



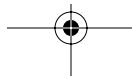
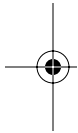
3

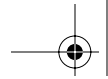
WHAT'S AT STAKE IN CURRENT DEBATES OVER JUSTIFICATION?

The Crisis of Protestantism in the West

BRUCE L. MCCORMACK

The doctrine of justification is *the* doctrine of the Reformation, that doctrine which—more than any other—gave to sixteenth-century Protestantism its character as Protestant. To put it this way is not to claim for the doctrine of justification the status of “central dogma” in the sense which that phrase acquired in the course of nineteenth-century debates over fundamental differences between the Lutheran and Reformed theological “systems.” Indeed, that entire discussion was misguided from the outset. For it presupposed that one doctrine could and did act as the “material principle” of each of the two dogmatic systems, that is, a doctrine from which the contents of all other doctrines could be deduced more or less analytically. There was no “central dogma” for any of the Reformers in this sense. The Reformers did not attempt to construct analytically deduced *systems* of doctrine, but contented themselves instead with the elaboration of *loci communes*—a collection of theological topics drawn together from Scripture and ordered by means of the progress of salvation history, from creation to eschatology. But to acknowledge that the Reformers did not pursue systems in the analytical sense takes nothing away from the fact that they were indeed systematic. They understood that Christian doctrines are organically related to one another. For that reason, they also understood that the decisions made in one area need to be consistent with the decisions made in other areas. If it could be shown that they were not, a strong presumption would then have existed that a mistake had occurred somewhere. Moreover, it was possible for the Reformers to honor the rejection of deductive systems resident in the option for *loci communes* without surrendering the belief that some





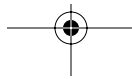
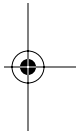
doctrines had a more basic character than others, influencing and coloring and shaping the way in which others were articulated to an extent that was not true of all doctrines. My contention would be that the Reformers' *forensic* understanding of justification had precisely that kind of wide-reaching influence. For the idea of an *immediate* divine imputation renders superfluous the entire Catholic system of the priestly mediation of grace by the Church. To speak of a positive imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer is to affirm the priesthood of all believers, the communion of the saints with its necessary protest against clericalism, the primacy of the preached word in worship, etc.

The great Reformers themselves confirm this understanding of the centrality of justification. Luther understood the doctrine of justification to be the doctrine by which the church stands or falls; the doctrine, in other words, by the understanding and lived appropriation of which it is decided whether a community of faith is a Christian church. So he could say in his 1537 Smalcald Articles, "On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost."¹ For Calvin, too, a rightly ordered understanding of justification was basic to the whole of the Christian life. He called it "the main hinge on which religion turns," and he added, "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 Lutheran and Reformed theologians disagreed on a number of things, but the one thing on which there was no disagreement was the central importance of justification by grace through faith, for it was that, above all, which defined Protestantism and gave to each of its member churches its character as Protestant. What is at stake in this doctrine is nothing less than the Reformation itself.

In putting it this way, I have already provided you with a succinct and clear answer to the question posed by my title. What is at stake in current debates over justification? My answer is: nothing less than the Reformation. This is not to suggest that the crisis of Protestantism, which we are experiencing today in the West, has its sole source in a relative incomprehension of the Reformers' teachings on the subject of justification. The current crisis has many sources, many of them less than theological (having to do with the ongoing impact upon the churches of our in-

¹Martin Luther, "Smalcald Articles," Part II, art. I in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), p. 292.

²John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.2.1.



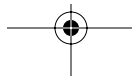


creasingly secularized culture). So even if the Protestant doctrine of justification were suddenly to be believed, taught and confessed on a churchwide basis, there is no guarantee that such a turn of events would save Protestantism. But this much seems clear: the absence of clarity about this doctrine and the inability of its would-be defenders to offer an adequate response to the challenges which are currently being brought against it are contributing mightily to the theological confusion which reigns in the churches of the Reformation and, in all likelihood, hastening the demise of Protestantism in the West.

This is not, I assure you, the hysterical response of an ultra-conservative Protestant who feels threatened by any and every change. To the contrary, it is my belief that the great Reformers themselves deserve at least some of the blame for the current crisis with regard to their chief article of faith. There were too many questions relevant to a comprehensive understanding of justification that remained suppressed as a consequence of the Reformers' lack of interest in questions they perceived to be "philosophical" rather than theological. We are paying a high price for that lack of interest today. So what I have written will not take the form of a plea that we simply return to the Reformation. We will need to move beyond the Reformation in order to save it. But moving "beyond," for me, means going "through" the Reformation and not doing an end-run around it—as do those who today give every sign of wanting a Protestantism without the Reformation.

At the heart of the Reformation understanding of justification lay the notion of a positive imputation of Christ's righteousness. That was the truly distinctive element in the Reformation understanding, and given the centrality of the doctrine for defining Protestantism, its abandonment can only mean the transformation of the Reformation into something qualitatively different.

Such a claim does not, of course, guarantee the truthfulness of the Reformation view. Only Holy Scripture can guarantee the truth of any set of doctrinal affirmations. But it is not my intention here to take on the truth-question. I intend instead to address a question that I regard as belonging to the prolegomena to any genuinely ecclesial exegesis of the Bible. As a baptized member of a Protestant church, I am to do my exegesis under the guidance of the confession of my church—until such time as the exegesis done in this way is made impossible by the demonstration of a fundamental conflict between Scripture and confession. But before that point is ever reached, before a truly ecclesial exegesis can even get off the ground, I need to be instructed in and by my confessional tradition. I need to know and understand both the presuppositions and implications of the theologies that came to ex-



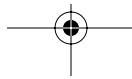


pression in the confessions of my church. I need to understand the Reformation doctrine in its strengths and in its weaknesses. Above all, I need to understand the ways in which the Reformers' other theological commitments may have contributed unwittingly to the current demise of their "central" doctrine. And I need to think through the question of how their other commitments might be brought into line with their "central" doctrine—in such a way as to make it less vulnerable to criticism. Only where all this is done, will I be fair to the Reformation view when the time comes to test it in the light of Holy Scripture.³

Let me put all my cards on the table. Where the doctrine of justification in particular is concerned, my own conviction is that the Reformers had it basically right with their emphasis upon a positive imputation of Christ's righteousness. But, unfortunately, they were not in a position to explore the *theological ontology* that was implied in their understanding of justification. And this left their articulation of the doctrine vulnerable to criticism. In an age like our own, in which men and women are crying for real change, for real transformation of the fundamental conditions of life, this can all too easily appear to be a decisive weakness. And it can also make the Protestant tradition appear weak and emaciated in comparison with those traditions, like the Catholic and the Orthodox, which have always given explicit attention to matters ontological.

In what follows, I will engage in a close reading of Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and John Calvin on the doctrine of justification and its relation to the theme of regeneration. What I hope to demonstrate is that the break with Medieval Catholicism which we might have expected to be complete if we paid attention only to the Reformers' doctrine of justification was actually less than complete due to a residual commitment to Medieval Catholic understandings of regeneration and a shaky grasp of the relation of justification and regeneration. I hope to show, secondly, that the reason for all of this is that the Reformers' refusal to engage directly issues of theological ontology made them blind to the extent to which they continued to subscribe to ontological assumptions which could, logically, *only fund a Catholic ordering of regeneration and justification* (to the detriment of their own definition of justification). Finally, I will suggest that there is an alternative understanding of theological ontology embedded in

³Whatever the merits and demerits of Albrecht Ritschl's massive three-volume study of soteriology in its material details, it seems to me that his strategy for doing dogmatic theology is the right one; first, the history of the doctrine, then a consideration of biblical material, and only then a turn to dogmatic reconstruction. See Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, 3 vols. (New York: Olms, 1978).





the forensic frame of reference which would have overcome the residual problems contained in the Reformers' ongoing attachment to a theologically outmoded ontology—an alternative which I will seek briefly to describe.

THE TEACHING OF THOMAS AQUINAS ON JUSTIFICATION

To understand Thomas Aquinas's teaching on justification, we must place it in the context in which he himself placed it, viz. a consideration of the nature of grace, its divisions and causes. For Thomas, considered on the most general level of reflection, grace is two things: it is the action of God upon the soul and the effect of that action.

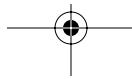
Considered as the effect of God's work in the soul, grace is a remaking of the soul or, as Thomas also speaks of it, a "healing."⁴ This "healing" is said to take place in the essence of the soul, not in the soul's powers (or faculties) only. This distinction between the "essence" of the soul and its powers is an extremely important one for an understanding of the nature of grace and how it works. So it would reward us to examine it more closely. In back of this distinction lies Thomas's theological ontology of the human.

For Thomas, the soul is an incorporeal—which is to say, "spiritual"—substance. As such, however, it is also the "form" which makes the matter of which the body is composed to be a *human* body and, indeed, this *particular* human body. Thomas rejected every Platonist understanding of the soul which would see it as something that is complete in and for itself apart from the body. Thomas held that soul and body belong together in a unity. You do not find one without the other "in nature"—which is to say, in this world. Either is an "incomplete substance" in the absence of the other. It is true that the soul is able to survive the death of the body, which also means that it can exist in separation from the body. But this is "unnatural" or, as Thomas preferred to say, "beyond nature."⁵ To claim this much is also to suggest that the "form" that is the soul is unique in kind. It alone, out of all the "forms" found in nature, is capable of continuing to exist in the absence of matter. Once created, it is immortal.

Now "form," generally considered, is the "whatness" of a thing; that which makes it to be what it is. In living things, however, the "form" is that whereby the thing in question *acts*. But the human is not just any living thing. In brute animals, that whereby a thing acts is what Thomas (following Aristotle) called the "sensitive

⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia2ae, Q.III, art. 2; Ia2ae, Q.III, art. 3.

⁵F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1955), p. 167.





soul.” Animals are capable of more than providing nourishment for themselves and reproducing; they can also experience sensation. But the human soul transcends this “sensitive soul” in that the human soul has the intellectual powers of mind and will which allow it to know and to will spiritual realities, to make universal judgments, to enter into fields of study like pure mathematics (which have no known applications), etc. For this reason, Thomas (again following Aristotle) denominates the soul in the human an “intellectual soul.” So the “form” that the human soul is turns out to be unique in kind from a second direction, as well. Not only is it immortal, it is also intellectual in character.

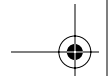
The final step is to see how the soul subsists; that is, how it receives and has its being and existence. Thomas says, “nothing acts except so far as it is *in act*; and so, a thing acts by that whereby it is *in act*.”⁶ “Form,” it turns out, is *the act* in which a thing has its being and existence. Thomas equates “form” with the “first principle of life” in living things, and since this principle in humans is intellectual in character, “form” is also the “principle” of intellectual activity. Now the act from which the human individual lives may be viewed from two angles. Viewed from the side of its origin in divine action, the act from which the human lives is a divine act of “creation out of nothing,” Thomas held that every individual soul is created by a special act of God. The soul is not “generated” through the reproductive process; it is joined to the body in the moment of conception. Viewed from the side of the terminus of this divine act in the human, the language of “the act from which the human lives” is descriptive of the ground in humans from which all other acts proceed. Viewed from the first angle, the soul *subsists* on the basis of a special act of God. Viewed from the second angle, as the terminus of the divine action in the human, the soul *subsists* through an existence proper to itself. This sets it apart from all other forms found in nature, in that all other forms are generated and, as a consequence, are never found in the absence of matter (as was previously suggested).⁷ The soul, then, we might say by way of summary, is a spiritual substance which is incomplete in the absence of the body. It is intellectual in nature and has its subsistence in itself (as a consequence of the divine will).

I hope that this much is reasonably clear. But there is a problem in it that comes clearly into focus when we inquire more closely into the distinction between the “essence” of the soul and its powers. Grace, we said at the outset, finds its “seat”

⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, Q.76, art. I (emphasis added).

⁷James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1974), pp. 208-9.



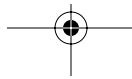
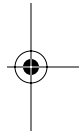


in the “essence” of the soul and *not* in the powers (not even in the highest powers of mind and will). It is clear what Thomas hopes to achieve with this distinction. For Thomas, the distinction between the “essence” of the soul and its powers is the distinction between the “subject” (a word which he will use on occasion) and the powers or faculties possessed by that subject. In Thomas’s hands, however, the distinction has the feel of something more nearly ideal than real—and this for two reasons. First and most important, when we turn to the question of the *nature* of that “grace” which is infused into the “essence” of the soul in justification, the only word Thomas has at his command for speaking of it is “light.” Now the metaphor light is most commonly employed in theology (and philosophy as well) to suggest something like intellectual illumination. But such a conclusion would appear to betray Thomas’s intention to locate infused grace in the “essence” of the soul rather than in its intellectual powers of mind and will. This conceptual confusion is only further heightened by the fact that Thomas can make “intellect” to be descriptive of *both* the “essence” of the soul and one of its highest powers.

Second, to speak of that whereby a human acts in terms of an *act* is to render the distinction between the “essence” of the soul and the powers of the soul *in action* in terms that *appear* to place them on the same plane of reality. Both are acts; the difference is that the “essence” of the soul is *the act* that founds all other, subsequent acts. The first act, then, is an utterly inward act which grounds all actions directed outwards (“outside of myself”). But this means that the distinction is largely a logical one, the result of an attempt to posit the existence of a ground of activity.

To be sure, Thomas wants this distinction to be understood as something real and not merely ideal. The distinction between the subject and the powers possessed by that subject is in complete conformity with the ontological presupposition which governs Thomas’s reflections throughout the *Summa Theologica*, namely, that “essence” precedes and grounds existence in all things finite. Only in God are the two identical. But however clearly realistic Thomas may be on the level of intention, his execution of these distinctions leaves us with nagging questions about conceptual clarity. And if I were asked to put my finger on the source of this conceptual fuzziness, I would say that it has much less to do with the Aristotelian distinctions with which he works than it does with the constitutive role that infant baptism is playing on the whole of his thinking about grace. The reasons for this claim will be clear in a moment. It is now time that we return to the subject of grace.

Grace, we have said, is infused into the soul. The infusion of grace results in a “healing,” a remaking of the soul after the image of God. Now how does this come





about? To enter into this question is to come up against the doctrine of justification.

In a human nature properly ordered after the image of God—the mind (which Thomas regarded as the highest part of human nature) is in subjection to God and the lower (appetitive) powers of the soul are in subjection to the mind. It is this right ordering of human nature which Thomas defined as “justice.”⁸ The effect of sin on human nature is to introduce a disordering into the individual’s very being. No longer is the individual in subjection to God. Her relationship with God is broken. No longer does the mind rule the appetites, but the appetites rule the mind. It is this essential derangement of nature that is addressed in divine justification. For Thomas, justification is the process by which God makes us to *be* just.⁹ It is the process by means of which our nature is re-created and re-ordered after the divine image. It is the process by which God actually makes human beings to *be* righteous. That is the most basic definition; now let’s look at it a bit more closely to see precisely how justification comes about.

“Justification” is a movement from a state of injustice to a state of justice. Any movement, Thomas said, involves a mover who sets things in motion, the movement itself and the object of the movement.¹⁰ The mover in this case is God, who infuses grace into the sinner. To explain the nature of the movement itself, Thomas says that God moves all things according to the mode proper to each. Men and women are also moved in accordance with the characteristics of human nature. But men and women are, by nature, beings endowed with free choice. And so God moves the sinner toward justice by moving his/her free will. “He infuses the gift of justifying grace in such a way that, at the same time, He also moves the free choice to accept the gift of grace.”¹¹ Grace is here depicted as exercising an influence on free will, whereby it is turned toward God. To be turned towards God is, at the same time, to be turned away from sin. Thus, the immediate result of the infusion of justifying grace is a “double movement” of the will.¹² And, finally, the object of the movement is the forgiveness of sins. The infusion of justifying grace has as its final goal the forgiveness of sins. There are, therefore, four elements in justification for Thomas. There is: (1) the infusion of justifying grace; (2) a movement of free choice directed toward God by faith; (3) a movement of free choice

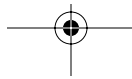
⁸Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Ia2ae, Q.II3, art. 1.

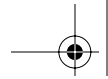
⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Ia2ae, Q.II3, art. 6.

¹¹Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Ia2ae, Q.II3, art. 3.

¹²Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Ia2ae, Q.II3, art. 5.



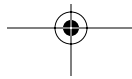
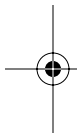


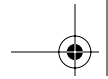
against sin; and (4) the forgiveness of sins. It should be noted that the four elements required for justification are simultaneous in time; they do not succeed one another. Justification is complete in an instant.¹³ Thomas has arranged these elements here in a logical, rather than a chronological, order. Thomas held that justification occurs in an instant, but it has to be remembered that he did not think that anyone is perfected in an instant. When we fall away and commit sin, we require to be forgiven anew and for this the infusion of grace through the sacramental system has been established. Therefore justification, or the making just of human nature, is something that is repeated throughout the Christian life as we make use of the means of grace—especially the grace given through the sacrament of penance.

Now Thomas's explanation of how justification comes about does have something curious about it. You will have noticed that he lays a great deal of emphasis upon the thought that God moves all things according to the mode proper to each and that this means that God moves men and women through the exercise of a spiritual influence on their free choice. But Thomas does know of a grand exception. "Infants are not capable of movements of free choice and so they are moved by God towards justice only by reception of a form in their souls. This does not take place without a sacramental act; for just as original sin, from which they are justified [or moved to a state of "justice"], reaches them not by their own will but by fleshly origination, so too grace has its source in them by spiritual rebirth."¹⁴ But precisely here is the curious element. Thomas speaks here as though the case of the infant is simply an *exception* to the rule of what normally happens in justification. For the entire presentation of the doctrine of justification as he has described it presupposes that the recipient of God's justifying grace is an adult. The "infusion of grace," as we saw, is understood by Thomas to consist in a spiritual movement of free choice in the human. But, of course, grace so construed would seem most naturally to find its "point of entry" on the level of the intellectual powers of the soul. *In other words: there would be no need to locate the infusion of grace in the essence of the soul if it were not for the fact that the Church's accepted practice was to baptize infants. And that also means that Thomas's tendency to understand justification as rooted in an "ontological healing" of the soul, rather than in a more personal understanding of the operations of grace, is a function of the fact that the regeneration of the infant is the truly paradigmatic case where that infusion of grace which initiates justification is concerned.*

¹³Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Ia2ae, Q.II3, art. 7, 8.

¹⁴Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Ia2ae, Q.II3, art. 3, ad. I.



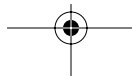
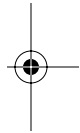


This does not mean that Thomas has been inconsistent—far from it. The justification from original sin, which is made ours in infant baptism, is repeated thereafter with respect to *acts* of sin through the sacrament of penance throughout our lives. But it is very likely that the conceptual difficulties we encountered earlier do find their source precisely at this point.

Thomas created problems for himself by speaking of the nature of infused grace in terms of light. That metaphor, suggesting as it does an illumination of the mind, works well enough in the case of adults (though it does render problematic the effort to locate infused grace in the essence of the soul rather than in the intellectual powers). But in the case of the regeneration of the infant in baptism, grace needs to be understood in terms of something other than light. The soul, we have seen, is a spiritual “substance.” And that which would “heal” this substance substantially ought itself to be something substantial, perhaps even quasi-physical. Healing, after all, is a metaphor drawn from the world of medicine where the object requiring help is a physical body.

But I hasten to add that such problems as I have identified in Thomas’s conception are only, so to speak, “around the edges.” In comparison with most other accounts of “ontological healing” which are being advocated today, it is tremendously coherent. And it is coherent because Thomas was able to appeal to a highly developed theological ontology to make clear what he meant by “ontological healing.” “Ontological healing” was not, in his hands, a theological rhetoric left hanging in the air by a refusal to engage ontological questions—which is often the case with many of our contemporaries.

It should be added that Thomas did have a place in his doctrine of justification for the Pauline language of “imputation.” In that the infusion of grace brings about the forgiveness of sins, it is right to say that the “non-imputation of sin” is the effect of an infusion of justifying grace. As the Pauline idea of imputation would play a sizable role in Reformation theologies, it is important to point out here that Thomas limits “imputation” to its negative side, the non-imputation of sin. Of what would later be thought of as a positive imputation of Christ’s righteousness, Thomas knew nothing. In its place is the infusion of grace into the soul (i.e., regeneration). But this also means that *the work of God “in us” was being made the basis of God’s forgiveness*. And that was precisely the point at which the Reformation would finally have to raise the necessary objection. Whether the Reformation was finally able to raise the question in the most decisive way possible is a question we will have to consider.





THE REFORMATION REACTION

Everything Thomas said about justification focused finally upon a single point the Protestant churches (both Reformed and Lutheran) would reject with increasing clarity and force. Thomas saw justification as a process by which we are actually made to *be* righteous. The Protestants, too, held that there is a process by which we are actually made to be righteous, but they referred to this as sanctification or “repentance,” not justification. But Medieval theologians like Thomas made no distinction between justification and sanctification. The Protestants had a problem with this because it made God’s forgiveness of our sins conditional upon the current state of our actual righteousness. And even if one took great care, as Thomas most certainly did, to insist that the state of our actual righteousness is not ultimately conditioned upon what *we do* (since the infusion of grace is the operative element which produces righteousness in the soul), the Protestants would still have seen a danger in this Medieval soteriology. The problem with Thomas, they would have said, lies in the fact that he makes the root of our justification to lie in what God does *in us*. But to the extent that we see our salvation as in any way contingent upon what we are or have become at a particular point in time, we shift the locus of our attention from what Luther called the “alien righteousness of Christ” (which is complete in itself) to a work of God in us which is radically incomplete. And to just that extent, we make personal assurance of salvation to rest on a work which, as incomplete, can never bring adequate comfort. Those with sensitive consciences are thrown back on their own experience of grace, in an effort to discern whether God has really been at work “in them.”

What, then, was the Protestant alternative? In its fully developed form, the alternative was to understand justification in terms of a twofold imputation. Calvin’s definition sets forth the fully developed view in a clear and succinct form: “we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men [and women]. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”¹⁵ To the most decisive question treated under the heading of “justification”—namely, how do those of us separated from Jesus Christ in space and time come to participate in Christ’s righteousness—the answer which Calvin gives is “by imputation.” Christ’s righteousness is “imputed” to us and, on that basis, we are forgiven (i.e., the negative nonimputation of sin is contained in the positive imputation of Christ’s righteousness). It should

¹⁵Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.2.





be noted that it is the role played by the imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification, and that alone, which makes possible the Protestant distinction between justification and sanctification. Indeed, there is no other sufficient basis for making a distinction. If, for example, we make regeneration to be the basis of the non-imputation of sin—as Thomas had it—there remains no reason to distinguish between the two. Regeneration, after all, is sanctification viewed from the angle of an initiating moment rather than as part of a larger process. Hence, Calvin insists on the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Now I have deliberately styled this form of the Protestant doctrine of justification as the “fully developed form.” I do so in order to indicate that it is the product of a development in thought. It did not suddenly appear, as if overnight, in the early years of the Reformation but was the result of a good bit of refinement. In this development, the decisive role was played—for both the Reformed and the Lutherans—by Calvin's response to the challenge of a one-time Lutheran by the name of Andreas Osiander. In what follows in this section, I want to begin with a brief sketch of Luther. I will then turn to a much closer examination of Calvin.

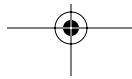
Martin Luther (1483-1546). It has long been recognized that Luther's thinking on the subject of justification did not achieve the degree of systematic coherence and consistency of the later Lutheran “Formula of Concord.” As Paul Althaus acknowledged:

Luther uses the terms “to justify” [*justificare*] and “justification” [*justificatio*] in more than one sense. From the beginning, justification most often means the judgment of God with which he declares man to be righteous [*justum reputare* or *computare*]. In other places, however, this word stands for the entire event through which a man is essentially made righteous (a usage which Luther also finds in Romans 5), that is, for both the imputation of righteousness to man as well as man's actually becoming righteous. Justification in this sense remains incomplete on earth and is first completed on the Last Day. Complete righteousness in this sense is an eschatological reality.¹⁶

Now, on Althaus's view, both of these possibilities result in a forensic view of justification. Both entail a positive imputation of Christ's righteousness. And there is much to be said in favor of this interpretation—on the basis of Luther's 1535 commentary on Galatians especially:

These two things make Christian righteousness perfect: The first is faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift and which formally believes in Christ; the second is

¹⁶Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 226.





that God reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness for the sake of Christ, His Son, who suffered for the sins of the world and in whom I begin to believe. On account of this faith in Christ God does not see the sin that still remains in me. For so long as I go on living in the flesh, there is certainly sin in me. But meanwhile Christ protects me under the shadow of His wings and spreads over me the wide heaven of the forgiveness of sins, under which I live in safety. This prevents God from seeing the sins that still cling to my flesh. My flesh distrusts God, is angry with Him, does not rejoice in Him, etc. But God overlooks these sins, and in His sight they are as though they were not sins. This is accomplished by imputation on account of the faith by which I begin to take hold of Christ; and on His account God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sins as not sin, even though it really is sin.¹⁷

And again,

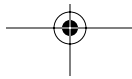
Therefore this is a marvelous definition of Christian righteousness: it is a divine imputation or reckoning as righteousness or to righteousness, for the sake of our faith in Christ or for the sake of Christ. When the sophists [by which he means the “scholastics”] hear this definition, they laugh; for they suppose that righteousness is a certain quality that is first infused into the soul and then distributed through all the members. They cannot strip off the thoughts of reason, which declares that righteousness is a right judgment and a right will. Therefore this inestimable gift excels all reason, that without any works God reckons and acknowledges as righteous the man who takes hold by faith of His Son. . . . [R]ighteousness is not in us in a formal sense, as Aristotle maintains, *but is outside us*, solely in the grace of God and in His imputation.¹⁸

Two things are abundantly clear in these passages. First, Luther was well aware of positions like that of Thomas and set out to overcome them. Righteousness is not to be understood as an “accidental form of the soul” as *per* Thomas but is “outside of us” and made ours through divine imputation. Second, there can be little question but that Luther had in view a positive imputation of Christ’s righteousness and not simply a negative, non-imputation of sin.

What is less than clear, though, is the role played by faith. So enamored was Luther with the thought that we are justified by faith, rather than by our works, that he was inclined in many contexts to give faith a priority over the act of divine

¹⁷Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia 1963), pp. 231-32.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 233-34. Emphasis added.





imputation. At times, Luther even goes so far as to suggest that our faith, considered from the human standpoint as something we do, can take us a good ways where justification is concerned. But faith is imperfect and at the point at which it becomes inadequate—losing its hold on Christ, perhaps?—the divine imputation of Christ’s righteousness enters in to make up for what is still lacking. “For because faith is weak . . . therefore God’s imputation has to be added.”¹⁹ Indeed, “faith begins righteousness but imputation perfects it until the day of Christ.” Now it might appear as though this would make faith a “work,” something that we do as a precondition to what God does. Luther was very aware of that possibility and strove to eliminate it. “Faith,” he says, is a divinely granted gift. Moreover, it is formal in character, though not in the sense advocated by Aristotle. Like the metal clasp of a ring, which holds a precious jewel, faith lays hold of Christ.²⁰ Faith is the “form” of righteousness, that which grasps righteousness. But the righteousness in question is Christ’s alone. Luther’s problem with Aristotelian conceptions seems to lie in the thought that a “re-forming” of the form that is the soul would require far too great a reordering of the human in the moment in which faith first takes its rise than is experientially verifiable. Luther is painfully aware of the ongoing presence of sin in the Christian life and so he prefers to think of the dawning of faith in the individual as the presence of a “little spark,”²¹ which—precisely as weak or small—must be accounted righteous by God for Christ’s sake.

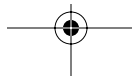
The residual problem created by Luther’s analysis (and one he bequeathed to later generations of Protestant theologians) lies in the fact that the priority of the giving of faith over the act of divine imputation would seem clearly to require a certain logical priority of regeneration (a work of God “in us”) over justification. And to the extent that that were so, the “break” with Catholic understandings of justification like Thomas’s would be less than complete.

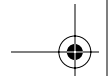
The foregoing account of Luther’s views also leaves some other important questions unresolved. What does it mean to say that faith “lays hold” of Christ? What, precisely, is it that is imputed to us by God? It is the righteousness of Christ, to be sure. But how are we to understand this? What are we speaking of when we speak of Christ’s “righteousness”? Is it that righteousness which is proper to him as deity, the very righteousness of God, which the Logos brought with him, so to speak, into his incarnate mode of existence? Or is it a “righteousness” which is his by vir-

¹⁹Ibid., p. 232.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 89, 132, 134, 229, 231.

²¹Ibid., p. 230.



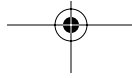
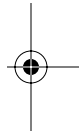


tue of the life of obedience he lived in his divine-human unity, as the already incarnate One, the God made flesh? And, secondly, having answered this first series of questions, we would then still need to ask: what is the manner or mode of our “participation” in the righteousness of Christ so defined? Imputation may give us an initial clue. But can we say more than this?

My own conviction is that Luther's answers to such questions are far from clear. Recently, however, a new school of Luther interpretation has suggested that answers to such questions are available when Luther is seen in the right light. The “Finnish” school which has formed around Professor Tuomo Mannermaa of the University of Helsinki would like to understand Luther's doctrine of justification as closely related to Eastern Orthodox notions of *theosis* or “divinization.” It should be noted that this line of interpretation is carried out in studied opposition to a thoroughgoing attachment to the more traditional forensic reading. The result is a view of salvation that is—as the blurb on the back of a recent book introducing the Finnish school to readers in the West has it—“more ontological and mystical than ethical and juridical.”²² The interpretive issues raised by the Finnish school are complex and cannot be addressed here. Suffice it to say that, although Luther's tendency to prioritize regeneration over justification does open a door to the Finnish interpretation, it is my view that this new reading brings as much to Luther as it reads out of him. The note of a positive imputation of Christ's righteousness, which was clear in the passages we considered, is suppressed. In its place, an ontology of grace is advanced which, in my judgment, finds a tenuous basis in Luther's writings at best. Luther was not, so far as I have been able to discover, inclined to understand grace as something substantial that is infused into the very “essence” of the soul; he was far more inclined to see it as the personal favor of God.²³ But more than that I cannot say here. I should note, however, before proceeding, that the new Finnish reading of Luther has found a warm reception in the “evangelical Catholic” wing of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a movement whose views are having a profound impact on the American theological scene through the journal *Pro Ecclesia*. The Finnish theologians also contributed appreciably to the final received text of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church at

²²Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

²³See on this point Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), pp. 152-53.





a great celebration in Augsburg, Germany, on Reformation Day, 1999.

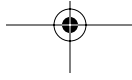
John Calvin (1509-1564). In the history of the development of the Protestant doctrine of justification in the sixteenth century, the role played by Andreas Osiander in forcing further clarification of Luther's view can scarcely be overestimated. Osiander started his career as a close confidant of Luther. He was a participant in the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 and the Diet of Augsburg the following year. Already at Augsburg, however, Osiander showed himself to be unhappy with Melancthon's defense of a forensic understanding of justification. In 1549, he was granted the first chair in theology at the University of Königsberg by his long-time benefactor and protector, Archduke Albrecht of Prussia—this over the objections of the faculty and in spite of the fact that he lacked an academic degree. The “Osiandrian controversy” began with a disputation on justification held in Königsberg on October 24, 1550. The outcry, which the publication of Osiander's views produced locally, forced the Archduke to appeal for an opinion to church authorities in other principalities. For this purpose, he asked for and received from Osiander a personal confession which was entitled *Von dem einigen Mittler Jesu Christo und rechtfertigung des glaubens bekanntnis*, published on September 8, 1551. Evaluations quickly poured in and were almost universally negative. Indeed, Osiander deserves credit for accomplishing something many at the time would have thought impossible—uniting the Philippists and the Gnesio-Lutherans (who were otherwise bitter opponents) in opposition to him. The only exception was the cautious attempt of Johannes Brenz to mediate between Osiander and his opponents.²⁴ The Formula of Concord condemned Osiander's views on the basis of the very forensic theory that he had sought to overcome.²⁵

A thorough treatment of Osiander's views has no real relevance to our subject here. Suffice it to say that Osiander made much of the ideas of mystical union with Christ and an essential indwelling of Christ in the believer. What is of greater interest is Calvin's critique of Osiander and the light it sheds on Calvin's doctrine of justification.

Calvin's mature doctrine of justification is set forth in the definitive 1559 edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.2. The chapter begins with a consideration of the place of the doctrine of justification in Christian soteriology and an attempt to provide a complete definition of the basic terms. In sections 5-12, he

²⁴For more on the Osiandrian Controversy, see Gottfried Seebass, “Osiander,” *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 25 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 507-15.

²⁵See *Solid Declaration* 3 in *The Book of Concord*, pp. 539-51.





then addresses Osiander's doctrine of "essential righteousness." All of this material is new in the 1559 edition. He then turns to a consideration of Roman Catholic teaching. The order of presentation strongly suggests that, by this point in time, Osiander's doctrine had superseded even the Roman teaching as Calvin's primary target. The chapter concludes with a renewed emphasis on the thought that we are justified before God on the basis of a righteousness that is "not in us but in Christ."²⁶

I will return momentarily to questions surrounding the place of the doctrine of justification in Calvin's soteriology. We may most usefully begin with a consideration of basic definitions. The basic meaning of *justification*, as Calvin employs the term, is "acquittal." "To justify' means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed."²⁷ The situation presupposed is that of a legal proceeding. A person stands in a judgment box, accused of wrongdoing. The question being deliberated is the question of guilt. The sentence rendered, however, is that of acquittal. Acquittal differs from clemency in that the latter does not expunge a conviction of wrongdoing from the record of the accused. Clemency merely means that an individual has been granted some sort of release from the debt he owed to society as a consequence of his guilt. But the guilt remains. Acquittal, on the other hand, is a declaration of innocence. No reason for condemnation remains.

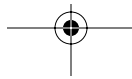
The question is: how can this happen? How can the sinner be seen as innocent before the judgment seat of God when, in himself, he is nothing of the sort? Calvin's answer is: by means of the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness. "Therefore, since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ."²⁸ Calvin means nothing else but this when he 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."²⁹ It might be tempting to try to press the image of being "clothed" in Christ's righteousness in the direction of an actual righteousness, a *being* righteous, but the context clearly forbids this:

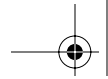
²⁶ Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.23.

²⁷ Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.3.

²⁸ Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.4.

²⁹ Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.2.





As iniquity is abominable to God, so no sinner can find favor in his eyes in so far as he is a sinner and so long as he is reckoned as such. Accordingly, wherever there is sin, there also the wrath and vengeance of God show themselves. Now he is justified who is reckoned in the condition not of a sinner, but of a righteous man; and for that reason, he stands firm before God's judgment seat while all sinners fall. If an innocent accused person be summoned before the judgment seat of a fair judge, where he will be judged according to his innocence, he is said to be "justified" before the judge. Thus, justified before God is the man who, freed from the company of sinners, has God to witness and affirm his righteousness.³⁰

Innocence? Here, again, this is not true of the individual in and for him/herself. No matter how advanced we may be in comparison with our fellow sinners in the way of sanctification, we can never undo the unrighteousness which we have done. We can never stand before God as those who are innocent. And the making of us to be actually righteous through sanctification could not accomplish the "innocence" of which Calvin speaks. If this nevertheless happens, if God regards us as innocent, there can only be one explanation for it. "Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."³¹

Given his repeated insistence that Christ's righteousness is made to be ours by imputation, it was with complete consistency that Calvin also made the transfer of our guilt to Christ to be accomplished by the same means: "This is our acquittal: the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God."³² And, commenting upon 2 Corinthians 5:21, Calvin says, "The Son of God, utterly clean of all fault, nevertheless took upon himself the shame and reproach of our iniquities, and in return clothed us with his purity." How? "He who was about to cleanse the filth of those iniquities was covered with them by transferred imputation."³³ A wondrous exchange has occurred. Christ clothed himself with the guilt that accrues to our sins and, as a consequence, clothes us with his righteousness resulting in our acquittal. And the mechanism by means of which this wondrous exchange takes place is imputation.

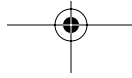
With these basic definitions in place, Calvin turns to his critique of Osiander.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Calvin *Institutes* 2.16.5.

³³Calvin *Institutes* 2.16.6.





The root of his criticism is to be found not simply in the account of the wondrous exchange, which we have just set forth, but also in certain basic commitments which are registered in his Christology. Obviously, we cannot enter fully into the subject of Christology here. Suffice it to say that Calvin would not allow for any “mixing” of Christ’s divine nature with his human nature. And that is the point he hammers home in his criticism of Osiander’s teaching.

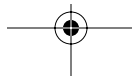
Osiander’s view, as Calvin understands it, is that justification is a term descriptive of a process by means of which the believer is united to God in such a way that he/she is made a participant in God’s “essence.” Put another way, the “essential righteousness” of Christ is infused into the believer. Such a view, Calvin concedes, might appear plausible on the surface. Osiander begins with the observation that “we are one with Christ.” With this assertion, Calvin can scarcely disagree. But how are we “one?” How is “union” with Christ effected? And with what, specifically, are we united? Calvin says that Osiander’s fundamental error lies in his failure to understand rightly the nature of the “bond of this unity.”³⁴ Osiander treats the fact that union comes about through the Holy Spirit as a matter of little importance if it does not result in a mingling of Christ’s essence with our own.³⁵ Worse still, in speaking of “Christ’s essence,” what Osiander has in view is the very essence of God. The “essential righteousness” of Christ is the righteousness that is his by virtue of being God, the divine righteousness he—so to speak—brought with him into the hypostatic union with human flesh. So Calvin numbers among Osiander’s “deceptions” the following ideas: “that Christ is our righteousness because He is God eternal, the source of righteousness, and the very righteousness of God Himself.” Osiander “has expressed himself as not content with that righteousness which has been acquired for us by Christ’s obedience and sacrificial death, but pretends that we are substantially righteous in God by the infusion both of his essence and of his quality.” Osiander’s view, thus, entails a “mixture of substances by which God—transfusing Himself into us, as it were—makes us part of Himself.”³⁶ Whatever else is meant by Calvin’s talk of the Holy Spirit as the bond which joins us to Christ, it is clearly intended to exclude this possibility.

Because Osiander has made himself guilty of such a mixing of substances, he has also confused two things that must be kept separate: justification and regeneration. Osiander holds that God “justifies not only by pardon but by regenerating.” Against

³⁴Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.5.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*





this, Calvin says that although the two things (justification and regeneration) cannot be torn apart in reality, they must be carefully distinguished on the level of sound teaching. It is quite true that “as Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification. Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he *at the same time* bestows the spirit of adoption [Rom 8:15], by whose power he remakes them to his own image.”³⁷ Justification is, thus, never without regeneration and vice versa. Still, “to be justified means something different from being made new creatures.”³⁸ To be justified is to be received, to be accepted as one who is innocent. “There . . . the question is simply one of guilt and acquittal.”³⁹

Through his critique of Osiander, Calvin’s own positive interpretation of justification has been considerably deepened. Earlier, I noted that we would eventually have to pose the question “what, precisely, is that righteousness of Christ’s which is made ours in justification?” and the answer has now been made abundantly clear. The righteousness of Christ that Calvin has in mind is his “acquired righteousness,” the righteousness that is created by his work—which is to say, through his life of perfect obedience and his sacrificial death. In making this distinction between “essential righteousness” and “acquired righteousness,” Calvin made a significant contribution not only to the Reformed understanding of justification but also to Protestantism in general. The Lutheran Formula of Concord expressed itself this way: “Christ is our righteousness not according to the divine nature alone or according to the human nature alone but according to both natures; as God and man, he has by his perfect obedience redeemed us from our sins, justified and saved us.”⁴⁰ *By his perfect obedience*: the emphasis here, too, lies on what Calvin called the “acquired righteousness” of Christ.

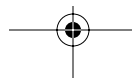
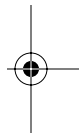
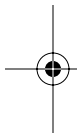
Calvin has also, it should be noted, given expression to a careful ordering of the relation of justification to regeneration. In saying, “Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he *at the same time* bestows the spirit of adoption [Rom 8:15], by whose power he remakes them to his own image,” Calvin makes justification to be logically prior to—and the foundation of—that bestowal of the Spirit of adoption by means of which the believer is regenerated. On this view, regeneration would have to be seen as the logical consequence of the divine verdict registered in justification.

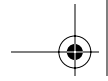
³⁷ Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.6 (emphasis added).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *The Book of Concord*, pp. 539-40.





In sum, Calvin's understanding of justification is strictly forensic or judicial in character. It is a matter of a divine judgment, a verdict of acquittal. And the means by which it is accomplished is imputation. I hope that this much has been made clear. For now I am going to have to muddy the waters a bit.

As clear and self-consistent as Calvin's doctrine of justification is when taken in isolation, a real question can be raised as to its fit with the rest of his soteriology. Calvin begins Book III with a chapter devoted to a theme which he would subsequently touch upon in his debate with Osiander, viz. that of "union with Christ." If we were to ask, after a rapid reading of this chapter, how we come to participate in the acquired righteousness of Christ, the answer that might easily be drawn is "through our union with Christ."

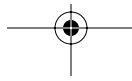
As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.

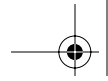
Calvin goes on to say that it is the Holy Spirit who is "the bond by [which] Christ effectually unites us to Himself."⁴¹ Now the reason this answer is problematic is that the answer which Calvin gives to the same question within the context of his treatment of justification is "by a divine act of divine imputation." Whether these two answers are compatible and, if so, how they are compatible are only the most obvious parts of our problem. But there is more.

At several points in the *Institutes*, Calvin appears to make "union with Christ" to be logically, if not chronologically, prior to both justification and regeneration. To the extent that this is so, "union with Christ" is made to appear as a third, independent aspect of the Holy Spirit's work, to be ranged alongside of both justification and regeneration as their common root. Most famously, Calvin appears to do this in a passage with which he opens his discussion of the place of justification in Christian soteriology. There he says, "By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life."⁴² The effect of such a statement would seem to make justification and regeneration the effects of a logically prior "participation" in Christ that has been effected by the uniting action of

⁴¹Calvin *Institutes* 3.1.1.

⁴²Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.1.





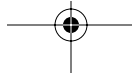
the Holy Spirit. “Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.”⁴³

Now the problem with such statements—and it is a problem of sizeable proportions—is that one of the “gifts” he speaks of—viz. regeneration—is very difficult to distinguish conceptually from that “union” which is supposed to give rise to both justification *and* regeneration. For surely the establishment of the intimate relation of head and members, the indwelling of Christ in our hearts, is what Calvin also means by “regeneration.” Moreover, the apparent contradiction that would arise here gives rise to a further problem. If Calvin were indeed intending to make “union with Christ” the root of justification, he would be breaking with the ordering of justification above regeneration which he at least implied in the context of his debate with Osiander, thereby guaranteeing that his “break” with Medieval Catholic views was not as clean and complete as he himself obviously thought and hoped. For where regeneration is made—even if only logically—to be the root of justification, there the work of God “in us” is, once again (and now on the soil of the Reformation!) made to be the ground of the divine forgiveness of sins. Such a conclusion is softened to some extent by the element of simultaneity, by the fact that the priority here spoken of is strictly logical. If it were not so, then what Wilhelm Niesel has described as the burden of Calvin’s response to Osiander would be something of which he, too, was still guilty. “If God were only to justify us in view of a new life previously begun in us, we should never be certain of salvation but would constantly have to ask whether the new life begun in us really qualified for God’s verdict of justification.”⁴⁴ What distinguishes Calvin from Osiander, according to Niesel, is the latter’s commitment to the note of “previously begun.” What Niesel does not seem to appreciate, however, is that the expedient of rejecting a chronological priority of regeneration over justification and an insistence on their simultaneity are scarcely adequate by themselves to prevent simultaneity from sliding gradually into the relation of “previously begun.” Only the strict emphasis upon imputation is capable of closing the door with finality upon the Medieval Catholic view.

Now there is much more that could be said here on the subject of “union with

⁴³Calvin *Institutes* 3.2.10.

⁴⁴Wilhelm Niesel, *The Gospel and the Churches: A Comparison of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 195.





Christ” in Calvin’s theology which might narrow the distance between imputation and “union with Christ” as possible answers to the question of how we come to share in Christ’s acquired righteousness. But that will have to remain a subject for another day. My goal here has been simply to identify a conceptual problem accentuated by the order of teaching with which Calvin opens book three of his *Institutes* (first, union with Christ, then regeneration and only then justification). It is quite true, as Niesel argued long ago, that Calvin’s motive in organizing book three in this way was to take the ground out from beneath Catholic polemic against the Protestant doctrine of justification on the grounds that it constituted a “legal fiction.” But one has to ask: did Calvin really maintain the kind of conceptual clarity which would have allowed him, in a different set of historical circumstances, to reverse the treatment and to take up justification before regeneration? Or was the treatment of regeneration prior to justification not necessitated by the foregrounding of “union with Christ”?

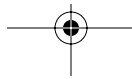
What I have tried to show here is that Calvin’s definition of *justification*, and the view of the relation of justification and regeneration that definition required, collided sharply with possible implications of his chosen order of teaching.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

In 1992 I presented a paper on the subject of incarnation and atonement in the Reformed tradition in Kappel, Switzerland, at an officially sponsored dialogue between the churches belonging to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Orthodox Churches. I will never forget the question-and-answer session that followed my presentation. As soon as I had finished reading, my good friend T. F. Torrance leaped to his feet to say something very close to the following:

I just want to assure our Orthodox brethren that Professor McCormack’s way of reading the Reformed tradition is not the only way to read it; in fact, it is the wrong way to read it. If you really want to understand what Calvin believed about the atoning work of Christ, you can’t start with *Institutes* 2.15-17. You have to start with the view of atonement which is implied in his treatment of eucharistic feeding in 4.17 and and only then turn to 2.15-17.

My initial reaction to this intervention was to think there was something hermeneutically odd, to say the least, about looking away from the one section of the *Institutes* in which Calvin treats Christ’s atoning work directly (i.e., 2.15-17) in order to generate a doctrine of the atonement on the basis of passages dealing with other doctrines. It was also clear to me what Torrance hoped to accomplish with this





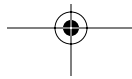
strategy. He saw his own soteriology of “ontological healing” (a variant on the Eastern idea of *theosis*) as required by Calvin’s understanding of eucharistic feeding. If he could show that much, then he could return to the teaching on the subject of atonement in 2.15-17 and subordinate its judicial elements to the ontological elements of his own theory in such a way that the element of penal substitution, while not simply being dismissed, drifts into the background.

But as I got some distance from this experience and subjected Calvin to renewed scrutiny, I came to the conclusion that the problem was not just the result of Torrance’s dogmatic commitments and his strange hermeneutic. Calvin himself bears at least some of the responsibility. You see, there is a structural tension that runs right through the heart of the *Institutes* between the forensicism of his doctrines of atonement and justification, and the more nearly patristic understanding of those themes which are suggested by a good bit of the rhetoric that Calvin employs in speaking of the eucharist. The tension is made quite clear in *Institutes* 4.17.9 (to give just one example), where Calvin says (in dependence on Cyril of Alexandria) that “the flesh of Christ is like a rich and inexhaustible fountain that pours into us the life springing forth from the Godhead into itself. Now who does not see that communion of [*sic*] Christ’s flesh and blood is necessary for all who aspire to heavenly life.”⁴⁵ Now, at the very least, it has to be said that it is hard to understand how a theologian who rejects all mixture of the divine and human natures in Christ, who everywhere in his Christology laid emphasis on the thought of “two natures unimpaired after the union”⁴⁶ and who, on that basis, rejected the doctrine of a communication of attributes from the divine nature to the human nature as taught by the Lutherans (not to mention Osiander’s confusion of Christ’s “essential” divine righteousness with his “acquired righteousness”!) can now speak of the life flowing forth from the Godhead into Christ’s human nature. Surely, the life flowing forth from the Godhead cannot be infused into the human nature of Christ in the absence of all the divine attributes? If there is a “communication of [divine] life” into the human nature of Christ, it would seem logical to affirm a communication of other attributes as well.

Now I would suggest that the cause of the confusion created by Calvin’s love for Cyril’s rhetoric in the area of eucharistic teaching lay in his unwillingness to address ontological questions directly. Had he done so, he might have realized that he

⁴⁵Calvin *Institutes* 4.17.9.

⁴⁶Calvin *Institutes* 2.14.1: “For we affirm his divinity so joined and united with his humanity that each retains its distinctive nature unimpaired, and yet these two natures constitute one Christ.”



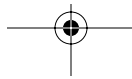


could not reasonably affirm Cyril's rhetoric on the life-giving character of Christ's "body" without accepting Cyril's soteriology of divinization, as well as the (largely) Platonic ontology of "participation" which made that soteriology possible in the first place. He might also have seen that he was creating serious problems for his doctrine of justification. For Calvin was committed to a judicial theory of the atonement and an equally judicial answer to the question of how believers come to participate "in Christ" which could not be easily squared (if at all) with the understandings of divinization and "participation" advocated by Cyril.

The problem with refusing to engage ontological questions as an essential part of the dogmatic task is that we all too easily make ourselves the unwitting servants of the ontology that is embedded in the older theological rhetoric that we borrow—and so it was with Calvin. I don't mean to imply that there are not resources in Calvin's theology for resolving the confusion; there are. I simply want to highlight the problem.

The importance of these observations for a more adequate defense of Calvin's understanding of justification in the face of the Roman Catholic charge of a "legal fiction" (a charge which is now becoming fashionable even among Protestants!) is not far to seek. Calvin contented himself, when attempting to counter this charge, with asserting the temporal simultaneity of justification with sanctification. That's not a bad answer as far as it goes and it is not surprising that it might have satisfied Protestants for a very long time. To assert the temporal simultaneity of justification and sanctification is to suggest that God doesn't lie in pronouncing a sinner just for Christ's sake because God is *also*—at the same time—making him/her to be righteous. But today's Protestants no longer seem to be as impressed with that answer as their forebears were. Today's Protestants give every indication of wanting to understand justification as being itself transformative. The tragedy is that Calvin had the resources at his disposal to meet this demand *without abandoning his judicial framework*. But he did not realize it.

We live in a time in which the churches of the Reformation are in doctrinal chaos. Many there are who, appalled by the gnosticism and even paganism of a good bit of the theology to be found on the left wing of their churches, have turned longing eyes towards Rome and Constantinople. And clearly there is much to be admired there. The Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches have been able, for various reasons, to sustain a theological existence in their churches which, for us Protestants, exists only in memory. But even more, the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches are the institutional bearers of soteriologies of transformation





that exercise a fascination among many. I think it is accurate to say that there are no hotter topics in Protestant theology today than the themes of *theosis*, union with Christ, the de Lubacian axiom “the Eucharist makes the church,” etc. Efforts to find what look like Roman and Eastern soteriologies in the Reformers themselves are rapidly becoming something of a cottage industry.

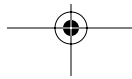
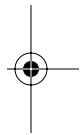
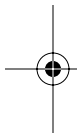
In the process, the churches are slowly coming under the influence of a concept of “participation” in Christ that owes a great deal to the ancient Greek ontologies of pure being. To appropriate this doctrine intelligently would require that we submit ourselves to the ancient ontologies embedded in them. But, like Calvin, we rarely stop to consider that. We do not raise the question whether or not there might be a theological ontology less inimical to our received doctrine of justification. In truth, forensicism (rightly understood!) provides the basis for an alternative theological ontology to the one presupposed in Roman and Eastern soteriology. Where this is not seen, the result has almost always been the abandonment of the Reformation doctrine of justification on the mistaken assumption that the charge of a “legal fiction” has a weight, which in truth, it does not.

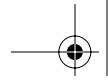
In concluding this lecture, I want to engage in a thought experiment. My thought experiment will suggest to you a way of ordering the central concepts of Christian soteriology that will not bring the content of those concepts into a relation of contradiction to the Reformation understanding of justification. In the process, I will try to at least give you a glimpse of a theological ontology which is more commensurate with the Reformation understanding of justification than the ancient Greek ontology which the Reformers themselves inherited—more commensurate, precisely because of its capacity to render intelligible the ordering of concepts which I will suggest. I am not going to try here to defend all the moves I will make by reference to Scripture. But I hope that you will be able to form some impression of their usefulness in understanding a person like Paul.

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

I am going to carry out my thought experiment in three movements. First, a defense of the Protestant understanding of justification in view of current revivals of the charge of a “legal fiction”; second, some reflections on the concept of “union with Christ”; and, third, a brief sketch of the theological ontology embedded in the doctrinal material treated in the first two steps.

The charge of a “legal fiction.” Earlier I noted that an understanding of the relation of justification to regeneration is implied by what Calvin says concretely about jus-



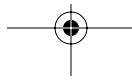


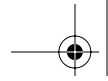
tification. This is seen clearly in a passage to which I have already directed your attention. “Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the spirit of adoption [Rom 8:15], by whose power he remakes them in his own image.” I want to take this passage as providing me with my clue for a proper ordering of the relation of justification and regeneration. Justification is clearly seen in this passage as logically prior to regeneration. Indeed, justification brings regeneration in its wake. The only interpretive question needing to be clarified is whether Calvin intended us to understand the relation as causal in nature. Are these two distinct (albeit simultaneous) acts of God or are they two “moments” in a single act of God? It is not clear to me that Calvin ever posed the question to himself in quite this form; hence it is also not clear to me that he answered it as clearly as I might like.

My own answer would be that justification and regeneration are conceptually distinguishable “moments” in a single act of God. The term “justification” has its home in the judicial sphere. In justification, God pronounces a judicial verdict upon the sinner. But God’s verdict and the divine word pronounced in it are not at all that of a human judge. The human judge can only *describe* what he hopes to be the real state of affairs. The human judge’s judgment is in no sense effective; it does not create the reality it depicts. It seeks only to conform to an already given reality. God’s verdict differs in that it creates the reality it declares. God’s declaration, in other words, is itself constitutive of that which is declared.⁴⁷ God’s word is always effective. When it goes forth, it never returns to Him void. So a judicial act for God is never merely judicial; it is itself transformative.

To put it this way is to suggest that the faith that receives the divine verdict is itself produced by that verdict. Imputation is itself regenerative. Now this may seem counter-intuitive, given the fact that in Romans 4 Paul appeals to Abraham as an analogy. Genesis 15:6, to which Paul makes appeal in Romans 4:3, says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” We might understandably think, *Surely you must first have a subject capable of believing if his faith is*

⁴⁷John Murray says something quite similar, though with a different result than the one I am aiming at here. He says that, “the declarative act of God in the justification of the ungodly is constitutive. In this consists its incomparable character.” Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 123. But Murray makes the divine declaration to be constitutive not of regeneration but only of “the righteous state or relation which is declared to be.” Regeneration he treats prior to justification and, curiously enough, as distinct from “effectual calling”—which is a move that even the Westminster Confession did not make.





then to be reckoned to him as righteousness. Surely the logic of the statement is, first, a believing subject and then the divine verdict. And if it were Paul's intention in this context to specify the order of these things, it would pose an insuperable obstacle to the view I am arguing for here. But seen in context, Paul's concern is to contrast justification by faith with justification by works. It would be strange if, given this intention, he were to turn around and treat faith as a "work"—that is, as a human possibility, as a condition which we humans must first provide before divine imputation can occur. So Paul's intention in citing Genesis 15:6 cannot be to negotiate the logical relation between justification and regeneration. To understand that relation, we would have to look to Paul's teachings everywhere on the nature of faith. Paul understands faith to be a gift of God wrought by his grace in the human heart. Faith is a divine possibility and never at any point a human possibility. God does not do our believing for us; it is we who believe. But believing is not something we can muster up on our own steam.

In sum, the judicial metaphor of justification and the corollary term *imputation* describe the objective turning of God toward us. The same thing is true of another judicial metaphor, namely that of adoption. Adoption is a legal term. It refers to the bestowal on one not naturally born to a parent or parents all the rights and privileges proper to a naturally born son or daughter. That Paul employs the metaphor of adoption at all shows that men and women are not children of God merely by virtue of having been created by him. The comparison implied here is to the one natural born Son of God, Jesus Christ. To be adopted as children of God is to be granted all the rights and privileges which belong to the God-human—the first of which is the bestowal of the Spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15) who enables us to call with confidence upon God as our Father. But if the gift of the Holy Spirit is itself a consequence of adoption and not the condition of its occurrence, then here too, in the case of adoption, a legal metaphor is being employed to describe the objective side of the act in which God turns towards the individual in his grace without respect for the subjective consequences of that turning *in us*. For the latter, other terms are needed—terms like regeneration.

But is this understanding of the relation of justification and regeneration sufficient to deliver the Protestant conception of justification from the charge of a "legal" fiction? Up to now, I have spoken only of imputation as itself regenerative. That by itself helps to get the ordering of our concepts right but that only makes possible a complete answer to the traditional Catholic criticism; it does not yet provide it.

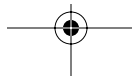
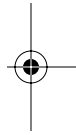




A complete answer to the charge must begin with the recognition that imputation is regenerative, but it is also more than that. The heart of the Reformation understanding of imputation had to do with the positive imputation of Christ's righteousness. The point was to secure the claim that Christ's righteousness is made to be *wholly* ours, so that we might appear before God as not merely forgiven sinners but as those who are already regarded by God as innocent, in advance of the completion of God's work in us. That Christ's "alien" righteousness is "imputed" to us means that we are covered by it, much as the blood of the sacrificial lamb covered the children of Israel at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Christ is our Passover sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7)—an idea closely connected in Paul's mind with justification. But how are these two aspects of imputation related? That is, how are the aspect of being clothed in Christ's righteousness and the aspect of regeneration, which is the immediate consequence of divine imputation, related? The attempt to answer that question necessitates that we take a step back and try to locate the place of divine imputation in a larger frame of reference.

The divine imputation is a verdict whose final meaning can only be grasped when it is seen in the framework of a teleologically-oriented covenant of grace. It is a verdict that looks backward and forward simultaneously. It looks back on the eternal divine decision to enter into a gracious covenant with the human race—a covenant in which what God demands of his covenant partners is something God himself provides in Christ. Thus, the decision registered in the divine imputation is not a *novum*, but the manifestation of the eternal decision of the triune God to redeem God's people on the basis of Christ's work. The eschatological dimension is even more important for my purposes here. The regeneration, which flows from justification as its consequence, is the initiation of a work that is completed only in the eschaton, only in the glorification of the saints. Hence, God's pronouncement of a sinner as innocent takes place with a view towards the final purification of the sinner in the eschaton. And that has to mean that God does not simply clothe us in Christ's righteousness in advance of the completion of his work but does so with a view towards that consummation.

Now the eschatological convergence which all of this implies for the divine verdict and the human reality spoken of in that verdict will not mean an end of Christ's work of intercession—and this leads us to one final observation. To be "clothed with Christ's righteousness" in time, means to be clothed with the saving efficacy of his death (which addresses the problem of guilt) and the saving efficacy of his life of obedience (in which the new humanity is inaugurated). In the es-



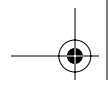


chaton, however, the consummation of God's work in us will mean that we no longer need to be clothed with Christ's righteousness on the side of the saving efficacy of his life of obedience. For in being purified, our lives will have been brought so completely into conformity to his life of obedience that there will remain no difference between his humanity and ours. We will be "like him" (I Jn 3:2) without remainder. The new humanity inaugurated in and by him will be ours as well. Still, with respect to the guilt that accrues to sins previously committed, we will need to be "covered." It is for this reason that Hebrews says that Christ's priesthood is permanent (Heb 7:24) and that he ever lives to make intercession for those who draw near to God through him (Heb 7:25).

In sum, the divine imputation by means of which God regards us as innocent in time is two-sided. It entails being clothed with the saving efficacy of Christ's death and the saving efficacy of Christ's life with a view towards the eschatological consummation. In the eschaton, imputation is one-sided in that we will be clothed then only with the saving efficacy of Christ's death. It will be one-sided because at that point, God will not simply regard us as righteous—we will actually *be* righteous.

Now if I am right up to this point in my reflections, then the ground has been taken out from beneath the charge of a "legal fiction" without recourse to the vexed problem of our union with Christ. Imputation, understood as a judicial act with transformative consequences, is adequate to handle the problem. With that move in place, let me return to the concept of our "union with Christ." I would like to suggest that there is a way of thinking about "union with Christ" which is completely compatible with the position I have outlined to this point.

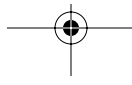
Union with Christ. The being of the Christian "in Christ" is to be construed along the lines of the conformity of my life to his life of obedience, which brings about his likeness in me. Union with Christ, biblically considered, refers to a union of wills, the uniting of my will with his by virtue of which my life is conformed to his. I do not participate in the historical humanity of Christ (a thought which would require a unity on the level of "substance" if it is really to move beyond the thought of a unity of wills); rather I participate in the *kind* of humanity which Jesus instantiated and embodied through his life of obedience. That, I would take it, is why the first epistle of John says that when we see him as he is, in his eschatological return, we shall be *like* him (I Jn 3:2). Now notice: this "union" is a unity-in-differentiation. The individuation of Christ's humanity and my own could be thought to be transcended in a higher unity in an age which thought in terms of a Platonic realism which held that universals are more real than particulars or in terms of the



Aristotelian distinction of substance and accidents. But I think that most philosophers in the West today would agree that the ancient Greek ontologies have lost their power to compel belief. I also think that the uncritical expansion of the concept of perichoresis today on the part of a good many theologians provides a kind of ironic evidence that that is indeed the case. Perichoresis, I would argue, is rightly employed in trinitarian discourse for describing that which is *dissimilar* in the analogy between intra-trinitarian relations among the divine “persons” on the one hand and human to human relations on the other. Nowadays, we are suffering from “creeping perichoresis,” that is, the overly expansive use of terms which have their home in purely spiritual relations to describe relations between human beings who do not participate in a common “substance” and who, therefore, remain distinct individuals even in the most intimate of their relations. This surely has to be true of the relation of the human believer to the human Jesus as well.

What has prevented us from seeing this, I think, is the degree of residual Catholic content in the Reformation understanding of eucharistic feeding. It is no accident that it is in the context of his treatment of eucharistic feeding that Calvin borrows rhetoric from the early church that brings him into conflict with his own doctrine of justification. For too long, sacramentology has been the tail wagging the dog of Christian theology when other topics—Trinity, Christology, election and so on ought to have been seen as more basic.

Be that as it may, the horticultural/organic images employed in the New Testament to describe the relation of Christ to the believer should be understood, I think, as metaphors that successfully bear witness to the intimacy of that relation but mislead if taken more literally. That these metaphors are employed for speaking of a relation that is quite unlike themselves in essential respects becomes quite clear when considering the image of the vine and the branches employed by Jesus in John 15. At first glance, the image might easily be seen to connote an organic connect-edness between Christ and the believer. So it is easy to understand how the early church might find in such an image a proof of its conviction that the union of the believer with Christ is an ontological union of a “person” in whom being is mixed with non-being (that’s us) with a “person” in whom being is pure and unalloyed with non-being (Jesus). Where that occurs, the life communicated from the vine to the branches flows organically from the source. To be sure, it would be difficult to understand, on this view, why the Holy Spirit would be needed as the bond joining us to Christ. At most, the Spirit’s activity might be seen as necessary in the first, initiating moment. But once the Spirit has joined our humanity to Christ’s, the life





that is in Christ would flow into us directly, much as nourishment arises from the vine into the branches. It would be difficult on this view as well to know why the Spirit would be called “the Lord and Giver of Life.” But there are good reasons to believe that all of this is only an analogy for describing what is, in the first instance at least, an ethical relation—an ethical relation with ontological overtones to be sure, but an ethical relation. The difference between the relation between a vine and a branch and the relation between Christ and the believer is that the first relation is impersonal and the second is personal. The flow of life-giving nutrients from the vine to the branches takes place naturally, automatically; it does not require an act of will on the side of either vine or branch. But in the case of the relation of Christ and the believer, we are dealing with a *willed relation*. That, already, marks the dissimilarity in the analogy being constructed here. The similarity lies on the side of the intimacy connoted by the image; that is the point of contact in the analogy. Moreover, the context in which this organic image is employed makes it clear that the subject is “bearing fruit”—that is, the performing of works of love which correspond to Christ’s own. And this ethical relation of lived—which is to say, willed—existence to Christ’s takes place on the foundation of justification. John 15:3 says, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”

Paul’s use of the language of “engrafting” has much the same result. The term is drawn from the horticultural sphere, but it is used in Romans 9—11 to speak of inclusion in the covenant of grace, an inclusion that results in a share in all the gifts and privileges that belong to the covenant. That Paul would preface his use of the horticultural image with the affirmation that the adoption as sons and daughters of God belonged to the Israelites long before us Gentiles suggests strongly that the image of “engrafting” is employed as a synonym for adoption—which would clearly mean that the horticultural image is subordinated to the legal. If that is correct, it would also have ramifications for how we understand the “engrafting” spoken of in relation to baptism in Romans 6.

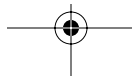
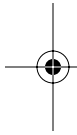
In conclusion, “union with Christ” is most certainly a New Testament concept. But we make a mistake, I think, if we jump to the conclusion that it can only refer in Greek fashion to a substantial participation in the being of Christ. The Greek ontology of pure being is far removed from Paul’s mind especially. Paul’s thought is shot through with eschatology—which leads him to be very concerned that his disciples should live in such a way that they will have no reason to be ashamed on the Day of Christ. This does not mean that an ontology is not implied by his thought. But the key to teasing it out lies in attending carefully to his eschatology



and his overwhelming preoccupation with ethics. Where this is done, it will be seen that *the ethical is itself ontological*. The being of the human is constituted, in large measure, by what she does. To explain what I mean, I turn finally to the subject of covenant ontology.

Covenant ontology. For all its faults, the one virtue of postmodernism in the philosophical realm has been its protest against a certain metaphysical understanding of the human. This is not to suggest that all metaphysics are equally misguided. It is simply to acknowledge frankly just how difficult it is to demonstrate philosophically the existence of a “unified subject”—a “self” which would ground and unify all the random states of consciousness that make up the “empirical self.” Is there something that underlies these random states of psychological experience? Is there something that secures for the individual a “personal identity” which remains unchanged throughout the many changes she undergoes as a consequence of experiencing these random states? Our common sense reaction is to say, “Yes, of course.” I am “I”—whether I am awake or asleep, present to myself (introspectively) or absent from myself (with my attention absorbed by other matters), whether I am in my childhood or my maturity. But again, demonstrating the truth of this common sense observation is far more difficult than one might think.

In spite of the difficulties, there is nothing wrong with speaking of an “essence” of the human. To speak of an “essence” of the human is to speak of a self-identical element that perdures through all growth and change on the level of conscious existence. One could, of course, seek to define this “essence” *metaphysically*—and much of the classical Christian tradition did so, following the Platonists in thinking of “essences” as universal ideas or the Aristotelians with their doctrine of “substances.” But it is not necessary to define the “essence” of the human in this metaphysical way, and it is most certainly not the preferable way to go about things. To tie the fortunes of Christian theology so strictly to philosophical metaphysics—whether ancient or modern—is to make theology vulnerable to the critiques of the adopted metaphysic being brought against it by more recent philosophical criticism. What so often happens in such circumstances is that theology presents to the world the unedifying spectacle of constantly following philosophical trends that have already lost their power to convince philosophers even as theologians finally make adjustments to them. It is not a pretty picture. It is far better to approach a question like that of the “essence” of the human on strictly theological grounds and only then ask whether there might not be “parables” of such a theological account in the philosophical world. It is precisely such a theological account that I



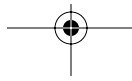


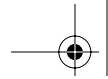
would like to advance under the heading of “covenant ontology.”

What is the unchanging “essence” of the human? The “essence,” I would argue, is not to be found in some kind of metaphysical substratum, something “beneath” the empirical, psychological self. Indeed, the “essence” of the human is not to be “in us” at all. The “essence” of the human—the “essence” of every individual human—lies in the divine act of relating to that individual in the covenant of grace.

I have long been fascinated by the fact that the names of God’s elect are written in his “book of life” (Rev 20:15). It has to be one of the most special evidences of the dignity that God bestows upon human beings that the names which we give to our children are the names he himself has inscribed into his “book.” The role God gives to parents is that significant. But even more significantly for our purposes here, these are the names by which God knew us and called us from eternity. Before any of us were, God called us by name. In so doing, God was granting us an identity that was fixed and unassailable when none of us existed yet. That God does this at all is indicative of the fact that it is he who holds our “personal identity” in his hands, who makes us to be who we are—both as a “race” of human beings and as individual members of it.

What we are “essentially” is that which God has chosen us to be in entering into covenant with us: “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:4). In this is our true humanity: to live in such a way that we conform to the purpose of God in electing, creating and redeeming us. That Christians do not always live up to this ideal is obvious. Only in Christ do we see the perfect conjoining of human “essence” (defined as that which we were chosen to be) and human existence. Or we might say: only in him is his “nature” (that which he makes of himself as a self-determining agent) in complete conformity to his “essence” (that which God called him to be as mediator of the covenant). Of Jesus Christ alone, then, can we say that he is what he does—without further qualification. In us, “essence” and existence (or “nature”) tend to fall apart and will continue to do so until the final consummation. But in those moments in which we respond to God’s call in faith and obedience, in those moments in which our lived existence is brought into conformity to Christ’s—our existence conforms to “essence.” But that is, obviously, not a continuous relation. Of all other humans than Jesus, we have to say that they are what they do on the level of their existence (their “natures” are the product of their self-determining activities through time)—but that, in an even more important and basic sense, they are not what they do (to the extent that their existence does not conform to their



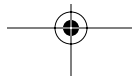
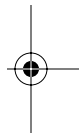


essence). Now notice in this depiction, “essence” is not treated along the lines of either a metaphysical “substance” (with the ancients) or an abstract metaphysical subject (with the moderns). What we are essentially is a divine act which establishes a covenantal relation—a relation which perdures and makes us to be what we are even when, in our perversity, we choose to live on the basis of a lie rather than the truth. I am I, I am identical with myself in all the random and unrelated moments of my existence, because God has chosen to make me his covenant-partner in Jesus Christ. That is my true identity.

It is of the utmost importance to see that the covenant ontology, which I have here described, is fully commensurate with the understanding of union with Christ that I set forth earlier. Covenant ontology is an ontology of correspondence. We are what we truly are (and what we will be in the eschaton) in those moments when our humanity is conformed on the level of lived existence to the humanity inaugurated in time by Christ's life of obedience. We are what we will be through correspondence. To put it this way is to tease out the ontology embedded in my earlier contention that union with Christ takes its rise through a unity of wills, not through a unity of substances. Human *being* is the product of decision, of willed action—both on the side of God's act of relating to us and on the side of our act of relating (or choosing not to relate) to him. But if human being is the product of decision, of willed action and there is no deeper-lying “substance” of the human, then the thought of a quasi-perichoretic indwelling of the historical humanity of Christ is shown to be an ontological impossibility.

Finally, covenant theology is fully compatible with and indeed, embedded in, the understanding of justification I outlined above. Justification, I suggested earlier, is itself regenerative. The faith and obedience by means of which my humanity conforms to the humanity of Jesus Christ is the effect of the divine declaration given in the justification of the ungodly. Nothing could make clearer the fact that, at its heart, forensicism is deeply ontological. At the very root of forensic thinking lies the recognition that human being is the function of a decision which gives rise to a willed relation. Human being is the function of a decision God *made* in eternity past in his electing grace. And it is a function of a decision God *makes* in time in justifying the ungodly. The former is the ground of the latter; the latter actualizes the content of the former in time.

With respect to the modality of the Holy Spirit's work, one final observation. Justification is rightly understood as a trinitarian act. The Father pronounces the verdict registered in justification on the basis of the Son's righteousness in the





power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Holy Spirit is the power of the divine declaration which gives rise to faith and obedience. The only question remaining is that of how the Spirit works. The question is an important one if we are to close the circle, so to speak, coming to as full an understanding as possible of the covenant ontology embedded in a Protestant understanding of justification.

For much of Christian theological history, the work of the Spirit has been thought of along the lines of a kind of divine surgery. The will, on this view, is thought of as something quasi-substantial, a “thing” that can be operated upon by God so as to effect a “healing.” The problem with this is that the will is not something substantial. What we call “will” is, in truth, the mind—but the mind seen as directed toward an object or end, accompanied by either desire or a sense of duty/obligation. It is not something special “in us” to be ranged alongside of the mind as a distinct power or “faculty.” Given that this is so, it is a real question what there might be “in us” upon which God might operate. We would be better off, I suspect, thinking of the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of an existential encounter of divine person with human person whose point of entry, if you will, is the mind.⁴⁸ It is no accident that Paul speaks in Romans 12:2 of a transformation which takes place through a renewal of the mind or that he would speak of the restoration of the divine image in Ephesians 4:22-24 and Colossians 3:10 once again in terms of a renewal of the mind with the result that the image itself is seen to consist in true knowledge of God. For Paul, of course, knowledge of God is not merely cognitive; it is not localized in the mind alone—though we make a huge mistake if we think the knowledge of God is so special in nature that it bears nothing in common with what everywhere else passes for cognitive knowledge. Paul is very concerned with what his disciples think, the ideas with which they stock their minds (see especially Phil 4:8 and Col 3:2). In accordance with this emphasis on the mind in the process of renewal, we would do well to conceive of the modality of the Spirit’s working primarily in terms of “illumination.” The power of the Father’s declarative word is the Holy Spirit’s illumination of the human mind. As Calvin put it in the very same chapter in which he treated the theme of union with Christ, “faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. . . . Paul shows the Spirit to be that inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears.” Calvin goes on to appeal to the

⁴⁸The difference between this form of Christian existentialism and the non-Christian, philosophical versions has to do with the fact that the former refers to an encounter that is full of content. It is not characterized by a leap into the void but rests on real knowledge.



writings of the apostle John who saw the “proper office of the Spirit” to consist in “bringing to mind” what Christ had taught by his mouth.⁴⁹ God’s declaration in justification is revelation, and revelation transforms the whole person. What happens in revelation is that the word of God breaks into the circle of self-enclosedness in which the sinner finds himself/herself with the power of a reality that is inescapable and indubitable. Where this occurs, the whole person undergoes a fundamental reorientation. He/she is brought into a sphere where conformity of existence to essence becomes possible for the first time. With this brief explanation of the Spirit’s work, my attempt to sketch the relation of justification to covenant ontology is now complete.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have not tried to demonstrate the truthfulness of the view I have been describing. To do that would require a tremendous amount of biblical work to test the various parts of the picture. What I have done, though, is to put an alternative before you that can only be adequately tested in the light of Scripture once it has been recognized as a possibility. I have done so in the conviction that, all too often, what exegetes think of as the spectrum of possible interpretations of New Testament teachings is unduly limited by their own lack of imagination where possible interconnections and implications are concerned.

It could be, however, that after all the testing that needs to be done is completed, it will have been shown that the Reformation was in many respects a mistake. I don’t believe that, but it is at least a theoretical possibility. My hope in the meantime is that the Reformation will not be brought to a premature conclusion by those whose power to affect the outcome is equaled only by their ignorance of the unexploited potential of their own tradition.

May God have mercy upon the churches of our day, and upon each of us as we seek to work our way through the welter of conflicting opinions that now increasingly divide even the evangelical denominations. Amen.

⁴⁹Calvin *Institutes* 3.I.4.

