

John Calvin and N. T. Wright on Imputed Righteousness

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SETTING THE SCENE

AT A NUMBER of points in his book on justification, *Justification, God's Plan and Paul's Vision*,¹ Bishop Tom Wright, in the course of telling the reader what he thinks Paul teaches about justification, contrasts it with that of the "Augustinian tradition." Here is a representative sample of what he says,

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Ever since the time of Augustine, the discussions about *what has been called* "justification" have borne a tangled, but only tangential relation to what Paul was talking about."²

Justification ... has regularly been made to do duty for *the entire picture of God's reconciling action towards the human race* ... everything from God's free love ... through final judgment.³

That always meant, for Augustine and his followers, that God, in justification, was actually *transforming the character* of the person, albeit in small,

preliminary ways (by, for example implanting the beginnings of love and faith within them).⁴

[There has grown up] in the Western church a long tradition of (a) reading God's righteousness as *iustitia Dei*, then (b) trying to interpret that phrase with the various meanings of *iustitia* available at the time, and (c) interpreting that in turn within the categories of theological investigation of the time (especially to make "justification" cover the entire sweep of soteriology from grace to glory).⁵

The problem with the old perspective on Paul is that it has followed the medieval tradition (to which it was never more thoroughly indebted than when reacting to some of its particulars) ... [I]t has *de-Judaized* Paul.⁶

It is therefore a straightforward category mistake, however venerable within some Reformed traditions including part of my own, to suppose that Jesus "obeyed the law" and so obtained "righteousness" which could be reckoned to those who believe in him. To think that way is to concede, after all, that

“legalism” was true after all—with Jesus as the ultimate legalist. At this point, Reformed theology lost its nerve ... “legalism” itself was never the point, not for us, not for Israel, not for Jesus.⁷

Wright makes it clear that the Reformed account of justification, involving the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, though somewhat distinct from medievalism, is nonetheless a part of this “tradition.” He says this about the Reformed view:

The idea that what sinners need is for someone else’s “righteousness” to be credited to their account simply muddles up the categories, importing with huge irony into the equation the idea that the same tradition worked so hard to eliminate, namely the suggestion that, after all, “righteousness” here means “moral virtue,” “the merit acquired from lawkeeping,” or something like that. We don’t have any of that, said the Reformers, so we have to have someone else’s credited to us, and “justification” can’t mean “being made righteous,” as though God first pumps a little bit of moral virtue into us and then generously regards the part as standing for the whole.⁸

Though he understands the Reformed view to involve the imputation of “someone else’s righteousness,” and so a distinct view from that of the medieval Augustinians, he sees it as being basically tarred with the same brush. The righteousness that is involved in the Reformed teaching on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness inhabits the same thought-world about justification as did the medieval view deriving from Augustine. Justification involves the acquiring of moral virtue by the merit acquired from law keeping being credited to us. He says elsewhere in the book, that such an idea “muddles up the categories.” And though he does not tell us in so many words what this muddle is, it seems to involve two aspects: the confusing the language of inner character with the language of objective declaration, and, secondly,

the understanding of that inner character in legal terms. According to Tom Wright, justification is an objective declaration of a person’s status, whereas the language of imputed righteousness is the language of personal virtue, “legalistic” virtue. So the idea of imputed righteousness, he thinks, embodies a category mistake: in less polite language, it is a nonsense.

However, it may be that Wright has not altogether extricated his own view from this muddle, if that is what it is. For it is important to understand that though targeting the idea of imputed righteousness, and criticizing it as inhabiting the world of “legalism,” Wright himself provides an account of Pauline justification that occupies much common ground with the Reformed view. According to Wright, Christ is the substitute-Savior, who “represents his people, now appropriately *standing in for them*, taking upon himself the death which they deserved”;⁹ justification is a forensic concept; there is imputation. The crucial difference is that for Wright the imputation in question is what might be called the negative imputation of not counting, of being “acquitted,” “forgiven,” or “cleared.”¹⁰

Wright says,

“Righteousness” remains the status that you possess as a result of the judge’s verdict. For the defendant in the lawcourt (Romans 3:19-20) it simply means “acquitted,” “forgiven,” “cleared,” “in good standing in the community as a result of the judge’s pronouncement.” “Imputed righteousness” is a Reformation answer to a medieval question, in the mediaeval terms which were themselves part of the problem.¹¹

But such negative imputation clearly involves the use of legal and moral categories; it can hardly itself avoid the charge of “legalism.” It is Wright himself who refers to justification as a “judicial sentence on sin.”¹² So if “legalism” is a failure of the Reformed view of positive justification by the imputation of righteousness, then it is also a fail-

ure of negative imputation, justification by the non-imputation of sin that Wright thinks is Paul's view, and which he endorses. After all, Wright can hardly insist that "justification" is a law-court term and then deny that it has anything to do with legality and illegality. Although it is true that Wright is somewhat reticent about how what Jesus did grounds the acquittal, yet if the judge acquits the accused then he is delivered from the charge that he broke the law. That's Wright's first objection, the "legalism" objection.

In addition, for some strange reason—a reason that he never overtly identifies or explains—for Wright the term "moral" cannot imply merely a *standard* of righteousness (as in "the moral law" or "a moral issue"), but must involve the subjective, personal possession of a set of qualities or "virtues." This is what he thinks the Reformed view teaches, i.e., the counting or reckoning or imputing to a person of such a subjective moral state. "Here we meet, not for the last time, the confusion that arises inevitably when we try to think of the judge transferring, by imputation or any other way, his own attributes to the defendant."¹³ He appears to think that the Reformed view is that the believer has Christ's righteousness in the way in which it may be said that I have your toothache. This is also an aspect of what Wright believes to be a "category mistake," it is "illogical and impossible."¹⁴ You and I can have the same (sort of) toothache, but it is impossible for me to have the very toothache that is your toothache. This is Wright's second objection, the "personal quality" objection, as we might put it.

But (as we shall shortly see) the Reformed view, at least as embodied in John Calvin, never involved such a logical impossibility. The imputation of righteousness never was the imputation of Christ's righteousness in the sense that his very subjective righteousness is transferred by imputation. That is utter confusion! How could there be such an imputation? How could someone have reckoned to him the very subjective state that is Christ's righteousness or virtue so that it

becomes his? And who ever said such a thing? In the imputation of righteousness, *nothing moves*. Imputation is not an electronic moral transfer. Righteousness is not transmitted, transfused, or relocated in any way. Any more than if I receive free insurance coverage I receive a transfusion of some mysterious substance called "insurance." The believer's imputed righteousness remains inalienably Christ's perfect righteousness. What is true is that by an act of the unspeakable mercy of God, the believer is shielded by, or seen through, or covered by, the righteousness of another.

CALVIN'S VIEWS

In order to show how problematic and unclear Wright's views are, in the rest of this article my aim is to set forth the Reformed view of imputation through the eyes and mouth of John Calvin, and to do so with the aim of allaying the fears and misunderstandings of Wright and of any others as to its exact character. We shall do this firstly by drawing out two of its central features: its alien, objective, external character insofar as it relates to the believer's own status, and also its deeply legal character. It has to do with the law of God, with our failure, and with Christ's victory. Since in Calvin's view righteousness has to do with the law, it is in some sense undoubtedly "legalistic." But it is not "legalistic" in the further sense that it has to do with the letter of the law and not with its spirit or purpose. Certainly not. It is "legal" in the sense that justification is intrinsically connected with perfect law-keeping; in Adam we failed; in Christ, our sponsor and representative, God graciously provides us with an alien, perfect righteousness. Secondly, we shall see in what sense, according to Calvin, we are "covered" with Christ's righteousness. Finally I shall briefly try to show how these views of Calvin link with others of his views, and by this endeavor to display something of the "grammar" of imputation as he understood it.

IMPUTATION AS ALIEN/OBJECTIVE AND LEGAL

The key to appreciating Calvin's account of justification is that it is a distinct blessing from sanctification but inseparable from it, both being the gifts of the risen and ascended Christ to his church. Noting this will alert us to the conceptual pattern of justification.

What has come to be regarded as Calvin's fundamental statement on the relation between justification and sanctification is the following:

I trust I have now sufficiently shown how man's only resource for escaping from the curse of the law, and recovering salvation, lies in faith; and also what the nature of faith is, what the benefits which it confers, and the fruits which it produces. The whole may be thus summed up: Christ given to us by the kindness of God is apprehended and possessed by faith, by means of which we obtain in particular a twofold benefit; first, being reconciled by the righteousness of Christ, God becomes, instead of a judge, an indulgent Father; and secondly, being sanctified by his Spirit, we aspire to integrity and purity of life.¹⁵

The double benefit that we receive embraces both justification and sanctification,¹⁶ two inseparable but distinct blessings.

So the basis of justification is something that is external to us, namely the righteousness of Christ. This externality is underlined by Calvin in two polemical sections of his treatment of justification in the *Institutes*; first his mild but important criticism of Augustine's view of justification, and then his fierce arguments against the Lutheran theologian Andreas Osiander (1498-1552). Both of these discussions throw light on Calvin's understanding of the objective, external ground or basis of justification.

AUGUSTINE

David F. Wright has this to say, in general, about why it is easy for the children of the Refor-

mation both to read and yet to misread Augustine.

He cites Scripture at great length, and especially the Pauline Epistles, which establish for him salvation received by grace alone—the initiative is entirely God's, who elects whom he wills, through faith apart from works performed in advance of reception, and faith itself the gift of God. That is to say, his anti-Pelagian writings in particular are replete with Pauline-inspired discussions of this kind, which do not call upon him to clarify repeatedly that *justifico* basically means “to make righteous”, or to show his readers how he understands the gift of justification—of being *justificati*—in relation to this normal meaning.¹⁷

I believe that it is in such general terms as these that Calvin rather guardedly appropriates Augustine on justification. Augustine sees clearly that justification (however exactly understood) is by grace alone. This is repeatedly expressed in the Anti-Pelagian writings which were such a rich resource for the Reformers in establishing their views of the “servitude” of the human will and the freeness and power of divine grace.

We can reconstruct Calvin's view of Augustine on justification by considering two lines of evidence. First by noting the striking fact that throughout his discussion of justification Calvin cites Augustine voluntarily (that is, he is not forced into a citation through the pressure of controversy) and almost wholly with approval. The second line of evidence is the reasons that he provides where he thinks that Augustine is defective.

Here are some of the places where Calvin records his approval of Augustine.

And lest you should suppose that there is anything novel in what I say, Augustine has also taught us so to act [viz. To pay no regard to our works for justification]. “Christ,” says he, “will reign forever among his servants. This God has promised, God has spoken; if this is not enough, God has sworn. Therefore, as the promise stands

firm, not in respect of our merits, but in respect of his mercy, no one ought to tremble in announcing that of which he cannot doubt.”¹⁸

Besides, if it is true, as John says, that there is no life without the Son of God (I John 5.12), those who have no part in Christ, whoever they be, whatever they do or devise, are hastening on, during their whole career, to destruction and the judgment of eternal death. For this reason, Augustine says, “Our religion distinguishes the righteous from the wicked, by the law, not of works but of faith, without which works which seem good are converted into sins.”¹⁹

The same thing is briefly but elegantly expressed by Augustine when he says, “I do not say to the Lord, Despise not the works of my hands; I have sought the Lord with my hands, and have not been deceived. But I commend not the works of my hands, for I fear that when thou examinest them thou wilt find more faults than merits. This only I say, this ask, this desire, Despise not the works of thy hands. See in me thy work, not mine. If thou sees mine, thou condemnest; if thou sees thine own, thou crownest. Whatever good works I have are of thee.”²⁰

It is in this fairly regular way that Augustine (and to a lesser extent Bernard) are cited in order to emphasize *sola gratia*. Sometimes the citations are for a positive purpose, sometimes negatively. Positively, that salvation is due only to the merits of Christ, and negatively, our own supposed “merits” count for nothing as regards forgiveness and justifying righteousness, no ground of boasting, because only the merits of Christ count.

Despite this widespread positive use of Augustine, there are two issues on which Calvin faults him. The first has to do with his use of the term “merit,” which does not directly concern us here. More centrally, Calvin notes that for Augustine the connotation of *justificare* includes subjective renewal. Reviewing the way in which the bibli-

cal idea of justification had degenerated in the church, Calvin says, in the first instance about Lombard,

You see here that the chief office of divine grace in our justification he considers to be its directing us to good works by the agency of the Holy Spirit. He intended, no doubt, to follow the opinion of Augustine, but he follows it at a distance, and even wanders far from a true imitation of him, both obscuring what was clearly stated by Augustine, and making what in him was less pure more corrupt. The Schools have always gone from worse to worse, until at length, in their downward path, they have degenerated into a kind of Pelagianism. Even the sentiment of Augustine, or at least his mode of expressing it, cannot be entirely approved of. For although he is admirable in stripping man of all merit of righteousness, and transferring the whole praise of it to God, he classes the grace by which we are regenerated to newness of life under the head of sanctification. Scripture, when it treats of justification by faith, leads us in a very different direction. Turning away our view from our own works, it bids us look only to the mercy of God, and the perfection of Christ.²¹

That is, in Calvin’s view for Augustine justifying grace is not distinct from, but includes, sanctification, subjective renewal. Not that justification is a meritorious consequence of renewal, for renewal is also the fruit of grace. But in Calvin’s view Augustine holds that a person is justified as he is being renewed, and (as well as being forgiven) in being renewed.

It is not unknown to me, that Augustine gives a different explanation; for he thinks that the righteousness of God is the grace of regeneration; and this grace he allows to be free, because God renews us, when unworthy, by his Spirit; and from this he excludes the works of the law, that is, those works, by which men of themselves

endeavour, without renovation, to render God indebted to them.... But that the Apostle includes all works without exception, even those which the Lord produces in his own people, is evident from the context.²²

There is ambivalence here, a certain awkwardness, in Calvin's treatment of Augustine. On the one hand, he states that we must not entirely approve of Augustine's thinking, "or at least his mode of expressing it." This suggests a mere verbal disagreement. On the other hand, the Bible's way of thinking "leads us in a very different direction." What is it in Augustine's way of expressing what he thinks that we may not approve of? It is not merely that Augustine uses the term "merit," because that term can be given a good sense, even though (in Calvin's eyes) it came in the medieval church to have a very bad sense. Augustine can hardly be blamed for that. Rather it is that he muffles the vital point that justification and sanctification are not only inseparable but also distinct. For in the Augustinian way of thinking, while there is agreement that justification involves freedom from condemnation through forgiveness and the provision of righteousness, and that faith is active in it, subjective renewal is also included in it. It is this merging of the two that, in Calvin's view, eventually led to appealing to good works as meritorious, and to the idea of supererogation on which the scandalous medieval abuses relied. Justification and sanctification are inseparable and *distinct*.

OSIANDER

Like Calvin, Osiander thinks of justification as an expression of our union with Christ. But for the Lutheran, we become righteous not first through free justification and inseparably and yet distinctly through the renewing of our characters through union with Christ and the work of Christ's Spirit. Rather, we become righteous by God actually imparting Christ's own divine righteousness to us in a much more substantive

sense. It is not that we become God by some kind of ontological merging, for Osiander does not, according to Calvin, teach that in justification God's *essence* is given to us, but that an *essential property* of God is given.

Osiander, however,

clearly shows, that not contented with that righteousness, which was procured for us by the obedience and sacrificial death of Christ, he maintains that we are substantially righteous in God by an infused essence as well as quality.... [H]e introduces a substantial mixture, by which God, transfusing himself into us, makes us as it were a part of himself.²³

There are two or three objections Calvin has to this idea, besides its basic metaphysical oddity, which Calvin notes by his use of the phrase "substantial mixture," i.e., a mixture of substances. First, Osiander confuses union with Christ (in what Calvin regards as the Pauline sense) with a metaphysical diffusion of the deity of Christ in the soul. Second, and consequently, he ascribes our justification only to Christ's divine nature. Osiander leads us away "from the priesthood of Christ and his office of Mediator to his eternal deity."²⁴ That is, he ties justification to the infusion of the divine nature, rather than to the mediatorship of Christ and his office as priest, which has no place in his account of justification. Third, like Augustine, he mistakes the nature of sanctification, co-mixing it with justification.

For, in the whole of this discussion, the noun righteousness and the verb to justify, are extended by Osiander to two parts; to be justified being not only to be reconciled to God by a free pardon, but also to be made just; and righteousness being not a free imputation, but the holiness and integrity which the divine essence dwelling in us inspires. And he vehemently asserts that Christ is himself our righteousness, not insofar as he, by expiating sins, appeased the Father, but

because he is the eternal God and life.²⁵

In Osiander's view our subjective righteousness is Christ's divine nature possessed by us and so (as far as Calvin is concerned) he splits Christ apart, disregarding the fact that it is as the incarnate Mediator that Christ is united to us by his Spirit.

According to Calvin, "Osiander derides us for teaching that to be justified is a forensic term, because it behoves us to be in reality just.... [He] objects that it would be insulting to God, and contrary to his nature, to justify those who still remain wicked."²⁶ This kind of objection to the idea of forensic justification, and the idea of Christ as the substitute for his people, bearing their sin on their behalf, has become widespread. How can God call those righteous (by freely imputing his righteousness to them) who are not righteous? How can he justify the wicked? If Osiander was not the originator of this objection, the objection that justification by imputed righteousness is a "fiction," he was certainly an early proponent of it.

In different ways, then, in his objection to making justification partly or wholly to consist in the subjective renewal of the one justified, Calvin makes it clear that the righteousness of the sinner is an objective, external matter, that of a person coming to possess, by imputation or "reckoning," the righteousness of Christ, and so being justified.

[A] man will be justified by faith when, excluded from the righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and clothed in it appears in the sight of God not as a sinner, but as righteous. Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as if we were righteous, and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.²⁷

So the imputation of Christ's righteousness is not a paler, weaker version of the Augustinian and medieval idea of the impartation or infusion

of righteousness. It is the downright opposite of Osiander's view. Righteousness is objectively reckoned, and, as a consequence, the believer's status is changed. It is not, "The judge has found in their favor and therefore they have a righteous character," but, "They are reckoned righteous and thus the judge must find in their favor."²⁸

It is true that sometimes Calvin writes of imputation as communication: "The righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation, while he is strictly deserving of punishment.... Our Lord Jesus Christ communicates his righteousness to us, and so by some wondrous way, insofar as pertains to the justice of God transfuses its power into us,"²⁹ citing Romans 5:19. The nature of the communication or transfusion clearly depends upon the character of what is imparted. To transfuse means "to cause to pass from one to another." To transfuse human blood from one person to another is obviously different from the transfusion of what "pertains to the justice of God," a moral status. Similarly with "impute," which means "to regard as being done or caused or possessed by." A person can be imputed with a fault because he already has it, or not imputed with it even though he has it. He can be imputed with a legal status if he already has it, but also imputed with it even if he does not yet have it. Calvin continues, "To declare that we are deemed righteous, solely because the obedience of Christ is imputed to us as if it were our own, is just to place our righteousness in the obedience of Christ."³⁰

So on Calvin's view, Christ's righteousness imputed to the believer is "alien," external, the righteousness of another, and even when imputed, *it will always remain alien*. God justifies the ungodly as ungodly. The widely-used illustration, that Christ's righteousness is credited to my account, is misleading. (If I'm credited, must not Christ be debited? Am I free to pass on my credit to someone else?) By the use of such extended book-keeping analogies, the external, purely forensic character of imputation tends to be

watered down or to be compromised. To repeat, in the imputation of righteousness, *nothing moves*. Righteousness is not transmitted, transfused, or relocated in any way. It is inalienably Christ's perfect righteousness.

In the case of justification, then, those who do not have a righteous status—who are liable to condemnation—are imputed with Christ's righteousness. So it is the status of the person which is transformed by justification, not the character.³¹ And although Calvin uses the illustrations of ransom, payment, and so forth, drawn from the New Testament, and writes in his *Commentary on Romans* of a "transferring to us" of Christ's righteousness, he does not develop these into elaborate analogies featuring ledgers or bank accounts.³² Calvin's fundamental point is that in Christ we are righteous without being inwardly changed. "Those are regarded as righteous who are not so in reality,"³³ and "clothed with the righteousness of Christ, they dread not the judgment of which they are worthy, and while they justly condemn themselves, are yet deemed righteous out of themselves."³⁴ So much for Calvin's idea of imputation.

THE MEANING OF "COVERED" WITH CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

We shall next consider what Calvin means by "righteousness," what its connotations are. It immediately becomes clear that only the immaculate righteousness of Jesus Christ himself is sufficient for justification. If this righteousness were not to be imputed to us, but to be imparted to us so as to become part of our inner nature, our moral character, (as it is, according to Calvin, in sanctification) then it would inevitably become tainted, and so lose its perfection and its power to justify. Sanctification in this life is always imperfect, tainted, and as a consequence the believer has to ask for pardon (based upon the objective provision of Christ's righteousness) for the deficiencies of even his best, sanctified, efforts. We see from this that the impartation or communica-

tion that is involved in imputation cannot imply anything that would compromise or sully the character of the righteousness in question. The imputation must be understood in a way that completely guarantees and safeguards the character of the righteousness that is imputed.

So for Calvin, only a perfect righteousness will secure pardon, and such righteousness is that possessed only by God himself. "[T]he righteousness of which God makes us partakers is the eternal righteousness of the eternal God."³⁵ Nevertheless, it is as the Mediator, as God-man, that Christ procures such righteousness for us.

Hence I infer, first, that Christ was made righteous when he assumed the form of a servant; secondly, that he justified us by his obedience to the Father; and, accordingly that he does not perform this for us in respect of his divine nature, but according to the nature of the dispensation laid upon him. For though God alone is the fountain of righteousness, and the only way in which we are righteous is by participation with him, yet as by our unhappy revolt we are alienated from his righteousness, it is necessary to descend to this lower remedy, that Christ may justify us by the power of his death and resurrection.³⁶

Believers are "clothed" in this righteousness,³⁷ they are "covered" by it.³⁸ And they completely depend on it alone for justification for as long as they live, not matter how godly they become.

Therefore we must have this blessedness not once only, but must hold it fast during our whole lives. Moreover, the message of free reconciliation with God is not promulgated for one or two days, but is declared to be perpetual in the church (2 Cor 5:18, 19). Hence believers have not even to the end of life any other righteousness than that which is there described. Christ ever remains a Mediator to reconcile the Father to us, and there is a perpetual efficacy in his death, i.e., ablu-

satisfaction, expiation; in short, perfect obedience, by which all our iniquities are covered. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul says not that the beginning of salvation is of grace, but “by grace are ye saved”, “not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2: 8, 9).³⁹

So the righteousness in question is the perfect righteousness of the Mediator. Further, its “legal” character is made clear in the following way:

For the righteousness of Christ (as it alone is perfect, so it alone can stand the scrutiny of God) must be summoned for us, and as a surety represent us judicially. Provided with this righteousness, we constantly obtain the remission of sins through faith. Our imperfection and impurity, covered with this purity, are not imputed but are as it were buried, so as not to come under judgment until the hour arrive when the old man being destroyed, and plainly extinguished in us, the divine goodness shall receive us into beatific peace with the new Adam, there to await the day of the Lord, on which, being clothed with incorruptible bodies, we shall be translated to the glory of the heavenly kingdom.⁴⁰

Justification is not a mere threshold blessing; something which applies to people at their conversion and not subsequently. It is operative at all times, an objective, perfect, judicial righteousness. It is this righteousness, complete and unassailable, that is the ground of Christian assurance. So there is a sense in which, for Calvin, the believer never leaves the law-court in which the judge declares us righteous for Christ’s sake. He needs that declaration always to stand, and never to be relegated into something over and done with, or requiring to be supplemented by some righteousness of his own.

THE “GRAMMAR” OF IMPUTATION FOR CALVIN

A reader of Calvin on justification cannot but be struck by the intensely personal and individual

way in which he couches his discussion. It may be that at points such as that just quoted, Calvin’s language in the *Institutes* reflects his own experience. The primary question for him is not whether or not a person is a member of the visible covenant community. That’s a secondary question, though by no means unimportant. For Calvin, the primary question is, how can I face God’s judgment? This is seen in the structure of his discussion. Having set forth the main elements of justification by faith,⁴¹ after chapter 11 of Book III, with its polemic against Augustine, Osiander, and the schoolmen, the reader is stopped short by the heading of chapter 12: “The necessity of Contemplating the Judgment Seat of God in Order to Be Seriously Convinced of the Doctrine of Gratuitous Justification.” Justification is not a matter merely of academic debate, one confined “within the precincts of the schools,” nor is it basically an ecclesiological matter, but it has to do with the “judgment seat of God.”

[T]he question must be: How shall we answer the heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us contemplate that Judge, not as our own unaided intellect conceives of him, but as he is portrayed to us in Scripture (see especially the book of Job), with a brightness which obscures the stars, a strength which melts the mountains, an anger which shakes the earth, a wisdom which takes the wise in their own craftiness, a purity before which all things become impure, a righteousness ... which once kindled burns to the lowest hell.... [I]f our life is brought to the standard of the written law, we are lethargic indeed if we are not filled with dread at the many maledictions which God has employed for the purpose of arousing us, and among others, the following general one: “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them” (Deut. 27.26).⁴²

At such points we begin to see some of the elements of Calvin’s “grammar” of justification. The

first element is that the one justification, depending only on Christ's righteousness, must be sufficient to carry the believer to the final judgment and to vindicate him there. The hint or suggestion that the grounds of "final justification" might be different from "first justification" makes no sense.⁴³ Given the immaculate righteousness of Christ, why would human works, however saintly, also be necessary? For however saintly, they are still tainted by sin. So a second element is that since the believer's best efforts in sanctification are themselves tainted and spoiled by his sin, even these efforts need forgiveness. This is so-called "double justification."⁴⁴ One consequence of this is that, as A. N. S. Lane puts it, "[F]or the Protestant being reckoned righteous through faith alone is a truth not just for the moment of conversion but for the whole Christian life."⁴⁵ As a consequence, because the best actions have aspects that need forgiveness, they cannot provide the basis of a further, final justification. Calvin's sees Paul's answer to his own exultant question "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" to be the "unremitted continuance of God's favour, from the time of our calling to the hour of death."⁴⁶ There is a final element of the grammar, in fact, one that does not depend on the need for "double justification," but that rests purely upon a point of logic, namely, that what is an inseparable concomitant of justification, namely sanctification and the inward changes that constitute it, cannot itself be a ground of justification.⁴⁷ Justification is sufficient for acceptance, and though sanctification is inseparably attached to justification, sanctification cannot in any way be necessary for acceptance.

This returns us to Calvin's point about the distinctness and yet inseparability of the two elements of the "double grace," and so brings our brief exposition of his view of justification a full circle. The clarity of Calvin's expression, and the differences between his views and those of Bishop Tom Wright will, I hope, be apparent.

ENDNOTES

¹N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

²Ibid., 80.

³Ibid., 86.

⁴Ibid., 91.

⁵Ibid., 178.

⁶Ibid., 195.

⁷Ibid., 232.

⁸Ibid., 213.

⁹Ibid., 105.

¹⁰Ibid., 213.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 206.

¹³Ibid., 66.

¹⁴Ibid., 70.

¹⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), III.11.1.

¹⁶For a first-rate exposition of Calvin's view of the relation between justification and union with Christ as presented in the *Institutes*, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr. "Justification and Union with Christ" in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008).

¹⁷D. F. Wright, 'Justification in Augustine' in *Justification in Perspective* ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 59-60.

¹⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, III.13.4. The quotation is from Augustine's narration on Psalm 88, Tract 50.

¹⁹Ibid., III.14.4. The Augustine quotation is from *Against Two letters of the Pelagians*, 3.5.

²⁰Ibid., III.14.20. The quotation is from Augustine on Psalm 137. See also Ibid., III.11.22, III.14.3, III.18.5, III.18.7.

²¹Ibid., III.11.15-16.

²²John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 3:22.

²³Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.5.

²⁴Ibid., III.11.8.

²⁵Ibid., III.11.6.

²⁶Ibid., III.11.11.

²⁷Ibid., III.11.2.

- ²⁸Cf. Wright, *Justification*, 69.
- ²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.23.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, III.11.23.
- ³¹Wright, *Justification*, 70, 71.
- ³²Calvin, *Romans*, 3.22.
- ³³Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.11.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*, III.11.11.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, III.11.9.
- ³⁶*Ibid.*, III.11.8.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, III.11.2.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*, III.11.23.
- ³⁹*Ibid.*, III.14.11.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, III.14.12.
- ⁴¹In *Ibid.*, III.11.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, III.12.1.
- ⁴³Compare the ambivalence (or ambiguity) of Wright, who writes that the future judgment “corresponds to the present verdict which is issued simply and solely on the basis of faith” (*Justification*, 165); ‘the present verdict which anticipates the verdict that will be issued on the last day’ (179; see also 207-12, 223). But see also 166-67 “the verdict on the last day will truly reflect what people have actually done.”
- ⁴⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, III.17.10.
- ⁴⁵Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 265-66.
- ⁴⁶Calvin, *Romans*, 8:30.
- ⁴⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, III.14.19-20.