

JUSTIFICATION IN JOHN CALVIN'S 1559 EDITION OF *INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION*

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I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which comes from God on the basis of faith.¹

A man who wishes to obtain Christ's righteousness must abandon his own righteousness.²

John Calvin wanted his theology to be a Biblical theology. His doctrine of justification is one that he supports Biblically throughout his *Institutes* as well as his other writings. This paper will take a look at Calvin's understanding of justification and how righteousness, faith, and sanctification relate, it aims to show that his doctrine of justification as posited in the 1559 *Institutes* is well supported Biblically. His Biblical support leads to the pious life we are called to through a better understanding of faith, righteousness, justification, and sanctification.

JUSTIFICATION, SANCTIFICATION, AND REGENERATION

Before delving into Calvin's Biblical support, it is important to have a clear definition of justification along with the related words: sanctification, regeneration, and righteousness. Definition and usage from both from the Bible and Calvin himself will be needed.

¹ Philippians 3.8,9 (NAS).

² *Institutes*, III.xi.13

JUSTIFICATION IN THE BIBLE

The use of the Hebrew צדק (tsadaq), which means “to be just or righteous”, in the Old Testament was often used to describe some sort of relationship between man and God. Elihu felt *justified before God* in his anger towards Job³, David knows that *God is justified* when he speaks⁴, and Isaiah posed that the descendants of Israel will be *justified in YHVH*⁵. In the Old Testament being justified and being righteous were one in the same.

Likewise, the New Testament will translate δικαιόω (dikaiōō) as both “to be righteous” or “justified” where both imply rightness and innocence.⁶ Justification in the New Testament, again, appears to most often pertain to the relationship between man and God. Paul exemplifies this when he says “He [God] poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”⁷ Both righteous and just imply relationship and “in essence, righteousness is an ethical quality imputed to human beings who stand in the right relationship to God through Christ.”⁸ While we are still sinners, the imputation wipes us clean in our relationship. “Calvin uses the word ‘imputation’ to

³ Job 32.2: “But the anger of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram burned; against Job his anger burned because he justified himself before God.” (NAS).

⁴ Psalm 51.4: “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when you judge.” (NAS).

⁵ Isaiah 45.25: “In the LORD all the offspring of Israel will be justified and will glory.” (NAS).

⁶ Δικαιόω is from δίκαιος meaning “correct, righteous,” and by implication, “innocent” as it comes from the primitive word δίκη meaning “right (as self-evident)” or “justice”.

⁷ Titus 3.6,7 and numerous other examples.

⁸ Bray, 107.

designate the way in which the believer is perfectly righteous. By imputation of righteousness he means *both* God's pronouncing the believer righteous *and* God's giving the believer actual community with the righteousness of Christ."⁹

SANCTIFICATION AND REGENERATION IN THE BIBLE

Sanctification is not a word that is used until the New Testament and is usually used to describe a process of being made holy that is a result of some particular quality.¹⁰ I will especially note its connection to righteousness as that seems to be Calvin's focus. Regeneration only appears twice in the New Testament¹¹ and has similar meaning as sanctification in the sense that it deals with a process of change into something distinctly different from when the process started.

SANCTIFICATION AND REGENERATION IN CALVIN

For Calvin, sanctification and regeneration are similar terms but there is still a distinction. Sanctification is the process of being made holy whereas regeneration is being made new. It seems that for the Christian these are one in the same as we are being made new in Christ just as sanctification makes us more holy like Christ is holy.

The understanding of justification will sometimes be connected with sanctification

⁹ Santmire, 302.

¹⁰ Sanctification is usually seen as a result of righteousness (Romans 6.19), purity (1 Thessalonians 4.3, 7, Romans 6.22), peace (Hebrews 12.14), being in Christ (1 Corinthians 1.30), or being chosen by God (2 Thessalonians 2.13).

¹¹ Matthew 19.28 and Titus 3.5. Regeneration is included here because it is a word that Calvin does use (even if it is not common in the Bible).

because both deal with our righteousness. “Calvin, of course, appeals to Scripture as the warrant for the distinction between justification and sanctification: ‘Yet Scripture, even though it joins them, still lists them separately in order that God’s manifold grace may better appear to us. For Paul’s statement is not redundant: that Christ was given to us for our righteousness and sanctification [1 Corinthians 1.30].’”¹² We are sanctified by Christ’s spirit to cultivate a pure life which is what regeneration is for Calvin.¹³ McGrath notes that “on account of the believer’s union with Christ – and *not* on account of his or her justification – the believer begins the process of being made like Christ through regeneration. Calvin asserts that both justification and regeneration are the results of the believer’s union with Christ through faith.”¹⁴ It is because of this that the two terms (sanctification and regeneration) can be used interchangeably. He also sees “repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression.”¹⁵ This fits naturally as sanctification’s goal is our restoration which can only be supplied through faith in Christ.

¹² Thompson, 465.

¹³ *Institutes*, III.xi.1

¹⁴ McGrath, 459.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, III.iii.9

JUSTIFICATION IN CALVIN

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on Calvin's use of justification. While Calvin places a great deal of importance on justification,¹⁶ he does not discuss it until nearly halfway through the *Institutes* so it appears to take a smaller role in his theology. While this may appear to be the case, Calvin deals with justification only after he has firmly established that we cannot merit our own righteousness and justification (and surely not salvation) and it is only after he has proved our depravity ("you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.") that he delves into justification.¹⁷ "Calvin, for his part, not only did not divorce sanctification from justification... he even dealt with the question of good works first, in order to avoid any misunderstandings on this score!"¹⁸ Once the issue of works is dealt with and it is plain to see that we cannot merit our justification, Calvin looks at how we are justified by righteousness. "He 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."¹⁹ This definition of justification is fairly general and Calvin must explain what it would mean to be righteous in God's judgment. Because of our inability to merit our own righteousness, Calvin uses faith to provide it for us. "Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ

¹⁶ Justification is "the main hinge on which religion turns..." (Ibid. III.xi.1).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bray, 107.

¹⁹ *Institutes* III.xi.2

through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man."²⁰ Hence the reformation doctrine of *sola fide*: by faith alone. "Total depravity did not mean that man was totally evil but that he was crippled by sin and that at the crucial point of turning to God he was totally unable to do so apart from God's grace."²¹ It is this understanding of depravity that we can turn to faith in God who freely gives that grace.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Calvin's mantra of "justified by faith" is certainly the key component of his doctrine of justification so a discussion of what "faith" entails is warranted.

Faith is necessarily faith *in* something or someone, a trusting response *to* something or someone we encounter. In this case our faith must be in God as we encounter him in his word: there is "a permanent relationship between faith and the Word"²² Yet God's word inspires our trust only if it assure us of God's mercy and goodness; and God's mercy and goodness are given only in Christ. Hence faith is our response of trust in God's benevolence toward us as revealed in the gospel message about Christ.²³

Our trust in Christ is our faith and through that faith we are made righteous and therefore justified. "Man's faith, as he receives it from the Word, is the formal cause of justification... Christ is the material cause of justification."²⁴ This statement helps us keep in perspective what the human role is in justification. "The righteousness man

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bouwsma as quoted in Thompson, 462.

²² *Institutes* III.ii.6

²³ Westerholm, 58.

²⁴ Santmire, 298.

needs is found in Christ alone. Righteousness, Calvin teaches, is not communicated to man except by the gospel.”²⁵ The gospel of Christ clearly spells out faith as a necessity. Faith “rests firmly in the clear knowledge of the salvation wrought by Christ. Though faith may not yet reign perfectly over the whole human being, even the small beginnings are sufficient for salvation.”²⁶ There should be no question in our minds of our salvation if we trust and therefore have faith in the salvific work of Christ. Through our faith, Christ imputes his righteousness to us so we are justified in the eyes of God and will become sanctified. Calvin always wants our faith to come to sanctification through Christ so as to increase in piety. “Calvin’s pastoral soul and his theology were not two things apart, but different manifestations of his experience of the human relationship with God. The biblical faith must be put into words so that people can know and confess what they experience, so they can teach and minister to others.”²⁷ Sanctification was a natural following of faith and Calvin talked of that lifelong process by which the Christian life grows towards perfection through Jesus Christ because of a holiness (and piety) from within.²⁸ Calvin’s concern for the pious life is even evident in his focus on justification by faith. Faith should lead to confidence in our salvation and good works should follow from our sanctification. “This [faith] is the fulcrum of his

²⁵ Ibid. 299.

²⁶ Pitkin, 32.

²⁷ McKee, 22.

²⁸ Battles, 298.

theology: the sheer grace of God justifying and regenerating human beings.”²⁹ Calvin’s definition fits directly, for faith is “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”³⁰

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Righteousness has already been mentioned above but it is important to have a clear understanding of how it fits in to justification for Calvin. “A man who wishes to obtain Christ’s righteousness must abandon his own righteousness.”³¹ As I have already shown, the depravity we are bound to makes it impossible for our works to make us righteous before God’s eyes. Only the work of Christ is righteous and pure so that work and righteousness is imputed to us by Christ because of our faith. “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”³² Because Christ imputes His righteousness to us, it becomes our own and we are therefore justified in God’s eyes. “We can only be righteous by imputation – in other words, it is our relationship with Christ, established

²⁹ KcKee, 23.

³⁰ *Institutes*, III.ii.7

³¹ *Ibid.* III.xi.13

³² II Corinthians 5.21 (NAS).

by faith in the Gospel, which permits us to claim a share in God's righteousness."³³

Relationship over law is often the focus for the reformers.

God's action is not exhausted in simply an external decree (a purely forensic declaration), but signifies the effective creation of a new reality through God. This new reality of the justified one, created by God, is not to be understood in terms of static ontology, but rather as a 'relational reality' ... ie a reality which consists of nothing except that new relationship between God and man created by God, the content of which is, from the side of God, Lordship, and from the side of man, obedience.³⁴

Our righteousness is not something that is inherently in us, but something that is created anew in the gift of grace through faith. "The doctrine of justification as Calvin delineates it ... is the story of the Creator's restoration of the unrighteous and condemned creature to fullness of life in righteousness."³⁵ This might seem to suggest that there is no room for human interaction, but this is not the case. While humans cannot merit their own work, justification still takes place in relationship and "Calvin conceives of man as being intimately involved in justification, as terms like *consors*, *communio*, *particeps*, and *participatio* indicate"³⁶ that relationship.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT

It must be shown that Calvin's theology of justification and his foundations in faith and righteousness are Biblical. A solid Biblical interpretation and understanding

³³ Bray, 111.

³⁴ Karl Kertelge quoted in Bray, 112.

³⁵ Santmire, 297.

³⁶ Ibid. 302.

is crucial when forming theology that impacts the Christian life. Calvin was very aware that there is “a permanent relationship between faith and the Word.”³⁷ The Word of God defines how we act out our faith and, as I have shown, faith is what leads to our imputed righteousness. Therefore proper understanding of the Word will lead to proper faith which leads to our justification.

GALATIANS

“The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.’”³⁸ Calvin’s commentary uses this to compare the thought that without circumcision, a Christian was removed from the covenant with the Pauline explanation that even Abraham was blessed through faith and that is where the true family resides.³⁹ God’s people are justified through their faith, not by keeping Torah.

Galatians 3.11 is also very clear that we are not justified by the Law but by righteousness in faith. Calvin suggests that Paul is excluding any form of works, regardless of title.⁴⁰ Calvin also points to this passage as reason for separating faith and

³⁷ *Institutes*, III.ii.6

³⁸ Galatians 3.8 (NAS).

³⁹ Calvin, *Galatians*, 87.

⁴⁰ *Institutes*, III.xi.14

law because there must be separation of works and righteousness but works are required for law righteousness so law must be different from faith.⁴¹

“The law justifies him who fulfills all its precepts, while faith justifies those who are destitute of the merit of works, and who rely on Christ alone. To be justified by your own merit, and to be justified by the grace of another, are two schemes which cannot be reconciled: one of them must be overturned by the other.”⁴² It is impossible, as fallen humans, to completely fulfill the law so we cannot be fully justified in following the law. That means we need additional justification through the grace of Christ. But, as Calvin argues, it is not reconcilable to be justified by both partially. Since we can never be fully justified by following the law, it is only logical that we will have to find our complete justification by faith in Christ.

ROMANS

“What complicates the picture is the sinfulness, guilt, and corruption found in every human being, making it impossible for God to pronounce us righteous as we are.”⁴³ Romans is a key book that deals with our pronouncement as righteous due to Christ’s sacrifice directly. “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather

⁴¹ Ibid. III.xi.18

⁴² Pringle’s translation of Calvin’s *Commentary on the Galatians* as quoted in Dowey, 151.

⁴³ Westerholm, 56.

who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”⁴⁴ Calvin explains this as giving definition to justification: “‘to justify’ means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed.”⁴⁵ It is here that we see that we truly are innocent because of the imputed righteousness of Christ. We cannot even be accused because He justifies us.⁴⁶ This solidifies the certainty of salvation.

Calvin does broach the topic of “faith alone” knowing that there are many who attack *sola fide*. “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”⁴⁷ For Calvin this is incontrovertible support for faith alone as works are expressly excluded. To those that say man is justified by faith, but not faith alone, Calvin says “Paul affirms in this passage that justification is so gratuitous, that he makes it quite evident, that it can by no means be associated with the merit of works.”⁴⁸ But a free gift of righteousness is not free if any sort of works are required. Romans 3.21 and 3.24 also give way to this interpretation. “In Romans 3.21-4.25, Paul asserts that sufficiency of faith in Christ for salvation for all human beings. He argues, on the one hand, that God’s righteousness is distinct from the law, yet, on the other hand, that since the law and the prophets bear witness to it, it is not inconsistent with the law.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Romans 8.33,34 (NAS).

⁴⁵ *Institutes* III.xi.3

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Romans*, 323ff.

⁴⁷ Romans 3.28 (NAS).

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Romans*, 148f.

⁴⁹ Pitkin, 43ff.

Calvin sees it necessary to draw the distinction between law and righteousness while making sure they are consisted so as to remain in the tradition of the Old Testament.

“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’ Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.”⁵⁰ Calvin interprets this passage as proof that Paul sees Abraham as being justified by faith and that “when reward is made for works it is done out of debt, not of grace.”⁵¹ Since we have been given our reward from God’s grace, it follows that our reward is not from debt due to works.

Romans 10.4-10 is also an important passage. Calvin on Paul: “To render it evident how much at variance is the righteousness of faith and that of works, he now compares them; for by comparison the opposition between contrary things appears more clear.”⁵² If we believe that Christ rose and died for us, we are called righteous.

HEBREWS

“And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”⁵³ Calvin notes that

⁵⁰ Romans 4.2-4 (NAS).

⁵¹ *Institutes* III.xi.13

⁵² Calvin, *Romans*, 381ff.

⁵³ Hebrews 11.6 (NAS).

this passage indicates that faith is that which obtains us favor and not works.⁵⁴ It is also not that the Spirit helps us along towards holiness (as some read this passage⁵⁵) but that we are imputed free righteousness in our faithful seeking.⁵⁶

Calvin also uses the example of Abraham in Hebrews 6. “According to Calvin, the example of Abraham proves that the grace of God can be received only by embracing the promise by faith and patiently cherishing it ‘in the bosom of our hearts.’”⁵⁷ The example of Abraham is used to show what faith that causes righteousness looks like. For Abraham, his living of faith in patience is what we are called to.

II CORINTHIANS

Calvin uses II Corinthians 5 to show that there is a direct relation between justification and forgiveness of sins. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Hebrews*, xvii.iii.

⁵⁵ Calvin is referring to the “papists and Schoolmen”.

⁵⁶ *Institutes* III.xi.15

⁵⁷ Pitkin, 75.

righteousness of God in Him.”⁵⁸ This is a rich passage that implies that 1) reconciliation and justification (“not counting their trespasses”) go hand in hand and 2) righteousness is to be had because we are reconciled to God.

JAMES

The most difficult passages for the reformers to deal with when it comes to justification by faith are to be found in the book of James, especially 2.14-26.⁵⁹ “What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?”⁶⁰ Calvin doesn’t seem to want to tackle this head on. “This is the same as though he had said, that we do not attain salvation by a frigid and bare knowledge of God, which all confess to be most true; for salvation comes to us by faith for this reason, because it joins us to God.”⁶¹ Calvin’s commentary on James is probably one of his weaker arguments for justification by faith (probably because it is hard to avoid the “works” language in James). Calvin’s views of justification are thoroughly founded in Paul’s theology and so he will read James through that lens.

“Calvin assumes that scriptures cannot contradict scripture and rejects the idea that James proves or is even trying to prove that Abraham was justified (in the Pauline sense) by works. In establishing this position, Calvin presupposes the understandings of faith and justification that he

⁵⁸ II Corinthians 5.19-21 (NAS).

⁵⁹ Luther is said to have detested this letter called it an epistle of straw.

⁶⁰ James 2.14 (NAS).

⁶¹ Calvin, *James*, vi.iii.v

derived from Paul and interprets James's statements in such a way as not to contradict that Pauline position."⁶²

It seems that Calvin tries to just pass over this section by saying that James does not use "faith" and "justify" in the same sense as Paul does. "James uses it ('justify') to mean the manifestation of righteousness by its effects before human beings."⁶³ While Calvin does better than Luther on this issue, it seems that it could have been dealt with more fully. Calvin "never tried pointing out that faith and works could not be separated any more than head could be separated from the light of the sun. Thus faith and works always go together, for where there is true faith there will always be good works."⁶⁴ Calvin does affirm that good works will follow in sanctification; he just doesn't want to make any sort of direct connection to works and righteousness.

CONCLUSION

The result of Calvin's doctrine of justification is a pious life guided by sanctification through the Holy Spirit. Calvin's theology was fully Biblical (even if you disagree with his interpretation, this is hard to deny) and the reason he wanted it to be Biblical was to benefit the Christian life. Calvin was also a pastor and piety was extremely important to him. Calvin takes great steps to make sure his doctrine is supported by the Word of God so as to make us better Christians. It was be ignorant to

⁶² Pitkin, 82f.

⁶³ Ibid. 83.

⁶⁴ Reid, 301.

suggest that justification by faith was posited to avoid works. It is quite the contrary. Because Christ's righteousness has been imputed to us, we are made righteous in God's eyes through faith which will then naturally lead to regeneration and sanctification. Sanctification is an ongoing process in the Christian life that, by its nature, will produce good works. Those good works, though, are not required by us to merit righteousness and salvation (because we cannot merit righteousness).

Sanctification is a gradual process. Some relics of sin remain in the righteous during the course of earthly life. Justification, on the other hand, takes place for once and for all and in a total manner. When it takes place, the justified may 'boldly appear in haven, as being invested with the purity of Christ.' ... Justification provides the true foundation or the fertile soil out of which the true Christian life grows.⁶⁵

Calvin tells us to be secure in our salvation because we have faith and are therefore justified so we can therefore live the sanctified life, producing good fruit. It is because of Calvin's Biblical foundation that he can encourage Christians to grow.

⁶⁵ Leith, 96f.

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