

## PATRONAGE, UNION, AND PARTICIPATORY REALISM: READING ROMANS 6 THROUGH ASIAN EYES (An Asian Hermeneutical Reinterpretation of Juridical Status and Existential Transformation in Pauline Soteriology)

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### Abstract

This article proposes a rereading of Romans 6:1–14 through an Asian hermeneutical lens, arguing that the dominant forensic-judicial interpretation of Pauline soteriology reflects Reformation-era Western legal culture more than the Mediterranean patronage world in which Paul originally wrote. Drawing on social-scientific studies of first-century Mediterranean honor-shame dynamics and patron-client relations, alongside developments in Asian contextual theology, the article contends that Asian readers—shaped by relational, communal, and patronage-based social structures—intuitively access a participatory reading of Romans 6 that has been largely obscured in Western scholarship. Special attention is given to Romans 6:7, where the forensic verb *δεδικαίωται* (*dedikaīōtai*, “has been justified/freed”) appears within a participatory argument, demonstrating that Paul himself does not separate juridical declaration from existential transformation. The article proposes “participatory realism”—a framework that is real, performative, and sacramental—as a constructive alternative that emerges from both rigorous exegetical analysis and Asian hermeneutical sensibility.

**Keywords:** Romans 6, patronage, Asian hermeneutics, participatory realism, Pauline soteriology, honor-shame, justification, union with Christ

### INTRODUCTION

Few debates in the history of Christian theology have proven as durable as the question of what, precisely, salvation in Christ changes. Does it change one’s legal standing before God? Does it change one’s very being? Or does it—as this article argues—change both in a single participatory event that Western theological categories have long struggled to hold together?

The dominant answer in Protestant theology since the Reformation has been predominantly forensic: salvation is fundamentally a change of legal status. God the Judge declares the sinner righteous on the basis of Christ’s imputed righteousness, received through faith. Yet it has also produced a persistent problem: if salvation is primarily a change of status, why does Paul in Romans 6 argue so insistently that the justified person cannot simply continue in sin (6:1–2)? Why does he use the language of organic union—*σύμφυτοι* (*symphytoi*, “grown together,” 6:5)—rather than the language of legal declaration ?

This article takes its starting point from an observation that is both exegetical and hermeneutical: the forensic paradigm’s dominance in Protestant soteriology reflects not only a reading of Paul but also the cultural location of the Reformers. Luther and Calvin addressed a world shaped by European legal institutions, ecclesiastical courts, and a guilt-and-acquittal

framework inherited from Roman law. Their reading of Paul was not wrong, but it was necessarily partial—shaped by what their cultural location made visible and what it obscured.

This article proposes that Asian readers, shaped by social structures far more similar to Paul’s own Mediterranean world than to Reformation-era Europe, are positioned to recover dimensions of Romans 6 that Western scholarship has undervalued. The central thesis is this: Romans 6:1–14 presents a single participatory reality in which juridical declaration and existential transformation are inseparable—not as two stages in a linear process, but as two dimensions of one event of union with Christ.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines the cultural roots of the forensic paradigm and the participatory alternative. Section 3 introduces Asian hermeneutics and the social-scientific framework of Mediterranean patronage as convergent interpretive resources. Section 4 conducts close exegetical analysis of Romans 6:1–14, with special attention to Romans 6:7 as what this article calls the “grammatical hinge” of the pericope. Section 5 develops the constructive framework of participatory realism through Asian eyes. Section 6 concludes with implications for ecumenical theology and future research.

## **The Cultural Location of a Paradigm**

### **The Forensic Paradigm and Its Reformation Roots**

The forensic interpretation of Pauline justification has deep roots in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. For Luther, the discovery that righteousness in Romans 1:17 referred not to God’s punitive demand but to the righteousness God gives to the sinner was transformative—not only personally but paradigmatically. Justification became the article by which the church stands or falls: a forensic declaration in which God pronounces the sinner righteous on the basis of Christ’s obedience imputed to the believer through faith alone.

Calvin deepened and systematized this framework. In the Institutes, he argued that justification and sanctification, though inseparable in experience, must be carefully distinguished conceptually: justification is the forensic declaration of righteousness; sanctification is the subsequent process of moral renewal. This distinction—logical and conceptual, not necessarily temporal—became axiomatic in Reformed theology and has remained influential to the present day.

Contemporary representatives of this tradition maintain the forensic emphasis with equal vigor. Schreiner argues that justification in Paul is fundamentally a “legal-declarative” category, clearly distinguished from sanctification as a transformative process. Piper has defended the doctrine of imputed righteousness as the non-negotiable center of the gospel.

The forensic paradigm’s strengths are real: it preserves the gratuity of grace, provides a firm ground for assurance, and captures something genuinely present in Paul’s language—the vocabulary of δικαιοῶ (dikaioō, “to justify/declare righteous”) does carry legal connotations. Yet a question persists: does this paradigm adequately represent Paul’s own categories, or does it represent a particular cultural translation of those categories? What the Reformers’ location made it difficult to see was the relational, patronage-based world in which Paul himself wrote.

## The Participatory Alternative

A second stream of Pauline scholarship has consistently insisted that the center of Paul's soteriology lies not in forensic declaration but in participatory union. Schweitzer was the first modern scholar to argue this programmatically: the "Christ-mysticism" of union with Christ—expressed in Paul's characteristic language of being ἐν Χριστῷ (en Christō, "in Christ")—is the primary framework, while forensic justification is a "subsidiary crater" in the larger landscape.

Sanders's landmark *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) reinforced this reading by demonstrating that Paul's soteriology operates on a "participationist" model: the fundamental movement is from one sphere of power (Adam, sin, death) to another (Christ, righteousness, life). Gorman has developed this insight into the richest recent account, arguing that salvation involves cruciformity and inhabitation—Christ dwelling in the believer and shaping life according to the pattern of the cross.

Macaskill has shown that union with Christ in Paul generates a fundamentally relational and participatory anthropology that resists the individualist, legal-transactional framework of much Western soteriology. Eastman's work on Pauline personhood similarly argues that the self in Paul is constitutively relational—defined not by autonomous legal standing but by the relationships in which it is embedded.

Despite these advances, the participatory stream has struggled to gain dominance in Western theological education. The reasons are partly institutional, partly philosophical (the individualism of Western modernity), and partly cultural. What has been less acknowledged is that these are cultural reasons, not purely exegetical ones.

## Reading From The Margins: Asian Hermeneutics And The Mediterranean World

### The Asian Hermeneutical Turn

The rise of contextual theology in Asia over the past half-century has generated a significant body of scholarship arguing that non-Western cultural frameworks are not merely illustrative additions to biblical interpretation but genuine hermeneutical resources that can recover dimensions of the text that Western scholarship has missed or marginalized. Yeo, in his study of Paul from a Chinese perspective, argues that the communal and relational assumptions embedded in Confucian social ethics provide a more natural framework for reading Paul's corporate soteriology than does Western individualism. Yong has argued more broadly that the multiple cultural locations of global Christianity generate readings of Scripture that together produce a richer interpretation than any single tradition can achieve alone. Chan's work on grassroots Asian theology similarly suggests that popular Asian Christian practice—often more sacramental, communal, and participatory than Western evangelical norms—reflects genuine theological instincts grounded in cultural experience.

These contributions share a methodological claim that this article adopts: cultural location is not an obstacle to interpretation that must be bracketed out in the name of objectivity. Rather, it shapes what the interpreter sees in the text. This is not relativism—the text retains its integrity and makes claims that adjudicate between readings. But it does mean that readings from the margins can and do recover features that dominant readings have suppressed.

## Patronage, Debt, and Honor in the First-Century Mediterranean World

A crucial insight from social-scientific New Testament scholarship is that the social world of first-century Mediterranean society—the world in which Paul wrote—was structured by dynamics profoundly different from those of modern Western society: honor-shame, patronage-clientage, and kinship networks. Barclay's *magisterial Paul and the Gift* (2015) demonstrates that the language of grace (χάρις, *charis*) in Paul cannot be properly understood apart from the Mediterranean gift economy, in which benefits given by a patron created bonds of obligation, loyalty, and transformed identity in the recipient. Grace, in this framework, is not merely a legal acquittal—it is the transformative gift of a patron who reshapes the client's identity and social standing.

DeSilva's work on honor-shame dynamics shows that in the Mediterranean world, identity was not primarily individual and internal but relational and public: one's worth and standing were constituted by one's relationships, particularly one's relationship to patrons and family. To receive a patron's benefaction was not merely to receive resources; it was to be incorporated into the patron's sphere of honor, to become identified with the patron's name and status.

Malina and Neyrey have argued that these dynamics are directly relevant to Pauline soteriology: salvation in Paul can be read as the supreme act of divine patronage, in which God as patron freely bestows the gift of righteousness on clients who could never earn or repay it. When Paul speaks of dying and rising with Christ through baptism, he is describing an act of radical incorporation into the patron's own story—a union so complete that the client's identity is restructured around the patron's death and resurrection.

## Asian Relational Logic as Exegetical Resource

Asian social structures—particularly in Southeast and East Asian contexts—share significant structural features with the Mediterranean patronage world. The concept of *utang na loob* in Filipino culture (literally “debt of the inner self”), the Chinese concept of *guanxi* (relational networks of reciprocal obligation), and the Indonesian concept of *budi* (gratitude-debt within hierarchical relationships) all operate within a logic of relational indebtedness and transformed identity that is strikingly consonant with Mediterranean patronage dynamics.

In these frameworks, a massive gift from a superior patron does not merely create an obligation to repay; it restructures the identity and social standing of the recipient. To receive a patron's comprehensive benefaction is to be drawn into the patron's relational world in a way that changes who you are, not only what you owe. The relationship is transformative, not merely transactional.

The following illustrative account, drawn from Indonesian Christian pastoral reflection, captures this dynamic with a clarity that formal theological prose often struggles to achieve:

Imagine a woman crushed under an impossible debt—one trillion rupiah. Debt collectors pursue her relentlessly. Then a patron arrives, drives away the collectors, and simply pays the debt in full. The creditors can no longer pursue her: the debt is settled, the accounts are closed. She can even turn to any collector who still dares to appear and say bluntly: it is finished.

But the relationship does not end there. The patron offers her a place in his household as a servant. She accepts gratefully. Then, unexpectedly, the patron asks her to become his wife. Her status changes completely: from debtor, to servant, to spouse. She now bears his name and his honor.

If her husband holds a doctorate, she is now addressed as Bu Dokter—“the Doctor’s wife”—regardless of her own educational background. The title belongs to her not because of her achievement but because of her union with him. Would she now live carelessly? On the contrary—she would study, grow, and aspire to honor the name she now carries. Not in order to become worthy of the title. But because she already bears it.

This account is not merely homiletical illustration. It is hermeneutical data: it shows how Asian relational logic makes visible the participatory movement of Romans 6 with a naturalness that formal Western theological categories often struggle to achieve. The movement from debt-cancellation to incorporation to transformed identity—all within a single relational event—is precisely the movement Paul describes in Romans 6:1–14.

## Exegetical Analysis Of Romans 6:1–14

### Romans 6:1–4: Baptism into Death

The argument of Romans 6 opens with a rhetorical question generated by the logic of Romans 5:20: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1, WEBUS). Paul’s response is immediate and uncompromising: “May it never be! We who died to sin, how could we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:2, WEBUS).

Paul does not answer the antinomian challenge with moral exhortation but with a participatory-ontological declaration. The phrase “we who died to sin” stands in Greek as οἵτινες ἀπεθάνομεν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ (hoitines apethanomen tē hamartia). The verb ἀπεθάνομεν (apethanomen) is aorist: the death has already happened; it is an established fact, not a future aspiration.

Paul grounds this death in baptism: “We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death” (Romans 6:4a, WEBUS). The key phrase is συνετάφημεν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον (synetaphēmen autō dia tou baptismatos eis ton thanaton). The prefix συν- (syn-, “together with”) marks genuine participation: the believer is not merely reminded of Christ’s death but incorporated into it. The result is not only a new status but a new mode of existence: “newness of life” (καινότητι ζωῆς, kainotēti zōēs, Romans 6:4b, WEBUS). Status and existence are inseparable.

### Romans 6:5–7: The Grammatical Hinge

Romans 6:5 introduces a term of extraordinary significance: σύμφυτοι (symphytoi, “grown together”). The BDAG lexicon notes that σύμφυτος carries an organic-biological connotation, as of two branches grafted into a single plant. This is emphatically not the language of legal declaration. It is the language of living, organic union.

Romans 6:6 explains what this organic union achieves: the “old man” (ὁ παλιὸς ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος, ho palaios hēmōn anthrōpos) refers not to a psychological component of the self but

to the whole person as constituted by solidarity with Adam—the entire relational identity defined by the old patronage of sin and death. Then comes Romans 6:7, the grammatical hinge of the entire pericope: “For he who has died has been freed from sin” (WEBUS).

ὁ γὰρ ἀποθανὼν δεδικαίωται ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας  
(ho gar apothanōn dedikaīōtai apo tēs hamartias, “for the one who has died has been freed/justified from sin”)

The verb δεδικαίωται (dedikaīōtai) is the perfect passive indicative of δικαιοῶ (dikaioō), the same root from which the doctrine of justification derives. In Romans 3–5, this verb is Paul’s primary forensic term. Three features make its appearance here extraordinary. **First, it is a perfect tense:** not simply “was freed” (aorist) but “has been freed with ongoing present effect.” The liberation accomplished in death-with-Christ is a present and continuing reality.

**Second, it carries forensic vocabulary:** δικαιοῶ is the terminus technicus of justification—deployed in Romans 3:24, 4:2, 4:5, 5:1, and 5:9. Its use here is not accidental. **Third, it appears in a fully participatory context:** the one who has “died” (ἀποθανὼν, apothanōn) is the one who has died with Christ. The forensic declaration does not occur alongside or after the participatory event. It occurs within and through it.

Cranfield reads Romans 6:7 as a deployment of a Jewish legal proverb: death liberates from legal obligation. Moo accepts the proverbial background but insists Paul uses it with full theological weight in a participatory context. Käsemann goes further: the use of δικαιοῶ here cannot be theologically neutralized, because every occurrence of the δικ- root in Romans 1–8 carries soteriological significance. This article presses the point further. Romans 6:7 is the precise location in the text where the forensic-participatory dichotomy collapses grammatically. Paul takes his most forensic verb and embeds it within his most participatory argument. The two cannot be separated without doing violence to the grammar. The forensic declaration is not a separate transaction that precedes or follows participation; it is the participatory event, viewed from its juridical dimension.

## Romans 6:8–11: The Performative Indicative

Paul moves from death-with-Christ to life-with-Christ (Romans 6:8–10), anchored by the adverb ἐφάπαξ (ephāpax, “once for all”): what Christ accomplished in dying to sin is definitive and unrepeatable—and it is precisely this definitive event into which the believer is incorporated.

The climax arrives in Romans 6:11: “Thus consider yourselves also to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (WEBUS). The imperative λογίζεσθε (logizesthe) is the same verb used in Romans 4 for the reckoning of faith as righteousness (λογίζομαι, logizomai). Gaventa has argued that this reckoning is not merely cognitive but performative: it actualizes and inhabits the reality already established by God’s action.

This is precisely the Asian logic of identity in the debt-and-marriage narrative: when the wife is told to “consider herself the patron’s spouse,” she is not being asked to pretend something that is not real. She is being invited to inhabit the identity that has already been given to her through the act of union. The imperative is not a condition for the indicative; it is its organic expression.

## Romans 6:12–14: Imperative as Organic Expression of Indicative

The transition to explicit imperatives in Romans 6:12–14 completes the argument: “Therefore don’t let sin reign in your mortal body... present yourselves to God, as alive from the dead... For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace” (WEBUS). The structure is decisive: indicative (6:1–11) → imperative (6:12–13) → indicative (6:14). The ethical demand is sandwiched by declarations of grace. Romans 6:14—“for sin will not have dominion over you”—is an indicative statement that grounds the preceding imperatives. The imperative is not an independent moral requirement imposed from outside; it is the natural, organic expression of the relationship already established by grace.

In Asian relational terms: the wife does not study and grow because she fears being expelled from the marriage. She does so because she now inhabits a new relational identity, and her actions are the organic expression of who she has become.

## Participatory Realism through Asian Eyes

### Defining the Framework

Building on the exegetical analysis above, this article proposes the framework of participatory realism as a theological account of Romans 6 that integrates the forensic and participatory dimensions within a single relational event. Three characteristics define this framework. **Real.** Participation in Christ produces genuine change—not a legal fiction or a change in divine accounting alone, but a restructuring of the believer’s relational identity. In the patronage narrative, the woman does not merely receive a new title on a form; she actually becomes the patron’s spouse, with all the ontological and social implications that follow.

**Performative.** The declarative indicative inherently generates existential transformation. The single event of union with Christ in his death simultaneously represents the forensic dimension (liberation from sin’s juridical claim, *δεδικαίωται*) and the transformative dimension (new life, new identity). The patron’s act of canceling the debt and taking the debtor as spouse is one comprehensive act, not two sequential transactions.

**Sacramental.** This participatory union is mediated concretely through the community of faith, specifically in baptism. As Romans 6:3–4 makes clear, baptism is the locus where the believer’s union with Christ’s death and resurrection is enacted communally—the embodied form in which faith meets grace.

## Distinguishing Participatory Realism from Adjacent Positions

Participatory realism must be carefully distinguished from several positions that may appear similar at the surface. It is not Schweitzer’s Christ-mysticism, which places participation in opposition to forensic justification and reduces the latter to a subsidiary element. Participatory realism does not discard the forensic dimension; it relocates it within the participatory event. Romans 6:7 demonstrates that Paul’s most forensic verb is inseparable from his most participatory argument.

It is not the forensic imputation of classical Reformation theology, which separates the declarative act of justification from the subsequent process of sanctification. Participatory

realism insists that the declaration is transformative—not in a subsequent causal sequence, but intrinsically, because what is declared is a relational reality that already reshapes existence.

It is not Eastern Orthodox theōsis (θέωσις) in its full metaphysical form, which operates with categories of divine essence and energies drawn from patristic metaphysics. Participatory realism is a descriptive theological category derived from the internal structure of Romans 6 itself. It is not a liberal moral influence theory. The prefix συν- (syn-) throughout Romans 6:4–8 denotes real co-participation, not imitation. Paul does not say “be like Christ in his death”; he says “we were buried together with him.”

### **The Asian Contribution: What This Reading Recovers**

The Asian hermeneutical contribution to participatory realism is not that it imports alien categories into the text. Rather, it recovers categories that the text already contains but that Western forensic reading has obscured. First, it recovers the relational ontology implicit in Paul’s participation language. When Paul says believers are σύμφυτοι (symphytoi, “grown together”) with Christ, he is invoking a logic of identity-constituting relationship that is immediately legible within Asian social frameworks. In patronage cultures—both Mediterranean and Asian—identity is not a fixed individual property; it is constituted relationally, through the bonds of patron, kinship, and household.

Second, it recovers the transformative dimension of juridical acts. In patronage culture, a patron’s comprehensive benefaction does not merely change an account balance. The δεδικαίωται of Romans 6:7 is not a divine accounting adjustment operating in isolation from relational reality. It is the juridical dimension of a comprehensive relational restructuring—a declaration that is simultaneously and inseparably a transformation.

Third, it recovers the organic relationship between the indicative and the imperative. The wife who bears her husband’s title does not study in order to deserve it; she studies because she already bears it. This is Paul’s logic in Romans 6:11–14: reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God—and live accordingly. The imperative is the natural, organic expression of the indicative.

### **Dialogue with the Apocalyptic Paul**

The apocalyptic reading of Paul, associated with Martyn and Gavena, emphasizes that salvation is God’s invasive, cosmic action—a divine initiative that transforms the human situation from outside. Participatory realism has significant common ground with this reading: both insist that salvation is genuinely transformative and that God’s action precedes and determines human response. The difference lies in the treatment of human agency. Participatory realism maintains the absolute priority of divine initiative while preserving the genuine—if entirely derivative—role of human response. In the patronage narrative: the patron initiates comprehensively; the new spouse responds organically. The response is real, but it is entirely dependent upon the patron’s prior and comprehensive act of grace.

### **Implications for Ecumenical Theology and the Global Church**

The framework of participatory realism, developed through Asian hermeneutics, offers constructive resources for ecumenical dialogue on several contested fronts.

On the question of justification and sanctification: participatory realism deconstructs the sharp distinction that Reformed theology has insisted upon, not by collapsing the two into each other but by showing that they are two dimensions of a single participatory event. The wife's changed title (justification: new status conferred through union) and her changed life (sanctification: growth into the new identity) are not two separate events; they are two aspects of one marriage.

On baptism: if Romans 6:3–4 locates the participatory union with Christ's death and resurrection in baptism, then the ecumenical question is not whether baptism "does" something—it clearly does in Paul's account—but how to understand the relationship between the sacramental act, faith, and the communal life of the church.

On the global church: the Asian hermeneutical argument suggests that readings from non-Western contexts are not supplementary but necessary for a full interpretation of Paul. The global majority church—increasingly located in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—brings social logics that are in some respects closer to Paul's Mediterranean world than is Western modernity. This is not an argument for relativism but for the catholicity of interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Romans 6:1–14 presents a single participatory reality in which juridical declaration and existential transformation are inseparable dimensions of one event of union with Christ in his death and resurrection. The dominant forensic reading of Pauline soteriology, while capturing genuine dimensions of Paul's argument, is culturally situated in Reformation-era Western legal frameworks that have tended to obscure the participatory dimensions of the same text.

Asian hermeneutics, drawing on the relational logics of patronage, debt-gratitude, and identity-constituting union, provides a framework that recovers these dimensions—not by importing alien categories but by illuminating features that the text already contains. The analysis of *δεδικαίωται* (*dedikaīōtai*) in Romans 6:7 as a grammatical hinge confirms that Paul himself does not separate juridical status from existential transformation. The performative logic of *λογίζεσθε* (*logizesthe*) in Romans 6:11 shows that the imperative is not an external addition to the indicative but its organic expression within the new relational identity.

The framework of participatory realism—real, performative, and sacramental—offers a constructive theological account that answers antinomianism by showing that grace is inherently transformative; answers perfectionism by maintaining the eschatological tension of already-but-not-yet; and answers the forensic-participatory dichotomy by showing that both dimensions are present in the grammar of the text itself, held together in the single event of union with Christ.

Future research should pursue a comparative study of the same forensic-participatory integration in Philippians 3:9–11 and Colossians 2:12–14, testing whether the pattern identified in Romans 6:7 is a structural feature of Pauline soteriology. Deeper engagement with specific Asian theological traditions—Indonesian, Filipino, Korean, Chinese—would enrich the hermeneutical argument with greater cultural specificity.

Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:11, WEBUS). This is not a legal requirement. It is an invitation to inhabit the truth of who, by grace, you already are.

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