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CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

SINCE our aim in this paper is to describe Calvin's doctrine of justification, we will first of all present an objective account of it as contained in *Institutio*, Lib. III, cap. xi, and then afterwards attempt a brief interpretation by underlining certain cardinal points.

Following the chief articles of the Creed, Calvin has in Book I dealt with the doctrine of God the Creator, and in Book II with that of God the Redeemer. Now in Book III he comes to the doctrine of God the Holy Spirit. This book should not at all be taken as separate from that which precedes it, for, as the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, His work consists in realizing to us and in us what Christ has done for us. But since the link that binds us to Christ is faith, the work of the Holy Spirit in us is the creating and sustaining of faith. In the long chapter ii faith is represented as the basic attitude towards God in Christ on which all others—e.g. love, repentance, hope—depend, and from which they spring. We must return to his view of faith in the proper place. But now he goes on to speak, not of justification, but of regeneration. His reason for this order, so strange in a reformer, is to bring out more clearly and emphatically that justification is not to be separated from regeneration, and that in a certain sense the Reformers do not exclude good works from justification.

And so we come to chapter xi, the first of the eight chapters on this specific subject. It is first necessary, says Calvin, to explain the expressions "to be justified in the sight of God" and "to be justified by faith or by works": "He is said to be justified in the sight of God who in the divine judgment is reputed righteous, and accepted on account of his righteousness."¹ A sinner, *qua* sinner, can never be accepted by God, who has declared His wrath against sin. It remains, therefore, that for a man to be accepted by God he must be righteous. If he is in himself righteous, that is, without sin before God, he is said to be justified by works. But, "on the other hand, he will be justified by faith, who, being excluded from the righteousness of works, apprehends by faith the righteousness of Christ, invested in which he appears in the sight of God, not as a sinner, but as a righteous man."² On this basis Calvin puts forward

¹ *Inst.* III. xi. 2.

² *Ibid.*

his definition, which for clarity and completeness could not be surpassed: "Thus we simply explain justification to be an acceptance, by which God receives us into his favour and esteems us as righteous persons; and we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ."¹

After at once, in accordance with his scriptural method, turning to the Bible for confirmation of his use of the term, Calvin moves on to attack the heretical Reformer Osiander. His refutation throws much light on his own position, and therefore we must deal with it at some length. Osiander, says Calvin, has taken the truth of the indwelling of Christ in the believer and "grossly perverted" it into a declaration of the "transfusion of the divine essence into men", saying that "Christ's essence is blended with ours". Osiander's argument, according to Calvin, runs thus: God infuses His essence into man, who thus becomes a sharer or partaker of the divine essence; but the divine essence is holy and righteous; therefore man shares with God the divine righteousness; and therefore man is in the sight of God righteous. Furthermore, by receiving the essence of God, man is regenerate. Osiander does not dispense with forgiveness altogether in his doctrine of justification, but holds it alongside regeneration; justification is by forgiveness and regeneration. Finally, Calvin accuses him of denying that "Christ is our righteousness as having in the character of a priest expiated our sins and appeased the Father on our behalf, but as being the eternal God and everlasting life."²

It is true, Calvin replies, that justification and regeneration are closely connected. None can be justified without also being born again to eternal life: "Whomsoever, therefore, God receives into his favour, he likewise gives the Spirit of adoption, by whose power he renews them in his own image."³ It must be particularly observed that the connection between justification and regeneration is Christological; by our *insitio in Christo*, our union with Him, we possess Christ, and therefore His blessings. As Christ cannot be divided, neither can His blessings of justification and regeneration. But on the other hand, they should not be confused, for there is a definite distinction between them: "it is one thing to be justified and quite

¹ *Inst.* III. xi. 2. ² *Inst.* III. xi. 6. ³ *Ibid.*

another to be made new creatures."¹ Justification is therefore not dependent on regeneration, for we are declared righteous by God when we are in ourselves unrighteous and unregenerate.

The second answer concerns a specific point of Christology. Christ is made to us righteousness, says Osiander, not in respect of His humanity, but of His divinity. Calvin's answer is a little model of trinitarian argument along the well-known lines of Tertullian against Praxeas. Certainly Christ could not have reconciled us to God unless He had Himself been God. Nevertheless, it is in His manhood that He has procured righteousness for us. If the office of the Mediator belongs to the Godhood of Christ, then it must also belong to the Father and the Holy Spirit, to whom the Godhood is common and also the attributes of the Godhood. "Hence I conclude, first," says Calvin, "that Christ was made righteousness when he assumed the form of a servant; secondly, that he justifies us by his own obedience to the Father; and therefore, that he does this for us, not according to his divine nature, but by reason of the dispensation committed to him."²

Thirdly, on the nature of the indwelling of Christ, Calvin, no less than Osiander, insists on the real union of Christ with believers. But Christ does not inhabit the believer in His essence, and therefore give him an essential righteousness. On the contrary Christ dwells in our hearts by faith; in other words, indirectly. The righteousness of Christ does not become ours by participation in a direct union with Him, but by being imputed to us. Because we do not now enjoy such a direct union with Him, we do not become sharers in His righteousness either. Here, as long as we live, we are sinners, and cannot be accepted by God on the basis of any inherent righteousness. "God justifies us by pardoning."³ Osiander's "by forgiveness and regeneration" is met with a firm "by forgiveness only".

We may now leave this particular controversy, and go on to consider the relationship between faith and works. And first we return to chapter ii and the definition of faith that it contains. "It is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds, and confirmed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit."⁴ From this

¹ *Inst.* III. xi. 6.

² *Inst.* III. xi. 8.

³ *Inst.* III. xi. 11.

⁴ *Inst.* III. ii. 7.

definition it is clear that, while faith is a very real activity of man, it depends for its particular nature upon its author and its object—it is the creation of God Himself, and it has God in Christ as its object. Calvin can readily agree with Osiander that in itself faith is a weak and imperfect thing. Properly speaking, it is not faith that justifies, but the Christ who is received and laid hold of in faith who justifies. If the act of faith justified, then faith would be a work and we should be justified by works. Faith is an emptiness, a waiting upon, a desiring. Calvin compares it to an empty vessel in which we receive the treasure of Christ. Faith is thus the acknowledgement that we ourselves are sinners but that Christ is our righteousness. And as this acknowledgement, it is the formal or instrumental cause of justification.

In this connection Calvin deals with two misinterpretations of the expression “works”. The “Sophists”—i.e. the contemporary Roman Catholic theologians—explain works as man’s own unaided actions performed before regeneration. These cannot justify. But the works performed after regeneration are good works, and go to implement the faith which justifies. In this sense we are justified by faith and works. This is the view taken by the Council of Trent. Against it, Calvin insists first that the Pauline repudiation of works extends to all activities of man whatsoever and whenever performed; and secondly, that “sanctification and righteousness are separate blessings of Christ.”¹ Next he turns to the Schoolmen whose errors “are rather more gross”. Their great fault is that they apply grace to the work of the Holy Spirit leading us to do the good works by which we are righteous. Against them Calvin asserts the true meaning of grace as the free and undeserved mercy of God, by which, when we are in ourselves sinners and without any righteousness at all, whether of our own or as the fruit of faith, we are forgiven by God for the sake of Jesus Christ and therefore accepted in Him as sinless and righteous. He proceeds to show from Scripture the necessary and inseparable connection between forgiveness, grace and justification on the one hand and faith on the other, and so reaches the heart of his doctrine “that a man is justified by faith only”. This word *only* is exclusive absolutely. Not only the ceremonial works of the Law, but also the moral works of the Law

¹ *Inst.* III. xi. 14.

are excluded. It is true, of course, that only the faith that works by love will justify. But it is not the love borne by faith that justifies, but the faith itself.

We must here digress from chapter xi for a moment to consider a serious difficulty raised by what is called double justification. Calvin, like Luther, taught, not only that the sinner is justified, but that his works done after justification are also accepted by God as good: "even the works of believers after their vocation are approved by God."¹ And, what is more, "we will admit, not only a partial righteousness of works . . . but such as is approved by God, as though it were perfect and complete."² It often appears from the *Institutio* as if the same work that before regeneration encountered only the wrath of God is after justification accepted as holy, and thus a double and unfair standard is set up. And moreover, it looks as if Calvin is here only a hair's breadth from the Scholastic doctrine of prevenient grace and its subsequent efficacious works. In fact, however, he is careful to emphasize that the believer also is a sinner and his works no less vitiated by sin than those of the unbeliever. God cannot accept these works as good in themselves, even though they are the fruit of the Spirit, but He accepts them in precisely the same way as He accepts the sinner—by forgiveness and imputation. "When we are ingrafted into Christ, therefore, as our persons appear righteous before God, because our iniquities are covered by his righteousness, so our works are accounted righteous, because the sinfulness otherwise belonging to them is not imputed, being all buried in the purity of Christ. So we may justly assert, that not only our persons, but even our works, are justified by faith alone."³

Continuing his explanation of the definition of justification. Calvin now turns his attention to forgiveness. First he lays it down as axiomatic "that the divine wrath remains on all men as long as they continue to be sinners."⁴ But God's anger is removed, not by a change in the nature of man but by God pardoning freely—i.e. without being motivated by anything in man—the sinfulness whose willing servant he is. By forgiveness sin is actually removed and ceases to exist, for God looks upon the man not as a sinner but as holy. In the sight of God, therefore, man is sinless, and if in the sight of God, then really.

¹ *Inst.* III. xvii. 5.

² *Inst.* III. xvii. 10.

³ *Inst.* III. xvii. 10.

⁴ *Inst.* III. xi. 21.

But forgiveness also means of necessity that the man who is sinless in the sight of God is in himself a sinner. Otherwise, what is there to forgive? This thought is sharpened by the fact that justification is only by forgiveness, and not also by regeneration.

And finally, justification "consists in the imputation of the righteousness of Christ". Behind this lies the large part of Calvin's Christology. By becoming man, the Son of God has not merely entered the world alongside other men and identified Himself with their lives, suffering, etc., but He has come as Man, the man who stands in the place of all other men, living, suffering and dying as their representative towards God. In all this He has been obedient to His Father, accepting every new demand made upon Him until at last He accepts the final wrath of God in the cup that is held out to Him in Gethsemane. Throughout His life He has consistently chosen obedience as His path. But, since He stands in the place of man as man's representative, in Him man is no longer disobedient to God but obedient. In this lies man's possibility; and this possibility is realized by faith. By faith we are made one with Christ, and therefore partakers in the properties of Christ. There takes place a *communicatio idiomatum*; what is ours is given to Him, and what is His is given to us. And His is the perfect obedience He rendered to God while He was on earth. By faith this obedience is reckoned or imputed to us, and God regards us no longer as the sinners that in ourselves we are, but the righteous men that we are not and never become in this world.

This, then, is the outline of Calvin's doctrine of justification. We may now draw out the implications of this doctrine by noticing some of its emphases.

In the first place, the backcloth to all his thinking on this subject is that it is God who justifies. On this fact rest the certainty and permanence of our salvation. Self-justification is bound to lead to uncertainty, because God's judgment on the matter is ignored, and thus the decree of the judge remains in suspense. Similarly, only the justification of God is a decree made once for all, because God alone is unchanging. If God is to-morrow and for eternity what He is to-day, then also His decree of justification pronounced to-day will not change to-morrow or in eternity. The word of justification is founded on the eternal decree of God which is its efficient cause. It is God that justifieth because it is God who elects.

But if justification is the work of God, Calvin never allows us to forget that it is the work of God in Christ. Nothing would be more fatally easy for a theologian holding Calvin's particular doctrine of predestination than to make justification into an arbitrary and immoral act of God performed purely because it pleases Him and having no relation to the deadliness of sin. But it is abundantly clear that for Calvin, God is the Father of Jesus Christ. Justification is, for him, justification in Christ. We may certainly say that he considers justification christologically.

Finally, we have in his doctrine of justification by faith alone the tension between time and eternity, possession and hope that is such a strong feature of Reformation theology. In justification something happens to us that yet does not happen to us. In eternity God pronounces upon us His judgment that we are righteous, and in eternity that judgment is the only real one. But we are not in eternity, but in time, and in time we are very far from being righteous in ourselves. We are simultaneously righteous and sinners; not righteous one moment and then sinners the next and then righteous again, but at one and the same time both righteous and sinners. Again, here on earth we do not possess our righteousness, which is hidden in the hidden Christ, and will only become visible when He also is revealed at the last day. In this world we believe that God accepts us in Him and we look for that day when our righteousness shall become our possession—i.e. when our righteousness in Him shall be in us fully and fully exercised by us. And yet we do possess this righteousness, for we possess Christ. In His Word and Sacraments Christ and His righteousness come to us and become ours. In them we have the real and entire Christ who was obedient for us and suffered for us. But we have this Christ indirectly and sacramentally, always in His Word and Sacraments, never directly and face to face. We have Him by faith, in all the certainty that faith receives from its object, but with all the emptiness that faith presupposes in its subject. Visibly we are sinners; invisibly we are righteous. When that invisible shall become visible, our all-too visible sinfulness shall be destroyed and we shall become that which now we are not in ourselves, but which we are even now in Jesus Christ.

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