Transitions from Justification to Sanctification: Identity, Essential Différance, and Absolute Relation

Faith without works justifies, although this needs prudence and a sound interpretation; for this proposition, that faith without works justifies, is true and yet false, according to the different senses that it bears.¹

This chapter is the most complex of the three constructive chapters, for it most intensively deals simultaneously with Hegel, Derrida, and Calvin. Later on, for instance, Derrida’s critical repetition of Hegel will itself be repeated in a re-reading of Calvin. The result is a text of severe hermeneutical complexity and density. No doubt I have not made my argument as accessible as I might, but the nature of the argument to a large extent determines its difficulty. Aside from carrying out a complicated reading of Hegel and Derrida, this chapter delves into the principal soteriological question: the relation between justification and sanctification. This question is explored in three parts. In the first, the Hegelian model found in the Logic and adopted by Chapter 4 to explicate justification is extended so as to include sanctification and subjectivity. “Transition One,” then, posits the unity of justification and sanctification in Christ. “Transition Two” marks a radical shift away from the Hegelian model by exploring how Calvin’s use of the term “experience” may be given a Derridean interpretation. Here sanctification is posited to be something quite different from justification, rendering a singular comprehension impossible. Yet Calvin’s soteriology does not entirely support this logic, either. “Transition Three,” then, follows Calvin’s attempts to conceive the relation between sanctification and justification in terms of expression and cause-effect, which I correlate to Hegel’s treatment of these concepts. The limitations of this construal of the relation point the account toward the next phase of the soteriological dialectic, to be pursued in Chapter 6. Taken together, these three sections provide a structure that holds together the diversity of ways that justification and sanctification can be related, as found in the soteriology of Calvin and others.

Yet, as I said, this chapter also makes an argument about the relation of Hegel and Derrida. This relation is considered here by way of a concern for

how the truth of soteriology can be written within the strictures of academic theology, with Hegel and Derrida serving as possible models. This chapter, in effect, first adopts (in Transition One) the Hegelian model of science, extending this model from Chapter 4. Interrupted by a meditation on Calvin’s use of “experience,” the argument next adopts the deconstructive model particular to Derrida (Transition Two), in order to show how an opposed way of writing can present a valid facet of the relation between justification and sanctification. While each model enjoys a limited success, still they remain insufficient to capture the richness of the implied structure of Calvin’s soteriology. Rather, Calvin’s soteriology demands a third model of the academic text, which receives proper treatment in Chapter 6.

To begin, the Hegelian model is retained from the previous chapter. Ideally, in a Hegelian mode the last phase of the dialectic would introduce the next. But justification was shown to be circular, with justification in Christ forming a circle that interrelates each phase of its dialectic. By virtue of this circularity, justification was seen to possess an objective completeness amenable to the structure of the academic text. Justification is the heart of the Gospel, which is salvation made text. While a living subject was necessary to the Gospel, his saving death provided a closure to his significance; thereby the Gospel text was able to sublate the person of Christ to its objectivity. In this way, the Gospel as text is analogous to Hegel’s Logic, which also attains a structural completeness in itself.

Of course, Christianity has usually thought it essential to spread the Gospel. Moreover, the Reformers consistently held, though not always agreeing on the same formula, that more must be said than simply justification in Christ. The authority of tradition, therefore, indicates that the soteriological account must go on. Moreover, pastoral concerns over moral complacency may drive one to say more, and indeed did drive the Reformers to say more. But if the purpose of this academic text is to give a complete account of salvation, such pastoral concerns are arguably irrelevant.

Since the model for “giving an account” has been borrowed provisionally from the Logic, the only way to proceed from the completeness of justification would be to show that something in the preceding account remains incomplete. Thus far, this soteriology has fully accounted for salvation as determined outside of us by God through Christ. If anything is incomplete, it is simply that the account has yet said nothing specific about us, or about human subjectivity aside from Christ. To be sure, faith was implicit in this account, and designated as a real potential owing to God’s mercy and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Yet this faith, oddly enough, had nothing to do with our specific subjectivity. Christ was shown to have taken our place. Faith, then, simply meant that our subjectivity has been objectively suspended with regards to the