

CALVIN ON JUSTIFICATION AND RECENT MISINTERPRETATIONS OF HIS VIEW

by J. V. Fesko

Introduction

WHEN ONE SURVEYS the history of the Reformation the central issue that arises is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Among the many Reformers who treated this subject, John Calvin (1509-64) towers above most of his peers, though this is not to say that his treatment is prescriptive for the Reformed tradition.¹ Nevertheless, surveying Calvin's understanding of justification is helpful for three major reasons: (1) his treatment of justification is one of the more well-known; (2) as of late some within the Reformed community have appealed to Calvin's doctrine of justification because of the emphasis he places upon the doctrine of the believer's union with Christ; and (3) because of the supposed divergence between Calvin and Martin Luther (1483-1546), specifically in the use of the adjective *alone*, in respect to faith. It is the contention of this essay that recent interpretation of Calvin that emphasizes the believer's union with Christ at the expense of the imputed righteousness of Christ, and those who claim that there is a great divergence between Calvin and Luther and their respective explanations of justification, are incorrect. Rather, central to Calvin's doctrine of justification is

¹ For a critique of the idea that Calvin is the sole source of Calvinism see Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford, OUP, 2003), 63-104; J. V. Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster* (Greenville: Reformed Academic Press, 2001), 299-302; cf. Basil Hall, "Calvin and the Calvinists," in *John Calvin*, Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology, vol. 1, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966), 19-37.

the imputed righteousness of Christ. There is also consonance between Luther and Calvin on justification, especially regarding the relationship between justification and sanctification, or works and the third use of the law. We must first survey Calvin's recent interpreters so we can understand the specific nature of their claims. Then, we will explore the writings of Calvin to test the claims of his recent interpreters as well as the thesis of this essay.

Calvin and the Claims of His Recent Interpreters

In recent years there have been three groups of interpreters who have made claims regarding Calvin and his doctrine of justification. The first group of interpreters is those who appear to argue their case apart from the context of the recent debates in the Reformed community over justification, among whom include Stephen Strehle and Peter Lillback.² The second group of interpreters comes from those who have sympathies for the new perspective on Paul (NPP), among whom include Craig Carpenter and Rich Lusk.³ The third group comes from those who are associated with the so-called federal vision (FV), among whom include P. Andrew Sandlin and Norman Shepherd.⁴ However, one should note that there is some overlap between groups two and three, though it depends on the individual author, as the FV is not a doctrinally homogenous movement. Let us explore the claims of each of these groups so that we understand the issues that must be tested against the evidence of Calvin's writings.

² Stephen Strehle, *The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel: Encounter Between the Middle Ages and the Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

³ Craig B. Carpenter, "A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification," *Westminster Theological Journal* 64/2 (2002), 363-86; Richard Lusk, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons. Debating the Federal Vision*, ed., E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 118-48.

⁴ P. Andrew Sandlin, "Lutheranized Calvinism: Gospel or Law, or Gospel and Law," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11/2 (2002), 123-36; Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Faith Alone," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11/2 (2002), 75-92.

Strehle and Lillback

The first group of interpreters appears to be those scholars who have done Reformation research apart from the current controversies surrounding the doctrine of justification, the NPP, and the FV. The claims of Strehle and Lillback deal with Calvin on imputation and his (dis)agreement with Luther, respectively. Strehle argues that Calvin, “while employing the term *imputation*, pictures justification as a result of union with Christ and his daily work in us.” He argues that “imputation was never accentuated in the theology of such pillars of the movement as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.”⁵ So, according to Strehle, imputation was not central for Calvin; rather, union with Christ was key. Strehle argues that the idea of imputation was introduced to Protestant polemics by Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) only in response to Roman Catholic criticism.⁶ Lillback, on the other hand, contends that “Luther and Calvin are in sharp disagreement concerning the inseparable nature of ‘inherent righteousness’ and justification.”⁷ Lillback claims that the differences between Luther and Calvin lie in Luther’s understanding of law and gospel as well as the third use of the law: “For Luther, it was ‘faith alone’; for the Reformed it was ‘faith working by love.’”⁸

What about the second group of interpreters?

The New Perspective on Paul

With the rise of the NPP and the reexamination of what the scriptures mean by its language about justification, there have been those who have tried to harmonize the new perspective with the Reformed faith, particularly by means of Calvin’s doctrine of one’s union with Christ.⁹ The thought process falls along the following

⁵ Strehle, *Catholic Roots*, 66, n. 1.

⁶ Strehle, *Catholic Roots*, 67ff.

⁷ Lillback, *Binding of God*, 190.

⁸ Lillback, *Binding of God*, 125.

⁹ The same is true of Luther and his doctrine of union with Christ. See Paul Louis Metzger, “Luther and the Finnish School: Mystical Union with Christ: An Alternative to Blood Transfusions and Legal Fictions,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65/2 (2003), 201-13; Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); cf. Carl R. Trueman, “Is the

lines: advocates of the NPP reject the idea of imputation on the basis that it is unscriptural, though they argue that they produce the same results through the believer's union with Christ.¹⁰ Along these lines Richard Lusk argues that

justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify 'righteousness' into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict passage over him at the resurrection. Union with Christ is therefore the key.¹¹

To support this contention, namely the superfluity of imputation, Lusk appeals to Calvin and his understanding of the relationship between justification and union with Christ. Citing *Institutes* 3.1.1 and 3.11.10, Lusk argues that Calvin saw union with Christ as the central motif of Pauline theology and not imputation. He also claims that "in Calvin's comments on Romans 5.12 and in *Institutes* 2.1.8 that Calvin does not conceive of original sin imputatively but rather in terms of organic union with Adam as the root of depravity: Calvin did not believe in the immediate imputation of Adam's sin."¹² Lusk is attempting to separate imputation from union with Christ by showing that: (1) Calvin sees union with Christ as central, not imputation; and (2) that Calvin does not hold to the immediate imputation of sin. Lusk is trying to use Calvin to show

Finnish Line a New Beginning? A Critical Assessment of the Reading of Luther Offered by the Helsinki Circle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65/2 (2003): 231-44. For the broader issue of the NPP and their evaluation of the reformers theological views as it relates to new testament studies see Gerald Bray, "Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship," *Churchman* 109/2 (1995): 102-26.

¹⁰ See N. T. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5.21," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 2, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 200-08; Travis Tamerius, "Interview with N. T. Wright," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11/1 (2002): 128-31; cf. Robert H. Gundry, "The Nonimputation of Christ's Righteousness," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, eds. Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2004), 17-45.

¹¹ Lusk, "Response," 142.

¹² Lusk, "Response," 143, n. 64.

that in the light of one's union with Christ imputation is superfluous. Lusk is not alone in his attempts to wed Calvin to the NPP.

Recently Craig Carpenter, a New Testament Ph.D candidate, has written an essay comparing the differences between Calvin and the Council of Trent on justification. The main point of Carpenter's essay is that for Calvin, justification does not hinge solely on the difference between imputed versus infused righteousness but also upon the believer's union with Christ.¹³ Where question arises, however, is when Carpenter states that, "Justification then, as a forensic benefit stemming from a believer's union with Christ, is an in-breaking of the future declaration of the forgiveness that will be shown to be true in the day of judgment, which the believer has now, already. Then the believer will be fully shown to be what he is now, one of God's covenant people."¹⁴ What is problematic about this statement is that it is a description, according to Carpenter, of Calvin's understanding of justification. Carpenter's proposed description of Calvin's doctrine of justification seems to have more in common with N. T. Wright's description than Calvin's: "Justification' in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people."¹⁵ Whether Wright's definition of justification is correct is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, what one must ask is, Does Calvin define justification in terms of an eschatological definition? What about the claims of the third group of interpreters?

The Federal Vision

Amidst the current debates over justification those associated with the FV make the claim that there is a large difference between Calvin and Luther and their respective traditions on the nature of justification. Andrew Sandlin, for example, claims that "some rather prominent Calvinists are leaning more heavily toward the Wittenberg Reformer and leaning somewhat away from John

¹³ Carpenter, "Calvin and Trent," 369.

¹⁴ Carpenter, "Calvin and Trent," 384.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 119.

Calvin.”¹⁶ Sandlin argues that Lutherans warn the Christian against sanctification because it may lead the believer to trusting in his good works to save him.¹⁷ Sandlin sees the primary difference between the Reformed and Lutheran traditions emerge in their respective uses of the law. Quoting the fifth article of the Formula of Concord, Sandlin highlights the stark antithesis that Lutherans place between law and gospel. Though Sandlin does not state his observations in these precise terms, his point is that Lutherans supposedly only see two functions to the law whereas the Reformed, following Calvin among others, see three functions of the law.

Similarly, Norman Shepherd sees the same type of divide between Lutherans and Reformed on the relationship of the law to justification:

Justification is forensic, not transformative. But it does mean that the Reformed view differs from the Lutheran view that sanctification in every respect follows upon justification. In the Reformed view there is no faith without the prior transformation of regeneration, and without faith there is no justification. It is not surprising that the Westminster Confession does not use the formula ‘justification by faith alone.’ There is no such thing as faith alone in the sense of faith existing all by itself.¹⁸

Like Sandlin, Shepherd tries to argue that there is a difference between the Reformed and Lutheran wings of the Reformation regarding the place of works in relationship to justification. Shepherd argues that the Westminster Standards never use the phrase, “justification by faith alone,” as did Luther but rather the phrase, “the alone instrument of justification.”¹⁹ We must ask the question, Are these assertions correct? Is there a large chasm between Luther and Calvin on the relationship between justification and works? Does this chasm exist in later Lutheran and Reformed confessional expressions?

¹⁶ Sandlin, “Lutheranized Calvinism” 123.

¹⁷ Sandlin, “Lutheranized Calvinism,” 124.

¹⁸ Shepherd, “Justification,” 83.

¹⁹ Shepherd, “Justification,” 76.

Summary

As we have seen the claims of the three groups of interpreters, we must keep the issues that they raise before us as we investigate Calvin's doctrine of justification. We must determine: (1) the place and significance Calvin gives to imputation; (2) the relationship of union with Christ to justification; (3) the relationship of justification to sanctification (good works and the third use of the law); and (4) the (dis)agreement between Luther and Calvin on these matters. We will begin with an exploration of the broad contours of Calvin's doctrine of justification, followed by a comparison to Luther on key matters, then an examination of his understanding of justification and the *historia salutis*, and finally conclude with an exploration of Calvin's preaching on justification.

Broad Contours of Calvin's Doctrine of Justification

Definition

When one begins a survey of Calvin's doctrine of justification it is essential that he understand the importance that the Reformer placed upon this teaching. Calvin wrote that the doctrine of justification "is the main hinge on which religion turns." He believed that "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."²⁰ Justification for Calvin, then, was as central to the Church as it was for Luther.²¹ In fact, Calvin saw justification by faith as "the first and keenest subject of controversy" between the Protestant and Roman Catholic

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20-21, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1, p. 726; also idem, *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, 5 vols., eds. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner (Munich: 1926-52), vol. 4, 182. Hereafter abbreviated as OS.

²¹ See Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1-4*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther's Works, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 106; idem, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: 1883-1987), vol. 40, pt. 1, p. 192. Hereafter abbreviated as LW.

churches.²² Generally speaking, Calvin understood that man “is said to be justified in God’s sight who is both reckoned righteous in God’s judgment and has been accepted on account of his righteousness.” This means for Calvin that there are two constituent elements of justification: the remission of sins and the need for righteousness. This is evident in his definition of justification: “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.”²³ This is the first important piece of evidence that gives some of Calvin’s recent interpreters significant problems. For Strehle to argue that imputation did not feature prominently in Calvin’s thought, or Lusk to say that union with Christ is more central, does not take Calvin’s own definition of justification into account. Calvin’s insistence upon imputation is evident in the way he exegetes Paul on justification. To what scripture does Calvin appeal to support his definition of justification?

Scriptural Data

Calvin appeals chiefly to three texts to support his understanding of justification: Romans 4:6-7, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, and Romans 5:19.²⁴ It is in these three passages of scripture where Calvin sees Paul develop the relationship between the remission of sins and the imputation of righteousness. Calvin explains that Romans 4:6-7 includes both the imputation of righteousness and the forgiveness of sins: “In the fourth chapter of Romans he first calls justification ‘imputation of righteousness.’ And he does not

²² John Calvin, “Reply by John Calvin to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, trans. Henry Beveridge, 7 vols. (rep.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), vol. 1, p. 41 (OS 1.469).

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.2, pp. 726-27 (OS 4.183): “Acceptionem qua nos Deus in gratiam receptos pro iustis habet. Eamque in peccatorum remissione ac iustitiae Christi imputatione positam esse dicimus.” See also James Weis, “Calvin versus Osiander On Justification,” *The Springfielder* 30/3 (1965): 38; Thomas Coates, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Justification,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 34 (1963): 325-26; Jonathan H. Rainbow, “Double Grace: John Calvin’s View of the Relationship of Justification and Sanctification,” *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989): 101.

²⁴ Coates, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Justification,” 326.

hesitate to include it within forgiveness of sins.”²⁵ Calvin, though, places chief emphasis upon 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. According to Calvin, when Paul speaks of being reconciled he means that people are justified.²⁶ How are they justified? Calvin explains that men are returned to God’s favor “by being regarded as righteous, by obtaining the remission of their sins. As long as God imputes our sins to us, He cannot but regard us with abhorrence, for He cannot look with friendship or favor upon sinners.”²⁷ Here we see, then, Calvin’s emphasis upon the remission of sins, but what about the imputation of Christ’s righteousness?

Calvin explains that the believer’s remission of sin comes through Christ’s sacrifice: “As a man’s curse used to be cast upon the sacrificial victim, so Christ’s condemnation was our absolution and with His stripes we are healed.”²⁸ So, at least at this point, one should take note how justification is intertwined with Christ’s atonement. The first element of justification, the remission of sins, is inextricably linked with Christ’s sacrifice. We find emphasis upon the second element, the imputation of righteousness, when Calvin comments upon 2 Corinthians 5:21:

How can we become righteous before God? In the same way as Christ became a sinner. For He took, as it were, our person, that He might be the offender in our name and thus might be reckoned a sinner, not because of His own offences but because of those of others, since He Himself was pure and free from every fault and bore the penalty that was our due and not His own. Now in the same way we are righteous in Him, not because we have satisfied God’s judgment by our own works, but because we are judged in relation to Christ’s righteousness which we have put on by faith, that it may become our own.²⁹

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.4, p. 729 (OS 4.184-85); idem, *Romans and Thessalonians*, CNTC, trans. Ross Mackenzie, eds. David W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 85-88; idem, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae Supersunt Omnia*, eds. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss (Brunswick: 1892), vol. 49, cols. 71-74. Hereafter abbreviated as CO.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.4, p. 729 (OS 4.185).

²⁷ John Calvin, *2 Corinthians and Timothy, Titus & Philemon*, CNTC, trans. T. A. Smail, eds. David W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 78 (CO 50.71).

²⁸ Calvin, *2 Corinthians*, 81 (CO 50.74).

²⁹ Calvin, *2 Corinthians*, 81-82 (CO 50.74): “Quomodo iusti coram Deo sumus? Qualiter scilicet Christus fuit peccator. Personam enim nostrum

While Calvin does not say so in the most specific terms, his interpretation is one that hinges upon imputation: the imputation of the sins of the ungodly to Christ, which is the remission of sins, and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer. Where the emphasis upon imputation is the strongest comes in Calvin's appeal to Romans 5:19.

Commenting on Romans 5:19 Calvin makes the connection between the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer when he writes that Paul

states that we are made righteous by the obedience of Christ, we deduce from this that Christ, in satisfying the Father, has procured righteousness for us. It follows from this that righteousness exists in Christ as a property, but that that which belongs properly to Christ is imputed to us. At the same time he explains the character of the righteousness of Christ by referring to it as *obedience*.³⁰

Here the connections between the obedience, or righteousness, of Christ and imputation emerge quite clearly. Moreover, from this triad of scriptural passages one can see the inextricable links between the remission of sin, the imputation, of sin to Christ, and righteousness, or obedience, to the believer. It is based upon Calvin's analysis of Romans 4:6-7, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, and Romans 5:19, then, that Calvin is able to conclude that justification involves the remission of sin and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, for any of Calvin's interpreters to claim that imputation played a minor or subsidiary role, simply does not accord with the evidence. It is not possible, at least according to Calvin's thought, to claim, as Lusk does, that union with Christ makes his imputed righteousness redundant.³¹ Nor does Strehle's claim appear to stand. Imputation, at least in the mature Calvin, features prominently. Equally unconvincing is Carpenter's

quodammodo suscepit, ut reus nostro nomine fieret, et tanquam peccator iudicaretur, non propriis, sed alienis delictis, quum purus foret ipse et immunis ab omni culpa, poenamque subiret nobis non sibi debitam. Ita scilicet nunc iusti sumus in ipso: non quia operibus propriis satisfaciamus iudicio Dei, sed quoniam censemur Christi iustitia, quam fide induimus ut nostra fiat."

³⁰ Calvin, *Romans*, 118 (CO 49.101).

³¹ Lusk, "Response," 142; cf. Coates, "Calvin's Doctrine of Justification," 327-28.

description of Calvin's understanding of justification: "Justification then, as a forensic benefit stemming from a believer's union with Christ, is an in-breaking of the future declaration of the forgiveness that will be shown to be true in the day of judgment, which the believer has now, already. Then the believer will be fully shown to be what he is now, one of God's covenant people."³² Carpenter's description rotates more upon the axis of ecclesiology than soteriology, evident by the absence of any mention of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. It seems irresponsible to describe Calvin's understanding of justification and leave out imputation, when Calvin places it in his very definition. What about Calvin's understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification, or the relationship between justification and works?

Justification and Works

How does Calvin relate his doctrine of justification to works? Calvin's position can be described, perhaps as it has been in the past, as justification is by faith alone but that faith is not alone, meaning that it is always accompanied by fruit, or good works. Calvin is quick to point out that while good works always accompany justification, one must not confuse the two: "Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image. But if the brightness of the sun cannot be separated from its heat, shall we therefore say that the earth is warmed by its light, or lighted by its heat?" Calvin wants the reader to be sure that he does not confuse justification and sanctification, or mixes faith and works. His analogy of the sun and its light works well to this end: "The sun, by its heat, quickens and fructifies the earth, by its beams brightens and illumines it. Here is a mutual and indivisible connection. Yet reason itself forbids us to transfer the peculiar qualities of the one to the other."³³ Calvin's point, then, is that we are justified by faith alone, but that justifying faith is always accompanied by the fruit of sanctification, or good works. The two are inextricably linked but must never be confused;

³² Carpenter, "Calvin and Trent," 384.

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.6, p. 732 (OS 4.187).

one must distinguish between the two but never separate them.³⁴ Calvin goes to great lengths to distinguish and explain the relationship between faith and works in justification.

Calvin is clear, “there is in justification no place for works,” the believer can only be justified by placing his faith in Christ: “We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ’s grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ.”³⁵ The believer cannot bring his own works forward in his justification but must rest solely in the works of Christ. This is why, commenting on Romans 4:6, Calvin writes: “The righteousness of faith is free and independent of works, since it depends on the remission of sins.”³⁶ But, how, then do works relate to a person’s justification if they are the fruit of his adoption? Calvin explains the technical relationship between faith and works by use of the heuristic tool of Aristotelian fourfold causality.³⁷ Calvin writes that

1. The efficient cause of securing eternal life is the mercy of the Father and his freely given love.
2. The material cause is Christ, who through his obedience, acquired righteousness for the Church.
3. The formal or instrumental cause is faith.
4. The final cause is both the proof of divine justice and the praise of God’s goodness.³⁸

The mercy of God, the work of Christ, faith, and the praise of God’s goodness are all involved in the believer’s justification, but Calvin clearly shows how each of these relate to one another. Like Calvin’s analogy of the light and heat of the sun, both are

³⁴ Weis, “Calvin versus Osiander,” 42; Rainbow, “Double Grace,” 102-03.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.6-7, p. 733 (OS 4.188); idem, “Reply to Sadolet,” in *Works*, vol. 1, 43 (OS 1.470).

³⁶ Calvin, *Romans*, 86 (CO 49.72): “Iustitiam fidei gratuitam esse ac sine operibus, quoniam a peccatorum remissione pendeat.”

³⁷ Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin’s Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 46.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.17, pp. 783-84 (OS 4.235-36).

inextricably linked, but heat is different than light. In case one might think that Calvin has imposed an artificial philosophical lens over the scriptures, it is helpful to see that Calvin arrives at his conclusions, exegetically, not philosophically.

Commenting on Romans 3:24, “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” Calvin explains that we have

the material cause by which righteousness is brought about for us. In the words ‘through faith in his blood,’ is shown the instrumental cause whereby the righteousness of Christ is applied to us. Lastly, he adds the final cause when, to demonstrate his righteousness he says, ‘In order that he himself may be righteous, and the justifier of him who has faith in Christ.’³⁹

Calvin bases his fourfold dissection of the causes of a person’s justification so that, like his analogy of the sun, one may distinguish but not separate the different constituent elements. Calvin carefully distinguishes between the instrumental and material causes of a person’s justification so that faith is not confused with works, for “so long as any particle of works righteousness remains some occasion for boasting remains with us.”⁴⁰ Calvin therefore insists that justification is by faith alone and that faith means “to believe that Christ died and rose again.”⁴¹ Calvin has strong words for those who think that justification is based upon a mixture of faith and works: “Those who prate that we are justified by faith because, being reborn, we are righteous by living spiritually have never tasted the sweetness of grace, so as to consider that God will be favorable to them.”⁴² Calvin is so intent on placing emphasis upon the exclusion of works from justification that he goes as far as to say that the righteousness, or obedience, by which a person is justified, is outside of the believer: “This is a wonderful plan of justification that, covered by the righteousness of Christ, they should not

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.17, p. 784 (OS 4.235-36); also 3.14.21, p. 787 (OS 4.238). For a similar explanation of Eph 1.5 see, idem, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, & Colossians*, CNTC, trans. T. H. L. Parker, eds. David F. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 126-27 (CO 51.148-49).

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.13, p. 743 (OS 4.197).

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.14, p. 744 (OS 4.198); also 3.13.4, p. 767 (OS 4.219).

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.13.5, p. 768 (OS 4.220).

tremble at the judgment they deserve, and that while they rightly condemn themselves, they should be accounted righteous outside themselves.”⁴³ This, of course, would be synonymous with Luther’s famous phrase that we are justified by an alien righteousness, one that does not belong to the believer but comes from Christ.⁴⁴ So, while there is consonance between Luther and Calvin at this point, is there further agreement between the two Reformers, particularly in matters related to justification and sanctification, good works and the third use of the law?

Luther Compared to Calvin

It is at this point that one must address the claims of those like Lillback, Sandlin, and Shepherd, who argue that Calvin’s doctrine of justification is different than Luther’s. Their claims center particularly in the use of the adjective *alone* in relation to justification and the question of the place of the third use of the law. To be sure, the claims of Lillback, Sandlin, and Shepherd are not new. There have been those in both the distant and recent past who have argued that Luther and Lutheranism only hold to two uses of the law: the political or civil, in restraining evil, and the elenctic or pedagogic, in leading people to a knowledge of sin and the need of redemption.⁴⁵ Yet, at the same time a perusal of primary sources, including Luther’s writings, Lutheran confessions, and other Lutheran theologians evidences that Luther and Lutheranism hold to the third use of the law in some form, the didactic or normative

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.11, pp. 740-41 (OS 4.195): “Sed haec est mirabilis iustificandi ratio, ut Christi iustitia tecti non exhorreant iudicium quo digni sunt, et dum seipsos merito damnant, iusti extra se censeantur.” See also Coates, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Justification,” 328-30.

⁴⁴ See Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm, trans. Lowell J. Satre (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 297-306 (LW 31.297-306); cf. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 260-61.

⁴⁵ See Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 62-78; Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 38-43.

use, regulating the life of the regenerate.⁴⁶ One may begin with Luther's own writings.

Luther

While Luther certainly divided the scriptures into the categories of law and gospel, commands and promise, just because a person became a Christian did not mean that he was now suddenly free from the demands of the law. Luther, for example, writes that

as long as we live in a flesh that is not free of sin, so long as the Law keeps coming back and performing its function, more in one person and less in another, not to harm but to save. This discipline of the Law is the daily mortification of the flesh, the reason, and our powers and the renewal of our mind (2 Cor. 4:16). . . . There is still need for a custodian to discipline and torment the flesh, that powerful jackass, so that by this discipline sins may be diminished and the way prepared for Christ.⁴⁷

So long as the Christian is *simil iustus et peccator*, there is always a need for the law in the life of the believer.⁴⁸ Luther's use of the law in the life of the believer is further evidenced from his catechisms.

Luther's Small Catechism begins with an exposition of the decalogue.⁴⁹ At the close of the exposition of the decalogue in Luther's Large Catechism, Luther explains the importance of the law in the life of the believer:

⁴⁶ Luther is truly the fountainhead of Lutheranism, unlike Calvin who is one among many influential theologians in the Calvinist, or more properly, reformed, tradition. See Trueman, "Finnish Line," 232; also Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520-1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

⁴⁷ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, vol. 26, p. 350 (LW 40/1.537): "Quamdiu igitur in carne quae sine peccato non est, vivimus, subinde redit lex et facit suum officium, in uno plus, in alio minus, Non tamen ad perniciem, sed salutem. Hoc enim exercitium legis est quotidiana mortification carnis, rationis et virium et innovacio mentis nostrae, 2 Corin 4 . . . Hic opus est ad huc paedagogo qui fortem asinum, Carnem, exercent et vexet, ut hac paedagogia minuantur peccata et Christo via paretur."

⁴⁸ Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (1988; Wipf & Stock, 1998), 10.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," in *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (1931; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), vol. 3, § 1, pp. 74-77.

Thus, we have the Ten Commandments, a compend of divine doctrine, as to what we are to do in order that our whole life may be pleasing to God, and the true fountain and channel from and in which everything must arise and flow that is to be a good work, so that outside the Ten Commandments, no work or thing can be good or pleasing to God, however great or precious it be in the eyes of the world.⁵⁰

Luther saw a need for good works, but was careful, like Calvin, to teach about the proper relationship between good works and justification.⁵¹ Luther addresses the proper place of the law as it relates to justification when he writes:

The matter of the Law must be considered carefully, both as to what and as to how we ought to think about the Law; otherwise we shall either reject it altogether, after the fashion of the fanatical spirits who prompted the peasant's revolt and decade ago by saying that the freedom of the Gospel absolves men from all laws, or we shall attribute to the Law the power to justify. Both groups sin against the Law: those on the right, who want to be justified through the Law, and those on the left, who want to be altogether free of the Law. Therefore we must travel the royal road, so that we neither reject the Law altogether nor attribute more to it than we should.⁵²

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, "Large Catechism," in *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 669-70. Luther also says: "Therefore it is not in vain that it is commended in the Old Testament to write the Ten Commandments on all walls and corners, yes, even on garments, not for the sake of merely having them written in these places and making show of them, as did the Jews, but that we might have our eyes constantly fixed upon them, and have them always in our memory, and that we might practice them in all our actions and ways, and every one make them his daily exercise in all cases, in every business transaction, as though they were written in every place wherever he would look, yea, wherever he walks or stands. This in our own house and abroad with our neighbors, to practice the Ten Commandments, that no one need run far from them" ("Large Catechism," 677).

⁵¹ Carl R. Trueman, *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers 1525-56* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 63-66; Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 264-66.

⁵² Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, vol. 26, p. 343 (LW 40/1.527-28): "Ideo locus de Lege diligenter est considerandus, Quid et quomodo sit de lege sentiendum, Nee am aut omnio reiiciams more Phanaticorum spirituum qui ante decennium moventes seditionem rusticorum dicebant libertatem

Luther, then, saw a place for the law in the life of the believer. When he was explaining the doctrine of justification, as Calvin, he said that there was no place for works or the law. In relationship, though, to one's sanctification and the knowledge of what is pleasing to God, the decalogue served as a guide as well as a tool in the hand of God to confront the remaining sin in the believer.⁵³ This careful fencing of justification from works, yet at the same time connecting justification to sanctification, is especially evident in the Lutheran confessions.

Lutheran Confessions

The Augsburg Confession (1530) is the chief Lutheran confession, and was largely written by Luther's lieutenant, Melancthon.⁵⁴ The Augsburg Confession carefully explains that justification is by faith alone: "Our works can not reconcile God, or deserve remission of sins, grace, and justification at his hands, but that these we obtain by faith only, when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ's sake, who alone is appointed the Mediator and Propitiatory, by whom the Father is reconciled." Yet, at the same time the confession gives an apology against antinomianism: "Ours are falsely accused of forbidding good works. For their writings extant upon the Ten Commandments, and others of the like argument, do bear witness that they have to good purpose taught concerning every kind of life, and its duties; what kinds of life, and what works in every calling, do please God."⁵⁵ The confession even goes as far as to say that Lutherans "teach that it is necessary to do good works," but it specifies, like Calvin, "not that we may trust that we deserve grace by them, but because it is the will of God that we should do them. By faith alone is apprehended remission of sins and grace. And because the Holy Spirit is received

Evangelicam absolvere homines ab omnibus legibus, aut ne vim iustificandi et tribuamus. Utrique enim in legem peccant, in dextra qui per legem iustificari, in sinistra qui prorsus a lege liberi esse volunt. Ingrediendum est igitur regia via, ut neque legem plane reiiciamus, neque plus ei tribuamus, quam oportet."

⁵³ Contra Lillback, *Binding of God*, pp. 185-93; cf. Trueman, *Luther's Legacy*, 66.

⁵⁴ Mark A. Noll, ed., *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 82-83; also Trueman, "Finnish Line," 240.

⁵⁵ Augsburg Conf., § 20, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 20-21.

by faith, our hearts are now renewed, and so put on new affections, so that they are able to bring forth good works.”⁵⁶ So, here, in this Lutheran confession we see the emphasis upon justification by faith alone but also the need for good works, informed by the law. While this is not precisely the same nomenclature that one finds in Calvin, it is nonetheless parallel to the Reformed emphasis on the third use of the law. What we find in inchoate forms in the Augsburg Confession, however, emerges quite clearly in the Formula of Concord.

The Formula of Concord (1577) was born out of the need to interpret authoritatively the Augsburg Confession in the face of various controversies, which included subjects such as original sin, synergism, justification, good works, antinomianism, the Lord’s supper, Christology, predestination, and others. Hence, one finds several articles that explain and elaborate upon the relationship between justification and good works.⁵⁷ It is in the Formula of Concord that the Lutherans, notorious for their insistence upon justification by faith alone, also state that “good works must certainly and without all doubt follow a true faith (provided only it be not a dead but a living faith), as fruits of a good tree.”⁵⁸ It is in article six, “Of the third use of the law,” where the document makes its most pronounced statement about the importance of the law and good works: “We believe, teach, and confess that although they who truly believe in Christ, and are sincerely converted to God, are through Christ set free from the curse and constraint of the Law, they are not, nevertheless, on that account without the Law.”⁵⁹ The document goes on to state that “the preaching of the Law should be urged not only upon those who have not faith in Christ, and do not yet repent, but also upon those who truly believe in Christ, are truly converted to God, and regenerated and are justified by faith.”⁶⁰ So, then, it appears from primary sources such as Luther, the Augsburg Confession, and the Formula Concord that Luther and Lutheranism places a heavy emphasis upon justification by faith alone but not to the exclusion of the importance and necessity of good works or the third use of the law. This is not a unique conclusion.

⁵⁶ Augsburg Conf., § 20, in Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 3, 24-25.

⁵⁷ See Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, 268-307.

⁵⁸ Formula of Concord, § 4, in Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 3, 122.

⁵⁹ Formula of Concord, § 6, in Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 3, 131.

⁶⁰ Formula of Concord, § 6, in Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 3, 132.

Later Lutheranism

Contemporary Lutheran theologians have previously observed that Luther and later Lutheranism have guarded justification by faith alone but at the same time maintained the importance of good works. Althaus notes that “Luther saw the commandments not only as a mirror in which he recognizes sin—although they certainly are and remain that even for the Christian—but beyond this as instruction about the ‘good works’ God wants; and such instruction is necessary and wholesome for the Christian.”⁶¹ Likewise, Francis Pieper (1852-1931) notes that “while the theologian must differentiate sharply between Law and Gospel, yet he must in practice join them most intimately.” Pieper also lists three reasons as to why the Christian still needs the law:

1. Because the Christian is *simil iustus et peccator*—he still sins and needs the law to understand the gravity of his sin.
2. The Christian must learn from the law to know what is pleasing to God and what he would have him do.
3. To keep the flesh outwardly in check.⁶²

To say, then, that there is a large chasm between Calvin and Luther on justification because Calvin and later Reformed theologians hold to the third use of the law whereas Luther and the Lutherans reject it neither accords with the evidence nor with history.

Historical Considerations

A historical fact that many do not take into consideration is that Calvin was familiar with Luther, and even more so with his

⁶¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 272; see also Eugene F. Klug, “Luther on Law, Gospel, and the Third Use of the Law,” *The Springfielder* 38/2 (1974): 166.

⁶² Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 236, 239-40; also Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, Lutheran Quarterly Books, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 67-68.

lieutenant, Melanchthon.⁶³ In a letter, for example, that Calvin wrote to Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75), he could state about Luther:

I do earnestly desire to put you in mind, in the first, place, that you would consider how eminent a man Luther is, and the excellent endowments wherewith he is gifted, with what strength of mind and resolute constancy, with how great skill, with what efficiency and power of doctrinal statement, he has hitherto devoted his whole energy to overthrow the reign of Antichrist, and at the same time to diffuse far and near the doctrine of salvation.⁶⁴

This hardly seems like the statement of one who had significant differences concerning justification by faith, especially given Calvin's praise for Luther's work in spreading the doctrine of salvation. If the differences that contemporary interpreters, such as Sandlin, Shepherd, and Lillback, argue existed between Luther and Calvin, we would expect to hear some qualification by Calvin in his praise of Luther. The essential agreement between Luther and Calvin is quite evident in Calvin's response to "Articles by the Theological Faculty of Paris" (1542).

In article six, "of Justification by Works," the Sorbonne identifies their primary opponent as the Lutherans. Concerning the teaching of the Lutherans, the document states that, "the Lutherans place the righteousness of faith in the predicament of a relation, saying that we are righteous merely because God accepts us in Christ." The document goes on to state that "the law of contraries is the same; but we are condemned on account of bad works; therefore we are justified on account of good works." Article six then states that the "Lutherans ridicule this argument, saying that works are rewarded by God, because they are accepted by Him after He has justified man freely, that therefore, the reward depends on the gratuitous acceptance, and must be subordinate to the righteousness of faith, as the effect to its cause."⁶⁵ If there was ever

⁶³ On Calvin's relationship with Melanchthon see, Timothy Wengert, "We Will Feast Together in Heaven Forever: The Epistolary Friendship of John Calvin and Philip Melanchthon," in *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg*, ed. Karin Maag (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 19-44.

⁶⁴ "Calvin to Bullinger, 25 Nov 1544," in *Works*, vol. 4, 433 (CO 11.774).

⁶⁵ John Calvin, "Articles by Theological Faculty of Paris," in *Works*, vol. 1, 81 (CO 7.12).

a point where Calvin might distinguish his own position over and against that of the Lutherans, it would be in response to these claims. The Sorbonne, after all, identifies, the Lutherans as their chief opponents. Yet, in Calvin's antidote there is not the slightest hint of disapprobation of the Lutheran position. Calvin responds with a catena of scripture references interspersed with his comments, such as: "God justifies men by forgiving their sins," and "not according to our merits, but according to the mercy of God, the promise of salvation is sure." Calvin concludes his response to article six by stating that, "there is perfect and entire glorying in God, when we acknowledge that we are void of any righteousness of our own, and are justified solely by faith in Christ."⁶⁶ Here, when Calvin had the opportunity to distance himself from Luther's *sola fide*, he himself declared his commitment to the slogan.

Summary

It appears safe to conclude, therefore, that there is no chasm between Luther and Calvin in their understanding of justification by faith *alone*, the place of works, or the third use of the law. This is not to say that Calvin and Luther and Reformed and Lutheran theologians employ the third use of the law identically, as there are some distinct differences and emphases.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, there is enough harmony between the two thinkers and theological traditions to agree whole heartedly with Stanford Reid in his assessment of Calvin and Luther on justification:

Calvin saw eye to eye with Martin Luther, and those who would make a distinction between them, would seem to be misrepresenting one or both of the reformers. Moreover, Calvin more

⁶⁶ Calvin, "Articles," 81-82 (CO 7.12): "sola autem fidem in Christum iustificari."

⁶⁷ See, e.g., David Wright, "The Ethical Use of the Old Testament in Luther and Calvin: A Comparison," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983): 463-85; I. John Hesselink, "Law and Gospel or Gospel and Law? Calvin's Understanding of the Relationship," and Merwyn S. Johnson, "Calvin's Handling of the Third Use of the Law and Its Problems," in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. 10 (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1998), 13-32, 33-50; Coates, "Calvin's Doctrine of Justification," 333-34.

than once testified to the fact of his agreement with Luther on this point. Since Calvin's day there have been various attempts even by those who have claimed to be Calvin's followers and spiritual heirs, to change this doctrine with an introduction of a legalism, and a claim that works must go along with faith as an instrument or basis of justification. Calvin's position, however, is only too clear.⁶⁸

At this point in our investigation, we must proceed to examine the relationship between justification and the *historia salutis*, especially as it concerns the person and work of Christ.

Justification and the *Historia Salutis*

Throughout Calvin's treatment of justification he is careful to argue that the believer does not contribute his own works, righteousness, or obedience to his justification. He always brings the work of Christ front and center. Calvin therefore constantly links the believer's justification, part of the *ordo salutis*, with the *historia salutis*, at three points: atonement, resurrection, and union with Christ.

Atonement

First, one must recognize that Calvin sees the work of the believer's justification as the work of Christ. The believer's source of righteousness is not himself but Christ alone, the material cause of justification. Calvin does not leave the reader with philosophical abstractions but materializes the material cause of justification by pointing the reader to the atonement. The believer "stands supported by the sacrifice of Christ's death, before God's judgment seat."⁶⁹ So, then, the redemptive historical event of the crucifixion of Christ is inextricably linked with the *ordo salutis* in Calvin's understanding of justification. One cannot have justification

⁶⁸ W. Stanford Reid, "Justification by Faith According to John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1979-80): 307; cf. Lillback, *Binding of God*, 80. Coates goes as far as to say that, "By and large, it can be said that in his treatment of justification Calvin was 'Lutheran'" (Coates, "Calvin's Doctrine of Justification," 333; see also Rainbow, "Double Grace," 100-01.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.9, p. 736 (OS 4.191); see Rainbow, "Double Grace," p. 103.

without Christology, without atonement for sins. This connection between the *ordo* and *historia salutis* is especially evident in Calvin's explanation of Romans 4:25.

Resurrection

When Paul writes that Christ “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25), Calvin explains that

as, therefore, Paul said that Christ died for our sins, because He delivered us from the calamity of death by suffering death as a punishment for our sins, so now He is said to have been raised for our justification, because He fully restored life to us by His resurrection. He was first struck by the hand of God, so that in the person of a sinner He might sustain the misery of sin, and afterwards was exalted into the kingdom of life, so that He might freely give His people righteousness and life. Paul, therefore, is still speaking of imputed justification.⁷⁰

Justification for Calvin is not simply the individual's means of being saved and going to heaven but the wedding of the individual who by faith is taken up into the *historia salutis* through the application of the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit, the *ordo salutis*. In other words, in Calvin's understanding, justification is what John Murray (1898-1975) has called “redemption accomplished and applied.”⁷¹ The wedding of the *ordo* and *historia salutis* as it pertains to justification is especially evident when Calvin connects justification to the believer's union with Christ.

Union with Christ

Throughout Calvin's exposition of justification he carefully delineates the roles of faith and works so that no confusion arises over the place of each. A believer is justified by faith alone to the total exclusion of works. Works, however, are the fruit of justification and flow from it. The righteousness, or obedience, that the believer receives is outside him, or alien. Yet, when Calvin considers the righteousness of the believer in justification in light of

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Romans*, 103 (CO 49.88).

⁷¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 5-6.

the wedding of the *ordo* and *historia salutis*, the believer can claim that the righteousness he receives from Christ indeed does belong to him through his union with Christ. Calvin writes:

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him.⁷²

Calvin holds the *ordo* and *historia salutis* together, which means that union with Christ, imputation, justification, sanctification, and Christ's redemptive work cannot be separated.

So, therefore, Calvin argues that through union with Christ the righteousness is alien prior to a person's justification but after his justification the righteousness of Christ now belongs to the believer, it is anything but alien.⁷³ Here Calvin does not allow the work of Christ to recede into the background in a person's justification, as if the *historia salutis* is the starting point and merely gives impetus to the *ordo salutis*. Rather, Calvin sees the *ordo salutis*, or justification, embedded in and inextricably connected to the *historia salutis*.⁷⁴ This shows us that, contrary to recent characterizations of the Reformed understanding of justification, at least as it comes through Calvin's

⁷² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.10, p. 737 (OS 4.191): "Coniuncto igitur illa capitis et membrorum, habitatio Christi in cordibus nostris, mystica denique unio a nobis in summo gradu statuitur: ut Christus noster factus, donorum quibus praeditus est nos faciat consortes. Non ergo cum extra nos procul speculamur, ut nobis imputetur eius iustitia: sed qui ipsum induimus, et insiti sumus in eius corpus, unum denique nos secum efficere dignatus est: ideo iustitiae societatem nobis cum eo esse gloriamur."

⁷³ Richard B. Gaffin, "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65/2 (2003): 178; Coates, "Calvin's Doctrine of Justification," 327.

⁷⁴ See Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (1988; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 112; idem, *Iustitiae Dei: A history of the Christian doctrine of Justification. From 1500 to the present day* (1986; Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 36-37.

pen, justification is not merely an abstract system of salvation divorced from redemptive history.⁷⁵ One should also note that there are two parts to the believer's union with Christ, justification and sanctification. In Calvin's reply to Sadolet he explains:

We deny that good works have any share in justification, but we claim full authority for them in the lives of the righteous. For, if he who has obtained justification possesses Christ, and, at the same time, Christ never is where his Spirit is not, it is obvious that gratuitous righteousness is necessarily connected with regeneration. Therefore, if you would duly understand how inseparable faith and works are, look to Christ, who as the Apostle teaches, (1 Cor. 1.30), has been given to us for justification and for sanctification.⁷⁶

So, while Calvin connects justification and sanctification through union with Christ, we must note that the former is the logical ground of the latter. It is clear through Calvin's writings that he lays a logical priority in the following order:⁷⁷

1. Remission of sin and the imputation of Christ's righteousness are the logical ground of justification.⁷⁸
2. Justification is the logical ground of sanctification.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ So Wright, *St. Paul*, 113-16.

⁷⁶ Calvin, "Reply to Sadolet," 43 (OS 1.470).

⁷⁷ Contra Carpenter, "Calvin and Trent," 381.

⁷⁸ "Can anything be clearer than that we are regarded as righteous in the sight of God, because our sins have been expiated by Christ, and no longer hold us under liability" ("Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote, 1546," in *Works*, vol. 3, 114 [CO 7.447]). Also, "Can the justification of the publican have any other meaning than the imputation of righteousness, when he was freely accepted by God?" ("Antidote," p. 115 [CO 7.447-48]: "Quid? Iustificatio publicani, Lucae 17, quid aliud sonat, quam iustitiae imputationem, dum gratis acceptus est Deo?"). For an analysis of Calvin's response to Trent, see Theodore W. Casteel, "Calvin and Trent: Calvin's Reaction to the Council of Trent in the Context of his Conciliar Thought," *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970): 91-117.

⁷⁹ "While I admit that we are never received into the favor of God without being at the same time regenerated to holiness of life, I contend that it is false to say that any part of righteousness (justification) consists *in quality*, or in the habit which resides in us, and that we are righteous (justified) only by gratuitous acceptance" ("Antidote," p. 117 [CO 7.449]: "Ego contra, tamesti concede, nunquam recipe nos in Dei gratiam, quin

3. Union with Christ is logically grounded upon justification.⁸⁰

Whether Calvin is correct regarding the logical priority of justification to union with Christ is an exegetical and theological question beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, in light of the logical priority of justification over union with Christ, contra Lusk, one cannot argue that union with Christ makes the imputed righteousness of Christ redundant. With the survey of Calvin's doctrine of justification concluded, it is helpful to see how Calvin coalesced his doctrinal formulations and preached justification.

Calvin's Preaching on Justification

One of the things that is important to recognize in any survey of Calvin's thought, is that while Calvin is primarily known by his theological writings, he was first and foremost a preacher.⁸¹ It is therefore helpful to see what Calvin has to say about justification within the context of his sermons. Do the same doctrinal emphases find their way into his sermons, or does he in any way change the way he expresses the doctrine in the pulpit? This is a relevant question because one must remember his audience. His doctrinal writings were aimed either at the divinity student or his theological adversaries, i.e., learned doctors of theology. His sermons, on the other hand, were aimed primarily at the common man. How, then, does Calvin express the doctrine of justification from his pulpit?

In Calvin's extant sermons, there are four in which he specifically treats the doctrine of justification. The four sermons

simul nos regeneret in vitae sanctitatem, falsum tamen esse contendo, ullam iustitiae partem in qualitate sitam esse, vel habitu, qui in nobis resideat, sed gratuita acceptione nos esse nos iustos"). Also, "It is necessary that the righteousness of faith alone so precede in order, and be so pre-eminent in degree, that nothing can go before it or obscure it" ("Antidote," p. 128 [CO 7.455]: "Ergo et ordine ita praecedat, et gradu ita supereminet necesse est unica fidei iustitia, ne quid eam vel praevetat, vel obscuret").

⁸⁰ "For that which God offers to us in Christ we receive only by faith. Hence, whatever Christ is to us is transferred to faith, which makes us capable of receiving both Christ and all his blessings" ("Antidote," p. 119 [CO 7.451]). See Weis, "Calvin versus Osiander," 38.

⁸¹ E.g., see T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990).

come from his greater series on Genesis, where he covers Genesis 15:6-7. While this small cross-section of sermons is by no means exhaustive, it is a helpful window into Calvin's mature thought on justification, as he preached these sermons in 1561, after all of his major theological writing was concluded.⁸² It is fair to say that the same emphases that Calvin expressed in his doctrinal writings found their way into his preaching, though this is not to say that there are no rhetorical differences. In large part, his preaching rhetoric is void of theological complexities, though at times he uses some technical language. When Calvin preached on Genesis 15:6, he explained the meaning of the words, that faith is imputed for righteousness:

That God puts it into allowance for us, so that thereby our sins are not imputed unto us, for the one cannot be understood without the other: and therefore the imputing of righteousness, is the cause why our sins are no more imputed unto us to judge and condemn us. For the imputing of righteousness, is in sum, mere pardon and absolution.⁸³

Here, once again, Calvin shows the two elements of justification: remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. As in his doctrinal writings, Calvin also stresses *sola fide*: "Since Abram was justified by believing God, that our works can no whit avail us to be liked of God," and "Abram was all his life long justified by the only means of Faith."⁸⁴

⁸² See Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 110-16.

⁸³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Melchizedek and Abraham*, trans. Thomas Stocker (1592; Willow Street: Old Paths, 2000), p. 104 (CO 23.692): "C'est qu'elle nous soit allouée d'autant, que nos pechez ne nous sont point imputez, car l'un ne peut estre entendu sans l'autre: l'imputation donc de justice fait qu'il n'y a plus d'imputation de coulpe pour nous iuger et condamner. Car l'imputation en iustice vaut autant que absolution en somme." Calvin has similar comments regarding imputation in his commentary: "Just as we understand that they to whom iniquity is imputed are guilty before God; so those to whom he imputes righteousness are approved by him as just persons" (John Calvin, *Genesis*, CTS, trans. John King [rep.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], p. 405 [CO 23.211]).

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Melchizedek and Abraham*, 107-08: "Si Abram en croyant à Dieu à esté iustificié que nos oeuvres ne peuvent rien pour nous faire approuver de Dieu" (CO 23.693); "Abram donc tout le temps de sa vie a esté iustificié par ce seul moyen de la foy" (CO 23.694). The use of *sola fide* is

Calvin insisted upon the *sola* of *fide* quite emphatically when he explained the relationship between faith and works:

But it is said, that faith and works can never agree together: and therefore this must be our conclusion, that when we are justified by faith, works must needs cease and be nothing worth. Now this at the first sight, may seem to be an hard kind of speech, to wit, that faith and good works can never go together: for it might seem, that if faith only justifies, that the reins are slacked and let loose to all iniquity. Now Saint Paul speaks this according to a certain quality and regard, as he also speaks of the law and faith: the law, says he, can no way agree with faith, for they are two incompatible things. And in what sort? For is not God as well the Author of the law as of the Gospel? Is there any contrariety or repugnancy in him? Without doubt no, for he is unchangeable. Why then finds Saint Paul such a contrariety between the law and the Gospel? Forsooth, it is in respect of our justification.⁸⁵

not uncommon in Calvin: “If we are to be partakers of the salvation that God offers us, we must bring nothing with us but faith alone. For . . . faith takes no help from good works” (idem, *Sermons on Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding [1577; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987], p. 159 [CO 51.378]: “Au reste, notons bien quant et quant, pour estre participans du salut que Dieu nous, presente, qu’il nous y faut venire seulement avec la foy: car . . . la foy ne prend nulle aide des bonnes oeuvres”). Preaching on Gal. 3:11-14 Calvin states, “Thus is sentence given that we cannot be justified by the law, but by faith only” (idem, *Sermons on Galatians* [1574; Audubon: Old Paths, 1995], p. 376 [CO 50.496]: “[. . .] “Voilà la sentence donee, que nous ne pouvons pas estre iustifiez par la Loy, mais par la seule foy”).

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Melchizedek and Abraham*, 128-29 (CO 23.703-04): “Or il est dit que la foy ne se peut accorder mullement avec les oeuvres: il faut donc conclure que quand nous sommes iustifiez par foy, les oeuvres cessant et sont abatues du tout. Or ceste façon de parler de prime face sembleroit estre dure, que la foy ne se puisse accorder avec les bonnes oeuvres: car il sembleroit qu’elle nous iustifie á toute iniquité. Or c’est selon une qualité certaine et un regard que saint Paul dit cela, comme aussi il parle de la Loy et de la foy: La Loy, dit-il, ne peut avoir nulle convenance avec la foy, ce sont deu choses incompatibles. Et en quelle sorte? Dieu n’est-il pas autheur de la Loy comme de l’Evangile? y a-il contrariété ni repugnance en luy? Il est bien certain que non, il est immuable. Et pourquoy donc est-ce que saint Paul trouve un telle contrariété entre la Loy et l’Evangile? C’est au regard de nous iustifier.”

So, then, Calvin explains that faith alone is the instrument of our justification: “Faith must go before righteousness: for it is the mean cause, the instrumental or formal cause we call it.”⁸⁶ Works play no role, as it pertains to one’s justification. This is not to say that Calvin excludes works, as it pertains to one’s sanctification: “And without doubt, we can never be said to be right Christians, without we be after that manner renewed, and be made the workmanship of God, created in our Lord Jesus Christ: to do the works which God has prepared.”⁸⁷ What about union with Christ and the connection between the *ordo* and *historia salutis*?

Just as in his doctrinal writings, Calvin also brings forward the believer’s union with Christ and the connection of *ordo* and *historia salutis*. Calvin expresses the believer’s union with Christ in terms of the metaphor of a coat: “Thus we see how the obedience of Jesus Christ serves us a cloak to cover all our rebellions and iniquities. It is he that has satisfied for us, and discharged us of all our debts by the merit of his death, and shed his precious blood to wash us withal.”⁸⁸ Here in this statement we see the combination of remission of sin and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as it is wrought by Christ in his crucifixion, the inseparable elements of the *ordo* and *historia salutis*. This same emphasis emerges regarding the connection between justification and sanctification when Calvin explains the agreement between Paul and James on justification:

For by faith we receive him, and are united unto him with this condition, that he reconciles us unto his father, puts away our sins, and regenerates and governs us by his holy spirit. And these are inseparable things as we have alleged out of Saint Paul. Seeing then it is so, Saint James had good cause to say, *how can you be justified*

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Melchizedek and Abraham*, p. 185 (CO 23.731-32): “La foy precede la iustice: car elle est law cause moyenne, la cause qu’on appelle instrumentale ou formelle.”

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Melchizedek and Abraham*, p. 158 (CO 23.718): “Et de fait nous ne pouvons pas estre Chrestiens que nous ne soyons renouvez en telle sorte, et que nous ne soyons la facture de Dieu, creez en nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ: pour faire les oeuvres que Dieu a prepares.”

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Melchizedek and Abraham*, p. 141 (CO 23.710): “Voila son obeissance qui nous sert de manteau pour couvrir toutes nos rebellions et iniquitez. Il a satisfait pour nous, et nous a acquitez de toutes nos debtes par le merite de sa mort, et puis il a espandu son sang pour nostre lavement.”

without works? For *faith* (says he) *without works is dead*. And besides, if you be the faithful children of God, you can be none otherwise justified than your father Abram was. Now Abram was so justified as that good works were joined with Faith; and therefore you must show yourselves like unto him, or else you make God in profaning so holy and sacred a thing as the name of faith and righteousness is.⁸⁹

Once again, Calvin unites justification and sanctification in the believer's union with Christ. Yet, one must remember that Calvin has said that works play no role in justification, but he tells his congregation that sanctification and good works most certainly do follow as the fruit of justification. It is safe to say that Calvin has the same emphases in his sermons as in his doctrinal works, or at least in this small cross-section of Calvin's preaching. With our survey of Calvin's preaching on justification concluded, we may now conclude our study.

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Melchizedek and Abraham*, p. 186 (CO 23.732): "Car nous le recevons par foy, nous sommes unis à luy à tell condition qu'il nous reconcile à Dieu son Pere et qu'il abolisse nos fautes, et qu'il nous regenere et nous gouverne par son S. Esprit. Ces choses-la sont inseparables, comme nous avons allegué de S. Paul. Puis qu'ainsi est donc S. Iaques à bon droit a dit, comment serez-vous iustes sans les oeuvres? Car la foy, dit-il, sans les oeuvres est morte. Et puis après vous ne pouvez nullement estre iustifiez d'une autre façon que vostre Pere Abram, si vous estes fideles. Or Abram a esté iustificié tellement que les bonnes oeuvres ont esté coniointes avec la foy. Il faut donc que vous monstrez le semblable ou vous estes des moqueurs de Dieu, qui prophanez une chose si sainte, et si sacree comme est le nom de foy et de iustice."

Summary and Conclusion

We began our study with a survey of Calvin's doctrine of justification. We explored his definition and established the two fundamental elements in his understanding of justification, the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Calvin largely, though not exclusively, formulated his understanding of justification from three scriptural texts, Romans 4:6-7, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, and Romans 5:19. Calvin was careful to fence justification by faith from works. He always distinguished but never separated the function and place of faith and works, as was evident in his analogy of the heat and light of the sun. One of the ways he was able to dissect the relationships of the constituent elements in justification was his use of the heuristic tool of Aristotelian fourfold causality. Just as Calvin did not separate faith and works in the overall *ordo salutis*, neither did he detach the *ordo* from the *historia salutis*. Calvin coupled justification, not only with sanctification and the rest of the *ordo salutis*, but he also connected it with the *historia salutis*, the atonement, resurrection, and union with Christ. He also gave logical priority to remission of sins and imputation of Christ's righteousness, or justification—it is logically prior to sanctification and union with Christ. For Calvin, like Luther, justification is by faith alone and involves the imputation of an alien righteousness. These points also emerged in Calvin's preaching on justification. Calvin nevertheless, like Luther, joined justification to sanctification and union with Christ. On justification, Calvin and Luther are in agreement. Our survey of some of Calvin's recent interpreters, however, reveals troubling trends.

Like the neo-orthodox school of a generation ago, in the recent debates over justification participants have tried to claim Calvin as a forerunner of their position.⁹⁰ Those with affinities for the new perspective on Paul who try to argue that Calvin was not concerned

⁹⁰ E.g., cf. James B. Torrance, "The Concept of Federal Theology—Was Calvin a Federal Theology?" in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed., Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 15-40; Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 3-18; J. V. Fesko, "The Westminster Confession and Lapsarianism: Calvin and the Divines," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, vol. 2, ed. J. Ligon Duncan (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2004), 477-526.

with imputation but thought union with Christ was more important fail to make their case. To imply that Calvin's doctrine of justification is viable exclusively through union with Christ at the expense of his imputed righteousness is akin to saying that one can live without lungs so long as he has a heart, at least as Calvin conceives it. Likewise, dare one say, to impute contemporary new perspective nomenclature about justification to Calvin uses the reformer's thought like the proverbial wax nose. It is one thing to say that a person is building off of Calvin and taking a decided departure from his thought. It is entirely another to say that Calvin is a forerunner of the new perspective, which is the implied message of his recent new perspective-minded interpreters. Similarly, concerning those who wish to create a chasm between Luther and Calvin on the use of the phrase, by faith alone, the primary sources do not appear to accord with their claims. In the debates over justification, rather than trying to bend historical sources in the search of credibility and precedent, is it not better to let the sources speak for themselves? Let Calvin be Calvin. Perhaps in doing this we will find that sitting at the feet of a great Reformed luminary we can be taught by a master of exegesis and theology.