Salvation Determined Solely by Justification: “God’s Mercy Alone and Christ’s Merit”

As philosophers have fixed limits of the right and the honorable, whence they derive individual duties and the whole company of virtues, so Scripture is not without its own order in this matter, but holds to a most beautiful dispensation, and one more certain than all the philosophical ones. The only difference is that they, as they were ambitious men, diligently strove to attain an exquisite clarity of order to show the nimbleness of their wit. But the Spirit of God, because he taught without affectation, did not adhere so exactly or continuously to a methodical plan; yet when he lays one down anywhere he hints enough that it is not to be neglected by us (III.vi.1).

Introduction to an Architectonic Soteriology

The next three chapters elaborate a reconstruction of Calvin's soteriology according to a series of three dialectical moments. This threefold architectonic soteriology makes possible a coherent arrangement of diverse and potentially contradictory material from Calvin. Hegel and Derrida provide models for this architectonics. Yet as I argued in the previous chapter, their respective architectonic conceptualities, in order to be understood and perhaps even to be distinguished from one another, demand attention as to how architectonics unfolds into textuality and institution. Just so, in my presentation the textual form cannot be taken for granted, but will shift at each turn of the threefold movement; some of these turns will push against the parameters of academic textuality, even while failing to escape it—an academic book cannot suddenly become something other.

This chapter examines the first moment, justification considered alone. Here justification suffices as the sole and complete concept by which salvation is defined and comprehended; it must stand alone, in some way. Hegel's *Science of Logic*, being a preeminently self-sufficient and complete science, presents a potentially appropriate model of academic textuality. In adopting its form, this chapter attempts to recast Calvin's doctrine of justification by progressing from fundamental, maximally condensed statements about the Father's mercy
to a more complex narrative about Christ’s role as Mediator. The simple statements receive greater content from the more complex, while the complex are shown to refer back to the simple. The arrangement utilized below makes it possible to argue that these different ways of writing salvation are complementary. To the extent that the different forms are integrated by showing their interdependence, the Hegelian model of the academic text serves this chapter well, resulting in a textual closure that purports to comprehend the very truth and being of salvation within this text. This Hegelian model of textuality will not be seriously challenged until the following chapter.

The main departure from the Logic is that this chapter does not claim to be without presupposition, but functions as a kind of commentary on Calvin’s Institutes. As a commentary, this chapter picks up where Chapter 2 left off: the unresolved matter of how Calvin’s soteriology coheres. There I presented, with reference to conflicts between interpreters of Calvin, two hypothetical versions of Calvin’s doctrine of justification in its relation to sanctification under these respective headings: “forensic” and “union with Christ.” Neither of these proposed versions alone can account for all of the relevant statements on soteriology in the Institutes, but both together probably can.

The most popular interpretation of Calvin in recent scholarship simply puts forward the “union with Christ” model as a single, adequate explanation of Calvin’s soteriology. In this case, the concept of the “union” or “engrafting into Christ” affords an overarching singularity to the otherwise complex, differential relationship between justification and sanctification. According to this

1 Of course, the Institutes is itself a kind of commentary on the Bible, itself taken by Calvin as a self-attestation of absolute truth; in that regard, despite many layers of mediation, this chapter is not as far removed from Hegel’s Logic as it might appear.

2 See Stadtland, Rechtfertigung, 118–124; Charles Partee, “Calvin’s Central Dogma Again,” in Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: The Organizational Structure of Calvin’s Theology, ed. Richard Gamble. vol. 7, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1992); Wendel, Calvin, 234–240; Paul Van Buren, Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 95–124; Wendel, Calvin, 235; McGrath, Iustitia Dei, 255–56. The controversy over forensic justification versus “union with Christ” has continued in recent scholarship, with the latter side currently carrying the day. Most recently see Canlis, Calvin’s Ladder. Mark Garcia, Life in Christ: Union with Christ and the Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008) has argued that the duplex gratia is essential to preserving forensic justification. J. Todd Billings, while strongly featuring the union with Christ (see Calvin, Participation, and the Gift), has argued against pitting it against the importance of the distinction of justification and sanctification; see his, “John Calvin’s Soteriology: On the Multifaceted ‘Sum’ of the Gospel” International Journal of Systematic Theology, 11:4 (2009), 428–47. Other articles and books have appeared recently, but the debate