

GALATIANS AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics
in Paul's Letter



EDITED BY
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Can We Still Speak of “Justification by Faith”?

An In-House Debate with Apocalyptic Readings of Paul

BRUCE MCCORMACK

Introduction

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by representatives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation on Reformation Day 1999, was arguably the greatest ecumenical achievement of the twentieth century.¹ For the first time the Roman Catholic Church joined with a church of the Reformation to proclaim shared belief together—and shared belief not just on any doctrine but precisely on the doctrine that, in the sixteenth century, had been basic to all other doctrinal disputes: the doctrine of justification. To be sure, ratification of this agreement did not result in full communion; differences remained even with respect to justification. But the convergence achieved on certain “basic truths” with regard to justification enabled the two great churches to subsume remaining

1. The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2000), cited in this volume as *JDDJ* with relevant paragraph numbers, marked with §.

differences with respect to this doctrine beneath these truths, as differing forms of explication of them.²

This step also enabled both sides to acknowledge that the sixteenth-century condemnations issued publicly by each side against the other's teachings were not applicable to the dialogue-partner's confession *today*. This was a skillful move but one made in a spirit of charity and indeed wisdom. The traditional condemnations of sixteenth-century positions were not lifted *as such*; it was simply said that the Spirit had led both sides into a greater understanding of scriptural teaching and the authoritative teachings of their own traditions, with the result that the ways in which each upholds and explains its confession today takes a form that does not fall prey to condemnation. This conviction was expressed in the following words: "By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing upon modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post-Vatican-II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification."³

The Joint Declaration is the product of more than thirty years of dialogue. We are all aware that this same period saw revolutionary changes take place in Pauline studies. In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, E. P. Sanders sought to show that "justification by works" was a construct of sixteenth-century Protestant theologians and bore little resemblance to the "covenantal nomism" of the Judaism of Paul's time.⁴ Richard Hays's field-changing dissertation argued that it was the faith of Jesus himself rather than faith *in* Jesus that was basic to the narrative substructure of Paul's theology, thereby shifting the locus of justification to Christology rather than the work of the Holy Spirit in believers.⁵ The 1990s saw the emergence of a variety of new perspectives on Paul (NPP), chief among which were the contributions of Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright.⁶ These

2. See Susan K. Wood, "Catholic Reception of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," in *Rereading Paul Together: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Justification*, ed. David Aune (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 47:

The heart of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification consists of seven affirmations of what Lutherans and Catholics confess together regarding justification. Each positive statement of common confession is followed by a paragraph clarifying the Catholic understanding and another clarifying the Lutheran understanding. These two paragraphs allow the differences within the two traditions to stand, but they are subsumed under a broader agreement. These differences do not destroy the consensus regarding basic truths. This document represents a differentiated consensus rather than uniformity in concept and expression.

3. *JDDJ*, §13.

4. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

5. See Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

6. E. P. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster

were followed by apocalyptic readings of various kinds, promoted by J. Louis Martyn, Martinus de Boer, Beverly Gaventa, and Joel Marcus, among others. For the most part, this last-named development came too late in the process to have an impact on the Joint Declaration. But the earlier works were well known to biblical scholars participating in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue—and it is quite clear that these participants understood Paul differently.

David Aune has offered three possible reasons for the conspicuous gap between this new church teaching and the new perspectives. “First, the New Perspective originated as and has continued to remain a largely Anglo-American approach to Paul. . . . Second, the fields of systematic theology and biblical scholarship are separated by a wide gulf. . . . Third, the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue predates the advent of the new perspective by more than a decade and it [the NPP] is still being debated and tested in the academy.”⁷ Of these possible explanations, the second is almost devoid of significance (since biblical work from its beginning was foundational to discussions between dialogue members). The first does tell us something significant, that the variegated NPP has not been greeted in Europe with the kind of support it has found in North America and the United Kingdom. But the third is most important for my purposes here.

Revolutions in academic circles come and go. New readings excite the attention of many, in some cases giving rise to a new scholarly consensus. But just as quickly as it forms, a consensus among scholars can also quickly dissipate. The NPP are not everyone’s cup of tea; nor, for that matter, are apocalyptic readings—though both enjoy sizable followings. If there is a consensus that stretches across these rather diverse groupings where Paul’s doctrine of justification is concerned, it is this: the so-called Lutheran Paul constitutes a serious distortion of Paul’s teaching.⁸ But will even that consensus last? In my opin-

John Knox, 1990), 183–214; idem., *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); idem., “Paul and Justification by Faith,” in *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul’s Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 85–101; N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); idem., *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

7. David Aune, “Recent Readings of Paul Relating to Justification By Faith,” in Aune, ed., *Rereading Paul Together*, 242.

8. Some and perhaps many of the contributors to the changes just described did not engage in polemics against Luther. But Richard Hays, who contributed mightily to the emergence of an apocalyptic perspective with his work on the “faith of Christ” in Paul’s theology, did make Luther a target. See Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, 119–22. In any case, the impact of the work of the movement as a whole on the “Lutheran” Paul has been tremendous. So it does not really matter if a given NT scholar supportive of the just-mentioned trends made Luther a direct target of their work. The consequences for the central doctrine of the Reformation have been enormous.

ion, the participants in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue were right to take a long view where biblical studies are concerned and not get too excited over recent developments. And so, far from rejecting the Lutheran Paul, their agreement simply gave him a facelift; it introduced modifications based in part on later Lutheran interpretations of the doctrine of justification.

In any event, the gap between systematic theologians and biblical scholars is as nothing in comparison to the gap between church theologies and guild commitments. For those of us who understand ourselves to be “doctors of the church,” the need to explain and (so far as possible) to defend church teaching cannot simply be subordinated to guild demands. Speaking for myself, I admit that the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* (and the understanding of the relation of Scripture to tradition which it entails) has to incline me to take the question of what Paul really said with the utmost seriousness. But the task of establishing what Paul really said is one that, for me, must take place under the guidance of ecclesial authority—which, in the case of those belonging to Protestant churches, means “under the guidance of *Protestant* ecclesial authority” in the first instance. And this brings me back to the Joint Declaration.

The basic truths affirmed in the Joint Declaration constitute, one might say, a riff on the uniform teaching on the subject of justification found in the official teachings of the Protestant denominations—including the Presbyterian Church (USA), of which I am a member. And it is a riff that is gaining in prestige and what in we might call informal authority. It was adopted by the World Methodist Council in 2006. And it is being closely studied by member churches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches with a view toward adoption in 2017. So I have no other choice but to take the Joint Declaration seriously too, though I do so gladly. I have my objections to it, but thankfully those are confined (for the most part) to the differentiating elements, not to the “basic truths” confessed together by Lutherans and Catholics.

In this essay my central task is to explain some important elements in Galatians 2:16; 3:6–14; and 5:4–5. Close exegesis of these passages is not possible here; I confine myself to highlighting a few key exegetical decisions. And I do so with a view toward the role played by these decisions in understanding Paul’s doctrine of justification and its place in his overall theology. My primary conversation partners will be Karl Barth (no surprise there) and two apocalyptic readers of Paul: J. Louis Martyn and Martinus de Boer. I have chosen to address the latter two because Martyn in particular has a self-conscious affinity with the theology of the early Karl Barth of the second edition of his *Romans*

commentary (1922).⁹ But neither Martyn nor de Boer seems to appreciate the degree to which Barth’s early apocalypticism was modified in his later work by being taken up into a judicial (or forensic) frame of reference—which, be it noted, places the later Barth’s doctrine of justification within hailing distance of the Joint Declaration.¹⁰ In any event, I have chosen to limit my attention here to apocalyptic readings of Paul because they overlap in interesting ways on my own work on Barth.

In what follows, I begin with the exegetical issues touching upon justification in Galatians. Then in a second section I turn to Barth’s contribution to a well-integrated doctrine of justification.

Galatians 2:16; 3:6–14; 5:4–5

Setting the Stage—with the Help of Louis Martyn

Translating a text is already an act of interpretation. How a particular text is received and understood by the exegete will often depend on decisions made with respect to textual elements found elsewhere in an epistle and even, perhaps, in other epistles written by the same author. To put it this way suggests that an overarching theology is being formed (or perhaps is fully formed) *even as* translation decisions are made with respect to a particular verse. The part is understood in the light of the whole, even as the whole is construed as the sum of its parts. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this in principle. We all do it to some degree or another, engaging in a movement from text to theology and a countermovement from theology to text—and both at the same time. But we do need to keep this twofold movement in mind, this dialectical to and fro, since our commentary on translations that we ourselves have devised is, at

9. Given that Richard Hays has testified to the influence of Karl Barth on his work, I could have chosen him instead. See Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, xxiv–xxv. In my judgment, however, the apocalyptic readers of Paul stand closer to Barth’s more central convictions than does Hays. After all, Hays thinks that “participation” (understood along the lines of the Eastern fathers) is more basic to Paul’s theology than is “justification.” Barth, early or late, would have had no sympathy with such a judgment. And it is one of the great virtues of the apocalyptic readers of Paul that they too have little patience with attempts to find the roots of a “divinization” theory in Paul. In sum, I have chosen to engage Martyn and de Boer because I thought they might be in a better position to understand what I am trying to do here.

10. These modifications cannot be explained simply as the consequence of a change of genre—a shift from the exegetical to the dogmatic task, since Barth sought at every stage of his dogmatic development to ground his dogmatic claims exegetically. Attention to the ecclesial context of Barth’s dogmatics and the conception of ecclesial authority bearing on his exegetical work would be more fruitful—which brings us back to the Joint Declaration. Whatever else might be said of the Joint Declaration, it clearly was formulated under the guidance of a conception of ecclesial authority that the later Barth also broadly shared.

the same time, a commentary on our own theories and indeed on ourselves as exegetes. To keep this in mind can engender a healthy dose of self-criticism, which is all the more necessary when the translations we offer constitute a break with the history of translating the texts in question. A good case in point can be found in Martyn's much-discussed commentary on Galatians.

What Martyn does is to elaborate a fairly full depiction of Paul's overall theology of "rectification" early on in his commentary—already in relation to Galatians 1:4. Having put the "whole" in place, he then invites other exegetes into a conversation with him about the "parts." Can the relevant exegetical decisions in, say 2:16; 3:6–14; and 5:4–5 support and confirm this picture? Or are there elements that sit poorly with the picture and call it into question? As I say, I do not think this procedure is wrong. It is what exegetes often do when they are attentive to issues surrounding the coherence of the theology they find in biblical texts; they are doing theology even as they do exegesis.

Martyn introduces his understanding of Paul's theology of "rectification" (a word he prefers to "justification") already at Galatians 1:4. Two elements in this passage are of crucial importance for him. The first is "the present evil age." This is taken (quite reasonably, I think) as a bit of shorthand for "the powers that rule the present age." References to "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4), "the rulers of this age" (1 Cor. 2:6–8), and "principalities and powers" (1 Cor. 15:24) are not infrequent in Paul's writings. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 2:8 Paul says that it is the "rulers of this age" who put to death "the Lord of glory." The second element is found in the verb *exaireō*, "snatch from the grasp" (Gal. 1:4). For Martyn, both a sketch of the human plight and God's solution to it have already been announced. "The *root* problem lies not in our sins, but in the powers of the present evil age."¹¹ The solution is deliverance from the powers that hold the human race in thrall. Understandably at this point, Martyn takes a step back in his comments on the text to offer his initial discussion of Paul's theology of rectification.¹²

From the list of ten elements identified in this initial sketch, only two are missing that are foundational to Martyn's reconstruction as a whole (though the second is adumbrated). The first element is his translation of the phrase *pisteōs [lēsou] Christou*, which appears six times in Paul's writings—twice in Galatians 2:16, once in 3:22, as well as in Romans 3:22 and 26 and Philipians 3:9. Martyn understands this phrase as a subjective genitive, the "faith of Christ" (rather than construing it as an objective genitive, "faith in Christ"),

11. J. Louis Martyn, "The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," *Interpretation* (2000): 253.

12. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 97–105.

so that Galatians 2:16 reads (in his translation): “Even we ourselves know, however, that a person is not rectified by observance of the Law, but rather by the faith of Jesus Christ [*dia pisteōs Iesou Christou*]. Thus, even we have placed our trust in Christ Jesus, in order that the source of our rectification might be the faith of Christ [*ek pisteōs Christou*] and not observance of the Law; for not a single person will be rectified by observance of the Law.”¹³ That this translation move is a relatively novel one is conceded. The Christian tradition had usually understood the crucial phrase as an objective genitive—“faith in Christ.” And so the NRSV, for example, renders Galatians 2:16 this way: “Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith *in* Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith *in* Christ” (emphases added; cf. mg.). The decision made here by Martyn is decisive for his understanding of Paul’s theology as a whole, and it is his picture of the whole (its power to explain this and other elements) that in turn justifies the decision made here.

The second decisive element has to do with Martyn’s translation of the *dikaïos* group in 2:16; 3:8 and 11 as “rectify” and “rectification”—words that Martyn prefers to the more traditional “justify” and “justification.” “Rectification” stands closer to the “deliverance” mentioned in 1:4; as we shall see, it also submerges “justification” into “new creation” conceptuality: the creation of a new world through the destruction of the old one. In any case, “to rectify” means to set things right—which could have a legal meaning but in Martyn’s hands does not. He discerns a meaning closer to liberation, the setting free of those who were imprisoned.

The “whole” of Paul’s theology of “rectification”—in the light of which Martyn understands the parts—has the following contours:

First, God is the Subject who redeems. “Redemption” is described in terms of an invasion of enemy-held territory, a war of liberation. In this war, the decisive action is taken by God.

Second, God’s opponents in this war are certain “anti-God powers.” At this point it bears mentioning that, in spite of the antipathy of the Martyn school to Bultmann, they too engage in a bit of demythologizing at this point. For them, the anti-God powers are not “fallen angels” in the first instance (as they were for Paul). The anti-God powers are Sin (reified into a power that holds the human race in thrall) and the Law (insofar as it is made to be the tool of sin). Salvation is achieved through a war of liberation directed against these powers.

Third, the decisive event in this war is the crucifixion. Paul, Martyn says, “is concerned to offer an interpretation of Jesus’ death that is oriented

13. *Ibid.*, 5.

not toward personal guilt and forgiveness but rather toward corporate enslavement and liberation. Jesus's death was the powerful deed in God's apocalyptic war, the deed by which God has already freed us from the malevolent grasp of the present age."¹⁴ How does the "faith of Christ" as the instrument of God's saving work relate to the event of the cross? The short answer is this: his death is itself faithful, though what that might mean is left somewhat vague.

Fourth, "the war is continued under the banner of co-crucifixion."¹⁵ The eschatological Spirit makes those upon whom he is poured out to be "freedom fighters," who are caught up in the war of liberation. There is a bit of ambiguity here since it is not always clear when the war commenced or who brought it about. On the one hand, Martyn can say that "the invading Spirit has decisively commenced the war of liberation from the powers of the present evil age"¹⁶ and "the Spirit of Christ has invaded the realm of Sin in order to commence the war of liberation."¹⁷ On the other hand, he can also say that "Christ's advent has commenced the war that will lead to that victory. Thus, in an anticipatory but altogether real sense, Christ's advent is that victory"¹⁸ and "the motif of cosmic warfare is focused above all on the cross. . . . There, in the thoroughly real event of Christ's crucifixion, God's war of liberation was commenced and decisively settled, making the cross the foundation of Paul's apocalyptic theology."¹⁹ No doubt Martyn would say that there is no ambiguity here. The eschatological Spirit makes us to participate in Christ's victory; in this derivative sense only does the Spirit "commence" the war. But the ambiguity remains nonetheless because Martyn has no theological ontology at his disposal that would help him to explain the relation of Christ to his "freedom fighters," the relation of his activity to theirs. If he had one, the place to introduce it would have been in commenting on Galatians 2:19–20.²⁰ But no real light is shed there on the problem of "participation" even though the word is employed by Martyn himself.

Fifth, for Martyn the fundamental contrast in Paul's theology is not between "works of the law" and the faith of an individual, but between "works of the law" and the "faith of Christ." The contrast, then, is between an action of God and all human action—which means that not only have the "works

14. *Ibid.*, 101.

15. *Ibid.*, 102.

16. *Ibid.*, 105; cf. Martyn, "Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," 258.

17. Martyn, "Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," 259.

18. Martyn, *Galatians*, 105.

19. *Ibid.*, 101.

20. *Ibid.*, 278–80.

of the law” been set aside as God’s means for achieving rectification; so also is faith set aside, insofar as faith is something humans do. Paul’s “gospel is not about human movement into blessedness (religion); it is about God’s liberating invasion of the cosmos (theology).”²¹ To be sure, humans do need to put their trust in Christ if they are to be “freedom fighters.” But such trust contributes nothing to the victory already achieved by Christ’s faith—and, in fact, Christ’s faith is (in the enactment of a proclaimed promise) “causative”²² of the faith of others.

Precisely at this point, however, a second ambiguity rears its head, one even more basic than the one already touched on. What is the relation of divine action to the human action of Christ expressed in his faithfulness unto death? How can what Jesus does be seen as what *God* does? Again, one needs a theological ontology to explain the relation of the divine to the human, of God to Christ. Martyn might well be forgiven for thinking that since Paul did not set forth an ontology, then it cannot be his task as an interpreter of Paul to provide one. But I hope the reader will understand the dilemma that this disciplinary restriction brings about. If New Testament scholars do not pause to consider the possibilities where theological ontology is concerned—that is, to ask whether Paul does not have an implicit ontology or perhaps even how systematic theologians might supplement Paul in order to make this theology more fully coherent—then they are left where Martyn himself winds up: with a rich battery of images and concepts. But images and concepts alone, no matter how rhetorically powerful, do not rise to the level of an adequate explanation. How is it that the “rectification” of the world is achieved by Christ’s faithful death? How can the faithful death of a single human being achieve a military victory over the anti-God powers? That’s my question—and really, it divides into two parts. First, what gives to Christ’s death its *universal* significance? That’s the ontological question. And second, *how does it work* in relation to the anti-God powers of Sin and the Law? Precisely *how* does Christ’s faithful death effect deliverance from these powers? To raise this question is to make inquiry into the mechanism that would make sense of the military rhetoric employed.

Let me explain where matters stand with an example. Gregory of Nyssa’s well-known ransom theory has a clearly defined mechanism for explaining how God’s victory over the devil is accomplished. God enters into a bargain with the devil. An exchange takes place. God trades an innocent human for the sinners who are already in thrall to the devil. What happens is that the

21. Martyn, “Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians,” 255.

22. Martyn, *Galatians*, 276.

devil fails to recognize that Jesus is joined to the eternal Logos, in whom is Life itself. When the devil puts Jesus to death, he discovers too late that death cannot hold him. The life of God is in him in the form of the Logos, who raises Jesus from the dead. The way in which victory is achieved on Gregory's theory tells us something else of importance. What makes it "work" is its subordination to a divinization scheme in which the resurrection plays a pivotal role. Gregory's ransom theory, it turns out, is not a stand-alone item of belief. More on that later, when we turn to Barth. The point here is that Gregory is what we might call "proto-Cyrrilline" in his Christology; he has an ontology in place that makes sense of God's victory over the devil. Martyn is not so fortunate. To be sure, his view does not involve a commercial exchange. His controlling metaphor is that of military conquest. Unlike Gregory, however, he lacks a theological ontology that would round out his attempted explanation and make it more complete.

One final issue before I turn to Galatians more directly. Martyn is certainly right in thinking that his association of "new creation" with the crucifixion rather than the resurrection is unexpected.²³ The thought that "new creation" would be inaugurated by the raising of Christ into a mode of embodied existence in which degeneration, decay, and death are no longer intrinsic is perfectly coherent. Less so is Martyn's attempt to make *the cross* the basis for "new creation." That liberation from the powers of Sin and the Law might well effect a change of lords over one's life is understandable, of course. But the life lived in the body would seem to remain unchanged by such an outcome. Part of the problem here is that Martyn does not seem to know what to do with the resurrection—a sizable problem on the face of it, since Paul says that Christ was "*raised* for our justification" (Rom. 4:25 NRSV). As a result of this deficit, Martyn makes the event of the cross do an awful lot of work. But that only raises new questions. Does Paul really limit "new creation" imagery to an exchange of lords that takes place "over our heads," so to speak? Is not the re-creation of the human (i.e., regeneration) an event that transforms human life from within? And is this transformation but a foretaste in time of the definitive change that will take place in human beings beyond the limits of history, in the general resurrection of the dead?

I turn then to Galatians. This time my interlocutor will be Martinus de Boer, whose recent Galatians commentary extends Martyn's perspective and provides an account of the Jewish literature that is thought to have influenced Paul's thinking.

23. Martyn, "Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," 259.

Paul’s Doctrine of Justification

In his 1989 essay, Martinus de Boer first set forth a distinction between two forms of Jewish apocalyptic theology available to Paul as he formed his own understanding of justification.²⁴ De Boer called the two forms “cosmological apocalyptic” and “forensic apocalyptic.” In a second essay published in 1998, de Boer argues that the first type understands the created world to have come under enslavement to demonic powers (“fallen angels”) in the time of Noah. On this view there is, however, an elect remnant who patiently awaits God’s invasion of this world to engage these forces and defeat them in a cosmic war. The key text for this cosmological pattern in Jewish apocalyptic theology is *1 Enoch*. The second type is a modification of the first. Here the emphasis on anti-God powers fades into the background, and the role played by the divine election gives way to a stress on the importance of free will and human decision:

Sin is the willful rejection of the Creator God (the breaking of the first commandment), and death is punishment for this fundamental sin. God, however, has provided the law as a remedy for this situation, and a person’s posture toward the law determines his or her ultimate destiny. At the last judgment, conceptualized not as a cosmic war but as a courtroom in which all humanity appears before the bar of the judge, God will reward with eternal life those who have acknowledged his claim and chosen the law and observed its commandments (the righteous), while he will punish with eternal death those who have not (the wicked).²⁵

According to de Boer, we find elements of both patterns in Paul’s writings, albeit in christologically modified forms. The cosmological pattern can be seen in Paul’s talk of Satan as a diabolical power opposed to God as well as in allusions to the “rulers of this age.”²⁶ In this case the modification is not obvious since de Boer does not call attention to it. It consists in the fact that de Boer himself has no interest in angelology. His interest lies in Paul’s “personification” of Sin and Death “as oppressive cosmic powers.”²⁷ Forensic thinking, however, comes to the fore in the focus on the fall of Adam and its consequences (i.e.,

24. See Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology,” in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joel Markus and Marion L. Soards, JSNTSup 24 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 169–90. For Martyn’s acceptance of this distinction and its significance for interpreting Paul, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 97n51.

25. Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. J. J. Collins, B. J. McGinn, and S. J. Stein, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 1998–2000), 1:359; derived from this *Encyclopedia* by the same scholars is *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

26. De Boer, “Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology,” 1:361.

27. *Ibid.*

death as punishment). This perspective and the understanding of God as Judge is predominant, de Boer thinks, in Romans 1:1 through 5:11. Romans 5:12–21 is a transitional passage, after which cosmological categories become predominant in chapters 6–8.²⁸ Indeed, for de Boer, “motifs proper to cosmological apocalyptic eschatology circumscribe and, to a large extent, overtake forensic motifs.”²⁹ Clearly the cosmological pattern is the more significant for de Boer’s “Paul”—and this, even though Paul returns to the legal language of “condemnation” in Romans 8:1, precisely at the point at which he speaks of deliverance from the “power” of Sin, spoken of expansively in Romans 7. De Boer can come to this conclusion—and this point is crucial, I think—because he finds an irruption of the cosmological already in Romans 1–5, suggesting to his mind that Paul’s use of the forensic in those chapters is something of a debater’s ploy. Paul, on this reading, is actually giving voice to the position of his opponents (real or imagined) so as to be able to qualify and ultimately overcome that position. Evidence for this suggestion is found in 3:9 (where Paul says that both Jews and Greeks are “under the power of sin”) and Romans 3:22 and 26 (where, as de Boer thinks, Paul makes the basis of justification to lie in “the faith of Christ”). What is clear in all of this is that construal of *pistis Christou* as a subjective genitive is doing a *lot* of heavy lifting here. Conceived as an objective genitive, there would be no obvious disruption of the forensic pattern, and one would be more naturally inclined to understand the forensic pattern as the more basic of the two, interpreting the work of Christ in Romans 3 in forensic terms (with the help of a cultic image in 3:25, *hilastērion*).³⁰ On this showing, use of the cosmological pattern in chapters 6–8 would be understood as drawing out some implications of the foregoing account for Christian life in this world and likewise for the future of the world itself. But de Boer clearly thinks otherwise.

As in Romans, so also in Galatians. Paul makes a start, de Boer thinks, with the forensic account of justification in 2:16 and again in chapter 3. But at the decisive points (where the “faith of Christ” is introduced in 2:16 and 3:22), Paul is setting forth a “‘cosmological’ redefinition of the forensic-eschatological understanding of justification.”³¹ This might seem to imply that Paul retains at least something of the forensic, and de Boer can speak in ways suggesting that this is so. He can say, for example, that justification *also* means forgiveness.

28. *Ibid.*, 364–65.

29. *Ibid.*, 365.

30. Strong support for this reading of Romans can be found in C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975).

31. Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 155.

He can say that it is not a matter of "approving the righteous (those who do right by observing the law)" but rather "of accepting sinners ('the ungodly' of Rom. 4:5 and 5:6), despite their sinfulness (Rom. 3:25; 4:6–8; 5:8)." Yet Paul's conception of justification entails more, de Boer says, than the acceptance of sinners. "Justification cannot mean only 'to accept' sinners but also 'to rectify' them, to make them righteous."³²

Parenthetically, what emerges in this last-cited passage is a recrudescence of an old typological misrepresentation of the chief difference between sixteenth-century Protestant and Catholic views of justification in terms of a contrast between the imputation and the impartation of God's righteousness. I call this a "misrepresentation" because Protestants did not, at any rate in their best moments, play imputation off against impartation. Sixteenth-century Lutherans understood the divine declaration in justification as itself an *effective word*, a word with regenerative power, so that imputation was never without an accompanying impartation.³³ The real issue between Lutherans and Catholics had to do rather with the insistence of the former that the basis for justification is always and at every moment in the Christian life to be found in "alien" (*extra nos*) righteousness of Christ.

But it turns out that de Boer's Paul makes use of the forensic only in order to establish a point of rhetorical contact with the position he wishes to overcome. He has no independent interest in it.

The justification language is . . . that of the new preachers, not that of Paul. . . . The Paul of Galatians prefers the language of deliverance (1:4), crucifixion with Christ (2:19; 6:14), redemption (3:13; 4:5), liberation (5:1), and walking by the Spirit (5:16). This language is much more important to his own theological understanding of Christ's death and resurrection than is the language of justification. In this passage (2:15–21), he focuses on justification because of its importance to the new preachers, so that he can show them . . . that works of the law are completely *irrelevant* for justification.³⁴

What are we to say to all of this? It seems to me that the whole of de Boer's reading of Paul depends for its success on his construal of *pistis Christou* as a subjective genitive in 2:16 and 3:22. It is the keystone in his arch; without it, the arch crumbles. De Boer considers four arguments in favor of taking the contended phrase as an objective genitive and seven arguments in favor of taking

32. Ibid.

33. Melancthon, *Apology* 4.72: "And because 'to be justified' means that out of unrighteous people righteous people are made or regenerated, it also means that they are pronounced or regarded as righteous. For Scripture speaks both ways."

34. De Boer, *Galatians*, 165.

it as a subjective genitive.³⁵ It is not possible to enter into each argument here. Suffice it to say that the central argument offered by de Boer in support of the objective genitive (i.e., the construal he rejects) is already a *distortion* of the traditional reading (at least in its leading Protestant forms)—so that the case is already prejudiced in favor of the subjective genitive before de Boer turns to the seven arguments he provides in favor of his preferred alternative. The argument in question is this: “If ‘works of the law’ refers to a human activity, *pistis Iēsou Christou* does as well; faith is the human response to God’s act of grace.”³⁶ The problem with this way of presenting the argument for the objective genitive is that it would never have occurred to Luther to think in this way. Faith is not, for Luther, a human work to be ranged alongside observance of the law. It is a gift of God’s grace, effected by the Holy Spirit in a human individual who is passive in its reception. Even more important, the service that faith performs in the act of receiving has no significance in and of itself. The significance lies altogether in that which is received. As Luther puts it in his Galatians commentary, “Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses the gem.”³⁷ In and of itself, the clasp of a ring has little or no value; its value lies in the precious jewel it holds. And in the case of “laying hold” of Christ, the righteousness of Christ *in us* could never provide an adequate basis for justification (since sanctification is never complete in this life). Only *extra nos*—only in Christ himself—is righteousness full and complete and therefore an adequate basis for justification. So when de Boer says (in *support* of his preference for the subjective genitive) that “‘Faith’ functions as a metonym for Christ,” it must be responded that “faith” functions in Luther’s theology as a metonym too. In Luther’s case, justification “by faith” means, in fuller expression, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ made effective in the human individual by the Spirit through the faith that the Spirit creates. “Justification by faith” is a shorthand; the phrase cannot be taken as the complete expression of what finally is a highly complex doctrine.

In any event, if the strongest weapon in the arsenal of arguments for the subjective genitive has to do with the contrast between divine activity and human activity, then the argument is in trouble, for it rests in part on a rather serious distortion of the ways in which the objective genitive was defended in the Reformation period.

Two other arguments not considered by de Boer can be added. The first is that Paul does indeed seem to understand the presence of faith in an individual

35. *Ibid.*, 149–50.

36. *Ibid.*, 149.

37. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, in LW 26:132.

as a “condition” of the person’s salvation. However true it may be that this “condition” is one the Holy Spirit effects in the individual, this “condition” will always be found in the person who is being saved. Romans 10:9–10 declares: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” (NRSV). I also do not think that there can be any question but that it is the individual whom Paul has in view here.

This leads me to a second point. I think that the weight born by the subjective genitive in de Boer’s theology of rectification is far too great for something quite so novel. The Christian tradition (both Protestant and Catholic) stands over against it in favor of the objective genitive. And the Joint Declaration establishes “faith in Christ” as basic to the shared understanding of justification. “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith *in* Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”³⁸ The Catholic exegete Joseph Fitzmyer, himself a participant in the drafting work leading up to the Joint Declaration, takes a very traditional line on the question. In relation to both Romans 3:22 and Philippians 3:9, he takes *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou* to mean “through faith in Jesus Christ.”³⁹ In addition to the position adopted in the Joint Declaration, every major translation of the Bible opts for the objective genitive (NRSV, RSV, NIV, ESV, NJB, NAB; yet NRSV and NIV offer the subjective genitive in mg.). What this amounts to, it seems to me, is an ecumenical obstacle far too great to overcome. At this point the subjective genitive is simply too controversial to obtain ecclesial standing. It is an interesting proposal but nothing more. Certainly I would not wish to rest my own case for an apocalyptic reading of Paul’s theology on this slender reed.

But if the case for the subjective genitive is seen to be weak, then there remains no truly compelling reason to prefer “rectification” language over “justification” language as the translation of *dikaioutai*, *dikaiōthōmen*, and *dikaiōthēsetai* in Galatians 2:16. I am content to stay with the NRSV: “We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith

38. JDDJ, §15, emphasis added.

39. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, “Justification by Faith in Pauline Thought,” in Aune, ed., *Rereading Paul Together*, 87. Given this translation, it is not surprising that Fitzmyer should affirm an understanding of justification lacking nothing that a traditionally minded Protestant might ask for: “When Paul speaks of Christ Jesus justifying the sinner, he means that because of the Christ-event the sinner stands before God’s tribunal and hears a verdict of ‘not guilty.’ . . . The sinner is pronounced *dikaios* (Rom. 5:7) and stands before God’s tribunal as ‘righteous, acquitted.’” See *ibid.*, 84.

in Jesus Christ.” In my view, there is no irruption of the cosmological into Paul’s forensic account of the saving significance of Christ’s death in Romans 3:21–26. And the phrase “under the power of sin” in Romans 3:9 would then also rightly be seen as having to do with sin’s power to condemn, to render one guilty and worthy of condemnation. And if that much is correct, then it also is not surprising for Paul to say that, in Christ’s death, God was condemning sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3).

Now none of what has been said thus far constitutes a straightforward victory for the Protestant doctrine of justification in its sixteenth-century forms. Nor does it require that we abandon apocalyptic readings altogether. By no means! In my opinion, a certain kind of apocalyptic thinking has the potential for enriching the traditional Protestant conception considerably. The one great impulse given to justification theology by the (in itself misguided) emphasis on the subjective genitive is how it honors the fact that Paul regards our justification as complete in Christ’s death—and I add, in his resurrection. This is something that was not grasped in the sixteenth century. My own view is that what happens in the bestowal of faith on an individual does not add anything to the justification that is achieved in Christ, nor does it even make that work effective.⁴⁰ What happens as we believe is that we begin to live from and toward *the Christ in whom justification is already fully effective*. Christ became for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30. And so Martyn and de Boer are right to lay great emphasis upon a “turn of the ages” in Christ, the passing of the present age and the coming of “new creation.” But rather than submerging justification into new creation (by redefining justification as rectification in order to bring it into line with the latter), what I think we find in Paul is the exact opposite: the divine verdict of “justification” pronounced in the raising of Christ from the dead (Rom. 4:25) is itself creative word.⁴¹ Christ is raised to die no more. “New creation” is therefore a function of the resurrection. “Justification” is (dare I say?) the master term (encompassing both the death and resurrection of Christ), and “new creation” needs to be understood as derivative of it (just

40. The most basic question to be answered in Christian soteriology is this: is what Christ accomplishes the *reality* of reconciliation/redemption or merely the *possibility* of it—a possibility that is realized only at the point at which the Holy Spirit awakens us to faith in Christ? My own view—one that I share with apocalyptic interpreters of Paul—is that Christ accomplishes the reality of reconciliation/redemption. Hence, it is already effective for those who are elect and who are, therefore, present in Christ when he does what he does—*before* they are made to be aware of it.

41. Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 61: “The event of justification implies an act of *creation*. In justification God is active as the Creator ‘who calls into existence things which do not exist’ (Rom. 4:17).”

as God’s turning toward us in mercy and grace are logically prior to the effects of that turning in us).

If, then, we cannot follow Martyn and de Boer in reading the “cosmological pattern” into the saving event itself, what are we to do? What is the *nature* of justification? What is its most fundamental meaning? And when does it take place? How are past and future related to the present?

The place to begin, in seeking answers to these questions, is with Christology. That Christ simply *is* our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30) and that he was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25) strongly suggest that the resurrection is an event of vindication and acceptance, the divine verdict pronounced on the sinless Jesus. No one would question that this acceptance is complete, full, and entire. But that then means that it is a verdict of “not guilty”—an *acquittal* in his case and precisely *not* the forgiveness of sins. Of what might Christ be forgiven? He was obedient to the point of death, and “therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend” (Phil. 2:9–10 NRSV). This Jesus stood in no need of forgiveness. He was acquitted at the bar of God’s judgment. What we see in the resurrection, I think, is the irruption into time of the final judgment. The judgment that will be universally proclaimed at the end of time has already fallen upon Jesus.

But if acquittal is basic to the meaning of justification as applied to the One in whom we too are justified, then how can it be that the *ungodly* (Rom. 4:5) are justified? “Forgiveness” we could well understand. The traditional Protestant understanding of justification has been presented often enough in terms of a nonimputation of our own sins (i.e., God chooses not to hold them against us) and a positive imputation of Christ’s (human) righteousness (i.e., God “credits” to us or “covers us” with the righteousness of Christ). And I have to admit that such a construction is not completely alien to Paul’s thinking. He does have a place for it (see, e.g., Rom. 4:7). But the place he gives it, I suggest, is *provisional*. It is not yet the *final* judgment but is something like a holding action, an interim arrangement, until ungodliness has completely passed out of existence; until, that is to say, the “old Adam” is no more. The problem with the Protestant doctrine in its traditional form is not merely that it looks like a “legal fiction.” That too is a problem, one not completely dealt with simply by making the divine declaration to be an “effective” (regenerating) word. But that is not the most basic problem. The most basic problem is that this view makes God seem arbitrary. God *chooses* not to impute our sins. God *chooses* to cover us with Christ’s righteousness. If we ask *why* God does this, we would likely respond, “Because he has entered into a covenant of grace with the human race and is faithful to the promises made in that covenant.” But

why then does God enter into a covenant of this nature? Sooner or later, our “why” questions reach an end, a point at which no further reason for God’s actions can be given. Heiko Oberman was not wrong, then, to seek the roots of the Protestant understanding of justification in medieval nominalism.⁴² But if now we were to understand God’s choices as limited to the *means* he selects for accomplishing an end that he has not chosen but is simply given in what God is (and in how God is what God is), then the specter of the arbitrary disappears. “Covering” as an interim arrangement is indeed a choice, but it is a choice that has no ultimacy. But then, if “forgiveness of sins” (and the “covering” that makes it possible) is only an interim arrangement, if it has no ultimate significance, then we must dig a bit deeper. It is precisely here, I think, that apocalyptic helps.

The final judgment that has fallen upon Jesus is not simply a judgment on him; it also is a judgment on us. That Christ’s death is a faithful death is certainly true. But what is it that Christ’s faithfulness leads him to do? It leads Jesus to die the death of a sinner. God “made him who knew no sin to be sin” (2 Cor. 5:21) so that he might “condemn sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). The death of Jesus Christ is the death *of the sinner*, the complete and total destruction not only of sin but also of the sinner. In Christ, the sinner is no more. In us, the sinner continues to exist, of course, as (we might say) the ongoing effects of a socially mediated sinfulness that was already at work in the world before the sinner was put to death on the cross—which is why God sets up an interim arrangement. But the *being* of the sinner has already been destroyed; thus the existence that is now ours is impossible and has no future. God has already put the sinner out of the way: that is the apocalypse of the righteousness of God that has prevailed and will prevail in the final judgment.

So then, justification as the judgment of acquittal pronounced on the elect on the final day requires two things: (1) the death of the sinner in the crucifixion of Christ and (2) “new creation” in his resurrection. The crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection must be seen *together* as providing the basis for God’s just judgment of acquittal on the last day. Thus the situation of the (formerly) ungodly believer in time is framed by a twofold ultimacy. Behind her (or him) lies her death as sinner; before her lies her “new creation” in the general resurrection of the dead. In the interim, her trust in God’s promise is “reckoned to her as righteousness.” She is not yet what she will be; she is not yet the person who can *rightly* be pronounced acquitted. But God regards her

42. Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1983).

for even now as if she were because her end is already known to him. And since the “as if” here has no ultimacy, God’s truthfulness cannot be questioned.

Seen in this light, several elements in Galatians 3:6–14 and 5:4–5 become more easily explained than would otherwise be the case. By his overall account of “rectification,” de Boer was placed in the position of having to undermine (if not set aside) the analogy that Paul sets up in 3:6 between Abraham and the believer in Christ. “Abraham,” de Boer says, “is not for Paul the model of believers in Christ.”⁴³ But it seems, on the face of it, that this is precisely what Paul is saying (once one has decided the dispute over the objective and the subjective genitive on the side of the objective). As the NRSV puts it, “Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ so, you see, those who believe are descendants of Abraham” (3:6). The believer is surely “like” Abraham because she does what Abraham did: she believes a promise that is directed toward an as yet unrealized end. True, the end of all things has broken into time in the cross and resurrection of Christ. But the believer in the promise contained in the Christ event has not yet been recreated in such a way that she can no longer sin. Only the general resurrection of the dead can and will accomplish that. For now, she believes the promise and trusts the One who makes it—and this trusting belief is reckoned to her “as” the righteousness that will be hers when she has been completely remade.

This way of understanding justification also helps us understand Paul’s reference to a “final justification” in Galatians 5:5. “For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness” (NRSV). The “righteousness” of the believer lies behind her and before her—and it will not do to curtail either part of the frame that Paul places around the believing existence of the Christian in time.

Barth’s Contribution to an Apocalyptic Understanding of Forensic Justification

The forensic framework of Reformation theology had two anchors: the twin doctrines of atonement and justification. Where the later Barth’s relationship

43. De Boer, *Galatians*, 191. Cf. 190: “We must stress that Abraham provides *only* an analogy, and a rough one at that, for believers in Christ. It cannot be pressed too far, for obvious reasons. The ‘believing’ of Christians involves (1) trust in (2) Christ (*pisteuein* + *eis*), whereas the ‘believing’ of Abraham involves (1) giving credence to (2) God (*pisteuein* + dative). The ‘believing’ is thus not only different in kind from that of Abraham; it is also directed to Christ, not to God.” The claim that the “believing” in question on each side of the analogy is “different in kind” would leave us with no analogy at all, and in any event, trusting and giving credence stand in a relation of reciprocity here, not opposition.

to these Reformation doctrines is concerned, the decisive questions are two: (1) In what ways did he see it necessary to modify the received doctrines? (2) What makes his later doctrine of justification “apocalyptic”? I have written extensively on the first of these problems and do not need to repeat that here.⁴⁴ A summary of the major points suffices. I take up the doctrine of atonement first since a discussion of the modifications introduced by Barth into that doctrine will help us to see not only his ongoing commitment to a genuinely *Protestant* conception but also how he was able to address the chief concerns of those who render *pistis Christou* as a subjective genitive—without committing himself to that rendering. I will then turn (very briefly) to Barth’s treatment of justification and conclude with a few remarks on Barth’s theological ontology.

Atonement

For Barth, the most significant question to be asked in Christian soteriology is this: is what Christ achieves the reality of reconciliation/redemption or merely its possibility, a possibility that is finally made effective only at the point at which the Holy Spirit awakens an individual to faith and obedience? Barth’s answer is clear: what Christ accomplishes is the *reality* of reconciliation/redemption; all that belongs to human salvation (including, of course, justification) is already fully realized *and effectual* for all *in its accomplishment*.⁴⁵ It does not need to be “applied” or even “mediated” by the Holy Spirit—which means that the Spirit’s work is not salvific in the strict sense. As the Spirit awakens an individual to faith in Christ, the Spirit enables her to *acknowledge* the reality and efficacy of Christ’s work on her behalf and to make that acknowledgment basic to her lived existence in this world. Though her faith in Christ contributes nothing to making Christ’s work effective for her, faith as acknowledgment will always be found in those who are finally redeemed.

Seen in this light, the “christological objectivism” that Richard Hays was aiming for with his recentering of justification in the event of Christ’s faithfulness is secured by Barth in an even more thoroughgoing and self-consistent way. Hays, after all, still needed for those who come after Christ to be “incorporated” into Christ’s faithfulness through baptism—which undermines the “already-efficacious” element in Barth’s reading of Paul.⁴⁶ The Martyr school has a decided advantage over Hays at precisely this point in that their

44. See Bruce L. McCormack, “*Justitia Aliena*: Karl Barth in Conversation with the Evangelical Doctrine of Imputed Righteousness,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 167–96.

45. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics (CD)*, IV/2 (2000): 507.

46. Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, xxix, xxxi.

"christological objectivism" is more complete than his—which brings them within hailing distance of even the later Barth. And yet important differences remain, differences that emerge most clearly into the light of day when Barth's thinking is understood in its historical development.

For the early Barth of the second edition of his commentary on Romans (1922), the work of Christ is subsumed largely into the category of revelation (*apocalypsis*). In that Jesus died a death to all human possibilities in his death on the cross and was raised by his Father, he revealed the true God—a God whose very being means the negation and reconstitution of all things.⁴⁷ This revelation is the turning of the ages; it is the proclamation that this world stands under the sign of death, that the "new world" is God's alone to bring. Revelation simply is reconciliation for Barth at this stage. The person who acknowledges God's self-revelation in Christ surrenders all that she has and is and lives in expectation of what God alone can and will do. Barth sets this constellation of ideas forth with the help of vivid images, many of which have been drawn from the sphere of military conquest. And so it should come as no surprise that at this stage of his development, Barth stood closest to the Martyn "school"—and its "members" can, with considerable legitimacy, lay claim to the early Barth's perspective on Paul as an anticipation of their own work. But it also has to be said that their weakness was his—and his long before it was theirs. Barth too had at that time no way to explain the relation of divine action to human action, and therefore no way to explain how one man's death could be the act of God that triumphs over sin, death, and the devil.

Without forgetting the lessons he had learned through his intensive engagement with Paul's Letter to the Romans, Barth began—just three years later—to lay the groundwork for a dogmatics.⁴⁸ For the first time he began to elaborate a doctrine of the incarnation and the rudiments of a doctrine of the Trinity. As he did so, he continued to wrestle with Paul. But he also listened to a host of other

47. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief, 1922* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1940), 72; ET, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 97:

At the high point, at the goal of His way, He is a purely negative magnitude; not a genius, not the bearer of manifest or hidden psychic powers, not a hero, a leader, a poet or thinker and precisely in this negation ("My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"), precisely in that He *sacrifices* every brilliant, psychic, heroic, aesthetic, philosophical, every thinkable human possibility whatsoever to an impossible *more*, to an unintuitable *Other*, He is the One who fulfills to the uttermost those mounting human possibilities born witness to in the law and the prophets. *Therefore*, God exalted Him, *therein* is He recognized as the Christ, *thereby* He becomes the light of the last things which shines forth above everyone and everything. Truly we see in Him God's faithfulness in the depths of hell. The Messiah is the end of the human. There too, precisely there, God is faithful. The new day of the righteousness of God wants to dawn with the day of the "sublated" human. (my translation)

48. See Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

voices—above all, the voice of the Reformers, of whom he knew little when writing his commentary. His thinking about the atonement also experienced considerable development—*initially* (up through *Church Dogmatics* II/1) in the direction of penal substitution.⁴⁹ The final step forward was taken with his revision of the doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. Here for the first time he began to articulate the ontological conditions in God for the possibility that God makes himself the subject of the human experience of death in the event of the cross. And so, the stage was set for the emergence of the later Barth's understanding of the work of Christ in volume IV of the *Dogmatics*, an understanding that moved well beyond the older penal substitutionary theories of the Reformers. The later Barth's doctrine of the atonement constitutes a modification of Calvin's forensic understanding by means of what we might think of as an "apocalyptic supplement." For him, Christ not only bears the *guilt* of human sinfulness in his death; he also has himself been "made sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). The supplement offered by Barth has to do with his belief that what takes place in the cross is nothing less than the destruction of the sinner as such. The very being of sin is dealt with in Christ's death.⁵⁰ Such a view stands in close proximity to what de Boer describes as "forensic apocalypticism."⁵¹

The later Barth not only shares with this form of apocalyptic the thought that final judgment takes place in a courtroom setting; even more important, he also agrees that the judicial verdict rendered in the event of the cross is eschatological and therefore definitive and final. The one remaining difference between the later Barth and "forensic apocalyptic" lies in the fact that Barth thinks this has happened in the midst of time rather than bringing the curtain down on history as we know and experience it. What has taken place in the cross and resurrection of Christ is, for him, a turning of the ages; the old has passed away, new things have come. That much he had said before, of course. But now it is explained by means of a judicial understanding of the atonement, which has been deepened by being joined to a theological ontology that finds its root in the doctrine of election. We can best understand this if we look in two directions: first, how Christ is "made sin" for us, and second, how we are made to be "righteous."

First, then, how is Christ "made sin" for us? John Calvin answered, "Through the mechanism of imputation."⁵² The guilt of human sin is "transferred" to

49. Barth, *CD* II/1:390–406.

50. *Ibid.*, 253–54.

51. In saying this, I am obviously suggesting that, for Barth, "forensic apocalyptic" was not the position of Paul's opponents but of Paul himself.

52. See John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5: "This is our acquittal: the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God." And 2.16.6: "The LORD has

the God-human—probably at the point when Christ says in the garden, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Barth’s answer looks in a different direction. In his soteriology, the doctrine of election does all the heavy lifting that the idea of imputation had done for Calvin. The God-human does not need to have the guilt that accrues to the sins of the elect imputed to him; he already is “the sinner” by virtue of God’s eternal choosing of himself in Christ to be the “reprobate” human. God chooses reprobation as his portion so that it will not be ours.⁵³ Thus Christ is “made sin” already in election. His embrace of the full consequences of human sinfulness (suffering, death, and perdition) is the concrete realization in time of what the God-human already *is* in pretemporal eternity—by way of anticipation. Moreover, Christ’s embrace of the full consequences of sin is the medium by means of which God takes these human experiences up into himself in order there, in his own being as God, to bring an end to them. In putting it this way, I am suggesting that sin is not simply “paid for” but indeed destroyed.

Second, Barth’s doctrine of election also provides the answer to problems surrounding “incorporation” into Christ’s “story.” Given that human beings are elected “in Christ,” they do not have to be “engrafted” into him at a later point in time. They were already “in” Christ when he suffered, died, and was raised. The death that he dies to bring an end to the sinner is already our death *in that it takes place in him*. And the new creation effected by the verdict of the Father is already effective for them in advance of their own final resurrection.

In sum, Barth’s treatment of the atoning work of Christ operates completely within the judicial frame of reference preferred by the Reformers. But the phrase “penal substitution” is not finally adequate to describe his view. Barth can certainly say that a “sentence” has been executed in Christ’s death—and he does so frequently.⁵⁴ So he is still operating primarily within the constraints of courtroom imagery. But he understands the death of Christ as bringing an end to sin as such, as removing its ontological ground so that its ongoing existence in this world has been made an “impossible possibility”—a possibility still realized but that has no future. In pursuing this line of thought, he has deepened, clarified, and modified the Reformers’ understanding of “penal substitution.” He has also addressed the concerns of the *pistis Christou* crowd without following them in their rendering of that disputed phrase. Faith *in* Christ is still necessary if one is to live in acknowledgment of what has been accomplished in Christ. But faith does not make the work of Christ effective.

laid on him the iniquity of us all’ [Isa. 53:6 NRSV]. That is, he who was about to cleanse the filth of those iniquities was covered with them by transferred imputation.”

53. See Barth, *CD II/2*:122, 353.

54. See, e.g., Barth, *CD IV/1*:219, 221, 223.

Justification

The basic meaning of “justification” for Barth is what the Protestants in the later stages of the Reformation (after 1550) said it was, namely, *acquittal*, a verdict of innocence. But for him, unlike the Reformers, the verdict in question is pronounced in the resurrection of Jesus. We are already what we will be eschatologically, but we are this only *in Christ*. In him, we have died as sinners. In him, we have been raised and made new. No imputation of Christ’s righteousness is necessary because we are the “new creation” in Christ’s already-effective work. For Barth as for Paul, justification requires that the sinner be subjected to that death that is the penalty for sin and be re-created in Christ’s resurrection. Basic to both is the divine judgment: a sentence of death in one direction and a verdict of innocence in the other. We might extend Barth’s thinking just a bit further, and thereby bring even greater clarity into it, if we said that the divine verdict of innocence is itself an “effective word,” a word that creates what it declares. To put it this way is to make God’s justifying verdict the effective cause of new creation. And to say that much brings Barth very much into line with the insistence of the Reformers on the centrality of the doctrine.

Theological Ontology

Unlike the apocalyptic readers of Paul, Barth does have a theological ontology that grounds and makes sense of the moves he has made. In his view, election is an eternal act of God with ontological significance for both God and the human. First on the side of God: election is an eternal act of *self-determination* on the part of God that makes its content essential to him.⁵⁵ If this act of “making essential” is not to introduce a mutation into God’s being already in pretemporal eternity, in God’s turning toward the world in his electing grace, then the divine “essence” cannot be thought of as in any way preceding this act but rather as given and established in it. There is nothing behind this act, no empty space in which God is at rest in himself in an “undetermined” mode of existence.⁵⁶ God is not “at first” undetermined and “then” (subsequently) determined—for God is never without this determination for the covenant of grace. The eternal act of divine self-determination is the eternal life-act of God. God is never without this determination of his being, for it is proper to him.

55. On this point, see Barth, *CD II/2:100*: “In respect of the whole attitude and being of God *ad extra*, in His relationship with the order created by Him, can there be anything higher or more distinctive *and essential* in God than His electing?” (emphasis added).

56. *Ibid.*

Now if that justification of the ungodly that is the outworking of the covenant of grace is understood to be essential to God, then we will already have removed the fundamental objection that might rightly have been brought against the Protestant doctrine in its classical, sixteenth-century forms, the objection that it makes God “arbitrary.” Given that God is never without the “determination” given in election, justification as the means by which the ends established in election are realized in time cannot be arbitrary. The ends of all God’s activities are given in the very nature of God as self-giving love. No hint of arbitrariness remains.

But election is also basic to what it means to be truly “human.” The true human, the real human, is Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and exalted. No longer is it necessary to think of the divine verdict as something that happens over the heads of those men and women who are awakened to its reality and efficacy. It is something that happens to them in Christ.

Could this theological ontology be appropriated by those working with a soteriology of cosmic warfare to provide an answer to the unresolved question of the relation of divine action to the human action of Jesus’s faithfulness? Perhaps. But there is a large obstacle in the way, for this ontology was generated while working within a judicial frame of reference. That something else—the military metaphors—could be made basic to Christian soteriology and still generate this theological ontology is doubtful.

Conclusion

What I have shown in this essay is that everything the defenders of the subjective genitive have tried to accomplish with their rendering of *pistis Christou* can be accomplished without it. And these aims can be accomplished without losing contact with the Reformation—or with the Joint Declaration for that matter. The Joint Declaration strikes the right note when it says, “We confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ. . . . Whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it.”⁵⁷

I conclude with an observation and a question. There can be no question but that significant progress has been made on the ecumenical front even as the Protestant churches, especially in North America, have drifted further and further and further away from their confessional moorings—which has certainly contributed to widening the gap between official teachings on the

57. JDDJ, §25.

one side and the content of the lived faith of theologians, ministers, and laity on the other. Our churches today are characterized by doctrinal fragmentation and even chaos. Confessing the faith together is becoming harder and harder to do. The question is posed: if we could correct Reformational teaching without contributing further to the doctrinal chaos in our churches, why wouldn't we do so? The later Barth has already provided us with a good example of how this might be done.