
The Principle of our Union with Christ

Romans 5:12-21; Galatians 1:22; 2:4, 16-17; 3:14, 28; 5:6

The great battle through the ages to hold a Biblical doctrine of righteousness. The challenge often has been centered on the question of on what basis is the Christian declared to be righteous? Is it by works, by faith or by faith plus works?

The debate has also raged as to what it means to be “declared righteous”, to have “righteousness put to our account” and “be righteous.”

There has been a lesser but significant discussion about what the righteousness is that we do have. Is it God’s intrinsic righteousness? Is it Jesus’ keeping of the Mosaic Law? Is it Jesus righteousness acquired through obedience? Or is it something else?

I raise all these questions because I want you to understand that these questions exist. We will not address them directly even though we are in texts that do speak to the issues.

One more opening statement. I believe in Biblical Theology. The Scripture is sovereign in all things and over all man-derived, man-organized body of truths. However, the Scripture says there is “the faith”; that is, a body of truths derived from the Bible which we are to hold fast to and which we are pass on to the next generation. But I have to come to the conclusion that we too often are trying to conform the Bible to our doctrines rather than conform our doctrine to the Bible.

Therefore, as we hear what the Apostle Paul wrote to us, let us bend our hearts and our doctrines to submit to the Lord’s words.

The Righteousness through our being in Christ (Romans 5:12-21)

Paul moves with ease from affection raising statements in the context to what appears to us to be pedantic and difficult doctrine. Let me assure you that the problem in this is with us, and not with Paul! The "therefore" that begins this section shows that it is not an intrusion or diversion or parenthesis. It is integral to his argument. The reality and demonstration of God's saving love is rooted in salvation history.

Running through this text is a very important Biblical way of thinking. Theologians call this Federal Headship. I am not so sure that the doctrine itself, now encrusted with many jewels is particularly the useful instrument it used to be.

However, in our series on Union with Christ, we have teaching what Paul alludes to here. We were in Adam. Now we are in Christ. This means that we have a unity with Adam and Jesus Christ so that their actions affect all those united in them. Thus, when Adam sinned, we are viewed as sinning in him. When Christ died and rose again, we are viewed as having died and risen again with Him. The author of Hebrews uses this same principle to show that in Abraham’s tithe to Melchizedek, Levi and his sons tithed as well. This is particularly difficult for us in the west because of our emphasis on individuality.

But this great text grounds abounding grace in this principle. In Adam we sinned, so in Christ we will be saved. Therefore, the grace in which we stand is surely a grace that abounds.

Because of our Ruin (v.12-14)

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— ¹³ for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

Adam is a real person who is designated by God as the corporate representation for humanity. Sin entered the world through Adam and thus death entered as a result. Everyone also died because everyone sinned in Adam. The implication then is that since everyone died, then everyone sinned.

Yet, there is a problem. In salvation history, the Law does not come till much later. Since sin is not imputed until there is Law, why did they die? They did not have the specific command like Adam did, so why did they die? Why is there death from Adam to Moses when there is no Law and no one else sins like Adam did against a clear and specific commandment (as it is recorded in the Bible, in salvation history)? Death reigns because all human kind is viewed as sinning when Adam did. Even if you never committed a single act of sin, you are still condemned. You sinned in Adam and his disobedience is put to your account.

Be careful denying this. If you deny your union with and in Adam, then you also must deny the possibility of union with and in Christ. If there is no condemning union with Adam, then there can be no saving union with Christ either.

So, grace abounds in the face of our universal ruin in Adam.

Through our Redeemer (v.15-17)

Paul now brings us to exult in Christ by a series of contrasts between Adam and Christ, between the effect of Adam's sin and the power of Jesus' righteousness.

¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. ¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

These are a bit difficult because of the precision and brevity of Paul's language. Here are the contrasts:

Adam's sin affected all, but the free gift of grace abounds so much more than (v.15)

All are doomed under condemnation because of the one disobedience but the free gift of grace justifies the transgressors based on the obedience of one (v.16).

Through Adam's sin, death reigned over us, but through the grace in Christ's righteousness, life will reign in us.

So, they are different because ❶ grace abounds (v.15), ❷ because justification is highlighted (v.16) and ❸ life reigns (v.17).

Therefore, we are in Adam, condemned transgressors ruled over by sin and death. Or, we are in Christ, justified by faith in His cross and resurrection and ruled by the power of His life in us.

For our Righteousness (v.18-21)

Finally, he concludes by summarizing and comparing the two.

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

One transgression, condemnation to all (v.18-19). One obedient righteousness (probably referring to His willing submission to a cross-kind of death) with a right standing before God to all. Now don't get confused: every human is condemned, but only those who believe are justified. Every human born in Adam is condemned; every human placed in Christ, is justified.

The Law "came in", or according to Galatians, "was added" so that the awfulness of sin would be fully disclosed (v.20-21) and grace would abound. The Law made it clearer as to what sin was. Thus, where there was greater revelation about what was sin, so saving grace that justified such sinners abounded and was magnified. The purpose was that grace would reign in life where sin once did.

Through one act of Christ's righteousness (v.18) the many are made righteous (v.19) so that grace would reign through righteousness (v.21).

The Freedom through our Union with Christ (Galatians)

The discussion about righteousness often turns to debate about the Mosaic Law. Since we are now in Christ, do we now learn how to live righteous lives by obeying the parts of the Mosaic Law that apply to us. I am being generous to others. No one who believes in salvation by faith believes that we are under all the Mosaic Law. We do slaughter sheep on Saturdays...

However, many of our theological friends and teachers and theologians whose books fill our shelves believe that some aspects of the Mosaic Law apply to us. They would focus on the what are commonly called the Ten Commandments and then some aspects of the civil code which, they say, still apply to us.

To put this badly: have we been set free from the Old Adam, placed into Christ so that we can go back to being under some aspects of the Mosaic Law? Is that what the Bible tells us? I think not...

The book of Galatians is the charter of our freedom in Christ. Paul here and in 2 Corinthians 3-4, clearly denies that our salvation or our transformation is a matter of the Mosaic Law. His growing crescendo rises through the text and his use of “in Christ...” My aim here is to let the melodic line unfold with only enough comment to make sense of each sentence or paragraph.

Churches are in Christ (Galatians 1:21-24)

²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only were hearing it said, “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Here is an interesting geographical reference. Paul considers local gathered churches to be able to say that they, as a church, are “in Christ.” Local gathered churches in Christ throughout the world are the outposts, the embassies of the God’s great kingdom. In these churches, the Christians were rejoicing to hear that God had saved the persecutor, Saul.

In Christ brings Gospel Freedom (Galatians 2:4-5)

⁴ Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— ⁵ to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

The gospel frees us. Those who are in Christ have been freed. But there were false brothers who were trying to spy out that freedom in order to bring them into a kind of slavery. Now that would not be a slavery to sin in line with Romans 6. Paul did not yield to them nor submit to them in order to preserve the gospel. So if you take away the freedom the gospel brings, you have lost the gospel too.

Justified by Faith in Christ (Galatians 2:14-17)

¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

¹⁷ But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

We are justified by faith in Christ. We are not justified by keeping the Law nor by the works of the Law. It is impossible to be accepted by God, to be righteous by the Law. Here then is the issue that Paul is dealing with. In Christ, we are freed from the slavery of the Law. We cannot be justified by the Law. Since we are justified by faith and not by works, we do not go back and try to live under the Law. Paul does *not* see these as

separate. Either you believe the Law justifies you and therefore sanctifies you or you believe you are justified and sanctified by faith in Jesus.

So you must live in the freedom you have in Christ. Peter was wrong in giving in to the Law-men. He was wrong to live one way with the Gentiles, but when the Law Keepers were present, to deny the gospel by leaving their table. We are not free to sin. But neither are we free to live under the Law and bring ourselves and others into bondage.

The Blessing of Abraham comes in Christ (Galatians 3:7-14)

⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” — ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Those who are justified by faith are the sons of Abraham. How? In Abraham there is a blessing to *all the people groups*. This is a part of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Why is this important? Because we are not in the Mosaic Covenant nor are we under the Mosaic Law. We are condemned as sinners because we were in Adam. Natural law condemned our behavior; being in Adam condemned our persons. Anyone relying on obeying the Law or its works puts themselves under the curse of the Law. But we have been redeemed from the curse of the Law. No one should under any circumstances, go back to it.

Those who are in Christ Jesus receive this “to the nations” blessing promised to Abraham. What is that blessing? We receive the Holy Spirit who was, in this blessing, promised. We receive the Spirit also directly as a result of Jesus’ promise.

The point? In Christ we are made alive by the Spirit. That we receive the Spirit as Gentiles without the Law is PROOF that we are a part of and beneficiaries of the Abrahamic Covenant.

No Natural Divisions in Christ (Galatians 3:28)

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The conclusion Paul draws from his argument? Our union in Christ is to be our identity. All secondary identities are subordinate to that fact that we are in Christ, that we are Christians.

One caution here, Paul is not saying that these distinctions do not exist in the church. Otherwise he would be contradicting himself in other texts. People bring these life

realities to being in Christ. But those are not our fundamental identity. We are Christians. That governs all. And then the roles are set within the church, home and so on.

All that Matters, in Christ (Galatians 5:6)

⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

In Christ, the only thing that ultimately counts is this incredible phrase of four words. All that matters is: faith... working... through love.

Reflect and Respond

In Christ you have His righteousness imputed to you as justification and imparted within you as regeneration.

In Christ, you must not go back to the Law. As a Gentile you were never under it and now you are certainly not under it.

In Christ, you are a recipient of the promises to Abraham. The Holy Spirit who made you alive and dwells within is that blessing.

In Christ, we are made a part of the New Covenant. The New Covenant then connects us spiritually to Abraham and to faith.

There is no way to be "in Christ" by Law, by works, by being good, by religion, by ethnicity, by gender. The way to be saved is by faith.

There is no way to live "in Christ" by Law. The way to live as a Christian, all that matters, is to live out who you are. All that matters is "faith working by love."