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A QUESTION OF UNION WITH CHRIST?
CALVIN AND TRENT ON JUSTIFICATION

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I. Introduction

The question of justification is discussed as much today as it was in Calvin's time, especially in connection with two matters. One is the recent, unofficial dialogue between Protestant evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Two documents, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" (ECT) and "The Gift of Salvation," have made the historic differences on justification between the Church of Rome and the churches of the Reformation once again a subject of international discussion. In particular, the joint statement on justification in "The Gift of Salvation" suggested a fair amount of agreement on the doctrine between Roman Catholic dogma and Protestant orthodoxy, and it did so by curiously leaving some of the most historically contentious issues to be resolved later, notably what is meant by imputation. This prompted some other evangelicals to restate their understanding of *sola fide* in terms that reinforced the disagreement between the two sides, especially as concerns imputation. They focused particularly on the Catholic understanding of justification's relation to sanctification, namely, the order in which they take place (*ordo salutis*). The legal, forensic character of salvation (imputation of righteousness) must occur, these Protestants insist, prior to the subjective, renovative character of salvation (infusion of righteousness).¹

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¹ "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 15-22; "The Gift of Salvation," *First Things* 79 (January 1998): 20-23. Reformation reactions can be found in *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (ed. J. Armstrong; Chicago: Moody, 1994); "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals: The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals' Reply to 'The Gift of Salvation,'" *Modern Reformation* 7 (September/October 1998): 29-32; R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); idem, "What ECT II Ignores: The Inseparable Link between Imputation and the Gospel," *Modern Reformation* 7 (September/October 1998): 24-28; W. Robert Godfrey, "A Discussion on Justification," *The Outlook* (February 1999): 5-7; and, somewhat differently, Mark Seifrid, "'The Gift of Salvation': Its Failure to Address the Crux of Justification," *JETS* 42 (1999): 679-88. For a broad attempt to define what it means to be "evangelical" in light of the recent Protestant-Catholic dialogue, see "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration," *Christianity Today*, 14 June 1999, 51-56; for a critical response, see Robert H. Gundry, "Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration' . . . even though I wasn't asked to," *Books and Culture* (January/February 2001): 6-9. More generally, see *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?* (ed. Thomas P. Rausch; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000). On

A second sphere in which justification figures significantly is in recent New Testament studies. Many NT scholars contend that justification is not the issue that should divide the church but unite it.² As they label the Protestant view of imputation a legal fiction (itself not a new charge) and, to one degree or another, reject its reading of justification as the means by which one gets saved, such scholars are zealous to maintain the eschatological nature of justification and thus see justification as integrally related to theodicy. One scholar, Richard B. Hays, writes that “justification is interpreted as God’s act of deliverance wrought in Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, whose sacrificial death avails for the salvation of the covenant people.” Justification is used to indicate that God has proved himself faithful to his covenant promises to Israel. Those who are justified in Christ (i.e., incorporated into him) are those who are included in this divine, saving action. The term *righteousness of God* is viewed almost exclusively covenantally (“will God be faithful?”) and eschatologically (“how will Israel’s story end?”), so that, says Hays, “it becomes apparent that the term refers neither to an abstract ideal of divine distributive justice nor to a legal status or moral character imputed or conveyed by God to human beings.”³ Against the background of evidence that multiple sects of first-century Judaism emphasized salvation based on God’s electing grace and not on human merit, Paul’s theology is cast more covenantally, corporately, and eschatologically than previously, with one’s reading of such key terms as “the righteousness of God,” “justification,” and “the works of the law” following suit. The supposed parallel between the medieval Catholic soteriology that stressed one’s (meritorious) works in justification and the first-century Judaism that Paul opposed breaks down. Hence, the historical debates between Catholics and Protestants are seen to be misguided at best and unfaithful to Paul at worst. Neither side, according to some of these “new perspective” advocates, puts its finger on the central covenant-eschatological pulse in Paul.⁴

the related Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, see The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

² E.g., N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 157-60.

³ Richard B. Hays, “Justification,” *ABD* 3:1129-1133; quotes from 1130, 1131. Further, idem, “Adam, Israel and Christ,” in *Pauline Theology* (ed. D. M. Hay and E. E. Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 3:68-86; idem, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4,11* (SBLDS 56; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983). Most recently, see his “Three Dramatic Roles: The Law in Romans 3-4,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (ed. James D. G. Dunn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 151-64.

⁴ For a few scholarly surveys of recent Pauline studies, among others, see Joseph Plevnick, “Recent Developments in the Discussion Concerning Justification by Faith,” *TJ* 2, no. 1 (1986): 47-62; P. T. O’Brien, “Justification in Paul and Some Crucial Issues in the Last Two Decades,” in *Right With God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 69-95; Douglas J. Moo, “Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years,” *SJT* 40 (1987): 287-307; Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), esp. 1-101; Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification By Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), esp. 1-77; Colin G. Kruse, *Paul, the Law, and Justification* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 27-53. Instructive also is the first part of Brendan Byrne’s

It should be borne in mind that the so-called “new perspective” is not a monolithic entity, and in fact it might be more precise to speak of “new perspectives” (plural) on Paul—that is, various understandings of Pauline theology that begin from a certain consensus about Second Temple Judaism. The idea of a unified movement is a common misperception. It is really just a new starting point for understanding Paul.⁵

Both of these issues—Protestant–Catholic dialogue and the “new perspective”—cannot be settled here, but they do invite a reassessment of the doctrine of justification understood by Roman Catholics, as expressed by the Council of Trent, and by Protestants, as articulated by John Calvin.⁶ To be sure, Calvin does not speak for the entire Protestant world,⁷ but he is the theological forebear of many weighing in on the contemporary discussions. The historical theological soundings in this paper, therefore, should not be taken to adjudicate either the ECT/“The Gift of Salvation” or the “new perspective” debate. But it is hoped that the descriptive evidence presented here, drawn principally from three sources spanning the Reformer’s career, will show that Calvin’s view of justification depends

“Interpreting Romans Theologically in a Post-‘New Perspective’ Perspective,” *HTR* 94 (2001): 227-41.

⁵ I was reminded of this by Prof. Stephen Taylor of Westminster Theological Seminary. The literature on the subject is voluminous, but for articulations of some prominent positions, see the essays in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (n. 3 above); E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977); idem, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983); Nils A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 95-120; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Reconciliation, Law and Righteousness: Essays in Biblical Theology* (trans. E. Kalin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); idem, “Justification” and “Righteousness,” *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright, and J. I. Packer; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 359-61, 590-92; idem, “Romans and the Theology of Paul,” in *Pauline Theology*, 3:30-67; Frank J. Matera, “Galatians in Perspective: Cutting a New Path through Old Territory,” *Int* 54 (2000): 233-45; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 354-71; James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 5-42. For recent critiques of these formulations, see Gerald Bray, “Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship,” *Churchman* 109 (1995): 102-26; Friedrich Avemarie, “Erwählung und Vergeltung: Zur optionalen Struktur rabbinischer Soteriologie,” *NTS* 45 (1999): 108-26; Dan G. McCartney, “No Grace Without Weakness,” *WTJ* 61 (1999): 1-13; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Paul the Theologian,” *WTJ* 62 (2000): 121-41; Mark A. Seifrid, “The ‘New Perspective on Paul’ and Its Problems,” *Them* 25, no. 2 (February 2000): 4-18; idem, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

⁶ Both issues, in fact, lie behind the focus on justification in a recent issue of *Modern Reformation* (11, no. 2 [March/April 2002]), which appeared after this article was initially accepted for publication.

⁷ On two common historiographical errors—(1) of reading Calvin as though he were the sole source of “Calvinism” and (2) of positing a decisive cleavage between Calvin and the subsequent period of Protestant orthodoxy largely because of misunderstandings of “humanism” and “scholasticism”—see Richard A. Muller’s two-part essay, “Calvin and the ‘Calvinists’: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities Between the Reformation and Orthodoxy,” *CTJ* 30 (1995): 345-75; 31 (1996): 125-60. Similarly, idem, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); Robert Letham, “Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort” (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1979).

on his understanding of what he labels variously union with Christ, participation in Christ, engrafting into Christ, and communion with Christ, and that it does so to a much greater degree than is commonly recognized.⁸ I argue that Calvin differs from Rome on justification not primarily in terms of the relative sequential occurrence of legal and subjective soteriological aspects, but rather in terms of the manner by which a sinner is united to Christ. If this can be established, it suggests that Calvin's response to ECT and "The Gift of Salvation" in particular and to Roman Catholicism in general might not be the same as that historically prosecuted by some of those who claim him as spiritual father. It also intimates that Calvin, by his insistence on union with the exalted Christ as the means by which sinners benefit from God's salvation activity in Christ, may be more faithful to Paul's redemptive-historical orientation than some critics admit his influence on Reformed Protestantism to have been.⁹

II. *The Council of Trent's View of Justification*

Calls for an ecumenical council had been sounded well before a council gathered in Trent in December 1545. What was known as the conciliar movement began in the Middle Ages in response to clerical abuses (e.g., immorality, lack of education, simony) and to papal instability and schism (e.g., Avignon papacy, Great Schism). By the time of the Reformation, the papacy had reconsolidated its power in Rome, but the general concern of clerical abuses had yet to be addressed. To the mind of the Reformers, more important even than the issue of abuses were questions of doctrine. Any ecclesiastical reforms that did not take into consideration the dogmatic differences within the church, they believed, would be tantamount to treating a gunshot wound with a band-aid. Martin Luther himself repeatedly appealed for a council to help arbitrate the debated issues, yet his own study and experience made him less than confident that such a meeting would resolve matters in a manner faithful to Scripture.¹⁰

Military and political campaigns throughout the 1520s and 1530s delayed the convocation of a council, campaigns not unrelated to the nationalism that had partially lit the Reformation fires. By the time Pope Paul III convened a council in Trent the European scene was altered not only by the emerging nation-states but also by the Protestant Reformation itself. Church and state were not neatly distinguished. The decision to assemble in Trent, located in

⁸ For a helpful list, with references, of the various ways in which Calvin speaks of this union, see Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 111-13.

⁹ For a revisionist reading of the place of union with Christ in Luther's theology, if not in Lutheranism, see Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why Is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1-20; and Robert Jenson, "Response to Tuomo Mannermaa, 'Why Is Luther So Fascinating?,'" 21-24.

¹⁰ Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements. Volume II: The Reformation* (rev. ed.; St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1987), 484.

northern Italy but technically in southern Germany, was itself a political concession on the part of the Pope to the Hapsburgs. Political posturing and ecclesiastical decisions were intimately related. The Council of Trent then was inherently a reaction to the recent changes taking place in Europe, most especially the Reformation. The order in which Trent addressed the issues before it bears this out.

The council met in three periods: 1545–47 (Sessions 1–10); 1551–52 (Sessions 11–16); and 1562–63 (Sessions 17–25). Lewis Spitz relates that “the president of the council, Cardinal del Monte, cited as the two main reasons for the convening of the council the growth of heresy and the need for reform of abuses.”¹¹ In the main, doctrinal matters were clarified in the first two gatherings, while church abuses were tackled in the last. So it was that the Council took up the doctrine of justification in the Sixth Session of its first period.

Trent’s decree on justification consists of sixteen chapters and thirty-three canons. The chapters, first, provide detailed explanations of the Roman Catholic position; the canons, then, concisely anathematize all who hold a stance which the Roman Catholics reject. In general, the chapters explain justification positively, the canons negatively. As we now turn specifically to the Roman Catholic view, W. Robert Godfrey’s six-point comparison of Trent and Calvin on justification will ably serve as a starting point for our investigation of their respective positions.¹²

In his essay “Calvin and the Council of Trent,” Godfrey enumerates six chief elements that together comprise the Roman Catholic stance on justification. First, Trent teaches that the “Christian is justified by grace, but human free will, although weakened by sin, can and must cooperate with grace.”¹³ Without God’s grace, justification is impossible. All men because of Adam’s sin are no longer innocent but are children of wrath. All humans, Trent affirms, are “servants of sin,” yet their free will is “attenuated” and “by no means extinguished.”¹⁴ To this weakened will and sinful disposition God adds his prevenient grace through an outward call. This grace enables a person to arrive at full justification. Men and women, therefore, are not entirely inactive in their salvation:

The Synod furthermore declares, that, in adults, the beginning of the said Justification is to be derived from the prevenient grace of God . . . that so they, who by sins were alienated from God, may be disposed through his quickening and assisting grace, to convert themselves to their own justification, by freely assenting to and

¹¹ Ibid., 486.

¹² W. Robert Godfrey, “Calvin and the Council of Trent,” in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (ed. Michael Horton; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 119–28.

¹³ Ibid., 121.

¹⁴ “The Canons and Dogmatic Decrees of the Council of Trent,” in *The Creeds of Christendom, Volume 2: The Greek and Latin Creeds* (ed. Philip Schaff; rev. David S. Schaff; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 89; Sixth Session, ch. 1. (Subsequent references will correspond to this version of the Sixth Session and will appear in the text in parentheses by chapter or canon number. Some italics are removed.)

co-operating with that said grace . . . yet is he not able, by his own free will, without the grace of God, to move himself unto justice in his sight. (ch. 5; cf. canons 1–5, 9)

Although affirming the necessity of grace, because of what it says about human free will and cooperation, this first point is most instructive, for it reveals Rome's view of fallen man's moral and volitional ability *prior* to the acquisition of the righteousness that saves.¹⁵

Second, the Tridentine Fathers affirm, according to Godfrey, that “[f]aith alone does not justify, but faith and love (which produces good works) justify.”¹⁶ Rome had traditionally held that “unformed” faith does not justify; unformed faith was tantamount to intellectual assent, what James might call devil's faith (Jas 2:19). Rather, faith must be “formed,” that is, filled out by one's loving obedience. This formed faith (faith plus love/charity) allows one to be justified, couched here, notably, in terms of union with Christ: “For faith, unless hope and charity be added thereto, neither *unites man perfectly with Christ*, nor makes him a *living member of his body* [*neque unit perfecte cum Christo, neque corporis eius vivum membrum effecit*]” (ch. 7; my emphasis).

Put differently, and connecting this to the first point, prevenient grace grants a disposition by which sinners are “freely moved towards God, believing those things to be true which God has revealed and promised—and this especially, that God justifies the impious by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . and they begin to love him as the fountain of all justice [= righteousness]” (ch. 6). Believing the announcement of the gospel, “understanding themselves to be sinners,” “turning themselves, from the fear of divine justice whereby they are profitably agitated, to consider the mercy of God,” and “confiding that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake”—all of this is viewed by Trent as the necessary preparation for, the requisite disposition prior to, receiving the righteousness of justification (ch. 6; cf. canon 9). In other words, a faith accompanied by these components (e.g., incipient love of God as the source of all blessing and renunciation of sin) is not alone sufficient to “unite man perfectly with Christ” (ch. 7).

Rather, and this is the third point Godfrey highlights, justification comes after preparation, when the merited righteousness of Christ that has been infused into the believer is inherent in him. The cooperating believer is not merely reckoned to be just, or righteous, but actually is righteous:

If anyone saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, *and is inherent in them*; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified is only the favor of God: let him be anathema. (canon 11; my emphasis)

¹⁵ This discussion and what follows have in view adults, not baptized infants. The Roman Catholic views of baptismal regeneration and sacerdotalism are certainly relevant, but for the most part the Reformation debate on justification, and Trent itself, centered on the place of faith in adults, or at least those believed to be able to exercise faith.

¹⁶ Godfrey, “Calvin,” 122.

. . . the alone formal cause is the justice of God, not that whereby he himself is just, but that whereby *he maketh us just* . . . and we are not only reputed, but are truly called, *and are just*, receiving justice within us. (ch. 7; my emphasis)

For, although no one can *be just*, but he to whom the merits of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ are communicated, yet is this done in the said justification of the impious, when by the merit of that same most holy Passion, the charity of God is poured forth, by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those that are justified, *and is inherent therein*: when, man, through Jesus Christ, *in whom he is ingrafted* [*cui inseritur*], receives, in the said justification, together with the remission of sins, all these gifts infused at once, faith, hope, and charity. (ch. 7; my emphasis)

In a word, justification for Trent involves the sinner's *becoming* righteous in himself. Godfrey's summary of the statement employs more familiar theological idioms: "Justification is not solely by the imputation or crediting of Christ's righteousness to the Christian, but by the infusion of Christ's righteousness into the Christian so that he actually becomes righteous."¹⁷

Godfrey's assessment certainly agrees with the intent of the Council itself: "This disposition, or preparation, is followed by Justification itself, which is not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just" (ch. 7). His focus on the language of imputation and infusion, however, does not permit him to seize upon the ideas of "ingrafting," "union," and "membership in Christ's body" at work in Trent's statement on justification. Perhaps Godfrey equates them with the concept of infusion, yet it is not clear that the ideas of union and ingrafting are strictly synonymous with infusion. The latter appears to culminate in the former; ingrafting into Christ ostensibly occurs along with justification after the requisite preparation. To be united with Christ and a living member of his body by formed faith seems to be integral to Trent's conception of justification and the sinner's remission of sins. It needs to be pointed out, then, that the question concerning disparate views of justification between Rome and Protestants may not turn solely on the question of infusion or imputation, as is usually thought (and fought!), but perhaps rather, or at least also, on the question of how and when one is united to Christ.

The fourth element that Godfrey notes, appealing again to chapter 7, underlines more specifically Rome's view of the relation between moral progress and justification: "Justification finally rests on the Christian acquiring and maintaining a certain level of sanctification."¹⁸ This more simply restates the second and third elements.

Fifthly, Trent insists, in Godfrey's words, that the "Christian can fulfill the commands of God."¹⁹ Canon 18 echoes chapter 11 when it affirms that it is possible for the justified to keep the divine requirements: "If any one saith, that

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹⁹ Ibid.

the commands of God are, even for one that is justified and constituted in grace, impossible to keep: let him be anathema.”

Finally, the Council of Trent denies that a Christian can be certain of his standing in grace, of his election, and of his perseverance except by special revelation; moreover, summarizes Godfrey, “such assurance would not be spiritually profitable, but would produce spiritual pride and moral indifference.”²⁰ Canons 13–17 discuss this point, as do chapters 9, 12, and 13.

Compared alongside Trent’s actual decrees, Godfrey’s six-point summary quite faithfully reflects the Council’s views. There is one important facet of Rome’s position, however, that Godfrey fails to mention explicitly. It is that a Christian may lose the grace of justification, although subsequently regain it through the sacrament of penance (cf. chs. 14–15; canons 23, 27–29). This loss may occur in two instances: first, if faith itself is lost; second, if a mortal sin is committed while faith remains. Godfrey alludes to this in the fourth point when he says that justification depends upon the Christian’s maintaining a certain level of sanctification, but it is curious that nothing more is made of it, especially since Calvin himself thinks this worthy of rebuttal in his “Antidote.” There he counters that neither assurance of grace nor one’s justification can be lost because faith once-for-all inseparably binds, unites, links, the believer to the indwelling Christ and to the Spirit of holiness.²¹ But we are getting slightly ahead of ourselves.

Although Trent may have been convened in reaction to the novel theological exigencies in Europe at the time, the character of its dogmatic decrees was not so novel. As with any church council, differing opinions were represented, which forced the Council to state its doctrines, according to James Buchanan, “in vague and somewhat ambiguous terms, which everyone might interpret in favour of his own views.”²² It is true that the Church had not before made any official pronouncement on justification, but reasoned opinions of the doctrine were held by ecclesiastical officials and religious orders. So although the decrees of Trent on justification may have been characterized by reaction to the Reformation (it did seek to respond to the Augsburg Confession) and by compromise to differences in the Church (it did desire to disseminate its conclusions across Christendom), they were in the final analysis a crystallization of the unofficial historic Roman Catholic consensus. Whether the decrees accurately represented the doctrine of justification taught by most parish priests is another question.²³

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ E.g., John Calvin, “Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith* (ed. T. F. Torrance; trans. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 143–44 (CO 7, col. 470–71).

²² James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (1867; repr., Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1961), 140; cf. 139. A. A. Hodge (“The *Ordo Salutis*; or, Relation in the Order of Nature of Holy Character and Divine Favor,” *The Princeton Review* 54 [1878]: 304–21) points out a “palpable inconsistency” in Thomas Aquinas regarding the priority of full forgiveness of sins to infusion of grace, which Hodge suggests contaminated “after him the whole Romish Church” (307).

²³ Buchanan (*Justification*, 140) claims the practical system was worse than the Council’s decrees indicate. Further, notes Alister E. McGrath, “A point not often appreciated is that the Tridentine

To summarize, Trent makes the meritorious work of Christ the necessary presupposition of justification, which is defined as “not remission of sin merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of grace, and of the gifts whereby man of unjust becomes just, and of an enemy a friend” (ch. 7). Its doctrine of justification then involves at least these four points: (1) the prevenient infusion of divine grace; (2) the movement of the weakened but free will toward God through the awakening of faith; (3) the movement of the free will against sin as faith is linked to love and becomes formed faith; and (4) the remission of guilt as the completion of justification.²⁴ Although perhaps an oversimplification, Rome teaches that renovation of the person precedes remission. The critical question, however, is what this renovation entails.

III. Calvin's View of Justification

Even the very best theologians cannot extricate themselves from the times in which they live.²⁵ John Calvin was not immune from his contagious polemical milieu. Many of his statements about justification are set against errors he believes others to have committed. We find his views situated in contexts of controversy and shaped somewhat apophatically. But this does not mean that Calvin's doctrine of justification lacks its own positive freshness. Just as his teaching on the real presence in the Lord's Supper is not a mere *via media* between Luther and Zwingli but possesses a scripturally faithful uniqueness, Calvin's doctrine of justification reveals his distinctive—perhaps even incisive—scriptural insight into this important issue of soteriology. Put differently, Calvin does not develop his view of justification simply over against the errors of others; rather, when he combats the errors of others he does so based on his definite view of justification. And his positive view sees justification as a key element or benefit in the soteric complex that brings a believer into an indissoluble union and communion with Christ.

There may be some formal merit in discussing Calvin's view of justification in six counterpoints to Godfrey's summary of Trent, as Godfrey himself does in his lucid article. However, Calvin's view is not most fully articulated in his “Antidote to the Council of Trent—1547,” as Rome's view is by the Council's official decrees. A full twelve years would elapse between his “Antidote” and the final version of his *Institutes*. Although in Book 3 of the 1559 *Institutes* Calvin echoes expressions from his earlier polemical “Antidote,” the different, more

decree on justification did not settle the debate on the matter within the Roman Catholic church” (“Justification: Barth, Trent, and Küng,” *SJT* 34 [1981]: 517-29).

²⁴ Slightly modified from Ritschl's *History of the Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, quoted in Hodge, “The *Ordo Salutis*,” 307-8.

²⁵ For a striking (because perhaps unexpected) comment on the “historically complexed” nature of creeds generally and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in particular, to the effect that they may not “reflect the particular and distinguishing needs of subsequent generations,” see John Murray, “The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith,” in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New* (ed. John H. Skilton; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 126.

didactic and edifying purpose that guides his exposition of the book's subject, "the way we receive the grace of Christ," suggests that it is there, in the 1559 *Institutes*, where Calvin's full systematic articulation of justification is to be found.²⁶ This is not to give the impression that there is a notable discrepancy between Calvin's earlier and later views. Far from it. Just because there is a fundamental continuity between Calvin's polemical writings, for example his letter to Sadoletto and his "Antidote," on the one hand, and his mature *Institutes*, on the other, it will be instructive for us to consider these in turn.²⁷

1. *Justification in Calvin's Reply to Sadoletto.* When the Genevan responded in 1539 to Cardinal Sadoletto's epistolary appeal for the Protestants to return to Rome, justification was but one of several subjects discussed. Nevertheless, Calvin identifies it as "the first and keenest subject of controversy between us." In fact, he takes issue with what he considers to be Sadoletto's slander against the Protestants, namely his "alleging that by attributing everything to faith, we leave no room for works." Calvin's response is admittedly brief: "I will not now enter upon a full discussion, which would require a larger volume . . . however I will briefly explain to you how we speak on this subject." Yet his brevity is instructive, because it shows what Calvin wanted to emphasize in the matter of justification and the role of works.²⁸

The Reformer put the matter in terms of a sinner's reconciliation to God, that is, the way in which the sinner receives the righteousness that becomes his through faith. Calvin does not mince words:

We maintain that in this way man is reconciled in Christ to God the Father, by no merit of his own, by no value of works, but by gratuitous mercy. When we embrace Christ by faith, and come, as it were, into communion with Him [*in eius communionem veniamus*], this we term, after the manner of Scripture, the righteousness of faith.²⁹

The sinner's faith-embrace of Christ is the moment when he comes into communion with Christ and therefore receives saving righteousness. This is fully gratuitous, and just several sentences later, as elsewhere, Calvin affirms that righteousness is imputed. But his dominant point is that "God hath reconciled us to Himself in Jesus Christ. The mode is afterwards subjoined—by not

²⁶ For a cogent defense of the position that Calvin was a "systematic" theologian and understood himself in the *Institutes* to be writing "systematic theology" by sixteenth-century standards and in light of scholasticism, see esp. Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 39-61, 101-17, 174-81.

²⁷ In this admittedly limited way, I am attempting to keep in mind the methodological premise articulated by Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, 186: "The *Institutes* cannot be rightly understood apart from Calvin's exegetical and expository efforts, nor can his exegetical and expository efforts be divorced from his work of compiling the *Institutes*." Similarly, David Steinmetz, "The Theology of John Calvin and Calvinism," in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research* (ed. S. Ozment; St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 1:216, 218-19.

²⁸ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply* (ed. John C. Olin; New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 66 (CO 5, col. 385-416; quotes from col. 396-97).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67 (CO 5, col. 397).

imputing sin.”³⁰ In these statements Calvin both defends himself against Sadoletto’s slander and attacks the Roman view which would be voiced at Trent, namely, that possession of faith does not mean simultaneous possession of Christ and his justifying righteousness.

The same point is put more expansively by Calvin when he focuses in on the connection between one’s regeneration (i.e., here, definitive and progressive sanctification) and his justifying union with Christ:

We deny that good works have any share in justification, but we claim full authority for them in the lives of the righteous. For if he who has obtained justification possesses Christ, and at the same time, Christ never is where His Spirit is not, it is obvious that gratuitous righteousness is necessarily connected with regeneration. . . . Wherever, therefore, that righteousness of faith, which we maintain to be gratuitous, is, there too Christ is, and where Christ is, there too is the Spirit of holiness, who regenerates the soul to newness of life. On the contrary, where zeal for integrity and holiness is not in vigor, there neither is the Spirit of Christ nor Christ Himself; and wherever Christ is not, there is no righteousness, nay, there is no faith; for faith cannot apprehend Christ for righteousness without the Spirit of sanctification.³¹

This passage articulates several significant points. For Calvin, but not for Rome, the presence of Christ cannot be separated from his Spirit. Because Rome gives the Spirit an assisting role in the regeneration/sanctification of the believer, which must occur prior to, and as a condition of, justification, the believer possesses the Holy Spirit and his benefits but may not possess Christ and his benefits. Trent, we have seen, agrees that “he who has obtained justification possesses Christ,” the first premise in Calvin’s argument. They balk, however, at the second premise, viz., that Christ and his righteousness are present where his indwelling and regenerating Spirit is. No point is more basic in Calvin’s conception of salvation than this.

Onto this essential point Calvin adds two indispensable corollaries: (1) righteousness is only present where Christ is present; (2) faith is only present where Christ is present. Put positively, this means that Christ and his Spirit work together to communicate the benefits of redemption merited by Christ in his work of humiliation and exaltation. Moreover, only because Christ is actively dwelling in the believer, who is united to Christ by the Spirit, can the believer’s

³⁰ The two Latin sentences fully read: “Illa, inquam, est nostra iustitia, quae a Paulo describitur, quod Deus nos sibi in Christo reconciliavit (2 Cor. 5, 19). Modus deinde subiicitur, non imputando delicta” (CO 5, col. 397-98). Calvin’s Romans commentary appeared in 1540, a year after the reply to Sadoletto. According to H. Paul Santmire, esp. in view of his comments on Rom 4:25 and 6:5, “Calvin uses the word ‘imputation’ to designate the way in which the believer is perfectly righteous. By imputation of righteousness he means *both* God’s pronouncing the believer righteous (this is the forensic act) *and* God’s giving the believer actual communion with the righteousness of Christ (this is the participatory aspect)” (“Justification in Calvin’s 1540 Romans Commentary,” CH 33 [1964]: 294-313; quote on 302).

³¹ *Debate*, 68 (CO 5, col. 398). For Trent’s view of baptismal regeneration, preparation, and the need for formed faith, see Sixth Session., chs. 3-6. For an updated statement of the same view, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1995), §§1250-54, 1257, 1271-74.

good works be righteous. Good works depend for their goodness on the justification that accompanies one's possession of Christ. And just because the Spirit is present where Christ is, the Spirit of holiness will see to it that holiness is cultivated and pursued in the life of the believer. If anything, the excitement to holiness in the believer is *increased* on Calvin's view because of the righteous energy of the Holy Spirit *and* Christ that motivates and empowers the new creature. Put negatively, Rome's charge against Protestants that works are nowhere to be found in the believer cannot be maintained.

2. *Justification in Calvin's "Antidote."* In 1547, the same year that Sadoletto died, Calvin turned his polemical pen against the decrees that had emerged from the first sessions of the Council of Trent. These decrees would not become official until more than a decade later, but they had entered the public sphere, which to Calvin's mind meant they were fair game for criticism. And criticize he did. The Reformer answered the dogmas chapter by chapter, canon by canon, meticulously and tirelessly. In his response to the Sixth Session on justification he accordingly begins where Trent does—and where his thoughts on justification would always end—namely, humankind's full depravity after the fall and his absolute need to be made a new creation in union with Christ.

The first major error Calvin seeks to refute is the Roman Catholic view that a human's spiritual will after the fall is weakened but not dead. The Genevan clearly believes, with Paul, that no matter how much the prevenient grace of God may excite man's weakened will to cooperate in the matter of forming faith for justification, nothing less than a monergistic rebirth, a spiritual resurrection from the dead, is required for man to possess faith in the first place. What humans need, Calvin contends, is not coaxing but coercion. To put it in the form of popular idiom, it's no use kicking a dead horse. And that is just what humans are in their will apart from the Spirit's new creation work, in which the will to believe God's promises and fulfill God's commands is given to humans, implanted in them, formed in them:

. . . they assert that we are prepared by the grace of God for receiving Justification, but they assign to this grace the office of exciting and assisting, we ourselves freely co-operating; . . . But I ask, Is it the same thing to excite a will, and aid it when in itself weak, as to form a new heart in man, so as to make him willing? . . . It is one thing for the will to be moved by God to obey if it pleases, and another for it to be formed to be good. Moreover, God promises not to act so that we may be able to will well, but to make us will well.³²

Later when replying to canon 4, Calvin addresses Rome's faulty view of depravity in his discussion of effectual calling by the Spirit. The genius of his polemic lies in affirming, after a fashion, what Rome demands for a person to be justified: that a moral change must occur for justification to take place. Calvin speaks of the moral change in terms of the enlivening of a dead and sinful will by God himself, not by the sinner, and of the formation of a renovated will in man that irresistibly arrives at the destination of God's intention:

³² "Antidote," 110-11 (CO 7, col. 444-45).

Paul declares, not that a faculty of willing is given to us, but that *the will itself is formed in us* [*velle ipsum in nobis effici praedicat*] (Phil. 2:13), so that from none else but God is the assent or obedience of a right will. He *acts within* [*Intus agit*], holds our hearts, moves our hearts, and draws us *by the inclinations which he has produced in us* [*voluntatibus eorum, quas in illis operatus est*]. . . . The will of man will, indeed, dissent from God, so long as it continues contrary, but *when it has been framed* for obedience [*verum si in obedientiam composita*], the danger of dissenting is removed.³³

By accenting the requisite reversal of human will, Calvin not only seemingly grants a degree of what can be described as nothing less than *infused* grace which is necessary for justification, but he also underlines the exclusion of cooperation in human willing spiritual good, excluded because the willing will is produced by divine monergism, not left to the uncertain and weakened disposition of the person. Or, as Calvin puts it elsewhere: “The whole may be thus summed up—Their error consists in sharing the work between God and ourselves, so as to transfer to ourselves the obedience of a pious will in assenting to divine grace, whereas this is the proper work of God himself.”³⁴

This naturally affords Calvin opportunity to explain himself in terms that he views to be decisive in the matter of justification. I have in mind his introducing the concept of union with Christ as the soteric answer to human depravity: “Assuredly a bad tree can only produce bad fruit. But who will be so shameless as to deny that we are bad trees until we are ingrafted into Christ [*donec insiti in Christum simus*]? . . . Let them anathematize Christ and Paul, who declare that all unbelievers are dead, and are raised from death by the gospel!”³⁵ For Calvin, regeneration (rebirth) by the Spirit and ingrafting into Christ are the necessary conditions that allow a believer to produce good fruit, which the Roman notion of a will inclined to spiritual good prior to its owner’s union with Christ effectively denies.

The second major error Calvin addresses is related to the first. Because the papists misunderstand man’s sinful nature they necessarily misunderstand justification itself. Trent is mistaken about three elements integral to the doctrine: (a) the meaning of the term; (b) the cause of justification; and (c) the role of faith as the cause.

a) Terminology. Calvin begins his refutation of Trent’s seventh chapter by contrasting definitions: “The verbal question is, What is Justification? They deny that it is merely the forgiveness of sins, and insist that it includes both renovation and sanctification.”³⁶ The flaw in Rome’s understanding of the term *justification* is that it subsumes the progressive character of one’s personal holiness under it. That is, Calvin believes that Trent conflates the theological terms justification and sanctification, thereby voiding justification of its scriptural meaning. At the same time, Calvin is keen to clarify that justification and

³³ Ibid., 148 (CO 7, col. 473-74; my emphasis).

³⁴ Ibid., 113 (CO 7, col. 446).

³⁵ Ibid., 150 (CO 7, col. 475).

³⁶ Ibid., 114 (CO 7, col. 447).

sanctification are intimately related: "It is not to be denied, however, that the two things, Justification and Sanctification, are constantly conjoined and cohere; but from this it is erroneously inferred that they are one and the same." He provides an illustration: "The light of the sun, though never unaccompanied with heat, is not to be considered heat. Where is the man so undiscerning as not to distinguish the one from the other? We acknowledge, then, that as soon as anyone is justified, renewal [i.e., progressive sanctification] also necessarily follows: and there is no dispute as to whether or not Christ sanctifies all whom he justifies." His explanation of why this is echoes the answer he gave Sadoletto about the integrity of the grace that comes in connection with Christ: "It were to rend the gospel, and divide Christ himself, to attempt to separate the righteousness which we obtain by faith from repentance."³⁷ These are two soteric realities not one. They are distinct but not separate. As we will see, it is the remission of sins and acquisition of righteousness in justification that does double-duty, giving value to the good works in one's sanctification.

b) The Cause of Justification. Calvin regards justification's *cause* as the heart of the disagreement between him and Rome:

The whole dispute is as to the cause of Justification. The Fathers of Trent pretend that it is twofold, as if we were justified partly by forgiveness of sins and partly by spiritual regeneration; or, to express their view in other words, as if our righteousness were composed partly of imputation, partly of quality. I maintain that it is one, and simple, and is wholly included in the gratuitous acceptance of God. I besides hold that it is without us, *because we are righteous in Christ only [quia in solo Christo iusti sumus]*.³⁸

The cause of free forgiveness of sins and imputation of righteousness which characterize justification is the sinner's being "in Christ" by faith. Calvin's affirmation is made explicit when he notes what Trent denies: "They deny that we are made *living members of Christ* by faith [*Viva nos Christi membra fide effici, negant*]."³⁹ Again he clarifies: "when we say a man is justified by faith alone, we do not fancy a faith devoid of charity, but we mean that faith alone is the cause of justification."⁴⁰ Faith is the cause of justification in this sense, because the sinner possesses Christ and all his righteousness when he possesses faith:

Let us remember that the nature of Faith is to be estimated from Christ. For that which God offers to us *in Christ* we receive only by faith. Hence, whatever Christ is to us is transferred to faith, *which makes us capable of receiving both Christ and all his blessings*. There would be no truth in the words of John, that faith is the victory by which we overcome the world, (1 John 5:4), did it not *ingraft us into Christ [nisi nos in Christum insereret]* (John 16:33), who is the only conqueror of the world.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., 116; cf. 152-53 (CO 7, col. 448; cf. col. 477).

³⁸ Ibid., 116 (CO 7, col. 448; my emphasis).

³⁹ Ibid., 119 (CO 7, col. 450; my emphasis).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 151; cf. also 152-53, 157-58 (CO 7, col. 476; cf. also col. 477, 481-82).

⁴¹ Ibid., 119 (CO 7, col. 451). It is curious that Godfrey refers only once to this all-important union by which the believer receives both Christ and with him all his blessings, and then he simply

Justifying imputation may then be considered one of the blessings (perhaps the key blessing) that is given to the believer when he is united to Christ in faith. Calvin reveals this intimate relation between imputation and union when, before summing up his thoughts via Eph 1 in reference to canon 15, he discusses together Rom 4:4-6 and 2 Cor 5:20-21 in connection with canon 11: “For [in 2 Cor 5:20-21] he immediately explains how that reconciliation comes to us. . . . Behold, when we have been reconciled to God by the sacrifice of Christ, also at the same time *we are righteous, and indeed we are reckoned in him* [*En ut Christi sacrificio reconciliati Deo, simul etiam iusti, et quidem in ipso censeamur*]. . . . One of the most striking passages is the first chapter of Ephesians (v. 6), where, going on word by word, he tells us that the Father hath made us acceptable to himself *in the Son*.”⁴²

The force of this statement must not be missed. Calvin temporally coordinates (“*simul*”) the application of reconciliation to the believer and the actual possession of righteousness (“*iusti*”), both of which lead up to the emphatic statement (“*quidem*”) that we are “reckoned in him”—a reckoning, by the way, which is not fictive but actual as it points to the vital union between believer and Christ. Reconciliation and the non-imputation of sin mentioned in the just cited 2 Cor 5:17, then, are applied to believers by means of their “becoming righteous” and being “made acceptable” to God “in the Son.”⁴³ Hence, Calvin consciously distinguishes imputation from actual possession of righteousness through the language of union, but this distinction does not admit a separation.

Leaving to the side for the moment the precise import of the words “and are righteous,” Calvin would not, and does not, agree with Rome that in any sense sinners are declared righteous on the basis of the inherent rectitude they have cooperated to achieve. Elsewhere the Reformer vigorously contends “that it is false to say that any part of righteousness (justification) consists *in quality*, or in the habit which resides in us, but we are righteous (justified) only by gratuitous acceptance.”⁴⁴ This denial and counter-affirmation have traditionally invited

uses the term “connects,” choosing instead to focus on imputation (“Calvin,” 124). “But this imputation,” rightly noted by François Wendel, “is made possible only by our union with the Christ and because we become at that same moment members of his body, although the union with Christ cannot be regarded as the cause of the imputation of righteousness,” which is technically reserved for faith (*Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* [trans. Philip Mairet; 1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 258). It should be noted that the volume in which Godfrey’s essay appears also contains a brief chapter by Michael Horton on “Union with Christ” (*Christ the Lord*, 107-15). Horton does cite Calvin from *Institutes* 3.1.1 (p. 109), he explains union with Christ as the basis of justification and sanctification (pp. 111-12), and he even seems to view union with Christ as occurring “prior” to one’s individual conversion (pp. 112, 114). But, probably because of the polemical aim of the book as a whole and because of the more historical focus of Godfrey’s essay in particular, Horton does not discuss union with Christ (or Calvin’s view of it) in connection with the justification debate with Rome.

⁴² My trans.; see *ibid.*, 152-53, which more visibly distinguishes imputation from possession of righteousness (*CO* 7, col. 477-78). Cp. with Trent, Sixth Session, ch. 7.

⁴³ The point would hold if the Latin were rendered “. . . at the same time we are indeed reckoned righteous in Him.” If anything, this would further point up the governing role of the union.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 117 (*CO* 7, col. 449; Beveridge’s emphasis and parentheses).

the response from Roman Catholics that the Protestant view of justification is a legal fiction. Calvin's understanding, however, of the relation between one's imputation and one's union with Christ, between one's justification and his incorporation into the resurrected Christ by faith—that is between the fact that we “are righteous, and indeed we are reckoned in him”—deflects the charge. How so?

Both 2 Cor 5:20-21 and Eph 1 employ the language of being “in Christ,” which is the typically Pauline way to indicate the idea of union or incorporation into Christ as exalted Christ, not only in an elective/predestinarian sense (Eph 1:4) but also in an existential/vital sense (Eph 1:3-4, 6-7, 10-11, 13; 2 Cor 5:21).⁴⁵ In bringing together the “reckoning” of Rom 4:4-6 with especially the multiple references to union in Eph 1, Calvin apparently stresses that the righteousness of Christ approved by his exaltation (Eph 1:3-4, 20-23) is both reckoned to the believer (Rom 4:5-6) and is the believer's actual possession because sealed by the Spirit (Eph 1:13-14), who not only certifies but effects the union between Christ and believer. This is confirmed by examination of his commentaries on these passages.⁴⁶ That is, Calvin's exegetical insights lead him to affirm justification not as a legal fiction but as the profoundest Spiritual truth. Because Christ's righteousness is the believer's by virtue of his vital union with Christ, it is also reckoned his.⁴⁷

c) Role of Faith as the Cause. The point to be grasped is of supreme importance in the controversy between Calvin and Trent. Whereas Trent maintains

⁴⁵ For an alternative reading of 2 Cor 5:21, see N. T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God,” in *Pauline Theology* (ed. D. M. Hay and E. E. Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 2:200-208.

⁴⁶ Consult his commentaries in loc., e.g., comm. on Eph 1:10: “The proper state of creatures is to cleave to God. Such an ἀνακεφαλαίωσις as would bring us back to regular order, the apostle tells us, has been made *in Christ*. Formed into one body, we are united to God, and mutually conjoined with one another. But without Christ, the whole world is as it were a shapeless chaos and frightful confusion. *He alone gathers us* into true unity. . . . By ‘gathering’ both into his own body, Christ has united them to God the Father, and established actual harmony between heaven and earth” (my emphasis)—where the manner of the eschatological summing up is said to be done by Christ (“He alone gathers us”), which is to say “in Christ” (*The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians* [ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance; trans. T. H. L. Parker; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965], 129 [CO 51, col. 151]). Cp. with comm. on 1 Cor 1:4: “I preferred to keep the phrase ‘in Him’ rather than change it to ‘by Him’ because in my opinion it is more vivid and forceful. For we are enriched in Christ, because we are members of his body [. . . *in Christo, eo quod corporis eius membra*], and we have been ingrafted into Him [*et quatenus in ipsum sumus insiti*]; and furthermore, since we have been made one with Him, He shares with us all that He has received from the Father” (*The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* [ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance; trans. J. W. Fraser; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960], 21 [CO 49, col. 310]). It would exceed the bounds of the present study to trace fully through the commentaries Calvin's exegetical thoughts on union; use has been made here only to corroborate my understanding of his meaning in the “Antidote.”

⁴⁷ Although Calvin does not use the term, the character of this vital, Spiritual union between the believer and the exalted Christ is decidedly eschatological. On this as regards Pauline theology more specifically, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), esp. 127-43; the wording of this last sentence is dependent on Gaffin's on p. 132.

that possession and exercise of faith is the beginning step toward justification, Calvin maintains that one does not have faith without being justified: "I presume, it is already superabundantly clear, that the completion, not less than the commencement of justification, must be ascribed to faith."⁴⁸ If faith (which is never bare intellectual assent, or "unformed" faith) instrumentally unites the believer to Christ, so that where there is faith in the believer there is Christ and every Spiritual blessing with him, then Trent cannot be right to posit the presence of the one without the presence of the other. One cannot lose one's justification while retaining true faith (a living, working, and loving faith) anymore than one can exercise true faith and await one's existential justification as a yet unrealized goal. One's justification is complete the moment the Spirit unites a person to Christ, and the Spirit unites one to Christ by working faith in him. This completion of justification provides him with deep assurance and compelling incitement to holy living, which leads us to the last substantial portion of Calvin's critique of Trent.⁴⁹

After treating Rome's confused doctrines of human depravity and justification, the third major error Calvin addresses is the value of good works, which was touched on briefly above. There we noted that justification labors on two fronts: by imputation a believer's sins are remitted and he is reckoned righteous; by the same imputation a believer's good deeds, despite being tainted with sinful imperfections, are reckoned righteous by God. When Trent affirmed that a Christian can fulfill the commands of God, Calvin responded by saying in effect, "Yes, the Christian renders real obedience to God, but that obedience is not so inherently righteous as to secure acceptance by God; the Christian's good works are accepted by divine grace because he is ingrafted into Christ, not by intrinsic merit." Calvin puts it this way, granting that God rewards a believer's good works but denying that they increase his justification: "That we are regarded as righteous when we are accepted by God, has already been proved. From this acceptance, too, works derive whatever grace they had."⁵⁰ Such a truth is not dangerous but feeds one's joy and assurance that his life is forever safely hidden with Christ in God, because God has united him in his life to Christ.

On the three major issues identified in his "Antidote"—human depravity, justification, and the value of good works in progressive sanctification—Calvin finds the theological implications of the believer's union with Christ to be both polemically expedient and the necessary remedy. Justification and sanctification, imputation and infusion, Christ and the Holy Spirit—these are as inseparable in salvation as the sun's light is from its heat. God's monergistic formation

⁴⁸ Calvin, "Antidote," 122 (CO 7, col. 453).

⁴⁹ For an example of Calvin's use of Aristotelian categories of causality, see his comm. on Eph 1:4-5 (CO 51, col. 147-49). Note also there the attention esp. given to adoption as a soteric benefit. As Prof. Timothy Trumper of Westminster Theological Seminary reminds me, there is a close relation between union with Christ and adoption in Calvin (e.g., *Institutes* [1559] 3.15.5-6), but given the limited scope of this article I have chosen not to explore this dimension.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 158 (CO 7, col. 482).

of faith in the Christian unites him irrefragably to Christ, who is his righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. To embrace Christ in the gospel is to embrace every redemptive blessing purchased by him as well. Justification and sanctification are distinct soteric aspects, or benefits, of one's union with Christ.

3. *Justification in the Institutes*.⁵¹ After witnessing the basic agreement in orientation between Calvin's 1539 epistle to Sadoleto and his 1547 "Antidote" to Trent, it should be no surprise that the 1559 version of the *Institutes* reconfirms and amplifies the Reformer's stance on justification and the salvific complex of which it is a part. In what follows I hope to demonstrate from a number of passages in the *Institutes* that Calvin's understanding of union with Christ is not something found here and there in his treatment of salvation in general and justification in particular. Calvin's view of justification itself is a function of his view of one's vital union with Christ. As important as justification by imputed righteousness is for him, it is not justification by faith but union with Christ that is the controlling principle of the Reformer's doctrine of applied soteriology.⁵²

Nowhere does Calvin present union with Christ as that which governs his theology of the application of redemption more explicitly than in the first two chapters of Book 3 of the 1559 *Institutes*:

How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are

⁵¹ Unless otherwise noted, English citations are taken from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

⁵² It may bear mentioning that other studies have, to varying degrees of thoroughness, examined Calvin's view of justification and the place of union with Christ in Calvin's soteriology; however, unless I am missing something, there is no notable and sustained investigation that explores the differences between Calvin and Trent/Rome on justification as a function of their different understandings of both the way one is united to Christ as well as the nature of that union. E.g., though perhaps most to the point, see William M. Thompson, "Viewing Justification through Calvin's Eyes: An Ecumenical Experiment," *TS* 57 (1996): 447-66, whose Barthian influence and methodological limitations are noticeable; Theodore W. Casteel, "Calvin and Trent: Calvin's Reaction to the Council of Trent in the Context of his Conciliar Thought," *HTR* 63 (1970): 91-117, who traces Calvin's desire for rapprochement between Protestant and Catholic churches; and Jae Sung Kim, "*Unio Cum Christo*: The Work of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998), esp. 102-55, 220-47, who underscores the centrality of union in Calvin's soteriology, but who leaves largely unexplored the broader implications of this centrality and who does not frequently respect the integrity and historical progression of Calvin's works. See also T. H. L. Parker, "Calvin's Doctrine of Justification," *EvQ* 24 (1952): 101-7; Thomas Coates, "Calvin's Doctrine of Justification," *CTM* 34 (1963): 325-34; François Wendel, *Calvin*, 233-90; H. Paul Santmire, "Justification in Calvin's 1540 Romans Commentary;" W. Stanford Reid, "Justification by Faith According to John Calvin," *WTJ* 42 (1979-80): 290-307; Charles Partee, "Calvin's Central Dogma Again," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987): 191-99; Jonathan H. Rainbow, "Double Grace: John Calvin's View of the Relationship of Justification and Sanctification," *ExAud* 5 (1989): 99-105; D. Willis-Watkins, "The Unio Mystica and the Assurance of Faith According to Calvin," in *Calvin: Erbe und Auftrag* (ed. Willem van 't Spijker; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), 77-84; Tamburello, *Unio with Christ*, esp. 41-63, 84-110; W. Robert Godfrey, "What Really Caused the Great Divide?" in *Roman Catholicism*, 65-82. Although not specifically focused on Calvin (or Trent), see the insightful discussion in William Borden Evans, "Imputation and Impartation: The Problem of Union with Christ in Nineteenth-century American Reformed Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1996), esp. 8-48, 144-46.

separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell in us. . . . We also, in turn, are said to be “engrafted into him [*in ipsum inseri*]” [Rom. 11:17], and to “put on Christ” [Gal. 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. . . . [It is] the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits . . . the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself. (3.1.1; *CO* 2, col. 393)

The significance of this lengthy statement can hardly be overestimated. That it appears at the head of Calvin’s discussion is noteworthy in itself, signifying that everything that follows must be understood under this rubric. All the grace we receive in the gospel comes to us by means of our union with the resurrected Christ by faith and the “secret energy of the Spirit.” The roles of the Holy Spirit and faith in the reception of Christ and with him all his benefits are here, as we have seen above, conceived together in terms of the ingrafting effected. Calvin succinctly states the implication elsewhere: “This union alone ensures that, as far as we are concerned, he has not unprofitably come with the name of Savior” (3.1.3).

Christ himself is the supreme gospel blessing that sinners receive. As they receive him they also receive the salvific blessings, including justifying righteousness, that he won for them: “For we await salvation from him not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, ingrafted into his body [*corpori suo insitos*], participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself” (3.2.24; *CO* 2, col. 418). Calvin makes the same point rhetorically when discussing the instrumental role of saving faith (“But how can there be saving faith except insofar as it engrafts us into the body of Christ [*in Christi corpus inserit*]? . . . it does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to Christ” [3.2.30; *CO* 2, col. 422]) as well as the nature of justifying righteousness (“You see that our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ [*Christi sumus participes*]; indeed, with him we possess all its riches” [3.11.23; *CO* 2, col. 552]). This joining to Jesus puts the sinner in possession of all Christ’s benefits, which give us our salvation entirely: “To sum up: Christ, when he illumines us into faith by the power of his Spirit, at the same time so ingrafts us into his body [*insere in corpus suum*] that we become partakers of every good” (3.2.35; *CO* 2, col. 427).

Incidentally, and in connection with this last point, it appears that Calvin’s *ordo salutis* does not require the logical or temporal priority of a forensic act to a renovative act. Although he does speak of one’s progressive sanctification following in time one’s justification, the legal and the transformative blessings of salvation are given together in the Spirit’s act of uniting the sinner to Christ. Calvin may have been reluctant to join either side in subsequent Reformed debates about the priority of one aspect to the other, since the gift and exercise of faith that legally justifies us itself entails a moral change of disposition, viz., the will to believe the truth.

The relation of justification to union in Calvin then may be said to be one of identical action, or simply one of specific aspect: “Thus, him whom [God] receives into union with himself the Lord is said to justify [*Quem ergo Dominus in coniunctionem recipit, eum dicitur iustificare*]” (3.11.21; *CO* 2, col. 550). This does not mean that union and justification are themselves identical; rather, it means that when one is ingrafted into Christ that person is also necessarily justified, one key salvific blessing. In his discussion of Paul and James on justification and faith, the Genevan answers his own question about the way true faith justifies, and he once again introduces the concept of union with Christ: “For in what way does true faith justify save when it binds us to Christ [*Christo conglutinat*] so that, made one with him, we may enjoy participation in his righteousness [*participatione iustitiae eius fruamur*]” (3.17.11; *CO* 2, col. 599). Here Calvin speaks of justification as a particular beneficial result (“so that”) of union, but one that accrues “when [faith] binds us to Christ.” Justification, again, is a distinct soteric aspect, or benefit of one’s union with Christ.⁵³

Although Calvin never tires of underscoring just how important it is for sinners to participate in Christ, and therefore in his righteousness, he is careful to distance himself from Osiander’s view of essential righteousness, by which sinners became righteous through their participation in Christ according to his divine nature (3.11.8-12). Because Osiander recoils from a free imputation of righteousness in justification, decrying as impossible God’s reckoning righteous those who remain wicked (i.e., the legal fiction charge), Calvin’s rejection of Osiander provides a slightly different perspective on how the Reformer handled a Protestant error concerning justification similar to Trent’s. In both cases Calvin takes basically the same tack. Misunderstood is the nature of our union with Christ, the way Christ is in us and we are in Christ, which holds “the highest degree of importance” in articulations of the way we receive the grace of Christ:

... I confess that we are deprived of this utterly incomparable good [justifying righteousness] until Christ is made ours. Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. *We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body [institi sumus in eius corpus]*—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness [*iustitiae societatem*] with him. (3.11.10; *CO* 2, col. 540; my emphasis)

⁵³ The same conclusion is drawn by Kim, “*Unio Cum Christo*,” 120, 154, 241, and by Evans, “Imputation and Impartation,” 9, 144-46. Evans writes pointedly of, in his estimate, the developmental disjunction between Calvin and his Reformed heirs: “Here the fundamental incompatibility of Calvin’s view of union with Christ with the later *ordo salutis* should be noted. On Calvin’s view, salvation is an organic unity communicated *in toto* through spiritual union with Christ. On the *ordo salutis* model, however, salvation is bestowed through a series of successive and discrete acts” (145). On *ordo* see further Gaffin, *Resurrection*, 127-43.

Calvin abhors Osiander's "gross mingling of Christ with believers," but in this positive statement of the nature of a sinner's union with Christ he is equally concerned to avoid a notion of justifying imputation that conceives this vital, mystical union to be of secondary status. Justification, in other words, occurs only "because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body" (cf. also 3.11.24).⁵⁴

When Calvin sets his eyes on refuting Roman Catholic dogmas, he picks up where he left off in his "Antidote." Unlike many of his followers, Calvin does not immediately or always seize on Rome's view of the sequential place of good works relative to justification. He seems equally, if not more, comfortable highlighting its skewed view of the priority of good works to one's engrafting into Christ: "So all sorts of 'moral' good works have been discovered whereby men are rendered pleasing to God before they are engrafted into Christ [*Christo inse-rantur*]. . . . As if good fruits could come from an evil tree!" (3.15.6; *CO* 2, col. 583). As we saw above, this mystical union answers the problem of depravity. In this same paragraph Calvin next points out the mistake regarding justification that is entailed by this foundational confusion of positing good works prior to union, but he concludes by restating positively the role of engrafting for both one's justification and his polemic against Rome: "Therefore, as soon as you become engrafted into Christ through faith, you are made a son of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker in righteousness, a possessor of life; and (by this their falsehood may be better refuted) you obtain not the opportunity to gain merit but all the merits of Christ, for they are communicated to you."

By noting the inseparable bond between justification and sanctification that union with Christ ensures, Calvin repeats the arguments that he marshaled in his "Antidote" to combat the papists' claims that he voids the Christian life of moral improvement (3.16.1). He restates his related view of double imputation as regards the good works of believers (3.17.5, 8). Assurance depends on this righteousness conferring union (3.13.5). And he provides in the *Institutes* a more overt statement than appears in his "Antidote" about the eschatological nature of applied soteriology that exists because of this union. For after mentioning the redemption, reconciliation, and adoption bestowed to the believer who is united to and participates in Christ, Calvin summarizes his interpretation of Paul by saying, ". . . thus ingrafted into him [cf. Rom 11:19] we are *already*, in a manner, *partakers of eternal life*, having entered the Kingdom of God through hope" (3.15.5; my emphasis). Although brief, this is a clear articulation of inaugurated eschatology at the personal soteric level which has its hope centered in the consummation of the kingdom of God.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ On this passage, Thompson ("Viewing Justification," 452) not incorrectly observes: "Texts such as this indicate that it would be simplistic to equate justification with the forensic or imputed dimension of saving grace, or to equate sanctification with the intrinsic or transforming, sanative dimension. Justification is already intrinsic and transformative."

⁵⁵ It is interesting that Calvin refers here and elsewhere in the *Institutes* (e.g., 3.1.1) to the ingrafting of Rom 11 in support of his view of union with Christ. Perhaps this reveals something of the way

In the 1559 *Institutes*, then, Calvin develops and clarifies the centrality of union with Christ to his understanding of justification by faith. He affirms, against the Roman Catholics, the gratuitous imputation of righteousness in justification, but he just as vociferously affirms that this imputation occurs because a sinner is engrafted into Christ. Calvin seems to see these as occurring simultaneously, when faith is both given by the Spirit and concurrently exercised by the regenerated believer, who is raised up with Christ through the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the bond of this union, which is itself the principle that governs Calvin's conception of the way we receive the grace of Christ, including justification.

IV. Conclusion

To seemingly every objectionable point related to justification raised by Roman Catholics, from total depravity to the necessity of assurance, Calvin responds by developing his doctrine of union with Christ. The critical element of applied soteriology for him is one's becoming ingrafted into the resurrected Christ, for to receive Christ by faith is also to receive all his benefits. The believer's reception of Christ involves a resurrection from death to life, a transfer from a state of guilt to a state of innocence. The juridical change requires a subjective change. Faith receives Christ for justification, but one does not possess or exercise faith until the willingness to believe is formed in the sinner by the Holy Spirit, who changes his nature. The presence of faith, the Holy Spirit and Christ are inseparable, as are objective and subjective benefits/results of salvation, which accompany one another. So Rome particularly errs in asserting that faith and the works that God reckons as good may be present in a person while Christ, and all of his saving benefits, may be absent. Because this vital union indissolubly connects the believer to the exalted Christ, who has already experienced everything for which the believer hopes, the Christian's present salvation is eschatological.⁵⁶ Justification then, as a forensic benefit stemming from a believer's union with Christ, is an in-breaking of the future declaration of the forgiveness that will be shown to be true in the day of judgment, which the believer has now, already. Then the believer will be fully shown to be what he is now, one of God's covenant people.

As mentioned at the outset, the scope of this study was limited primarily to three texts that fairly span the course of Calvin's theologically productive life. It remains, however, to trace the particular theme of union with Christ through the whole corpus of his commentaries, tracts, treatises, sermons, revisions of the *Institutes*, etc., and then to ask whether this additionally illumines Calvin's differences with Rome on the question of justification. The present article,

in which he sees Gentiles incorporated into the covenantal history of Israel through their union with and incorporation into Christ.

⁵⁶ This point of difference between Calvin and Trent is made somewhat differently but helpfully by Casteel, "Calvin and Trent," 111-12: "At any rate, [for Trent] justification is a process, a matter of degrees, and something capable of being increased or diminished. . . . For Calvin, this change of relation to God is a complete work, once and for all, and incapable of degrees."

however, narrow in its scope though it is, may suffice to shed some light on this question concerning their disagreement. And if the disagreement has historically been described in different terms, with less attention to one's union with Christ, that might be because the 1539 edition of the *Institutes* emphasizes it less than the 1559 version.⁵⁷ If Richard Muller is correct that the 1539 *Institutes* must be recognized "as the principal text of that work to be examined for a sense of Calvin's impact on his own time" because it was "the primary form [along with its major expansions in 1543 and 1550] by which his theology was known and assessed by his contemporaries," then it is somewhat understandable why the Reformed tradition developed with more emphasis on imputation than on union with Christ in its debates with Roman Catholics. Especially welcome, then, is a chronicle of the historical development of union with Christ in the various editions of the *Institutes* as well as the texts leading up to and constituting the period of Protestant Orthodoxy.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, a couple of broad conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing. On the one hand, Calvin's understanding of justification as a function of one's union with Christ may have anticipated in some respects certain features in Paul that NT scholarship is presently highlighting.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, I do not want to overstate the matter. There are some real differences. For instance, Calvin's understanding of the NT, for obvious historical reasons, was not informed by textual discoveries of the last two centuries that have expanded our view of the diverse groups and views that make up Second Temple Judaism. And though Calvin is more "ecclesiocentric" than some are willing to recognize, he does not speak of salvation as corporate or covenantal in the same way that scholars such as Hays, Wright, Dunn, and Sanders do.

On the other hand, it is not clear that Calvin's view is entirely in line with that brand of Protestant soteriology whose characteristic mark, A. A. Hodge notes, "is the principle that the change of relation to the law signaled by the term justification . . . necessarily precedes and renders possible the real moral

⁵⁷ Though in the 1539 edition the language of "participation" is used more than ingrafting; see CO 1, col. 746, 751, 776, 786-87.

⁵⁸ There was at least one defender of the soteriological centrality of union with Christ at the Westminster Assembly: Obadiah Sedgwick, an English member of but not a commissioner to the Westminster Assembly; wrote: "The faith which brings us into the Covenant, is that faith which doth unite us unto Christ, which makes us one with him: And we being thus united to Christ, we are thereupon, and therefore in the Covenant: Faith considered as justifying, doth not bring us into the Covenant; for our justifying follows our being in the covenant; we must first be in the Covenant before we can have Righteousnesse and forgiveness of sins" (*The Bowels of tender Mercy Sealed in the Everlasting Covenant* [ed. H. Chambers, E. Calamy, S. Ash, and A. Byfield; London: Edward Mottershed for Adoniram Byfield, 1661], 185; his emphasis). (I am grateful to Chad Van Dixhoorn for supplying me with this quotation.) Sedgwick's view seems to be represented, e.g., in *Westminster Larger Catechism* 165-69 and latent to a degree in the Reformed tradition (cp. *WLC* with *Heidelberg Catechism* Q 20, 32, 64, 70, and 76, and with *Belgic Confession* Art. 22). A burden of this article, in many ways, has been to retrieve this aspect of the tradition's soteriology, to underscore union's capital-"s" Spiritual (and not simply federal) nature, and to reconsider this doctrine's relevance to a familiar debate.

⁵⁹ In addition to the NT literature cited above, see Udo Schnelle, "Transformation und Partizipation als Grundgedanken paulinischer Theologie," *NTS* 47 (2001): 58-75.

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change of character signaled by the terms regeneration and sanctification.”⁶⁰ The question might then be raised: to what extent does appealing to Calvin promote a rapprochement between Protestants and Roman Catholics? Although Calvin certainly believes that justification precedes any sustained moral improvement by the believer (progressive sanctification), the way he coordinates regeneration, the formation of and exercise of faith, union with Christ, and justification as a particular benefit of this union leads one to doubt that, if he were alive today, he would level his polemic against Roman Catholic soteriology on the precise sequence of salvation’s renovative and juridical aspects in the believer. This, however, is precisely what many Protestant apologists who identify themselves with Calvin have historically done and what some are doing with respect to ECT and “The Gift of Salvation.” Just as he did in his own day, I suspect that Calvin would spend more energy challenging Rome’s view of sin and depravity, on the one hand, and of union with Christ, on the other, always underscoring the controlling significance of this union for every saving benefit, including justification by faith.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Hodge, “The *Ordo Salutis*,” 311.

⁶¹ I am grateful, in particular, to Professors Richard Gaffin, Stephen Taylor, and Timothy Trummer for providing helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

a doctrine of justification of a different character. From the Reformation perspective, justification was the crux of all the disputes. Doctrinal condemnations were put forward both in the Lutheran Confessions^[3] and by the Roman Catholic Church's Council of Trent. These condemnations are still valid today and thus have a church-dividing effect. 2. For the Lutheran tradition, the doctrine of justification has retained its special status.