

DO BIBLE WORDS HAVE BIBLE MEANING?
DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN IMPUTATION
AS WORD AND DOCTRINE

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The Protestant definition of justification in terms of imputation is no mere description of biblical teaching for which terminology is lacking in Scripture, as is the case, for example, with the doctrine of the Trinity. Here we are dealing in some measure with the replacement of the biblical categories with other ways of speaking.¹

I. *Introduction*

“The beginning of education is the scrutiny of terms.” So said Epictetus, the first-century Stoic philosopher, citing his hero Socrates.² Following Socrates’s advice, I propose in this article to put the term *imputation* under the microscope to see if new light can be shed on the stalemate that has developed over the last decade in evangelical scholarship on this issue. My focus is on the particular features of the debate over imputation that have arisen in evangelical discussion in light of recent trends in mainstream NT scholarship.

The majority of modern biblical scholars do not accept the classic Protestant understanding of imputation. One need only peruse, for example, the treatment of Paul’s use of imputation terms in Rom 4 in the major Romans commentaries published over the last few decades to see evidence of this trend. In actuality, it is not so much that the doctrine of imputation is disputed in recent Pauline scholarship, as that it is usually ignored.³ Yet there are some, such as

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¹ Mark A. Seifrid, “Luther, Melancthon and Paul on the Question of Imputation,” in *Justification: What’s At Stake in the Current Debates* (ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier; Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2004), 150. Cf. Don Garlington, “Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper,” *Reformation and Revival* 12 (2003): 82.

² In *Diatr.* 1.17.12, as quoted by A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 84.

³ See, e.g., Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 310-19; Eduard Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer* (KEK 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 148-53; N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 490-95; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988), 201-10; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:228-38. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans:*

Robert Gundry and N. T. Wright, who have voiced vigorous protests against the doctrine claiming that it simply does not correspond with biblical categories and modes of expression.

The central contention of this article is that recent debates over imputation have largely been exercises in missing the point. This is so because those defending and those disputing the doctrine are not actually talking about the same thing when they talk about imputation. One side is talking about a systematic theological doctrine; the other side, about the meaning of a single word in Paul's letters. Unless this distinction—as simple as it seems—is clear in the minds of all involved in these debates, confusion is inevitable.

The purpose of this article, then, is to bring clarity to recent debates over the meaning and validity of the classic Protestant doctrine of imputation. In order to do this I will first set out what the doctrine of imputation, as it has been historically formulated, actually states. If one is going to comment on the doctrine, showing how it does or does not correspond with biblical categories of thought, one must first understand the claims that proponents of the doctrine actually make in their articulations of imputation. A lack of such understanding is prevalent among biblical scholars and is one of the main reasons why there has been so much confusion in recent debates. I will then assess how the doctrine has been received in contemporary discussions, especially among NT scholars. Finally, I will set out a simple proposal for clarifying the debate.

II. *The Doctrine of Imputation in History*

How, then, has the doctrine of imputation been defined historically?⁴ Obviously, a brief survey cannot hope to address every significant aspect of

A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 33; London: Chapman, 1992), 373-82, mentions the doctrine of imputation as it developed in Lutheranism, but does not discuss it further. Exceptions include Leander E. Keck, *Romans* (Abington New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 123-25; and Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (SP 6; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996), 149, both of whom dispute the doctrine, although the former does so only insofar as he, like Wright (see, e.g., N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* [Oxford: Lion, 1997], 98; cf. Garlington, "Imputation or Union?," 97) confuses it with an argument for a *transfer* of God's righteousness as if from one bank account to another, while Byrne only mentions it in a single sentence. When biblical scholars do address imputation they usually do so only very briefly, and usually because other exegetical positions they have taken make the doctrine of imputation irrelevant or the result of what they see as a category error. See, e.g., Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 731-32; Richard B. Hays, "Psalm 143 as Testimony to the Righteousness of God," in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 50, 60; Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (2 vols.; ICC; London: T&T Clark, 1994), 1:444.

⁴ I begin with the Reformation simply because that is the point in history in which imputation became a key, discrete point of theological discussion. Furthermore, when modern anti-imputation biblical scholars put forward their own account of Paul's theology of justification, it is Reformation or post-Reformation views of imputation that they dispute.

imputation. Nevertheless, since one of the central arguments advanced in this article is that biblical scholars have mishandled Paul's imputation texts precisely because they have misunderstood the historical doctrine of imputation, a survey is necessary, however partial it may be.

1. *Martin Luther*

The place to begin such a survey is, of course, with Martin Luther. Luther's own views on imputation, although they developed over the course of his life, centered on working out the implications of what it means for justification to be solely by faith, and for one's righteous standing before God to be based wholly on a righteousness external to one's own attempts at sanctity.⁵ As early as 1519, Luther argued in his sermon "Two Kinds of Righteousness" that "there are two kinds of Christian righteousness" and that "the first is alien [*aliena*] righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith."⁶ In union with Christ "Christ's righteousness [*iusticia Christus*] becomes our righteousness [*nostra iusticia*] and all that he has becomes ours; rather he himself becomes ours."⁷ Christ's righteousness becomes the believer's righteousness in the sense that it is counted *as if* it were his or her own inherent righteousness.

In his treatise from 1520 entitled "The Freedom of a Christian," the logic of the doctrine of imputation is even clearer. In a famous passage Luther states that one of the chief benefits of faith "is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom."⁸ As Luther goes deeper into an exploration of this analogy, he comes to the question of righteousness: the believer (i.e., the bride) "has that righteousness in Christ [*iustitiam in Christo*], her husband, of which she may boast as of her own [*ut sua propria*]."⁹ Christ

⁵ On the necessity of interpreting Luther's earlier statements on justification in light of the way his understanding developed over time, see R. Scott Clark, "Iustitia Imputata Christi: Alien or Proper to Luther's Doctrine of Justification?," *CTQ* 70 (2006): 287-88; on the nature of this development, see Lowell C. Green, *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel: The Doctrine of Justification in the Reformation* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict, 1980), 166-210, 239-50.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; 55 vols.; Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 31:297 (hereafter *LW*); Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]* (65 vols.; Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993), 2:145 (hereafter *WA*). Luther cites 1 Cor 1:30 in defense of this claim, as well as many passages from the Gospel of John, Genesis, Ephesians and other biblical books.

⁷ *LW* 31:298; *WA* 2:146.

⁸ *LW* 31:351; cf. *LW* 31:297.

⁹ *LW* 31:352; *WA* 7:55. Thus, *pace* Seifrid (see "Paul, Luther, and Justification in Gal 2:15-21," *WTJ* 65 [2003]: 229-30; "Luther, Melancthon and Paul," 144-45), it is unnecessary to even intimate a dichotomy in Luther between a righteousness that is found only *in* Christ and having Christ's righteousness as *one's own*. Compare Luther's statement in his 1536 "Disputation Concerning Justification" (*LW* 34:178; *WA* 39:109): "Righteousness is our possession [*Est . . . iustitia possessio nostra*], to be sure, since it was given to us out of mercy. Nevertheless, it is foreign to us [*aliena a nobis*], because we have not merited it."

makes the bride's "sins, death, and pains of hell . . . his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned" in order that the believing soul might be "endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom."¹⁰ The righteousness necessary for divine acquittal is found nowhere else than in Christ, and becomes the believer's only as he or she is united to him.¹¹

In none of these passages does Luther use explicit imputation terminology to describe what would later be called the doctrine of imputation.¹² However, in these passages Luther clearly propounds a view of justification in Christ alone similar to later Lutheran and Reformed theologians who would speak of justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness.¹³ More explicit statements approximating the later theology of imputation and using the *terminology* of imputation, however, are not lacking in Luther's developing theology either.

For example, even as early as 1515 or 1516 Luther, in his *scholia* on Rom 4:7, says that "we are righteous extrinsically when we are righteous solely by the reckoning [*reputacione*] of God and not of ourselves or of our own works. For his reckoning [*reputatio*] is not ours by reason of anything that is in us or in our own power. Therefore our righteousness is neither in us or in our power."¹⁴ Luther's understanding of alien (extrinsic) righteousness is here combined with a notion of imputation where the believer is considered (reckoned) righteous solely on account of Christ's person *and* righteousness standing in for his or her personal unrighteousness.

I turn now to a final example from Luther's writings that clearly exemplifies his mature view of justification. In 1536 Luther engaged in a disputation on the topic of justification. In a third thesis prior to the body of the disputation, Luther reiterates the view of righteousness being found in Christ alone in a way similar to that seen in "Two Kinds of Righteousness" and "The Freedom of a Christian": "Therefore, whoever is justified is still a sinner; and yet he is considered [*reputatur*] fully and perfectly righteous [*velut plene et perfecte iustus*] by God who pardons and is merciful."¹⁵ Christ's own righteousness "serves like an umbrella against the heat of God's wrath," saving the sinner from judgment.¹⁶

¹⁰ LW31:352.

¹¹ However, against those who set union with Christ against imputation in Luther's writings, see Clark, "*Iustitia Imputata Christi*," 287-310.

¹² Thus Green is correct to argue that a "fully forensic justification" is not worked out in detail in these earlier writings (*How Melancthon Helped Luther, 172-73*). Nonetheless, much of the *substance* of Luther's later doctrine is present.

¹³ Pace Seifrid, "Luther, Melancthon and Paul," 149. There are certainly differences between Luther and other later formulations as well, on which see Carl R. Trueman, "Is the Finnish Line a New Beginning? A Critical Assessment of the Reading of Luther Offered by the Helsinki Circle," *WTJ* 65 (2003): 235.

¹⁴ Cited from LW25:257 (WA 56:268-69) by Clark, "*Iustitia Imputata Christi*," 290.

¹⁵ LW34:152-53; WA 39:83; cf. LW34:153; WA 39:83: "To be justified includes the idea, namely, that we are considered righteous [*reputari nos iustos*] on account of Christ."

¹⁶ LW34:153; WA 39:83.

In the disputation itself Luther insists, against those who believe that righteousness is infused into human hearts, that “righteousness is imputed to us [*nobis imputari iustitiam*]” and that “to justify means to impute [*imputare*],” citing Rom 4:3, 5, 23, 24.¹⁷ In this disputation Luther contends that “the law is fulfilled then, when what is missing is forgiven. For [the fulfilment of the law] does not take place with regard to our works, but by divine imputation [*imputatione*], that is the mercy of God.”¹⁸ In brief, Luther argues for righteousness by imputation because of the truth that “God accepts you or accounts you righteous only on account of Christ, in whom you believe.”¹⁹

To summarize: when Luther speaks of imputation he does not attempt to define the concept merely on the basis of the meaning of explicit imputation language in Paul’s letters. Instead, Luther derives his notion of imputation from a reading of broad biblical-theological themes taken from the whole of Scripture, ranging from the images of marriage in Hosea (Hos 2:19), the Song of Songs (Song 2:16), and Ephesians (Eph 5:25-27), to Paul’s pronouncement of Christ’s victory over sin and death in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 15:56-57).²⁰ Furthermore, Luther often writes of an imputation of Christ’s righteousness when discussing passages that have no imputation terminology in them at all, as seen, for example, in his comments on Gal 2:15-16 and Gal 2:21 in his 1519 lectures on that epistle.²¹ However, as we have just seen, Luther also incorporates Pauline texts that use explicit imputation language into his argumentation in support of the idea that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the believer.

The reason Luther uses the language of imputation is because he sees a basic principle of imputation at work in Scripture, a principle most clearly stated by Paul in places like Rom 4. This principle of imputation allows Luther to completely eliminate human righteousness from the grounds of the justifying verdict of God. Imputation enables him to refer to “Christ’s work and justification as one and the same thing.”²² While Luther’s mature statements

¹⁷ LW34:167; WA 39:98; cf. LW34:165: “sin is . . . remitted by imputation.”

¹⁸ LW34:180; WA 39:111. Cf. LW34:168; WA 39:99: “God cleanses the Gentiles, that is, he considers [*reputat*] them cleansed, because they have faith, although they are really sinners.” LW34:168; WA 39:99: The only sanctity that can justify a guilty sinner, according to the entirety of the scriptural witness, comes by imputation: “To purify the heart is to impute [*imputare*] purification to the heart.”

¹⁹ LW26:132, cited by Seifrid, although he takes this very quote as evidence that a refined view of imputation is alien to Luther’s christocentric understanding of the gospel (“Luther, Melancthon and Paul,” 143).

²⁰ According to Sibylle Rolf, the majority of Luther’s references to imputation are not found in expositions of Pauline texts that use the terminology of imputation; see “Luther’s Understanding of *Imputatio* in the Context of His Doctrine of Justification and Its Consequences for the Preaching of the Gospel,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010): 436.

²¹ See Clark, “*Iustitia Imputata Christi*,” 291-92. Clark (*ibid.*, 292n124) cites Luther’s comment on Gal 2:15-16 (LW27:221; WA 2:490) as representative: “*Sic fit, ut credentibus in nomine domini donentur omnia peccata et iusticia eis imputetur*” (“Thus it comes about that he forgives all the sins of those who believe in the name of the Lord, and imputes righteousness to them” [my translation]).

²² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (trans. Robert C. Schultz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 225.

on justification show a more extensively worked out theology of imputation, the logic of imputation is present from a very early stage. And even though Luther's doctrine of imputation is simpler than that of subsequent Lutheran and Reformed theologians, it includes the substance of what would be more clearly articulated in the later doctrine. It is quite strange to fault him for not articulating a doctrine of imputation in the same manner as those who came *after* him, especially in the manner of the most fully developed doctrine of imputation, since the doctrine in this form included responses to a variety of issues that arose subsequent to Luther's life.

The whole point of this survey is not to contend that Luther teaches the doctrine of imputation as it was codified in its most developed form in late Protestant orthodoxy, but rather to note that imputation is a doctrine (however inchoate) in Luther that describes the way in which the wholly alien righteousness of Christ serves as the sole basis for the justification of sinners who have no inherent righteousness.²³ Imputation for Luther, however, is not merely a comment on Pauline *logizomai* texts, even if those texts highlight the word (imputation) and corresponding divine action that is at the heart of his doctrine of justification.²⁴ The distinction between the biblical word imputation and the developing Lutheran and Reformed doctrines of imputation is absolutely critical when evaluating how imputation has been understood in recent NT scholarship, as will be shown further below.

2. Philip Melancthon

A doctrine of imputation is also vital in the teaching of Philip Melancthon, Luther's younger contemporary and colleague.²⁵ In the 1555 edition of his *Loci Communes*, Melancthon argues that Christ has won redemption for his people, which includes "the forgiveness of sins; of gracious acceptance by God; of the imputation of righteousness [*von Zurechnung der Gerechtigkeit*]; [and] of the new

²³ Cf. Rolf, "Luther's Understanding of *Imputatio*," 436 (cf. 444-47): "Luther does not explicitly use [the formula *imputatio iustitiae Christi* (imputation of Christ's righteousness)], since it is a product of the theological reflection of later Protestant Orthodoxy. Yet Luther seems to hold this form of *imputatio* as the centre-piece of imputation and justification in general: the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer by God in such a way that Christ's righteousness is regarded as the believer's." Cf. Lowell C. Green, "Faith, Righteousness and Justification: New Light on Their Development Under Luther and Melancthon," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 4 (1973): 86: "In terms of later terminology, [Luther's Reformation breakthrough] was the discovery that the passive righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer by grace through faith."

²⁴ Cf. Clark, "*Iustitia Imputata Christi*," 285-87.

²⁵ On the harmony between Luther and Melancthon on justification (while allowing for differences of emphasis), see Timothy J. Wengert, "Melancthon and Luther/Luther and Melancthon," *Luther-Jahrbuch* 66 (1999): 68-70 (repr. as ch. 10 in Timothy J. Wengert, *Philip Melancthon: Speaker of the Reformation* [Farnham: Ashgate Variorum, 2010]); and Green, *How Melancthon Helped Luther*, 213-67 (esp. 253-56).

birth in us.”²⁶ Speaking explicitly of an imputation of *Christ’s* righteousness he continues later in the *Loci*: “If we believe on the Son of God, we have forgiveness of sins; and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us [*Christi Gerechtigkei zu gerechnet*], so that we are justified and are pleasing to God for the sake of Christ.”²⁷ Melanchthon also insists that that which is imputed to the believer, Christ’s righteousness, is received wholly “on account of his obedience.”²⁸ To make this argument Melanchthon appeals to Rom 5:19, although he does not make a sharp distinction between the active and passive righteousness of Christ.²⁹ For him, imputation means that justification is all of grace, completely apart from one’s just deserts.³⁰

In essence, for Melanchthon, imputation means that we are forgiven of our sins and are righteous before God on the sole basis of Christ’s righteousness counted as ours. It may be true, as some urge, that Melanchthon does not bring mystical union with Christ as prominently into the picture as do Luther, Calvin, and others, but he certainly does not speak of imputation as “a bare declaration” or a “mere transaction that has been performed on our behalf”³¹ apart from a warm and vital relationship with Christ created through faith, which is supplied and sustained by the Holy Spirit, and which is the means through which “*Christ* and his grace are conveyed to us,”³² thus making us “the dwelling place of God.”³³ Melanchthon so strongly emphasizes the fact that our righteousness is accomplished only through Christ’s obedience, *not* in order to drive a wedge between the believer and Christ, but in order to ensure that the gospel is entirely of grace, that contrary to Roman Catholic teaching and the views of the Lutheran theologian Andreas Osiander, an inherent righteousness plays no role (however small) in the believer’s justification.³⁴ The chief function of the doctrine of imputation is to secure this truth. While some of Paul’s imputation texts figure into Melanchthon’s argument, he moves across a wide range of biblical texts in support of his teaching on redemption in Christ alone, a redemption that is based completely on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. In other words, as is the case with Luther, a doctrine of imputation for

²⁶ Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* (trans. Clyde L. Manschreck; New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 154; Philip Melanchthon, *Philippi Melanthonis opera quae supersunt omnia* (ed. Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider [vols. 1–15]; Heinrich Ernst Bindseil [vols. 16–28]; *Corpus Reformatorum* 1–28; Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 22:325.

²⁷ Melanchthon, *Loci*, 155–56; cf. 166; *Corpus Reformatorum* 22:327.

²⁸ Melanchthon, *Loci*, 162.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 162; cf. 167–68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

³¹ Seifrid, “Paul, Luther, and Justification,” 229.

³² Melanchthon, *Loci*, 166 (emphasis added).

³³ See *ibid.*, 162–63 (this quote is on p. 163). See also *ibid.*, 173, where Melanchthon’s Trinitarian conception of redemption leads him to speak of the Holy Spirit being sent by the Father and the Son (who “himself speaks comfort to our hearts”) into the hearts of believers, thereby “producing love and joy in God.”

³⁴ See *ibid.*, 168–69.

Melanchthon is not built upon the meaning of a small set of Pauline texts that explicitly use the word imputation.³⁵

3. John Calvin

John Calvin, in his 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (among other works), argues for a doctrine of imputation similar to Luther's and Melanchthon's. In *Institutes* 3.11.2 Calvin says that justification "consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness [*iustitiae Christi imputatione*]."³⁶ In this justification "God receives us into his favor as righteous men [*pro iustis*]."³⁷ Calvin does cite some of the classic Pauline imputation texts, namely, Rom 5:19 and 2 Cor 5:21, but it is notable that he, like Luther and Melanchthon, does not argue that the entire doctrine can be found in these verses. Also important is the way in which Calvin, like Luther, firmly insists "that our righteousness is not in us, but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches."³⁸ Union with Christ is a key soteriological concept for Calvin, although union in no way detracts from the fact that "we are justified before God solely by the intercession of Christ's righteousness" and that this "is equivalent to saying that man is not righteous in himself but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation [*Christi iustitia imputatione cum illo communicatur*]."³⁹ Particularly in light of the controversy over the views of Osiander, Calvin is concerned to distinguish sharply between—although

³⁵ On the problems with attempting to pit Melanchthon (and the later Lutheran confessional tradition) against Luther on imputation, see Wengert, "Melanchthon and Luther/Luther and Melanchthon," 68-70; Green, *How Melanchthon Helped Luther*, 213-67; Trueman, "Finnish Line," 240-42.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 3.11.2; John Calvin, *Iohannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reutz; Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 4:183 (hereafter CO).

³⁷ Calvin, *Inst.* 3.11.2; CO 4:183.

³⁸ Calvin, *Inst.* 3.11.23. The debate over whether justification or union with Christ should be conceived of as having logical priority (or put differently: whether justification is the source of sanctification) in Calvin (and later Calvinism) is beyond the scope of this article. See the summaries of this debate (from opposing sides of the spectrum) in William R. Edwards, "John Flavel on the Priority of Union with Christ: Further Historical Perspective on the Structure of Reformed Soteriology," *WTJ* 74 (2012): 33-41; J. V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517-1700)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 13-24.

³⁹ Calvin, *Inst.* 3.11.23; CO 4:206; cf. CO 7:477-78 (*Acts of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote*): "For [in 2 Cor 5:20-21] he immediately explains how that reconciliation comes to us. . . . Behold, when we have been reconciled to God by the sacrifice of Christ, also at the same time *we are righteous, and indeed we are reckoned in him [En ut Christi sacrificio reconciliati Deo, simul etiam iusti, et quidem in ipso censeamur]*. . . . One of the most striking passages is the first chapter of Ephesians (v. 6), where, going on word by word, he tells us that the Father hath made us acceptable to himself *in the Son*." Translation and emphasis is taken from Craig B. Carpenter, "A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 377.

without separating—justification and sanctification.⁴⁰ The doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is precisely one of the ways in which he does this, specifically because it utterly excludes any notion of an inherent human righteousness that avails before God's judgment, whether that righteousness be created by the Holy Spirit or not.⁴¹

4. *John Owen*

For a final example in this brief historical survey I have singled out John Owen's view of imputation. I have chosen Owen because he is arguably the best exemplar of what was being taught about justification and imputation in the era of high Protestant orthodoxy.⁴²

Owen, in his work *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677), affirms what was at the heart of the teaching on imputation in Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin, namely, that the believer's sins are imputed to Christ,⁴³ that all forms of inherent righteousness are excluded from the justifying verdict of God,⁴⁴ that imputation requires a forensic declaration of righteousness, as opposed to an infusion of righteousness,⁴⁵ that Christ's satisfaction of God's wrath on the cross is imputed to us as the basis of the forgiveness of our sins,⁴⁶ and that, as Owen puts it, "the foundation of the *imputation* asserted is union . . . whereby the Lord Christ and believers do actually *coalesce into one mystical person*."⁴⁷

What primarily distinguishes Owen from the magisterial Reformers is his response to new objections that arose subsequent to the Reformation. While his teaching on justification retains the polemical edge of previous Protestants against Roman Catholic teaching, several new controversies push Owen and his fellow Protestant scholastics to further refine and clarify their teaching on justification and on the doctrine of imputation. Chief among these doctrinal disputes are Socinianism, antinomianism, and neo-nomianism, represented

⁴⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Inst.* 3.11.11: "We must bear in mind what I already said, that the grace of justification is not separated from regeneration, although they are things distinct." Marcus Johnson explains this distinction well: justification and sanctification "are distinct only by reason of their soteriological function" (i.e., they are not distinct with regard to when they are received). See Marcus Johnson, "New or Nuanced Perspective on Calvin? A Reply to Thomas Wenger," *JETS* 51 (2008): 555.

⁴¹ Cf. Calvin, *Inst.* 3.11.14: "From this it follows that not even spiritual works come into account when the power of justifying is ascribed to faith." Cf. W. Stanford Reid, "Justification by Faith According to John Calvin," *WTJ* 42 (1980): 298-305.

⁴² Although there is no denying that there are differences between Lutheran and Reformed views of imputation, these should not be exaggerated. On this see Trueman, "Finnish Line," 239-44.

⁴³ See, e.g., John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 153-54.

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, 184; cf. 230.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 182 (emphasis original); cf. 189. For Owen, justification is not based on that renewal that comes with mystical union, but is not to be found apart from the context of that union either.

by Richard Baxter.⁴⁸ In light of these challenges, Owen's distinctiveness—as compared with the early Reformers—lies primarily in his use of the precise distinctions of a well-developed system of covenant theology. For example, he strongly insists that the active righteousness of Christ, that which Christ secured through his perfect, lifelong obedience to the Father, must be imputed to the believer along with the passive righteousness that results from Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Here Owen has particularly in mind the Socinian claim that Christ need only have obeyed God for his own sake.⁴⁹ Although Christ's righteousness cannot be split in half, as if he sometimes obeyed actively and sometimes passively, it is still vital for Owen that the two types of righteousness are distinguished conceptually for the purpose of explaining how the believer is first forgiven of all of his or her sins, and second, set before God as fully righteous on the basis of what Christ has done and nothing else. In this regard, Owen employs a strong notion of federal representation, the idea that Christ stands as a righteous "public person" and mediator in the place of the redeemed sinner who has no inherent righteousness, and therefore deserves the wrath of God.⁵⁰ In all of this, Owen's use of covenant theology is not original, but does represent the development of such theology at a late stage in its progression.⁵¹

5. *Lutheran and Reformed Confessions*

With Owen, the doctrine of justification and its corollary, the doctrine of imputation, have become "Protestant given[s]," shared in all of their basic elements in the confessional consensus of both the Lutheran and Reformed branches of the Reformation.⁵² This can be further elucidated by pointing briefly to the most developed confessional statements in both the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1584) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). The Formula of Concord (Article 3) articulates its teaching on imputation like this:

We believe, therefore, teach, and confess that this very thing is our righteousness before God, namely, that God remits to us our sins of mere grace, without any respect of our works, going before, present, or following, or of our worthiness or merit. For he bestows and imputes to us the righteousness of the obedience of

⁴⁸ For the historical context of these debates, and how they shaped Owen's articulation of justification and imputation, see Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 101-21.

⁴⁹ See Owen, *Justification*, 218-19; cf. 234.

⁵⁰ See *ibid.*, 148.

⁵¹ On the material continuity between Calvin and the later development of Reformed covenant theology, in response to scholarship that pits the Reformed scholastics against the magisterial Reformers, see Carl R. Trueman, "From Calvin to Gillespie on Covenant: Mythological Excess or an Exercise in Doctrinal Development?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009): 378-97.

⁵² Trueman, *John Owen*, 102-13 (quote from p. 103).

Christ; for the sake of that righteousness we are received by God into favor and accounted righteous.⁵³

Similarly, the Westminster Confession of Faith (11.1) says this about imputation:

Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.⁵⁴

6. *Summary: Imputation, a "Protestant Given"*

There is no doubt that the doctrine of imputation developed and expanded from the time of Martin Luther up to the time of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the writings of John Owen. Various nuances came to the fore depending on who was discussing imputation and against whom they were arguing. The basic doctrine, however, had taken its classic form by the time of Owen, and has changed very little among traditional Protestants since his day. I will, therefore, repeat the central points of the doctrine of imputation in propositional form as Owen articulates them:

1. A counting, or imputation, of the believer's sins to Christ.
2. A counting, or imputation, of Christ's passive righteousness to the believer; that is, the forgiveness of sins secured through the cross of Christ.

⁵³ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 3:115-16. The Augsburg Confession (1530), Article 4, reflects the simpler form of the doctrine of imputation at an earlier stage of development in the Lutheran tradition: "Men cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works; but are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and their sins forgiven for Christ's sake, who by his death has satisfied for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness before him." Translation from Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:10.

⁵⁴ Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:626. Two later modifications of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Savoy Declaration (1658) and the London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689), repeat Westminster's teaching on imputation almost verbatim, the only real difference being that they both more explicitly state that both Christ's passive and *active* righteousness are imputed to believers. See the Savoy Declaration 11.1 and the London Baptist Confession 11.1. While the imputation of Christ's active obedience may not be explicitly stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the basic *idea* is present in the Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 70–73. For more on this see Jeffrey Jue, "The Active Obedience of Christ and the Theology of the Westminster Standards: A Historical Investigation," in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint; Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2007), 128; for a slightly different perspective see Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 261-64.

3. A counting, or imputation, of Christ's active righteousness to the believer; that is, the bestowal of a righteous status on the believer that is based solely on Christ's life of obedience to God's moral law.
4. Federal representation, or the principle that both Adam and Christ, as public persons, represent different groups before God; on the one side, all of humanity is in solidarity with, and represented by, Adam; on the other, all the elect are in solidarity with, and represented by, Christ.⁵⁵
5. A principle of forensic accounting; that is, justification is a "counting as if" one were righteous, rather than a making one righteous.
6. Union with Christ; namely, the notion that a redemption accomplished by Christ is of no benefit to those not united *to* Christ by faith.

Whatever the various nuances that can be detected in the different articulations of the doctrine of imputation surveyed above, the most important thing to keep in mind when turning to the doctrine's fate in recent biblical scholarship is that none of the authors or confessions surveyed above understands imputation to be merely a comment on the meaning of a few verses in Paul's letters that use *logizomai* terminology.⁵⁶ For all of them imputation is a *doctrinal* motif, not a narrow lexicographical or exegetical comment; it is a way of synthesizing the entire scriptural testimony to man's salvation in Christ alone. Arguing that the whole doctrine is not present in Rom 4, 2 Cor 5, or any of the other Pauline "imputation texts"—while this is true—does not actually engage the classic Protestant doctrine *as a doctrine*.⁵⁷

III. *Recent New Testament Scholarship on Imputation*

If this is the doctrine, what do biblical scholars have to say about it? The main impetus for recent evangelical debate is an article Robert Gundry wrote against

⁵⁵ While it is true that later Lutheran theologians have not situated the doctrine of imputation within a covenantal framework in the same way that post-Reformation Reformed theologians have done, what matters for my purposes is that the expressions of the doctrine of imputation after Luther and Calvin are similar. Whether Lutheran or covenantal/Reformed, both affirm the same basic idea, namely, that believers are counted as righteous solely because Christ's righteousness is counted as their own.

⁵⁶ This is true both in their more systematic works and in their commentaries on individual passages often associated with imputation.

⁵⁷ It is certainly true that a set group of Pauline texts (Rom 4:3; 5:18-19; 8:3; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21) are often commented on in classic defenses of the doctrine of imputation. See, e.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 2:646-56; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 3:144-61. Nonetheless, these texts are discussed by such authors in the context of a synthetic argument for justification by faith alone, through the redemption that is found in Christ alone. Protestant theologians who defend the doctrine of imputation do not attempt to find the whole doctrine in any single verse or couple of verses. Such a procedure would not even make sense to them, and yet this is exactly what many modern biblical scholars say is necessary in order for the doctrine of imputation to stand.

the idea of an imputation of Christ's righteousness in *Books and Culture* in 2001.⁵⁸ His two primary criticisms of imputation are, first, that it is not a suitably biblical formulation, that Paul never actually speaks of an imputation of Christ's righteousness, but instead of an imputation of faith *in the place of righteousness*,⁵⁹ and second, that it is a disincentive to "*the obedient life of righteousness that we are supposed to live*" and that it thus fails to create a due regard in Christians for "*the judgment of our works at the end*" of time.⁶⁰

N. T. Wright similarly asks:

If 'imputed righteousness' is so utterly central, so nerve-janglingly vital, so standing-and-falling-church important as John Piper makes out, isn't it strange that Paul never actually came straight out and said it? . . . I note . . . that when our tradition presses us to regard as central something which is seldom if ever actually said by Paul himself we are entitled, to put it no more strongly, to raise an eyebrow and ask questions.⁶¹

Along with Gundry, Wright finds the doctrine of imputation wanting because Paul never explicitly states what the doctrine affirms. Furthermore, for Wright, it is simply a category error to speak of an imputation of righteousness, because, for him, righteousness is simply a status rather than a substance that can be transferred.⁶²

Similarly, Mark Seifrid, while clearly diverging from Wright on major points of Pauline interpretation, also finds the notion of an imputation of Christ's righteousness problematic.⁶³ For him, talking of this kind of imputation has

⁵⁸ Robert H. Gundry, "Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration' . . . even though I wasn't asked to," *Books and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2001): 6-9; cf. Gundry, "On Oden's Answer," *Books and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2001): 14-15, 39. The dismissal of the classic doctrine of imputation on grounds such as Gundry's has a long pedigree in modern biblical scholarship. See, e.g., the claim of Moses Stuart in his Romans commentary (first published in 1832): "There is not in all the Bible a single declaration that one man's sin or righteousness is ever *imputed* to another. . . . Having followed *יְשׁוּבָה* and *λογίζομαι* through the concordances, I hesitate not to challenge a single example which is fairly of this nature in all the Bible" (Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [3d ed.; Andover, Mass.: Warren F. Draper, 1854], 584).

⁵⁹ See Robert H. Gundry, "The Nonimputation of Christ's Righteousness," in *Justification: What's At Stake*, 18, 42-43.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 44 (emphasis original).

⁶¹ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009), 30; cf. 47, 133-34. Cf. also Glen Shellrude, "Imputation in Pauline Theology: Christ's Righteousness or a Justified Status?," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 28 (2010): 28.

⁶² See Wright, *Justification*, 47; *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98; cf. Shellrude, "Imputation in Pauline Theology," 21; Garlington, "Imputation or Union?," 52. Additionally, divine righteousness is not something that can be imputed, because it is a divine attribute. For Paul the idea of divine righteousness is primarily about God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham, which in its original intention was meant to bring salvation to the whole earth. On this see, e.g., Wright, "Letter to the Romans," 529; Garlington, "Imputation or Union?," 57.

⁶³ I am sympathetic with Carson's concern to avoid painting with the same brush everyone who disputes any aspect of the classic formulation of the doctrine of imputation (D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," in *Justification: What's*

the unfortunate consequence of causing justification “to be defined in terms of the believer and not in terms of Christ,”⁶⁴ and “inadvertently bruise[s] the nerve which runs between justification and obedience.”⁶⁵ Because justification encapsulates the *totality* of our redemption—and thus of our acceptance before God—Seifrid maintains that there is no need to insist on a mere “erasure of our failures which must be supplemented by an ‘imputed’ righteousness,” since all “notions of an inherent righteousness and progress in justification” are excluded according to Seifrid’s understanding of justification.⁶⁶ The heart of Seifrid’s objections is that, at least in “some measure,” the doctrine of imputed righteousness is a “replacement of . . . biblical categories with other ways of speaking.”⁶⁷

While Michael Bird believes that “the notion of ‘imputation’ is entirely legitimate within the field of systematic theology as a way of restating the forensic nature of justification . . . and [that] it is implicit in the representative roles of Adam and Christ,”⁶⁸ he insists that “it is not the language of the New Testament”⁶⁹ although it “is a necessary and logical inference to make, as it allows us coherently to hold together a number of ideas and concepts in Paul’s story of salvation.”⁷⁰ Instead, speaking in terms very similar to Seifrid’s, Bird insists that it is better to speak of justification through being “incorporated” into Christ’s righteousness since this prevents talk of a righteousness that is “abstracted from Christ” and merely “projected onto” the believer.⁷¹

In sum, recent critics of imputation do not all share the same objections to the doctrine, although there is one major criticism that most hold in common. It is this: the doctrine of imputation simply is not anchored firmly enough to the biblical text. In other words, the way the doctrine of imputation

At Stake, 50n13). Nonetheless, it seems justifiable to discuss scholars such as Seifrid and Wright together as disputing aspects of the doctrine of imputation, while obviously taking into account the large differences between the two on other matters, even on justification in general.

⁶⁴ Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 9; Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2001), 174; cf. Seifrid, “Paul, Luther, and Justification,” 228.

⁶⁵ Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness*, 175; cf. Seifrid, “Luther, Melancthon and Paul,” 151.

⁶⁶ Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness*, 175; cf. Seifrid, “Paul, Luther, and Justification,” 229-30. In this regard, Seifrid is rather close to Gundry’s criticisms of imputation, a fact which Seifrid himself recognizes (see “Luther, Melancthon and Paul,” 149).

⁶⁷ Seifrid, “Luther, Melancthon and Paul,” 150; cf. 146, 148.

⁶⁸ Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 70; cf. 87. See also Michael F. Bird, *A Bird’s Eye View of Paul: The Man, His Mission and His Message* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2008), 95-96. Bird also believes that the doctrine rightly captures the fact that the believer’s “justification consists of an alien righteousness” (Bird, *Saving Righteousness*, 70).

⁶⁹ Bird, *Saving Righteousness*, 70; cf. 85; and *Bird’s Eye View*, 97.

⁷⁰ Bird, *Bird’s Eye View*, 97. Thus, in *A Bird’s Eye View of Paul* Bird appears to allow that a doctrine or concept of imputation is more indispensable to a proper view of redemption in Christ than he did in *The Saving Righteousness of God* (see, e.g., *Saving Righteousness*, 69).

⁷¹ Bird, *Saving Righteousness*, 85.

has been classically stated does not correspond with biblical language and conceptualities.⁷²

Despite these criticisms, many scholars remain convinced of the propriety of speaking of an imputation of Christ's righteousness and have responded to recent challenges over the last decade. The most prominent of these defenses have been from D. A. Carson, John Piper, and Brian Vickers, although numerous others have also appeared.⁷³

Piper and Vickers are characteristic of the responses. Both recognize that an imputation of Christ's righteousness is never explicitly stated by Paul, but both believe that a careful reading of the classic Pauline imputation texts does in fact reveal that although "imputation is not mentioned *explicitly*," this "is not a compelling support for its absence *conceptually*," as Piper puts it.⁷⁴ Vickers agrees and contends in his book that all of the central imputation texts, despite their genuinely different emphases, can be legitimately brought together "in an attempt to develop a Pauline synthesis regarding the doctrine of imputation."⁷⁵

Are the critics of imputation right to contend that not only is the doctrine unbiblical, but that it is also an illegitimate synthesis of biblical teaching about the "mechanics" of redemption in Christ? Or are recent defenders right to remain vigilant in their claims that despite recent critiques, the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness can indeed be found, even if not explicitly, in the key Pauline "imputation texts"?⁷⁶ Is there any hope for a solution to this exegetical and theological standoff?

For evangelicals, the solution to this confused state of affairs might seem obvious: What does the Bible say? How does it define imputation? Scholars such

⁷² Most critics would also agree that in thus straying from the way in which Paul actually expresses himself, classic statements of the doctrine of imputation have obscured fundamental aspects of Paul's understanding of justification, such as its christocentric nature and its vital connection with the believer's new, Spirit-induced life of obedience.

⁷³ See Carson, "Vindication of Imputation," 46-78; John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002); John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 117-32; Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006). Cf. J. V. Fesko, *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 241-63; Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union With Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 102-25; Richard D. Phillips, "A Justification of Imputed Righteousness," in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification* (ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 75-98; Cornelis P. Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), 232-56.

⁷⁴ Piper, *Counted Righteous*, 109n57.

⁷⁵ Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness*, 17.

⁷⁶ While Carson clearly recognizes that a lack of explicitness does not mean that a doctrine is not biblically supportable (see Carson, "Vindication of Imputation," 48-55, 78) he does not develop this insight in the direction I believe is necessary in order to answer challenges like Gundry's to the doctrine of imputation, and instead approaches an expositional defense of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in much the same way that Piper and Vickers do (see Carson, "Vindication of Imputation," 55-77).

as Gundry and Wright see themselves to be doing nothing other than asking these very questions. Who could fault them for attempting to be biblical? After all, the word imputation (*logizomai* in Greek), they say, shows up numerous times in Scripture, especially in Paul's letters. Wright puts the question pointedly: "Is the church free to use words and concepts in fresh ways which do not correspond to their biblical origins?"⁷⁷ In other words, is it not simply a given that Bible words have Bible meaning, that the biblical usage of a word must determine everything we are to say about a doctrine based on that word?

The short answer is that Bible words do not—and need not—necessarily have "Bible meaning" *when we are talking about the definition of a doctrine*. As counterintuitive (even counter-biblical) as it might seem on the surface, the insistence of scholars like Wright that we "use words and concepts in ways which correspond to their biblical origins" betrays a fundamental confusion about the very nature of exegesis and its relationship to doctrinal formulation. This confusion is rampant in discussions of imputation on both sides of the debate, and from the outset has set discussions off on the wrong foot.

IV. The Necessity of Distinguishing between Imputation as Word and Doctrine

It is my contention that recent opponents of the doctrine of imputation have a single, unifying error in their approaches: they believe that with regard to Pauline texts that use imputation terminology, a simple repetition of Paul's phraseology determines the validity or invalidity of the doctrine of imputation. The charge—almost across the board—of recent opponents of the doctrine of imputation is that the doctrine cannot be found in any passage in the Bible, Pauline or not. Such arguments are based on a significantly confused understanding of the very nature of so-called Bible words and how they should function in relation to doctrines that use the same word as a doctrinal label. This final section will attempt to substantiate this claim.

Returning to a representative critic of the doctrine of imputation, we see, for example, Don Garlington, who, in commenting on Phil 3:9, insists that "it seems to me far simpler and exegetically more straightforward just to stay with the Pauline language," which speaks of righteousness through union with Christ rather than imputation.⁷⁸ This is the critics' argument: stay with scriptural wording, stay close to the text, stay near to what Michael Bird calls the "exegetical level,"⁷⁹ or what Garlington insists is "exegetically more straightforward." In order for opponents of the classic doctrine of imputation to be convinced of its appropriateness, they demand that it be supportable from explicit statements in passages in Paul that use imputation language. In other words, Bible

⁷⁷ Wright, *Justification*, 60.

⁷⁸ Garlington, "Imputation or Union?," 78.

⁷⁹ Bird, *Saving Righteousness*, 85.

words, like imputation, must have Bible meaning, or at the very least, words like imputation must be used in sentences that say what the doctrine of imputation says. Since Paul does not explicitly state that Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer, that settles the question. For such scholars there can be no talk of this kind of imputation, at least among those who carefully attend to how words such as imputation are actually used in the Bible, and thus the doctrine can be safely discarded. This objection is persuasive to many, especially those scholars with training in biblical studies who have spent their lives engaged in close readings of biblical texts.

Yet, it is not simply detractors of the doctrine who argue in this way. Scholars who support the doctrine and who have written in response to recent criticisms quite often appear to be letting the critics set the terms of the debate. Many defenders of imputation appear to accept the premise that they must find the entire doctrine of imputation in those places in Paul where he uses imputation language, or at least language closely approximating the entire doctrine of imputation. This is seen in the fact that almost every single defense of imputation over the last decade has been based exclusively on only a few texts in Paul: Rom 4:1-11; 5:18-19; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21; and Phil 3:8-9. Attending to these texts is surely important, but when they are thought to contain the *entire* doctrine of imputation, a mirror image of the arguments of the critics against imputation appears. Even in his careful approach, D. A. Carson, who is well aware of the fact that doctrines do not always correspond with the biblical words from which they take their names, ends up attending to only a few Pauline imputation texts in an attempt to show that they do in fact reflect the redemptive logic encapsulated in the doctrine of imputation. Brian Vickers, although attempting to formulate a "Pauline synthesis," only does so on the basis of what can be gleaned from the standard "imputation texts." John Piper does much the same.⁸⁰ Both sides of the debate agree, for the most part, that for the doctrine to remain intact it must be derivable from Paul's "imputation texts," and that

⁸⁰ This is not to imply that the *exegesis* of scholars such as Carson, Piper, or Vickers is faulty, or that it does not make an important contribution to the defense of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Instead, I simply want to insist that, despite the importance of the key texts that use explicit imputation language, the doctrine itself is built upon a much wider foundation than these texts. None of these texts *alone* articulates the entire doctrine, nor can it be derived simply from a synthesis of Pauline passages that use explicit imputation language. This should not trouble proponents of the doctrine, since very few—if *any*—doctrines of significance can be found in single verses or passages of Scripture. For example, even if the Reformation reading of 2 Cor 5:21 is correct (and I think it is), this does not, and *cannot*, prove the entire doctrine of imputation. It contributes an important piece to the puzzle (justification is a matter of our sins being counted as Christ's, and of his righteousness being counted as ours), but even this leaves out elements of the doctrine, such as the distinction between Christ's active and passive righteousness, or the basis of our justification being inseparably connected to Christ's law-keeping obedience. On the traditional Reformed reading, this verse contains much that is central to the doctrine (at least implicitly), but it does not contain everything.

the imputation of Christ's righteousness must be found implicitly—even if not stated explicitly—in the logic of only these texts.

The problem with this kind of approach to Paul's imputation texts is not that it is attentive to the specific terminology and phraseology in these texts, but rather that that is *all* it is. That is to say, when a scholar maintains, for example, that faith, rather than Christ's obedience, is imputed for righteousness in Rom 4:3, such a scholar is merely rehearsing the wording of the text, simply making a philological remark about an isolated sentence in one of Paul's letters. An understanding of what single sentences in the Bible say is an important first step in all Christian appropriation of Scripture, but it should be recognized for what it is. This knowledge *alone* is completely irrelevant to the doctrine of imputation. The doctrine is not a statement about the meaning of a few texts in Paul that use "imputation language." It is not a comment on the meaning of the imputation word group. It is a whole-Bible *doctrine*.

Good exegesis does not simply lead to restating the wording of Scripture. Rather, it is the first step in the Christian attempt at what David Yeago calls "analyses of the logic of . . . scriptural discourse."⁸¹ Yeago's distinction between concepts and judgments, that is, the difference between how something is verbally expressed in the Bible and the *substance* or *heart* of "scriptural discourse," is very helpful here.⁸² Although Yeago is speaking specifically of the Trinity, the same dynamic is at work with imputation. Yes, it is true that the entire doctrine of imputation is not present in Rom 4:3, or any other single text, but as I have labored to show above, the classic expositions of the doctrine never made such claims, nor should they have. Instead, they built up a synthetic and thematic portrait of what it means to say that Christ is our Redeemer and that we have been redeemed only in him, that our justification is accomplished completely in and by Christ.⁸³ What matters in assessing the doctrine of imputation is whether it accurately captures the substance of a biblical theology of redemption, or more specifically, whether it gets to the heart of what the Bible has to say about how sinful humans can stand before God's judgment.

Furthermore, the argument that responsible exegesis and theology depend simply on using Bible words the way the Bible does reflects a mistaken notion of the nature of doctrinal development. Developed doctrines do not normally

⁸¹ David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *ProEcl* 3 (1994): 152.

⁸² See *ibid.*, 159-63. Yeago's distinction is fruitfully applied to the doctrine of justification in R. Michael Allen and Daniel J. Treier, "Dogmatic Theology and Biblical Perspectives on Justification: A Reply to Leithart," *WTJ* 70 (2008): 107-10.

⁸³ Cf. Venema, *Gospel of Free Acceptance*, 42. A good example that clearly brings out the synthetic, whole-Bible nature of the doctrine of imputation is ch. 11 on justification in the Westminster Confession of Faith. The first subheading in this chapter cites Jer 23:6; Rom 3:22-28; 4:5-8; 5:17-19; 1 Cor 1:30-31; 2 Cor 5:19, 21; Eph 1:7; and Titus 3:5, 7 as prooftexts for the claim that "the obedience and satisfaction of Christ" is imputed to believers. While two of Paul's *logizomai* texts are present in this list, these two are set alongside six others that make no use whatsoever of imputation terminology, although two of them have often been used to defend a principle of imputation in Paul.

arise out of quiet, measured Christian reflection on Scripture. Instead, doctrines are formulated in the heat of controversy as core beliefs—often those that are held implicitly—are challenged. This is precisely what happened with the early Trinitarian and christological controversies. For example, although this is obviously an over-simplification, it was not until those like Arius began to claim that “there was when the Son was not,” that the church was pushed to articulate more fully on biblical and doctrinal grounds how the worship of Christ that underlies the NT and the earliest Christian worship could be maintained within the monotheistic religion that lay at the heart of the OT and ancient Jewish worship.

Similarly, the doctrine of imputation arose amidst claims and counter-claims about what exactly was sufficient to make a human being acceptable before God. The Reformers were unified in their insistence that only an alien righteousness, a righteousness accomplished by, and received solely in union with, Christ was sufficient to endure the unyielding assault of God’s holiness against human rebellion and sin. The doctrine was then clarified as new challenges arose, such as Andreas Osiander’s claims about the inherent presence of Christ as the basis of justification, or later Socinian denials of the possibility of Christ’s securing (or meriting) salvation for his people. Thus, Mark Seifrid’s contention that “to insist that one define justification in terms of ‘the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,’ is to adopt a late-Reformational, Protestant understanding” and that “it is impossible to force Luther into this paradigm” is simply confused about the purpose of doctrinal formulation and development: the earlier simplicity of Luther’s view of imputation was not a simplicity arising out of his retention of pure, biblical conceptualities, but rather a simplicity borne out of a specific polemical context that, as of yet, had no need to address certain challenges, because of course those challenges did not yet exist.⁸⁴ Once those later disputes arose they had to be answered. Development and clarification, while often brought about by division and controversy, are nonetheless beneficial as the church seeks to make clear what can and cannot be said about a specific issue. When division and arguments arise, it will no longer do to simply repeat the wording of Scripture, the *interpretation of which* is precisely what is in dispute.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Quotes from Seifrid, “Luther, Melancthon and Paul,” 149. Carl Trueman highlights the many similarly problematic claims regarding the deformation of Calvin’s theological simplicity in the development of covenant theology after Calvin up to the period of high Protestant scholasticism. See Trueman, “From Calvin to Gillespie,” 397: The “work of men such as [Thomas] Gillespie represents the culmination of a long tradition of sophisticated theological reflection, started by Calvin and his contemporaries who were themselves building on established patterns of discourse; to dismiss this is myopic, whether such is done by the use of terms such as ‘mythology’ or by the application of simplistic binary categories of covenant/contract which fail to take account of what is really going on in the development of the theological concept and in the field of biblical linguistics.”

⁸⁵ Cf. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005), 3, 5; Allen and Treier, “Dogmatic Theology and Biblical Perspectives,” 108.

In the case of imputation, increasingly more precise definitions of the doctrine were responses to various challenges that arose over more than a century. This narrowing down of what the doctrine meant sought, above all else, to preserve the truth that salvation is wholly the act of the triune God, and that the only righteousness that avails before God is the righteousness that is founded on the redemptive work of Christ. This is hardly a quibbling or needlessly complicating distinction. The fact that a fully developed doctrine of imputation (such as Owen's) is different from Luther's or Calvin's simply reveals how the theological truths that the doctrine sought to express had to be reframed with each successive attempt to introduce a system of redemption at odds with the Bible's over-arching teaching on salvation in Christ.

By way of analogy I quote from a comment on Christology by Thomas Aquinas:

Although the word 'person' is not found applied to God in Scripture, either in the Old or New Testament, nevertheless *what the word signifies* is found to be affirmed of God in many places of Scripture; as that He is the supreme self-subsisting being, and the most perfectly intelligent being. If we could speak of God only in the very terms themselves of Scripture, it would follow that no one could speak about God in any but the original language of the Old or New Testament. The urgency of confuting heretics made it necessary to find new words to express the ancient faith about God. Nor is such a kind of novelty to be shunned; since it is by no means profane, for it does not lead us astray from the *sense of Scripture*.⁸⁶

Similarly, the word *imputation* cannot be found in Scripture as referring to an imputation of Christ's active and passive righteousness. Nevertheless, classical Protestantism claims that that which is articulated in the *doctrine* of imputation most certainly is to be found in the Bible. The obvious difference between the words *imputation* and *person* is that the word *person*, or *hypostasis*, as it is used in the NT, is not even related to later christological doctrine, whereas the word *imputation* is certainly associated with the doctrine that bears its name. But as I have attempted to show above, the principle is quite similar, since the doctrine of imputation is not meant to answer the question, "In Paul's letters what does the verb *impute* (*logizomai*) indicate is counted to a believer?" Rather, the doctrine answers the question, "How can a person, though lacking a sufficient inherent righteousness, both now and at the final judgment, be righteous before God?"⁸⁷ The former question, while important as a first step in exegesis

⁸⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 29, art. 3, ad. 1 (emphasis added). This quote is taken from the 1920 translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. I owe this reference to Dr. Wesley Hill in personal conversation.

⁸⁷ Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith* (trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer; London: T&T Clark, 2001), 205-6: "The intention of the forensic view of justification is to highlight the justification of sinners as an event by which they are accepted by God as righteous purely on the basis of God's righteousness—a righteousness completely extraneous to them—as it has been shown in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus believers are described as those who 'are made acceptable to God because of [the] imputation [of God's righteousness].'" Jüngel is citing the Lutheran Book of Concord. Cf. Venema, *Gospel of Free Acceptance*, 232-33; Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 114.

of the Bible, is not nearly as important as attending to the panoramic sweep of the biblical theology of redemption in Christ that stretches from Genesis to Revelation, and that is not, and indeed cannot be, encapsulated in a few texts in Paul's letters. The doctrine of imputation, which seeks to systematize this biblical theology, is far bigger than these few texts.

In this article I have not attempted to offer proof for the doctrine of imputation. Instead, my aim has been to reframe the debate via a plea that it be moved into the realm of competing, whole-Bible syntheses, rather than leaving it where it is in much recent discussion, muddled and confused through a mere repetition of biblical phraseology as if this represents any sort of commentary on the doctrine. All sides of the debate should be able to agree that Paul never gives us an entire doctrine of imputation by means simply of the use of imputation (*logizomai*) terminology. However, this fact is completely irrelevant to the doctrine of imputation. Any engagement with the doctrine must engage it *as a doctrine*, doctrinal point by doctrinal point. If scholars are going to dispute the doctrine, they must have the right target in their sights.

Furthermore, for all of those who care to speak of Christ as the only Redeemer of the world, if they would dispute the doctrine of imputation they must provide an equally *doctrinal* construal—or to borrow and adapt the language of Lewis Ayres, an alternative “grammar of justification”—of what it means for salvation to be found in Christ alone.⁸⁸ Regarding the development of Trinitarian orthodoxy, Ayres speaks of “the grammar of divinity” as the articulation of “different rules for speaking about divinity,” which, once they “have been articulated” are used by theologians “as the basis for further arguments about the adequacy of particular ways of speaking about God.” I am arguing that a notion like this should be applied to imputation: the earliest “grammars of justification” in Luther, Calvin, and others are meant to articulate certain parameters within which all discourse about justification in Christ must take place, that is, to state clearly the implications of a salvation accomplished wholly *extra nos*. Once this grammar has been articulated, it too serves “as a basis for further arguments about the adequacy of particular ways of speaking about” justification.

The essence of my argument is this: the only hope for genuine progress to be made in debates over imputation is for two competing grammars of justification to be articulated that explain the nature of redemption in Christ and that can be debated *as whole-Bible doctrines*, point by point. Classical Protestantism already has its own grammar of justification, built on a theology of imputation. Highlighting the fact that the Greek word *logizomai* in Paul's letters does not contain the entire Reformational doctrine of imputation proves nothing with regard to the validity of the *doctrine*. Apart from critiquing or defending

⁸⁸ See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14-15. I owe this reference and its application to justification to Paul Helm; see “Imputation and the Grammar of Justification,” <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2009/12/imputation-and-grammar-of-justification.html> (accessed September 20, 2012).

imputation as a doctrine, and of providing alternative dogmatic accounts of redemption in Christ (should one find the Protestant doctrine of imputation wanting), the debate will remain a jumbled confusion of apples and oranges, a confusion of words for doctrines, a confusion of verses for themes. Many biblical scholars will likely remain uninterested in this kind of doctrinal discussion. However, if they can be brought to see that the doctrine of imputation as it has developed historically in Protestantism is not coextensive with, nor dependent on, Paul's use of the *word* imputation, true progress in these debates is possible.