

“Christ our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification”

By Mark A. Seifrid

Inter Varsity Press, New Studies in Biblical Theology, 2000

\$ 19.99, 222 pages (paper)

Readers of *Modern Reformation* certainly will be interested in any book which sets forth Paul’s doctrine of justification and its relationship to the law of God. This is especially true when such a study is conducted in light of the challenges raised to traditional Protestant formulations of this critical doctrine by proponents of the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) such as E. P. Sanders and James D. G. Dunn.

Christ our Righteousness by Mark Seifrid is such a book. Associate professor of New Testament at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Dr. Seifrid is among a group of evangelical scholars widely hailed for their substantial contributions to Pauline studies. Other names which come to mind in this regard are: Douglas Moo, Frank Thielman and Thomas Schreiner. Seifrid has already written a substantial volume on Paul, *Justification by faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (E. J. Brill, 1992), and an important essay on the subject of Romans 7:14-25 in *Novum Testamentum* (Vol. 34, 1992). He is the author of an insightful review of *The Gift of Salvation* which originally appeared in *First Things* (1997) as the fruit on the ongoing evangelical-Roman Catholic discussion about the nature of the gospel (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 42). When someone with Seifrid’s pedigree weighs in on Paul, justification and the law, it is important to take notice.

Christ our Righteousness is a more accessible version of Seifrid’s earlier book, *Justification by Faith*. While *Christ Our Righteousness* includes several additional topics it remains focused on current reflection upon Paul’s understanding of justification and the law, following the trajectory set by Adolf Schlatter, Ernst Kasemann, and Peter Stuhlmacher (p. 171). As D. A. Carson points out in the book’s forward, *Christ our Righteousness* has a “prophetic quality to it” and that Seifrid is “no slave to mere traditionalism. He does not hesitate to amend traditional formulations that he judges inadequate” (p. 12). This is both the strength and the weakness of the book.

Seifrid tackles a number of exegetical issues facing the interpreter of Paul. Before summarizing some of these, let me say that *Christ our Righteousness* is another reminder that historic Protestants need not abandon the orthodox doctrine of justification *sola fide*. According to the new perspective, Paul’s gospel should be understood as follows; a person enter the covenant through election, but they remain in the covenant through obedience (covenantal nomism). As several writers have pointed out, this approaches a rather bald Pelagianism. On the other hand, Seifrid’s rather straightforward reading of Paul demonstrates that the Sanders-Dunn interpretation of Jewish and Christian sources is highly idiosyncratic and very selective in referencing critical Pauline texts. Seifrid’s book stands with those mentioned above (also see Stephen Westerholm’s book, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 1988) in providing a robust critique of the new perspective, simply by giving us a more plausible reading of Paul.

Seifrid and others have also succeeded in demonstrating that the all-too common assumption that it was Martin Luther's guilt-ridden conscience which side-tracked Pauline studies into a four hundred and fifty year dead-end, is unfounded. It was Westerholm who stated that anyone who did not think there was something to be learned about the exegesis of Paul from Martin Luther ought take up a career in metallurgy. Seifrid bolsters that case by demonstrating at several disputed points that Luther's exegesis does indeed breathe forth the spirit of Paul (p. 14, 46, 75, 117, 125, 173-174, 184, 186).

In the opening chapter, "The Conversion of Paul," Seifrid defends the thesis that Paul's conversion is best explained by not conducting a psychological evaluation of Paul or through identifying nationalistic factors which supposedly led to Paul's role in the founding of Christianity. Instead, says Seifrid, we must trace Paul's conversion to "an unconditioned act of mercy, to which Paul brought no preparation but his own sins" (p. 32). Seifrid rejects the Bultmannian interpretation which argues that Paul's rejection of "works of law" stems from the failure of the ego to trust in God, while the apostle's stress on faith in Christ arises from humanities' existential need for utter dependance upon God (p. 19). Seifrid also rejects Dunn's view that Paul's phrase "works of law" refers to ethnic "boundary markers" associated with Jewish nationalism, such as the commandments, feast days, dietary laws, and circumcision. (pp. 17-18).

In Chapter Two, "The Righteousness of God: The Message of Romans," Seifrid sets forth his main thesis that the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel and apprehended by faith (defined as "submission to the promise God fulfilled in the gospel," p. 38) must be seen against the background of the Old Testament, where God's righteousness "involves not only his vindication against his enemies, but also his bringing salvation" (p. 45). The balance of the chapter (pp. 45-76) contains Seifrid's very insightful exegesis of Romans 1:17-8:32.

Echoing traditional Protestant formulations, Seifrid argues that "the divine reckoning alone makes us righteous, not by transforming us, but by recreating our persons in God's sight. Paul's language [of justification] suggests yet a further idea; In Abraham's justification, God was also justified . . . Faith, passive though it is, is obedience, because it lets God be God and allows his judgment upon us to stand" (pp. 68-69). According to Seifrid, the central point of Romans 5:21 is that "the obedience of the one has secured life eternal for the many" (p. 72). Paul's distinction between the indicative and imperative "rules out any mystical conception: Christ's saving benefit must be grasped by faith. We have to do here with a 'theology of the word of God'" (p. 73). Much of this discussion is illuminating and will certainly stimulate those who teach and preach from the Book of Romans.

Chapter Three contains a brief survey of Paul's teaching on justification in the other epistles traditionally assigned to him ("Beyond Romans: Justification by Faith in the Letters of Paul"). Throughout these letters, Paul's "language varies according to the occasion of his writing, but the underlying structure of his thought remains constant. In Christ's death God has passed judgment upon sin, and has brought his contention with fallen humanity to its end. In Christ's resurrection God has granted righteousness and life to those who believe" (p. 77). Seifrid concludes that while Paul uses a freedom of expression determined by the varying situations in which these letters were written, themes of righteousness and justification are much the same throughout (p. 93).

In Chapter Four ("The Law of God"), Seifrid takes up the subject of the righteousness of God in relationship to the law. The law is that which "was given through Moses to Israel, announces the demands of God for life in the present, fallen world in written words, which offer life and blessing on the condition of obedience, but death and curse for disobedience. Those who know the law shall be judged

by it” (p. 96). When dealing with Galatians 2:16—one of the most disputed and important texts in current Pauline studies, as previously mentioned, Seifrid rejects the view of Dunn that Paul’s phrase “works of the law” refers to ethnic boundary markers which divided Jew from Gentile. As Seifrid correctly notes, “we may think of ‘works of the law’ in general terms as including adherence to prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, idolatry and the like along with circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and food laws.” While these things have ethnic significance, Paul rejects them as signs of the righteous (pp. 100-101).

According to Seifrid, it is vital to notice that “Paul consistently views the law in relation to God’s justifying work in Christ. He knows only of one, indivisible law of God, and provides no ground for the traditional bifurcation of the law into moral and ceremonial law.” This statement may raise a few eyebrows, and Seifrid’s case is an interesting one. Indeed, “the whole law bears witness to Christ. The whole law therefore now stands like John the Baptist in the presence of Christ. It has to yield to the greater one who has arrived” (p. 123). There are a number of points made here which will trigger additional reflection. The law is unable to effect the obedience it requires (p. 124). It is fulfilled in the gospel (p. 124). The law *as law* is absent in Paul’s moral instruction and where imperatives appear in Paul’s writings, they appear in the form of the gospel, “in which the law has been taken up and transcended” (pp. 126-127).

In Chapter Five, “Justification and the Obedience of Faith,” Seifrid addresses the question of the relationship between faith and obedience. Once again, there is much here with which historical Protestants will find of interest. Faith is defined as “directed to God’s promise Abraham which has come to fulfillment in Christ” (p. 130). Faith is God’s work in the human being through the gospel. It represents the new creation, which is called into existence by God’s word (p. 131). Faith is God’s effectual work in the human heart and “regards the recognition that the gospel which is its object is also its source” (p. 132). Faith is not mere assent or an act of decision. It is the obedience of the heart to the teaching of the gospel (pp. 135-35), since the whole person believes the promise (p. 137). The well-known distinction between the indicative and imperative is essential to Paul and have their basis in faith (p. 137). In response to the work of Richard B. Hays (*The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 1983), Seifrid rejects the notion that the phrase, “the faith of Christ,” is a subjective genitive (i.e., Christ’s faith) and should be understood in the traditional sense, Christ as the object of justifying faith (pp. 139-146).

In Chapter Six, Seifrid discusses Romans 9-11 (“The Justification of Ungodly Israel and the Nations”), and the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles throughout redemptive history. Seifrid concludes that while Israel is presently under condemnation because of unbelief (p. 152), the presence of a believing remnant becomes the “outward sign and visible promise of the [eschatological] justification of the ungodly nation” (p. 165). Israel has come under God’s judgment so that it can be created anew. “The eschatological Israel, which will be created by the fulfillment of the promise, will believe in the crucified and risen Christ” (p. 166). Therefore, Seifrid concludes, “the continuing remnant, which is truly a miracle of God . . . is a sign of salvation which its yet to come for Israel” (p. 169).

However, *Christ our Righteousness* ends on a very disappointing note. In the final chapter (“Justification in Paul, The New Testament Witness and Beyond”), Seifrid adopts the discredited thesis that a doctrinal disconnect of sorts exists between the magisterial Reformers (Luther and Calvin with their “Christ-centered view of justification” p. 172) and their Protestant scholastic descendants, who, it is argued, took the biblical insights of the Reformers and codified them into the rationalistic formulations typical of the Protestant orthodoxy of the seventeenth century. The latter, supposedly, focus not upon Christ, but on the justification of the individual believer (p. 173).

In adopting the Reformers versus the Protestant orthodox thesis, Seifrid exposes an important weakness of the contemporary theological enterprise; namely the eclipse of dogmatic (systematic) theology at the hands of biblical theology. Many, no doubt, see the eclipse of dogmatic theology as a positive thing. But this is highly problematic for a number of reasons. For one thing, this creates a climate where the myth of the magisterial Reformers versus the Protestant orthodox can be easily perpetuated. For another, biblical theologians no longer see themselves confined by traditional theological formulations. Possessing a liberty which systematic theologians do not have, biblical theologians often see themselves as functioning closer to the text of Scripture than dogmatists. Therefore, they do not feel constrained by prior theological reflection.

But dogmatic theology has an important theological task as well, providing coherent theological models for the instruction and edification of the church, and to defend the church against error. As traditionally conceived, the systematic theologian did his work using the data supplied by biblical scholars. The two disciplines were understood as being complementary, with the biblical theologian asking new questions of the text and warning systematicians of traditionalism which is the bane of dogmatic theology. But in the present theological climate, even those biblical scholars who take the authority of Scriptures very seriously feel quite free to cross traditional boundaries and to make provocative statements about matters dogmatic theologians have long regarded as essential to the gospel. Despite the need to constantly listen to the text of Scripture for new exegetical insights, there are, after all, some rather pointed warnings in Paul about “another gospel, which is no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6-9).

This divide between biblical and dogmatic theology can be seen when Seifrid makes several unfortunate and provocative comments in his closing chapter. While Seifrid is perfectly clear that justification is a forensic declaration (p.171), that is never presented as a process in which the believer is made new (p. 172) he nevertheless concludes that “it is worth observing that Paul never speaks of Christ’s righteousness as imputed to believers, as became standard in Protestantism” (p. 174).

Seifrid points out that Paul does indeed speak of imputation in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6, and ties Christ’s righteousness to his resurrection and our participation in it through faith (p. 174). But what does Paul say about Christ’s righteousness and the believer’s relationship to that righteousness in texts such as Romans 5:12-21, Philippians 3:9, and 2 Corinthians 5:21? How can we be righteous through another’s obedience? What does Paul mean by a righteousness not his own, but a righteousness which comes from God and is by faith? What does Paul mean when he speaks of being in Christ, and therefore, becoming the righteousness of God? Seifrid does not clearly say. Indeed, we must ask the question, “can we separate Christ’s resurrection from his obedience to the law of God?” Seifrid made this very point when discussing Romans 5:21: “the obedience of the one has secured life eternal for the many” (p. 72).

Furthermore, Seifrid contends that “it is not so much wrong to use the expression ‘the imputed righteousness of Christ’ as it is *deficient*. Paul after all, speaks of the forgiveness of sins, of reconciliation to God, the gift of the Spirit, ‘salvation’ and so on” (p. 175). But where do the Protestant orthodox ever neglect the reality of forgiveness, reconciliation, the gift of the Spirit, and so on, because they stress the importance of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, especially in contexts where the forensic and declaratory nature of justification is disputed? In Protestant orthodoxy, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is but one aspect—albeit a very important aspect—of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ and never negates those other vital aspects of the *ordo salutis*, which Seifrid seeks to preserve.

Seifrid singles out the *Heidelberg Catechism* for criticism because it has the “appearance of unreality” by supposedly speaking of believers in themselves apart from the justification of God (p. 174). But if

anyone reads Question 60 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* carefully (not to mention questions 16-19), they will find a list of those things the believer receives from Christ by virtue of union with him through faith; Christ's perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness, along with that obedience which Christ has fulfilled for believers. The language of satisfaction, as used by the catechism, gets to the heart of the issue which Seifrid says should be central; that the justification of the sinner is simultaneously a justification of God in his wrath against sinners. It is only through faith in Jesus Christ that the believer receives God's just verdict of forgiveness and righteousness which has already pronounced upon Christ in the form of God's wrath and vindicated by Christ's resurrection—i.e. Christ's perfect "satisfaction." Therefore, Seifrid's assertion that the catechism in particular and Protestant orthodoxy in general, contemplates justification of the believer in isolation from Christ, is simply unfounded.

Christ our Righteousness offers much exegetical insight into the letters of Paul. Seifrid reminds us that justification is at the very heart of the Paul's theology and that we cannot be justified by "works of law." But this otherwise fine volume is marred by Seifrid's unjustified assumption that the Protestant orthodox failed to grasp the apostle's Paul teaching about justification, especially in regards to the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Seifrid's purpose would be much better served had he sought to work with the dogmatists, instead of against them.