

“Not Imputing Their Trespasses unto Them” —Reflections on Corporate Justification

by Fred Bischoff



Our title is taken from 2 Corinthians 5:19, where Paul speaks unequivocally of

God’s universal accomplishment “in Christ” in legal terms, wrapped in a relational context.¹ From the constraining “love of Christ” (5:14), through the “reconciliation” He is achieving (5:18, 19), to the received “grace of God” (6:1), this is no purely legal act on His part. The law that defines it flows from His heart, describing who He is at His very core. Let’s consider the extent of this accomplishment in breadth (who all are included), in depth (what was accomplished), and in length (how far this goes).

Breadth, Depth, Length

Paul uses universal terms to describe the breadth. From the double “all” in 5:14, repeated singly in 5:15, to the “no man” in 5:16, and “the world” of 5:19, Paul shows an inclusiveness in Christ’s death and reconciliation that excludes no one, and therefore demands of all (“they which live”) a new motivation of living—“not henceforth unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again” (5:15). If His love and grace are not universal, then the appeal and demand that flow out of His salvation act are likewise limited. Paul sees *no limit* to these foundational realities. He was empowered by the Spirit to convey to everyone he met that they were included. This was the heart of his evangelistic effectiveness.

Paul describes a similar expanse in the depth of what was accomplished: “All died” (5:14).² This then was a corporate death, in a representative Head.³ More than taking simply our sins to the cross, He took us there. That is, He did something at the cross to the flesh that we all share that teaches us to view no man from that perspective (5:15).⁴ Paul’s paradigm elsewhere consistently pits the Spirit against

the flesh.⁵ Thus “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” began something for every human being in bringing freedom from “the law of sin and death”⁶—those things which separate His creatures from Him. The reconciliation of the world reached its defining act at the cross, because “God was in Christ” (5:19), and there He “made Him to be sin for us” (5:21).⁷ His success in being “obedient unto death”⁸ assured He was dying for our sins, not His. But this condemnation that resulted in His (our) death was not the only thing that happened. He also revealed faith and love (the heart of being “obedient”) that effectively manifested the righteousness (justice) of God that showed Him to be both righteous (just) and the justifier of the sinner.⁹ Thus Paul could affirm that in this act of reconciling the world, God also is “not imputing their trespasses unto them” (5:19).¹⁰ The resurrection affirmed His success in taking our condemnation and nailing it to the cross in Himself.¹¹ He not only “died for all”—He “rose again” for all (5:15).

Paul weaves into this description of the gospel its intent—the length to which its accomplishments reach—and the implied limits the human response can place upon it, in regards to that individual’s experience of it. God’s goal in giving to the extent described is to draw sinners into similar selfless giving, living “not henceforth . . . unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again” (5:15).

The process has begun for each (thus they “live”), but *what happens if one does not want to move along with it*, to build on the foundation God has laid in Christ, the foundation on which one’s very existence currently rests? The gospel teaches us to see all others through the eyes of the Spirit, not “after the flesh” (5:16). *What if one refuses to receive that perspective, and/or keep it to the end?* Those who grasp the reconciling act of Jesus are thereby commissioned to share the news of what they have received, “the ministry,” “the word of reconciliation”

as “ambassadors for Christ” (5:18-20). *What happens if one does not give what he was given?* The destiny of the plan is this—once again being “made the righteousness of God in Him” (5:21). *What if one resists the process to that goal, intensely practical in its workings?* Perhaps the all-inclusive picture—true in its seed form, revolutionary in its birth, but awesome in its fullness—is that “in Christ” each is a “new creature”—“all things are become new” (5:17). *What if one still loves the old, and finds some aspect of the new unacceptable to him?* Paul’s warning is clear—Christ and he (“workers together”) “beseech” each and all to “receive not the grace of God in vain” (6:1).

Applying to Imputing

In the heart of our passage, wrapped in explicit words of reconciling, we find our title, the strong negative affirmation of the negative—of how God is *not* handling our negative condition. Here two negatives indeed make a positive. “The world” is “dead in trespasses,” as the cross alone could reveal.¹² But God “in Christ” is “not imputing their trespasses unto them.” Consider the verb (*logidzomai*) and the noun (*paraptoma*). Christ was “numbered with the transgressors”¹³ so that we would not be counted such *without Him*. He was “delivered for our offences”¹⁴ so that they would not be counted to us *without Him*.

The salvation dynamic shows how, with Jesus’ being reckoned one of us, a stream is flowing from the heart of God to humanity that is described also in the positive equivalent of “not imputing . . . trespasses.” This positive word is “justification.”¹⁵ This describes our being “numbered” with “the Just One.”¹⁶ It occurs twice in the entire New Testament, both in adjacent chapters of Romans. The breadth, depth, and length are explicit in both locations.¹

Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.
(Rom 4:25)

A literal translation of this verse better captures the dynamic of the prepositions

that connect the cross and the resurrection with what lay behind each. “Who was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised up because of our being declared righteous.”¹⁸ Our offences¹⁹ led to His being “delivered up.”²⁰ The parallel structure informs us therefore that “our justification” led to His being “raised up.” The sequence of events is the following: Humanity’s offences stirred Him to give His life for us, an action that culminated on the cross, but also met the needs of all offences, counting them against Him in our place, “not imputing” offences to any apart from Him, *and the success of this justification was shown in His resurrection.*

Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. (Rom 5:18)

Paul describes here the events in salvation history in another parallel structure, this one of affirmative contrasts. However, he uses the same preposition of origin as in 4:25, but adds in both parallels two uses of a preposition of consequence.²¹ Because of “the offence of one” head of the race, Adam,²² the consequence led “into all men” and “into condemnation.”²³ This half of the parallel is essential in realizing the need. It is not part of the gospel, but precisely that to which the gospel has brought solution. “So then as”²⁴ the need arose, “even so” God met it.

Paul’s summary of the gospel solution follows precisely the same structure of the human need. Because of “the righteousness of One” new Head of the race, the “man Jesus Christ,”²⁵ the consequence led “into all men” and “into justification of life.” The foundation of the need could not be more clearly laid alongside the foundation of the solution. The corporate results of each head (the body’s involvement with its respective heads) are concise and comprehensive. Paul in essence is saying that because Adam’s offence led into condemnation for all (with death, the end result²⁶), God found a way because of Christ’s righteousness (His obedience unto the corporate death) into justification of the life of all sinners. *God has justified (and is just/justified in), keeping all sinners alive.* If this cannot be seen to be

the foundation of the solution, it is doubted that any other description from Scripture will suffice. But there are more examples of this principle.

Closing Observations

If what we have seen is an accurate reflection of the foundation of salvation, it must be a function of “faith which worketh by love.”²⁷ Paul asserts that this is the only thing that has power to overcome in this situation, in which justifying grace is needed. In some fundamental sense of atonement that we must come to appreciate better, “love covereth all sins.”²⁸ Careful observation reveals the simplicity of God’s plan. He did not have to invent some new thing to solve sin. He simply had to reveal more of Himself. Faith was expressed to rekindle faith, and love for love. They will find a response in the hearts of “a great multitude.”²⁹ They will be seen to be sufficient to solve the cosmic crisis.

The implications and extrapolations should be considered. Some acknowledge the dimension of God’s forgiveness preceding the human response of faith, but desire to exclude it from “justification by faith.”³⁰ A simpler explanation is that it is God’s faith,³¹ revealed in the faith of Jesus,³² which is responsible for this foundational dimension. When responsive human faith appears in answer to creative divine faith, another dimension of justification is realized, with broader and deeper implications for that individual. The final judgment declaration in Revelation addresses the final goal in the process. “. . . He that is just, let him be justified still . . .”³³

Let’s close by asking a few probing questions about a series of Bible passages, questions that may shine a light on more of this dynamic, particularly a justification by the faith of Jesus.

- Can we see in the fig-tree experience a clear reference to a justification by faith that is not at all a consequence of man’s faith, but has that as its goal? “Have God’s faith.” (Mark 11:22; compare 11:25).³⁴
- Does God ask us to forgive others in a way He does not? “When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any.” (Mark 11:25; see Ellen G.

White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 113, paragraph 3).³⁵

- On the flip side, does Christ’s forgiveness at the cross not provide us an example? “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34; compare 1 Peter 2:19-24). Is this forgiveness a function of the faith described in Ellen White, *Lift Him Up?* “Christ would never have given His life for the human race if He had not faith in the souls for whom He died.”³⁶
- Who carried the debt in the parable of the king, until the time came to “take account of his servants” (Matthew 18:23)? Who carried the debt later in the story, and what was it called, in relation to the servant who had no sense to repent or to ask for mercy (18:26, 27)? What did the king call the servant’s insistence on his own ability to pay, and how could the king have such a view (18:32)? Did this servant ever manifest faith? Did he ever stop trusting in creature merit? Did the King’s forgiveness of him last forever, and if not, what determined the loss of its eternal quality (18:33-35)? Do the positive implications of the negative conclusion show a King whose plan, from His desire, is to forgive from His heart every one of His servants all their debts for eternity (18:35)?
- Can we clearly see the opposite of justification? Can we see how “neither do I condemn thee” is justification? Is this how the individual application of the corporate “not imputing” looks? (John 8:11; Romans 5:16, 18).
- Can the act of not imputing trespasses be shown to equal justifying sinners? (2 Corinthians 5:19; compare Romans 4:7, 8).
- Can we find a dimension of justification that leads to repentance rather than follows it? Does forbearance and longsuffering precede or follow repentance and confession? (Romans 2:4). Can one have forgiveness without forbearance, or forbearance without forgiveness?
- The faith that reveals righteousness, grace, and redemption, is intended to lead to what human response?

(Romans 3:3, 22-24).

- What was in Jesus' look at Peter while the curses, oaths, and denials were fresh on his lips, that led to his remembering and weeping bitterly? (Luke 22:61; 2 Peter 3:9; see Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 713, paragraph 1).³⁷
- If there is a corporate justification (that reaches all individuals), whose eternal justification is the inevitable result of it? (Romans 3:3, 4; compare Revelation 15:3; 16:5,7; 19:2, Strong's #1342)
- Can we see the process paradigm in each of the "if" statements of 1 John 1:6-10? Could it be that just as in each of the "if we" statements of verses 6, 7, 8, and 10 where the "if we" action shows a following action or reality *that already is in existence* (rather than leading to it), so the "if we" of verse 9 is simply an evidence of the following realities already functioning at some basic level? For sure our confession does not lead to His being faithful and just. Was He not that all along? Could the subjunctive mood of both "forgive" and "cleans" in verse 9 simply imply that the process has not yet been finished, and its continuance is contingent upon our positive, confessing agreement? If not, what does the indicative mood of "cleanseth" in verse 7 indicate? Can cleansing by Jesus' blood occur without forgiveness/justification?

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- 1 Unless noted otherwise, all scriptures are taken from the *King James Version*.
- 2 ASV (Grammatical details in the Greek are taken from the *Textus Receptus*.) Using the same second aorist verb to describe the death of all that he used for the death of Christ, Paul leaves little room to see the universal death other than that in which all sin was dealt with, and thus all sinners. (See 1 John 2:2.)
- 3 That Christ is the head, not just of the church (those who acknowledge His headship), but of the entire human race, is shown by multiple evidences (1 Cor 11:3; 15:22, 45; Col 2:10; see also Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1967], 13, paragraph 3; Idem., *The Upward Look* [Washington, D.C.:

Review and Herald, 1982], 195, paragraph 2).

- 4 Paul's view ("know" in this verse, using *eido*) echoes Jesus' words to Nicodemus. Only as we are born of the Spirit can we see (*eido*) these heavenly realities (John 3:3). Paul describes here and elsewhere the basis of the process leading to such birth. For example, Jesus "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom 8:3), clearly the flesh of all humanity (8:2). This accomplishment severed sin and the flesh from "the world" (John 1:29), enabling a new identity.
- 5 See for example Rom 8:4-6, 9, 13; 1 Cor 5:5; Gal 3:3; 4:29; 5:16, 17; 6:8; Phil 3:3. He follows Jesus in this (Matt 26:41; John 3:6; 6:63).
- 6 Rom 8:2, 3. This universal freedom is not at the level of the new birth, but is akin to conception, the origin point where a new existence/identity begins unconditionally, totally without the will of the individual. We are probing both the legal terms that describe this, and the historical event that accomplished it. One description of this foundation, expressed in freedom terms, is the third sentence of Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1940), 466: "Under the influence of the Spirit of God, man is left free to choose whom he will serve." The verb "made free" (*eleutheroo*) in Rom 8:2 is used in its seven New Testament occurrences to describe the entire process of being freed from sin, the flesh, and death.
- 7 The participle "reconciling" in 5:19 is present tense. In that process the cross stands as an accomplished act ("made" in 5:21 is aorist). Paul describes elsewhere Christ's being made sin as when He "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom 8:3; aorist), and was "made a curse for us" (Gal 3:13; aorist).
- 8 Phil 2:8.
- 9 Rom 3:21-26. In verse 26, the noun (righteousness/justice, from *dikaiosune*), adjective (righteous/just, from *dikaos*), and participle (justifying, from *dikaioo*), form a trio of words of the same family, whose defining dynamic is faith that works by love. When we see the faith through this passage (verses 22, 25, 26) as the faith of Jesus (the "them that believe" of verse 22 being the only phrase focused solely on the human response), we see that Paul is explicit that the faith of Jesus is what has demonstrated (*phaneroo*; verse 21), and what the Godhead used for the showing of (*endeixis*, verses 25, 26), God's righteousness/justice. Verse 26 ends literally, "out of faith of Jesus."
- 10 Present tense.

11 This is a core meaning of Col 2:14.

- 12 Compare Eph 2:1, 5 with the cost of "trespasses"/"sins" (trace the word *paraptoma* through these texts), revealed "through His blood," thus the "redemption," equated with "the forgiveness of sins" (Eph 1:7).
- 13 Mark 15:28; "numbered" is *logizomai*.
- 14 Rom 4:25; "offences" is *paraptoma*.
- 15 *Dikaiosis* (from the same large family of words noted in Rom 3:26, having the *dik* root).
- 16 1 Pet 3:8 (compare Acts 7:52; 22:14; Hab 2:4 LXX). Can we see the reconciliation inherent in being thus numbered?
- 17 While the verb form (*dikaioo*, used 40 times, mostly by Paul) addresses the spectrum of the process, this noun's focused and restricted use speaks most strongly of the beginning of the process, totally in the hands of God, due to the condemned, hopeless state of all humanity. This beginning establishes the framework for the whole. That God would do this for all at the root level shows His intent for all for the entirety of their existence.
- 18 *Young's Literal Translation*; "because of" appears a better translation of *dia*.
- 19 Again, the *paraptoma* that 2 Cor 5:19 states God is "not imputing" to the world, here clearly imputed to Him.
- 20 *Paradidomi* is used repeatedly for what the Father did to the Son (Matt 17:22; 20:18; 26:2; Luke 24:7; Rom 8:32) and the Son did Himself (Eph 5:2, 25), as seen in God's wrath against sin (Rom 1:18, compared with 24, 26, 28).
- 21 *Eis*, as "into" a consequence; in the KJV the supplied phrases "judgment came" and "the free gift came" use nouns from the parallels in verse 16, where the KJV translates *dikaion* as "justification," the only time it renders this word such (the other nine occurrences translated as "righteousness," "ordinance," and "judgment").
- 22 *Dia* is again the preposition "by" in the verse. "Offence" is again *paraptoma*. Adam is explicitly identified in verse 14.
- 23 *Eis* occurs with each noun.
- 24 ASV rendering of *ara oun hos* ("therefore as" in KJV)
- 25 In verse 15 Paul has identified this other Head.
- 26 Verse 12 is explicit on this.
- 27 Gal 5:6; see also 4, 5. Paul is explicitly excluding one's circumcised state as the solution, but extends this exclusion to "law" in general. The law as such defines the problem but does not solve it.

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from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8) in order that His grand design of a universe populated with trusting, loving individuals could eventually be realized—in an eternally secure universe that, one day, would never again have a rebel say “No” to the overtures of love.

Further, God, the Cosmic Lover, will not give up wooing His reluctant bride—His chosen people who wanted His name but not the responsibility of love. God would not give up on His restless, wayward bride. He does everything He can to help her get herself ready for the “wedding” (Rev. 19:7-9)! Imagine that! The Creator and Sustainer of the universe motivated by a love more personal and intense than that of a human lover, more tender than a nursing mother—all that boggles my mind. What could be a greater reason to help Him get us ready for the wedding?

God knows three things: 1) He knows His own ability to be patient and 2) He knows that some in every generation will say “Yes” to His overtures and will rightly represent Him in saying what is right about Him. Further, 3) He knows that with the accumulated record of such people flooding the world of later generations who also are being constantly wooed by His Spirit, eventually He will have a significant witness (Matthew 24:14) through whom and on whom He will rest His case. He will not rest until He has

“sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads” (Revelation 7:3), those who have “the Father’s name written in their foreheads. . . . These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes And in their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God” (Revelation 14:1,4,5; see also Revelation 22:4).⁵ Such people indeed help secure the universe forever!

Love wins, but also loses. Love remains but some angels and human beings will turn away their faces forever. Such spurning of God’s love has been God’s risk from the beginning. Perhaps Jesus revealed the heart of God most clearly when He said shortly before His own people murdered Him: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37, 38).

The risk of granting freedom was not only that God should have a forever heartache. He would also put Himself on trial! He would be charged with the meanest, most unfair accusations that could be leveled against anyone! For millennia, it has seemed that Satan with his accusations has been winning. More people, it seems, have believed Satan’s lies about God than those who have had faith in His Word, His promises, and His trustworthiness.

And such is the essence of the Great Controversy! But God will be vindicated!

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- 1 Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 116.
- 2 Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), 55.
- 3 C. S. Lewis said it well: “Free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give [created intelligences] free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.”—*Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 1952, 1980), 48.
- 4 Hos 2:14-20; Rev 19:7-9.
- 5 As C. S. Lewis said so well regarding the future of good and evil: “Finality must come some time, and it does not require a very robust faith to believe that omniscience knows when.”—*The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1957), 112.

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- 28 Prov 10:12. This clearly is for the saving of sinners, not the excusing of sin. The cross condemns sin while justifying sinners.
- 29 Rev 7:9. The freedom carried by this faith/love demands that, though all be included in the beginning of this process, not all be forced to its end (the context of Rev 7). The failure of God to have all justified and reconciled at the end does not prevent the great controversy from being ended. His faith and love will be effective to bring it to a successful conclusion, the root of which is His righteousness, not that of all of His creatures (Rom 3:3, 4).
- 30 For example, see Woodrow W. Whidden in *E. J. Waggoner—From the Physician of Good News to Agent of Division* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2008), 74, paragraphs 1 and 2.
- 31 This faith is addressed in Rom 3:3; Mark 11:22,

- and Hab 2:4 LXX. Based on these and other evidences of faith being a divine dynamic (such as 1 Cor 13:7, Gal 5:22), one must not assume each time faith is mentioned that it refers to the human response solely.
- 32 Such passages as Rom 3:22, 26; Gal 2:16; 3:22; Phil 3:9; and Rev 14:12 address this faith, if *pistin* *Iesou*, is seen in the subjective genitive.
- 33 Rev 22:11, *Douay Rheims Version*.
- 34 *Bible in Basic English*. Compare other translations for this use of the subjective genitive (*Douay Rheims Version*, *Emphatic Diaglott*, *Green’s Literal Translation*, *Young’s Literal Translation*).
- 35 Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1955), 113, paragraph 3.
- 36 Idem., *Lift Him Up* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review

and Herald, 1988), 221, paragraph 4.

- 37 Idem., *The Desire of Ages*, 713, paragraph 1.

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