The *SBJT* Forum

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Barry Joslin, C. Everett Berry, and Denny Burk have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

***SBJT*: What are the most common errors that people make when it comes to understanding and proclaiming the kingdom?**

D. A. Carson: I shall list a handful. They are in no particular order of importance, primarily because several of these interpretive errors belong to distinctive groups. To rank the importance of the error would require ranking the influence of each group—and that, of course, is an entirely different question. But several of these errors have something in common: they are errors because they succumb to reductionism. They rightly see some corner of the truth, but then absolutize it in such a way that they fail to see how "kingdom" is, linguistically speaking, a tensive symbol, with a very broad array of referents and overtones in the Bible. To absolutize only a part of the evidence not only makes exegetical nonsense out of other passages and thus skews the comprehensiveness of the ways in which the Bible speaks of the kingdom of God (and related expressions), but it ends up with distorted theological synthesis.

First, some forms of theology inject a temporal barrier between "kingdom" and "church": the church belongs to this dispensation, and the kingdom to the next. At least some passages cannot easily be squared with such an outlook: e.g., "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin" (Col 1:13–14).

Second, sometimes the inverse error is promoted. The old hymn by Timothy Dwight promotes the view that "kingdom" and "church" refer to the same thing:

> I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
> The house of Thine abode,
> The church our blest Redeemer saved
> With His own precious blood.

But this is a *category* mistake. The word "church" refers to a gathering, an assembly, of people; the word "kingdom," in the first instance, refers to the dynamic notion of "reign" (whatever the more precise meanings it carries as it interacts with particular contexts). Even if there is some sense in which God rules over his church in a different way than he rules over everyone else—and we shall see that that is the case—the two words "church" and "kingdom" belong to different categories and should not be treated as synonyms. Sometimes this mistake is made by people who argue that we ought to *expect* the church to be made up of believers and unbelievers alike, and who

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attempt to defend the point by appealing to the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matt 24:13–29, 36–43). But Jesus explicitly tells us that this is a parable of the *kingdom*. And, as we shall see, it is a parable designed, in part, to establish a certain stance on the present and the future, not to give us a profile of the church.

Indeed, that is the *third* arena where errors about the kingdom are not uncommon: tensions between the biblical descriptions of inaugurated eschatology (the kingdom has come) and futurist eschatology (the kingdom comes at the end). On the one hand, Jesus tells certain parables of the kingdom in order to get across that the expected "big bang" is not yet. For instance (if I may use the formula much loved by the rabbis when they told their parables, and used by Jesus himself), it is the case with the kingdom as with the soils: there is varying receptivity to the word that is sown, and varying degrees of fruitfulness. The kingdom did not come in instantaneous and utterly effective division. It came slowly, with varying responses. Elsewhere we are told that this side of Jesus' resurrection and exaltation, *all* authority in heaven and on earth is his: in other words, Jesus Christ reigns, even though we do not see everything and everyone cheerfully submitted to him. To use the language of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus must reign until he has destroyed all his enemies, the last of those enemies being death itself. So all of the Father's royal authority is now mediated through Christ: he reigns, even though his reign must be contested until the last enemy is destroyed. All of these images and passages (and there are many more) conjure up a picture of a kingdom already here, already operating, already inaugurated, still contested. On the other hand, the seer John foresees a time when "[t]he kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15), when the hosts of darkness face crushing defeat (Rev 19:11-21); Paul announces a time when every knee will bow (Phil 2:10–11). Many passages picture believers "inheriting" the kingdom at the end.

There are pastoral implications to this running tension between the "already"-reigning kingdom and the "not yet" kingdom. It has been plausibly argued that Corinthian believers were tempted by an over-realized eschatology: already they think of themselves as kings beginning their reign (1 Cor 4:8), and thus they have overlooked the call to suffer exemplified by the apostles themselves. By contrast, it appears that some Thessalonians, insufficiently grateful for the gospel blessings they had already received, and eagerly anticipating the coming of the future kingdom which they thought to be right around the corner, could stint on mundane responsibilities, don ascension robes, sit on a hill in California and sing advent songs. There are negative repercussions to getting the balance of Scripture wrong.

A *fourth* arena of reductionism is found where Christians overlook the fact that in some passages "kingdom" is a sweeping category that leaves nothing out from the arch of its reign—nothing in heaven or on earth, no human being redeemed or otherwise—while in other passages the "kingdom" is that subset of God's sweeping, providential sovereignty under which there is forgiveness with God and eternal life. Not everyone falls under this latter "reign" or "kingdom."

It is easy enough to recall texts on both sides of this pair. On the one hand,

"The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (Psa 103:19). In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, to which I've already referred, it is the *kingdom* that is likened to this situation, a situation of mixed wheat and weeds until the end when a final separation takes place. When "kingdom" has so broad an embrace, we must conclude that *everyone* is in the "kingdom" in that sense of "kingdom"; all of us are wheat or weeds. It is equivalent to saying that all of us live under God's reign whether we like it or not; all of us live under his reigning providence; it is simply unavoidable. On the other hand, elsewhere Jesus can teach that unless people are born again they cannot see or enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). Clearly "kingdom" in this context is more restrictive: some people are in it, and some people are not. To focus entirely on the former sometimes engenders conclusions made up of equal parts of truth and of mushy sentiment: "All human beings are children of God, all are in his kingdom." Well, yes, in exactly the same way that Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler, and Joe Stalin remained, all their lives, under the unavoidable aegis of God's sovereign sway, but this will not strike thoughtful people as an adequate basis for establishing discernment or for fostering utopian inclusivism. On the other hand, to focus entirely on the kingdom as presented in John 3 may regrettably lead some so to focus on the circle of the regenerated that they overlook the sweeping ways in which God's reign, however mediated by secondary causalities, is truly over all.

Increasingly during the last couple of decades, two vociferous groups focus on a *fifth* emphasis which, if it were well-integrated with everything else the Bible says about the kingdom, would not be problematic, but which, when it is taken almost on its own, makes "kingdom" an adjective that blesses whatever I want blessed. Thus we hear a lot today of "kingdom ethics": the actual content can come from that part of the Reformed camp that speaks fluently of redeeming the culture, or from that part of the Anabaptist/Hauerwas/Emergent camp that nods repeatedly and appreciatively at either pacifism or 1920s liberalism, or both. Neither camp is entirely wrong: certainly to live under the saving reign of God entails the transformation of life, including the transformation of ethical life. Yet the ease with which *other* biblical emphases regarding the kingdom are lost is disconcerting. In the present climate I'm suspicious of anyone who uses "kingdom" only as an adjective, for usually it is merely a theologically posh way of approving one's current theological and ethical agenda. If we like some ethical course, we label it "kingdom ethics" and bless it with a text, and epistemology is satisfied.

A particularly virulent form of this approach is hidden behind what Tony Campolo now approvingly calls "red letter Christians." These red letter Christians, he says, hold the same theological commitments as do other evangelicals, but they take the words of Jesus especially seriously (they devote themselves to the "red letters" of some foolishly printed Bibles) and end up being more concerned than are other Christians for the poor, the hungry, and those at war. Oh, rubbish: this is merely one more futile exercise in trying to find a "canon within the canon" to bless my preferred brand of theology. That's the first of two serious mistakes commonly practiced by these red letter Christians. The other is worse: their actual grasp of what the red letter words of Jesus

are actually saying *in context* far too frequently leaves a great deal to be desired; more particularly, to read the *words* of Jesus and emphasize them *apart from the narrative framework of each of the canonical gospels, in which the plot-line takes the reader to Jesus' redeeming death and resurrection*, not only has the result of down-playing Jesus' death and resurrection, but regularly fails to see how the red-letter words of Jesus point to and unpack the significance of his impending crosswork. In other words, it is not only Paul who says that Jesus' cross and resurrection constitute matters "of first importance" (1 Cor 15:3), and not only Paul who was resolved to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:1–5), but the shape of the narrative *in each canonical gospel* says the same thing. In each case the narrative rushes toward the cross and resurrection; the cross and resurrection are the climax. So to interpret the narrative, including the red-letter words of Jesus, apart from the climax to which they are rushing, is necessarily a distortion of the canonical Gospels themselves.

Some of the Gospel passion accounts make this particularly clear. In Matthew, for example, Jesus is repeatedly mocked as "the king of the Jews" (27:27–31, 37, 42). But Matthew knows that his readers have been told from the beginning of his book (even the bits without red letters) that Jesus *is* the king: the first chapter establishes the point, and tells us that, as the promised Davidic king, he is given the name "YHWH saves" ("Jesus") because he comes to save his people from their sins. Small wonder for its first three centuries the church meditated often on the irony of Jesus "reigning" from a cross, that barbaric Roman instrument of torture and shame. And it is Matthew who reminds us that, this side of the cross, this side of the resurrection, *all* authority belongs to Jesus (28:18–20). These constitute parts of the narrative framework without which Jesus' red-letter words, not least his portrayals of the kingdom, cannot be rightly understood.

In short: serious Christians will want to avoid reductionism. We must carefully study the sweep of "kingdom" uses, pay close attention to the immediate context, and faithfully emphasize what all of Scripture declares to be matters "of first importance."

***SBJT*: Is the kingdom of God the same thing as the church? If not, are they related?**

Barry Joslin: The relation of the kingdom of God to the church is a difficult question. They are not to be seen as one and the same, though they are related. While the church is the bride of Christ and the new covenant community of God, the kingdom is God's redemptive and sovereign rule that has broken into the present evil age. It was inaugurated in the ministry of Christ, and His church awaits its consummation and global, visible rule (Matt 25:31-46).

Both the kingdom of God/heaven (also called the kingdom of Christ, Eph 5:5; Col 1:13) and the church are major themes in the New Testament, yet in Jesus' ministry it is clearly the kingdom that takes center stage—being referred to well over forty times *each* in Matthew and Luke alone. Beginning with his forerunner John the Baptist (whose message was identical to that of Jesus—compare Matt 3:2 and 4:17), our Lord's central topic of preaching was the kingdom of God (Mk 1:15). When the seventy were sent out, their message was the same (Luke 10:9). When Jesus teaches

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his disciples (and his church) how to pray, they and we are taught to pray "Thy kingdom come." Further, the message of the kingdom was so apparent in Jesus' own ministry that the dying thief on the cross next to Jesus requested to be part of this kingdom (Luke 23:42).

Luke records for us that the proclamation of the early church was centered on the matter of the kingdom. The disciples' forty days of training before Pentecost consisted of Jesus speaking about a central issue—the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). In addition, it is helpful to note several things concerning the earliest record of the church in Acts: Luke begins and ends Acts with the matter of the kingdom (Acts 1:3 and 28:30); Philip's message as he preaches is the kingdom (8:12); Paul reasons with the Jews for several months about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8); the kingdom is the summation of Paul's preaching to the Ephesian church (Acts 20:25); and Acts concludes with Paul in Rome preaching and reasoning from the Old Testament about the kingdom of God (Acts 28:23, 30). Thus, on a most basic level, what we see is that the church *preaches* the kingdom, yet it is never called to preach the church. The church is not the message. Rather, the church witnesses to and is the instrument of the kingdom. Therefore as the church, we are to preach the kingdom right up until the time the King returns to consummate His kingdom. In short, Christ's message was the kingdom of God, and this was passed on to the founding pillars of the church, and must be the church's message today. Kingdom and church are related, but are not synonymous.

Now that we have seen that the kingdom and the church are not identical, the question returns to how they relate. As defined above, the kingdom is God's saving, redemptive rule into which we are summoned. One enters the kingdom, and God's kingdom rule in Christ delivers each of its subjects from the dominion of darkness, spelling defeat for Satan and the powers of evil. His rule invades the kingdom of Satan and overthrows it one soul at a time, binding the strong man (Mark 3:24-27; Matt 12:26-29). Therefore an important distinction between the two is that the kingdom *creates* the church and not vice-versa. The church is the *result* of the kingdom's inauguration into the world through the proclamation in and through Jesus. While the New Testament regularly refers to believers as the church, it does not refer to believers as the kingdom (except in Rev 1:6 and 5:10, the context of which indicates that the saints are "a kingdom" in that they will share in Christ's reign). It is right to say that the church is a people who have received the offer of the kingdom of God, but that is not the same thing as saying that the church *is* the kingdom. As the church, we await its full and final expression at the end of the age—the coming of the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ—the glorious eschatological rule of God where justice reigns and death is no more. It is the day both of salvation and judgment, depending on whether one has entered the kingdom (Matt 7:21; John 3:3, 5) or remains outside (Matt 13:36-43; 47-50; 22:11-14; 25:1-13).

What we also see as part of this inseparable relationship is that the kingdom of God works through the church. Matthew 16:18-19 informs us that the church holds the keys to the kingdom. Concerning this passage, many have noted that Luke 11:52 is helpful in ascertaining that the "keys" in view are the keys of the knowledge of what the scriptures teach of Christ and

entrance into his kingdom. As such, the religious leaders do not enter, and their teaching prevents their followers from entering as well. Yet Peter's confession of Christ in Matt 16:18-19 is just the beginning of what Peter is coming to understand. He will proclaim the gospel of the kingdom and in so doing it will be opened to many ("loosed") while others will be shut out ("bound"). We see that this occurs in Peter's recorded ministry in Acts in which many are loosed (Acts 2:14-39; 3:11-26) while others are bound and shut out (Acts 4:11-12; 8:20-23). This begins with Peter, but is not restricted to him. This binding and loosing is accomplished whenever the gospel of the kingdom of Christ is preached. Those who respond are loosed, while those who reject this message are bound.

Through gospel preaching, whatever the church binds or looses will have already been bound or loosed. This kingdom binding and loosing is seen in Matt 18:18 in the context of discipline, and is an application of what is taught in 16:18-19. The church has the keys to the kingdom, and so long as its message adheres to the divinely-given gospel, then it either ushers in or excludes those that have already been loosed or bound by God. The church is God's eschatological people of the kingdom that has already broken into this age, and we are summoned by the King to utilize the keys to bind and loose. A correct application of church discipline is part of what it means to follow Jesus during this age of the inaugurated kingdom. As such, it is often noted that the church is not only the *instrument* of the kingdom, but also the *custodian* of the kingdom.

In short, the church is not the kingdom, yet the two are inseparable. The sovereign, redemptive rule of God has broken into this age in the ministry of Jesus Christ, and creates the church by plundering the devil's dominion and loosing many from the bonds of their captivity. The church is the instrument and custodian of the kingdom, and witnesses to the kingdom of Christ until it has been preached to all the nations. Then our King will come (Matt 24:14).

***SBJT*: How can the theological construct of inaugurated eschatology help us in forming a biblical understanding of Christian sanctification?**

C. Everett Berry*:* The term inauguration essentially refers to an act of ceremonial observance whereby a given party officially inducts another newly designated party into a special position of authority. Note also that this practice typically alludes to a significant transition wherein the subject being inaugurated represents a new phase of leadership or service. And it is here where insight has proven helpful to evangelicals as they attempt to conceptualize the theological flow of the biblical storyline and delineate the hermeneutical symmetry between Old Testament promise and Christological fulfillment. Specifically, the concept known as "inaugurated eschatology" highlights a theological tension in the New Testament between the temporary co-existence of two mutually exclusive realms. First there is "the present age," which is marked by all the consequences of sin upon the world including the divine curse as well as Satanic oppression. This era continues to wreak havoc upon humanity but now with one crucial difference. It exists on borrowed time because of the beginning of another age established by the finished work of Jesus Christ. His act of redemption defeated death, made atonement for

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sin, thwarted the works of the devil, and provided a means whereby the kingdom of heaven might eventually become a full reality on earth. Consequently, the completion of his Father's mission marked the dawning of a new eschatological era that would bring salvation and restoration from sin.

The key though is that the full realization of this *telos* is not instantaneous. The biblical writers understood the resurrection and ascension of Christ as events that set in motion, or inaugurated, the gradual ushering of "the age to come" into the present. Now the present age commences on a divinely-set stopwatch ticking down the last days until the impending kingdom of God arrives in its consummate form on the last Day, which is otherwise known as the Day of the Lord when the glorified Christ returns to save his people and judge his enemies. Furthermore, believers in the early church were taught that this future was certain because of promises made by Christ and his apostles regarding the imminent *parousia*. They were also assured of this reality by virtue of the fact that Christ was currently executing in preliminary form the power of the future kingdom amidst the very time of spiritual darkness in which they still lived. While they existed in a world blinded by Satan and cursed because of Adam's sin, they were likewise experiencing many of the blessings of the eschatological age. The forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of the Spirit, and the gift of eternal life were soteric foretastes that were indicative of future realities not yet received, such as resurrection from the dead, the absence of sin's carnal influence, and a new creation.

Theologically speaking then, the concept of inaugurated eschatology obviously has tremendous implications for interpreting numerous motifs in Scripture. Yet one theme often overlooked is its relationship to the doctrine of sanctification. One notices when reading the ethical sections of the New Testament that biblical writers frequently allude to believers' identity as kingdom citizens of the age to come in order to exhort them to live out their faith in the world now. The portrait given in Scripture is that believers are a people who live in the hostile convergence of two antithetical ages that overlap, thus creating a kind of parallel universe. On the one hand, our redemption is not experientially culminated because we still struggle with temptation, sin, and spiritual immaturity. Yet on the other, we have been born again, empowered by the Spirit, and thereby become new creations in Christ.

The net result of these dual truths is a clash of loyalties because now we as believers are admonished to repudiate the immoral ways of our old identity as children made in Adam's image by walking in the power of the Spirit so we can be continually conformed into the image of the second Adam. The theological irony, however, is that we do not reject our former way of life so we can gradually achieve a new spiritual rank. We recognize instead that at conversion, we forfeit our spiritual link to the present age and became full citizens and heirs of the future kingdom. Therefore, because of the dynamic of inaugurated eschatology, biblical sanctification does not focus on maintaining a certain life style in order to gain something we do not have yet. Rather we are to grow in grace in order to reflect the identity that is already fully ours. This is why believers in the New Testament are not described as sinners who should change in order to be called

saints one day. It is because they already are saints positionally that they are to exhibit a certain life practically. So in a sense each ethical mandate placed before us as believers entails an eschatological context that validates its authority. For instance, we seek those things that are Christ-honoring because it is there where we have already been seated (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1). We forgive those who wrong us because we have been forgiven (Eph 4:32; 1 John 4:11). We do not take fellow believers to civil courts because we are to be judges of angels (1 Cor 6:2-3). We live as loving servants in all social contexts because the ones exalted in the future are the ones who serve in the present (Matt 18:4-5; 19:28-30). We maintain physical purity because we are indwelt by the Spirit who is given to us as a promise of a future eschatological reunion (1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 5:5; Eph 1:14). Moreover, in the end we see that because Christ's kingship is a reality now, sin in our lives is not only to be understood as rebellion against God our Creator. It is also contrary to who we are as Christ's redeemed people because in the age to come, kingdom citizens will walk in full obedience to their Lord.

SBJT: How does an inaugurated eschatology feature in Paul's teachings about "justification/righteousness"?

Denny Burk: D. A. Carson has made an important methodological distinction that must be taken into account as we consider how inaugurated eschatology informs our thinking about the doctrine of justification. We can speak of any given theological concept in at least two different domains of discourse—that of systematic theology and that of exegesis. For this reason, it would be a methodological mistake to read the systematic definition of a doctrine into every lexical parallel that one finds in the Bible. Such a procedure will inevitably lead to an *eisegetical* distortion of the Scripture.

So it is when we speak of the doctrine of justification. At the level of systematics, justification is rightly used to describe the Bible's total message about how God reckons sinners to be righteous by faith apart from works. In this sense, justification is grounded in the atoning work of Christ, and it consists of God's declaration that the sinner is righteous. It is God's forensic declaration of "righteousness" upon the believing sinner. It is an acquittal experienced by the sinner at the moment he believes in Christ. In terms of the sinner's experience, justification is a part of the "already" of God's salvific work.

It would be an *eisegetical* distortion of the text, however, to read that systematic definition of justification into every use of *righteousness* language in Paul's writings. At the level of exegesis, it is plain enough that Paul employs terms from the *dikē* word group with reference to both the "already" and the "not yet" of God's justifying work in Christ.

In fact, I would argue that it is impossible to understand properly Paul's doctrine of justification without recognizing both the *already* and the *not yet* features of God's work for us in Christ. In terms of the "already," Paul teaches that when sinners believe in the gospel, God reckons the sinner to be righteous quite apart from his keeping of the law. For example, Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). In this instance, justification has *already* been apprehended as a present reality of the sinner's experience (cf. Rom 5:9; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21; Titus 3:7).

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Elsewhere, however, Paul uses the *dikē* word group to refer to future, eschatological realities. In Romans 2:13, it is not the "hearers of the law" who are "righteous before God," but the doers of the law who "will be justified." Paradoxically, it is not by doing works of law that sinners "will be justified" (Rom 3:20). Paul says that God "will justify" both Jews and Gentiles by faith (Rom 3:30). According to Robert Yarbrough (see *SBJT* 11, no. 3 [2007]: 53), all three of these uses of the *dikē* word group refer to God's end-time verdict of justification. Thus, justification in this sense is very much a part of the "not yet" of the sinner's experience.

But how does Paul integrate the "already" and the "not yet" features of his *righteousness* language? The answer to that question lies in the eschatological verdict and acquittal that God enacted through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul believed that God's end-time judgment had broken into history through the death and resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, God condemned sin in the flesh (Rom 8:3). Paul believed, along with many other Jews of his day, that at the final judgment God would raise to life and blessedness the dead bodies of the righteous (e.g., Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29; 11:24). That general resurrection would constitute a vindication of God's people. Paul therefore viewed Christ's resurrection through an eschatological lens. Jesus' resurrection/vindication was not an isolated event. It was the signal that God's eschatological judgment had begun and that in due time God would resurrect and vindicate all of His people. Thus Paul speaks of Christ as the "first fruits" of those who have died and who are to be resurrected (1 Cor 15:20, 23). God is working to conform believers to the image of the resurrected Christ "that He might be the first-born among many brothers" (Rom 8:29).

For Paul, believing in Christ means uniting oneself to the one Human for whom God has already pronounced His eschatological judgment. God has condemned sin in the death of Jesus. God has vindicated Christ in the resurrection. The only refuge from the wrath to come is in the One who has already absorbed that wrath at the cross. The only hope for resurrection and vindication in the age to come is to be united to the One who has already been resurrected and vindicated. Paul teaches that when the sinner believes in Christ, God declares him to be what he will in fact be at the final judgment. Thus God's justifying verdict upon the believing sinner in the present is grounded solely in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. God's justifying work at the final judgment is merely the enactment of the verdict that was already received by the sinner through faith.

It is only in this framework that the curious collocation of "justification" and "resurrection" in Rom 4:25 makes any sense: "He was handed over for our transgressions, and he was resurrected for our justification." In the first clause, Paul is simply saying that Christ's death ("handed over") constitutes a sacrificial death in place of sinners. In the second clause, he is indicating that our final vindication (which consists in resurrection) is grounded in Christ's own resurrection and vindication.

Paul teaches that the gospel compels sinners to trust Christ in the present for a resurrection they will receive in the future based on the resurrection of Jesus accomplished in the past. Thus authentic faith is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus

and in all of its implications for the future resurrection of the faithful. That is why Paul says in Rom 10:9, "If you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead ones, you will be saved." Here we find present faith, rooted in the resurrection of Christ, looking forward to the promised resurrection at the end of the age. In other words, justification involves both the "already" and the "not yet."