Jonathan R. Huggins


‘Living Justification’ is the title of the dissertation written by the Anglican theologian Jonathan Huggins at Stellenbosch University about the doctrine of justification of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and Nicolas Thomas Wright. The latter two in particular have drawn attention in the Anglo-Saxon world as they have stirred considerable controversy with their view of justification.

This book offers a comparative analysis of the views of these theologians regarding the doctrine of justification and sets out the similarities and differences between them. This study was motivated by the current debate in the United States about the doctrine of justification in light of the ‘New Perspective on Paul.’ This has induced several pastors—including the dissertation’s author—to step down as they were no longer able to reconcile their views with the confession of their church, the Westminster Confession of Faith. So, in a way, ‘Living Justification’ carries traces of an *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Rather than being a doctrine that unites—which in fact it is, according to Huggins (in imitation of Wright)—justification turns out to be a source of discord, not only between Protestants and Roman Catholics, but also between Protestants themselves.

In the Reformed view of justification, the central question is: how is a human being accepted by God? Justification consists in the imputation of Christ’s righteousness which makes the believer righteous in God’s eyes. After providing the reader with a convenient survey of the doctrine of justification through the centuries, the author discusses the three theologians in succession.

In my opinion, the chapter on Calvin is the least convincing of the three. Before anything else it contains a list of quotations from the latest edition of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and relevant passages from commentaries on Paul’s epistles. At the end of the discussion of the doctrine of justification in the *Institutes*, Huggins concludes that: ‘... it is difficult to paint a clear picture of what his doctrine of justification is exactly’ (61). In my view this is an unjustified conclusion. Calvin’s doctrine of justification is rooted in the idea of participation in Christ (*unio cum Christo*). Justification—as the legal aspect of this *unio*—comprises both the aspect of non-imputation of sin and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. While Huggins may have his reasons to find this hard to accept, this does not mean that Calvin failed to make himself clear. In my opinion this chapter would have gained in clarity if the author had exposed the development of Calvin’s doctrine of justification by adopting a
diachronic rather than a synchronic approach. Another omission in this chapter is the interaction with essential recent studies such as that of Mark Garcia and others who so clearly expounded the triangular structure of the *unio cum Christo* and the *duplex gratia* of justification and renewal as distinct, yet inseparable blessings bestowed on the believer.

The author is obviously more comfortable with Edwards. He provides a lucid survey of Edwards’ doctrine of justification. Like Calvin, Edwards stresses the great importance of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, placing even more emphasis than Calvin on Christ’s active and passive obedience. Edwards closely links present and eventual justification. In Edwards’ view, faith is not merely an instrument of justification, but a disposition which is effective in love and thus lays the foundation for the future justification at the eschaton. This is the reason why this aspect of his orthodoxy has sparked controversy: is it not just another way of leaving a loophole to the Roman Catholic view of faith that justifies through love? Opinions differ on this point and the author provides a clear depiction of this debate.

In Chapter Five, Huggins leaps to the 21st-century New Testament scholar N.T. Wright. Again, a lucid survey is provided, although Wright’s recent extensive study of Paul, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (2013) is a sad omission. Huggins considers Wright as a theologian who aims to take a positively critical stance in the Reformed tradition. His partial divergence from this tradition has its very origin in his deep respect for the principle of *sola scriptura*, just like Calvin and Edwards. His reverence for the Scriptures inspires him to draw a number of far-reaching conclusions, such as his view of God’s righteousness as His faithfulness to the covenant and the conviction that ‘righteousness’ is a quality rather than a substance or status that is ‘imputable’ to others. Unlike Calvin and Edwards, Wright views justification not only as a soteriological category (‘How can I be saved?’), but he also puts strong emphasis on the ecclesiological aspect: justification is more than a state of rightness before God: it also means belonging to the people of God.

Up to this point the author has fulfilled his promise to provide a survey of the various views. In the final chapter he provides a comparative analysis. The conclusion is that Wright, in spite of his partial deviation from the Reformed tradition before him, can nevertheless be considered an exponent of this tradition. The dogma is not a closed reality, but it interacts with the historical context and must therefore be open to correction or review. Because the Reformed church should be ‘always reforming’, Reformed theology will do well by taking Wright’s conclusions and criticisms seriously.

My main objection is that Huggins tends to take his descriptive approach too far. His final analysis is disappointing in that it merely enumerates similari-