and the result is that we are heirs. Since he saved us by pouring the Holy Spirit upon us, this is how he justified us. The wording of the passage supports the conclusion that salvation is

²⁰ Ellen White emphasized the two biblical concepts: "If you give yourself to Him [Christ], and accept Him as Your Savior, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.

More than this, Christ changes the heart. He abides in your heart by faith," *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 62.

"Through faith in His name He imputes unto us His righteousness, and it becomes a living principle in our life," *That I May Know Him* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1964), 302.

"Having made us righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ, God pronounces us just, and treats us as just," *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 1: 394.

"Let perfect obedience be rendered to God through the imputed righteousness of Christ, and we shall reveal to the world the fact that God loves us as he loves Jesus" (*Signs of the Times*, May 28, 1896).

justification, and that God accomplishes this for us by the washing of rebirth and the renewing by the Holy Spirit.

A similar emphasis appears in Galatians 2. Believers are justified by “faith in Christ Jesus,” “not by the works of the law” (v. 16). Paul “died to the law” that he “might live to God” (v.19). He has been “crucified with Christ” so that now Christ lives in Him (v. 20). Paul is talking about justification. He also asks the Galatians: “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” They began with justification (Gal. 2:16) and they began by the Spirit. This correlation indicates that the work of the Spirit is an essential aspect of justification. Paul again quotes Genesis 15:6 (Gal. 3:6) and speaks of the Gentiles being justified by faith (v. 7-9). He concludes by announcing that Christ died “in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (v. 14). Abraham’s blessing was justification by faith. It is ours when “we receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” So justification is a transforming work of the Spirit. Galatians teaches the same message as Titus 3:5-7: Justification includes the new birth experience.

Union with Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Righteousness is revealed by the Holy Spirit. Paul teaches that the power in the gospel for believers in Christ results from “the righteousness of God” being “revealed” (*ἀποκαλύπτεται*) to them (Rom. 1:16-17). Elsewhere Paul uses the verb *ἀποκαλύπτω* to refer to the revelation of God’s gifts to believers by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9-16). In Romans 1:16, 17, the revelation of the righteousness of God by the Spirit results in the believer becoming righteous. “The righteous person shall live by faith” (v. 17, my translation).

Justification by grace is the gift of spiritual power (righteousness) to the believer. In Romans 3, “the righteousness of God” is “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (v. 22) Justification is “by grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24). In the writings of Paul, grace is the gift of unmerited spiritual power (1 Cor. 1:4-9; 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:8, 14; 2 Tim. 2:1). As in Ephesians 1:7, 8 Paul identifies *forgiveness* with redemption and the gift of grace, so here in Romans 3:24 he identifies *justification* as redemption and the gift of grace. What this gift entails, Paul proceeds to explain: 1. Christ’s atoning

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sacrifice, “effective through faith” (v. 25); 2. “to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed” (v. 25, i.e. forgiveness for the believer); 3. “to show his righteousness (δικαιοσύνης) at the present time, so that he might be righteous (δίκαιον) and the one who “righteouses” (δικαιοῦντα, declares and makes righteous) the one by faith in Jesus” (v. 26, my translation). Justification “by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24) involves these three elements: his sacrifice and his forgiveness, which is his transforming gift of righteousness to the believer.

Justification involves peace through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Romans 5 tells us that “since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 1), because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (v. 5).

Justification is death to sin and new life in Christ. Romans 6:7 translates literally: “For he who has died has been justified from sin.” By justification, the “old man” (v. 6), the old manner of life, the old life of habitual sinning has died (cf. Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:3), and the new life in Christ has begun (cf. Rom. 6:4; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:1). Paul adds: “So you also must consider [λογίζεσθε] yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). Once again, Paul uses λογίζομαι. Believers are to regard themselves dead to sin but alive to God. They are not merely recipients of a legal declaration; this transformation is a reality.

Justification results in sanctification (holiness). The Christian believers Paul was addressing had “once been slaves of sin” (Rom. 6:17). But when they responded to the gospel message they were “set free from sin” and had “become slaves of righteousness” (v. 18). This transformation occurred when they were justified. In the book of Romans, Paul speaks of justification as the gift of the righteousness of God (1:16, 17; 3:21-24; 4:22-25). For these believers the old life of sin had been crucified (6:6). They had died to sin when they were justified. “For he who has died has been justified from sin” (v. 7; my translation). Before they were justified, they presented their members “as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity” (v. 19). Now Paul urges that, since they have become willing slaves of righteousness (in justification), they should present their members “as slaves to righteousness *for sanctification*” (εἰς ἁγιασόν, v. 19; emphasis supplied). Paul adds, “Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God

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[in justification], the advantage you get is sanctification” (v. 22). Here the gift of Christ’s righteousness in justification is the divine act that makes the believer holy or sanctified. So justification results in sanctification.

The Greek word for “sanctification” (ἁγιασμός) used in Romans 6:19, 22 means “holiness.” The consistent teaching of Scripture is that the Holy Spirit makes us holy (1 Peter 1:2; 2 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 15:16). Never does the Bible say that we sanctify ourselves or that our works make us holy. The gift of righteousness in justification sanctifies us or makes us holy because in justification the Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts (Titus 3:5-7; Rom. 5:1, 2, 5; 8:9, 10; Gal. 3:3-14). This is why justification and sanctification are inseparable. Christ’s gift of himself to us by the Holy Spirit in justification makes us holy or sanctified. Justification is Christ bestowed; sanctification is Christ possessed. Justification is Christ coming into believers’ hearts every day as they surrender to him; sanctification is Christ dwelling in their hearts every day. They have the possession because they have received the bestowal.

Sanctification is often spoken of in Scripture as present holiness in Christ. Paul was sent to the Gentiles “so that they may receive forgiveness of sins [justification] and a place among those *who have been sanctified* [τοῖς ἡγιασμένοις] by faith in me” (Acts 26:17, 18).²¹ Paul speaks of himself as “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles . . . so that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, *having been sanctified* [ἡγιασμένη] by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:16).²² To the Corinthian believers, Paul wrote: “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:11). They had received the cleansing involved in the inseparable experiences of justification and sanctification, and Paul wanted them to retain the blessing.

²¹ My translation. Ηγιασμένοις is the perfect, passive participle of ἁγιάζω (the verb “to sanctify”). Τοῖς ἡγιασμένοις means “those who have been sanctified.” “The significance of the perfect tense in presenting action as having reached its termination and existing in its finished results lies at the basis of its uses. Emphasis, as indicated by the context or the meaning of the verb root, may be on either the completion of the action or on its finished results.”—Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar*, 201.

²² My translation. The Greek reads ἡγιασμένη ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ, having been sanctified (or “made holy”) by the Holy Spirit.” Ηγιασμένη is the perfect passive participle of ἁγιάζω.

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Paul also spoke of sanctification as progressive growth in holiness. “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). The daily experience of justification (receiving Christ into the heart by the gift of the Holy Spirit) results in progressive growth in holiness. Paul emphasized this as a more-and-more experience in his first epistle to the Thessalonians. “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless. . . .” He urged them “to live and to please God . . . more and more. . . . For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” (1 Thess. 3:12-4:3).

Notice that the evidence presented above shows that both justification and sanctification involve the work of God both for and in the believer. The commonly cited distinction that “justification is what God does *for* you and sanctification is what God does *in* you” is a false dichotomy that fails to accurately reflect biblical teaching.

Justification involves the bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of the believer, providing union with Christ. Romans 7 emphasizes that justified believers enjoy “the new life of the Spirit” (v. 6). Romans 8:9, 10 further stresses the point: “But you are not in the flesh,” i.e., you are not unjustified, “You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” That is, you are justified believers. “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” So if justification does not involve the transforming work of the Spirit, so-called justified believers would not belong to Christ. “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” Therefore, union with Christ by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit is the justifying gift of righteousness.

Luther and Calvin²³

The standard view in the Middle Ages was that, when God justifies a believer, the Holy Spirit injects into the soul a *habitus* or quality that makes the soul intrinsically righteous, having the capacity to perform works capable of earning merit with God.²⁴ Influenced by Aristotle's matter-form analysis, Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-74) defined justification (salvation) as infusion of grace that repairs (re-forms, re-makes) the soul of man so that now it has the power to do meritorious works.²⁵

The Tridentine definition of justification closely followed that of Thomas Aquinas.²⁶ The fathers of the Council of Trent (1545-63) taught that the sinner's own will, cooperating with grace, projects him toward justification.²⁷ Like Aquinas, Trent defined justification as an inner renewal of the soul.²⁸ The justified person has the ability to do works that are meritorious in the sight of God and that will improve upon his level of justification.²⁹

The Roman Catholic position on justification, as defined by Aquinas and Trent, involved transformation, re-creation, re-forming of the immortal soul within man. This was not a reiteration of Jesus' teaching of the new birth. Righteousness within, for Aquinas and Trent is a *habitus* or quality injected or infused into the souls of believers so that they are intrinsically or inherently righteous. Righteousness within is not Christ within by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The soul which is now righteous in nature has the capacity to perform works that are meritorious in God's sight.

²³ What follows is a brief summary of my paper, "The Roman Catholic and Reformation Concepts of Justification." An abbreviated version of this paper titled "Justification: Historic Journey from the Middle Ages through Now" was published in *Ministry* (December, 2009), 16-21.

²⁴ See Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 1:40-51.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 20: *Great Books of Our Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 1952), part I of second part, question 110, articles 2 and 4. *Ibid.*, part I of second part, question 113, article 3. Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 1:44-47, 63-65, 81, 82, 85-87.

²⁶ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2: 64; Reinhold Seeberg, *The History of Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1977, 1898), 2:433.

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1877, 1919), 2:93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 94-99.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 99-101, 107-109.

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Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64), by contrast with Aquinas and Trent, saw justification as involving two simultaneous, inseparable aspects: (1) The legal or forensic aspect involving God's forgiveness of the believers' sins and his crediting Christ's righteousness to their account, and (2) a transformational aspect involving Christ's gift of his righteousness to believers by the Holy Spirit. The soul is not reformed or re-created so that it becomes inherently righteous. The transformation is Christ, by the Holy Spirit, coming to dwell in the human heart, so that his righteousness becomes the believer's righteousness by his righteous presence. Believers remain fallen, sinful human beings, but their fallen natures are now under the control and direction of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Paul Althaus establishes that Luther understood justification in the two senses described above,³⁰ and Alister E. McGrath has underlined the point.³¹ Study of Luther's works supports their interpretation. Luther often emphasized the legal aspect in justification.³² On the other hand, he often emphasized the transformational aspect in justification.³³ He regarded justification as involving the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. For example, he wrote: "Then what does justify? Hearing the voice of the Bridegroom, hearing the proclamation of faith—when this is heard it justifies. Why? Because it brings the Holy Spirit who justifies."³⁴ In his lengthy comments on Galatians 2:16, contained in his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther repeatedly presents justification as Christ bestowed upon the heart of the believer.³⁵

McGrath points out that, although John Calvin gave greater emphasis to the legal (forensic) aspect in justification than did Luther,³⁶ "he nevertheless preserves an important aspect of Luther's understanding of justification which Melancthon abandoned—the personal union of Christ and the believer in justification. Calvin speaks of the believer being

³⁰ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, transl. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 226, 234, 235.

³¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:14, 126.

³² *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 34:152, 153.

³³ *Ibid.*, 34:177, 178; 22:275; 25:104.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26:208.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26:130, 132, 137. Cf. Luther's comments on Gal. 2:20: *Ibid.*, 26:167, 168.

³⁶ McGrath, 2:36-38.

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‘grafted into Christ’, so that the concept of *incorporation* becomes central to his understanding of justification. The *iustitia Christi* [the righteousness of Christ], on the basis of which man is justified, is treated as if it were man’s within the context of the intimate personal relationship of Christ and the believer.”³⁷ In Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he identifies both the legal element³⁸ and the transformational element³⁹ in justification.

Calvin properly objected to Andreas Osiander’s (1498-1552) view that justification involves infusion of essential righteousness into the soul of the believer. In his answer, Calvin emphasized the importance of personal union with Christ. He wrote:

Moreover, lest by his cavils he deceive the unwary, I acknowledge that we are devoid of this incomparable gift [righteousness] until Christ becomes ours. Therefore, to that union of the head and members, the residence of Christ in our hearts, in fine, the mystical union, we assign the highest rank, Christ when he becomes ours making us partners with him in the gifts with which he was endued. Hence we do not view him as at a distance and without us, but as we have put him on, and been ingrafted into his body, he designs to make us one with himself, and, therefore, we glory in having a fellowship of righteousness with him.⁴⁰

McGrath summarizes later theological developments: “Luther’s concept of justification, his concept of the presence of Christ within the believer . . . all were rejected or radically modified by those who followed him.”⁴¹ In his later works, Melancthon promoted legal-only justification, as Luther never had.⁴² The authors of the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577), including Martin Chemnitz, followed Melancthon,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 36, 37; cf. Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 120-139.

³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1559, 1962), III.XI.2, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, III.XI.10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ McGrath, 2:32.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 23-26.

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not Luther.⁴³ The tendency within orthodox Lutheranism has been to treat justification as a “legal fiction.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

The biblical evidence indicates that justification as forgiveness and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is both forensic and transformational. It also establishes that justification includes the new birth experience for the believer.

Despite N. T. Wright’s assertions and John Piper’s counter-claim, Luther and Calvin closely and accurately followed Paul’s understanding of justification (or imputation of righteousness) as involving both a forensic and a spiritually transformational aspect.

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⁴³ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 44, 45.