

“Careful exegetical study and refined theological reflection ought always to be wedded by biblical scholar and theologian alike. Sadly, this union is less common than one might expect. But in Brian Vickers’s *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, we see a careful and clear biblical exegesis joined to a richly refined theological reformulation displayed with beauty and grace. Vickers’s work is sure to be one of the most significant contributions to the ongoing discussion of the nature both of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and of God’s justification of the believer in Christ. The reader will be informed of the broad range of scholarly proposals on these issues and will be served well by the judicious judgments Vickers offers. While upholding a fully reformational understanding of imputation, his defense is altogether fresh, at times surprising, and everywhere filled with insight. For the sake of one’s own soul, and for richer biblical and theological understanding, I commend to Christians that they read with care this excellent work.”

—BRUCE A. WARE

Professor of Christian Theology;
Senior Associate Dean, School of Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The historic reformational doctrine of imputation is under serious duress in our day. Interestingly, it is often evangelical, Protestant, biblical studies scholars who have the doctrine in their sights. The critiques come from different angles, but almost all suggest that we’ve read imputation back into Paul, and that it’s high time we understood and articulated Paul’s theology more biblically. In order to do so, they say, we must reject the Protestant confessional formulations of imputation. Brian Vickers comes to our aid in this important discussion. He gives us a helpful survey of the trajectory of the doctrine in history—from Luther to N. T. Wright—and then engages in a vigorous exegetical and biblical theological defense of imputation. Arguing that imputation is not merely possible but a necessary synthesis of Paul’s teaching, Vickers thoroughly analyzes the key passages of Romans 4:1-8; 5:12-21; and 2 Corinthians 5:21. He counters a reductionist/minimalist reading of those texts and articulates instead a strong Pauline, biblical, theological argument for what we would call the traditional view of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. The book is accessible to any intelligent reader with an interest in theology, exegesis, and doctrine, but especially helpful to pastors, teachers, and seminarians. For all of us who are servants of the Word, we can ill afford indifference to this debate. If our evangelical forebears were right in their understanding of the Bible’s teaching on the gracious and just divine salvation of sinners, it is the very stuff of the gospel. Vickers says they were right, and does a yeoman’s service in this volume showing why.”

—J. LIGON DUNCAN

Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi;
Adjunct Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Unfortunately, the Reformation doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is today a matter of debate, even among evangelicals. Brian Vickers, therefore, has performed a valuable service for the church by affirming imputation in *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*. With great clarity Dr. Vickers bases his theological conclusions on careful, contextual study of the Scriptures. (This is so important today, when theology and exegesis often go their separate ways.) He correctly situates justification as a subset of union with Christ. Wisely, he does not overreach the evidence but makes a cumulative case for imputation based on a synthesis of the teaching of three passages—Romans 4:3; 5:19; and 2 Corinthians 5:21. In my judgment, his case succeeds. And he does all of this with a gentle spirit that refuses to demonize those who disagree with him. I heartily commend this volume as a needed, constructive, and helpful piece of theological exegesis.”

—ROBERT A. PETERSON
Professor of Systematic Theology,
Covenant Theological Seminary

“Integral to the Pauline understanding of salvation is the idea of imputation—not only of that of human sin to Christ, but also that of his righteousness to sinners. Yet, this doctrine has been somewhat neglected in recent years and in a number of evangelical quarters it is even being seriously questioned. Brian Vickers’s study of what our evangelical forbears regarded as vital to the gospel is therefore a welcome study. He clearly demonstrates how it fits within the contours of Pauline theology and masterfully exegetes the pertinent texts on which the doctrine is founded. Highly recommended!”

—MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN
Principal, Toronto Baptist Seminary

“One rarely finds books today that display knowledge of church history, systematic theology, and biblical exegesis. Brian Vickers’s contribution on imputation is a sterling exception, showing that the best biblical exegesis is informed by, but never captive to, historical and systematic theology. Too often discussions on imputation produce quarrels rather than understanding, but here we have a work that furnishes an exegetical basis for the Pauline teaching.”

—THOMAS R. SCHREINER
James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

JESUS' BLOOD *AND*
RIGHTEOUSNESS

PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF IMPUTATION

BRIAN VICKERS

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PREFACE

SOMETIMES A PHONE CALL can change your life. I was a Ph.D. student working happily away in preparation for a dissertation on the letter to the Hebrews when one day I pressed the button on our answering machine. A familiar voice said, “I want to tell you something that will change your life”—a dramatic message to say the least. Ultimately it took three days to get the life-changing message. One can think a lot of things in three days, though admittedly as more time went by I began to doubt just how radical this life change could really be if the delivery of the message could be postponed indefinitely. Finally, after several missed phone calls and a twenty-four hour virus, I was home when the phone rang. There was a pause, no hello, and then I heard, “You should work on imputation.” It was my then supervisor and now colleague, Tom Schreiner. To make a long story short, that phone call resulted in a dissertation, and that dissertation later resulted in this book. It was, at least on one level, a phone call that changed my life.

Though I was working on Hebrews, I had been studying justification and related topics in Paul and tracking with the ongoing debates since my days as a graduate student at Wheaton College. In my own thinking, however, there were lots of loose ends. I needed some time to work on the issues. Writing a dissertation provided the time I needed. It also led to the writing of this book, something I doubt I would have done were it not for that phone call.

Maybe the phrase “changed my life” is a bit too dramatic, but the months and years spent writing the dissertation were formative in my own thinking and experience. The dissertation informed my thinking because my thoughts had time to solidify as I studied and restudied the relevant texts, and as I read and often reread (at least some of) the mountains of secondary literature. It shaped my experience because in the final months of writing, my father, Lloyd Vickers, was diagnosed with can-

cer, and as I wrote, he fought. Yet he did not fight in desperation, even though the prognosis never got better than a hope of a slight prolonging of weeks, perhaps months. After the initial shock, he faced cancer with confidence—not confidence that he would “beat it,” but confidence that came from resting, as he put it, “only in Jesus and all he has done for me.” My dad was resting in the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in the face of a disease that was quickly ending his life. He lived to see me finish a dissertation and watch me be hooded. Just under four months later, right after finding out that I was hired to teach New Testament, he died, clinging more than ever to Jesus and his righteousness. It dawned on me later how my thesis topic and my Dad’s battle with cancer had dovetailed. I was working on the topic that sustained him and gave him hope and confidence in the face of the last enemy; the defeated enemy. In my dad’s life and in his death I witnessed the doctrine of imputation in action.

Like all books, this book could not have been written without the encouragement and assistance of many people. First of all, heart-felt thanks to my friend and colleague Tom Schreiner. Tom was always quick to give his insights, suggestions, corrections, and encouragements. Tom not only read the dissertation, he has gladly read parts of this book, whether new, old, or revised. Bruce Ware and Shawn Wright also deserve a special note of appreciation. Both were an encouragement to me as I pursued the possibility of publishing this work and helpful to me because of their keen theological and historical insights. Thanks also to Jim Hamilton for his friendship and for his remarkable ability to rejoice in the Lord at all times and to give thanks in all things.

Special thanks go to Matthew Anderson, who converted all the Greek fonts in my manuscript, and to John Meade who helped with reading the manuscript in its final stages.

My mother, Virginia, though living with the loss of her companion of sixty-one years, continues on with a resilience that flows from her indomitable view of life under the sovereignty of God. Her wit and wisdom are untarnished as she turns eighty this year. Her ability to tell her son what he needs to hear, even if he does not want to hear it, is invaluable.

Finally, no one can compare to my lovely wife, Denise. She is a gift from God and a constant source of strength and joy in all things. Jamie, our daughter, could not have a better model of faith, hope, and love.

INTRODUCTION

“I’M SO THANKFUL FOR the active obedience of Christ; no hope without it.”¹ One day before his death, J. Gresham Machen sent this message to John Murray. This one short phrase is theologically loaded. “The active obedience of Christ” means the obedience that Jesus rendered to the Father during his incarnation, and which, along with the forgiveness that flows from his sacrifice on the cross, is imputed to the believer by faith. When we sing “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood *and* righteousness,” we are singing about the same thing that Machen wrote to Murray. In theology, a conjunction can be extraordinarily important.

The “active obedience of Christ,” just like the short phrase “*and* righteousness,” is a statement about what it means to be justified. In much of both the Calvinist and Lutheran traditions, the active obedience of Christ is a vital component in the doctrine of justification.² Specifically, the doctrine of justification is formulated so as to include both the non-imputation of sin (forgiveness) and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (his active obedience). The latter aspect, namely that justification must necessarily include the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, draws the lion’s share of controversy.

The debate over imputation is not a mere academic debate. The discussion strikes at the heart of what it means to be right with God. Core biblical themes like forgiveness, sacrifice, and union with Christ are

¹J. Gresham Machen, *God Transcendent*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth), 14. The quotation appears in Stonehouse’s introduction. In this collection of Machen’s essays there is a chapter entitled “The Active Obedience of Christ” that summarizes the essential content of the traditional view of imputation in simple terms (ibid., 187-96). Readers not familiar with the topic may want to consult Machen’s essay for a brief, pastoral introduction.

²I recognize that there is a great deal of debate over whether there is continuity or discontinuity between Calvin and Luther and the traditions that bear their names. That is not the issue here. This investigation is not concerned primarily with how doctrine has developed within these traditions (though that issue does surface in the section on historical background below) but with how representative theologians have dealt with the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

woven into the doctrine of imputation. There is more at stake than merely continuing a debate. What is the connection between Adam and the human race? How did Christ fulfill the role of the second or new Adam? How can the “ungodly” stand before a righteous God? Is faith itself, or the object of faith, the foundation for righteousness? These are but a few of the questions related to the topic of imputation. At the center of the debate over the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is the interpretation of key Pauline texts.

“KEY” TEXTS

The main goal of this book is to investigate Pauline texts linked historically to the topic of imputation.³ The bulk of this investigation is driven by a consideration of three general questions: (1) In Romans 4 when Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (v. 3), and shortly thereafter quotes Psalm 32:2, “blessed is the man against whom the Lord does not reckon sin” (v. 8), what is the implication for the doctrine of imputation? More to the point, does Romans 4 create a tension for the traditional view of imputation since the emphasis there seems to be primarily on forgiveness? (2) Does the parallel and antithesis between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21 imply that Paul understands that Christ not only provided pardon for Adam’s (and his posterity’s) sin *but also*, in contrast to Adam, fulfilled God’s commands thus providing a positive status for “the many who will be made righteous”? (3) Does Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (which, according to Paul, includes the non-imputation of sin, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not reckoning their trespasses against them” [5:19]), also include the imputation of righteousness? In the history of the debate these are the primary issues discussed in these texts.

Once these three texts are identified as the central texts in the debate, a rather common-sense observation arises: In these three “imputation” texts, Paul deals with different, albeit related, issues. Romans

³ The terms *imputation*, *impute*, *reckon*, and *count* are used interchangeably throughout this work. This decision is not driven by any particular theological bias or presupposition. Although the word *impute* may appear theologically loaded to some, it is treated here as synonymous with *reckon* and *count*.

5:19 is not simply another way of putting Romans 4:3, and 2 Corinthians 5:21 is not a restatement of either Romans 4:3 or 5:19. In other words, the three imputation texts do not appear to be about the exact same thing. In each text Paul discusses similar ideas (e.g., righteousness, sin, God, and/or Christ) but the texts are not the same. There are different subjects, actors, actions, and concepts. For instance, there is an emphasis on “faith” in Romans 4:3 but no explicit mention of it in either Romans 5:19 or 2 Corinthians 5:21. In Romans 5:19 obedience is at the core of Paul’s discussion, but obedience is not at all the emphasis in Romans 4:3 and even if “knew no sin” in 2 Corinthians 5:21 implies Christ’s obedience, it is still not the primary focus as it is in Romans 5:19. This observation regarding the differences between the key texts plays a major role throughout this book.

Secondly, there are other texts that have both textual and conceptual links to the “key” texts and have also played a role in the historical debates. These other texts (i.e., 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9; and Rom. 9:30–10:4) are presented along with the “key” texts in an attempt to develop a Pauline synthesis regarding the doctrine of imputation. These texts are essential for understanding Paul’s theology of imputation. The goal here is to focus as narrowly as possible on the issues in these texts that link them with the doctrine of imputation and present a kind of “synoptic” reading of these texts along with the “key” texts.

Finally, part of the goal of this work is to try to avoid the two extremes that too often characterize the debate. On one hand defenders of imputation, because of a healthy desire to know and understand the whole counsel of God, sometimes ignore the differences between, and subsequently the unique contribution of, the texts typically associated with the doctrine. When this happens the biblical texts are flattened out and become mere springboards for lectures and sermons on the doctrine of imputation.

On the other hand, critics of the doctrine, rightly concerned about eisegesis (reading into rather than from a text), often miss the connections not only between the major texts but between the texts and a larger biblical-theological framework. Ironically, critics often end up doing the very thing that defenders of imputation often do—they expect too much from a single text, and when they find (as they inevitably will) that the entire doctrine of imputation in the traditional sense is not in Romans

4:1-8 or 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, they pass the doctrine off as just so much “systematic theology” and pronounce imputation dead on arrival.

The truth, as someone once said, is somewhere in the middle. The traditional doctrine of imputation is not theology apart from exegesis, nor does one have to subscribe to one particular theological presupposition before accepting imputation. At the same time, no historical doctrine was ever established, or denied, on the basis of one text alone. Though a great deal of time will be spent on the particulars of each text, one eye will be kept on the broader biblical horizon. Imputation, like other doctrines of Scripture, must be investigated exegetically and synthetically. The contention of this book is 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.

THEOLOGY AND HISTORY

Although this work deals primarily with the New Testament, specifically, New Testament theology, the nature of the topic demands inquiry into areas typically associated with historical and systematic theology. The reason for this is twofold: (1) the doctrine of imputation formally arose in Protestant confessional settings; and (2) the most comprehensive treatments of the doctrine appear in works written by Protestant systematic theologians. Contrary to the opinion of some biblical scholars, the fact that “imputation” is closely associated with confessional and systematic theology does not make it off limits, or illegitimate, for biblical scholarship. In addition, it should be kept in mind that confessional statements and systematic theologies are usually based on the reading of biblical texts.⁴

While some readers may think that this book belongs in the realm of systematic rather than biblical theology, a clear distinction remains between true systematics and the type of work found here. The clearest differences are in method and arrangement. Rather than moving along and organizing on synthetic lines, the pattern will be to move along

⁴I hope, as a corollary goal, to confirm that contrary to some modern caricatures, Protestant theology, particularly the Reformed tradition, has not been dominated only by systematicians who cared little for exegesis.

through the exegesis and interpretation of a selected number of biblical texts, then weighing the evidence. Even if systematic theology provides a jumping off point, the majority of the work is exegetical. After the work is done, then we will move on to a synthesis of Paul's teaching on imputation.

Although I have included a fair amount of historical and systematic theology, I have tried, for the most part, to stay above the historical debates, choosing rather to include, usually in notes, the main ideas that have characterized the historical discussion and the various presuppositions that lie behind it. Not the least of my reasons is that I make no claim to be an expert in a large part of the history discussed in the first chapter. I am not setting forth a comprehensive study of imputation in the theology of, say, Luther or Calvin, but rather focusing on places where their work helps build historical-theological trajectories that aid in presenting a streamlined view of the history of the doctrine. It is my hope that others will perhaps follow some of these trajectories and do what I am not able to do in the scope of this work. In sum, the historical chapter is intended to (1) frame my discussion by providing a way to move back and forth between history and the exegesis that comprises the bulk of this book, and to (2) provide readers, especially those not familiar with the historical aspect of the question, with a context for understanding the breadth of the topic of imputation.⁵

DRAWING BOUNDARIES

The subject of imputation lends itself to the discussion of a variety of exegetical, biblical, theological, linguistic, and historical issues and questions. The intention is to proceed with as narrow a focus as such a broad topic will allow. If we paused all along the way for thorough discussions or definitive answers to every question or explorations of every connection, the book would not only exceed the allotted page limit, but also

⁵ I have obviously biased my historical interaction toward the Reformed tradition. There are two reasons for this. The first is that imputation, as it is typically formulated, is a consistent and vital tenet of Reformed theology, so it only makes sense to interact with sources from that tradition. The second reason is that my own background and relative level of expertise lie in the Reformed traditions. Since this is not a book on historical-theology, I thought it best to stay as close as possible to the tradition with which I am most familiar. For those interested in the type of work that has influenced the method and goal of this book, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Systematic and Biblical Theology," *WTJ* 36 (1976): 281-99.

try the patience of even the most determined reader. For instance, even though this work focuses on the imputation of righteousness, it does not present a thorough linguistic discussion of the biblical language of righteousness. Rather than retrace the disputed question of “righteousness” in Paul, the discussion of righteous/righteousness in the relevant texts is determined by their immediate contexts, with particular attention given to the pivotal phrases, “reckoned as righteous,” “made righteous,” and “become . . . righteous.” To take but one other example, the theme of union with Christ plays an important role later in this study, but that theme is not presented in anything like an exhaustive treatment. Rather, it is limited to how it functions in texts associated with imputation. Secondly, this topic has vast amounts of historical background not only in the areas of historical and systematic theology, but also in the history of both Old Testament and New Testament interpretation, and all of the “key texts” are accompanied by extensive secondary literature on any number of exegetical topics and debates. Care has been taken to consider only those aspects of exegesis that have direct bearing on imputation. The goal is primarily to investigate the texts in Paul most closely associated with imputation, keeping an eye on the history of interpretation and sticking as close as possible to those issues in the texts that directly speak to the topic. Finally, there is no section in this book devoted to a study of the “New Perspective” on Paul. There are many studies on the New Perspective, so rather than simply repeat what can be easily read in various other sources, the scholars associated (to various degrees) with the New Perspective are dealt with when appropriate in the course of interpreting biblical texts.⁶

⁶Works on our about the New Perspective abound increasingly. For readers already possessing knowledge of the debate and who want to pursue both the background and the technical aspects of the central issues, the clear choice is the set of volumes edited by D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid: *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), and *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). These volumes stand out because the debate over the New Perspective is essentially a debate that begins with the reading of Second Temple Jewish literature. For analysis and engagement of the various streams of the New Perspective, and an exegetical/theological study of Paul's theology of justification, one cannot do better than to read Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). For an overall introduction to the New Perspective that does not assume prior knowledge and that carefully and fairly sets forth the various proponents of the New Perspective and responds to them accordingly, see Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004).

A NOTE TO THE READER

There is in places a fair amount of Greek and Hebrew. I have not transliterated the languages. The reason is simple: I know few, if any people, who actually find transliterations helpful, much less people who can read them. Moreover, people who do not read Hebrew or Greek are not made to do so by transliterations. Essentially all it does is introduce two additional foreign languages into the text. It may *look* a bit more like English, but in reality it is not English nor is it Greek or Hebrew. I have provided translations and I have tried to keep the languages in the text only when I thought it was helpful for readers who might want to see the text, phrase, or word for themselves.