

THE PURITAN DISTORTION OF JUSTIFICATION

John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession

If significant differences exist between Calvin and high Calvinists over the atonement, the same may be said regarding the doctrine of justification. Whereas the former deviation is 'distortion by deduction', the latter may be styled 'distortion by addition'. Following Theodore Beza's lead, high orthodoxy developed a cluster of ideas which may be summed up as follows:

1. Justification is more than forgiveness. Acceptance with God requires more than mere innocence. A positive righteousness is necessary.
2. Justification is a declaration on God's part, perfect and complete at the moment a guilty sinner truly trusts in Christ for salvation.
3. Justification is based on the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, both 'passive' and 'active', viz. Christ not only suffered the penalty of the law in his death. He also obeyed the precept of the law in his life. The believer requires the merit of both for justification. Hence justification is by a twofold imputation.

Accordingly, the *Westminster Confession* (1647), XI. I, IV, V, states that God justifies those whom he 'effectually calleth' by 'pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them,...but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them'. While God decreed to justify all the elect from all eternity, actual justification takes place at the moment, 'in due time', when Christ is applied to them. Also, 'God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and...they can never fall from the state of justification...' Through alterations proposed by John Owen, the teaching on imputation became even more explicit in the equivalent chapter of the *Savoy Declaration* (1658). Thus the believer's 'whole and sole righteousness' consists of 'Christ's active obedience unto the whole law' as well as his 'passive obedience in his death'.

On the three above points, a comparison with Calvin's teaching reveals differences too conspicuous to miss. First, he regularly insists that 'Justification by faith...consists solely in the remission of sins' (*Inst.* III. xi. 21); 'God justifies by pardoning' (*ibid.* 11); 'this justification may be termed in one word the remission of sins' (*ibid.* 21); 'the Apostle connects forgiveness of sins with justification in such a way as to show that they are altogether the same' (*ibid.* 22); 'indeed, since it is only by the forgiveness of sins that God is reconciled to us,...This verse teaches clearly what it really is to be justified - to stand before God as if we were righteous...and from this it follows that righteousness consists in the forgiveness of sins' (*Comm.* Luke 18: 13-14);

'...righteousness for Paul is nothing other than the remission of sins' (*Comm. Rom. 4: 6*).

Second, Calvin never teaches that justification is a single 'lightning-flash' event; this is more applicable to adoption and regeneration. He views justification as a continuum, beginning at conversion and extending throughout the duration of life (see *Inst. III. xiv. (title), 11; Comm. Luke 1: 77*). This is not to be confused with the process of sanctification, which admits of degrees. At any moment in one's life, justification relates to current guilt arising from defective sanctification. In this respect, justification and sanctification are perpetual and inseparable correlates in the believer's daily pilgrimage. This connection between the two parts of salvation (see *Inst. III. xi. 6*) has implications for faith and good works. While the latter possess no meritorious value, they are necessary concomitants of a living faith. Faith, while directed to Christ alone is never alone. Calvin says: 'We dream not of a faith which is devoid of good works, nor of a justification which can exist without them' (*Inst. III. xvi. 1*) Since justification and pardon of sin are the same thing, and pardon is a daily requirement (see *Comm. 2 Cor. 5: 20; Comm. 1 John 1: 7*), justification is to be seen as a lifelong continuum rather than a once-for-all conversion event. This is perfectly consistent with the Greek *aorist* tense - the tense of simple action, whether complete or incomplete - in Romans 5: 1. Whenever justification occurs, either at conversion or subsequently, it consists of a succession of forensic justifying instants. Accordingly, having stated that reconciliation with God is enjoyed when we embrace his promises and rest on the mercy of God in Christ, Calvin is careful to add: 'Nor can this be confined to the commencement of justification, as those interpreters fondly suppose, for the definition, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, was effected in David after a lengthy period of training in the service of God. And Abraham, though a rare example of holiness, thirty years after his call had no works in which to glory before God, and therefore his belief in the promise was imputed to him for righteousness. When Paul teaches us that God justifies men by not imputing their sins, he quotes a passage which is daily repeated in the Church. That peace of conscience, which is disturbed on the score of works, is not a one-day phenomenon, but ought to continue through our whole life. It follows from this that until our death we are justified only as we look to Christ alone in whom God has adopted us, and now regards us as accepted' (*Comm. Rom. 3: 21*).

Third, Calvin always defines pardon or justification in terms of Christ's death alone: 'Christ has attained righteousness for sinners by his death' (*Comm. Rom. 5: 9*); '...righteousness has been procured for us by the death of Christ, so that our sins being abolished, we are acceptable to God' (*Comm. Col. 1: 22*); 'Our righteousness has been procured by the obedience of Christ which he displayed in his death' (*Comm. Rom. 4: 25*); 'Christ by his obedience satisfied the judgement of the father...Our guilt is taken away by the expiatory sacrifice

which he offered' (*Comm. Rom. 3: 24*); 'When [Paul]...states that we are made righteous by the obedience of Christ, we deduce from this that Christ, in satisfying the Father, has procured righteousness for us' (*Comm. Rom. 5: 19*). Clearly, nothing further is necessary for justification than the pardon of sin through the death of Christ.

Whenever Calvin expounds the subject, he plainly regards 'justification', 'imputation' and 'pardon' as synonymous terms: '...in the fourth chapter of Romans he first calls justification 'imputation of righteousness'. And he does not hesitate to place it in forgiveness of sins. Paul says: 'That man is declared blessed by David whom God renders acceptable or to whom he imputes righteousness apart from works, as it is written: "Blessed are they whose transgressions have been forgiven"' (*Rom. 4: 6-8; Ps. 32:1*). There he is obviously discussing not a part of justification but the whole of it' (*Inst. III. xi. 4*). Numerous quotations may be cited from Calvin to the same effect (see *Inst. III. xi. 3; Comm. Luke 1: 77; Comm. Rom. 4: 6; Comm. Rom. 6: 14*).

While Calvin occasionally defines justification as 'the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ' (*Inst. III. xi. 2*), high orthodox authors misleadingly cite such statements to endorse their double-imputation view. In view of his ubiquitous teaching, Calvin would be contradicting himself if they are correct. However, the most accurate interpreter of Calvin is David Pareus of Heidelberg (1548-1622), who disputed Cardinal Bellarmine's similar misinterpretation of Calvin's words: '[Calvin's] meaning was not, that there should be a double (formal) cause of justification (for so he would fight against himself, and against the Scriptures) but his intent was, by two Scripture-terms equipollent, the one to the other, to express one and the same formal cause, or to join these two expressions together exegetically...so that one might help to explain the other' (cited in J. Goodwin, *Imputatio fidei, or a Treatise of Justification* (London, 1642), 121-4). This view is surely made clear by Calvin himself. When he states that Christ 'atoned for our sins by his death, and his obedience is imputed to us for righteousness' (*Comm. 1 Cor. 1: 30*), Calvin merely equates Christ's 'obedience' with his 'death' (see also *Comm. Rom. 4: 25* above). In this Corinthian comment, he is not asserting that the imputation of righteousness is something additional to 'the remission of sins'.

While Calvin clearly grounds Christ's saving work in the whole of his obedience (see *Inst. II. xvi. 5*), he plainly implies that while he possessed innate and habitual holiness, the 'active' aspect publicly demonstrated Christ's qualification to be the guiltless sin-bearer (see also *Comm. Heb. 7: 26-7*). Since a guilty mediator could not mediate, his own obedience is thus immediately relevant to his mediatorial role, and to the believer's justification only indirectly. In the passage just cited from the Institutes, Calvin focuses attention on Christ's sacrifice as the basis of 'pardon' (= 'righteousness'). At no point does he even mention imputation, let alone hint that this includes the 'active' obedience (the term is, of course, post Calvin). Untypical of the high

orthodox tendency to over-react to medieval theology, Calvin would have us believe that Christ's 'active' obedience or example is for imitation rather than imputation (see *Comm.* 1 John 2:6).

Unlike the English puritan confessions, Calvin's teaching on justification found clear expression in Articles XVII-XVIII of the French *Confession of Faith* (1559)(see my article, 'John Calvin and the Confessio Fidei Gallicana' in *EQ* 58.3 (1986), 203ff). While it is commonly assumed that most Reformed theologians adopted the high-orthodox double-imputation theory, many did not, including the English reformers. Others include the eminent Johann Piscator of Herborn in Nassau and the Heidelberg divines Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus and David Pareus. As well as English puritans such as William Twisse, George Lawson, John Ball, Thomas Gataker, John Goodwin, Anthony Wotton and others, the list embraces several French Reformed divines such as Moise Amyraut, Jean Daillé, Louis Cappel, Joshua de la Place and David Blondel (see H. Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 221). Regarding the latter group, although the French Reformed churches censured Piscator's view at the Synod of La Rochelle (1607)(see Quick, *Synodicon*, i. 265f), these 'Amyraldian' divines were never censured for holding it. Had a controversy erupted on this issue during Amyraut's career (see his teaching in Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 226), he would doubtless have appealed to Calvin as he did in the atonement controversy (1634-59). Notwithstanding the ruling at the Synod of Privas (1612)(see Quick, *op. cit.* 348), it was contradictory to repudiate Piscator's 'Calvinist' view and still affirm the Confession of Faith's teaching on justification.

More important than any departure from Calvin, Beza and the English Puritans arguably went beyond Scripture. Focusing on Christ's death, Paul says quite specifically that sinners are 'justified by his blood' (Rom. 5: 9). From the high orthodox perspective, Paul was only half right. He should therefore have said that we are 'justified by his blood and his obedience in life'. But Paul's statement is clarified in Romans 5: 18. Here the AV translation is unclear and misleading. It should read 'righteous act' (as in the NKJV, NIV, etc) rather than 'righteousness' since the Greek is *dikaioma* rather than *dikaioisune*. The point made by Paul is clear: whereas Adam's sinful act of revolt brought condemnation, Christ's righteous act of sacrifice is the basis of justification. Significantly, Calvin makes this very observation in *Comm.* Rom. 5: 18. Predictably, wherever the New Testament discusses Christ's obedience, the context focuses attention on his sacrifice (see Phil. 2: 8; Heb. 5: 8). It is therefore unscriptural to say that justification requires the imputation of Christ's passive and active obedience.

Such a view is also unnecessary, as Piscator and even John Wesley made clear. In short, the law only required 'do or die', not both, to satisfy its demands. The high orthodox view implies a twofold satisfaction if Christ had to fulfil both precept and penalty for double imputative ends. It also implies

that the statements 'Christ died for others' and 'Christ lived for others' have the same substitutionary status. If the latter is true, it makes the former redundant. If the former is adequate (as the event understood by Paul and Calvin clearly is), then the latter - as a basis for imputation - is superfluous. In addition, whereas the former makes good 'gospel sense', the latter is bad 'antinomian nonsense'. Indeed, as Calvin makes clear (see *Comm. Gal.* 3: 25, 4: 4), the believer is delivered not from the precept but only the penalty of the moral law, a view impossible to reconcile with a high orthodox view of imputation. And while the antinomian implications of such teaching were held in check by a stress on the necessity of personal holiness in the English puritan confessions, such tendencies found expression in hyper-Calvinist piety. For a comprehensive discussion of these and other issues, see my *Atonement and Justification*, 170ff.

Dr Alan C. Clifford
(Pastor, Norwich Reformed Church)

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