

IMPUTED OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW THROUGH UNION WITH CHRIST: JUSTIFICATION IN THE REFORMED TRADITION AND ITS HEIRS

While Martin Luther (d. 1546) and his followers were carrying out the work of reform in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli (d. 1531) and his contemporaries were engaged in their own work of ecclesiastical and civic reform in Switzerland. These Swiss reformers inherited Luther's recovery of justification by faith and, like Luther, prioritized the Scriptures over tradition and affirmed the priesthood of all believers. But they differed from Luther on some key points, disagreeing with him most famously over the presence of Christ in the bread at the Lord's table. Their teaching thus heralded the beginnings of what would come to be known as a Reformed, as distinct from Lutheran, interpretation of the Scriptures within Protestantism. Their labors also anticipated the reforming efforts of a French lawyer whose piercing intellect, theological acuity, and organizational acumen would shape the contours of Reformed theology and practice for generations to come.

For some of our readers, the terms *Reformed* and *Reformed theology* will immediately bring to mind the name of John Calvin (d. 1564) and the teaching that bears his name, Calvinism. The association is not wrong, for Calvin and Calvinism are the most influential part of the Reformed tradition and are inseparable from it. But neither is the association fully accurate, for Reformed theology is broader than the teaching of Calvin embodied most notably in his masterwork *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Reformed hallmark of predestination, for example, is not as prominent in Calvin's teaching as it is in some later Reformed expositors. Some Reformed versions of predestination may not even qualify as strictly Calvinist. Reformed theology, therefore, manifests some variation among the many groups claiming a Reformed identity, some of which are more Calvinist than others. Nonetheless, the emphases in Reformed theology are consistent across Reformed denominational boundaries. Thus, we can speak of a distinctly Reformed theology with the understanding that the term is not monolithic, as the misapplication of the term *Calvinism* may at one time have suggested (Campbell et al. 2:65-66).

Justification in the Reformed Tradition

We can discern in this theology a distinctive understanding of justification by faith. In their efforts to define justification, the Reformed have made positive contributions to a proper understanding of the doctrine but also, in our estimation, have erred with particular consequence. On the positive side, Reformed theology stresses that justification is the first effect of faith and that it flows out of the believers' mystical union with Christ; therefore, union is logically (not temporally) prior to justification and is necessary for justification. Moreover, the Reformed were the first to recover the truth concerning the security of salvation—a welcome advance over traditions that have taught that believers remain in perpetual danger of losing their salvation. But Reformed theology also teaches that although believers are mystically united to Christ prior to justification, that union is not the immediate ground of justification. Rather, justification for the Reformed is a purely forensic matter in which God imputes to the believers Christ's righteous obedience to the law. God therefore reckons the believers righteous on account of Christ's imputed righteousness, not on account of the believers' union with Christ as righteousness. We see this as a serious misunderstanding that has regrettably become a mainstay in Protestant theology. In what follows we first offer an overview of justification by faith in Reformed theology. We then narrow our focus to three features of the Reformed teaching concerning justification that we consider distinctive to the tradition and most worthy of evaluation: the role of faith and union in justification, the ground of justification, and the security of salvation (Campbell et al. 2:69-70).

Overview of Justification by Faith in Reformed Theology

Reformed theologians have long contended that the main or exclusive sense of the term *to justify* (and its variants)