

# Prejudices Against Imputation of Righteousness of Christ

by John Owen

*The doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ is a divine truth sufficiently witnessed to in the Scripture, despite some objections and differences among Protestant writers.*

**Scripture:** Luke 24:25, John 1:12, John 3:16, John 3:18, John 5:24, John 16:12, Acts 1:3, Romans 4:6, Romans 5:19

**Topics:** "Imputed Righteousness", "Justification Doctrine"

## Description

John Owen addresses common prejudices against the doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. He refutes objections that claim this doctrine is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, highlighting the importance of understanding the essence of the doctrine rather than specific terminology. Owen also discusses differences among Protestants regarding this doctrine, emphasizing the agreement on the core belief that our righteousness before God is based on Christ's righteousness imputed to us. He delves into controversies surrounding the nature of faith, the extent of Christ's righteousness imputed, and the formal cause of justification, while stressing the unity in the substance of the doctrine among Protestant writers despite varying expressions.

## Transcript

Seventhly, General prejudices against the imputation of the righteousness of Christ: -- 1. That it is not in terms found in the Scripture, answered. 2. That nothing is said of it in the writings of the evangelists, answered, John xx. 30, 31 -- Nature of Christ's personal ministry -- Revelations by the Holy Spirit immediately from Christ -- Design of the writings of the evangelists. 3. Differences among Protestants themselves about this doctrine, answered -- Sense of the ancients herein -- What is of real difference among Protestants, considered

Seventhly. There are some common prejudices, that are usually pleaded against the doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ; which, because they will not orderly fall under a particular consideration in our progress, may be briefly examined in these general previous considerations:--

1. It is usually urged against it, that this imputation of the righteousness of Christ is nowhere mentioned expressly in the Scripture. This is the first objection of Bellarmine against it. "Hactenus," says he, "nullum omnino locum invenire putuerunt, ubi legeretur Christi justitiam nobis imputari ad justitiam; vel nos justos esse per Christi justitiam nobis imputatam," De Justificat., lib. ii. cap. 7; -- an objection, doubtless,

unreasonably and immodestly urged by men of this persuasion; for not only do they make profession of their whole faith, or their belief of all things in matters of religion, in terms and expressions nowhere used in the Scripture, but believe many things also, as they say, with faith divine, not at all revealed or contained in the Scripture, but drained by them out of the traditions of the church. I do not, therefore, understand how such persons can modestly manage this as an objection against any doctrine, that the terms wherein some do express it are not *&#8165;&#951;&#964;&#8182;&#962;*, -- found in the Scripture just in that order of one word after another as by them they are used; for this rule may be much enlarged, and yet be kept strait enough to exclude the principal concerns of their church out of the confines of Christianity. Nor can I apprehend much more equity in others, who reflect with severity on this expression of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ as unscriptural, as if those who make use thereof were criminal in no small degree, when themselves, immediately in the declaration of their own judgment, make use of such terms, distinctions, and expressions, as are so far from being in the Scripture, as that it is odds they had never been in the world, had they escaped Aristotle's mint, or that of the schools deriving from him.

And thus, although a sufficient answer has frequently enough (if any thing can be so) been returned unto this objection in Bellarmine, yet has one of late amongst ourselves made the translation of it into English to be the substance of the first chapter of a book about justification; though he needed not to have given such an early intimation unto whom he is beholding for the greatest part of his ensuing discourse, unless it be what is taken up in despiteful revilings of other men. For take from him what is not his own, on the one hand, and impertinent cavils at the words and expressions of other men, with forged imputations on some of them, on the other, and his whole book will disappear. But yet, although he affirms that none of the Protestant writers, who speak of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ unto us (which were all of them, without exception, until of late), have precisely kept to the form of wholesome words, but have rather swerved and varied from the language of the Scripture; yet he will excuse them from open error, if they intend no more thereby but that we are made partakers of the benefits of the righteousness of Christ. But if they intend that the righteousness of Christ itself imputed unto us (that is, so as to be our righteousness before God, whereon we are pardoned and accepted with him, or do receive the forgiveness of sins, and a right to the heavenly inheritance), then are they guilty of that error which makes us to be esteemed to do ourselves what Christ did; and so on the other side, Christ to have done what we do and did, chap. 2, 3. But these things are not so. For, if we are esteemed to have done any thing in our own persons, it cannot be imputed unto us as done for us by another; as it will appear when we shall treat of these things afterwards. But the great and holy persons intended, are as little concerned in the accusations or apologies of some writers, as those writers seem to be acquainted with that learning, wisdom, and judgment, wherein they did excel, and the characters whereof are so eminently conspicuous in all their writings.

But the judgment of most Protestants is not only candidly expressed, but approved of also by Bellarmine himself in another place. "Non esset," says he, "absurdum, si quis diceret nobis imputari Christi justitiam et merita; cum nobis donentur et applicentur; ac si nos ipsi Deo satisfacissemus." De Justif., lib. ii., cap. 10; -- "It were not absurd, if any one should say that the righteousness and merits of Christ are imputed unto us, when they are given and applied unto us, as if we ourselves had satisfied God." And this he confirms with that saying of Bernard, Epist. ad Innocent. cxc., "Nam 'si unus pro omnibus mortuus est, ergo omnes mortui sunt,' ut videlicet satisfactio unius omnibus imputetur, sicut omnium peccata unus ille portavit." And those who will acknowledge no more in this matter, but only a participation quovis modo, one way or other, of the benefits of the obedience and righteousness of Christ, wherein we have the concurrence of

the Socinians also, might do well, as I suppose, plainly to deny all imputation of his righteousness unto us in any sense, as they do, seeing the benefits of his righteousness cannot be said to be imputed unto us, what way soever we are made partakers of them. For to say that the righteousness of Christ is imputed unto us, with respect unto the benefits of it, when neither the righteousness itself is imputed unto us, nor can the benefits of it be imputed unto us, as we shall see afterward, does minister great occasion of much needless variance and contests. Neither do I know any reason why men should seek countenance unto this doctrine under such an expression as themselves reflect upon as unscriptural, if they be contented that their minds and sense should be clearly understood and apprehended; -- for truth needs no subterfuge.

The Socinians do now principally make use of this objection. For, finding the whole church of God in the use of sundry expressions, in the declaration of the most important truths of the gospel, that are not literally contained in the Scripture, they hoped for an advantage from thence in their opposition unto the things themselves. Such are the terms of the Trinity, the incarnation, satisfaction, and merit of Christ, as this also, of the imputation of his righteousness. How little they have prevailed in the other instances, has been sufficiently manifested by them with whom they have had to do. But as unto that part of this objection which concerns the imputation of the righteousness of Christ unto, believers, those by whom it is asserted do say, --

(1.) That it is the thing alone intended which they plead for. If that be not contained in the Scripture, if it be not plainly taught and confirmed therein, they will speedily relinquish it. But if they can prove that the doctrine which they intend in this expression, and which is thereby plainly declared unto the understandings of men, is a divine truth sufficiently witnessed unto in the Scripture; then is this expression of it reductively scriptural, and the truth itself so expressed a divine verity. To deny this, is to take away all use of the interpretation of the Scripture, and to overthrow the ministry of the church. This, therefore, is to be alone inquired into.

(2.) They say, the same thing is taught and expressed in the Scripture in phrases equipollent. For it affirms that "by the obedience of one" (that is Christ), "many are made righteous," Rom. v. 19; and that we are made righteous by the imputation of righteousness unto us, "Blessed is the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works," chap. iv. 6. And if we are made righteous by the imputation of righteousness unto us, that obedience or righteousness whereby we are made righteous is imputed unto us. And they will be content with this expression of this doctrine, -- that the obedience of Christ whereby we are made righteous, is the righteousness that God imputes unto us. Wherefore, this objection is of no force to disadvantage the truth pleaded for.

2. Socinus objects, in particular, against this doctrine of justification by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, and of his satisfaction, that there is nothing said of it in the Evangelists, nor in the report of the sermons of Christ unto the people, nor yet in those of his private discourses with his disciples; and he urges it vehemently and at large against the whole of the expiation of sin by his death, *De Servator.*, par. iv., cap. 9. And as it is easy "*malis inventis pejora addere,*" this notion of his is not only made use of and pressed at large by one among ourselves, but improved also by a dangerous comparison between the writings of the evangelists and the other writings of the New Testament. For to enforce this argument, that the histories of the gospel, wherein the sermons of Christ are recorded, do make no mention of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ (as in his judgment they do not), nor of his satisfaction, or merit, or expiation of sin, or of redemption by his death (as they do not in the judgment of Socinus), it is added by him, that for his part he is apt to admire our Saviour's sermons, who was the author of our religion, before

the writings of the apostles, though inspired men. Whereunto many dangerous insinuations and reflections on the writings of St Paul, contrary to the faith and sense of the church in all ages, are subjoined. See pp. 240, 241.

But this boldness is not only unwarrantable, but to be abhorred. What place of Scripture, what ecclesiastical tradition, what single precedent of any one sober Christian writer, what theological reason, will countenance a man in making the comparison mentioned, and so determining thereon? Such juvenile boldness, such want of a due apprehension and understanding of the nature of divine inspiration, with the order and design of the writings of the New Testament, which are the springs of this precipitate censure, ought to be reflected on. At present, to remove this pretence out of our way, it may be observed, --

(1.) That what the Lord Christ taught his disciples, in his personal ministry on the earth, was suited unto that economy of the church which was antecedent unto his death and resurrection. Nothing did he withhold from them that was needful to their faith, obedience, and consolation in that state. Many things he instructed them in out of the Scripture, many new revelations he made unto them, and many times did he occasionally instruct and rectify their judgments; howbeit he made no clear, distinct revelation of those sacred mysteries unto them which are peculiar unto the faith of the New Testament, nor were to be distinctly apprehended before his death and resurrection.

(2.) What the Lord Christ revealed afterward by his Spirit unto the apostles, was no less immediately from himself than was the truth which he spoke unto them with his own mouth in the days of his flesh. An apprehension to the contrary is destructive of Christian religion. The epistles of the apostles are no less Christ's sermons than that which he delivered on the mount. Wherefore --

(3.) Neither in the things themselves, nor in the way of their delivery or revelation, is there any advantage of the one sort of writings above the other. The things written in the epistles proceed from the same wisdom, the same grace, the same love, with the things which he spoke with his own mouth in the days of his flesh, and are of the same divine veracity, authority, and efficacy. The revelation which he made by his Spirit is no less divine and immediate from himself, than what he spoke unto his disciples on the earth. To distinguish between these things, on any of these accounts, is intolerable folly.

(4.) The writings of the evangelists do not contain the whole of all the instructions which the Lord Christ gave unto his disciples personally on the earth. For he was seen of them after his resurrection forty days, and spoke with them of "the things pertaining to the kingdom of God," Acts i. 3; and yet nothing hereof is recorded in their writings, but only some few occasional speeches. Nor had he given before unto them a clear and distinct understanding of those things which were delivered concerning his death and resurrection in the Old Testament; as is plainly declared, Luke xxiv. 25-27. For it was not necessary for them, in that state wherein they were. Wherefore, --

(5.) As to the extent of divine revelations objectively, those which he granted, by his Spirit, unto his apostles after his ascension, were beyond those which he personally taught them, so far as they are recorded in the writings of the evangelists. For he told them plainly, not long before his death, that he had many things to say unto them which "then they could not bear," John xvi. 12. And for the knowledge of those things, he refers them to the coming of the Spirit to make revelation of them from himself, in the next words, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you," verses 13, 14. And on this

account he had told them before, that it was expedient for them that he should go away, that the Holy Spirit might come unto them, whom he would send from the Father, verse 7. Hereunto he referred the full and clear manifestation of the mysteries of the gospel. So false, as well as dangerous and scandalous, are those insinuations of Socinus and his followers.

(6.) The writings of the evangelists are full unto their proper ends and purposes. These were, to record the genealogy, conception, birth, acts, miracles, and teachings of our Saviour, so far as to evince him to be the true, only-promised Messiah. So he testifies who wrote the last of them: "Many other signs truly did Jesus, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," John xx. 30, 31. Unto this end every thing is recorded by them that is needful unto the ingenerating and establishing of faith. Upon this confirmation, all things declared in the Old Testament concerning him -- all that was taught in types and sacrifices -- became the object of faith, in that sense wherein they were interpreted in the accomplishment; and that in them this doctrine was before revealed, shall be proved afterward. It is, therefore, no wonder if some things, and those of the highest importance, should be declared more fully in other writings of the New Testament than they are in those of the evangelists.

(7.) The pretence itself is wholly false; for there are as many pregnant testimonies given unto this truth in one alone of the evangelists as in any other book of the New Testament, -- namely, in the book of John. I shall refer to some of them, which will be pleaded in their proper place, chap. i. 12, 17; iii. 14-18, 36; v. 24.

But we may pass this by, as one of those inventions concerning which Socinus boasts, in his epistle to Michael Vajoditus, that his writings were esteemed by many for the singularity of things asserted in them.

3. The difference that has been among Protestant writers about this doctrine is pleaded in the prejudice of it. Osiander, in the entrance of the reformation, fell into a vain imagination, that we were justified or made righteous with the essential righteousness of God, communicated unto us by Jesus Christ. And whereas he was opposed herein with some severity by the most learned persons of those days, to countenance himself in his singularity, he pretended that there were twenty different opinions amongst the Protestants themselves about the formal cause of our justification before God. This was quickly laid hold on by them of the Roman church, and is urged as a prejudice against the whole doctrine, by Bellarmine, Vasquez, and others. But the vanity of this pretence of his has been sufficiently discovered; and Bellarmine himself could fancy but 61four opinions among them that seemed to be different from one another, reckoning that of Osiander for one, *De Justificat.*, lib. ii., cap. 1. But whereas he knew that the imagination of Osiander was exploded by them all, the other three that he mentions are indeed but distinct parts of the same entire doctrine. Wherefore, until of late it might be truly said, that the faith and doctrine of all Protestants was in this article entirely the same. For however they differed in the way, manner, and methods of its declaration, and too many private men were addicted unto definitions and descriptions of their own, under pretence of logical accuracy in teaching, which gave an appearance of some contradiction among them; yet in this they generally agreed, that it is the righteousness of Christ, and not our own, on the account whereof we receive the pardon of sin, acceptance with God, are declared righteous by the gospel, and have a right and title unto the heavenly inheritance. Hereon, I say, they were generally agreed, first against the Papists, and afterwards against the Socinians; and where this is granted, I will not contend with any man about his way of declaring the doctrine of it.

And that I may add it by the way, we have herein the concurrence of the fathers of the primitive church. For although by justification, following the etymology of the Latin word, they understood the making us

righteous with internal personal righteousness, -- at least some of them did so, as Austin in particular, -- yet that we are pardoned and accepted with God on any other account but that of the righteousness of Christ, they believed not. And whereas, especially in their controversy with the Pelagians, after the rising of that heresy, they plead vehemently that we are made righteous by the grace of God changing our hearts and natures, and creating in us a principle of spiritual life and holiness, and not by the endeavours of our own free will, or works performed in the strength thereof, their words and expressions have been abused, contrary to their intention and design.

For we wholly concur with them, and subscribe unto all that they dispute about the making of us personally righteous and holy by the effectual grace of God, against all merit of works and operations of our own free will (our sanctification being every way as much of grace as our justification, properly so called); and that in opposition unto the common doctrine of the Roman church about the same matter: only they call this our being made inherently and personally righteous by grace, sometimes by the name of justification, which we do not. And this is laid hold on as an advantage by those of the Roman church who do not concur with them in the way and manner whereby we are so made righteous. But whereas by our justification before God, we intend only that righteousness whereon our sins are pardoned, wherewith we are made righteous in his sight, or for which we are accepted as righteous before him, it will be hard to find any of them assigning of it unto any other causes than the Protestants do. So it is fallen out, that what they design to prove, we entirely comply with them in; but the way and manner whereby they prove it is made use of by the Papists unto another end, which they intended not.

But as to the way and manner of the declaration of this doctrine among Protestants themselves, there ever was some variety and difference in expressions; nor will it otherwise be whilst the abilities and capacities of men, whether in the conceiving of things of this nature, or in the expression of their conceptions, are so various as they are. And it is acknowledged that these differences of late have had by some as much weight laid upon them as the substance of the doctrine generally agreed in. Hence some have composed entire books, consisting almost of nothing but impertinent cavils at other men's words and expressions. But these things proceed from the weakness of some men, and other vicious habits of their minds, and do not belong unto the cause itself. And such persons, as for me, shall write as they do, and fight on until they are weary. Neither has the multiplication of questions, and the curious discussion of them in the handling of this doctrine, wherein nothing ought to be diligently insisted on but what is directive of our practice, been of much use unto the truth itself, though it has not been directly opposed in them.

That which is of real difference among persons who agree in the substance of the doctrine, may be reduced unto a very few heads; as, -- (1.) There is something of this kind about the nature of faith whereby we are justified, with its proper object in justifying, and its use in justification. And an instance we have herein, not only of the weakness of our intellects in the apprehension of spiritual things, but also of the remainders of confusion and disorder in our minds; at least, how true it is that we know only in part, and prophesy only in part, whilst we are in this life. For whereas this faith is an act of our minds, put forth in the way of duty to God, yet many by whom it is sincerely exercised, and that continually, are not agreed either in the nature or proper object of it. Yet is there no doubt but that some of them who differ amongst themselves about these things, have delivered their minds free from the prepossession of prejudices and notions derived from other artificial reasonings imposed on them, and do really express their own conceptions as to the best and utmost of their experience. And notwithstanding this difference, they do yet all of them please God in the exercise of faith, as it is their duty, and have that respect unto its proper object as secures both their justification and salvation. And if we cannot, on this consideration, bear

with, and forbear, one another in our different conceptions and expressions of those conceptions about these things, it is a sign we have a great mind to be contentious, and that our confidences are built on very weak foundations. For my part, I had much rather my lot should be found among them who do really believe with the heart unto righteousness, though they are not able to give a tolerable definition of faith unto others, than among them who can endlessly dispute about it with seeming accuracy and skill, but are negligent in the exercise of it as their own duty. Wherefore, some things shall be briefly spoken of in this matter, to declare my own apprehensions concerning the things mentioned, without the least design to contradict or oppose the conceptions of others.

(2.) There has been a controversy more directly stated among some learned divines of the Reformed churches (for the Lutherans are unanimous on the one side), about the righteousness of Christ that is said to be imputed unto us. For some would have this to be only his suffering of death, and the satisfaction which he made for sin thereby, and others include therein the obedience of his life also. The occasion, original, and progress of this controversy, the persons by whom it has been managed, with the writings wherein it is so, and the various ways that have been endeavoured for its reconciliation, are sufficiently known unto all who have inquired into these things. Neither shall I immix myself herein, in the way of controversy, or in opposition unto others, though I shall freely declare my own judgment in it, so far as the consideration of the righteousness of Christ, under this distinction, is inseparable from the substance of the truth itself which I plead for.

(3.) Some difference there has been, also, whether the righteousness of Christ imputed unto us, or the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, may be said to be the formal cause of our justification before God; wherein there appears some variety of expression among learned men, who have handled this subject in the way of controversy with the Papists. The true occasion of the differences about this expression has been this, and no other: Those of the Roman church do constantly assert, that the righteousness whereby we are righteous before God is the formal cause of our justification; and this righteousness, they say, is our own inherent, personal righteousness, and not the righteousness of Christ imputed unto us: wherefore they treat of this whole controversy -- namely, what is the righteousness on the account whereof we are accepted with God, or justified -- under the name of the formal cause of justification; which is the subject of the second book of Bellarmine concerning justification. In opposition unto them, some Protestants, contending that the righteousness wherewith we are esteemed righteous before God, and accepted with him, is the righteousness of Christ imputed unto us, and not our own inherent, imperfect, personal righteousness, have done it under this inquiry, -- namely, What is the formal cause of our justification? Which some have said to be the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, -- some, the righteousness of Christ imputed. But what they designed herein was, not to resolve this controversy into a philosophical inquiry about the nature of a formal cause, but only to prove that that truly belonged unto the righteousness of Christ in our justification which the Papists ascribed unto our own, under that name. That there is a habitual, infused habit of grace, which is the formal cause of our personal, inherent righteousness, they grant: but they all deny that God pardons our sins, and justifies our persons, with respect unto this righteousness, as the formal cause thereof; nay, they deny that in the justification of a sinner there either is, or can be, any inherent formal cause of it. And what they mean by a formal cause in our justification, is only that which gives the denomination unto the subject, as the imputation of the righteousness of Christ does to a person that he is justified.

Wherefore, notwithstanding the differences that have been among some in the various expression of their conceptions, the substance of the doctrine of the reformed churches is by them agreed upon and retained

entire. For they all agree that God justifies no sinner, -- absolves him not from guilt, nor declares him righteous, so as to have a title unto the heavenly inheritance, -- but with respect unto a true and perfect righteousness; as also, that this righteousness is truly the righteousness of him that is so justified; that this righteousness becomes ours by God's free grace and donation, -- the way on our part whereby we come to be really and effectually interested therein being faith alone; and that this is the perfect obedience or righteousness of Christ imputed unto us: in these things, as they shall be afterwards distinctly explained, is contained the whole of that truth whose explanation and confirmation is the design of the ensuing discourse. And because those by whom this doctrine in the substance of it is of late impugned, derive more from the Socinians than the Papists, and make a nearer approach unto their principles, I shall chiefly insist on the examination of those original authors by whom their notions were first coined, and whose weapons they make use of in their defence.

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