

## Introduction

The title I was given for this paper was ‘Justification in the *Ordo Salutis*’. As you will see, I have taken the liberty of changing that slightly to ‘Justification and the *Ordo Salutis*’. In the course of my preparation, it became clear that the question I needed to answer was not simply: ‘Where does justification fit into the *ordo salutis*?’ but ‘Is the construction of an *ordo salutis* an appropriate way to deal with the doctrine of justification?’ This perhaps requires a word of explanation.

As one who stands within the Reformed theological tradition and who has an interest in the history of that tradition, I have been fascinated to observe a changing approach to the subject before us today. For most of its history, Reformed theologians have generally sought to understand and explain the application of redemption by means of an ‘*ordo salutis*’ method, namely, by demonstrating the relationship between the various doctrines in terms of the order in which they impact on the human condition. So, for example, some have argued that the *ordo salutis* begins with effectual calling, which leads to regeneration, which in turn produces faith, which leads to justification and so on. It might almost be said that these various doctrines were conceived of in terms of a ‘domino’ effect, such that, the process having begun, one follows from the other automatically.

In more recent Reformed theology, however, theologians have chosen to approach the application of redemption by focussing on union with Christ, instead of following an ‘*ordo salutis*’ method. Paradoxically, this ‘union with Christ’ method has been adopted by two schools of thought within Reformed theology which, in most other respects,

are normally opposed to one another, namely, neo-orthodoxy on the one hand and the theologians associated with Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia on the other hand. Not surprisingly, there is a marked contrast in the way in which these two schools use the ‘union with Christ’ method, leading to quite different conclusions.

In order to open up the discussion, this paper is divided into four sections. First, a brief general introduction to the concept of the *ordo salutis*; second, an identification of some of the important theological issues raised in seeking to discern the place of justification within the *ordo salutis* in Reformed theology; third, a discussion of the ‘union with Christ’ method as developed within neo-orthodox theology and as developed by scholars associated with Westminster Theological Seminary; and fourth, an attempt to draw some conclusions and to suggest possible ways forward for Reformed theology.

## 1. The *Ordo Salutis*

Louis Berkhof defines the *ordo salutis* in this way: ‘The *ordo salutis* describes the process by which the work of salvation, wrought in Christ, is subjectively realised in the hearts and lives of sinners. It aims at describing in their logical order, and also in their interrelations, the various movements of the Holy Spirit in the application of the work of redemption.’<sup>2</sup>

The origins of the term have been traced to two Lutheran scholars, Frank Buddeus and Jakobus Karpov, writing between 1724 and 1739.<sup>3</sup> As Sinclair Ferguson notes, however, the concept, ‘... has an older pedigree, stretching back into pre-Reformation theology’s attempts to relate the various experiential and sacramental steps to

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salvation. In this context Luther's personal struggle may be viewed as a search for a truly evangelical *ordo salutis*.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty experienced in developing an *ordo salutis* is that the biblical evidence for the creation of an *ordo salutis* does not lie on the surface of the text but has to be deduced and inferred from various places.<sup>5</sup> This problem, however, did not deter many of those within the Reformed tradition from developing an *ordo salutis*, drawing their structure from Romans 8:28–30 and elsewhere.

Within Reformed theology, the development of an *ordo salutis* involved three main considerations. First, it was recognised that God takes the initiative in salvation and that he does so through his Word and by his Spirit. Second, the *ordo salutis* was developed in such a way as to give proper expression to the Calvinistic theology and its understanding of the application of salvation. Third, it was clearly understood that the *ordo salutis* must account for the two problems which fallen human beings face, namely, their broken relationship to God and their polluted, sinful condition. Thus in the *ordo salutis* the various doctrines were divided into two groups: those which described the change in the sinner's relationship to God and those which described the renovation and renewal of the human condition.

The construction of an *ordo salutis* in order to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption was essentially a Reformation and post-Reformation development. As Berkhof writes,

The doctrine of the order of salvation is a fruit of the Reformation. Hardly any semblance of it is found in the works of the Scholastics. In pre-Reformation theology scant justice is done to soteriology in general. It does not constitute a separate locus, and its constituent parts

are discussed under other rubrics, more or less as *disiecta membra*. Even the greatest of the Schoolmen, such as Peter the Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, pass on at once from the discussion of the incarnation to that of the Church and the sacraments.<sup>6</sup>

Berkhof goes on to say that 'Calvin was the first to group the various parts of the order of salvation in a systematic way ...',<sup>7</sup> while recognising that this was a very preliminary attempt at such a process. Indeed, we might say that Calvin's *ordo salutis* was very simple, consisting of faith, justification and sanctification.<sup>8</sup> As Ronald Wallace has written, 'Calvin defines what we receive from Jesus Christ by faith as a "double grace", or a twofold benefit, the whole of which can be summed up for the purpose of theological discussion under two headings: Justification and Sanctification.'<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bromiley argues that the way in which Calvin dealt with the relationship between justification and sanctification was itself highly significant:

Perhaps Calvin's most important contribution to the understanding of justification is his reuniting of two things which for purposes of clarity had in a sense been divided, namely, justification and sanctification. Now obviously neither Luther nor Cranmer nor others meant to keep the two apart. Their anxiety to relate faith to works bears ample testimony to this. On the other hand, the Reformers in general can hardly be said to have presented a comprehensive view of Christian salvation and the Christian life in a way which brings out the full relationship of justification and sanctification. This was to be the great achievement of Calvin.<sup>10</sup>

Berkouwer puts it slightly differently, arguing that, in discussions about the *ordo salutis*, the emphasis should be on salvation in Christ and this he sees in Calvin:

Though one does not find an *ordo salutis* in Calvin, in the sense of its later development, there is nonetheless

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an order, perhaps better called an orderliness, which is determined by salvation in Christ. Salvation in Christ – this is the center from which the lines are drawn to every point of the *way of salvation*. The lines themselves may be called faith.<sup>11</sup>

Those who followed Calvin, however, developed the *ordo salutis* considerably. This was particularly true of Theodore Beza on the continent and William Perkins in England, both of whom developed charts (or *Tabulae*) in which the various doctrines were located in a logical (although not necessarily chronological) order. Perkins's 'golden chain' was particularly decisive for Puritan theology. The *ordo salutis* developed by Perkins involved first, effectual calling, which produced faith; second, justification, involving the remission of sin and the imputation of righteousness; third, sanctification, which involved mortification, vivification and repentance; finally, glorification and life eternal.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to point out, however, that the *ordo salutis* as developed by Beza and Perkins was not driven and controlled by a predestinarian or deterministic worldview as some have argued.<sup>13</sup> Richard Muller, in a profound and scholarly analysis of the relationship between Christology and Predestination in early Reformed theology, says this: It would be a mistake to say that there were no deterministic tendencies in Beza's thought, but these tendencies existed in tension with a christocentric piety and a very real sense of the danger of determinism. Beza did not produce a predestinarian or necessitarian system nor did he ineluctably draw Reformed theology toward formulation of a causal metaphysic. Nor did he develop one locus to the neglect, exclusion, or deemphasis of others. Beza's role in the development of Reformed system may better be described as a generally successful attempt to clarify and to render more precise the doctrinal definitions he had inherited from Calvin and the other Reformers of the first era of theological codification.<sup>14</sup>

Rather than predestination, the key to the *ordo salutis* in early Reformed theology was effectual calling. This was defined as that work of God the Holy Spirit whereby the outward call of the gospel was combined with the effectual call of the Spirit.

In the first half of the seventeenth century theologians tended to define the term 'effectual calling' in such a way as to include regeneration. This is reflected in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which has a chapter on effectual calling<sup>15</sup> but no chapter on regeneration. In the later seventeenth century, for example in John Owen,<sup>16</sup> a clearer distinction was made between effectual calling and regeneration, with much more stress being placed on the latter. The general shape of the *ordo salutis* was thus clarified. It was argued that effectual calling produces regeneration. Faith, being the first fruit of regeneration, the *ordo salutis* then divided into two streams. On the one hand, faith led to justification and adoption, thus dealing with the sinner's relationship to God; on the other hand, faith led to repentance and sanctification, thus dealing with the sinner's inner condition.

Some of the discussions about the *ordo salutis* in seventeenth century Reformed theology were occasioned by internal debates. For example, Arminius and the Remonstrants wanted to put faith before regeneration, in order to emphasise the human decision, as over against the Reformed view that regeneration must precede faith, in order to emphasise *sola gratia*. It is in this context that Berkouwer refers to Arminianism as '... this particular over-estimation of faith as a spiritual achievement.'<sup>17</sup>

This is only one example of the many variations between Reformed scholars on the *ordo salutis*. A more recent example concerns the disagreement

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between the Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck and G.C. Berkouwer. Kuyper taught that justification was from eternity, in order to stress the priority of grace. Berkouwer sums up his position 'If justification is a divine act of grace which no human merit can achieve, then it must also precede faith ... as eternity "precedes" time.'<sup>18</sup> Kuyper's argument is that justification is from eternity by grace but is 'appropriated' in time through faith. Bavinck rejected this theory of eternal justification because, he argued, it is not taught in Scripture and could be used in respect of many other doctrines as well.<sup>19</sup> He did, however, want to affirm with Kuyper that '... all the benefits of the covenant of grace are established in eternity.'<sup>20</sup> Berkouwer later comments, 'This concept of eternal justification reveals how a speculative logic can invade a scriptural proclamation of salvation and torture it beyond recognition. This is the danger of an apparently consistent logical process which at first imperceptibly and then quite finally estranges itself from scriptural reality.'<sup>21</sup> He concludes by agreeing with Bavinck in rejecting Kuyper's notion of eternal justification and does so in quite strong terms: He who allows justification and redemption to ascend out of time into eternity is never again able to avoid the fatal conclusion that everything occurring in time merely formalizes or illustrates what has been molded in eternal quietness. Even the terrible reality of the cross is swallowed in the deep, still waters of eternity.<sup>22</sup>

The concept of the *ordo salutis*, then, was developed in post-Reformation theology, although the precise 'order' of the doctrines varied considerably from scholar to scholar.

## 2. Justification in the Ordo Salutis

We must now turn more specifically to the place that has been given to justification in the *ordo* been regarded by most scholars as following upon faith, which in turn is brought about by effectual calling and/or regeneration. There are, however, at least three significant issues on which Reformed theologians have been divided in relation to justification, namely, imputation, the nature of saving faith and the place given to repentance.

### a. Imputation

Justification was defined in forensic terms as the remission of sin and the imputation of righteousness, all of which in later Reformed theology was set in the context of a federal structure involving a covenant of redemption, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. Just as the sin of Adam was imputed to all those whom he represented in the covenant of works, on the basis that he was their federal head, so the righteousness of Christ is imputed to all those whom he represents as federal head in the covenant of grace.

This matter of imputation is vital to any proper understanding of the Reformed view of justification. Indeed, the very nature of the imputation became a significant issue. This is demonstrated by the way in which the doctrine of justification is presented in the confessional documents. More specifically, it is highlighted by the way in which the *Savoy Declaration* differs from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* on the issue of imputation. The *Savoy Declaration* is, on most matters, almost identical to the WCF, on which it was based. On justification, however, there is an interesting difference.

Note first of all the section from the *WCF* statement on justification:

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Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing *the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them*, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.<sup>23</sup>

When we come to the statement on justification in the *Savoy Declaration*, however, one part has been changed and expanded. As Alan Clifford puts it, 'Through alterations proposed by John Owen, the teaching on imputation became even more explicit ...'<sup>24</sup>

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing *Christ's active obedience to the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness*, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.<sup>25</sup>

This was not an alteration which all Reformed scholars accepted. William Cunningham, for example, in discussing this issue, pointed out that it was not to be found in the writings of Calvin: It is to be traced rather to the more minute and subtle speculations, to which the doctrine of justification was afterwards subjected; and though the distinction is quite in accordance with the analogy of faith, and may be of use in aiding the formation of distinct and definite conceptions, – it is not of any great practical importance and need not be much pressed or insisted on, if men

heartily and intelligently ascribe their forgiveness and acceptance wholly to what Christ has done and suffered in their room and stead. There is no ground in anything Calvin has written for asserting, that he would have denied or rejected this distinction, if it had been presented to him. But it was perhaps more in accordance with the cautious and reverential spirit in which he usually conducted his investigations into divine things, to abstain from any minute and definite statements regarding it.<sup>26</sup>

No matter which position is taken on the issue of the imputation of the active and passive obedience of Christ, however, one thing is clear: imputation is at the very heart and centre of the Reformed understanding of justification.

#### **b. Faith**

Another issue which Reformed theologians have debated, in their thinking about justification, concerns the nature of saving faith and the location of faith in the *ordo salutis*. In general, Reformed theologians have taught that faith is the formal or instrumental cause of justification and is not in itself meritorious. That is to say, faith is not something which sinners bring to God from out of themselves, in exchange for which God justifies them. Rather, faith is a free gift of God, by the instrumentality of which justification is obtained.

Some Reformed theologians have also been concerned lest the significance of faith be lost by regarding it simply as another step in the *ordo salutis*. Berkouwer, for example, expresses the concern in this way:

If the *ordo salutis* were really intended to be a straight line drawn through a sequence of causal factors it would be open to the same objections that we have against the Roman Catholic concept of the function of faith as a preparatory phase preceding justification or infused grace. Reformation theology has always protested that faith thus loses its central and total character and becomes a mere step

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on the way of salvation. In contrast to this devaluation of faith, the Reformation confessed *sola fide*, meaning thereby to emphasize the universal significance of faith. In this way faith possesses no unique functional value; it rests wholly in God's grace. Theological study of the way of salvation, or *ordo salutis*, must, then, always revolve about the correlation between faith and justification. It must simply cut away everything which blocks its perspective of this *sola fide*. Heresy always invades the *ordo salutis* at this point, and this is why it is so necessary to realize that the entire *way of salvation* is only meant to illuminate *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. For only thus can it be confessed that *Christ is the way*.<sup>27</sup>

He underlines this point and concludes by stressing that '... it is perpetually necessary for the Church to reflect on the *ordo salutis*, or, as we think better to say on the *way of salvation*. The purpose of her reflection is not to refine and praise the logical systematization. It is to cut off every way in which Christ is not confessed exclusively as *the Way*.'<sup>28</sup>

We can now take the argument a step further and through the instrumentality of faith, a faith which is itself meritorious and which exists only because of God's grace.

### c. Repentance

In formulating its understanding of the place of justification in the *ordo salutis*, Reformed theology has often been divided over the place of repentance. There were some Scottish theologians, for example, who argued that repentance was a condition of salvation and therefore must come before justification in the *ordo salutis*.<sup>29</sup>

There have been, of course, Reformed theologians who wanted to put repentance before justification in the *ordo salutis* but who would certainly not regard justification as conditional upon repentance. Robert Reymond, for example, argues on Scriptural grounds that repentance comes before justification.<sup>30</sup>

His *ordo* is: effectual calling, regeneration, repentance unto life, faith in Jesus Christ, justification, definitive sanctification, adoption (and the Spirit's sealing), progressive sanctification, perseverance in holiness and glorification.<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that repentance comes before justification (and even faith) he is careful to insist that faith is the sole instrument of justification and that repentance is '... not to be rested in as if it were itself a satisfaction for sin or the cause of pardon, for repentance *per se* is and can be neither.'<sup>32</sup>

On the whole, however, Reformed theologians have viewed repentance as following upon justification as a result, rather than going before it as a cause. Irrespective of the view taken on the place of repentance in the *ordo salutis*, however, Reformed theologians are at least in agreement that neither justification, nor the faith which is its instrumental cause, are occasioned by repentance, which must rather be regarded as a non-meritorious but necessary accompaniment to faith.

### 3. Union with Christ

As we now turn to consider the two schools of thought which, in their teaching concerning the application of redemption, have followed the 'union with Christ' method, as over against an '*ordo salutis*' method, it must not be imagined that the Reformed theologians of earlier centuries ignored this vital doctrine. We noted earlier the emphasis on effectual calling in early seventeenth century theology. We should also note that it was characteristic of these theologians to see effectual calling as that which unites believers to Christ. Heinrich Heppé writes, 'At the root of the whole doctrine of the appropriation of salvation lies the doctrine of *insitio* or *insitio in*

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*Christum*, through which we live in him and he in us.<sup>33</sup> Heppie goes on to quote Witsius: ‘The goal to which we are called is Christ and communion with himself ... The result of this communion is communion in all the benefits of Christ, in grace as well as in glory, to both of which alike we are called.’<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, John Owen among the English puritans and Thomas Boston among the Scottish covenant theologians are good examples of scholars who gave due emphasis to union with Christ. John Owen followed in the general line of those we have noted above. As Sinclair Ferguson notes, ‘For Owen, then, such order as there is in the *ordo salutis* would seem to be: Effectual Calling; Regeneration; Faith; Repentance; Justification; Adoption; and Sanctification.’<sup>35</sup> Yet Owen could speak about union with Christ as ‘the sole fountain of our blessedness’.<sup>36</sup> His understanding was that this union took place by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through effectual calling.<sup>37</sup> This was a very significant element in his overall understanding of the *ordo salutis*. Ferguson sums up Owen’s position this way: ‘Thus divine election, and the outworking of it through the *ordo salutis* find their meeting place in union with Christ. This union, and all aspects of the plan of salvation are, for Owen, the application and fruit of the covenant of grace. To become a Christian is therefore to be taken into covenant with God in Christ, by the Holy Spirit.’<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Boston was an orthodox covenant theologian who developed the *ordo salutis* in line with Calvinist theology and who understood the place of justification accordingly. He argued that effectual calling leads to regeneration, which in turn produces faith by which we are justified. Nevertheless, he placed such emphasis upon union with Christ as to be able to say,

It is the leading, comprehensive, fundamental privilege of believers, 1 Cor. iii. 23. ‘Ye are Christ’s.’ All their other privileges are derived from and grafted upon this, their justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. All these grow on this root; and where that is wanting, none of these can be. All acceptable obedience comes from the soul’s union with Christ, John xv. 4. Hence faith is the principal grace, as uniting us to Christ.<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, Boston saw no incompatibility between emphasising an *ordo salutis* and at the same time recognising that union with Christ is vital for salvation. For example, in another place Boston insists that ‘Union with Christ is the only way to sanctification.’<sup>40</sup> He was also very clear in his specifications as to the nature of this union with Christ. It was not an external union, such as might exist, for example between a ruler and his subjects. Rather it was an internal and spiritual union. He does not regard the benefits which flow from union with Christ as being like benefits which might be passed on to us externally but rather as benefits which flow because of the nature of the union. In seeking to explain this union and the benefits which accrue from it, he uses an illustration. The benefits we receive by union with Christ are not like those of the beggar who is thrown some money by a rich man but rather like those of a poor, debt-ridden widow who, by marrying the rich man, has her situation transformed.<sup>41</sup>

This view is shared by Louis Berkhof who writes, ‘Since the believer is “a new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17), or is “justified” (Acts 13:39) only in Christ, union with Him logically precedes both regeneration and justification by faith, while yet, chronologically, the moment when we are united with Christ is also the moment of our regeneration and justification.’<sup>42</sup>

We must recognise, however, that although these scholars gave a place (sometimes a significant place)

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to union with Christ, they did so without any intended critique of the *ordo salutis* method. Those we are to consider now, in placing emphasis upon union with Christ, do so with the clear theological intention of raising questions about the validity of the *ordo salutis* method.

**a. Union with Christ in Neo-Orthodoxy**

Based upon his Christological approach to theology, Karl Barth views the application of redemption from the perspective of Christ, rather than from the perspective of the individual human being. He does not regard justification, adoption, sanctification and so on as a series of separate but connected events or processes in the life of the believer. Instead he emphasises that all of these blessings come to human beings as a direct result of their being united to Christ.<sup>43</sup> He was particularly concerned that the relation between justification and sanctification should be properly understood.<sup>44</sup>

For Barth, questions such as whether regeneration precedes effectual calling, or whether justification has a logical priority over regeneration, are largely irrelevant. For him, all of these are embodied in Christ and we come to share in all of them as we are united with Christ. In this context, it is interesting to note the recently published lectures of Barth on the Reformed Confessions, which date from the very earliest days of his academic career.<sup>45</sup> In these lectures Barth touches upon the *ordo salutis* in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. His objection is not the same as that of later Barthians, who have argued that the Confession puts predestination at the head of the *ordo* and works out everything logically from there.<sup>46</sup> Rather, Barth's objection is that, by placing such a heavy emphasis upon the application of redemption and upon the

means by which the individual believer finds peace and assurance, it seeks '... to make Reformed theology into anthropology'.<sup>47</sup> He asks, 'Why could the successors of John Knox celebrate the Pyrrhic victory of Puritanism in the Westminster Confession so that they gave up their Scots Confession and exchanged the idea of the "holy city" for the deficient idea of the "order of salvation", the theology of the assurance of salvation?'<sup>48</sup>

T.F. Torrance followed the main tenets of Barth's theology in this matter of union with Christ, as in other areas, although preferring to call himself an Athanasian than a Barthian! As Duncan Rankin has demonstrated, however, there is a significant difference between Torrance and Barth in their developed positions.<sup>49</sup> Torrance built his theology around two separate notions of union with Christ: first, an incarnational (or carnal) union, which is with all humanity by the very act of Incarnation; and second, a spiritual union which is only between Christ and believers. It is not at all clear how one moves from the first union to the second, or indeed (given that Torrance is not a universalist) how unbelievers fall out of the first union. The key point for this paper, however, is that the union itself is presented in such a way as to obviate the need for a forensic explanation of the atonement.

The position is outlined with considerable clarity by Trevor Hart, who argues that both traditional Protestant theology and traditional Catholic theology have made the mistake of understanding salvation as the application of 'benefits'.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to this, he argues, we must see salvation in terms of our union with Christ who has already, in the incarnation, taken up sinful human flesh, united it with the divine and purified it from all sin. When we are

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united to Christ, we share in that reconciled and purified humanity.<sup>51</sup>

In Barth, Torrance and Hart, then, justification is not conceived of in forensic terms, involving the imputation of the righteousness of Christ and the non-imputation of sin but rather in terms of the participation in and the sharing of, Christ's righteousness.

In preparing this section of my paper, I am indebted to Professor Bruce McCormack of Princeton Theological Seminary for sending me an unpublished lecture on justification which he gave as part of 'The Josephine So Lectures for 2001', given at the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong. In that lecture, having demonstrated that the doctrine of justification in Reformed theology was forensic, based on the non-imputation of sin combined with the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, McCormack writes,

... in the period between 1551 and 1619 (the *terminus ad quem* of that period which establishes the 'originating trajectory' of Reformed teaching on any given subject), there is no deviation from a forensic understanding of justification. Seen in this light, a genuinely Reformed understanding must be forensic in both the negative and positive senses. Any deviation on either front – but especially the latter – would have to be seen as constituting not a development of the Reformed teaching on this subject but a departure from it.<sup>52</sup>

After considering the development of modern 'Protestant' theology and surveying some recent church documents which abandon forensic justification and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, McCormack's conclusion is striking. He argues that if we follow a non-forensic understanding of justification,

...then the simple demand of honesty lays upon us the requirement to find a different word than the word 'Reformed' and 'Protestant' to describe what it is that

we have now become theologically. For a forensic understanding was so essential to defining the meaning of the words 'Reformed' and 'Protestant' by 1580, that its elimination can only mean a 'break' with the Reformation at the decisive point. Such an admission would not automatically make us Catholic or Orthodox, to be sure. It is not at all clear to me what we would be. But what is clear is that we wouldn't be Protestant. And that is something which I think we all need to face squarely.<sup>53</sup>

Berkouwer reaches much the same conclusion by analysing the relationship between faith and justification in several Reformed and Lutheran Confessions. He begins with three Reformed confessional documents: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort. He concludes that

A single theme plays through all three documents ... the theme of *sola fide*. And this is the heart of the Reformed confession. The various and varied expressions are religiously simple and transparent. The fathers understood that justification through faith alone was the confession pre-eminent, the confession *sine qua non*.<sup>54</sup>

He then compares these with two Lutheran documents: the Augsburg Confession and the Apology for the Confessio Augustana. These too, like the Reformed documents, emphasise *sola fide*. He notes, in passing, that this is true also of the Smalkald Articles, Luther's Catechism and the Formula of Concord. His conclusion is that forensic (or declarative) justification '... was the uniting truth of the sixteenth century. All differences, some of which were not unimportant, within the Reformation stood in the shadow of this transcending verity.'<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere he makes it clear that the imputation of righteousness is a key element in his understanding of forensic justification:

We need only state forthrightly that declarative or forensic justification, as it was, on biblical grounds,

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understood by the Reformation, rules out the thought of faith as a meritorious condition of salvation. Forensic justification has to do with what is extra nos, with the imputation of what Christ has done on our behalf. This was, indeed, the original disposition of the Reformation.<sup>56</sup>

#### **b. Union with Christ in Westminster Calvinism**

We now turn to the second group of theologians who have focussed attention on union with Christ rather than on the traditional *ordo salutis* method. In doing so, we must have in mind the trenchant criticism which Professor McCormack applied to the Barthian scholars who did likewise. We must ask whether, in taking this position, these Westminster Theologians have somehow managed to maintain forensic justification involving the non-imputation of sin and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

From the influence of Gerhardus Vos and John Murray, there gradually developed within Westminster Theological Seminary (henceforth WTS) an approach to the application of redemption which seeks to draw together strands of the two positions considered so far. There is indeed an emphasis upon the 'union with Christ' method but there is also a commitment to forensic justification involving the imputation of Christ's righteousness. To understand how this position holds together, we must consider an important work by Richard Gaffin. Originally a doctoral dissertation submitted to WTS under the title: 'Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Soteriology' in 1969, it was published in 1978 as *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*.<sup>57</sup>

Gaffin argues that the key element in understanding Paul's soteriology is the resurrection of Christ and that a redemptive-historical outlook is '... decidedly dominant and determinative'.<sup>58</sup> He argues that it is not possible to understand either the accomplishment or the application of redemption

without focussing on the union between Christ and believers in resurrection. The resurrection of believers is entirely dependent upon Christ's resurrection, both historically (already realised) and eschatologically (we will be raised).<sup>59</sup>

On the basis of this study, Gaffin argues that the traditional *ordo salutis* ought to be revisited. In particular he raises three problems with the traditional *ordo salutis*. First, he notes the failure to take seriously the eschatological perspective of the Pauline doctrine: 'The traditional *ordo salutis* lacks the exclusively eschatological air which pervades the entire Pauline soteriology'.<sup>60</sup> Second, he points out that traditionally, the various elements in the *ordo salutis* are regarded as separate acts, which he regards as a serious mistake:

Nothing distinguishes the traditional *ordo salutis* more than its insistence that the justification, adoption and sanctification which occur at the inception of the application of redemption are separate acts. If our interpretation is correct, Paul views them not as distinct acts but as distinct aspects of a single act.<sup>61</sup>

Gaffin emphasises this point by showing the difficulty the traditional method has in dealing with the relationship between the various doctrines in the *ordo salutis* and the doctrine of union with Christ. That is to say, if union with Christ comes before these various acts, then why are they necessary? If, on the other hand, union with Christ follows these other acts, does that not devalue its meaning and significance?

Gaffin's third issue in relation to the traditional *ordo salutis* concerns the prominent place given to regeneration and whether or not this is compatible with Paul's soteriology. His concern is whether a 'distinct enlivening act (causally or temporally) prior to the initial act of faith' might actually involve a

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'distortion of Paul's viewpoint'.<sup>62</sup> He does not elaborate on this point, however, saying that it '... brings us to the limits of this study'<sup>63</sup> although he clearly believes it to be an important question for further work.

Gaffin's view has been very influential at WTS and others have followed his line of reasoning, including Sinclair Ferguson, who writes, 'Union with Christ must therefore be the dominant motif in any formulation of the application of redemption and the dominant feature of any "order" of salvation.'<sup>64</sup>

There is, however, a marked difference between the understanding of union with Christ as developed by Gaffin, Ferguson and others and as developed by the neo-orthodox theologians. As we saw in the previous section, particularly in Torrance and Hart, neo-orthodoxy views union with Christ as an alternative to a forensic understanding of atonement with its key component of imputation. In Gaffin, Ferguson and the WTS theologians, the forensic element is retained. The imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers remains a key element in their theology, it is simply that the means by which this imputation is effected is located in the prior doctrine of union with Christ.

This position has not gone unchallenged, related as it is to the development of John Murray's modified covenant theology in which he argued against a legal 'covenant of works' in favour of a gracious 'Adamic administration'. Meredith Kline and others, particularly Mark Karlberg, have argued that this failure to pursue a clear law/grace antithesis is a departure from Reformed theology and endangers the doctrine of justification which they believe to be dependent upon this antithesis.<sup>65</sup> We do not have time to discuss this argument here but it is interesting

to note that Karlberg goes so far as to say that John Murray, Norman Shepherd,<sup>66</sup> Dick Gaffin and Sinclair Ferguson have moved towards a 'Barthian' theology!

#### 4. Summary & Conclusions

We have seen, then, that Reformed theology has characteristically dealt with the application of redemption in terms of an *ordo salutis*. Within that *ordo salutis* justification has normally been placed after faith and before sanctification. Faith itself is seen as a gift of God, which is granted in effectual calling/regeneration. This is to ensure the priority of grace and to avoid any notion that justification could be earned or achieved by sinful human beings.

This *schema*, however, involves several difficulties. First, there is the difficulty of establishing the order in which the various doctrines are to be placed (based on very little direct Scriptural evidence) and whether the sequence is logical or chronological. Second, there is the danger of viewing the various doctrines as mere steps in a sequence, which, having once begun, will continue until complete. Third, and most significant, there is the problem of ascertaining the precise relationship between the steps in the *ordo salutis* and the act of God whereby he unites believers to Christ.

In order to avoid these difficulties, particularly the third, some modern Reformed theologians have largely abandoned the use of an *ordo salutis* method and opted instead to view the various doctrines in the *ordo salutis*, not as a series of connected acts and processes, but rather as aspects of union with Christ. We considered briefly two schools of thought within Reformed theology which have taken this approach

and noted the differences between them. In particular, we noted the crucial difference, namely, that the neo-orthodox understanding of union with Christ obviated the need for a clear forensic doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. The WTS theologians, on the other hand, maintained both the doctrine of union with Christ as the key to understanding the application of salvation and a clear forensic doctrine of imputation.

In my view, we have a great deal to learn from Gaffin, Ferguson and others in this regard. It is not necessary, of course, to abandon totally the concept of the *ordo salutis*. It may well be important to retain the concept in order to clarify the nature of the various doctrines and to guard against mistakes in the relationship posited between them.<sup>67</sup> Two things, however, are certainly clear: first, the doctrine of justification by faith cannot be properly and fully understood unless it is seen in the context of union with Christ; second, any understanding of justification which fails to maintain a forensic notion of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, cannot claim to be Reformed.

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ATB McGowan is the Principal of the Highland Theological Institute, Dingwall.