Imputation as Attribution: Union with Christ, Reification and Justification as Declarative Word

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Abstract: Calvin's integration of the christological features of the eucharistic controversy with soteriological questions in his refutation of Andreas Osiander marks a critical development in Reformed theology. In this article, that development is extended further in reconsideration of the nature of imputation as a linguistic action. It is argued that imputation is a soteriological corollary of the christological idea of attribution. Imputation thus conceived clarifies not only how it is located within the doctrine of union with Christ, but how that union and imputation provide clarity in ongoing discussions about reification of sin and righteousness as well as the nature of justification as a declarative word.

Introduction

Though it is notoriously difficult and precarious to render such judgements, in my view Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ is his greatest contribution to the development of Reformed soteriology, at least if one has in mind a particular doctrinal contribution. However, it is more accurate to point to Calvin's explicit integration of the emerging Reformed Christology (in eucharistic controversial context) with soteriological concerns as the true contribution. Union with Christ is the common denominator and controlling feature of this integration, but appreciating this doctrine in Calvin depends on having an eye to its setting.

Situating this integration historically and theologically was the principal aim of a recent monograph, *Life in Christ*, in which I explored Calvin's theology of union with Christ in relation to saving grace, specifically his defense of the necessity of

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good works for those justified by faith alone.[1] In an article published a little earlier, certain elements of that study were picked up with a view to more recent questions regarding the doctrine of imputation.[2] In that article, I proposed an understanding of imputation as soteriological attribution, suggesting that on a Reformed model of union with Christ, imputation is in a soteriological context what attribution is in a christological context. That proposal was, therefore, an effort to extend further Calvin's integration of the christological-eucharistic and soteriological. In the present article I commend those considerations more particularly and with a view to two questions in contemporary discourse on justification: the reification of sin and righteousness, and justification as forensic declaration.

Before turning to Calvin's theology as a stimulus to our own, we note that recent trends in scholarship have warned soberly and wisely against the dangers of modern accommodations of Calvin's thought. At times these voices warn so fervently that the impression is given that any interest in the contemporary usefulness of Calvin's work smacks of abuse of historically-bounded texts. This need not be the case, however, if one's reading of Calvin is historically faithful. Indeed, to argue otherwise empties the modern task of theology of a great deal more than the work of one sixteenth-century figure. All theology to some extent presupposes the long story of dogmatic development. Ultimately, then, such an approach denies theology as a discipline, and the church as a theological body, any connection to the past, forcing the impossible prospect of creating the vocabulary, structures and content of theology anew with every attempt to speak. We turn to Calvin, then, not to transform him into the modern figure that he was not, but to hear him as the modern people that we are, to learn from him as we are called to learn from all our teachers. Even though our interest in his work is inescapably *ours*, inevitably reflective of our own situation and questions, still it is an interest pursued with a determined eye to the Calvin of history.

Calvin's great move: integrating Christ, eucharistic union and salvation

It is not among the most familiar of Calvin's statements, but in its historical and theological contexts it is arguably his most significant. With a view to the development of Reformed theology after Calvin, this possibility is only strengthened. At the height of his extensive refutation of the theology of justification propounded by the Lutheran controversialist, Andreas Osiander, Calvin wrote:

> [Osiander] forces a gross mingling of Christ with believers. And he therefore calls 'Zwinglian' all who disagree with his 'essential' righteousness because they do not say Christ is eaten in the Supper . . . Osiander's violent insistence

1 Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Studies in Christian History and Thought; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).
2 Mark A. Garcia, 'Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ: Calvin, Osiander, and the Contemporary Quest for a Reformed Model', *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006), pp. 219–51.

> upon essential righteousness and essential indwelling of Christ has this result: first, Osiander holds that God pours himself into us as a gross mixture, just as a physical eating in the Lord's Supper.[3]

Osiander's theology of justification, according to which one is justified by union with Christ according to his divine (and thus 'essentially' and ontologically righteous) nature only, was rejected not only by the Reformed but also by most Lutheran theologians of his day. Formal rejection within Lutheranism was eventually codified in the Formula of Concord, but this had been in place practically much earlier.[4]

Critically, with this statement, and with his Osiander refutation more generally, one discovers Calvin attacking the Lutheran Christology of ubiquitarianism held in common by his opponents as the cause of which Osiander's heresy was the effect. This statement is in fact the apex of an argument Calvin had been developing from the outset of his refutation and which was anticipated in previous replies to his Lutheran critics.[5] Calvin's Lutheran opponents had attempted repeatedly to associate Osiander with Calvin on the basis of perceived similarities on the doctrine of union with Christ. But Calvin here places the responsibility for the Osiandrian affair squarely on the shoulders of the Lutherans themselves, arguing that Osiander's widely-rejected theology of justification by union with the divine essence is only the consistent outworking of the christological assumptions at work in Lutheran ubiquitarianism,

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3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (LCC 20–21; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.10; *Joannis Calvini opera selecta . . .* , ed. Peter Barth *et al.*, 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–68), 4.192: 'Sed Osiander hac spirituali coniunctione spreta, crassam mixturam Christi cum fidelibus urget: atque ideo Zuinglianos odiose nominat, quicunque non subscribunt fanatico errori de essentiali iustitia: quia non sentiant Christum in Coena substantialiter comedi. . . . Quod ergo essentialem iustitiam et essentialem in nobis Christi habitationem tam importune exigit, huc spectat, primum ut crassa mixtura se Deus in nos transfundat, sicuti in Coena carnalis manducatio ab ipso fingitur . . .'. Calvin's fullest refutation is found in *Institutes* 3.11.5–12, a major section in his treatment of justification. See Garcia, *Life in Christ*, pp. 197–252, for an extensive investigation into the history and theology of Calvin's refutation of Osiander and for the documentation that supports the summary here. This material follows on from an exploration of the relevant christological matters in pp. 149–95. The two are brought together in more succinct form in Garcia, 'Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ', pp. 226–43. For more on Osiander's theology see, in a growing literature, Rainer Hauke, *Gott-Haben – um Gottes Willen: Andreas Osianders Theosisgedanke und die Diskussion um die Grundlagen der evangelisch verstandenen Rechtfertigung* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999); and, for a guide to Osiander's writings, Gottfried Seebass, ed., *Bibliographia Osiandrica: Bibliographie der gedruckten Schriften Andreas Osianders d. Ä., 1496–1552* (Nieuwkoop: de Graaf, 1971).

4 See *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 569.

5 Cf. John Calvin, *Ultima Admonitio* in *Calvini Opera*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz and Edward Reuss, 59 vols. (Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke & Sons, 1863–1900) (hereafter CO), 9.246; *Tracts and Treatises*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), vol. 2, p. 488; and *De vera participatione*, CO 9.504–5; *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 308.

particularly their horizontal or nature-to-nature model of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Whereas most critiques of Osiander, including an earlier one from Calvin himself, had focused on justification in relative isolation, Calvin's 1559 refutation serves as the first extensive and *explicit merging* of the eucharistic and justification controversies of the day.[6] Calvin demonstrates that eucharistic union with Christ, disputed by Lutherans and Reformed in terms of its patent christological roots, is deeply tied to soteriological union with Christ, and has clear implications in that context. There is theological reciprocity here, and Calvin exploits that reciprocity in his assessment of Osiander. It also serves, then, as a critical moment in the movement within Reformed theology in the direction of more explicit internal consistency and coherence, and not surprisingly this takes place along the lines of differing views with the Lutherans over the Christology and soteriology of union with Christ.

These considerations lead us to the concept of attribution and, in turn, to a proposal for the concept of imputation. In its formative period, the Reformed attribution model was set opposite the Lutheran interpretation of the *communicatio*, serving as it did in the latter case as the precondition for ubiquitarianism.[7] Whereas the Lutheran model was perceived to maintain a direct and 'horizontal' communication, from nature to nature, the Reformed ordinarily employed the language of attribution: what is properly true of one nature is *attributed* to the whole of Christ's person. The qualities of his divine and human natures must be kept distinct in order to avoid compromising the integrity of either, yet these distinct natures belong inseparably to the one person of Christ, so that what is predicated of one nature, properly, is attributed to the whole of the person. When Jesus is portrayed as in some way ignorant, for instance, J. Wollebius argues that this is meant 'properly' of his human nature only,[8] though this would apply to the whole of his person by attribution inasmuch as it is Jesus to whom reference is being made, not a nature in abstraction from his person. The Lutheran model, in contrast, employed

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6   Calvin had already written a brief response to Osiander's theology, in reply to the requests of friends: 'Contra Osiandrum', CO 10.165–67, of which an English translation is available in *Calvin's Ecclesiastical Advice*, trans. Mary Beaty and Benjamin W. Farley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), pp. 32–4.

7   The summary of the attribution model that follows draws from the fuller account in Garcia, 'Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ', pp. 244–9. For standard studies see G.C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 271–301; Joseph N. Tylenda, 'Calvin's Understanding of the Communication of Properties', *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975–76), p. 64; and, for the period of Reformed Orthodoxy, Heinriche Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson, ed. and rev. Ernst Bizer (1950; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978; repr. London: The Wakemen Trust, n.d.), pp. 439–47; and Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), s.v. 'communicatio idiomatum/communicatio proprietatum', pp. 72–4.

8   John Wollebius, *The Abridgment of Christian Divinitie So exactly and Methodically compiled, that it leads us, as it were by the hand To the Reading of the Holy Scriptures, . . .* 3rd edn; trans. Alexander Ross (London: T. Mabb for Joseph Nevill, 1660), p. 125.

a horizontal interpretation of the *communicatio*, in terms of the enhypostatic subsistence of the human nature of Christ in the divine person, as the necessary presupposition for ubiquitarianism. The Reformed opposed this model, arguing instead for a *predicatio verbalis* from the natures or *idiomata* to the person.

Following upon the foundational insights laid down in the sixteenth-century eucharistic controversy, the Reformed Orthodox stressed the reality of the union while insisting upon the persisting distinction of natures within the union. More particularly, they demonstrate a concern for the union as it illuminates the reality in view by the verbal action of attribution, that is, what is attributed is not merely verbal but real. So Wollebius calls the communication 'a manner of speaking, whereby that which belongs to either nature is predicated of the Person of Christ', explaining that the communication is 'verbal or real: verbal in respect of the manner of speaking but real in respect of the foundation, to wit, the personal union'. The union is thus the 'foundation' for the relationship of the distinct natures and is prior to them.[9] This effort to clarify the verbal action of attribution as linguistic ('a manner of speaking') and yet not merely so, surfaces as a distancing effort on the part of the Reformed from the more Zwinglian notion of *allaeosis*, according to which the relationship is purely verbal and thus, as Luther insisted, unreal.

I suggest it is against this christological-eucharistic backdrop that 'imputation' should be understood. Imputation is best seen as the soteriological corollary to christological attribution, not only as a verbal action but also in its function as an ontological-theological safeguard within the reality of union with Christ. To repeat how I have expressed the matter elsewhere:

> the distinctive righteousness of Christ, which is proper to him alone, is 'attributed' to believers *only within* and *because of* the reality of their union with him. This 'attributed' righteousness, proper to Christ alone, is ours 'improperly' but truly because of the reality of the union . . . Imputation is the *attribution* to the believer of the righteousness which is proper to Christ and yet truly the personal possession of the believer within the context of his union with Christ, the 'foundation' for this attribution. Put differently, in the indissoluble union of the believer with Christ, the righteousness which is proper only to Christ is *attributed* to the whole (Christ-and-the-believer-in-union) in such a way that the imputed righteousness truly belongs to the believer but, as far as justification is concerned, 'improperly,' that is, by attribution.[10]

Several considerations point to the tenability of such a proposal, chief among them the fact that 'imputation' is a declarative reckoning and thus a linguistic action. It ascribes to one what belongs properly to another, and does so with an interest in expressing both the otherness and the unity involved. Within the architecture of justification, 'imputation' serves to distinguish Christ's (proper) righteousness as the

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9   Wollebius, *The Abridgment of Christian Divinitie*, p. 125.
10   Garcia, 'Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ', p. 246.

meritorious grounds for the declaration, which is to say, then, that what is true of one (Christ) is being 'attributed' to another (the believer) within the reality of the union without obscuring the distinction between them. Such a construct seems to reflect the impulse of other early Reformed theologians such as Francis Turretin who describes imputation 'proper' as to 'hold him who has not done a thing, as if he had done it'. He proceeds to address the expected 'legal fiction' charge by stating, 'nor does it lack justice because there is granted a communion between us and Christ, which is the solid foundation of this imputation'.[11] 'Foundation' language for union with Christ in relation to imputation and justification, then, is hardly unusual within the texts of the Reformed tradition.

In view of this general profile, it is suggested that understanding 'imputation' as the soteriological corollary of christological attribution is deeply embedded in the defining features of the Reformed theological tradition. Further, it brings to clear expression two of its principal concerns: the distinction that persists between the natures (Christology) and thus between Christ and the believer (soteriology) in the context of union, and the priority and glory of the union itself, inasmuch as what is being 'attributed' in imputation is something true and real of the fullness of the eschatological reality of Christ-and-his-people as one.[12]

Imputation as attribution and the specter of reification

An attribution model for imputation promises to help clarify two questions in the contemporary discussion over imputation and justification. One principal concern is the reification of sin and righteousness. Reification, a logical and communicative fallacy in which ideas or abstractions are treated as though they were real, concrete entities, is a danger for a theology of imputation and justification when the courtroom metaphor is taken too far, suggesting that sin and righteousness are 'things' passed from one side of the courtroom to the other. As N.T. Wright has said in a study of the apostle Paul, 'Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.'[13] Clearly Wright is working for a rhetorical effect, and

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11   Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr, trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 2:648 (top. 16, q. III.vii); cf. p. 649 where imputation is a 'reckoning'. Cf. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, p. 149, s.v. 'imputation', who defines imputation in the period of Reformed Orthodoxy as an 'act of attribution'.

12   In arguing for a christological-eucharistic and soteriological corollary I am not suggesting an identity, as though the christological union of natures and the soteriological union of Christ and the believer by the Spirit and faith are of the same order, which they are not. Cf. Garcia, 'Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ', p. 248.

13   N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 98. Cf., more recently, N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), pp. 134, 206 *et al.*

it may be argued that he is interacting with a caricature rather than the more responsible models of imputation, yet the truth of his judgement should not be overlooked. It is unquestionably the case that explanations and defenses of the concept of imputation frequently treat sin and righteousness as 'things'.

In critical reaction to reification, and the metaphysical essentialism it assumes, it is becoming more common to accent a controlling relational core to human acting, sinful or otherwise. For instance, on a relational model of human personhood, the traditional notion of original sin as inheritance has given way, in some cases, to a matter of self-discovery, original sin being, in this case, only the awareness of one's being 'bound' to sin.[14] Sin, too, then has been framed exclusively in terms of relationality and, as a result, set in antithesis to any ostensibly depersonalized abstractions. Because 'imputation' runs the risk of suggesting such an abstraction, an attribution model clarifies how in fact it need not fall prey to reification. A reified notion of imputation is the result of depersonalizing sin and righteousness, of abstracting these ideas away from their personal contexts, but an attribution model for imputation eliminates the possibility of such depersonalization.

One place where the issue is perhaps more recognizable is in the translations of the Greek word *logizomai* as either 'reckon' or 'transfer'. The translation of the word has long been a central feature of the debate over imputation. D.A. Carson is correct that a doctrine of imputation cannot be derived merely from the word, or even from an instance of its use in the New Testament, but must be derived from the totality of its uses in the still larger context of biblical teaching.[15] 'Imputation', in fact, is an instance of theological vocabulary attempting to refer and capture faithfully a biblical teaching that is not wholly identifiable with any one Hebrew or Greek word or expression employed by the biblical writers. Much depends, then, on the extent to which the explanatory vocabulary chosen by theologians faithfully communicates the biblical and theological idea.

In this light, it is important to observe that 'to reckon' and 'to transfer' are not identical. To 'reckon' is akin to the understanding of imputation commended here for it communicates a verbal or linguistic action, something which works naturally with understanding justification as judicial *declaration*. As such, 'to reckon' suggests attribution and to 'impute' is understood in those terms. To 'transfer', however, immediately suggests something quite different. The term suggests the reification of sin or righteousness, even if it does not require such a conception. In the choice of theological vocabulary, a case could be made that greater clarity is achieved by use of 'reckon', or something similar, instead of 'transfer' language.

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14 Alistair McFayden, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

15 D.A. Carson, 'The Vindication of Imputation: Of Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields', in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 46–78, engaging the work of Robert Gundry. Carson calls the question of imputation the most contested element in the debate over justification (p. 47).

Justification in Christ as declarative, not creative word

The other question which an attribution model helps clarify regards the nature of justification as word. More specifically, imputation as attribution points to a word which is judicially or forensically declarative and not, as it is often presented to be, creative. At issue here is the unintentional compromise of the cardinal Reformational (and thus not only Reformed) insistence regarding justification, set opposite the Roman Catholic consensus: justification is an exclusively forensic declaration of status or standing, not a transformative one. This principle is compromised by models with render justification as a word which 'creates what it declares to be' or, more specifically, which relate sanctification and transformation to justification as effect to cause, inasmuch as such models inevitably ascribe a transformative core to justification, thus compromising its exclusively forensic character. Such models are found widely across the theological and ecclesiastical terrain and reflect a theological (and ironic) common ground of no small significance: Luther's rhetorical and theological identification of the justification word of God as *creative* and not only declarative.

On Barth's place in this picture, Hans Küng's Catholic interaction with Barth over justification is a helpful point of reference. Barth had taken up Luther's expression 'the word creates what it declares' in order to explicate justification as creative, declarative word. Luther's theology was shaped by the idea,[16] and Barth's relationship to Luther on this point is suggestive of a Lutheran theological pedigree for this way of speaking of justification within Reformed circles in our day.

In critical interaction with Barth, Küng affirmed:

> Unlike the word of man, the word of God *does* what it signifies . . . The declaration of justice is the cause of something which before now was *not*, but now *is*. What man accomplishes by action, God accomplishes by speech, through His Word, filled with spirit and power . . . It is the efficacious Word of God; His verdict is the creative fiat of the Almighty. In brief, God's *declaration* of justice is, as God's declaration of justice, at the same time and in the same act, a *making just*.[17]

Most significant here is how Küng himself recognized no great chasm between him and Barth on this point. 'A declaring of justice which makes just: this expression needs further explanation. For the moment,' he continues, 'it is easily established that

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16   See Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 131–59.

17   Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, trans. by Thomas Collins, Edmund E. Tolk and David Grandskou (London: Burns & Oates, 1964), pp. 203–4; emphases Küng's. Cf. also p. 210: 'So it is vitally important that the relationship between the declaration of justice and making just be precisely defined, as we did above – that is, as the single act which simultaneously declares just and makes just.'

here there is no essential difference between the Barthian and the Catholic position.'[18]

However, in light of what has been said above about Calvin and Osiander, it is critical to the ongoing discussion that one recognizes Küng's response to Barth as a flattening of the theological and confessional landscape. He blurs what are, in this context, rather crucial theological differences across confessional-traditional lines. As I have argued elsewhere, the Lutheran and Reformed traditions share an important understanding of justification at the level of confessional definition; they do not, however, share a fuller theology of justification beyond this confessional level, that is, at the level of theological and biblical contexts and relationships. Whereas the Lutheran tradition typically has seen sanctification as rooted in justification as effect to cause, and regarded union with Christ as a benefit of justification, the Reformed tradition has instead seen justification and sanctification as aspects of union with Christ.[19] Incidentally, even where it has been thought that Calvin understood sanctification as the fruit or effect of justification, a close reading with a view to the contextual signals he himself regularly provides demonstrates this is an oversimplified misunderstanding of the texts.[20]

With this panconfessional problem[21] in view, we carefully note Küng's statement a few pages later: 'Protestants speak of a declaration of justice and

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18 Küng, *Justification*, p. 206.
19 See Garcia, *Life in Christ*, *passim*; and Mark A. Garcia, 'No Reformed Theology of Justification?' in *Ordained Servant*, October 2007, online at www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=66, and the documentation cited in both.
20 See the discussion of this question in Mark A. Garcia, 'Of Doorposts and Hinges: Calvin on Union with Christ', forthcoming in a volume of essays from the 2009 Spring Conference at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Greenville, SC, USA; and Garcia, 'No Reformed Theology of Justification?'. Contrast Michael S. Horton's reading of Calvin in *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 143.
21 By 'panconfessional' I do not have in mind the idea that there is important agreement at the confessional level between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, that is, agreement among the *confessions themselves* (in fact there is agreement here). Instead, I have in mind the approach which fails to distinguish the different theological frameworks and explications for justification and salvation at work in these *confessional traditions*. It is the *different confessional traditions as authoritative codifications of different theological traditions* of christological, sacramental and soteriological exposition, not the confessional definitions themselves, which are confused in what I am referring to as panconfessionalism. At the same time, I do not suggest that there are no significant differences to be noted within the respective confessional standards, either. For instance, it would appear that only Reformed confessional standards could include statements like Westminster Larger Catechism 69: 'Q. What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ? A. The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, *and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him*.' 'Panconfessionalism' is a term introduced and more fully explained in my review article, 'No Reformed Theology of Justification?'.

Catholics of a making just. But Protestants speak of a declaring just which includes a making just . . .'.[22] Küng thus divides the Church into 'Protestants' and 'Catholics', and 'Protestants', he says, hold to a model of justification which 'includes a making just'. What Küng has in mind, of course, is the justification word of God as *creative*, especially in terms of what he is finding in Barth. This description of the matter, however, it must be observed, applies fairly to the Lutheran branch of the Protestant Reformation, and perhaps to other branches, in their commitment to justification as the cause or source of sanctification. But it does not apply fairly to the Reformed. By engaging 'Protestants' in such a fashion, and Barth himself as a Protestant in these specific terms, he in fact treats all Protestants in terms of the Lutheran, not Reformed consensus, and thus overlooks the historical and theological *raison d'être* of the Reformed tradition as it was born in the sixteenth century, which has to do with differences with the Lutherans over union with Christ in its christological-eucharistic as well as soteriological contexts. This same assumption of a panconfessional theology of justification, though sometimes with quite contrary goals, continues to plague the discussion within biblical, historical and theological studies.[23]

As noted, however, Barth's use of Luther's language is not unique to him and it continues to resonate with many who engage the topic of justification. As an example, Michael S. Horton, in an engagement with Bruce McCormack's views on union with Christ and justification, operates within the identical theological framework of a Luther-informed Barthianism. He calls the Reformation doctrine an attempt to place 'the *ordo salutis* on an entirely different theological map redrawn by forensic justification' and then asks if 'God's Word, rendered effectual by the Spirit, [has] the illocutionary and perlocutionary force to bring about the world of which it speaks'. He answers the question in the affirmative, stating justification is the 'communicative source of the new creation *as a whole*'.[24] Even as he moves immediately to deny that justification is not to be confused with anything produced within us, he has already confused the matter by identifying the justification word as itself transformative, and thus no longer purely forensic and declarative, at its core. To put the matter somewhat differently, if the justification word is productive of the new creation, and that new creation is exhaustively righteous and holy ethically and not only formally, then justification at its core is not an exclusively forensic declaration but is at least partly transformative.

With these comments, Horton is interacting to some extent with McCormack's concern that the Reformed theology of union with Christ, in connection to

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22   Küng, *Justification*, p. 211.
23   For example, in Paul A. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), generally in defense of the New Perspective on Paul and similar models; and R. Scott Clark, ed., *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), in critique of such models. See, as a review of these volumes, Garcia, 'No Reformed Theology of Justification?'.
24   Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, pp. 199, 203. Emphasis is Horton's.

regeneration, is itself the fatal threat to its doctrine of forensic imputation and justification. Horton's response to McCormack is to transform the Reformed theological tradition into the classical Lutheran one, illustrating a panconfessional approach which recalls Küng's assessment of Barth, by making union with Christ the result of justification. It is this move that creates the dilemma noted above. While the question cannot be discussed fully here, it is basic to the discussion of these points that the Reformed model of union with Christ is not from the start an essentially transformative thing into which a forensic idea must somehow be fit or even forced. So long as union with Christ is confusedly assumed to be principally a transformative, regenerative idea, identifiable to some degree with the category of sanctification, it will continue to present a problem or even threat to forensic justification.[25] To recall the discussion of reification above, one can also appreciate how imputation as a 'reckoning' or 'attribution' is most consistent with justification's purely forensic, and not transformative, nature, whereas imputation as 'transfer' suggests not a pure declaration but instead a substantive communication.[26]

Advantages of imputation as soteriological attribution

In light of these brief remarks, several advantages of an attribution model for imputation appear to be significant. Firstly, the context of union with Christ for imputation (as 'foundation', to use the language of the Reformed Orthodox) is clarified as necessary and irreversible. On an attribution model, 'imputation' is meaningful only as it is located within and shaped by its setting in union with Christ. It is an 'attribution' only of what is true by virtue of the union with Christ.

Secondly, an attribution model of imputation ensures that imputation remains personal rather than a reified abstraction. As the soteriological corollary of a christological notion of attribution, imputation has no independent status or structure apart from the righteous Christ and the nature of our relationship to him in terms of union. It has not been possible to develop it here, but Calvin's other great contribution to a Reformed model of salvation is relevant to this point. In explicating the nature of the necessity of sanctification for salvation, and of the believer's possession of the Spirit of Christ, Calvin grounded this necessity in the Christ of history, not in an abstraction. In his Romans commentary especially, and in his

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25 As Horton does in *Covenant and Salvation*, p. 140, where the author connects union with Christ in Calvin to 'inner renewal' in contradistinction to justification, and then cites a passage from Calvin's commentary on John that does not support such a reading.

26 Interestingly, Wright, in *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*, shows he is sensitive to the tension between speaking of God's justification word creating what it declares and the forensic, not transformative, nature of justification. On p. 206, he wants to retain the language of a creative word but proposes that what is 'created' by the justification word is not a moral, ethical character but the *status* of 'justified'. This, it should be noted, is a use of justification as creative word that departs from the more standard use of this language found in, for example, Küng and Horton.

important 1539 revision of his *Institutes*, Calvin pointed to the transition in Christ from humiliation to exaltation, suffering to glory, cross to resurrection, and obedience to eschatological life as the concrete, historical location of the believer's present life in Christ.[27] The indispensability of the historical to Calvin's notion of union with Christ points well away from any possibility of theological abstraction, but it also provides a healthy framework within which we may see justification as the believer's participation in the justification-verdict passed over Christ himself in resurrection.[28] In these ways, Calvin's union idea is determined by the concrete and historical particularity of the person, work and covenantal story of Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, an attribution model provides a more satisfactory accounting for how we must speak of the 'meritorious' quality of Christ's righteousness in distinction from the believer's righteousness or obedience. In an attribution model, the merit of Christ's righteousness has to do, at least in part, with its 'otherness', the enduring truth that it is not like ours, neither in quantity (our righteous deeds not being as many as his) nor in quality (our righteous deeds not fulfilling the Law as thoroughly and exhaustively as his but being instead always marred in some way). Christ's uniquely meritorious righteousness as the sole ground of justification is therefore not put in question by the reality of the union but is instead most clearly distinguished from the believer's *within* the context of a real union by virtue of the 'otherness' of Christ that persists within that union. Because the believer does not *become* Christ in union with him, 'meritorious' may gain its greatest clarity in terms of that persistent distinction.

Justification as status-in-relation

Perhaps if there is one all-encompassing advantage to the attribution model of imputation, it is that it has this clarifying point at its heart: justification, located within union with Christ and illumined by an attribution model of imputation, is irreducibly a matter of *status-in-relation*, never status in isolation. It is not, then, and principally for this reason, a 'static' affair any more than Christ's continuing, active priestly service in the heavenlies, on which justification depends, is static and not 'dynamic'. It is neither mere status nor is it mere relation. Nor is it a mere relation-in-status, such that justification is the more basic reality that provides the relational alongside all other dimensions of grace. If imputation is an attribution (*predicatio*

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27 For full discussion see Garcia, *Life in Christ*, pp. 89–147.

28 See Mark A. Garcia, 'Christ and the Spirit: The Meaning and Promise of a Reformed Idea', in Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington, *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), pp. 424–42. For foundational work in biblical and systematic theology along these lines see especially Richard B. Gaffin, Jr, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (repr. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987); and Lane G. Tipton's essay on union with Christ and justification in K. Scott Oliphint, ed., *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2007), pp. 23–49.

verbalis) to believers 'improperly' of what is true of Christ 'properly', then justification is always a declaration regarding *status-in-relation*.

As a final aside, however, one notes that in view of the Reformed theology of union with Christ, the relation itself, like the status, must be of a particular kind in order to render such service. It will not do simply to affirm the relational as a catch-all for questions of *ordo salutis*. Relationality per se cannot serve as the explanatory, interpretative framework for imputation and justification. Only when relationality is situated in the revelatory and historical features that belong to covenant can it serve its purpose. Though it has not been possible to elaborate on the point here, it is only covenantal relationality – the historically differentiated ways the covenants inform and fill 'union with Christ' with its eschatological and revelatory content – that provides the framework for locating the blessings of that relationship in satisfying, clear proximity to each other.

With these considerations in view I propose that an attribution model for imputation, against the backdrop of Calvin's contributions to the distinct Reformed christological–pneumatological–soteriological nexus, appears most compellingly to express the internal consistency of the Reformed theological system. Granted such an interest in theological coherence is not as widespread as it once was; but for those who continue to labor self-consciously within the Reformed tradition, this model may help weave together, more explicitly and consistently, its most basic theological convictions regarding Christ, the Spirit and the eschatology of redemptive grace.