



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 169

Justification is an act of imputation – The biblical doctrine of justification is one of imputation. To understand what happens in justification it is critical for us to understand the concept of imputation. To impute means to regard, to consider, to reckon, to account. To impute is a financial, bookkeeping and legal term, which means to credit or ascribe something to someone's account, and to treat him based on the imputation and not based on what he is inherently or what he has done (Numbers 18:25-27).

In the Bible we first see this word in the life of Abraham, where in Genesis 15:6 we read, "And he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness." The Hebrew word for counted is the verb "khashab." Paul refers back to this event in Romans 4:2-3, and in verses 23-25 says that the same thing happens to all of us who believe in Christ. The Greek word for counted is the verb "logizomai," which comes from "logos," meaning word, thought, logic, reason, calculation.

The concept of imputation goes back to the garden of Eden. The Bible teaches that God established Adam not only as humanity's natural head but also as humanity's federal head (Acts 17:26; 1 Corinthians 15:49), and thus when he fell so did all whom he represented, that is, all mankind. Therefore even though we did not physically eat the forbidden fruit, being in Adam we shared in the outcome of his sin, and thus God imputed or counted Adam's sin and guilt to our account. Also all mankind inherited a corrupt or sinful nature, and with it death (Psalm 51:5; 58:3; Ephesians 2:1, 3). Before God we all stand as guilty and condemned, deserving of His punishment (Romans 5:17-19; 1 Corinthians 15:22). Thus, the first imputation in the Bible resulted in the condemnation of Adam's descendants.

The law of God cannot justify us, not because there is something wrong with the law (Psalm 19:8; Romans 7:12), but because there is something wrong with us, namely sin (Romans 1:18-20; 3:10-20). But in Romans 3:21-24 Paul gives the amazing news, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." So what is this righteousness which God has manifested apart from the law? It is the righteousness of another. Luther called this a foreign or alien righteousness, as opposed to an inherent righteousness. It is the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ (v. 24).

This is the second main imputation in the Bible, which is in Christ, and results in our justification. The imputation that occurs in our justification is really a double imputation – a negative transfer, and a positive transfer. This is directly related to what God demands from sinful man for salvation – the payment of the penalty of sin, and the fulfillment of perfect righteousness.

Jesus Christ, as the federal head and substitute for His people, had come to fulfill both of these requirements. In the doctrine of Christology, we distinguished between two aspects of Christ's work, His positive or active obedience, being the righteous life which He lived, obeying the law of God; and also His negative or passive obedience, being the sufferings He bore, culminating in His sacrificial death on the cross. Christ did not come to merely die for us; He also came to live for us. If he had only died for us then that would have only purged our sins (Acts 13:38; Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 9:22), and would have only returned us to the original condition Adam and Eve were in before they fell; but as the last Adam, Christ came to do what the first Adam failed to do, which was to fulfill the law of God perfectly (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 3:14-15; 5:17-18; John 4:34; 6:38). In doing so He merited a much greater state for us than the state of Adam and Eve, that being eternal life (Galatians 4:4-5; Titus 3:4-7).

Though sinful man is saved by grace alone, the grounds of his justification is good works, the works of Christ. Under Adam's federal headship guilt and condemnation were imputed to all mankind; but under Christ's federal headship righteousness and justification are imputed to His people (Romans 5:17-19).