

The Role of Scripture in Calvin's Doctrine of Justification¹

Anthony N. S. Lane

*Director of Postgraduate Research and Professor of Historical Theology
London School of Theology, Northwood, U.K.*

In this paper I shall be expounding Calvin's doctrine of justification. I shall begin with an account of the main features of the subject in terms that will

¹For accounts of Calvin's doctrine, cf. e.g. J. Boisset, 'Justification et Sanctification chez Calvin' in W. H. Neuser (hrsg.), *Calvinus Theologus* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976) 131-48; J. H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) ch.2; P. Marcel, 'The Relation between Justification and Sanctification in Calvin's Thought,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 27 (1955) 132-45; W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (London: Lutterworth, 1956) ch.9:2; T. H. L. Parker, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Justification,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 24 (1952) 101-107; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to his Thought* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 95-106; J. H. Rainbow, 'Double Grace: John Calvin's View of the Relationship of Justification and Sanctification,' *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989) 99-105; W. S. Reid, 'Justification by Faith according to John Calvin,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1979-80) 290-307; H. P. Santmire, 'Justification in Calvin's 1540 Romans Commentary,' *Church History* 33 (1964) 294-313; H. Schrotten, 'Rechtaardigmaking en Heiligmaking bij Calvin,' *Theologia Reformata* 2 (1959) 161-75; T. Stadtland, *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung bei Calvin* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972); Thompson, 'Viewing Justification through Calvin's Eyes,' 447-66; S. van der Linde, 'De Rechtaardiging bij Luther en Calvin,' *Theologia Reformata* 8 (1965) 4-15; F. Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (London: Collins, 1963) 255-63; G. D. Wood, *Clothed in his Righteousness: Calvin's Doctrine of Justification against the late medieval theological Background* (Cambridge (MA): Episcopal Theological School BD thesis, 1967).

For Calvin's polemic against the Lutheran Osiander, in addition to sections in works cited above, cf. W. Niesel, 'Calvin wider Osianders Rechtfertigungslehre,' *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 46 (1927) 410-30; J. Weis, 'Calvin versus Osiander on Justification,' *The Springfielder* 29:3 (Autumn 1965) 31-47; G. Zimmermann, 'Calvins Auseinandersetzung mit Osianders Rechtfertigungslehre,' *Kerygma und Dogma* 35 (1989) 236-56. For Osiander's own doctrine, cf. A. Ritschl, 'Die Rechtfertigungslehre des Andreas Osiander,' *Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie* 2 (1857) 795-829.

For Calvin's relation to Augustine on this doctrine, cf. G. Bavaud, 'La doctrine de la justification d'après saint Augustin et la Réforme,' *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 5 (1959) 21-32; G. de Ru, *De Rechtaardiging bij Augustinus: Vergeleken met de leer der iustificatio bij Luther en Calvin* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1966); F. W. Snell, *The Place of Augustine in Calvin's Concept of Righteousness* (New York: Union Theological Seminary ThD thesis, 1968).

be familiar to most. I shall then move on to some less familiar aspects of his doctrine. There are three different things that have prompted me to tackle this topic. First, George Hunsinger, in a most stimulating paper given here two years ago,² drew attention to some interesting anomalies in Calvin's teaching. Secondly, I came to write a chapter on Calvin's doctrine of justification as part of a volume on Catholic-Protestant dialogue.³ Thirdly, I have been working over the last six months on the agreed article on justification produced at the Regensburg colloquy, towards which Calvin was very positive.⁴ I shall be considering his stance vis-à-vis the Regensburg doctrine of *duplex iustitia* or twofold righteousness. Finally, I will make some concluding observations about Calvin's use of Scripture in his doctrine of justification, drawing upon what has gone before.

I. Justification in Christ and by Christ Alone

Calvin understood 'justification' in forensic terms. To be justified is to be accepted by God as righteous, to be declared righteous, to be acquitted. Justification is a 'Not guilty' verdict in a law court. Calvin defined it as 'the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men' and added that 'it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness'.⁵ Thus justification refers to our not-guilty standing before God

Calvin's response to the Tridentine decree is also important. On this, in addition to sections in works cited above, cf. G. Bavaud, 'La doctrine de la justification d'après Calvin et le Concile de Trente,' *Verbum Caro* 22 (1968) 83-92; T. 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 (at 105-13); W. F. Dankbaar, 'Calvijs Oordeel over het Concilie van Trente, inzonderheid inzake het Rechvaardigingsdecreet' in *Hervormers en Humanisten* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1978) 67-99 — first appeared in *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 45 (1963) 79-112; C. S. Smith, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Justification in Relation to the Sense of Sin and the Dialogue with Rome' (London Bible College M.Phil. thesis, 1993); R. P. Swierenga, 'Calvin and the Council of Trent: A Reappraisal. Part II,' *Reformed Journal* 16:4 (April 1966) 19-21.

²G. Hunsinger, 'A Tale of Two Simultaneities: Justification and Sanctification in Calvin and Barth'. I am referring to the paper in the form that it was given at the 2000 colloquium. It has subsequently been published in J. C. McDowell & M. Higton (eds.), *Conversing with Barth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), though I have not yet seen this.

³A. N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (Edinburgh and New York: T & T Clark, 2002) 17-43, some of which overlaps with the present paper.

⁴This was subsequently published as 'Calvin and Article 5 of the Regensburg Colloquy' in H. J. Selderhuis (ed.), *Calvinus Praeceptor Ecclesiae* (Geneva: Droz, 2004) 233-63.

⁵*Inst.* 3:11:2 [1543]. Cf. *Inst.* 3:11:3 [1543]: 'Therefore, "to justify" means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed. Therefore, since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ.' *Inst.* 3:17:8 [1539]: 'We define justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ, is reconciled to God by his grace, while, cleansed by Christ's blood, he obtains forgiveness of sins, and clothed with Christ's righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat'.

and consists negatively in the forgiveness or non-imputation of sins and positively in the reckoning or imputing to us of Christ's righteousness.⁶

Related to this definition of justification is his distinction between justification and sanctification or regeneration. These two must be distinguished, but cannot be separated. Justification and sanctification are like the two legs of a pair of trousers, not like two socks which may well become separated and, in my experience, too often do become separated.

How are we justified? Justification is in Christ alone and by Christ alone. 'We are reckoned righteous before God in Christ and apart from ourselves'.⁷ Justification is also by faith alone, but faith is of value not as a virtue in its own right but as faith *in Christ*. 'We say that faith justifies, not because it merits righteousness for us by its own worth, but because it is an instrument whereby we obtain free the righteousness of Christ'.⁸ Calvin compares faith to an empty vessel with which we come to receive Christ's grace. The power of justifying lies not in faith itself, but in the Christ who is received by faith.⁹

Central to Calvin's doctrine of salvation is the concept of union with Christ.¹⁰ This is seen most clearly from the structure of his *Institutio*. Having in Book Two expounded his doctrine of the person of Christ and what he has achieved for us, in Book Three he turns to 'The Way in which we Receive the Grace of Christ'.¹¹ There he starts by affirming that 'as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us'.¹² Until we are united with Christ what he has achieved for us helps us no more than an electricity mains supply that passes our house but is not connected to it. It is the Holy Spirit that unites us with Christ, by faith, which brings us two major benefits — justification and sanctification.¹³ These are the theme of most of the remainder of Book Three.

Quotations from the *Institutio* are taken from J. T. McNeill & F. L. Battles (eds.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Library of Christian Classics vols 20-21) (London: SCM and Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). Page numbers are not given as book, chapter and section numbers suffice. The edition in which the material was added is indicated in brackets — e.g. [1543].

⁶*Inst.* 3:11:11 [1559]: The justified are righteous 'not intrinsically but by imputation'.

⁷*Inst.* 3:11:4 [1559]. Cf. *Inst.* 3:11:23 [1539] 'Our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, ... we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ'.

⁸*Inst.* 3:18:8 [1539]. Cf. *Inst.* 3:13:5 [1559]: 'As regards justification, faith is something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God's favor but receiving from Christ that which we lack'.

⁹*Inst.* 3:11:7 [1559].

¹⁰For an important study on union with Christ in Calvin, cf. D. E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville (KY): Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

¹¹*Inst.* 3:title [1559].

¹²*Inst.* 3:1:1 [1559].

¹³*Inst.* 3:3:1 [1559]: 'Now, both repentance and forgiveness of sins—that is, newness of life and free reconciliation—are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith'

In order to make it clear that we cannot have justification without sanctification, Calvin first devotes eight chapters to the latter,¹⁴ before turning to the former¹⁵ — to make it clear that forgiveness of sins cannot be separated from holiness of life.¹⁶ Justification and sanctification are inseparable, because they both flow from union with Christ, which Calvin describes as a 'mystical union'.¹⁷ 'As Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification. Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image'.¹⁸

So faith unites us with Christ and it is 'in him' that we are justified and have new life. Justification is not a benefit that Christ confers upon us, which we then possess independently of him. We are justified only by virtue of being in Christ. For Calvin justification and sanctification both follow inevitably from union with Christ. He appeals to I Corinthians 1:30: that Christ is given to us for both righteousness and sanctification. 'Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify'.¹⁹ It should be noted that Calvin, unlike some of his interpreters, does not speak of justification as the cause of sanctification nor of the latter as the fruit or consequence of the former. Both are the fruit and consequence of union with Christ. (Perhaps the confusion arises in part because justification is complete from the beginning, while sanctification is progressive. Thus the event of justification is followed by the process of sanctification. But it would be wrong to deduce that for Calvin the latter is the *consequence* of the former.)

¹⁴*Inst.* 3:3-10.

¹⁵*Inst.* 3:11-19.

¹⁶*Inst.* 3:3:1 [1559]. Thompson, 'Viewing Justification through Calvin's Eyes,' 450, compares Calvin's distinction between justification and sanctification without separation to Chalcedon's treatment of Christ's two natures and the relation between the Son and the Spirit. While Thompson rightly stresses that for Calvin justification and sanctification are inseparable, he goes too far when he claims that for Calvin justification itself is 'intrinsic and transformative' (452f.). For Calvin faith and union with Christ bring intrinsic transformation, but that transformation is called sanctification.

¹⁷*Inst.* 3:11:10. '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.' (*Inst.* 3:11:10 [1559])

¹⁸*Inst.* 3:11:6 [1559] (with 'Spirit' in place of 'spirit'). Cf. *Inst.* 3:11:1 [1539] where Calvin speaks of the 'double grace' received by partaking of Christ: reconciliation and sanctification. Luther tended to see sanctification as the fruit of justification rather than seeing them both as flowing from union with Christ. Cf. Rainbow, 'Double Grace,' 102f. That justification and regeneration/sanctification are distinct without being separated is often affirmed (e.g. *Inst.* 3:11:11 [1559]).

¹⁹*Inst.* 3:16:1 [1539].

II. Justification is only by faith, but the faith that justifies is never alone.

Why is justification by faith *alone*? Calvin stresses that faith is effective not in itself but because it unites us to Christ. Justification is by faith alone not because of what faith merits or *achieves* but because of what it *receives*. Faith justifies not because it is of itself inherently superior to love, for example, but because it unites us to Christ, in whom we are accepted. In response to those who maintain that we are justified by love rather than by faith, because love is more excellent, Calvin is happy to concede the latter point, but not the former.²⁰ 'It is as if someone argued that a king is more capable of making a shoe than a shoemaker is because he is infinitely more eminent'.²¹ 'The power of justifying, which faith possesses, does not lie in any worth of works. Our justification rests on God's mercy alone and Christ's merit, and faith, when it lays hold of justification, is said to justify'.²²

The Reformation stress on faith alone was not intended to affirm that faith is to be found on its own but rather to stress that it is only in Christ that we are acceptable. Justification is by faith alone, *sola fide*, but this faith does not stand alone; it is not *nuda fides*. As Calvin put it: 'It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone: just as it is the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light'.²³ Saving faith is not to be confused with a dead faith which does not give birth to works of love. Rather than talk of justification 'by faith alone' it may cause less misunderstanding to say that justification is 'only by faith.' This makes clear the distinctive role of faith without the unfortunate implication that such faith can stand alone. The fact that justification is *by* faith alone does not mean that one can be justified *with* faith alone.

Calvin is emphatic that there can be no faith without hope nor vice versa.²⁴ Similarly, faith gives birth to love²⁵ and cannot exist without it. 'We confess with

²⁰Cf. *Inst.* 3:11:17 [1559]: 'When the Spirit of God forms us to such love, why is it not for us a cause of righteousness, except that even in the saints it is imperfect, and for that reason merits no reward of itself?'

²¹*Inst.* 3:18:8 [1539].

²²*Inst.* 3:18:8 [1536]. Cf. *Inst.* 3:11:20 [1539]: '[Faith] does not take its power to justify from that working of love [Gal. 5:6]. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ'.

²³*Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote* 6th Session, can. 11 in H. Beveridge & J. Bonnet (eds), *Selected Works of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 3:152. For further use of the sun analogy, cf. *Inst.* 3:11:6 [1559].

²⁴*Inst.* 3:2:42f. [mostly 1539].

²⁵*Inst.* 3:2:41 [1536/39].

Paul that no other faith justifies “but faith working through love” [Gal. 5:6].²⁶ Again, justification by ‘faith alone’ is not meant to deny the need for baptism nor its role in Christian initiation.²⁷ Similarly, while works are most certainly not the ground of justification, where there is true faith works will follow. Justification is not *by* works, but nor is it *without* works.²⁸ ‘We dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them. This alone is of importance: having admitted that faith and good works must cleave together, we still lodge justification in faith, not in works’.²⁹ It can be said that love (for example) is a necessary condition in that one cannot be justified without it — just as spots are a necessary condition of having chicken pox. This does not prejudice justification ‘only by faith’ in that love no more causes justification than having spots causes chicken pox.

III. The Value of Human Good Works

Why is Calvin so keen to exclude human works from justification? He argues that the Pharisee in the parable trusted in the merit of his works only because he was judging them by the wrong standard. When we see God’s holiness, his justice, his law, his standards, his requirements, our response can only be that of the tax collector, to cast ourselves on God’s mercy alone with trembling and humility. This involves a real humility, not just a feigned, polite modesty. It is not to be confused with the schoolboy definition of humility as pretending to be what you know you are not. This is nothing less than a sober appraisal of the reality of the situation.³⁰ For Calvin, as he explains at the beginning of his *Institutio*, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are intimately related to one another. It is only as we come to an awareness of God’s majesty and holiness that we begin to appreciate our sinful state. This was the experience of those in both Testaments who felt the presence of God.³¹ So we need to assess our good works before God, in the light of his holiness and purity. This Calvin does for four different groups of people.

²⁶*Inst.* 3:11:20 [1539]. ‘When we say a man is justified by faith alone, we do not fancy a faith devoid of charity, but we mean that faith alone is the cause of justification’ (*Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote*, 6th Session, can. 9 in Beveridge & Bonnet (eds.), *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 3:151).

²⁷*Inst.* 4:16:26 [1539].

²⁸*Inst.* 3:16:1 [1539].

²⁹*Inst.* 3:16:1 [1539]. Cf. 3:11:6 [1559]: ‘there is in justification no place for works’. Cf. 3:11:13 [1539]: ‘faith righteousness so differs from works righteousness that when the one is established the other has to be overthrown’.

³⁰*Inst.* 3:12:1-8 [mainly 1539].

³¹*Inst.* 1:1:1-3 [mainly 1539].

The first group are unbelievers.³² Calvin is aware (from classical antiquity especially) that unbelievers can perform heroic works of moral virtue and he sees these as gifts of God. But since unbelievers' hearts are opposed to God they defile these gifts. Relative to one another, some people are indeed virtuous, but God looks behind the deeds to the motivation of the heart. The 'good works' of such people, thus evaluated, are not genuinely virtuous. Calvin lays stress on their lack of faith. Augustine reached a similar conclusion, but placing greater emphasis on the lack of love.

Calvin considers the second and third groups together.³³ Nominal Christians are initiated in the sacraments but by their lives deny the faith they profess. Hypocrites are those who conceal their wickedness from others, and indeed from themselves, and appear to be regenerate when they are not. As with unbelievers, their hearts have not been cleansed so their works remain impure.

The fourth group are those who are born again of the Spirit and seek after holiness.³⁴ Conversion brings a real change and leads us to seek from the heart to obey God. 'Through his Holy Spirit he dwells in us and by his power the lusts of our flesh are each day more and more mortified; we are indeed sanctified, that is, consecrated to the Lord in true purity of life, with our hearts formed to obedience to the law'.³⁵ But even in the best works of the godly there remains some taint of the sinful flesh. They may indeed be motivated by love of God and neighbor, but in this life there always remain elements of sinful motivation as well.³⁶ It is not that their works are not good but that they are less than 100% good. Judged by the standard of God's holiness and purity they fall short, they are less than perfect. 'There never existed any work of a godly man which, if examined by God's stern judgment, would not deserve condemnation'.³⁷ In sum, therefore, for Calvin 'we have not a single work going forth from the saints that if it be judged in itself deserves not shame as its just reward'.³⁸

If this were all that Calvin had to say it would be a negatively depressing and demotivating message. What is the point of bothering to do good? Why seek to

³²*Inst.* 3:14:1-6, cf. 2:3:3f. [both mainly 1539].

³³*Inst.* 3:14:7f [mainly 1539].

³⁴*Inst.* 3:14:9-11 [1536/39/43].

³⁵*Inst.* 3:14:9 [1536].

³⁶'The disciples of Christ love him with sincere and earnest affection of heart, and according to the measure of their love keep his commandments. But how small is this compared with that strict perfection in which there is no deficiency?' (*Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote*, 6th Session, ch. 11 in Beveridge & Bonnet (eds.), *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 3:132).

³⁷'Even if we hold that *some* of our works are indeed 'wholly pure and perfect', these works are nevertheless tainted by our sins. 'If such a [perfect] work were found (something not possible for man), it would still lose favor — weakened and stained as it is by the sins with which its author himself is surely burdened' (*Inst.* 3:14:10f. [1539]).

³⁸*Inst.* 3:14:9 [1539].

serve God if one's best works will be flung back in one's face as tainted and inadequate? As believers, however, we relate to God not as a strict Judge through the law but as our gracious Father through Christ. This leads to Calvin's doctrine of 'double justification', to give it its modern name.

IV. Double Justification

Calvin argued that if we approach God as a just and holy Judge, seeking to be justified by works outside of Christ on the basis of law, we are all condemned and furthermore none of our works pass muster. Given this negative attitude towards works, it may come as a surprise to some to learn that for Calvin God both accepts and rewards the good works of the justified believer.³⁹ In fact this is not so surprising when one sees what are his concerns. Justification by works is excluded 'not that no good works may be done, or that what is done may be denied to be good, but that we may not rely upon them, glory in them, or ascribe salvation to them'.⁴⁰ Works are of no value to those who seek justification from them outside of Christ. But for the justified believer the situation is different.

When we approach God in faith we are accepted as righteous, in Christ. But it is not only *we* who are accepted. God also accepts our good works in Christ, overlooking whatever defects and impurities may remain in them. 'Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account.' Thus, 'by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified'.⁴¹

How does this work? This is not God arbitrarily calling evil works good. It is not that the works of Christians are indistinguishable from those of non-Christians, God deciding to accept the former but not the latter. These are genuinely good works in that they are done in faith from a genuine love for God and neighbor. The reason why such works do not justify in their own right is not because they are totally bad but because they are less than totally pure, because being tainted they fall short of the standards of God's holiness. In Christ, God accepts these works by overlooking their blemishes and accepting what is genuinely good in them. 'Everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ's perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity'.⁴² God looks with favor both on the godly and on their good works because he embraces them 'in Christ rather than in themselves'.⁴³ This is not a matter of his calling vice virtue

³⁹This is spelled out in *Inst.* 3:15:3f., 3:17:3-10 [both mainly 1539].

⁴⁰*Inst.* 3:17:1 [1539].

⁴¹*Inst.* 3:17:10 [1543].

⁴²*Inst.* 3:17:8 [1539].

⁴³*Inst.* 3:17:5 [1539].

— as if one were to mug an old lady and God were to declare that a righteous deed. Instead it is a matter of his accepting works that are genuinely good, overlooking their defects — as if one were to help the old lady over the road partly out of compassion for her and partly out of pride in one's great holiness. 'Whence, also, are these works reckoned good as if they lacked nothing, save that the kindly Father grants pardon for those blemishes and spots which cleave to them?'⁴⁴ This doctrine, which Calvin shared with the other Reformers,⁴⁵ served a number of different purposes.

First, it had a pastoral aim. It is an important and much needed counterbalance to Calvin's teaching about the sinfulness of even our best works. That may be true in the context of our seeking to be justified by God, but leaves the believer with little incentive. What is the point of striving for good works if even one's best efforts are going to be weighed and found wanting? But once we are accepted in Christ the situation is different. Calvin contrasts those who approach God on the basis of law and merit, who cannot please him without perfect obedience, with those who are his adopted children in Christ, whose feeble works he approves with fatherly generosity.⁴⁶ 'We ... remarkably cheer and comfort the hearts of believers by our teaching, when we tell them that they please God in their works and are without doubt acceptable to him'.⁴⁷ It is worth pressing on because God is easily pleased and looks with favor upon our feeble efforts. As George MacDonald put it, God is easy to please but hard to satisfy.⁴⁸ That distinction captures the essence of the doctrine of double justification. Calvin illustrates this from the manner in which loving parents relate to their children. They will encourage and be delighted by the smallest evidence of progress, but they also long for their children to progress to full maturity.

Secondly, the doctrine also had an exegetical and apologetic aim. Calvin was forced to account for biblical passages where the writer appeals to his own righteousness or which speak of God rewarding good works. How could these be squared with other biblical teaching against human merit? Double justification was a tool to account for the whole range of biblical data⁴⁹ and also to respond to Roman Catholic polemical attacks on this front. It enabled Calvin to acknowledge that our works do indeed have value before God and that he

⁴⁴*Inst.* 3:17:5 [1539].

⁴⁵Article 12 of the Thirty-nine Articles states that 'Good Works, which ... follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's Judgement; yet they are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ'.

⁴⁶*Inst.* 3:19:4f. [mostly 1536].

⁴⁷*Inst.* 3:15:7 [1536/39].

⁴⁸As cited by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952) 168f.

⁴⁹The aim of this doctrine is that 'Scripture may, without quibbling, be duly brought into agreement with itself' (*Inst.* 3:17:8 [1539]).

looks upon them with favor and rewards them — all because of his kindness to us in Christ. The doctrine of double justification is a way of handling a tension found in Scripture and of doing so by contrasting our standing before God as a strict Judge and God as our loving Father.

The doctrine of double justification is often confused with a rather different doctrine, the doctrine of twofold righteousness or *duplex iustitia*. It was the latter doctrine, not the former, which was the basis of the agreement reached at Regensburg.

V. *Duplex Iustitia*

Underlying the Regensburg article on justification is the idea of *duplex iustitia* — that conversion brings both inherent and imputed righteousness. The term itself (*duplex iustitia*) is not found in the article, but the article is built on the idea that there are these two *iustitiae*, which are clearly set out. The doctrine of *duplex iustitia* meant a belief in both inherent righteousness (the righteousness wrought within by the Holy Spirit) and imputed righteousness (the reckoning to our account of the righteousness of Christ). It also requires not just the distinction between these two types of righteousness (inherent and imputed) but also the belief that the latter is needed because of the imperfection of the former. We need imputed righteousness to be acceptable to God because our inherent righteousness does not suffice to make us acceptable before the throne of God's justice.

This idea of *duplex iustitia* is fundamental to Calvin's theology of salvation. The actual term he used only in a negative sense, when opposing Osiander's teaching on the subject.⁵⁰ But the idea of *duplex iustitia*, in the sense that it is understood in Article 5, is found in his references to a *duplex gratia*, referring to justification and sanctification.⁵¹ He did not in his account use the term *iustitia inhaerens*, but his teaching on regeneration and sanctification is all about an inward renewal by the Holy Spirit and he is happy to refer to this as *iustitia*. Thus, righteousness is one of the fruits that follow renewal.⁵² As we grow in the Christian life we become increasingly like God, righteous.⁵³ But when we turn

⁵⁰*Inst.* 3:11:11f. [1559]. For Calvin's polemic against the Lutheran Osiander, in addition to sections in works on his doctrine of justification in general, cf. W. Niesel, 'Calvin wider Osianders Rechtfertigungslehre,' *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 46 (1927) 410-30; J. Weis, 'Calvin versus Osiander on Justification,' *The Springfielder* 29:3 (Autumn 1965) 31-47; G. Zimmermann, 'Calvins Auseinandersetzung mit Osianders Rechtfertigungslehre,' *Kerygma und Dogma* 35 (1989) 236-56. For Osiander's own doctrine, cf. A. Ritschl, 'Die Rechtfertigungslehre des Andreas Osiander,' *Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie* 2 (1857) 795-829.

⁵¹*Inst.* 3:11:1 [1539], 6 [1559].

⁵²*Inst.* 3:3:8f. [1539].

⁵³*Inst.* 3:3:9 [1539].

to the section on justification there is a strict contrast between human righteousness, which is soiled, and the imputed righteousness of Christ.⁵⁴ Why is Calvin willing to concede human righteousness in one context but not in the other? When the question is growth in the Christian life, he is happy to refer to human righteousness, but when the issue is acceptance by God he emphasizes the worthlessness of human righteousness. In the former context the reality of human righteousness is the issue, in the latter its imperfection. For this reason, although in the context of sanctification Calvin is happy to talk of a human righteousness, he never sets this alongside imputed righteousness as a 'second righteousness'. When he wishes to juxtapose the two he prefers to echo the language of 1 Corinthians 1:30 and so he repeatedly refers to our [imputed] righteousness and [inherent] sanctification. Thus Calvin was fully in agreement with the *content* of the Regensburg doctrine of twofold righteousness, but did not himself adopt the Regensburg *terminology*.

VI. Reward

In 1647 Thomas Hooker, the founder and Puritan pastor of Hartford, Connecticut, was on his deathbed. A friend told him that 'he was going to heaven to receive the reward for his extensive labors'. 'No,' he replied, 'I am going to receive mercy.'⁵⁵ Calvin would have agreed with Hooker's affirmation, but not with his denial. As a skilled exegete Calvin was aware of the New Testament teaching on reward. Our works are all tainted by sin and even were they not we would be no more than unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10). Yet our good works, which are the fruit of God's grace, are also 'our' works and are acceptable to God (double justification) and even bring a reward, in this life and the next.⁵⁶

But is not reward an unworthy motive? Should we not serve God freely, out of love and gratitude, with no thought of a reward? It is true that the desire for reward is an insufficient motive on its own. 'If it is only a matter of men looking for reward when they serve God, and hiring or selling their labor to him, it is of little profit. God wills to be freely worshiped, freely loved'.⁵⁷ But to stop there is to be more 'spiritual' than the New Testament and, more particularly, than the teaching of Christ, which is full of teaching about reward. 'He who is justified

⁵⁴In these chapters (*Inst.* 3:11-18) Calvin recognizes that believers are those who pursue and obey righteousness, that relative to the wicked they are righteous (3:17:14) and that God accepts their works as righteous (double justification). In short, while they are called righteous because of their holiness of life, this consists more in the pursuit of righteousness than actually fulfilling it (3:17:10).

⁵⁵J. R. Beeke, 'Reading the Best in Puritan Literature,' *Reformation and Revival Journal* 5 (1996) 138.

⁵⁶*Inst.* 3:15:3 [1539].

⁵⁷*Inst.* 3:16:2 [1536].

will not forget that a reward is laid up for him, but be incited by it as the best stimulus to well-doing. And yet he will not look to this alone.⁵⁸

What is the reward that is held out to us? Calvin repeatedly concedes that Scripture calls eternal life the reward of works⁵⁹ and a recompense for the sufferings of this life.⁶⁰ 'The fruit of the promises is duly assigned to works, which bring us to the ripeness of that fruit.'⁶¹ But at the same time he insists that 'the Kingdom of Heaven is not servants' wages but sons' inheritance'.⁶² Our works are rewarded not according to strict justice but generously and because their blemishes are overlooked. 'Our works are pleasing only through pardon.'⁶³ God rewards them both because of his grace and generosity and in order to encourage us and give us an incentive to good works. But there is a problem here. He seems to teach that the content of the reward is no different to that which is promised to the new believer who has yet to perform any works. 'The Lord rewards the works of believers with the same benefits as he had given them before they contemplated any works'.⁶⁴ But what incentive is it to be offered as a reward that which one has already been promised freely? Calvin is aware of this objection as he proceeds to state that 'the Lord does not trick or mock us when he says that he will reward works with what he had given free before works',⁶⁵ although it is not altogether clear why this should be so.

VII. The Worthlessness of Works

Calvin disliked the word merit.⁶⁶ He realized that it was introduced early in church history but considered that it was unwise to use such a non-scriptural term, prone to abuse, to describe 'the value of good works'.⁶⁷ He is emphatic in denying the merit of our good works. Merit is not legitimately inferred from Scripture.⁶⁸ Nor does it follow from the fact that God rewards our works.⁶⁹ Indeed God in his generosity 'bestows unearned rewards upon works that merit

⁵⁸*Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote* 6th Session, can. 31 in H. Beveridge & J. Bonnet (eds), *Selected Works of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 3:162.

⁵⁹*Inst.* 3:18:1-5 [mostly 1539].

⁶⁰*Inst.* 3:18:4 [1536].

⁶¹*Inst.* 3:18:3 [1539].

⁶²*Inst.* 3:18:2 [1536].

⁶³*Inst.* 3:18:5 [1559].

⁶⁴*Inst.* 3:18:2 [1539].

⁶⁵*Inst.* 3:18:3 [1539].

⁶⁶Cf. J. Wawrykow, 'John Calvin and Condign Merit,' *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte* 83 (1992) 73-90.

⁶⁷*Inst.* 3:15:2 [1539] ('pretium bonorum operum').

⁶⁸*Inst.* 3:15:1, 4, 3:18:7 [all 1539].

⁶⁹*Inst.* 3:15:3f., 3:16:2, 3:18:3f. [mainly 1539].

no such thing'.⁷⁰ Paul speaks of the Thessalonians being counted worthy of God's kingdom (2 Thess. 1:5). This does not imply any 'worth of merit' nor indeed that our works 'have any worth'.⁷¹ Instead, 'to quicken us to well-doing, although the services we offer him are unworthy even of his glance, he permits none of them to be lost'⁷² and 'however unworthy our services, a reward will not be lacking from God's generosity'.⁷³

What is Calvin saying here? Clearly the reward is on the basis of generosity and there is no strict correlation between the work and the reward. But is he also saying that the works are totally lacking in any worth at all? This is what he at times appears to say. Our works have value *only* because of God's fatherly generosity in accepting and approving them after we have been justified by faith.⁷⁴ Calvin says this so many times and so emphatically that it is hard to explain it as merely rhetorical exaggeration. But it would seem to contradict the very structure of his doctrine of double justification — that they are accepted when their imperfections are covered. The implication of this would seem to be that what remains when the faults are pardoned is indeed of worth and value.

Calvin states that our works receive reward 'not because they so deserve but because God's kindness has of itself set this value on them'.⁷⁵ There are two different factors at work here. As we have seen, Calvin is stressing the generosity of God in overlooking the blemishes of our works. But there is another factor also at work. Calvin elsewhere states that the death of Christ has merit only because of God's good pleasure.⁷⁶ Here he is influenced by the 'voluntarist' stream of late medieval thought which stressed the will of God rather than reason as the ultimate rationale.⁷⁷ If he is unable to see the inherent value of the death of Christ it is perhaps not surprising that he has a problem seeing any inherent value in human good works. This extends to the point where Calvin affirms that not even the holiness of unfallen angels would be acceptable to

⁷⁰*Inst.* 3:15:3 [1539].

⁷¹*Inst.* 3:18:7 [1539].

⁷²*Inst.* 3:18:6 [1539].

⁷³*Inst.* 3:18:7 [1539].

⁷⁴*Inst.* 3:11:20, 3:15:3, 3:17:3, 8, 15, 3:18:6 [all 1539].

⁷⁵*Inst.* 3:15:3 [1539].

⁷⁶*Inst.* 2:17:1 [1559].

⁷⁷Cf. A. E. McGrath, 'John Calvin and Late Medieval Thought,' *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 77 (1986) 73-77. Cf. *Inst.* 3:23:2 [1539]: 'When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it'. Cf. *Inst.* 3:23:4f. [mainly 1539].

God if weighed in his heavenly scales.⁷⁸ Calvin here goes where not only angels but the great majority of his followers would fear to tread. He is too consistent in following through his one-sided principle (already stated in 1536) that the 'whole end [of Scripture] is to restrain our pride, to humble us, cast us down, and utterly crush us'.⁷⁹

VIII. Justification by Worthless Works⁸⁰

Calvin goes to great pains to deny any inherent value or merit to our works. God accepts these works — but purely of his great generosity. Given that these works are in themselves worthless it is all the more surprising that Calvin has a doctrine of justification by these worthless works. That is, he not only states (quite often) that God accepts our good works in Christ, but he also states (rarely) that we ourselves are also accepted by God on the basis of these works. Calvin several times sets out the four causes of salvation/justification, with the aim of showing that works have no place among them.⁸¹ But he also goes on to acknowledge that the Lord embraces our works as 'inferior causes'. That is, he normally leads us into the possession of eternal life by means of good works, although Calvin sees this more as a matter of sequence than of cause.⁸² This is nonetheless a remarkable statement. The Council of Trent, in its *Decree on Justification*, sets out the five different causes of justification. Four of these five relate to God, the exception being the instrumental cause which is 'the sacrament of baptism, which is the sacrament of faith'.⁸³ Thus the only mention of human activity is baptism, in which the recipient plays a passive role. Trent was not crass enough to state that works cause justification. Yet Calvin says as much of works, albeit as inferior causes (of eternal life). Why should he have done this? George Hunsinger notes that 'even with Calvin's tortured qualifications,

⁷⁸ *Inst.* 3:12:1 [1559], 3:17:9 [1539]. Calvin argues this from Job and develops the theme further in his sermons on Job. Cf. S. E. Schreiner, 'Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin's Sermons on Job,' *Church History* 58 (1989) 332-38; idem, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 105-20; P. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (forthcoming from O.U.P.) ch. 10.

⁷⁹ *Inst.* 3:18:4 [1536]. Cf. 3:14:16 [1539]: 'there are two plagues that we must especially banish from our minds: we must not put any confidence in the righteousness of works, and we must not ascribe to works any glory'.

⁸⁰ I am indebted to George Hunsinger for drawing my attention to this anomaly in his 'A Tale of Two Simultaneities,' though my interpretation of the passages concerned is rather different from his. Niesel, *Theology of Calvin*, 135f. also draws attention to it.

⁸¹ *Inst.* 3:14:17 [1539/43]. L. Goumaz, *La Doctrine du Salut (doctrina salutis) d'après les Commentaires de Jean Calvin sur le Nouveau Testament* (Lausanne: Payot and Paris: Fischbacher, 1917) structures Part II on the four causes of salvation: the Father as the efficient cause; Christ as the material cause; the Holy Spirit as the formal cause; the glory of God as the final cause.

⁸² *Inst.* 3:14:21 [1539]. Cf. 3:18:4 [1536].

⁸³ J. H. Leith (ed.), *Creeeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982 — 3rd edition) 411f.

it is hard to see how this statement can be retrieved, or indeed why it should really have been ventured at all'.⁸⁴ The reason, I would suggest, lies in Calvin's commitment to Scripture. Unlike most systematic theologians today, he was committed to listening to and accommodating even those passages which do not easily fit into his theology. Of course he does not always succeed in achieving this, but it was his conscientious aim. The fact is abundantly clear that many passages of Scripture do teach that 'the good works of believers are reasons why the Lord benefits them'.⁸⁵ Calvin felt obliged to accommodate such passages within his theology — and had he felt inclined not to do so there was no shortage of Catholic polemicists eager to advertise the fact.

It is in wrestling with the case of Cornelius, about whom Peter states that all who act righteously are acceptable to God, that Calvin makes his most significant concession. This passage can be reconciled with others only if we acknowledge 'a double acceptance of man before God'. The first is, of course, being accepted in Christ by faith. Thereafter God also accepts believers as a 'new creation' [2 Cor. 5:17] in respect of their works. This is possible for two reasons. First, as we have seen, because God chooses to give this value to them. Secondly, because he is himself the author of this righteousness. 'For the Lord cannot fail to love and embrace the good things that he works in them through his Spirit'⁸⁶ — though it is hard to see why this should be so if these works are indeed as devoid of inherent value as Calvin repeatedly argued. At this point we are not so far distant from the Tridentine idea of acceptance on the basis of an imparted, infused righteousness. Calvin shortly after argues that because God graciously accepts our works in Christ, 'we shall concede not only a partial righteousness in works, as our adversaries themselves hold, but also that it is approved by God as if it were whole and perfect'.⁸⁷

Calvin does not say in so many words that believers are also 'justified by their works' but acceptance 'by reason of works' can mean nothing else. As so often in Calvin, some of the most interesting features in his theology come where he is forced by his reading of Scripture or of Augustine or by the arguments of his opponents to make concessions that he would otherwise have been most unlikely to have made.⁸⁸

After his statement about 'double acceptance' Calvin proceeds to explain the idea of acceptance on the basis of works by expounding his doctrine of double justification, of the acceptance of our good works on the basis of faith.⁸⁹

⁸⁴'A Tale of Two Simultaneities.'

⁸⁵*Inst.* 3:14:21 [1539].

⁸⁶*Inst.* 3:17:4f. [mainly 1539].

⁸⁷*Inst.* 3:17:10 [1543].

⁸⁸As in his teaching on free will.

⁸⁹*Inst.* 3:17:8-10 [mainly 1539].

He then proceeds to discuss James's teaching and its relation to Paul's. Here, of course, he has to handle James's statement that we are justified by works and not by faith alone (2:24). This he expounds differently from Acts 10. For James 'justification' refers to 'the declaration, not the imputation, of righteousness'. 'He is not discussing in what manner we are justified but demanding of believers a righteousness fruitful in good works.'⁹⁰ While Calvin interprets Acts 10 of a double acceptance by God, James 2 he refers not to acceptance by God but to the proof of the genuineness of Abraham's faith. Why does he treat these two passages so differently? I think the answer lies not in any systematic considerations but in the fact that Calvin was above all a careful exegete who interpreted each passage according to what it actually says.

Two conclusions can be drawn. *First*, if Calvin was prepared to acknowledge an acceptance by God on the basis of the righteousness God has brought about in our lives, he might not be totally lacking in sympathy for those who today are seeking (as he was at Regensburg) to effect a convergence between the Catholic and Protestant doctrines of justification. *Secondly*, it seems to me that though Calvin was one of the greatest exponents of the classical Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, he manifested towards that doctrine a flexibility that he never manifested towards his opposition to human merit. He is more willing to admit that we are accepted on the basis of our works than to concede any worth to those works. We have, therefore, the paradox of justification by worthless works.

IX. The Role of Scripture

The discussion of the anomalies of Calvin's doctrine has yielded some conclusions about his use of Scripture. There are apparent aberrations in his doctrine of justification — the total worthlessness of works, works as inferior causes of salvation, acceptance by God on the basis of works. Here, as with his doctrine of double justification, he was motivated above all else by the need to account for the teaching of Scripture — in part because his opponents were appealing to the passages concerned but also because of his genuine commitment to take the whole of Scripture seriously. This is seen from the way in which he handled Acts 10 very differently from James 2 — because he was skilled enough as an exegete to discern that they were saying very different things.

But I do not wish to give the impression that Calvin was faultless. As with all theologians, he was influenced by aspects of his theological and cultural context of which he was probably unaware. The Nominalist and voluntarist statement that the death of Christ has value only because of God's good pleasure is not self-evidently scriptural. Underlying all of Calvin's theology is the principle already cited that the 'whole end [of Scripture] is to restrain our pride, to hum-

⁹⁰*Inst.* 3:17:11f. [1539].

ble us, cast us down, and utterly crush us'.⁹¹ That Scripture sets out to restrain human pride can scarcely be questioned, but with Calvin the one-sided application of this principle distorts his theology in a number of places. At the end of the day, though, it is perhaps preferable to the contemporary dogma that the 'whole end of Scripture is to make us feel good, to supply our needs and, above all else, to boost our self-esteem'. Faced with the need to choose between these two my vote is for Calvin every time.

⁹¹*Inst.* 3:18:4 [1536].