What is Non-Negotiable in any Theology that wishes to be 'Reformed'? (Part 1)

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of our conference poses to each speaker a question: are we called in our day to 'maintain' Reformational theology or to revise it? This question does not arise in a vacuum. It is an obvious question to ask on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation; obvious, because the central doctrine of the Reformation — the doctrine of justification — has come under fire in the last forty years or so as never before. Much of the criticism has come from specialists in the theology of Paul. To be sure, Paulinists are not agreed amongst themselves with regard to 'what Paul really meant.' There is no consensus where a positive alternative to the 'Lutheran Paul' is concerned. But most do seem to be in agreement that Luther's dialectic of faith and works reflected a set of late-medieval concerns not shared by Paul. And agreement on that negative point has effectively de-centred the doctrine; denying to it the status of a 'central dogma' which would condition the explication of other doctrines. In its place, other doctrines are now seen by many as more nearly central to NT teaching. The primary candidate is 'union with Christ' as the putative foundation of Christian soteriology. And with this shift in understanding of fundamental doctrines has come a suppression of forensic thinking more generally in favour of metaphysically-grounded ontologies of God and of human persons — which has also had an impact on the doctrine of the atonement since that doctrine too was conceived by the Reformers in a forensic frame of reference.

In any event, it is understandable that we should find ourselves here this week, discussing maintenance and/or revision. I do not think myself that these contrasting terms should be thought of as an either-or. Revision, after all, is inevitable in any genuinely 'Reformed' theology. What makes it inevitable is the 'Scripture-principle.' Any theology which says that Scripture alone is the 'norming norm' and that all other 'authorities' can never rise higher than the level of a subordinate 'standard' is a theology which is open, as a matter of principle, to revision. That is why there is no place in Reformed theology for the Catholic understanding that the 'official' teachings of the church are irreformable. It is, of course, true that pan-Christian statements like the Nicene Creed have a *practical* irreform-

ability insofar as it cannot be expected in a divided Christendom that all the churches which have a stake in that Creed would ever be in a position to speak together in carrying out a revision — a problem rendered *absolutely* unresolvable by the fact that at least one of those churches subscribes to the irreformability thesis. But that cannot be allowed to keep us from seeing that the 'Reformed' could never agree that the Creed is 'irreformable' *as a matter of principle*. And if that is true of the Creed, it is also true of the Reformed confessions.

On the other hand, the goal of any proposed revision must be to bring the Reformed witness more into line with the witness of Scripture. That being the case, revision can never be an end in itself. And revision ought never to occur simply because the *Zeitgeist* is blowing in a different direction. 'The Church Reformed according to the Word of God and always reforming' is a church that has a starting-point in received teachings ('The Church Reformed') — so that any proposed revision would have to be revision of *that* received teaching — in the light of the Word of God. It is here that things get very interesting.

How are we to differentiate between legitimate doctrinal development and a change which amounts to a 'break' with the Reformed tradition altogether? A change so massive or so fundamental that those carrying it out would have to find another label by which to define what they believe than the word 'Reformed'? Can we develop criteria by means of which developments might be assessed? Just what is non-negotiable in any theology which wishes to be recognized as 'Reformed'?

I want to suggest that no doctrinal proposal can be regarded as a legitimate development of a classically 'Reformed' doctrine which does not honour the concerns which animated the authors of its original and originating formulation. Establishing what those concerns were requires asking some historical-critical questions. For example: did the originating formulation of a specific doctrine take its rise in a situation of conflict? Was this doctrine formed in studied opposition to something else? Were the authors saying no to something even as they said yes to this? And, in any case, what was at stake for them? What theological values did they seek to uphold? And, most importantly: can the same things be said differently? Can the theological values seeking expression in the originating formulation find expression in a new and different formulation?

I would hope that it is clear that in asking questions like these we are not placing ourselves in a situation of 'anything goes.' In fact, the bar has been set pretty high for the authorization of a doctrinal proposal as 'Reformed.' Careful historical work is required in the attempt to understand what lies behind specific confessional formulations. And critical-systematic decisions have to be made as well. Forensicism, for example,

is not a doctrine. It is more nearly a frame of reference which enabled the Reformers to order topics one to another in a coherent and self-consistent way. Can a frame of reference be abandoned without altering the doctrines formed with its help *from the ground up*? Can a frame of reference be enriched if not replaced, so as to continue upholding core values? That is a more nearly systematic and constructive question than a historical one. In any event, I will try to be faithful to the following 'rule': *only those developments are legitimate which are authorized by the tradition itself.*

I turn then to the question I have been asked to address: what is non-negotiable? It is quite probable that something non-negotiable can be found in every Reformed doctrine. But time will not allow me to treat the full range of doctrines touched upon in the Reformed confessions. What I would like to do is to treat those doctrines only which — precisely by being controverted — contributed most directly to 'defining' the term 'Reformed' as a *distinctive* branch of Reformational theology. To ask what is non-negotiable in relation to these doctrines is to ask what it is that makes any theology to be 'Reformed' at the most foundational level. Those doctrines are: first, justification and atonement and then, Christology and sacramentology. The reason for treating them as pairs will become clear as I proceed. In each case, I will be asking the kinds of questions I have just elaborated. I will not treat here the Scripture-principle or the doctrine of predestination. The Scripture-principle was shared by the Lutherans (albeit differently deployed) — and predestination had been the common property of all Augustinians for more than a millennium — and would continue to be upheld by the Dominicans after the later Lutherans sought to distance themselves from it. So my focus will be directed to doctrinal distinctives.

I. JUSTIFICATION AND ATONEMENT

The linkage of the doctrines of justification and atonement is made necessary by the fact that the early Reformed understood the mechanism by means of which the so-called 'happy exchange' took place in forensic terms. 'He took what is ours and gave to us what was His' means, on Reformed soil, that Christ took upon Himself our guilt and gave to us His righteousness. And the mechanism by means of which this occurred was imputation. God imputes our guilt to Christ; God imputes Christ's righteousness to us. That is why I treat these two doctrines together.

But 'imputation' is a term borrowed from the commercial sphere, from the practices of accountants. Something is or is not credited to one's account. Why, then, do we speak of the early Reformed treatment of justification and atonement as 'forensic'? The reason is that both have to do

with divine judgment. And because that is the case, both are construed as occurring in a courtroom setting. Justification is the outcome of the trial of a sinner at the bar of God's justice. It is a declarative act by means of which a sinner is pronounced 'not guilty' and, therefore, not liable for the penalty ordained by God to be the appropriate sentence for sinners. By the same token, what takes place in atonement is that Christ is made by God to be the sinner, the guilt-bearer in our place. And in our place, He is judged by God, found guilty and suffers the penalty of that eternal 'death' which was our just deserts. I am sure all of this is very familiar to most of you. For the others, I would hope that you can see how the term 'imputation' functions as a description of the mechanism by means of which the judgment taking place in the divine courtroom is effected. Imputation is a tool; divine judgment is the overarching interpretive horizon — which tells you how important the forensic is. I turn then first to justification. Thus far, I have only said what was necessary to defend treating the two doctrines together as a pair. But there is much more to be said.

A. Justification

The shared Protestant conception of justification was not fully formed by the first generation of Reformers. It took the Osiandrian controversy in the 1550s to bring final clarity into what the Reformed, especially, wished to say with respect to the content of this doctrine and its entailments. But the foundational importance of this doctrine was recognized from the earliest days. Zwingli called it 'the sum of the gospel' in his Sixty-Seven Articles of 1523. And the First Helvetic Confession referred to it as 'the principal article.' To be sure, in neither case is the term 'justification' employed. But the subject-matter treated under that term subsequently is clearly what is in view.[1] And the decisive point for our purposes here

[1] This is what Zwingli says in Article II. 'The sum of the gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, has made known to us the will of His heavenly Father, and by His innocence has redeemed us from death and reconciled us to God' (*Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, ed. by Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 36). In Article LIV, Zwingli adds that 'Christ has borne all our pain and misery' (Cochrane, p. 42). And so, it is the righteousness of Christ which provides the basis for the 'remission of sins' in Article L (ibid.). The First Helvetic Confession reads (at Article 12): 'Consequently in all evangelical teaching the most sublime and principal article and the one which should be expressly set forth in every sermon and impressed upon the hearts of men [and women] should be that we are preserved and saved solely by the one mercy of God and by the merit of Christ.'

is that this subject-matter is referred to as 'the sum of the gospel' and the 'principal article.'

Calvin would later say of justification that it,

> is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it. For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.[2]

Calvin tells us that the only reason he treated faith and repentance before turning to justification is because he wanted first to show 'how little devoid of good works is the faith through which alone we obtain free righteousness by the mercy of God'.[3] The order of teaching adopted here — first faith and repentance or 'sanctification' in *Institutes* III.ii-x and then justification in III.xi-xix — is meant to quell Catholic criticism of the Reformer's doctrine in advance, i.e. before Calvin has even gotten to the doctrine of justification and, therefore, before the Catholics would have had opportunity to criticize. He achieves this goal by showing first how highly he values 'good works' and how important they are in Christian life. But now he comes to the doctrine which he regards as foundational to the Christian life. He says we must 'first' know God's judgment concerning us if we are to have a 'foundation on which to establish' our salvation. It might be possible to interpret these lines as merely epistemic — as the first thing believers ought to think about as they reflect upon the saving work of God — were it not for the fact that linking the human act of reflection with the term 'foundation' would all too easily suggest that faith itself is a work, a thing which Calvin clearly wanted to avoid. No, what he is saying is that we are to build piety on the foundation laid in God's judgment — a judgment which is firm and secure. Justification is the doctrine which treats this *wholly objective* divine judgment.

My point for now is this: it is not the Lutherans alone who believed that justification is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. The Reformed had other ways of saying this but what they said amounted to much the same thing. If we are to take 'being Reformed' seriously, then we have to understand the doctrine of justification as having fundamental (or foundational) importance. It is because it has this importance that Calvin says he will 'devote the greater attention and care to it'; that is to

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2 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.1, p. 726. [N.B. The page references to the *Institutes* will always be to the McNeill edition.]

3 Ibid.

say, 'greater attention and care' than was given to faith and repentance. The doctrine of justification has fundamental significance for Calvin.

What then is the content of the Reformed doctrine of justification in its mature form? And what did Calvin's response to Osiander add to the mature conception? It is appropriate that we turn first to Calvin. He it was who provided the most thorough and compelling response to Osiander. First, then, the definition, then the contra-Osiandrian supplement.

Calvin actually has *two* definitions of justification which are not obviously compatible. I am not saying that they could not be made compatible; I think they can. But that would require more work than Calvin did. In any event, here is the first and most basic definition — the one most often cited. 'Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as righteous men [and women]. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.'[4] So defined, justification has two parts. There is the forgiveness of sins and there is the positive imputation of Christ's righteousness. We might express this with even greater precision if we were to say that justification includes a positive imputation of Christ's righteousness and a negative non-imputation of sin and guilt. The relation between the two is made more clear by my reversal of Calvin's ordering. For it is precisely the positive imputation of Christ's righteousness which, on Calvin's view, *effects* the non-imputation of our sin and guilt. Where Christ's righteousness is, there can be no unrighteousness. And so Calvin says, 'Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.'[5] This is *not* Calvin's best formulation, since it opens him to the charge of making the divine declaration to consist in a 'legal fiction.' But it is important for us to see that the positive imputation is what brings about the non-imputation of sin and guilt. It is important to say that because it allows Calvin to maintain a truth dear to him, viz. that the ground of our justification — not just in its initiating moment but in every moment of the Christian life — is to found 'outside' of ourselves in Christ alone. Why 'outside' of us? The answer to that question is simple. It is because the justified are still sinners. There will never be a moment in the life of any justified person in which she is not still a sinner. But remember now! The content of the divine verdict is innocence. Not guilty! A sinner can never *be* this. And so, we have to face the fact that it is not only the case that *our* works can never justify us; not even *God's* work *in* us will ever bring it about that we are

4 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.2, p. 727.

5 Ibid., pp. 726-27.

now innocent in ourselves and as such. If God were to kill us and raise us from the dead in the eschatological sense of 'new creation,' then we might well say that we are innocent (since it will no longer be possible for us to sin). But until that day, we are sinners — who can never be 'innocent.' If then God's verdict is true, its basis must be found in One who is truly innocent, who is sinless. In sum, our situation is this. 'Outside' of us (*extra nos*) the ground — and, therefore, the truthfulness — of God's verdict is complete. But God's sanctifying work in us is never complete and even if it were, it could not change the fact that we have been sinners. My point is that what God does in us could never result in a verdict of innocence. So we cannot surrender the 'outside' of us when speaking of justification. We are justified, as Luther said, by Christ's 'alien' righteousness, not by God's work in us that follows upon justification.

Based upon what we have seen thus far, we may justly lay stress on two points of non-negotiability. Calvin has defined justification in studied opposition to the Catholic view that justification is a divine act of making the sinner righteous in herself. For Calvin, justification, precisely because it takes place through imputation, has no ontic significance. It is, he says, a 'legal term' having to do solely with our standing before God. The second point is this. Because the sinner is made righteous 'not intrinsically but by imputation', the basis for God's determination to regard us as righteous is 'outside' of ourselves. 'This is a wonderful plan of justification that, covered by the righteousness of Christ, they should not tremble at the judgement they deserve, and that while they rightly condemn themselves, they should be accounted righteous outside themselves.'[6] Both of these points — that justification is a 'legal' term and that its ground is 'outside' of us are, I would say, non-negotiable. If continuity with central Reformational teachings is necessary in order to use terms like 'Lutheran' and 'Reformed' with integrity, then this is a good place to start.

The second definition heightens the stakes where the charge of a 'legal fiction' is concerned and leaves Calvin with an unresolved problem. The second definition is this: '"To justify" means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed.'[7] In one respect, the language of 'acquittal' is nothing new. To say that the divine verdict is 'not guilty' is to say 'innocent' of all charges. And to speak of innocence in the setting of a court trial is to speak of 'acquittal.' There really is no way around that conclusion. And there is much to be said in favour of it. Most importantly, it allows Calvin to tie his treatment of justification quite directly to his reflections on the problem of how Christ 'is

6 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xi.11, pp. 740-41.
7 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.3, p. 728.

made sin' for us (2 Cor. 5:21). With respect to the atoning work of Christ, Calvin says 'This is our acquittal: the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God [Isa. 53:12].'[8] Or again (just to underscore the parallel Calvin finds between the way our sin was made to be Christ and His righteousness made to be ours): '"The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" [Isa. 53:6]. That is, he who was about to cleanse the filth of those iniquities was covered with them by transferred imputation.'[9]

Now the obvious question to raise at this point is how well Calvin's doctrine of justification as acquittal accords with Paul's teaching. Paul never speaks of acquittal. He speaks more simply of God reckoning as righteous those who place their faith in Christ — and even more simply of justification *by* faith. And through his citation of Psalm 32:1-2 in Romans 4:7-8, Paul links justification to the forgiveness of sins. And with that, we are brought up against Calvin's unresolved problem.

If you were to ask most Protestants what justification is about, they would probably answer: the 'forgiveness of sins' or 'pardon.' They would probably not say 'acquittal.' And it is quite true that talk of 'acquittal' makes any talk of the forgiveness of sins seem strange. After all, if one is truly innocent, there is nothing to be forgiven. But are we truly, really made 'innocent' by God? Eschatologically, yes — on the traditional account. And so I suppose we could say that justification is a divine verdict which looks forward to the eschatological glorification of the sinner which provides her with a completely clean slate, an absolutely new starting-point. But that would seem to reduce justification to glorification. And so I ask: are we, in some meaningful sense, already innocent here and now, in our historical lives, so that a verdict of not-guilty could already have been pronounced upon us in Christ? The answer, I would say, is that this can only be true if the eschatological verdict has already been rendered in the death and resurrection of Christ — and rendered in such a way that the sinner *as such*, the very being of sin and all of us *as sinners* were truly and really 'in' Christ, present 'with' Christ, when He died in our place. If we were there — not 'engrafted later' but already there — if the divine sentence was pronounced upon us and carried out in a Christ in whom we are already 'present', then it could be rightly said of us that 'our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin' (Rom. 6:6-7). The 'old man' has been crucified! Think of that! And that would then mean that, we were also in Christ when He was raised from the dead. In His resurrection, He is the

8 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.5, pp. 509-10.

9 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.6, p. 510.

New Creation in the midst of time — and we are the 'new man' in Him. Not in ourselves as yet! but in Him!

Of course, if Calvin had thought of all of this, he would have been a Barthian. He didn't get this far in his thinking. He tends to treat 'pardon' and 'acquittal' as synonyms (which they cannot be) — or, in one instance places them together in way that suggests a distinction which he fails to explore.[10] But this Barthian addition I am gesturing towards does have the effect of resolving the problem Calvin left unresolved. Barth has provided a convincing reason to interpret what Paul says about justification as 'acquittal.' Acquittal is the divine judgment with respect to the sinner whom God has killed in order that she might be made alive. In other words, *Calvin has opened the door widely to appealing to the nature of the atonement in order to understand justification*. Barth simply took that move a step further. Here we have a perfect example of how it is possible to honour the values Calvin held most dear in his treatment of justification without remaining strictly tied to his account. And we can now see the advantage: 'acquittal' as a verdict pronounced upon a sinner in her place and time would make the charge of a 'legal fiction' an impossible one. For in this case, the one who is being called innocent is not a sinner. For if we are already 'in' Christ, present with Him as He submits Himself to the eschatological judgment of God, then a verdict of acquittal is the only possible outcome that can befall the sinner who has truly and already been put to death with Christ and raised with Him to a new condition of life in which she can sin no more. Of *that* person, of the eschatological human subject already appearing in the resurrection of Christ, we are right to speak of acquittal. And this is most certainly not legal fiction. I should add that, in my view, the word 'acquittal', while not part of Paul's vocabulary, does a very good job of describing the divine verdict registered in the cross and the resurrection, understood as a single, two-part event. If the blessed are those to whom the Lord will not reckon sin (Rom. 4:8), then surely they are without guilt — and therefore, worthy objects of divine acquittal. And when you add to this Calvin's conception of a positive imputation of Christ's righteousness (which seems to make excellent sense of Rom. 5:1-11), you are very close to 'acquittal' as a proper interpretive tool in reading Paul.

What then of the contra-Osiandrian supplement introduced by Calvin? It is not possible to overestimate the importance of this supplement. Historically, what I am about to discuss now became basic to ongoing disagreements with the Lutherans — and for that reason, is rightly

[10] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xi.11, p. 738.

understood to constitute a 'defining' element where what it means to be 'Reformed' is concerned.

Osiander understood justification in quasi-Catholic terms as a 'making righteous' or 'just.' That by itself would have been enough to arouse Calvin's opposition. But Osiander also believed that the righteousness that is made ours in justification is the righteousness that belongs to God essentially and, therefore, to the divine nature subsisting in the Person of the Mediator. That being the case, it is only by being united to Christ in *both* natures that a participation in Christ's divine nature is made possible. In this way, a particular understanding of union with Christ is being made the basis for justification. And the righteousness which is made ours in justification is, for Osiander, the righteousness which the eternal Son brought with Him into the incarnate state, an 'essential' righteousness which is then infused, so to speak, into the believer. Calvin refers to this idea as a 'strange monster' and sets himself the task of refuting it.

Calvin's alternative is clear. It is not the righteousness proper to God that is imputed to us in justification but the 'acquired' righteousness which accrues to the human obedience and reconciling sacrifice of the God-human.[11] In other words, it is the human righteousness of Christ which is made ours in justification. The divine nature of the Mediator is needed, Calvin thinks, to give to Christ's human work an infinite worth, but it is still a human work which is the ground of our justification. Calvin finds biblical support for this conclusion in 1 Corinthians 1:30 in which it is said that Christ was 'made' righteousness for us, a passage which he then links to Philippians 2:7-8.[12] According to the latter passage, the eternal Son 'took upon himself the form of a servant' and in it was 'obedient to the Father.' The Son could not, by nature, obey the Father (being equal to Him) but could obey only as human. Therefore, Christ was obedient to the Father unto death 'not according to his divine nature but in accordance with the dispensation enjoined upon him.'[13]

Taking a step back, we can say: it is because the reconciling and redeeming work of Christ is conceived of by Calvin as a human work that he is led to say that the righteousness which is bestowed upon us in justification is the perfect but human righteousness of the Mediator. This does lay upon him the obligation of advancing an alternative understanding of union with Christ than that taught by Osiander. This he does under the sign of an eschatological understanding of 2 Peter 1:4.

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11 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.8, p. 734.

12 Ibid., pp. 734-35.

13 Ibid., p. 735.

> I shall not labor much in refuting the Scriptural proofs that he [Osiander] brings forward, which he wrongly twists from the heavenly life to the present state. 'Through Christ,' says Peter, 'were granted to us precious and great promises […] that we might becoming partakers of the divine nature' [2 Pet. 1:4]. As if we now were what the gospel promises us that we shall be at the final coming of Christ.[14]

Calvin's understanding of union with Christ in 'the present state' is carefully adjusted to the need to overcome 'the mingling of Christ with believers' which he finds in Osiander. 'Mystical union' is closely linked with the 'indwelling of Christ in our hearts.'[15] Whatever else may be said, it is clear that Calvin has no interest in or even understanding of a metaphysically-grounded conception of the union of divine and human but rather, locates the concept of 'union' in the lived existence of the believer — in the 'psychological self' if I may put it that way, the 'experiencing self' we know ourselves to be empirically.[16] This being the case, he can also say, 'he unites himself to us by the Spirit alone'[17] — and the chief work of the Spirit is faith.[18] By faith, we lay hold of Christ, embrace Him and His benefits, and in this way are united to Him. Although the 'supernatural gift' of faith and union with Christ are simultaneous, a certain logical priority must be granted to the Spirit's work of effecting that faith in us which 'lays hold of' Christ. Nothing could make it more clear that union with Christ cannot be thought of as the ground of justification.[19] The truth is that

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14 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.10, pp. 737-38.

15 Ibid., p. 737.

16 Of this self, we might rightly say: 'Innumerable people live within us. If I think and feel, I know not who is thinking and feeling, I am only the place where there is thinking and feeling, and though they do not end here, it is as if everything ends, for beyond thinking and feeling, there is nothing.' José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, trans. by Giovanni Pontiero (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1991), p. 12. A metaphysical 'essence' is but an idea, an abstraction which consists in a catalogue of attributes which we have acquired through phenomenal observation — which is then used to organize experience. But it is we who create such ideas and they have no reality in themselves. Suffice it to say that Calvin showed no interest in such things.

17 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.1, p. 538: 'the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.'

18 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.4, p. 541.

19 Given Calvin's insistence — when dealing with the topic directly — that it is Christ's righteousness as it is in Himself and not as it is in us which provides the ground of justification, they do violence to Calvin's teaching who would like to make union with Christ the ground. The pivotal passages to

Calvin does not know of a concept of 'union with Christ' that is anything more than a willed act of self-identification on the part of the believer; an act of submission, of surrender to One who remains Other than herself, resulting in a conformity of her life to that of the Other.

One final point: the gifts bestowed upon Christ by the Spirit for carrying out His mediatorial office are the gifts in which we obtain a share through faith and regeneration. But it should be clear that if these gifts are *given* to Christ by the Spirit, then they are not uncreated graces proper to His divine nature. They are created excellences, bestowed upon Christ's human nature to which we are united in faith. In later Reformed theology, this point would acquire enormous significance in debates between the Lutherans and the Reformed. For the Reformed, it would be foolish to speak of a participation in the 'life of God' — where that phrase is meant to describe the eternal life that is proper to God as God. Our participation is in the Mediator *according to His human nature* and, therefore, a participation in created graces. The thought of a participation in the *uncreated being* of God is simply an impossible one on Reformed soil. And that, too, I would take to be a non-negotiable element in Reformed thought. To be sure, this commitment does make the Reformed something of 'the odd man out' in ecumenical discussions these days. And I am sure that it is an embarrassment for a fair number of Reformed theologians who care deeply about ecumenical relations. But they do need to understand that if it is the *Reformed* tradition they would represent in dialogue, this is really not a negotiable matter.

So how much of Calvin's teaching on justification found its way into the Reformed confessional tradition? The answer is: all of what I have here characterized as non-negotiable elements are witnessed to a number of the most formative confessions of the same period. That imputation is a 'legal' term having to do with our standing before God, that the ground of righteousness is to be found in Christ alone and not in God's work in us, that the focus falls on Christ's *human* obedience as constituting the righteousness that is made ours — all of this is to be found in the three

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which they make appeal teach only a simultaneity of justification and union with Christ, not an *ordo salutis* in which union is made to be the first thing. For example, 'as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are 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. There, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.' Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xi.1, p. 537. The Spirit's work of effecting faith in an individual is her regeneration — which includes an indwelling of Christ in her heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. But regeneration and justification must be kept separate.

primary confessions composed in what Robert Kingdon has called the 'great age of confession building' (1560-1600).[20] I have in mind here the French Confession (co-authored by Calvin); the Belgic Confession (which was influenced by the French); and the Second Helvetic Confession (first drafted by Heinrich Bullinger in 1561 and published in 1566). According to the French, 'we rest simply in the obedience of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to us as much to blot out all our sins as to make us find grace and favour in the sight of God'.[21] The pastoral importance of this teaching is immediately added, 'we believe that in falling away from this foundation, however slightly, we could not find rest elsewhere, but should always be troubled'.[22] We are said to be 'partakers of this justification *by faith alone*'.[23] No mention is made here of 'union with Christ.' On the contrary, the French ascribes 'regeneration in newness of life' to that faith which is worked in us by the Holy Spirit.[24] The language of both the 'remission of sins' and 'acquittal' are also found here, guaranteeing that both would stand alongside of each other in a tensive relation as the Reformed tradition moved forward. Neither formula can be said to be non-negotiable but, on the other hand, neither can be excluded as acceptable Reformed teaching either.

The Belgic Confession follows Calvin in making Christ's obedience to be the source of our righteousness. We must, it says, rest 'upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in him'.[25] The Belgic makes explicit the instrumental character of faith, so that faith contributes nothing positive to justification. 'We do not say that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our Righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits, and so many holy works, which he hath done for us and in our stead, is our Righteousness'.[26]

The Second Helvetic Confession also makes it clear that the righteousness of Christ which is said to be imputed to us is the righteousness which accrues to 'Christ's sufferings and resurrection' — clearly human activities.[27] Like the Belgic, the Second Helvetic also helpfully adds that faith

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20 Robert Kingdon, 'Foreword' to Jill Raitt, *Shapers of Religious Traditions in German, Switzerland, and Poland, 1560-1600* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. viii.

21 *French Confession*, Article XVIII, Cochrane, p. 150.

22 Ibid.

23 *French Confession*, Article XX, Cochrane, p. 151.

24 *French Confession*, Articles XXII and XXI, respectively, Cochrane, p. 151.

25 *Belgic Confession*, Article XXIII, Cochrane, p. 204.

26 *Belgic Confession*, Article XXII, Cochrane, p. 204.

27 *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter XV, Cochrane, p. 256.

does not justify insofar as it is a human act. The reason faith is said to justify lies elsewhere, 'because faith receives Christ our righteousness and attributes everything to the grace of God in Christ, on that account justification is attributed to faith, chiefly because of Christ and not therefore because it is our work. For it is the gift of God'.[28]

All of this is completely consonant with Calvin's doctrine, even if the formulations are more economical. And there would, thereafter, be no departures on any of the points I have described as non-negotiable within the Reformed tradition as such — not on the official level of Church confession at any rate. I am deliberately leaving to one side the recent signing by representatives of the WCRC of the 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification' because it is not clear to me what that signing means for WCRC member churches. Originally composed by Lutheran and Catholic theologians, the central chapters of JDDJ set forth a 'common understanding' (what Lutherans and Catholics were able to say together) and differing explications of that common understanding (Lutherans would understand the shared teaching this way; Catholics that way). Given that the document is not amended each time a new church or group of churches signs on to it, any differences on the level of explication which might have been thought important by the Reformed could not be expressed. But, then, it is not clear whether the WCRC's actions have any binding significance for member churches anyway. It could be that the signing was more of the nature of a symbolic gesture than it was constitutive of any member church's doctrinal witness.

In sum, it would be difficult for me to understand how any doctrine of justification could be rightly characterized as 'Reformed' which did not: a) operate wholly within a judicial or forensic frame of reference; b) which did not affirm that the ground of our justification is at every moment of our Christian lives to be found 'outside' of ourselves in Christ alone; and c) which did not lay stress on the fact that the righteousness that is bestowed upon us is Christ's *human* righteousness, the righteousness of obedience.[29] No concept of 'union' with Christ's 'person' — whatever that might be thought to entail — should be allowed to shift the centre of grav-

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28 Ibid.

29 It could be argued that JDDJ upholds the first two commitments. It should not be surprising, however, that the third does not come to expression — it being a distinctively Reformed teaching. And it is also the case that the classical Lutheran confession in this area of doctrine was assimilated to the requirements of the so-called Finnish School of Luther interpretation at significant points — which, had they been any more explicit — would have made impossible the third non-negotiable element in Reformed teaching.

ity in justification from the alien righteousness to the work of God 'in' us, a making righteous of one who can never again be innocent.

B. Atonement

There really should be no question but that the early Reformed tradition understood the atoning work of Christ primarily (if not exclusively?) along the lines of 'penal substitution' — the view that Jesus Christ took the place of the 'elect' in order to be burdened with the guilt of their sins (both actual and original) and, on that basis, to be tried, convicted, sentenced and executed. Thus, the human drama played out in Jerusalem was but the instrument of the divine judgment which provided the overarching horizon of theological meaning where the passion and crucifixion were concerned. And there really was no deviation on this point; not among the early Reformers or in the most formative confessions. This is not good news for those theologians who, while belonging to Reformed church bodies and wishing on that basis alone to be known as 'Reformed,' function instead as 'free church' theologians (if not 'independent contractors') who pick and choose freely from the smorgasbord of options placed on offer today by equally free theologians from other denominations and traditions. It is worth repeating: a theological tradition can be extended, amended, and/or improved upon in relation to any doctrinal commitment. But to simply abandon one's own traditional stance on any subject without having so much as made the attempt to extend, amend and improve — and to opt instead for the greener pastures of another tradition does not entitle one to the label 'Reformed.' Nor does the fact that one belongs to a Reformed denomination if theology plays no constitutive role in that 'belonging.' Here again, deciding what is non-negotiable and what is subject to further development is the decisive question.

In relation to that last named consideration, it seems to me that frames of reference continue to be more significant than the categories employed in bringing theological values to expression because frames of reference remain consistent across a range of doctrines — which is why justification and atonement had to be treated together. Both were thought about by the early Reformed in a forensic or judicial frame of reference which linked them together. To leave that frame of reference in relation to even just one of the two would be to sever the organic connection between them. To leave that frame of reference in relation to both would be to ensure that neither could be 'Reformed.' I will begin as before with Calvin. Here we can be much briefer since I have already touched upon the mechanism by means of which our guilt is transferred to Christ.

The reconciling and redeeming work of Christ involves more than atonement. The word 'atonement' is applicable only to Christ's death. It is

wrongly employed, if we take Calvin as our guide, to the whole of Christ's work; above all, when doing so means the abandonment of the judicial setting in which the meaning of Christ's death is rightly interpreted. To be sure that we do not miss this, the divine pedagogy itself arranged that Christ's death should result from a trial, resulting in the judicial verdict of condemnation.

> To take away our condemnation, it was not enough for him to suffer any kind of death: to make satisfaction for our redemption, a form of death had to be chosen in which he might free us both by transferring our condemnation to Himself and by taking our guilt upon himself. If he had been murdered by thieves or slain in an insurrection by a raging mob, in such a death there would have been no evidence of satisfaction. But when he was arraigned before the judgment seat as a criminal, accused and pressed by testimony, and condemned by the mouth of the judge to die—we know by these proofs that he took the role of a guilty man and evildoer.[30]

Or again: 'For he suffered death not because of innocence but because of sin.'[31] So, though Christ committed no acts of sin and was, through conception by the Holy Spirit, cleansed of the sin nature that is shared by all others so that He bore no personal responsibility for it, His death was not the death of an innocent but of a guilty human being.

Two 'benefits' come to believers from Christ's death. The first is the death of death. 'By dying, he ensured that we would not die. […] He let himself be swallowed by death, as it were, not to be engulfed in its abyss, but rather to engulf it that must soon engulf us.'[32] The passage is tantalizing. Calvin no doubt has in mind biological death when he says that Christ ensured that we would not die. Of course, it is not a straightforward statement even then — because the end of human life continues to be death for all until the curtain is brought down on human history with the final judgment. Calvin looks forward here, in all likelihood to the general resurrection of the dead. But, then, resurrection is not what overcomes death in his view; it is Christ's death which does that. It would make far greater sense, given that this is the case, if Calvin had in view 'spiritual death' — that death in God-abandonment which is the penalty for sin, the 'second death' spoken of in Revelation 20:14. *That* death does die in that the penalty is fully paid, in that sin itself is condemned in the flesh of Christ and is no more. In that this takes place in the cross of Christ, we might justly say that the end of all things has invaded time

30 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.5, p. 509.

31 Ibid.

32 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.7, pp. 511-12.

and been concretely realized for the 'elect' in one human being. This is, I would say, to push Calvin to greater self-consistency than he was able to achieve. But to bring this to your attention here is to remind you that Calvin's version of penal substitution leaves certain questions open and identifiable problems unresolved. The question is: can these questions be addressed and the problems resolved through a series of corrections/amendments which do not constitute the abandonment of Calvin's frame of reference or his central commitments? I think they can — though this is not the place to engage in a defence of the doctrine.[33]

The second 'benefit' of Christ's death is, Calvin says, that our mortification is effected through our participation in it.[34] He is here thinking of the 'mortification' which can and should follow in our lived historical existence as Christians. But as I suggested earlier, he would have done better simply to say that the sinner died (was annihilated and taken away) in Christ. Any mortification which occurs in our here and now is the result of our willed activity in response to the Spirit's work of effecting faith in us.

When we turn to the confessions from the period which establishes the originating trajectory of the meaning of the word 'Reformed', we find the doctrine of the atonement treated most expansively in the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). The language of the Scots is, rhetorically, quite striking.

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[33] I would suggest that there are two quite real problems that have always been felt and sometimes clearly articulated. These problems will not go away by being ignored but must be addressed head on. First, is there a true equivalency between the penalty owed and the penalty paid for Calvin? This question, it should be noted, is not adequately formulated when it is made to be a question about how 'three days' in the tomb can be equivalent to 'eternal' (in the sense of 'endless') punishment. The 'penalty' is, in this case, is separation from God, alienation from the source of one's good, of 'life' characterized by peace and joy. That is what the Substitute must experience — and, in experiencing it, 'consume' it, exhaust its power. A second question is one raised by Faustus Socinus and renewed by today's feminists. Does the penal substitution theory (in all of its forms) allege abusive behaviour on God's part in relation to God's Son such that violence on the plane of human to human relations is granted legitimacy by it? I have addressed these problems elsewhere. See Bruce L. McCormack, 'The Ontological Presuppositions of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Atonement' in *Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, ed. by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), pp. 346-66.

[34] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.7, p. 512.

> [We acknowledge and confess] That our Lord Jesus offered Himself a voluntary sacrifice unto His Father for us, that He suffered contradiction of sinners, that He was wounded and plagued for our transgressions, that He, the clean innocent Lamb of God, was condemned in the presence of an earthly judge, that we should be absolved before the judgment seat of our God; that He suffered not only the cruel death of the cross, which was accursed by the sentence of God; but also that He suffered for a season the wrath of His Father even in the midst of His anguish and torment which He suffered in body and soul to make full atonement for the sins of His people.[35]

The Belgic says:

> We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and also perfectly just, sent his Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, to make satisfaction in the same, and to bear the punishment of sin by his most bitter passion and death. God, therefore, manifested his justice against his Son when he laid our iniquities upon him, and poured forth his mercy and goodness on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation.[36]

Even more simply, the Heidelberg Catechism has the following:

> He bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race, so that by his suffering, as the only expiatory sacrifice, he might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation and might obtain for us God's grace, righteousness and eternal life.[37]

Taking a step back, I would observe in concluding this section that if you are going to treat justification forensically, you really must treat the atoning work of Christ forensically — and vice versa. The two are intimately linked in this frame of reference since the 'righteousness' imputed to us in justification is a righteousness which is acquired by Christ through His fidelity to God's call to be a propitiatory sacrifice. If it is in Christ's death that our guilt is borne and the penalty accruing to it is paid, then the two doctrines cannot be treated in differing frames of reference without producing dissonance. Even the attempt to marginalize (while retaining) the forensic element in justification cannot sit well with, say, a metaphysically-grounded ontological theory of redemption.[38]

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35 *Scots Confession*, Chapter IX, Cochrane, pp. 169-70.

36 *Belgic Confession*, Article XX, Cochrane, p. 202.

37 *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q.37, Cochrane, p. 311.

38 Part 2 will appear in the next edition of *SBET* [ed.].