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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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# BIBLICAL JUDGMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS: TOWARD A DEFENCE OF IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS

JORDAN P. BARRETT

3965 E. DE BLAAY LN SE, GRAND RAPIDS, MI 49512 USA

jordan.barrett@my.wheaton.edu

According to B. B. Warfield, the term *imputation* has been used in three ways since the time of the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> First, it may refer to the imputation of Adam's sin to his descendants; second, the imputation of believer's sins to Jesus; and finally, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to his people. Crucial to this statement is that 'the divine act called "imputation" is in itself precisely the *same* in each of the three great transactions'. Furthermore, 'the ground on which it proceeds... and the things imputed may be different... [but] in each and every case alike imputation itself is simply the act of setting to one's account'.<sup>2</sup> Warfield's definition is a helpful starting point, but much more needs to be said about imputation in light of recent defences and critiques. In this essay I will specifically focus on the third way imputation language has been used, namely the imputed righteousness of Christ.

The doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness has been a source of comfort to some and frustration to others. On the one hand, the belief that we have been 'clothed' with Christ's righteousness before God has brought great peace to those who see their own 'righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Isa. 64:6). On the other hand, critics argue that imputed righteousness has been *imputed* onto the biblical text as a foreign concept with no biblical roots. While the issues are certainly more complex than this, the debate raises many questions: can this crucial doctrine of the Reformation be found in Scripture at the exegetical level? If imputed righteousness cannot be found in Paul or any other biblical author, then is the doctrine the result of systematic categories being forced upon Scripture? Michael Bird answers that 'the notion of "imputation" is entirely legitimate within the field of systematic theology as a way of restating the forensic nature of justification over and against alternative models and it is implicit in the representative roles of Adam and Christ. However, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Warfield calls them three 'acts'. See B. B. Warfield, 'Imputation', in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. by Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: P&R, 1968), pp. 262–69.

<sup>2</sup> Warfield, 'Imputation', p. 263.

not the language of the New Testament'.<sup>3</sup> At first glance, this appears to validate the use of imputation language within the borders of systematic theology. However, I believe Bird and others are after something else: the *biblical* view based on the Bible's own terms, categories, and context. And, at some point, imputation language falls short of representing Scripture's viewpoint. So, can the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ truly be a legitimate expression of biblical ideas and yet not be *explicitly* found in Scripture? Or, stated more generally, can an external (non-biblical) concept be faithful to an internal (biblical) viewpoint? My answer is 'yes', and I will spend the remainder of this essay exploring the reasoning behind this response. In short, I will demonstrate that imputed righteousness is a suitable theological concept that faithfully represents and corresponds to the judgments Scripture makes with regard to justification. Imputed righteousness is neither imposed on the text, nor is it *deduced* from it.<sup>4</sup> This means that many of the proponents and opponents of imputed righteousness are both wrong and right, and so I will begin by evaluating the views of three opponents—Gundry, Seifrid, and Wright—and three proponents—Piper, Carson, and Vickers—in order to present their views on relationship between imputed righteousness and Scripture. I will argue that none of the six representatives sufficiently explain the relationship between the concept of imputed righteousness and Scripture. At this point, I will employ David Yeago's argument regarding the distinction between concepts and judgments and demonstrate how this distinction can be fruitfully applied to the question of imputed righteousness in Scripture and theology. Here, I will also present what I see is the biblical judgment of 'reckoned righteousness' and how the concept of imputed righteousness faithfully expresses this view. The conclusion will draw out the implications of my account and suggest one other possible way forward.

<sup>3</sup> Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), p. 70. On this point, Bird quotes George Ladd who says that 'Paul never expressly states that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers' (George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, revised [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], p. 491; cf. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, p. 70, n. 45). However, Bird fails to mention that on the very same page Ladd adds that 'it is an unavoidable logical conclusion that people of faith are justified because Christ's righteousness is imputed to them' (Ladd, *Theology*, p. 491).

<sup>4</sup> This wording stems from Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 344.

## I. IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

What is the relationship between imputed righteousness and Scripture? On some level it involves attending to the author's intended meaning, but is the process complete once we discover and express this meaning? Must we seek to translate the message of Scripture into new cultural contexts and do so through the use of new concepts? These are crucial questions that deeply affect the way the doctrine of imputed righteousness must be understood in relation to Scripture. While the discipline of systematic theology is more sympathetic to the doctrine of imputed righteousness, the concept has proven most controversial in the area of biblical studies. Therefore, this essay will focus on contemporary views of imputed righteousness, specifically the way various contemporary scholars see this doctrine in relation to the questions raised above.<sup>5</sup>

***Critics of Imputed Righteousness***

**Robert Gundry.** Gundry argues against imputed righteousness in various places, but his most sustained and clearest exposition stems from the 2003 Wheaton Theology Conference.<sup>6</sup> He does not dispute the imputation of

<sup>5</sup> Space does not allow for a full history of the doctrine of imputed righteousness. For the history and background, see Paul ChulHong Kang, *Justification: The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness from Reformation Theology to the American Great Awakening and the Korean revivals* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 31–151; Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), pp. 23–70; Stephen Strehle, 'Imputatio iustitiae: Its Origin in Melancthon, its Opposition in Osiander', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 50 (1994), 201–19; idem., *The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel: Encounter Between the Middle Ages and the Reformation*, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 60 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 66–85. For a survey and assessment of Owen, Piscator, Wesley, Baxter, and Tilloston, see Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640–1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 186–201. See also Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Gundry, 'The Nonimputation of Christ's Righteousness', in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), pp. 17–45. This essay is a response to John Piper's book, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002); the main argument of Piper's book will be outlined in the next section. Gundry's earlier essays include: 'Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration' . . . Even Though I Wasn't Asked To', *Books and Culture*, February 2001; 'On Oden's Answer', *Books and Culture*, April 2001.

our sins to Christ; however, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers cannot be found in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> Instead, 'righteousness comes into view not as what is counted but as what God counts faith to be'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, an external or alien righteousness is not counted or imputed to a person who has faith. Instead, our faith *is* our righteousness because God counts it to be the case: 'faith was reckoned to Abraham *as* righteousness' (Rom. 4:9, NRSV). Gundry argues that those who see the doctrine of imputed righteousness see 'faith as the *instrument* by which that righteousness is received',<sup>9</sup> and his survey of Paul's use of *logizomai eis* reveals that an instrumental view of faith cannot 'make good contextual sense' of biblical passages and 'in most of them it makes absolute nonsense'.<sup>10</sup>

The debate over imputed righteousness is important for Gundry because at its core it is a dialogue about 'what the Bible does and does not teach and . . . whether the doctrine of an imputation of Christ's righteousness represents a valid development of biblical teaching'. Gundry adds: 'Of course theologians are not limited to repeating what the Bible says, but what they develop in and from their own circumstances should at least arise out of what the Bible says'.<sup>11</sup> The doctrine of imputed righteousness is thus an *invalid* development of biblical teaching and does not arise out of Scripture. Rather, God counts our faith to be righteousness.<sup>12</sup>

*Mark Seifrid.* Seifrid is also not convinced that imputation language is necessary and makes a biblical and historical argument against the view. When it comes to imputation, 'we are dealing in some measure with the replacement of the biblical categories with other ways of speaking'.<sup>13</sup> This is because 'Paul never speaks of Christ's righteousness as imputed to

<sup>7</sup> Gundry explains that 'Paul does not match the imputation of our sins to Christ with an imputation of Christ's righteousness to us believers because he (Paul) wants to emphasize the life of righteousness that we are supposed to live . . . apart from the Old Testament law, under which Christ was born, and to emphasize the judgment of our works at the end' ('Nonimputation', p. 44).

<sup>8</sup> Gundry, 'Nonimputation', p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Gundry, 'Nonimputation', p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Gundry, 'Nonimputation', p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Gundry, 'Nonimputation', p. 43 (emphasis in original).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Horton comments that Gundry's formulation ends up saying that 'we are justified by faith, through faith, on the basis of faith. Beyond the question of imputation, this exegesis represents a remarkable position in the history of exegesis and doctrine'. See *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, 'Luther, Melancthon and Paul on the Question of Imputation: Recommendations on a Current Debate', in *Justification: What's at Stake*

believers'.<sup>14</sup> Even if imputation is not a biblical category, is it still a warranted historical development? Seifrid admits that Luther spoke of the imputation of righteousness, but 'he does not speak of the imputation of *Christ's* righteousness—or does so only rarely—because he regards Christ himself as present in faith'.<sup>15</sup> For Luther, the work of Christ is mediated through union with Christ. But for Melancthon, imputation becomes necessary to mediate Christ's work. Therefore, those who claim that the doctrine of imputed righteousness is a crucial Reformation teaching must realize that 'to insist that one define justification in terms of "the imputation of Christ's righteousness," is to adopt a late-Reformational, Protestant understanding'.<sup>16</sup> This indicates that the doctrine only makes sense as a contextual response to the Tridentine understanding of infused righteousness. Even if this is the case, Seifrid attempts to qualify his objections: 'it is not so much wrong to use the expression "the imputed righteousness of Christ" as it is deficient'.<sup>17</sup> For Seifrid, Paul's doctrine of justification encompasses forgiveness, reconciliation, righteousness, and so forth. But justification is bigger than any one of these aspects alone, including imputation. As a questionable teaching of Scripture and development of late-Reformational thought, the doctrine of imputed righteousness remains troublesome.

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*in the Current Debates*, ed. by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 151.

<sup>14</sup> Seifrid, 'Luther, Melancthon, and Paul', p. 149. Seifrid also finds the idea of imputing the active and passive obedience of Christ to be 'unnecessary and misleading' (*Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], p. 175). Michael Bird makes a similar move in his *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), pp. 562–3.

<sup>15</sup> Seifrid, 'Luther, Melancthon and Paul', p. 144. Seifrid claims that language of the 'imputation of Christ's righteousness' is lacking in the 1530 *Confessio Augustana*, the First Helvetic Confession (1536), including Melancthon's 1543 *Loci*. After the Osiander controversy (1550–1551), however, the language can be found in Melancthon's 1555 *Loci*, Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*, and other confessions after this time (*Ibid*). Even if the language may be lacking in later works, Luther spoke more than *rarely* of Christ's righteousness. See the discussion and references to 'alien righteousness' in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), pp. 227–32.

<sup>16</sup> Seifrid, 'Luther, Melancthon and Paul', p. 149. Seifrid is clear at the end of the essay that he prefers Luther's formulation of justification which, he argues, gives a different and lesser role to imputed righteousness than later reformers.

<sup>17</sup> Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness*, p. 175 (emphasis in original).

N. T. Wright. Wright has been a longstanding critic of imputed righteousness; however, it is arguable that his position has softened in more recent publications.<sup>18</sup> For Wright, the key question is this: 'if "imputed righteousness" is so utterly central, so nerve-janglingly vital, so standing-and-falling-church important..., isn't it strange that Paul never actually came straight out and said it?'<sup>19</sup> Wright is clear at the outset that imputed righteousness is not a Pauline teaching nor something emphasized in Scripture. At best, the doctrine of imputed righteousness is 'sub-Pauline' and is ultimately a 'blind alley'.<sup>20</sup>

Imputation is also 'a straightforward category mistake' since it assumes that the righteousness Jesus obtained can be reckoned to a believer.<sup>21</sup> The judge may declare the defendant 'not guilty' but confusion 'arises inevitably when we try to think of the judge transferring, by imputation or any other way, his own attributes to the defendant'.<sup>22</sup> The background for this

<sup>18</sup> For his earlier views, see Wright's *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). His more recent position can be found in *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); and *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). See also his 'Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever', *JETS* 54 (2011), 49–63.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, *Justification*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Justification*, pp. 142, 231.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, *Justification*, p. 232.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, *Justification*, p. 66. Horton correctly notes that 'Wright is refuting a position that confessional Lutheran and Reformed traditions do not hold. None of the Reformers taught that *God's righteousness* is imputed, although the one who fulfilled the terms of the law-covenant as the human servant is also the divine Lord. A third party, a representative, is left out of the courtroom in Wright's description. There is only a judge/plaintiff (God) and the defendant (Israel). However, Christ is both, and this complicates the picture' (*Covenant and Salvation*, p. 104). Horton adds that 'the mature Reformation doctrine of justification was articulated against both Rome's understanding of justification as an infused quality of righteousness and Andreas Osiander's notion of the believer's participation in God's essential righteousness. The Reformers and their heirs laboured the point that it is Christ's successful fulfilment of the trial of the covenantal representative that is imputed or credited to all who believe. His meritorious achievement, not God's own essential righteousness, is imputed' (Ibid.).

Wright also seems to misunderstand imputation when he links it to 'transfer' language. Mark Garcia offers a helpful caution: 'it is important to observe that "to reckon" and "to transfer" are not identical. To "reckon" is akin to the understanding of imputation . . . for it communicates a verbal or linguistic action, something which works naturally with understanding justification as

confusion ‘goes back to the medieval ontologizing of *iustitia* as a kind of quality, or even substance, which one person might possess in sufficient quantity for it to be shared, or passed to and fro, among others’.<sup>23</sup>

Instead of relying on the concept of imputation, Wright leans more heavily on Paul’s language of union with Christ. Yet, this still entails an aspect of imputed righteousness, but in a very limited and qualified sense. For Wright,

‘righteousness’ is something that believers have because they are ‘in Christ’—though it is quite illegitimate to seize on that and say that therefore they have something called ‘the righteousness of Christ’ imputed to them, in the full sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sense so emphasized by John Piper. There is, as we have already glimpsed, a great truth underneath that Reformation claim.<sup>24</sup>

In a biblical understanding of the believer’s union with Christ ‘we find that [Paul] achieves what that doctrine [of imputation] wants to achieve, but by a radically different route’.<sup>25</sup> Similar to Gundry and Seifrid, Wright

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judicial *declaration*. As such, “to reckon” suggests attribution and to “impute” is understood in those terms. To “transfer”, however, immediately suggests something quite different. The term suggests the reification [i.e., making concrete or real] of sin or righteousness, even if it does not require such a conception’ (‘Imputation as Attribution: Union with Christ, Reification and Justification as Declarative Word’, *IJST* 11 [2009], 421). Therefore, even in our union with Christ, Christ’s righteousness is not somehow *transferred* to us in the midst of the union. This language makes righteousness sound like a substance whereas imputation refers more to a legal status or account.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 947. The problems raised in footnote 21 can be applied to this statement as well.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *Justification*, p. 157. Elsewhere, Wright states: ‘As with some other theological problems, I regard [the imputation of Christ’s righteousness] as saying a substantially right thing in a substantially wrong way, and the trouble when you do that is that things on both sides of the equation, and the passages which are invoked to support them, become distorted’ (‘Paul in Different Perspective: Lecture 1: Starting Points and Opening Reflections’, unpublished lecture delivered at Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana [January 3, 2005]. <[http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Auburn\\_Paul.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Auburn_Paul.htm)> [accessed Jan 15, 2014]).

<sup>25</sup> Wright, *Justification*, p. 233. A page earlier, Wright expresses his sympathies with John Piper and other defenders of imputed righteousness, yet he is clear that he still sees significant problems: ‘John Piper is rightly concerned to safeguard the great Christian truth that when someone is “in Christ” God sees him or her, from that moment on, in the light of what is true of Christ. But, in line with some (though by no means all) of the Protestant Reformers and



objects to the use of the imputed righteousness of Christ when talking about Scripture's teaching on justification.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Defenders of Imputed Righteousness***

*John Piper.* Piper is an influential proponent of the imputed righteousness of Christ and has written a book-length defence of the doctrine.<sup>27</sup> Piper sees the external imputed righteousness of Christ as the ground of a believer's justification and defines it as 'the act in which God counts sinners to be righteous through their faith in Christ on the basis of Christ's perfect "blood and righteousness," specifically the righteousness that Christ accomplished by his perfect obedience in life and death'.<sup>28</sup> As a crucial doctrine with practical implications for the Christian life, the key question is this: 'Does *Paul* believe and teach the imputation of Christ's obedience for those who are in Christ by faith alone?'<sup>29</sup> With this question in mind, Piper's aim is 'to show that the imputation of Christ's divine righteousness (as opposed to impartation) is what *Paul* teaches'.<sup>30</sup> From the outset the goal is to understand and explain imputation on the exegetical level.

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their successors, he insists on arriving at this conclusion by the route of supposing that the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ—his "active obedience" as opposed to the "passive obedience" of his death on the cross—is the ground of this security. Jesus has "fulfilled the law", and thus amassed a treasury of law-based "righteousness", which we sinners, having no "righteousness" of our own, no store of legal merit, no treasury of good works, can shelter within. I want to say, as clearly as I can, to Piper and those who have followed him: this is, theologically and exegetically, a blind alley' (*Justification*, p. 236).

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, while Seifrid is moderately critical of imputed righteousness, he argues that Wright's view of the 'righteousness that justifies us' is 'nearly Tridentine' and 'is certainly not evangelical or reformational' ('The Near Word of Christ and the Distant Vision of N. T. Wright', *JETS* 54 [2011], 294). Although Seifrid questions imputed righteousness, he has been a consistent critic of the New Perspective on Paul. For example, see his 'Blind Alleys in the Controversy Over the Paul of History', *TynBul* 45 (1994), 74–95.

<sup>27</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*. This book is a response motivated by Gundry's two shorter essays from 2001 (see footnote 5). Along with Gundry's 2004 essay and Wright's 2009 book, Don Garlington has responded to Piper's book in 'Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper', *Reformation and Reformed Journal* 12 (2003), 45–113.

<sup>28</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 41 (emphasis mine).

<sup>29</sup> Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), p. 167. He adds that 'the concept of 'imputation' is in Paul's mind as he writes these verses' (p. 69).

<sup>30</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 110 (emphasis mine).

Piper spends considerable time interpreting the key passages that he believes teach imputed righteousness. Of particular importance is 2 Corinthians 5:21 which, for Piper, 'gives us biblical warrant for believing that the divine righteousness that is imputed to believers in Romans 4:6 and 4:11 is the righteousness of Christ. Becoming the righteousness of God "in him" implies that our identity with Christ is the way God sees his own righteousness as becoming ours'.<sup>31</sup> Even if there is biblical warrant for the doctrine, Piper also notes that it is the result of a synthesis of biblical and theological teaching.

If one allows for biblical reflection and comparison and synthesis and a desire to penetrate to reality behind words (as with, for example, the biblical doctrines of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, or the substitutionary atonement), then the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is not an artificial construct of systematic theologians but is demanded by the relevant texts.<sup>32</sup>

For Piper, imputed righteousness is both the teaching of Paul and an essential concept for expressing other biblical texts. Additionally, and despite the mistaken views of some critics, Piper also argues that imputation happens because 'we are united to Christ in whom we are counted as perfectly righteous because of his righteousness, not ours'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Piper, *The Future of Justification*, p. 180. See also *Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 82.

<sup>32</sup> Piper, *The Future of Justification*, p. 90. My concern with this statement is twofold: (1) Piper says this in passing and never develops the claim any further. This is a significant assertion and without expansion it appears as special pleading; (2) this defence presents imputed righteousness as an acceptable concept that expresses a biblical reality (behind the words); however, Piper's goal is to show that imputed righteousness is not just *behind* the words but is *in* them. That is, imputed righteousness is *Paul's* teaching.

<sup>33</sup> Piper, *The Future of Justification*, p. 123. The simple inclusion of 'in Christ' in the title of Piper's book makes this point. Other statements by Piper on imputed righteousness and union with Christ include: 'God counts us as having his righteousness in Christ because we are united to Christ by faith alone' (*The Future of Justification*, p. 164); 'the implication seems to be that our union with Christ is what connects us with divine righteousness' (*The Future of Justification*, p. 172); 'The reality of being "in Christ" is all-important for understanding justification' since 'our union with Christ is what connects us with divine righteousness' (*Counted Righteous in Christ*, pp. 84–5). Wright (*Justification*, p. 157) and Bird (*Evangelical Theology*, p. 563) 'add' union with Christ imagery and language to the discussion as though it was not there from the beginning. To be sure, it could be argued that Piper and

D. A. Carson. In response to Gundry's 2004 essay, Carson analyzes Genesis 15 and Romans 4. Paul's argument in Romans 4 interprets Genesis 15:6 differently than previous Jewish exegesis, and so Carson outlines the parallelism in Romans 4:5–5 to help clarify Paul's teaching:

4:5	God	justifies	the ungodly
4:6	God	credits righteousness	apart from works

This means that “justifies” is parallel to “credits righteousness”; or, to put the matter in nominal terms, justification is parallel to the imputation of righteousness.<sup>34</sup> Because of this and other arguments, Carson concludes that imputed righteousness ‘makes [the] most sense of most passages’.<sup>35</sup>

But, is imputed righteousness a concept found in Scripture? In order to answer this question, Carson states that two dangers must be avoided: (1) the biblical scholars must avoid being ‘narrowly constrained by the exegetical field of discourse’ and, (2) the theologian must be exegetically sensitive in order to avoid tying their doctrine to the wrong passages.<sup>36</sup> This leads Carson to agree with critics that imputation language is not present in Scripture. However, this is not a problem since, as he demonstrates regarding sanctification and reconciliation, it is not an unprecedented issue ‘if our terminology in our theological expression does not perfectly align with Paul’s terminology’.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, even if there is no *explicit* passage on the imputed righteousness of Christ, ‘is there biblical evidence to substantiate the view that the *substance* of this thought is

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others may be subordinating union with Christ to imputation, but it cannot be said that union with Christ does not play an important role for Piper. Critics also miss the fact that union with Christ has been part of a doctrine of imputation since the time of the Reformation. This is especially true of the either–or setup by Garlington in ‘Imputation or Union with Christ?’ See J. V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517–1700)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012); Mark A. Garcia, ‘Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ: Calvin, Osiander, and the Contemporary Quest for a Reformed Model’, *WTJ* 68 (2006), 219–51.

<sup>34</sup> D. A. Carson, ‘The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields’, in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Carson, ‘The Vindication of Imputation’, p. 78.

<sup>36</sup> Carson, ‘The Vindication of Imputation’, pp. 49–50.

<sup>37</sup> Carson, ‘The Vindication of Imputation’, p. 78. See Carson’s discussion of this issue in relation to sanctification and reconciliation (pp. 48–50).

conveyed?’<sup>38</sup> Carson answers positively and believes a doctrine of imputed righteousness is both exegetically informed without being exegetically constrained.

*Brian Vickers.* Similar to Piper, Vickers offers a book-length defense of imputed righteousness.<sup>39</sup> After presenting a historical survey of the doctrine (this is one of the better ones available), he examines three texts—Romans 4, Romans 5, and 2 Corinthians 5—in order to assess the relationship between imputed righteousness and Scripture. The doctrine of imputed righteousness ‘is not theology apart from exegesis’<sup>40</sup> even if ‘Paul never says explicitly, word-for-word, that the righteousness of Christ counts for, is reckoned to, or is imputed to believers’.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, although neither Romans 4 nor 5 ‘paints a full picture in regard to the question of “imputation”,’<sup>42</sup> when seen *together* the doctrine begins to emerge from the text. Vickers concludes that ‘the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is a legitimate and necessary *synthesis* of Paul’s teaching. While no single text contains or develops all the “ingredients” of imputation, the doctrine stands as a component of Paul’s soteriology’.<sup>43</sup>

What are the ingredients? Vickers locates five ‘common threads’ that run throughout Scripture: ‘(1) an external act, which is specifically (2) God acting in Christ, (3) on behalf of sinners, and is, thus (4) an act of grace, and is affected or applied in (5) union with Christ’.<sup>44</sup> He admits that these do not *prove* imputation, but they ‘they do argue forcibly against any conception of justifying righteousness apart from Christ’.<sup>45</sup> In the end, the doctrine of imputed righteousness is not explicitly stated in Scripture but is the result of common themes which, when seen together, is best expressed through a doctrine of imputed righteousness.

### Summary

After briefly surveying some opponents and proponents of imputed righteousness, what can be concluded for the purposes of this essay? First, even if both sides end up with different conclusions, those involved in the debate recognize the significance of a close reading Scripture and its

<sup>38</sup> Carson, ‘The Vindication of Imputation’, p. 50 (emphasis mine).

<sup>39</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*. This is a revised version of his dissertation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>40</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, p. 191.

<sup>42</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, p. 157 (emphasis mine).

<sup>43</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, p. 195; see also p. 235.

<sup>45</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, p. 195.

relation to theology. This is clear and none of the scholars surveyed above should be faulted on this issue.

Second, most, though not all, agree that the language of imputation is an external concept that cannot be found in Paul or other writers of Scripture. The key difference is that proponents of imputed righteousness see the concept as expressing a biblical aspect of justification. They argue that this is a warranted move due to precedent (e.g., the Trinity), whereas critics still see this as an imposition on the text of Scripture.

Third, there is great need for clarity when it comes to the term 'righteousness'. Unfortunately, some defenders of imputed righteousness are unclear on this crucial detail. For example, is *God's* righteousness imputed to the believer? Or *Christ's* righteousness? Is the righteousness a status, or is it a transfer of God or Christ's *attribute* of righteousness (i.e. divine righteousness)? If not, is it a form of human righteousness earned by Christ?<sup>46</sup> The answers are not always clear and it is therefore understandable why N. T. Wright protests that 'it makes no sense whatever 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'.<sup>47</sup> This assumes that we are speaking of *God's* righteousness as an attribute or characteristic and the confusion creates unnecessary problems within the debate. As Garcia has pointed out, 'it is unquestionably the case that explanations and defences of the concept of imputation frequently treat sin and righteousness as "things"'.<sup>48</sup> Until these points are

<sup>46</sup> For example, Piper refers to righteousness in a number of ways: 'divine righteousness' (*Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 53); 'imputation of external righteousness' (ibid., p. 67); 'God reveals his own righteousness that we receive' (ibid., p. 68); 'his righteous act, his obedience, is counted as ours. . . . It is a real righteousness' (ibid., p. 110); 'The ground of our being declared righteous is the imputed righteousness of God, manifest in the righteousness of Christ' (ibid., p. 122). The righteousness is divine, external, God's, an act, real, and manifest in Christ. This crucial concept deserves greater clarity not only for the academic debate but for both teaching and preaching. To speak of the righteousness as 'divine' sounds unnecessarily similar to Osiander. He asserted that the righteousness we have is God's essential righteousness. For a recent reflection on Osiander, see Stephen Strehle, '*Imputatio iustitiae*'; Julie Canlis, 'Calvin, Osiander and Participation in God', *IJST* 6 (2004), 169–84.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 98. Similarly, Bird wants to avoid speaking of 'righteousness molecules floating through the air to us' (*Evangelical Theology*, p. 563).

<sup>48</sup> Garcia, 'Imputation as Attribution', p. 421. God's righteousness is not a thing or a property that can be separated from his other attributes. To speak as though *God's* righteousness, as a 'part' of his character, could be given to a

clarified, there will likely continue to be additional confusion on both sides of the discussion.

If we are to retain imputed righteousness, it seems that we must be willing to *confess* and be able to *explain* how imputed righteousness is an external concept and yet somehow expresses a biblical teaching. On the one hand, it is not enough to assert, as the defenders do, that there is historical precedence for using external concepts or that imputed righteousness is a legitimate synthesis of biblical teaching. This is a mere statement and does not wrestle with the question: how and why is this concept warranted? On the other hand, although I agree that the Reformation teaching on imputed righteousness cannot be found in Paul on the exegetical level, I disagree with the critics that this means that the concept of imputed righteousness is unwarranted. How does this work? It is at this point that I turn to David Yeago's helpful distinction between concepts and judgments as a helpful resource for defining the relationship between a theology of imputed righteousness and Scripture.

## II. CONCEPTS AND JUDGMENTS: A CRUCIAL DISTINCTION

David Yeago's essay, 'The New Testament and Nicene Dogma', has been widely cited by those working on theological exegesis or theological interpretation of Scripture and has the potential to be a key resource in the debate on imputed righteousness.<sup>49</sup> He analyzes Philippians 2:6–11 and argues that 'the ancient theologians were right to hold that the Nicene *homoousion* is neither imposed *on* the New Testament texts, nor distantly deduced from the texts, but, rather, describes a pattern of judgments *in* the texts, in the texture of scriptural discourse concerning Jesus and the God of Israel'.<sup>50</sup> To support this claim, Yeago investigates Paul's use of

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human being is to miss the significance of divine simplicity and its importance for understanding God and his attributes. On divine simplicity, see Stephen R. Holmes, "'Something Much Too Plain to Say": Towards a Defence of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity', in *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 50–67; James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> David S. Yeago, 'The New Testament and Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis', in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 87–100. This essay was originally published in *ProEccl* 6 (1997), 16–26.

<sup>50</sup> Yeago, 'The New Testament and Nicene Dogma', p. 88. A somewhat similar proposal can be found in Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*:

Philippians 2 in Isaiah 45:21–24 and concludes that in this passage ‘no stronger affirmation of the bond between the risen Jesus and the God of Israel is possible’.<sup>51</sup> How does this work? Yeago argues that we must ‘distinguish between *judgments* and the *conceptual terms* in which those judgments are rendered’.<sup>52</sup> As Michael Allen paraphrases:

judgments are the material claims made by any given communicator, while concepts are the particular and contingent forms used to express that judgment. Importantly, judgments may be rendered by a variety of concepts, and concepts can be employed to express a number of judgments. In other words, categories and metaphors are tools.<sup>53</sup>

So, to return to Philippians 2 and Isaiah 45, ‘the judgment about Jesus and God made in the Nicene Creed—the judgment that they are “of one substance” or “one reality”—is indeed “the same”, in a basically ordinary and unmysterious way, as that made in a New Testament text such as Philippians 2:6ff’.<sup>54</sup> Put differently, doctrines can be faithful to Scripture even if they use concepts or terms that are not found in Scripture. This is because the concepts express and correspond to the judgments found in Scripture.

Yeago’s distinction between judgments and concepts is helpful because it offers a way to see how the imputed righteousness of Christ, as found and developed in the early Protestant Reformation, is not deduced *from* Scripture nor is it *forced upon* the text.<sup>55</sup> The crucial point, here, is that

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*One Being Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 88–107. Torrance presents three levels of theological inquiry: an evangelical and doxological level that pertains to our faith and worship of God; a theological level that incorporates new terms in relation to God’s self-revelation to us; and a third, higher theological level that moves from God’s economic self-revelation to theological statements about the immanent being and life of God. So, in affirming *homoousios*, the early church was not going beyond Scripture, but was following Scripture while also digging deeper into the logic involved in its teachings.

<sup>51</sup> Yeago, ‘The New Testament and Nicene Dogma’, p. 90.

<sup>52</sup> Yeago, ‘The New Testament and Nicene Dogma’, p. 93.

<sup>53</sup> R. Michael Allen, *Justification and the Gospel: Understanding the Contexts and Controversies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> Yeago, ‘The New Testament and Nicene Dogma’, p. 94. At this point Yeago criticizes Dunn’s *Christology in the Making* for disrespecting the distinction between judgments and concepts (pp. 95–7).

<sup>55</sup> This is similar to Vanhoozer’s view on the issue: ‘what systematic theology at its best can contribute to the discussion [is] not an imposition of some foreign conceptual scheme onto the text *but rather a conceptual elaboration of what is implicit within it*’ (‘Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of

imputed righteousness is the *concept* used to express the biblical *judgment* of righteousness that is reckoned, credited, and counted. Yet, what does it mean to reckon, credit, or count in relation to imputation? Garcia helpfully cautions us against a simplistic solution. Imputation is

an instance of theological vocabulary attempting to refer and capture faithfully a biblical teaching that is not wholly identifiable with any one Hebrew or Greek word or expression employed by the biblical writers. Much depends, then, on the extent to which the explanatory vocabulary chosen by theologians faithfully communicates the biblical and theological idea.<sup>56</sup>

So, what is the biblical judgment that corresponds to the concept of imputed righteousness? In short, to reckon, count, or credit means to ‘ascribes to one what belongs properly to another’.<sup>57</sup> More specifically, it aims to demonstrate how *the righteousness that justifies* apart from the law and our works *does not derive in any way from us but from Christ and his work alone*. For example, in Romans 5:12–21 Vickers points out that ‘there must be a way in which God considers Christ’s obedience as the ground upon which he will view “sinners” as “righteous” ... Christ’s obedience “counts” for our righteous status’.<sup>58</sup> Imputed righteousness—the crediting of Christ’s righteousness to our account—is the concept that continues to best explain what we see Paul doing and saying in Scripture and critics must sufficiently explain why this concept is unacceptable. It does not help the discussion to simply point out that Paul never uses imputation language.

Similar to proponents of imputed righteousness, Yeago points out that this kind of move is not without precedent. In contrast, Yeago more clearly explains what the precedent is and how it works. The early church attempted to draw out the judgments in Scripture and *how* they were made with regard to God. How do we make sense of monotheism, the Incarnation, Pentecost, and the equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? The language of being, essence, person, *homoousios*, and so forth were employed in order to provide concepts that faithfully expressed judgments found

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the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology’, in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011], p. 247).

<sup>56</sup> Garcia, ‘Imputation as Attribution’, p. 421.

<sup>57</sup> Garcia, ‘Imputation as Attribution’, p. 419. Warfield says that ‘imputation itself is simply the act of setting to one’s account’ (‘Imputation’, p. 263).

<sup>58</sup> Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, p. 157.



in Scripture.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, imputed righteousness is an external concept that expresses an internal (i.e., biblical) judgment and is suitable because faithfulness to Scripture's judgments does not require a continual act of repetition.<sup>60</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

If imputed righteousness is a concept that faithfully expresses biblical judgments regarding justification, then what might we conclude? First, proponents of imputed righteousness need not worry whether the *Reformation expression* of this doctrine can be found in Paul or anywhere else in Scripture. It is not there! But this does not mean that the Reformers missed the heart of the biblical judgment that we are justified apart from the law, our works, or anything in us and that the righteous status we have is external, extrinsic, and alien. Their aim was to express this teaching clearly and faithfully in response to what was deemed as false or harmful teaching that deviated from Scripture.

Second, this means that the debate should not *first* be on the level of concepts (i.e. can we locate imputed righteousness in Paul), but should begin with the biblical judgments. In this sense, opponents and proponents of imputed righteousness are both right and wrong. Critics are cor-

<sup>59</sup> For a further reflection on this issue, see Vanhoozer's discussion of 'doctrine and canonical improvisation' in *The Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 340–44.

<sup>60</sup> Some scholars attempt to describe this judgment through other concepts. For example, Michael Bird proposes that 'incorporated righteousness' better attends to what Paul is saying at the *exegetical level* and that it more clearly explains how a believer attains such righteousness through union with Christ. ('Incorporated Righteousness: A Response to Recent Evangelical Discussion Concerning the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness in Justification', *JETS* 47 [2004], 253–75). I am sympathetic to this position and agree that it may alleviate some of the concerns of various critics, but Bird wrongly assumes that union with Christ is not already a part of the doctrine of imputed righteousness (see footnote 31 above). Second, I am not convinced that 'the medieval mind-set of a treasury of merits' forms the real background to the imputed righteousness of Christ's active obedience (*Evangelical Theology*, p. 562). For example, Michael Allen points to the significance of imputation for the distinction between justification and renewal in Luther (*Justification and the Gospel*, p. 50). Greater clarity is needed on the history and background of imputation before it is decided that it is in need of replacement or revision. If union with Christ is already included, and if the doctrine is not a remnant of outdated mind-sets, then perhaps the current concept of imputation sufficiently fulfils the task of theologically expressing Scripture's teaching even if it is in need of further clarification.

rect to argue that the concept of imputation is not found in Scripture. However, defenders rightfully argue that imputed righteousness faithfully represents Paul's theology is not in conflict with the rest of Scripture's teaching.

Third, to some extent we can agree with Bird that 'to equate the gospel as consisting of the doctrine of imputed righteousness makes about as much sense as saying that the gospel is the pre-tribulation rapture'.<sup>61</sup> The gospel is not *identical* to imputed righteousness, but if one loses the *judgment* that grounds the concept of imputed righteousness, then it is arguable that the gospel is altered or at least begins to fall apart. As T.F. Torrance says, 'that he is our righteousness, is the gospel message, so that its being freely offered to us for our righteousness is the glad tidings of the gospel. That is why repentance is not ascetic love of feeling guilty but the life of joyful self-denial in which we find our righteousness and truth *not in our selves but in Christ alone*'.<sup>62</sup>

Fourth, imputed righteousness should never be stated in such a way that it negates or causes problems for our understanding of union with Christ. Union with Christ forms the context for a doctrine of imputed righteousness in contrast to an abstract doctrine that resembles the idea of a transference of a righteous substance. Imputation is personal and relational and takes place with regard believers who are *in Christ*. Together, union with Christ and imputed righteousness help articulate the depths of justification.

Fifth, another angle may provide an additional way forward: defenders of the imputation of Christ's righteousness might stand on more solid ground if, for example, they compared the doctrine of imputed righteousness (and its relation to Scripture) to translations that seek dynamic equivalence rather than a more literal word-for-word result. Opponents appear to claim that imputed righteousness is not a true representation of the teaching of Scripture in a word-for-word sense since Paul never uses this language nor can it be found elsewhere in Scripture. However, if dynamic equivalence is after 'freedom rather than literality, paraphrase rather than repetition',<sup>63</sup> then the defenders are at liberty to use this concept in order to express the judgment they find in Scripture. This may be another way to move the discussion forward, or at least another point

<sup>61</sup> Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, p. 69.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. by Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 108 (emphasis his).

<sup>63</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Translating Holiness: Forms of Word, Writ and Righteousness', *IJST* 13 (2011),: 387.

of discussion. Then again, this is essentially another way of expressing Yeago's distinction between judgments and concepts.

Whenever we choose concepts to articulate various judgments in Scripture we surely run the risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation. But this does not mean that we are locked into mere repetition of biblical terminology. Scripture's terms and categories surely express judgments that must determine and constitute the concepts we use—and not the other way around—but we must have the courage to express carefully these judgments with concepts that faithfully represent Scripture and speak clearly to our cultural contexts. This paper defends both the freedom to use concepts like imputation as well as the fact that this concept faithfully corresponds to the biblical judgment of crediting righteousness to a believer that properly belongs to Christ. My hope is that this essay also helps remove the pressure to find imputed righteousness at the exegetical level. I do not believe it is there. Nevertheless, imputed righteousness is a helpful and crucial shorthand concept. Although it may not sum up all that can be said of justification, we cannot truly have a sufficient doctrine of justification without it.