

## INAUGURAL LECTURE

### BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS REVISITED: UNION WITH CHRIST AND JUSTIFICATION *SOLA FIDE*

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**T**he Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 30, asks the question that lies at the heart of the application of redemption: “How does the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?” The answer: “The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.”

Basic to both the question and the answer is a distinction, commonplace in Reformed theology, between redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*) and redemption applied (*ordo salutis*). This question and answer in its simplicity and profundity provides an instructive paradigm that ought to orient our thinking about the nature of the redemption accomplished by Christ, on the one hand, and applied in Christ, on the other hand.

Gaining clarity on this basic distinction, particularly with reference to the relationship between union with Christ by faith and justification in Christ by faith alone, will occupy the bulk of this presentation.

#### I.

Addressing the accomplishment of redemption, answer 30 speaks of redemption “purchased” by Christ. This pecuniary language is designed to locate the redemption of believers in a unique and unrepeatabe event in redemptive history, by which the Mediator and Surety of the covenant of grace secures the redemption of his people in his humiliation and exaltation.

Stated in summary terms, Jesus Christ, as our Redeemer, executes the three-fold office of a prophet, priest, and king, both in his estate of humiliation and in his estate of exaltation (WSC 23).

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The accent on the once-for-all character of the securing of redemption by Christ, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation, finds clear expression in Westminster Shorter Catechism 25:

How doth Christ execute the office of a priest? Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.

The accent in the first half of the answer falls properly on the once-for-all character of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice of himself to satisfy divine justice (cf. Heb 9:26). Yet that once-for-all past earthly ministry that culminates in death is not divorced from the present, ongoing heavenly ministry of Christ as resurrected, ascended, and interceding (cf. Heb 7:24-25). The two estates of the Redeemer, humiliation and exaltation, provide the basic redemptive-historical framework for understanding the climax of the *historia salutis* in the once-for-all, unrepeatable work of Christ.

Put a bit more expansively, the accomplishment of redemption is clearly associated with the unique and unrepeatable sufferings and glory of the Messiah. This way of speaking accents the Son-centered, or Christ-centered, character of the gospel. The gospel, viewed from the standpoint of redemption accomplished, is centrally focused on *Christ*, crucified and raised.

This is, of course, rooted in the teaching of Christ and the Apostles. Jesus defines the gospel under the rubric of the suffering and glory of the Messiah (Luke 24:44-47). Paul identifies as of "first importance" for the gospel the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:1-4; Rom 1:1-4). Peter affirms the same basic redemptive-historical perspective, where he speaks of the salvation of the church rooted in the "sufferings of Christ and his subsequent glories" (1 Pet 1:10-12). The sufferings of the Messiah, his humiliation and exaltation, fulfill the Old Testament Scriptures (Jesus), encapsulate the gospel (Paul), or distill the essence of salvation (Peter). Christ himself, his person and work for us, comprises the climactic expression and essential eschatological realization of the *historia salutis*. This is a benefactor-centered understanding of redemption accomplished, and this perspective exerts a controlling perspective on the nature of redemption applied *in Christ*—the *ordo salutis*.

## II.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism continues by focusing on the essential concern of the *ordo salutis*, the application of redemption. Again, Q&A 30:

How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ? The Spirit applyeth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.

Key to the theology of redemption applied is its Christ-centered character. Matching a benefactor-centered notion of redemption accomplished is a

benefactor-centered notion of redemption applied. Believers come to benefit from the redemption accomplished by Christ when the Spirit works faith in them, thereby uniting them to Christ in their effectual calling. Union with Christ by a Spirit-wrought faith is the central redemptive reality of the gospel, viewed from the standpoint of redemption applied. Union with Christ lies at the center of the *ordo salutis*—the application of redemption—in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

In summary terms, Q&A 31 reads:

What is effectual calling? Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

In effectual calling the Spirit of Christ persuades and enables the sinner to embrace Jesus Christ as he is freely offered in the gospel. The Spirit, in a unilateral and monergistic work of renewal, effects a decisive breach with the reigning power of sin and enables faith, which is both gifted to and exercised by the believer (cf. Eph 2:8).

As B. B. Warfield has noted, divine sovereignty, expressed in effectual calling, enables an attendant human response, so that no sooner does God call the sinner than the sinner is united to Christ by a Spirit-wrought faith.<sup>1</sup> Faith, then, supernaturally wrought in effectual calling, is the instrumental bond of union with Christ. Sinners are united to Christ by a Spirit-enabled faith in effectual calling. Therefore, the movement from a benefactor-centered expression of redemption accomplished is matched with a benefactor-centered expression of redemption applied.

### III.

Let us move on, then, to consider how Spirit-wrought union with Christ by faith alone relates to justification by faith alone.

The Westminster Larger Catechism expands and expounds what union with Christ involves. What, specifically, are the benefits of being united to Christ by faith in effectual calling? Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 65 asks, "What special benefits do the members of the invisible church enjoy by Christ?" The answer, "The members of the invisible church by Christ enjoy union and communion with him in grace and glory." Notice that before any particular benefit is discussed in the Westminster Larger Catechism, union and communion with Christ is invoked. This positions union with Christ as the organizing structure in terms of which the Spirit applies to believers several benefits of redemption. In addition—and this is a point I can only note in passing, although it is of

<sup>1</sup> B. B. Warfield, "On the Biblical Notion of 'Renewal,'" in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Vol. 2, Biblical Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 439-66.

importance—notice that union and communion with Christ is set in terms of grace and glory, language that denotes the eschatological “already” and “not yet” of the believer’s situation in Christ. Union with Christ is an expansive reality that encompasses both realized and future aspects of eschatology.

Question 66 recapitulates and expands what we saw from Q&A 30 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Question 66, “What is that union which the elect have with Christ?” The answer:

The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God’s grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling.

While this is a more elaborate statement than what we found in Westminster Shorter Catechism 30, what remains constant is the central role played by union with Christ in the application of redemption. It is within this basic frame of reference that we need to understand Westminster Larger Catechism 69. The question reads, “What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ?” The answer is as follows:

The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.

This language crisply delineates the relationship between union with Christ and justification—between the benefactor to whom we are united and an attendant benefit of that union.

Justification is a forensic benefit of union with Christ, and, as such, the benefit of justification manifests Spirit-wrought union with Christ by faith. This needs to be explicit: the believer’s justification is never applied apart from or prior to union with Christ by faith alone.

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., summarizes the constellation of these realities tersely when he comments,

Faith is Spirit-worked, sovereignly and effectively. Union with Christ, then, is forged by the Spirit’s working faith in us, a faith that “puts on” Christ (Gal. 3:27), that embraces Christ as he is offered to faith in the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

I should note at this point that the Westminster Standards and Calvin are in fundamental agreement here, a point that Gaffin has expressed quite clearly.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Justification and Union with Christ,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (Calvin 500 Series; ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 259.

<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards,” in *The Practical Calvinist: An Introduction to the Presbyterian and Reformed Heritage; In Honor of D. Clair Davis’ Thirty Years at Westminster Theological Seminary* (ed. Peter A. Lillback; Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), 425-44.

The net effect of the teaching contained in the Shorter and Larger Catechisms is that union with Christ occurs by a Spirit-wrought faith in effectual calling.

Following closely upon this, and integrally related to it, the divines insist that justification is also by faith alone. Westminster Shorter Catechism 33 asks, "What is justification?" The answer is,

Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by *faith alone*.

Justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*) and based on the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. Critical to note in this formulation is the location of justification relative to union with Christ, on the one hand, and faith, on the other hand. Spirit-engendered faith is the sole instrumental bond of union with Christ. The faith that unites to Christ is likewise the sole instrumental organ that receives the imputed righteousness of Christ. Justification does not precede, either temporally or logically, union with Christ by faith.

These twin truths must be kept clear throughout. First, union with Christ is by faith alone in effectual calling. Second, justification in Christ, which manifests the logically prior, Spirit-wrought union with Christ, is likewise by faith alone. These truths, of course, derive from the biblical data with regard to (a) the central structural significance of union with Christ in the application of redemption, and (b) the uniform testimony of Scripture that the believer's justification is by faith alone.

Regarding the former, Scripture teaches that believers are effectually called in Christ (1 Cor 1:9); made alive together with Christ (Eph 2:5); and die and rise with Christ in the past-historical event of his death and resurrection (Rom 6:7), in the present personal reality of faith-union (Col 2:12), and bodily in the age to come (1 Cor 15:45-49). It is in Christ that believers have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3). Christ has become for believers "righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30) and the "life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor 15:45). Believers have been justified in Christ (Rom 8:1; Gal 2:17), sanctified in Christ (Rom 6:10-11; 1 Cor 6:11), and adopted in Christ (Gal 3:26). In brief, Paul can say that "Christ in you" is the "hope of glory" (Col 1:27).

Scripture also teaches that justification is by faith alone in Christ alone. The biblical testimony to this truth is clear, but I will cite one particularly relevant text, noted by Murray in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*—a text that has controlling significance on our understanding of justification by faith. In Gal 2:16 Paul declares that we have "believed in Jesus Christ, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law." In commenting on this verse Murray observes, "In a word, faith in Christ is in order to justification and is therefore regarded as antecedent to it (cf. also Romans 4:23, 24)."<sup>4</sup> It is

<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 129.

in this context, then, that we are to understand Paul's language that believers are justified by faith (Rom 3:28), as they receive the free gift of righteousness (Rom 5:17). There is no justification for believers prior to or apart from Spirit-engendered faith-union with Christ.

The Westminster Standards therefore situate the justification of believers within (a) the larger context of union with Christ by faith, and (b) faith as the exclusive receiving instrument of imputed righteousness. There is no context for the justification of believers that occurs prior to union with Christ, whether that priority is understood temporally or logically. Likewise, there is no context for a justification of believers that occurs prior to faith, either temporally or logically.

#### IV.

The Standards are also painstaking in their insistence that the justification of believers occurs only within the context of faith-union with Christ, and not in the eternal decree or in the past-historical atonement or resurrection of Jesus Christ. Put with a different focus, the justification of believers does not occur in terms of predestinarian or past-historical union with the Mediator but only in terms of present personal union with Christ by faith.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 11.4 makes this clear:

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect; and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

While it is certainly true, and must be affirmed, that the justification of the elect was ordained from all eternity, this must be distinguished from the actual, existential reality of justification by faith in union with Christ. Put a bit differently, the predestinarian union that includes an *ordained* justifying aspect cannot be collapsed into existential union by faith with its *applied* justifying aspect. Predestinarian union is the eternal ground of existential (or faith) union, and the purposing of justification in the Mediator is the eternal ground for the application of justification in the Mediator, but the divines insist that the decree to justify is at no point to be collapsed into the actual application of justification in union with Christ by faith.

Likewise, while it is clear that Christ died so that we might be justified by faith (Rom 8:33), and while it is true that justification is grounded in his shed blood (Rom 5:9), and that Christ was raised for our justification (Rom 4:25), believers are not justified until they are actually united to Christ by faith, and by faith alone receive his imputed righteousness as the sole ground for their remission of sins and are accepted for his righteousness before God.

Westminster Confession 11.4 therefore locates two grounds for the believer's union with Christ by faith and the imputed righteousness that is received by

faith alone. The eternal ground is predestinarian union ordained by God in the pretemporal decree. In that decree God ordains that believers will in due time be justified by faith, when, by Spirit-wrought faith, the righteousness of the Mediator will be imputed to them. The past-historical judicial ground for union with Christ by faith alone, and justification by faith alone, rests in the once-for-all complex of events associated with Christ's humiliation and exaltation (Rom 8:33-34).

That being said, the justification of the believer is not actually effected until the time-point of Spirit-wrought union with Christ by faith in effectual calling. We must maintain *without any form of equivocation* that believers are not personally justified until they are united to Christ by faith in their effectual calling. Put most basically, in terms of the initial exercise of saving faith in effectual calling, we do not believe that we are justified in Christ; we believe *in order that* we might be justified by faith in Christ (Gal 2:16).

Faith is unto justification; justification is not unto faith. We must avoid at all costs the Barthian error that the message of gospel is that you have been reconciled. Therefore, believe. You have been justified. Therefore, believe. The message is rather the *reverse*, believe that you may be justified (Gal 2:16). The justification of believers is not prior to Spirit-wrought faith in *any sense* of the term. Only by speaking in this way can we maintain the basic distinction between the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis* as found in Westminster Confession of Faith 11.4.

## V.

It is within this biblical and confessional context we have sketched, as incomplete as it is, that I want to express concern about a dogmatic distinction that has developed in some quarters within the Reformed tradition and warn against some perceived dangers that distinction introduces.

Louis Berkhof in his *magnum opus*, *Systematic Theology*, distinguishes between objective/active justification and subjective/passive justification. Regarding "objective/active" justification, Berkhof says,

This is justification in the most fundamental sense of the word. It is basic to what is called subjective justification, and consists in a *declaration* which God makes *respecting the sinner*, and this declaration is made *in the tribunal of God*. This declaration is not a declaration in which God simply acquits the sinner, without taking any account of the claims of justice, but is rather a divine declaration that, in the case of the sinner under consideration, the demands of the law are met. *The sinner is declared righteous in view of the fact that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him*. In this transaction God appears, not as an absolute Sovereign who simply sets the law aside, but as a righteous Judge, who acknowledges the infinite merits of Christ as a sufficient basis for justification, and as a gracious Father, who freely forgives and accepts the sinner. *This active justification logically precedes faith and passive justification. We believe the forgiveness of sins.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 517 (italics mine).

Regarding "passive/subjective" justification, he says,

Passive or subjective justification takes place *in the heart or conscience of the sinner*. A purely objective justification that is not brought home to the sinner would not answer the purpose. The granting of a pardon would mean nothing to a prisoner, unless the glad tidings were communicated to him and the doors of the prison were opened. Moreover, it is exactly at this point that the sinner learns to understand better than anywhere else that salvation is of free grace. *When the Bible speaks of justification, it usually refers to what is known as passive justification*. It should be borne in mind, however, that the two cannot be separated. *The one is based on the other. The distinction is simply made to facilitate the proper understanding of the act of justification. Logically, passive justification follows faith; we are justified by faith.*<sup>6</sup>

What emerges from these statements is a concern to distinguish between what obtains "in the tribunal of God" as opposed to what "takes place in the heart or conscience of the sinner." Certainly this distinction is valid and useful.

The declaration of justification has unique reference to the tribunal of God's justice; the sinner's legal relationship to the tribunal of God's justice is changed in justification. The declaration of justification occurring in the tribunal of God is the objective reality that the sinner comes to know as true by faith "in his heart or conscience." What the sinner receives by faith in Christ (passive justification) is a declaration of righteousness that obtains before the tribunal of God's justice (active justification).

However, the appropriate distinction between the tribunal of God and the conscience of the sinner is clouded when Berkhof positions "faith" in his formulation. He says, "This active justification logically precedes faith and passive justification. . . . Logically, passive justification follows faith."<sup>7</sup> As useful as it is to distinguish between justification in relation to the tribunal of God's justice, on the one hand, and the conscience of the sinner, on the other hand, the distinction between active justification logically preceding faith and passive justification logically following faith raises concerns. If active justification is a blessing of redemption applied (*ordo salutis*), and if active justification logically precedes faith, then active justification logically precedes faith-union with Christ. This is not possible from a biblical and confessional perspective.

Moreover, the matter becomes more concerning when we observe that what comes into view is a judicial declaration before the tribunal of God with respect to a sinner's justification. Berkhof is suggesting that the declaration of the sinner's righteousness logically precedes faith, by which the sinner is united to Christ in his effectual calling and by which the sinner receives the imputed righteousness of Christ.

A rather startling consequence seems to follow from Berkhof's formulation. Active justification is, logically at least, non-pistic justification. Active

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (italics mine).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



justification logically precedes faith. Active justification is a declaration of righteousness that does not bring into view the sinner's faith by which he is united to Christ. To the extent that we take Berkhof's language seriously, faith logically cannot come into view when we speak of the legal declaration of righteousness that obtains before the tribunal of divine justice. Berkhof's formulation therefore requires us to speak of justification in its active or objective aspect as logically prior to faith in the sense that union with Christ by faith is not brought into the picture.

This way of speaking does not cohere at all with what we surveyed from Scripture and the Westminster Standards. The implications of Berkhof's formulation would be two-fold. First, justification *sola fide* would need to be qualified in terms of a more basic, logically prior, non-pistic justification. The problem here is that the only justification that Scripture allows us to affirm regarding believers is justification by faith in union with Christ. Hence, Berkhof's formulation clouds a clear affirmation of justification *sola fide*.

Second, to the extent that the declaration does not yet bring into view faith, by which alone righteousness is imputed, we would be left with a legal fiction. That is to say, we would be left with a judicial declaration that is not according to the truth of imputed righteousness received by faith alone. In both of these ways, Berkhof's formulation does not cohere with a biblical or confessional notion of justification by faith alone by virtue of union with Christ by faith alone.

Perhaps sensing these lines of critique, and seeking in some way to soften them, Berkhof makes a qualifying statement that, taken on its own, seems to undermine the notion that active justification can be logically prior to faith. He describes active justification, you will recall, as

a declaration which God makes respecting the sinner, and this declaration is made in the tribunal of God. . . . [and then he says] The sinner is declared righteous in view of the fact that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him.<sup>8</sup>

It is hard to see how this statement coheres with his earlier formulation.

Here is the key question to ask at this point: how precisely can God declare a sinner righteous in a way that brings into view the imputed righteousness of Christ, when the declaration logically *precedes* the faith that receives imputed righteousness in the first place? In other words, it is by faith that God imputes righteousness to the sinner. If the declaration of justification brings into view the righteousness of Christ imputed and received by faith, *then the declaration of righteousness cannot logically precede the faith that receives the imputed righteousness*. If anything, the declaration of righteousness would presuppose the faith that receives the imputed righteousness, but this would contradict Berkhof's insistence that active justification logically precedes faith.

We are left with a lack of clarity, and troubling implications associated with that lack of clarity, in Berkhof's formulation regarding the relationship of faith

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

to so-called active and passive aspects of justification. How ought we to respond to Berkhof's formulations, given the problems we have encountered?

Let me begin by saying that there is a sense in which Berkhof is on the right track. When he says that the declaration of righteousness brings into view the imputed righteousness of Christ, received by faith alone, he is moving in the right direction. However, to maintain consistently that declaration brings into view imputed righteousness, Berkhof would need to abandon his notion that the declaration of righteousness logically precedes faith. It is precisely Berkhof's notion that legal declaration in the tribunal of God precedes faith (and union with Christ by faith) that neither Scripture nor the Westminster Standards will sustain.

It is therefore critical to clarify the relationship between the declaration of righteousness in Christ and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer by faith. In order to gain clarity at this point we will need to abandon Berkhof's notion that the declaration of righteousness logically precedes union with Christ by faith and replace it with something more adequate—a positive alternative. What does the positive alternative look like when developed with more rigor?

## VI.

Moving now in a positive direction, we need to note first and foremost that no aspect of forensic justification comes to believers (logically or temporally) prior to union with Christ by faith, so that *justification sola fide depends on union with Christ sola fide*. This statement has significant implications that we need to spell out more clearly.

The declaration of righteousness depends on and brings into view the righteousness of Christ that is imputed *by faith alone* to the believer. The declaration of justification brings into the tribunal of God (objective aspect) the concrete reality of union with Christ by Spirit-wrought faith, and the imputation of his righteousness received by faith alone (subjective aspect), as that reality to which the declaration is addressed. It is only when a sinner, by faith, is united to Christ in effectual calling, and when the sinner receives by faith alone the imputed righteousness of Christ, that the sinner is declared righteous before God.

The declarative aspect of justification in Christ presupposes the imputation of the righteousness of Christ as the sole ground for the sinner's right standing before God. Imputation without declaration is empty. Declaration without imputation is blind. The declarative and the imputative are distinct, inseparable, and simultaneous aspects of the one reality of the justification of believers united to Christ by a Spirit-wrought faith. The two aspects of justification—the declarative and the imputative—logically presuppose one another; the one is unintelligible without the other.

Justification, in other words, is a forensically constitutive declaration that brings into view the imputed righteousness of Christ given only in union with Christ and received by faith alone. As John Murray has noted, justification

“is declarative in such a way that it is also imputative. . . . The justifying act is constitutive. . . . The justification of the ungodly is constitutively and imputatively declarative.”<sup>9</sup> This means that the declaration of righteousness is not prior to the imputation of righteousness, either logically or temporally, because the declaration takes into account the constitutive act of imputation; and the transaction of imputation is situated within the broader reality of union with Christ by Spirit-wrought faith.

Precisely as a consequence of these priorities the Westminster Standards do not make the declaration of justification logically prior to either Spirit-wrought union, on the one hand, or the faith that lays hold of Christ and receives his imputed righteousness, on the other hand. Instead, the declaration of righteousness is situated concretely within Spirit-forged faith-union, and a faith that lays hold of Christ and his imputed righteousness.

The objective/active concern is preserved in this formulation, since it is the God-approved righteousness of Christ himself that appears before the tribunal of divine justice on my behalf. The subjective/passive concern is preserved in this formulation, because what comes to me is a constitutively declarative act of imputation, received by faith. However, and this is critical to maintain, neither the declaration of righteousness nor the imputation of righteousness is logically prior to union with Christ by faith, but comes to the believer *only in terms of* that union which is by faith. John Murray puts it with characteristic brevity and clarity: “Justification does not consist in that which is reflected in our consciousness; it consists in the divine act of acquittal and acceptance. And it is precisely this that is by faith.”<sup>10</sup> The implications of this are wide-ranging, but I will develop only two very briefly.

First, if we want to locate the judicial ground for the believer’s union with Christ, we do not need to look to the forensic benefit of the believer’s *justification*. Rather, we need to look to the past-historical work of Christ, crucified and raised. It is not merely in the atoning death of Christ that we find the judicial ground for the believer’s justification by faith alone in union with Christ; it is also found in the resurrection of Christ as justified. It is the God-approved resurrection righteousness of Christ, imputed to me by faith alone, that stands at the tribunal of divine justice on my behalf. The objective righteousness is the resurrection-validated righteousness of Jesus Christ (1 Tim 3:16), and just in light of this we can make sense of Paul’s language that Christ was “raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25). The past-historical work of Christ in his humiliation and exaltation supplies the judicial ground for union with Christ by faith.

Second, Berkhof makes a curious statement about the way that Scripture relates to the so-called active aspect of justification that logically precedes faith. He says, “When the Bible speaks of justification, it usually refers to what is

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<sup>9</sup> John Murray, “Appendix A: Justification,” in *Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 352-53.

<sup>10</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished*, 129.

known as passive justification."<sup>11</sup> He says this, I believe, for the obvious reason that Scripture's uniform testimony is that believers are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. I would challenge Berkhof precisely at the point regarding scriptural support for his notion that the declaration of righteousness before the tribunal of God logically precedes faith-union with Christ. Scripture does not teach that the declarative aspect of the believer's justification logically precedes faith and union with Christ by faith.

This point then brings us directly to consider our *principium*, the *normans* of our theology, Holy Scripture. Murray again is insightful:

There have been good protestants who have maintained that this faith is not the antecedent of justification but the consequent, that we do not believe in order to be justified but we believe because we have been justified, and that the faith referred to is the faith that we have been justified. The witness of Scripture does not appear to bear out this view of the relation of faith to justification. . . . We cannot believe that we are justified until we are first justified. . . . The faith by which we are justified is the initial and primary act of faith in Jesus Christ by which in our effectual calling we are united to Christ and invested with his righteousness unto our acceptance with God and justification by him.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly Murray's insistence is tethered to the uniform teaching of Scripture. At stake in our discussion, among other things, is the foundational role that Scripture must play in our theology of union with Christ and justification.

We must avoid at all costs speculative, dogmatic constructions that move us away from Scripture and our confessional standards normed by Scripture. A dogmatic distinction that makes the declaration of righteousness logically prior to union with Christ by faith, no matter how noble in its motivation, clouds the precious biblical truth that believers are justified only by faith alone in their Spirit-effected union with Christ. The Scriptures teach that believers are clothed with the righteousness of Christ only as they are ingrafted into him by a Spirit-wrought faith. The declarative act of justification takes squarely into account this Spirit-wrought union, and the attendant imputation of Christ's righteousness that is received by faith alone within that union. The God-approved, resurrection-validated righteousness of Christ obtains before the tribunal of divine justice for me (active aspect). Yet that righteousness is mine only by faith in my Spirit-wrought union with Christ (passive aspect).

Let us, then, remind ourselves anew, from Scripture and our confessional standards—and in that order—of the basic biblical truths that believers are justified by faith alone and that no aspect of justification obtains in the tribunal of God or comes to believers apart from or prior to faith-union with Christ. In this way we can continue to reform *according to Scripture* as we confess that justification *sola fide* depends on union with Christ *sola fide*.

<sup>11</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 517.

<sup>12</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished*, 128.

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