

**A REPLY TO “THE OPC JUSTIFICATION REPORT”
ON UNION AND IMPUTATION
(With Special Reference to the Views of Richard B. Gaffin)**

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The “Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification” has now been made available. There is some confusion as to whether or not the OPC powers-that-be intended the Report to be publicly accessible before General Assembly, but the document has already been the subject of several internet responses.¹ That being the case, I will venture a reply myself. Actually, I have in mind a series of replies, culminating in a rather large response that deals with a broad range of concerns raised by the Report. This paper is intended to offer some preliminary thoughts on the Report’s claims about imputation and union with Christ. In other papers, I deal with other issues brought up in the Report. If the Report itself were to be modified in some way, obviously, I would be happy to adjust my responses accordingly here and elsewhere.

The Report takes issue with my colloquium essay, “Reworking the Covenant of Works: A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” found in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons*, edited by E. C. Beisner. Specifically, the Report critiques the way I relate union with Christ to imputation. The Report puts it this way:

Rich Lusk writes, in marked contrast to the Westminster Confession,

This justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify ‘righteousness’ into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict

¹ See especially: Peter Leithart, <http://www.leithart.com/archives/002002.php>; Patrick Ramsey, <http://dpatrickramsey.blogspot.com/2006/06/facts-do-not-speak-for-themselves.html>; Mark Horne, <http://markhorne.blogspot.com/2006/05/gaffin-and-opc-report.html>; Ralph Smith, <http://www.berith.org/pdf/A-Response-to-the-OPC-Committee-on-the-Doctrine-of-Justification.pdf>, <http://berith.org/pdf/Van-Til-on-the-Trinity-and-Covenant.pdf>; Andrew Sandlin, <http://www.andrewsandlin.net/?p=219>; and Barb Harvey, <http://www.upsaid.com/scarecrow/index.php?action=viewcom&id=647>, <http://www.upsaid.com/scarecrow/index.php?action=viewcom&id=644>, <http://www.upsaid.com/scarecrow/index.php?action=viewcom&id=629>.

passed over him at the resurrection. Union with Christ is therefore the key [page 142].

The WCF certainly recognizes the significance of union with Christ, both explicitly (cf. WLC 66 and 69) and also under various rubrics (cf. WCF 25.1; 28.1; 29.1). But neither our Standards, nor a host of Reformed theologians who also clearly affirm the importance of union with Christ, have taught that such union swallows up every other theological consideration and solves every theological problem. We need to be reckoned or accounted (*logizomai*) as righteous in God's sight and imputation is the way that we as a confessional church understand the Scriptures to speak of that transfer of righteousness (cf. WLC 71).

There are several problems with the way the Report interprets my language, and possibly with the position of the Report itself.

First, I have nowhere suggested that union with Christ solves every problem or swallows up every other doctrine. Indeed, when I concluded the section of the essay of mine that the Report is quoting from, I cheerfully admitted that we may continue using imputation language if we desire, provided we understand imputation as a feature of union with Christ, rather than a piece of our salvation having a discrete structure of its own (page 143). So I am not opposed to imputation as a theological category as such.

However, in any discussion of how we are justified before God, I do not think we can move away even one inch from union with Christ as the center. This is true even when we analyze the concept of imputation, which cannot be properly defined in abstraction from union. Imputation is not a transfer of righteousness between two unrelated persons, but God's declaration over us in Christ. "Imputation," properly understood, is not a stand-alone step in the *ordo salutis*, but rather how God accounts and regards us in view of our union with Christ. When Paul says that God imputes righteousness to faith (Rom. 4:5), or that he does not impute sins to believers (Rom. 4:8), he is not talking about *transferring* anything from one person to another; rather, he is discussing how God *considers* and *counts* us in Christ. As the quotations I included in my essay demonstrated (page 143), my position was simply following and elaborating on the work of John Calvin and (the early?) Richard Gaffin (though I know my reliance on Gaffin now appears ironic, given his membership on the OPC Committee that produced the report – more on that below).

Second, the Report shifts both categories and language mid-stream. After admitting the importance and centrality of union with Christ in the soteriology of the Westminster standards, the Report shifts ground from imputation as "reckoning" to imputation as "transfer." But no argument is made for this switch; it is assumed (wrongly) that "reckoning" and "transfer" are one and the same. The Report gives no explanation of how union relates to either

“reckoning” or “transferring,” and no argument is given as to why the Report considers *logizomai* to necessarily indicate a transfer. Whereas I would take “imputation” as a description of justification itself (justification = God declaring, or imputing, us as righteous in Christ), the Report insists that imputation is something conceptually distinct from justification. As best I can tell, in the view of the Report, God transfers Christ’s righteousness to me, and on that basis declares me righteous. Thus, the act of justification in the view of the Report has an extra step, compared to way I have laid things out.²

I have made the case that Paul’s *logizomai* language is used to describe God’s declaration over us in Christ. It is not transfer language in Paul’s theology. As I have written:

To summarize this point: in Paul’s theological vocabulary, *logizomai* does not seem to refer to an extrinsic transfer of something from person A to person B. Rather, it has to do with how God regards or considers you in relationship to himself. God can count/impute your own faith as righteousness, as he did Abraham (no doubt, because of the object of the faith, which is ultimately God himself, identified by his act of raising Jesus from the dead; cf. Rom. 4:22-25). God can refuse to count/impute your sins against you (no doubt, because of the cross; cf. Rom. 4:6-8, 22-25). In Rom. 5:12ff, we learn that Paul’s theology of “imputing” or “regarding” is grounded in covenant union: God ultimately regards us according to the covenant head we are united to – either Adam or Christ. This is simply the way the language works. It has nothing to do with an imaginary imputation/infusion debate going on in the pages of the NT. Imputation (with attendant legal and commercial metaphors) as developed by the Reformed scholastics served a useful purpose in anti-Roman Catholic polemics to stress that the ground of our acceptance with God is found solely in what Christ did for us, but it should not be shoehorned into the exegesis of NT texts. The key is incorporation, not imputation or infusion.

The Reformed scholastic tradition needs refinement in its use of imputation language, but the basic point of the Reformed tradition stands unassailable: By faith, God reckons us as righteous, and he does so because faith unites us to Christ. The virtue of faith is found in its object. Justifying faith is directed to the God who handed Jesus over for our transgressions and raised him up for (his own and) our justification (Rom. 4:22-25). When we believe into Christ Jesus, his resurrection status becomes ours...

If we want to speak of justification as a transaction or transfer, we should put it this way: God does not justify me by transferring Christ’s righteousness to my account, but by transferring *me* from Adam to Christ. Under my new covenant head, God regards [that is, imputes] me as righteous because he [that is, Christ, my representative] is righteous.

² I freely admit this is a small point. I have only raised the issue in my work for the sake of streamlining our theological concepts and terminology so that they square more easily with Paul’s own language and concepts. I would not suggest that the Report’s formulation in any way compromises the graciousness of the gospel. We are grappling with the finest of fine points with regard to Pauline exegesis.

His status is shared with me (and all his people). In Paul's argumentation, *logizomai* functions more as a covenantal term than an economic or bookkeeping metaphor.³

There are several instances of the use of the *logizomai* word group in Paul that simply *must* mean "reckon" or "declare," but *cannot mean* "transfer" (e.g., Rom. 3:28; 4:8; 6:11). To be "reckoned righteous" is just a synonym for the act of justification. If the Report insists that *logizomai* is transfer language it needs to make an exegetical argument and not simply rely on bald assertion. Paul nowhere uses the formulation that *Christ's righteousness* is given over to us by means of transfer, nor does he ever refer to such a transfer with the term *logizomai*. I do not deny that a "transfer" formulation has been used by Reformed theologians, but certainly not monolithically, and not without important questions and even objections being raised. I do not deny that this "transfer" formulation is consistent with what Paul says, even if it is not his precise way of putting the matter. I *do* deny that the transfer formulation is necessary to the explication of Paul's gospel.

Third, note that the Westminster Standards do not define "imputation" in a way that excludes my understanding. Whether "impute" is a transfer of righteousness from Christ to us, or God's reckoning of us as righteous in Christ, is an unanswered question. We can certainly be sure that imputation is set in opposition to infusion, but that fact alone does not settle the question that stands between the Report and myself, namely, whether imputation has its own discrete theological structure, signifying a transfer of righteousness from Christ to the believer, or if imputation should be regarded as the legal, declarative aspect of our incorporation into Christ. Of course, we both reject justification as grounded in an infused righteousness.

Related, the Report does not seem to be fully aware of the fact that the content carried by imputation language in the Confession cannot be necessarily or simplistically read into the exegesis of specific biblical texts. Whether Paul's usage of the term "imputation" in Romans 3 and 4 (or elsewhere) is identical to the Confession's usage is not settled, or even addressed, by the Report – but it is a question very much on the minds of so-called "Federal Vision" theologians. Whether or not "impute" in Paul's writings should be understood as a transfer from Christ to us, or a declaration of our status in union with Christ, is not going to be settled by appealing to the Westminster divines. Given the prominence of union with Christ in the soteriology of the Standards, the union-with-Christ view

³ See my lecture notes from the Christ Church Ministerial Conference on justification, available at <http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/christchurchjustification.pdf>. See especially Lecture #2.

should not be hastily dismissed. It is not unthinkable that many of the divines might have opted for just such a formulation.⁴

Other Lutheran and Reformed theologians, long before the so-called “Federal Vision” came along, described justification in general, and imputation in particular, in terms of union with Christ. I have cited several of these theologians in my work elsewhere, with extensive explanation and interaction. To give one lengthy sampling:

Martin Luther often defined “imputation” in terms of a marriage relationship, in which goods are shared and possessed jointly. He explained the exchange of the gospel in

⁴ Certainly, no one would argue the fact that many Reformed theologians have based imputation on union, and seen imputation as a function of union. These theologians tend to see imputation not as a transfer, but as a declaratory counting, of righteousness. Patrick Ramsey’s blog recently included a quotation from a Presbyterian theologian named Thomas Bell that argues convincingly for the imputation-rooted-in-union view (<http://dpatrickramsey.blogspot.com/2006/05/ringing-bell-on-imputation.html>). Bell’s view of imputation requires no transfer, and indeed would render any kind of transfer superfluous:

That our sins were imputed unto Christ, is a precious gospel truth: but that they became his by imputation, is not quite so evident, inasmuch as a just imputation always presupposes that that which is imputed was the person's, previous to its imputation. Neither sin nor righteousness can be justly imputed to a man, except he has committed the one, or fulfilled the other, viz. either in his own person, or in that of his representative. Thus Adam's first sin was ours before it was imputed to us, and so likewise is Christ's righteousness. Much after the same manner, our sins were Christ's before they were imputed to him, viz. in virtue of his suretiship for us. By it he became legally one with us, taking our sins upon him, and engaging to make satisfaction for them. So the surety, by his bond of suretiship, comes into the place of the original debtor, making the debt his own. Therefore, the creditor, in imputing it to him, does not make it his, but finds and declares that it is his, and treats him accordingly...Properly speaking, it is not by imputation that our sins become Christ's or his righteousness ours. The act of imputation necessarily presupposes a relation betwixt the party and what is imputed to him, whether it be righteousness or sin, otherwise it is not a just, but an iniquitous act...It was observed, that Christ's righteousness becomes ours, not by imputation but by our union to him...Adam's sin was ours, not because imputed to us, but because we were united to him. Union was the ground of imputation. Thus it also is with respect to our Lord's surety-righteousness. It is not imputed, and therefore ours; but ours, and therefore imputed.

While we might quibble with the terminology here, the logic is flawless. God declares (imputes) to us what is true of us, in virtue of our covenantal head. Imputation is not a transfer; it is a corollary of union and grounded in that union. In this way, imputation can never be a legal fiction, because it presupposes a true relationship. The declaration God makes about us is true to fact, in that sense.

Sadly, the Report takes far too narrow a view of the Reformed tradition. By excluding those who view imputation as Bell does, the Report unnecessarily truncates and narrows the very tradition it purports to uphold and defend.

relationally intrinsic terms: "If Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his." Faith "unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom." The righteousness of Christ by which we are justified is simply the presence of Christ himself dwelling within us:

Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ . . . Where the confidence of the heart is present, therefore, there Christ is present, in that very cloud and faith. This is the formal righteousness on account of which a man is justified . . . Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life.

John Calvin also rooted justification and imputation in union with Christ. We receive Christ's benefits only as he dwells in us and we dwell in him:

We must now see in what way we become possessed of the blessings which God has bestowed on his only-begotten Son, not for private use, but to enrich the poor and needy. And the first thing to be attended to is, that so long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us. Accordingly, he is called our Head, and the first-born among many brethren, while, on the other hand, we are said to be ingrafted into him and clothed with him, all which he possesses being, as I have said, nothing to us until we become one with him . . .

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our heart—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him (*Institutes* 3.1.1, 3.11.10).

Jonathan Edwards argues the same point:

What is real in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is legal; that is, it is something that is really in them and between them, uniting [them], that is the ground of the suitability of their being accounted as one by the Judge. . . . because Christ and they are so united that they may be well looked upon [as] one (M 568).

The whole mystical Christ shall be rewarded for this, which is the same thing as the having Christ's righteousness imputed to them (M 502).

According to Edwards, faith justifies precisely because it is the act of union with Christ...

[John Williamson] Nevin makes the same point. He argues for the centrality of the resurrection. Even the benefits we receive from Christ's death flow to us through his

resurrected life. A dead Christ cannot justify (cf. 1 Cor. 15); thus, everything hinges on the fact and meaning of the resurrection.

Could the sacrifice of Calvary be of any avail to take away sins, if the victim there slain had not been raised again for our justification, and were not *now* seated at the right hand of God as our Advocate and Intercessor? Would the atonement of a *dead* Christ be of more worth than the blood of bulls and goats, to purge the conscience from dead works and give it free access to God? . . .

We receive what Christ has to offer not by means of a mechanical, outward transfer but by a living union with the Savior, illustrated by the likes of marriage, a vine and its branches, and a body and its members.

What Christ does or has done, must ever be conditioned certainly by what he is; and it is hard to see how the force of his righteousness forensically taken can ever be impaired, by its being allowed to be in truth a part of himself and in union always with his own life.

In other words, Christ's righteousness becomes ours not by legal transfer, but by covenantal union. This union includes a legal/forensic component, but much else besides....

Against scholastic formulations, it makes better exegetical sense to say that we are justified in virtue of our participation in Christ's justification. We are integrated into his resurrection status. This is how it works: The Son identified himself with us, foundationally in his incarnation, and then officially in his baptism. As our substitute and representative, he died on the cross for us and as us, bearing the curse of the law. The Father then justified the Son in the resurrection (1 Tim. 3:16). We are united to Christ by faith alone, and in union with him, share in that justifying verdict (Rom. 4:25). The resurrection life of Christ is the ultimate source and ground of our justification...

Many theologians have rightly understood union with Christ at the center of Paul's soteriology. Our justification inheres in Christ's person as the crucified and risen (justified) God-man. Of course, all the other blessings of salvation reside in him as well. All [of our] salvation – including justification – is participatory....

Union with Christ is a helpful organizing theme for biblical theology and practical piety because it so all-encompassing. Union with Christ was absolutely central in Calvin's soteriology, and in more recent times, many Reformed theologians have recovered its importance. However, its significance has never been fully eclipsed in the Reformed stream. For example, Edwards wrote:

The Scripture is very plain and evident in this, that those that are in Christ are actually in a state of salvation, and are justified, sanctified, accepted of Christ, and shall be saved . . . But those that are not in Christ, and are not united to him, can have no degree of communion with him. For there is no communion without union. The members can have no communion with the head or participation of its life and health unless they are united to it . . .

At least some versions of what became known as federal theology argued for an extrinsic doctrine of imputation as the basis of our justification. Such stress was put on Christ's

“alien” work outside of us that the doctrine of union with Christ was stressed and even fragmented. The John Nevin/Charles Hodge debate is a good illustration. Nevin, following Calvin, grounded justification in organic union with Christ. We share Christ’s forensic status precisely because we participate in his life. In fact, Nevin defined “Christianity” simply as participation in the life of Christ.

For Christianity . . . is in a deep sense identical with the life of Christ itself. It is not the words he spoke, nor the works he wrought, as something sundered from his own person but the living fountain of all these introduced into the world in the mystery from which his person springs. He is the Word itself made flesh; grace and truth enshrined in living *shekinah*; the life of God disclosed, to the fullest possible extent of revelation, in the very bosom of man’s life.

The new humanity is comprehended in Christ’s person. Nevin grounded every facet of Christian life and experience in vital union with Christ. Nevin did not oppose imputation as such, but he did criticize “extrinsic” notions of imputation that were insufficiently rooted in our living union with Christ and which severed the fruit of Christ’s work from the person of Christ himself. He wrote,

[The value of Christ’s work] is all lodged in the life [of Christ], by the power of which alone this work has been accomplished, and in the presence of which only it can have either reality or stability. The imagination that the merits of Christ’s life may be sundered from his life, and conveyed over to his people under this abstract form, on the ground of a merely outward legal constitution, is unscriptural and contrary to all reason at the same time . . .

In the very act of our justification, by which the righteousness of Christ is accounted to be ours, it becomes ours in fact by our actual insertion into Christ himself. He is joined to us mystically by the power of the Holy Ghost, and becomes in this way the principle of a new creation within us, which from the very start includes in itself potentially, all that belongs to it already in his own person . . .

This view of justification counters the “legal fiction” charge:

The judgment of God must ever be according to truth. He cannot reckon [that is, “impute,” in the sense of “declare” or “consider” or “regard”] to anyone an attribute or quality, which does not belong to him in fact. He cannot declare him to be in a relation or state, which is not actually his own, but the position merely of another . . . ⁵

Such lengthy, broken quotations may make for difficult reading, but in this case it is necessary in order to demonstrate that the Report has not quite grasped the key point in the current discussion over justification. Their critique of my view has missed its mark.

⁵ Again, see my notes from the Christ Church Ministerial Conference on justification, available at <http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/christchurchjustification.pdf>, especially Lecture #2.

All this is to say: our justification inheres in the person of Christ. It is not found in a transfer of righteousness, abstracted from Christ himself, nor in an act of transfer from Christ to us. Rather, *it is found in the person of Christ himself, crucified and raised for us*. Justification, therefore, is an act of God's free grace in which he accepts us as his own people and forgives our sins, declaring (or considering, or regarding, or reckoning, or imputing) us to be righteous only because of and on account of the righteousness of Christ, received by us by means of faith alone. Through the sole instrumentality of faith, we are conjoined to Christ, in whom we have righteousness, and all other blessings pertaining to life and salvation. God considers, or imputes, us as righteous because we share in the status of the Risen Christ.

Fourth, when examined closely, the "imputation as transfer" model creates an insuperable set of theological problems. It treats Christ's benefits as something separable from Christ himself. What else could be meant by insistence on a transfer of righteousness, over against and distinguished from union with Christ?⁶ The Report's criticisms only make sense if the Report presupposes that Christ's righteousness is something that can be severed from Christ's person and given to another. I would much rather say than in giving us himself -- that is, in uniting us to himself -- Christ *also* gives us his status and his story as God's Righteous One. As Christ makes us his own and makes himself ours, he shares all he has with us. In this light, I do not think it is helpful or biblical to think of imputation as something given to us outside of, or apart from, union with Christ. If the Report desires to make imputation a benefit received apart from union with Christ, their quarrel is really with Calvin, not the FV.⁷ This is how I put it in my essay "Rome Won't Have Me," dealing with the twin concerns of the active obedience of Christ and the nature of imputation:

⁶ Some might object that the Report does not actually advocate understanding imputation as an extrinsic transfer. The summary on page 1686 says, "The application of this benefit of Christ comes through union with Christ, by means of *imputation*; that is, when sinners are united to Christ by faith, Christ's righteousness is judicially reckoned or credited to sinners so that their sins may be forgiven and the perfect obedience of Christ accounted as their own (e.g., see Ps. 32:2; Rom 4:5-11, 22-24; 2 Cor 5:19, 21; Phil 3:8-9; WCF 11.1; WLC 69-71; WSC 31-33)." This statement is entirely correct in linking union with justification, but leaves the relationship between these concepts and imputation undefined. Is imputation a transfer of righteousness from Christ to us? Or is simply God's declaration over us in Christ? Is imputation God's act of declaring or reckoning us just? Or is it a transfer of righteousness, on the basis of which God makes the justifying declaration? Is imputation a rough synonym of justification, or the basis of justification?

⁷ I am not necessarily claiming the Report does this. It is hard to tell. It seems that many of the Report's positive statements about justification situate imputation within union. On the other hand, the Report's criticisms of the so-called "FV" seem to presuppose that imputation is a transfer of righteousness from Christ's account to mine, on which basis God declares me righteous. This is obviously an issue that needs further attention to detail, especially in connecting the different conceptual models of justification to biblical exegesis.

Christ's active obedience is integral to the gospel. My point in the colloquium essay was not to deny the imputation of Christ's active obedience (see page 140: "First, there is no question the perfect obedience of Jesus played a vital role in his salvific work on our behalf . . . So his active obedience is necessary to guarantee the efficacy and worth of his death and guarantee his resurrection on the other side") but to situate that doctrine within a broader, eschatological framework. How does the active obedience of Christ fit within the broader sweep of the biblical metanarrative?

Jesus fulfilled his vocation in living as the faithful one (in place of Adam's and Israel's faithlessness) and in dying on the cross under the double curse of Adam's fall and Israel's broken law. To complete his plan of salvation, the Father raised him up on the third day. The resurrection is the key to the new status we receive in Christ. In my colloquium essay, I homed in on Rom. 4:25. Despite Gaffin's best efforts (see again his wonderful *Resurrection and Redemption*), I think we have still significantly underplayed the role of Christ's resurrection in our justification in contemporary Reformed theology. It's not enough to talk about how Jesus lived a sinless life (his active obedience) and died on the cross for our sins (his passive obedience). We have to press on through to talk about the resurrection as well. The gospel includes Christmas and Good Friday, but it doesn't stop there; it also includes Easter. And yet my exegetical appeal to Rom. 4:25 has been ignored. Exactly *why* broadening out our understanding of the doctrine of justification to include the resurrection should prove to be controversial is hard to figure. But nevertheless, that's where things stand right now.

In my colloquium essay, I said,

The resurrection is the real centerpiece of the gospel since it is the *new* thing God has done. This seems to be the thrust of Rom. 4:25. It is not Christ's life-long obedience per se that is credited to us. Rather, it is his right-standing before the Father, manifested in his resurrection. His resurrection justifies us because it justified him . . . Christ shares his legal status in God's court with as the One who propitiated God's wrath on the cross and was resurrected into a vindicated, glorified form of life (141).

....

In the addendum, I summarized the matter:

Interestingly, critics of my essay have generally ignored Romans 4:25 and the function of the resurrection in our justification. It was suggested to me that by denying a place for Christ's active obedience in my doctrine of justification, my view leaves us in Adam's probationary state. But I would argue the reverse is the case. If all we have credited to us is Jesus' pre-resurrection (pre-eschatological) obedience, we are still in need of eschatological justification. We are still in need of new age righteousness. We are still not glorified priest-kings, reigning over the creation from heaven. We are still in need of eschatological, resurrection life. Thankfully, such is not the case. For Paul, the resurrection justifies precisely because it takes us beyond the Adamic/Torah phase of history into something new and more mature (Gal. 3-4). We are justified because we are in Jesus and he was justified at his resurrection. The resurrection, rather than the active obedience, is the real linchpin [because it includes the active and passive obedience, but moves beyond them].

Look closely at the flow of this argument. I have fully acknowledged that at the heart of the gospel stands a crediting (or an imputation). Christ's righteousness is our righteousness in the divine law court. His righteousness is our only hope and surety of justification. But note: it is not Christ's righteous character as such or his thirty-plus years of obedience that get reckoned to our account. Rather, it is *the verdict* the Father passed over him. The Father declared Jesus righteous; that verdict took the shape of the resurrection (cf. 1 Timothy 3:16). Now (by faith alone, of course) that verdict belongs to us. He shares his legal righteousness and vindication with us. This is a forensic, external, and gracious justification.

Surely, it is plainly obvious that nothing from the typical "imputation of Christ's active obedience" formulation has been lost – only nuanced. Everything found in that wonderful answer to WSC 33 is preserved. Indeed, the imputation of Christ's active obedience is tightly included in my view, since the verdict the Father passes over the Son in the form of the resurrection is *grounded upon* his perfect obedience. The imputed verdict brings with it the perfect record of obedience upon which the verdict was based. Thus, my view makes the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience, as well as the resurrection, internal to the doctrine of justification.

This doctrine is not new, even if it has been obscured and overshadowed. For example, Henrich Hepp paraphrases the view of Caspar Olevianus in this way in *Reformed Dogmatics*, 498-499:

[T]his first exaltation of Christ (i.e., the resurrection) . . . is itself a practical declaring righteous of all those who are aroused to faith in Christ. Just as by giving the Son to death the Father actually condemned all our sins in him, the Father also by raising Christ up from the dead, acquitted Christ of our sin-guilt and us in Christ (Olevian, pp. 76-77). So Christ's resurrection is our righteousness, because God further regards us in the perfection in which Christ rose. Whereas the Father regarded us previously in the dying Son as sinners, He sees us now in the resurrected Son as righteous; or rather; whereas previously He regarded the Son in our sins as sinner, He regards Him now, and us in Him, as the person which He is, and which He is not for Himself [only] but for us [as well] (Olevian, p. 80).

In other words, Olevianus viewed the cross and resurrection as forensic events. In the cross, Christ is condemned as a sinner in our stead; in the resurrection, he enters into a state of vindication for us. It should be easy enough to see how Olevianus' view arises from exegesis of passages like Rom. 4:25 and 1 Tim. 3:16. Further evidence of Olevianus' single-minded preoccupation with the death and resurrection of Christ as the basis of our justification may be found in consulting his book, *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, translated and edited by Lyle Bierma, pages 111-112. While some may not think this view well-founded exegetically, it is hard for me to see why anyone would accuse me of denying the gospel as such, or subverting the Reformed confessions. This view is only ever so slightly different from what is now regarded as the standard view (and has deep affinities with the views of many early Reformers and Puritans). It is nothing more than a refinement, hopefully well-informed by the best Reformed biblical theology. It certainly isn't Rome's view – not even close!

.....

So Christ was the perfectly faithful man. He lived a life of total faith in his Father. While his faith obviously has significant discontinuities with our faith, we must see our faith is simply the result of our being swept up into union with him. Our life of faith derives from and depends upon and gets its efficacy from his life of faith. Everything needed for salvation – even faith itself – is located in Christ. We need look nowhere else. Calvin said it best:

We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ [Acts 4:12]. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is “of him” [1 Cor. 1:30]. If we seek any other gift of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity in his conception; if gentleness; it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects [Heb. 2:17] that he might learn to feel our pain [cf. Heb. 5:12]. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross [Gal. 3:13]; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other (*Institutes* 2.14.19).

I would only add: if we seek faith, we find it in his life of faithfulness. If we seek justification, we find it in his own justification on Easter Sunday. Everything is *in Christ*. Again, Calvin: “Our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, . . . we possess it only because we are partakers of Christ” (*Institutes* 3.11.23).

This focus on Christ’s faithfulness (and our participation therein) is crucial, because it also allows us to carefully distinguish faith and works (the fruit of faith). While faith and obedience are inseparably and organically related (as Christ’s own life shows), nevertheless, *only faith can unite us to Christ*. Works cannot play that function. And so whatever role works play, they cannot be the ground of our justification, or even the instrument of our justification in the same way that faith is instrumental. Works are necessary, to be sure, but they are not parallel or analogous to faith; they flow out of faith. By faith, and by faith alone, we receive all that Christ possesses on our behalf, including justification.

Thus, I have no bone to pick with the doctrine of imputation. I think it makes good sense in terms of our union-with-Christ theology. Indeed, as I said in the colloquium essay, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is simply a “corollary of union with Christ” (page 143). Reformed heavy weights such as Calvin, Gaffin, and Anthony Hoekema have felt no tension between union with Christ and a forensic, imputed justification....

In other words, when the FV views imputation as the judicial aspect of union with Christ, it is not simply collapsing imputation (or justification) into union. Union with Christ cannot be reduced to a legal relationship, but it certainly has a legal dimension. No one involved in the present controversy wants to jettison the

forensic component of salvation. Thus, the Report is badly mistaken when it assumes that we desire to “contend against a ‘judicial’ theology” (line 2164).

All “FV” theologians affirm some version of the “imputation of active obedience” formula, though with nuances. We would all say that by virtue of our union with Christ, “what is true of him is now true of us.” Imputation is the judicial aspect of that. But the tendency of the critics – including those authoring the Report – has been to take a few expressions out of context and set them against the “received” view of justification. But in doing this, the critics all too often have missed the force of the questions the “FV” side has been asking. The paucity of exegesis is often disturbing.

To be more specific, I want to ask the authors of the Report: What does the imputation-as-transfer model have the union-with-Christ model lacks?⁸ Why is it *better* to have Christ’s obedience imputed/transferred to me than to have a share in his resurrection status? Why is transferred obedience superior to a participatory verdict? What valid concerns or truths are left unprotected by formulating the matter in terms of union? Why should we not view imputation as simply the legal dimension of union?⁹

Further: If imputation is a transfer (as my critics suggest), *in what way* is his righteousness transferred to me? The standard answer would be faith. But faith is the also the means of union with Christ -- so we're right back where we started, with imputation as a function and aspect of a larger doctrine of union with Christ. Is imputation something discrete from union with Christ, or just a

⁸ This gets us to the heart of the matter. I have repeatedly asked this question, “Why is it better to have the imputed/transferred active obedience of Christ than to participate in the verdict/status given to him in his resurrection?” in several essays and forums to critics over the last several years. I can honestly say that no one has even *attempted* to give me an answer in public or private settings.

⁹ On a related issue, the Report criticizes Norman Shepherd for claiming that only Christ’s passive obedience (the cross) is imputed to us, not his active obedience as well (lines 562-603). From this point forward, Daniel Kirk’s two-part essay, “The Sufficiency of the Cross,” just published in the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, must be reckoned with by those who want to continue to insist on the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as the basis of our justification. Kirk shows this formulation lacks firm grounding, in terms of both exegesis and theology. It misunderstands the function of the law/Torah in the economy of redemption, and, by generally down playing the significance of the resurrection, de-eschatologizes the doctrine of justification. Indeed, if you read WCF 11 all on its own, you could easily conclude the resurrection is of no soteric significance and that we could in fact be justified by a dead Christ. That cannot be right, per Rom. 4:25 and 1 Cor. 15. The “FV” folks want to see union with the risen Christ given its proper place in our doctrine of justification. This is no threat to the doctrine of justification as it stands in the Reformed confessions; rather, it is an enhancement and enrichment of that doctrine.

component of union with Christ? And if it's a component, all transfer language is unnecessary, is it not? How can something be transferred from one person to another when they already share everything in common? How can Christ transfer into my possession something I already hold in common with him?¹⁰

To continue this line of questioning: If I have Christ, why do I still need to receive his righteousness as some additional, separate step in order to be justified? Why does union with Christ fail to include a new legal standing (on the Report's view)? If I have Christ, I have his righteousness and his status already, do I not? Why do I need some extra thing, an *additional* imputation/transfer, to *complete* my justification? If imputation is not simply an aspect of union with Christ, then are the Report's authors saying that imputation takes place outside of, or apart from, union with Christ? They say that in my view, union "swallows up" imputation -- but I get the sense that on their view (at least when they are in "critique mode") that imputation is supposed to function outside of union altogether. What else could the language of the Report be taken to mean? The Report specifically says that union with Christ is *not* the answer to the question of justification, of how I am made right before God (lines 2715-2718).

Following Calvin, I must register strong disagreement with that line of reasoning. As Calvin might want to ask, how can I be justified by a Christ who remains altogether distant from and outside of me? How can a detached Christ justify? Further, following the language of the Report, if union with Christ is *not* the answer to the question of justification, how do we know it is the answer to the questions of sanctification, adoption, or assurance? What holds all these benefits together if not union with Christ? And yet the authors of the Report would have us be careful, lest we allow union with Christ to "swallow [them] up"! I do not think union with Christ obliterates the distinctions between these various components of our salvation, but I would be more than happy to have the whole *ordo salutis* "swallowed up" by union with Christ. The only other option would be to suggest that some benefits of salvation are either found somewhere other than Christ, or they are somehow separable from his person. I find those approaches unattractive and unbiblical (cf. Eph. 1:3f; etc.).

Fifth, insofar as the Report ties imputation (that is, what God declares to be true of us in Christ) into our union with Christ, its case against me vanishes. It is very hard for me to see how the Report's case against me (at least on this issue) is

¹⁰ This does not obliterate the personal distinction between the believer and Christ, of course. The preeminent model of union with Christ is marriage (Eph. 5:21ff). But as we are joined to Christ, he shares all he has with us. This sharing is not a matter of transferring but comprehensive incorporation. God's view of us is refracted through Christ's covenantal headship over us. God never contemplates the bride apart from her husband, or the branches apart from the vine (Jn. 15:1ff).

anything more than a word game. The Report admits as much: “We need to be reckoned or accounted (*logizomai*) as righteous in God’s sight and imputation is the way that we as a confessional church understand the Scriptures to speak of that transfer of righteousness” (lines 2719-2720). In other words, “This is our approved way of speaking and do not deviate from it. We as a confessional church read the Confession, and therefore the Bible, in this way, and that settles it.” But this borders on sectarianism. Is this really the *only* way we can describe these precious, infinitely rich theological truths? Are we not allowed to speak in any other fashion? Why not admit that there has been a breadth of theological formulations in the Reformed tradition, all of which amount to the same truth – that in Christ, we are justified before God by faith and apart from our own works? The claim of the Report that this is the one and only way “to speak” the truth of the gospel simply does not hold up – especially when we take into account that the fact that the way the Report prescribes does not match up precisely with Paul’s own ways of putting things. Paul himself (not to mention the other apostles and even Jesus) do not meet the Report’s standards for theological speech.

In this way, I fear that the Report represents yet another chapter in “the closing of the American Presbyterian mind.” But a tradition that devours itself in this way is at risk. A tradition that can no longer be revised or refined in light of exegesis of the living and active Word of God is a dead tradition. A tradition that is so brittle that it cannot cope with variant formulations that reach the same conclusion, meet the same concerns, and protect the same truths, is a dead (or at least very sick) tradition. The Report does not actually demonstrate a deficiency in my formulation, exegetically or even confessionally. But because I do not pronounce “shibboleth” as they do, I am shoved to the outer darkness of Reformedom. If the Report carefully followed out the arguments I have made, they would see that nothing is lacking in my way of framing things – and that it has solid backing in the wider Reformed tradition. I am by no means the only person in the history of Reformed thought and theology to structure the doctrine of justification (and imputation) in terms of union with Christ. A solid exegetical case can be and has been made for this view.¹¹

¹¹ Surprisingly, albeit frustratingly and inconsistently, the Report comes very close to understanding imputation as the *declarative aspect* of union with Christ, rather than a *transfer* of righteousness. In other words, I am not even sure the authors of the Report are fully homed in on the crucial issues here. On line 2718, the Report says, “We need to be reckoned or accounted (*logizomai*) as righteous in God’s sight and imputation is [the way we describe that].” But no one (I know of) has ever objected to imputation language as a way of describing how God reckons or accounts us in Christ. The issue has always been “imputation” as a way of describing a *transfer* of righteousness from Christ to the sinner. The “transfer” formulation has certain attendant liabilities that can lead to the fragmentation of our salvation. Once Christ is separable from his benefits, his benefits become all too separable from one another! So-called “Federal Vision”

Sixth, I want to give special consideration to the recent work of one of the Report's authors, Richard Gaffin, because it brings out a further set of problems and misunderstandings. I have the highest degree of respect for Gaffin's work, and many observers of the recent unpleasantness that has become known as "the Federal Vision controversy" can see an obvious link between Gaffin's earlier work and the overall shape of the "Federal Vision" project.¹² This may explain why Gaffin has taken special pains to distance himself from the so-called "Federal Vision," and (conversely) why some associated with the "Federal Vision" have suggested that Gaffin has simply failed to follow through on the brilliant insights offered in his earlier published work.

This is obviously a "hot button" for Gaffin because he has brought it to the fore in at least two of his recent publications.¹³ Gaffin articulates his criticism of my formulation of justification in this way:

While there is no imputation without union or antecedent to union, neither is there union without imputation. There are those, in the past and present, who, grasped by some understanding of union, conclude that union excludes any notion of imputation or at least renders it unnecessary. As it has been put recently, union "makes imputation redundant" [fn. 19: R. Lusk, "A response to the Biblical Plan of Salvation," p. 142].

I am unable here to enter in any detail into the reasoning that comes to such a conclusion,

theologians are concerned to relate union and imputation because they want to uphold the unity of salvation in Christ.

¹² I am still not convinced that there is any definable movement that corresponds to the "Federal Vision" label. But I use the term here for convenience and consistency with the Report. It is certainly noteworthy that many of the most intense critics of the "Federal Vision" (e.g., John Robbins, Brian Schwertley) are equally critical of Gaffin. Indeed, they even view the "Federal Vision" largely as the brainchild of Gaffin's seminal work, *Resurrection and Redemption*. Frankly, I considered the heart of my colloquium essay to be nothing more than an extended meditation on Gaffin's famous paragraph on page 132 of *Resurrection and Redemption*:

Christ's resurrection, the act of being raised with Christ in its constitutive, transforming character is at the same time judicially declarative; that is, the act of being joined to Christ is conceived of imputatively. In this sense the enlivening action of resurrection (incorporation) is itself a forensically constitutive declaration.

Whether Gaffin likes it or not, it is safe to say that all "Federal Vision" thinking about justification arises from the concerns Gaffin expresses here. As I read this quotation, imputation is not a transfer of righteousness, but God's justifying declaration over those who have been joined to the Risen Christ.

¹³ See his essay "Union with Christ and Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A.T.B. McGowan (Leicester: Apollos, 2006), pages 271-88, and *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (London: Paternoster, 2006), pages 50f. Page number citations below refer to the "Union with Christ" essay. Gaffin is quoting from and interacting with my colloquium essay, found, as already noted above, in E. C. Beisner (ed.), *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004).

only to say that it is troubling, and, I judge, more disturbing to a biblically sound doctrine of justification than the view that ignores or obscures union in maintaining imputation. Why more disturbing? Because, as far as I can see, it leaves us unclear about what is absolutely essential to our justification; namely its ground or basis. Specifically, what is left unclear or perhaps even being denied is Christ's own righteousness as the exclusive ground, on which, solely, our hope of acquittal before the bar of God's justice rests.

If it is excluded or deemed unnecessary that in justification Christ's righteousness, his finished righteousness, is imputed to sinners, then the ground of their justification must lie elsewhere. If I understand correctly, what is being proposed with this dismissal of imputation is that the ground is either the union itself; that is, the fact of the relationship, the existence of the uniting bond, itself. Or, alternatively, that ground is righteousness being produced in me, as it flows from that union.

Suffice it to say here, the basis of my justification is not a relationship, no matter how real and intimate. Nor is the basis a righteousness that results in me from that union, no matter how otherwise important such Spirit-worked righteousness is, no matter how integral to the salvation I receive in Christ. Rather, that basis is Christ's own righteousness, established and completed in his obedience culminating in his death, which, in union with him, is imputed to me. Just as it is his, as distinct from any righteousness I might manifest, it is reckoned as "mine." (pages 286f)

Because this quotation is so important, allow me to analyze it bit by bit, putting it in conversation with my paper. Gaffin cites all of three words from my colloquium essay, from which he derives a rather elaborate argument. But closer inspection will show that he has failed to actually enter into dialogue with my view. It is my goal here to create the dialogue that *should have* happened before Gaffin's articles went into print (and before the OPC Report was put together, for that matter). In this way, I hope to show that Gaffin's conjectures about my view amount to unsubstantiated speculations. Gaffin gives his reader the sense that I have left certain key questions unclear when in fact I have provided robust and forthright answers.

Turning to our analysis, Gaffin writes,

While there is no imputation without union or antecedent to union, neither is there union without imputation.

This is entirely unobjectionable, as far as I am concerned, provided we understand imputation language properly, not as an extrinsic transfer of righteousness, but as a function of union with Christ. Imputation is not a juggling of the heavenly books (expect perhaps in a highly metaphorical way), but God's declaration and consideration of me in Christ. I have no beef with imputation language as such. Indeed, in the very colloquium essay with which Gaffin is interacting, I conclude the section under review with these words: "[Imputation] is simply a corollary of union with Christ. We may conceive of

union with Christ imputatively, if we wish, but the key is to affirm that if we are *in Christ* we share in his right standing before the Father” (p. 143). I do not think the language of imputation-as-a-transfer-of-righteousness is essential to preserving the gospel. It is sufficient – and indeed, more Pauline, perhaps – to argue that we are justified in Christ, as God regards (or imputes to) us righteousness by faith, on account of Christ’s own right standing.

After describing my view (somewhat inaccurately) as excluding or rendering unnecessary imputation, Gaffin continues:

I am unable here to enter in any detail into the reasoning that comes to such a conclusion, only to say that it is troubling, and, I judge, more disturbing to a biblically sound doctrine of justification than the view that ignores or obscures union in maintaining imputation. Why more disturbing? Because, as far as I can see, it leaves us unclear about what is absolutely essential to our justification; namely its ground or basis. Specifically, what is left unclear of perhaps even being denied is Christ’s own righteousness as the exclusive ground, on which, solely, our hope of acquittal before the bar of God’s justice rests.

With all due respect, I find this a bit disingenuous. Why can’t Gaffin enter into the argument with any detail? If he’s so disturbed by my line of reasoning, isn’t he obligated to show how and why it is so dangerous, so that others do not fall into the same error? How can he let such an important matter rest on mere assertion, with no proof whatsoever? Without any elaboration, his case against me is all bark and no bite. More importantly, even a cursory reading of my materials shows that nothing has been left unclear about the exclusive ground of our hope of acquittal before God. That ground is Christ, and him crucified, ever and always!

I would suggest that the reason Gaffin is reluctant to show how he arrived at this conclusion about my teaching is because *there is no such line of reasoning*. For Gaffin to demonstrate the error of my ways, he would have had to quote my work more fully, and as soon as he did so, his whole case against my view would unravel. He picked the one phrase from my essay that could be turned to suit his polemical purposes, and largely ignored the rest. He is disturbed not by my view, but by a straw man of his own making.

Repeatedly, I have stressed that *our justification is grounded exclusively in Christ’s own justification* – which is to say, it is grounded in Christ’s death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 4:25). If Gaffin has missed this point, if he has to wonder where the ground of justification lies in my position, it can only be a sign of bias or of failing to read carefully. On the *same page* he quotes from above, (p. 142), I say, “With regards to justification, this means my right standing before the Father is grounded in Christ’s own right standing before the Father.” Contra

Gaffin's claim, nothing has been left unclear. My justification inheres in the person of Christ himself, who is "justified" before his Father in his resurrection (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16). His status is now my status, as I have been joined to him by faith. Justification is simply the legal or forensic or imputative aspect dimension of union with Christ. I am legally right with God because Christ is legally right. I have a secure hope of acquittal before the bar of God's justice because Jesus has already died for my sins and been raised for my justification (Rom. 4:25). The same justice that demanded his resurrection on the third day will demand my acquittal at the last day. These are just two sides of the same coin. His cross is my hope of forgiveness and his resurrection is my hope for final vindication. Contra Gaffin, I am make it clear where the exclusive ground of our justification rests.

Gaffin goes on,

If it is excluded or deemed unnecessary that in justification Christ's righteousness, his finished righteousness, is imputed to sinners, then the ground of their justification must lie elsewhere. If I understand correctly, what is being proposed with this dismissal of imputation is that the ground is either the union itself; that is, the fact of the relationship, the existence of the uniting bond, itself. Or, alternatively, that ground is righteousness being produced in me, as it flows from that union.

But neither of these views is close to what I actually wrote. At this point, it would be worth quoting *my argument* at more length, to see how Gaffin has missed his mark. This seems to be the "Ready, fire, aim!" approach to theological discourse. Consider what I actually had to say:

These theologians [e.g., Wright, Garlington] are not denying the forensic nature of justification. Nor are they suggesting that our merit plays any role in our justification. Nor are they denying the "great exchange": namely, that on the cross Christ became what we were - sin - so that we might become what he is - the embodiment of God's righteousness (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). They uphold the intention of the doctrine of imputation and affirm everything imputation is designed to safeguard. But they cover the same ground in a different way.

These theologians focus on union with Christ. They suggest justification presupposes union with Christ. If I am in Christ, he is my substitute and representative. All he suffered and accomplished was for me. All he has belongs to me.

With regards to justification, this means my right standing before the Father is grounded in Christ's own right standing before the Father. So long as I abide in Christ, I can no more come under the Father's negative judgment than Jesus himself can! I have this assurance because Jesus died in my stead, taking the penalty my sins deserved to secure my forgiveness. On the third day, he was raised to life for my justification. His resurrection was his own justification, as the Father reversed the Jewish and Gentile death sentences passed against him. But it was the justification of all those who are in him as well. He was raised up on the basis of his flawless obedience to the Father. Death could not hold him because he was a righteous man. His status is now my status.

This justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify "righteousness" into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict passed over him at the resurrection. Union with Christ is therefore the key.

Gaffin has failed to consider a *tertium quid*. He says that if justification is not based on a transfer of righteousness, then our justification must either be grounded in the relationship itself (considered apart from Christ) or in our own good works. He sees (extrinsic) imputation and infusion as the only possibilities, overlooking the full meaning of incorporation in Paul's theology. I am offering another option altogether from those Gaffin considers: our justification is found in Christ himself, with whom we are in union by faith. We are justified in Christ, not apart from him, and not by a benefit separable (and thus transferable) from his person. The ground of our justification is the righteousness of the Risen Christ, which becomes our when we are joined to him by faith.¹⁴

I freely admit that the sentence from my colloquium essay, "My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant," is open to misunderstanding. Indeed, I gladly withdraw that statement, and let the rest of the argument stand on its own. But in context, Gaffin has no real reason that I can see for taking the expression in the

¹⁴ I have stated this truth so many times and so many ways, it is hard for me to imagine how Gaffin and the other men behind the OPC Report missed it. For example, in my essay "Justification: Cosmic, Ecclesial, and Divine" (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/justification_ecclesial_cosmic_and_divine.htm). I wrote:

But Jesus' resurrection was also our justification as well. He was raised as our covenant representative. His vindication was our vindication. We are regarded as righteous by the Father because the verdict the Father passed over Jesus was passed over us as well. So long as we are in Christ by faith, we can no more be condemned than Jesus himself (cf. Rom. 8:1). The very Godhood of God demands our acquittal.

All this is to say, justification presupposes union with Christ. Calvin was fond of saying that all Christ did and suffered for humanity was of no advantage for us until we actually came into vital union with him by faith and the work of the Spirit. It is only because we are organically one with him that we come to share in the vindication he received on Easter morn. Just as he took our place on the cross, dying in our stead, so he stands in our place at his resurrection, receiving the Father's justification and salvation on our behalf. What is true of him now becomes true of us...Our justification is of a piece with Jesus' justification; our vindication is simply an extension of his own vindication. The cross and resurrection, as eschatological events, marking the great divide of redemptive history and inaugurating the new aeon, span the passage of time. Their virtue and benefits are ever present to us by faith.

way that he does. If I excise this one line, what argument does Gaffin have left against my formulation? The context makes it clear is “imputation or transfer” – or “imputation as transfer,” to be more precise -- that I am critiquing.¹⁵

To state the point again (since it is apparently easy to miss): In my view, as articulated above, I am not justified by the “union itself.” I am not even sure what sense can be made of this notion of grounding justification in a relational bond. Neither do I ground justification in an inherent righteousness, worked in me by Christ’s Spirit. In all of my writings, even my discussions of future justification, I have emphatically grounded justification solely in Christ, the Crucified and Risen One. To give further documentation should be unnecessary at this point.

Moving further into my colloquium essay, I go on to illustrate the point. This illustration has been sadly overlooked by those who have argued with other parts of the essay, but I think it is critical to understanding what I am doing. I think it shows why I relate union to imputation as I do. Still quoting from page 142, this is how I put it:

Suppose a woman is in deep, deep debt and has no means at her disposal to pay it off. Along comes an ultra wealthy prince charming. Out of grace and love, he decides to marry her. He covers her debt. But then he has a choice to make about how he will care for his bride. After canceling out her debt, will he fill up her account with his money? That is to say, will he transfer or impute his own funds into an account that bears her name? Or will he simply make his own account a joint account so it belongs to both of them?

In the former scenario, there is an imputation, a transfer. In the second scenario, the same final result is attained, but there is no imputation, strictly speaking. Rather, there is a real union, a marriage.

This illustration (closely related to illustrations used by Luther himself) shows exactly what my critique of imputation amounts to. There is nothing in this

¹⁵ Again, in retrospect, I am happy to withdraw the offending sentence about the “redundancy” of imputation. My argument does not depend on that particular way of stating the matter, and perhaps overstates it. I wish now I had been even more explicit that it was specifically imputation-as-extrinsic-transfer (a.k.a. “alien righteousness”) that I was critiquing. As with most of the debate surrounding the so-called “Federal Vision,” subsequent clarifications in things I have written on this point do not seem to have gotten through to the critics.

The really chief thing, as I see it, is that we conceive of imputation as the way God reckons, or regards, us, in Christ. That is to say, imputation is an aspect of, or angle on, union with Christ. It is the declarative, or forensic, dimension of union with Christ. God imputes faith as righteousness, meaning that he regards believers as judicially one with Christ. If we *must* speak of a transfer, let us talk of God’s transferal of our persons from Adam’s covenant headship to Christ’s (Rom. 5:12ff; cf. Col. 1:12-14).

illustration about justification being found in the relationship, rather than the person. Instead, in terms of the analogy, I say that our righteousness is found in Christ, within the context of our relationship to him. Christ and his benefits are a package. You only get Christ if you “marry” him – and if you do marry him, you get everything he has to offer. But I do not say or imply in this illustration that the relationship itself is our righteousness. (How could a relationship per se fill an account?) Rather, the point is that God reckons us according to our status in Christ, to whom we belong by faith. We are judicially and legally one with Christ.¹⁶

I would very much like to see Gaffin (and other critics, such as Michael Horton and Calvin Beisner) deal with this illustration. Critics generally seem to have eluded its force. But to negate this analogy, one must argue that Christ is separable from his blessings, that Christ can be pried apart from his benefits so that his benefits can be transferred over to us in an act distinct from union with Christ. This issue really gets to the essence of my position, vis-à-vis others in the Reformed world. If the former scenario in the illustration is more biblical, more Pauline, where is the proof? Why should the latter scenario be considered a compromise of the doctrine of justification?¹⁷

¹⁶ Again, note that the illustration does not blur the personal distinctions between believers and Christ. We remain ontologically distinct from Christ, even as we become legally one with him.

Gaffin hints at my view in these lines, already quoted once above:

Suffice it to say here, the basis of my justification is not a relationship, no matter how real and intimate. Nor is the basis a righteousness that results in me from that union, no matter how otherwise important such Spirit-worked righteousness is, no matter how integral to the salvation receive in Christ. Rather, that basis is Christ's own righteousness, established and completed in his obedience culminating in his death, which, in union with him, is imputed to me. Just as it is his, as distinct from any righteousness I might manifest, it is reckoned as “mine.” (pp. 286f)

I am essentially in agreement with this paragraph, with a few caveats. I am not content to say that Christ's righteousness culminated in his condemnation on the cross; rather it culminates in his vindication on the third day, when he is raised from the dead (Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15; 1 Tim. 3:16). In this quotation Gaffin seems to be back in the realm of *Resurrection and Redemption*, viewing imputation as a function of union. It is not a matter of transferring something to me that is separable from Christ. Rather, it is a matter of how God “reckons” me – that is, what he declares about me, in Christ. In view of my union with Christ, God reckons his righteousness as my own.

¹⁷ Moreover, is it not obvious that the first scenario could easily fall prey to all kinds of theological abuse? Think about the transfer analogy. Someone could transfer money into the destitute woman's bank account apart from marrying her or even loving her. In other words, it is quite possible for imputation apart from union to be considered as “alimony payments” (Anthony Hoekema) or “a cold piece of business” (N. T. Wright). This formulation also risks fragmenting the various blessings of salvation. If one gets imputed righteousness apart from union, why can't one have imputed righteousness without sanctification? If the benefits of redemption are so easily separable from the Benefactor, how do we avoid the specter of antinomianism? This is precisely why the “federal tradition” of covenant theology (not to be

Further, proof that Gaffin's argument is arbitrary is found in the fact that it is reversible. Gaffin suggests that I have grounded justification in a relationship rather than Christ. The gist of his complaint is that I root justification in the union or bond with the Savior, rather than the person of the Savior. But given his (and the Report's) formulation, I could just as easily and plausibly (if not more so) suggest that Gaffin (or the Report) has rooted our justification in *a transfer*, rather than in Christ himself. After all, it is Gaffin who insists that imputation is something distinct from, and in addition to, union.¹⁸ It is Gaffin who insists on a transfer of something that (in the nature of the case) must be separable from Christ's person (in order for the transfer model to work). My whole position is designed to avoid any notion that one can get what Christ offers without having Christ, the whole Christ, himself. But all transfer models of imputation risk dividing Christ's person from his work, and even separating different aspects of his work from each other. If the American church were not so haunted by just these distortions, this matter would be merely theoretical. Unfortunately, the dangers are all too real.¹⁹

confused with the "Federal Vision") has had such a hard time holding together the unity of salvation in Christ. Dispensational and no-Lordship theologies are the distinct offspring of federal theology in its American form. See William Borden Evans' dissertation "Imputation or Impartation: Union with Christ in Nineteenth Century American Reformed Theology." I develop this thought very briefly in my lecture notes, at <http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/christchurchjustification.pdf>, especially page 21f.

¹⁸ No doubt, Gaffin would object to this claim, and in many places he says something different. But the problem is that when he is in critique mode, he ends up saying something very much like what I have suggested here. His critique of my position ultimately rests on the necessity of treating imputation as having a discrete structure of its own.

¹⁹ In "Blurring the Federal Vision"

(http://www.auburnavenue.org/articles/Blurring_the_Federal_Vision.htm), I briefly draw out this point:

That federal theology (not to be confused with the "Federal Vision," of course) did indeed lead to the pulling apart of justification and sanctification is clearly established in William Borden Evans' magisterial (though unfortunately not yet published) dissertation, "Imputation and Impartation: The Problem of Union with Christ in Nineteenth Century American Reformed Theology."

Evans notes ways in which federal theology vitiated Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ, ultimately even leading to such distortions as dispensationalism (with its strong law/gospel antithesis and antinomian "carnal Christian" theory):

"[C]ertain factors, when combined with the federal bifurcation, caused justification and sanctification to become further abstracted from one another . . . [T]he disjunction of justification and sanctification [is] implicit in the federal bifurcation of union with Christ . . . It is not at all surprising, therefore, that dispensational writers used the conceptual structure and some of the terminology of federal theology to describe union with Christ – the federal

Gaffin's criticism of my formula is baffling in view of his prior work. In his excellent study *Resurrection and Redemption*, he went to great lengths to situate justification within our union with the Risen Christ. In other teaching elsewhere, he has admirably stressed the unity of salvation in Christ. But now, in developing a critique of my essay, he wants to give imputation a discrete structure of its own and make justification something that takes place outside the framework of union with Christ!²⁰

But it gets even more confusing. In the same essay in which Gaffin criticizes my "imputation is redundant" remark, Gaffin offers his own criticisms of the standard justification-by-an-alien-righteousness formula. While deeply appreciating what the alien righteousness formula is driving at (the same way I can appreciate what the imputation-as-extrinsic-transfer is getting at, even while choosing to formulate things differently), he writes,

At the same time, however, we should recognize a definite liability that attaches to this expression. 'Alien' can suggest what is detached, at a distance. It can easily leave the impression of an isolated imputative act, remote from the believer and without a clear relationship to Christ and the other aspects of salvation. In this regard, I have the impression that some Reformed thinking on justification, past and present, at least practically or popularly, centres on a line, focused on the individual sinner, that moves from my eternal election to its realization and documentation in history by my faith, produced by regeneration, faith that then receives justification. With this view Christ and his work are surely essential but recede into the background, along with other aspects of salvation (page 285).

bifurcation of a federal and a spiritual union fit well with the dispensational separation of law and grace . . . In this sense, the recent squabbles between conservative [bi-covenantal, federalist] 'Reformed' and 'Dispensational' thinkers have been a family dispute [e.g., a dispute among those who share basic presuppositions about law and grace]" (417, 420, 423-4, 426).

By sharply separating law and gospel into air tight compartments, earlier bi-covenantal federalists prepared the way for dispensationalism. Dispensationalism took certain features of the federal scheme and extended them. Evans further explains:

As noted earlier, the soteriological dualism of the federal theology, with its *ordo salutis* and bifurcation of *unio Christi* into legal and spiritual unions, was unable to meaningfully relate the forensic and transformatory aspects of salvation. For this reason, the tradition tended to oscillate back and forth between the two poles of legalism and antinomianism" (199).

²⁰ It is hard for me (and others) to resist the conclusion that Gaffin has changed his mind – or at least has become double-minded. The Gaffin of the Report is not the same as the Gaffin of *Resurrection and Redemption*. The Gaffin of the recent "Union with Christ" essay is somewhere in the middle, trying to have it both ways. At least, that is how it appears.

This is well put, and the concerns are certainly valid. Gaffin is insisting here that Christ's righteousness cannot be imputed to us if Christ remains detached from us. A distant Christ cannot justify us. Further, Gaffin is suggesting that imputation cannot be isolated from other aspects of salvation. Union with Christ is the "glue," so to speak, that holds it all together.

In an earlier work of mine, I quoted these same lines from Gaffin (from their appearance in an article in the *Westminster Theological Journal*), and commented in this way:

Richard Gaffin has called into question the wisdom of the "alien righteousness" formula. While the early Reformers did at times use the "alien righteousness" metaphor, they did so in a guarded way. Calvin, in particular, was always quick to run back to union with Christ. He insisted that Christ's work was of no value to us unless we are joined to him. While the "alien righteousness" motif was helpful from one vantage point, in safeguarding the priority of Christ's work in history outside of us to accomplish redemption, in another sense it was a real liability, because once Christ was abstracted from his people in an "alien" way, the various facets of his saving work could not be held together....

In other words, justification should be formulated in terms of union with Christ. Christ's righteousness is not "alien" to me *because it really belongs to me*. It has become mine because I have been incorporated into Christ himself. Apart from union with Christ, God's act of declaring sinners "righteous" would have to be regarded as a "cold piece of business" at best, and a "legal fiction" at worst. Union with Christ was and is the necessary presupposition to the Protestant doctrine of justification by an imputed righteousness. Or, to put it another way, imputation is simply a corollary of, or aspect of, union with Christ.

"Alien righteousness" is a terribly inadequate way of expressing this truth. For example, when a man and woman come together in marriage, it simply does not do justice to the nature of the marriage relationship if the man continues to treat his assets as "alien" to his new wife. No, in the very act of marrying this woman he has pledged to share all that he has with her. Nothing is alien; all is jointly possessed. In the same way, Christ shares his status as the resurrected and vindicated one with us. We are married into all he possesses.²¹

But it seems to me that now Gaffin wants it both ways. On the one hand, Gaffin can see the problems and pitfalls of an "alien righteousness" formula. At the same time, he knows he must affirm some kind of extrinsic transfer of righteousness ("imputation") to not run afoul of the Reformed "doctrinal police." But all his criticisms of "alien righteousness" could apply just as easily to "transferable righteousness." The same liabilities inhere in both expressions. In other words, his own critique of alien righteousness could and should fall prey to his critique of my imputation-as-redundant formulation. Or to turn it around, his

²¹ Once again, this comes from my conference lecture notes, available at <http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/christchurchjustification.pdf>. See page 15.

critique of alien righteousness could easily be made applicable to the transfer model of imputation which he advocates. In other words, Gaffin is at odds with himself.

However, this is not an attack on Gaffin's intelligence or competence as a scholar. The tension in Gaffin is really a tension that lies deep within the Reformed tradition itself. As William Borden Evans's dissertation (referred to in a footnote above) pointed out, with the rise of Reformed scholasticism (and its "federal theology" version of covenant theology), a definite shift took place. Whereas for Calvin, justification was regarded as an aspect of union with Christ (*Institutes*, 3.1.1, 3.11.10), for Charles Hodge, it was essential to keep justification distinct and isolated from other bits and pieces of the *ordo salutis*. As I have written elsewhere:

Evans (page 364) points out that whereas for Calvin, "as long as Christ remains outside of us . . . all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us," for Hodge it is precisely Christ outside of us that justifies. In other words, Hodge's (extreme, but quite representative) federalism effectively *reverses* Calvin's point! For Hodge, "it is only as Christ remains outside [of us] that what he has suffered for the race can avail for salvation."²²

Of course, as I also pointed out there, Hodge's view suffers from an apparent inconsistency.²³ Hodge would agree with the Reformed tradition that justification is received by faith; only believing sinners receive Christ's righteousness. But faith is both the fruit of the Spirit's regenerating work and the means of union with Christ. So justification can be isolated from subjective renewal and union with Christ only in a very artificial way! Logically, if not chronologically, in terms of the *ordo salutis* that Hodge himself advocated, Christ has already united me to himself by faith prior to and as a prerequisite of my actual justification. Hodge is at odds with himself as well. The union with Christ model solves these difficulties, as we have seen.

This brings us to our final point. Gaffin is surely aware of the fact that the view of justification he set forth in *Resurrection and Redemption* cannot be equated with the classic doctrine of justification by imputed righteousness, championed by the Reformed scholastics and their modern day heirs. Many in the Reformed establishment rightly perceived Gaffin's book as a threat to their cherished formulations. After all, Gaffin's book challenged and reworked the whole *ordo salutis* tradition. Gaffin's work had its precursors (e.g., Herman Ridderbos), but it still must be admitted that he made a decisive break with the tradition (or at least

²² Ibid, page 21.

²³ Even if one objects that Hodge actually manages to avoid these problems, they still crop up elsewhere in American Reformed theology. I am simply following Evans's use of Hodge as an illustration.

certain popular elements within the tradition). However conservative he might be by training and instinct, Gaffin broke new ground and made significant gains, in terms of a biblical-theological understanding of salvation, oriented around the *historia salutis*. Gaffin's work drew attention to the overarching significance of union with Christ and the soteric significance of the resurrection. Many found his case persuasive because it was argued with exegetical skill and depth. Gaffin's lead has been followed by the likes of Sinclair Ferguson (see especially his *The Holy Spirit*) and Anthony Hoekema (see his *Saved by Grace*), and has many points of contact with theologians outside of American Presbyterian circles (e.g., Wright, Simon Gathercole, Mark Seifrid, Peter O' Brien, etc.).

In the earlier volume, Gaffin says that justification -- the imputation of Christ's righteousness -- has no discrete structure of its own. Instead, he says,

As with Christ's resurrection, the act of being raised with Christ in its constitutive, transforming character is at the same time judicially declarative; that is, the act of being joined to Christ is conceived of imputatively. In this sense the enlivening action of resurrection (incorporation) is itself a forensically constitutive declaration (page 132).

Note the key phrases: "being joined to Christ is conceived of imputatively...resurrection (incorporation) is itself a forensically constitutive declaration."²⁴ This is *not* the way the scholastics described justification. This is something quite in line with Calvin (at his best), but also going beyond his reach. It is significantly different from the Reformed scholastic view of justification, epitomized in nineteenth century American Presbyterian theologians and popularized in soft cover Reformed literature in the latter half of the twentieth century. In fact, it is the opposite of the scholastic description of justification, in important respects, as seen above in Evans's description of Hodge. For the scholastics, all the weight of justification is carried by the obedience and death of Christ, made over to us in an outward, extrinsic way, labeled "imputation." For Reformed biblical theologians, the resurrection becomes central and our justification is located in Christ himself, as the Righteous One, who has been justified and vindicated for the sake of his people, and in whom the Father declares us to be in the right as well.

²⁴ These phrases get us right back to the earlier stages of my counter-argument against the critiques of Gaffin and the Report: If being raised with Christ by faith is judicially declarative, why do I need some additional transfer of righteousness to my account in order for God to accept me as righteous? How can "imputation as a transfer of righteousness" be teased out of Gaffin's statement above? It would be an unnecessary addition and complication. By insisting on imputation in addition to union with Christ, Gaffin and the Report have added an unnecessary step to our justification. Maybe the Report should have used its beloved Occam's Razor on its own arguments (see Report, line 2344)!

In this light, Gaffin needs to decide which role he wants to play in the life of the church. Does he want to retreat into (the admittedly safe confines of) the very *ordo salutis* Reformed scholasticism that his earlier work shattered? Or does he want to continue his work (whatever the risks) as a pioneering biblical theologian? I hope and pray he chooses the latter, for it is the pressing need of the hour.

These counter-criticisms of the Report in general and of Gaffin in particular are offered in love and humility. I hope they will be received in that spirit. The "Federal Vision" controversy has already become an ugly wrinkle and spot on the bride of Christ. Most of the controversy could have been easily avoided with more diligent and charitable attempts to communicate across "party" lines. I am afraid we are letting denominational politics get the best of us. Lord willing, God will give us grace to press ahead towards mutual understanding and unity, as fellow brethren in the body of Christ.