

Calvin on Ezekiel 18:14-17 Justification, Faith and Works

Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: [15] he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, [16] does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, [17] withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. (ESV)

A passage from Calvin's commentary on Ezekiel 18:14-17 has the distinction of being among the last, perhaps the last, of his comments on the relationship among justification, faith and works (progressive sanctification*), having apparently been written shortly before his death in 1564. Also, it is perhaps as pointed as any of his comments on their interrelationship and so, highly instructive concerning his matured understanding. An excerpt of some length is provided here, because it needs to be read carefully and digested (*Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel*, Vol. II [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979], p. 238; bolding added):

When therefore, we say that the faithful are esteemed just even in their deeds this is not stated as a cause of their salvation, and we must diligently notice that the cause of salvation is excluded from this doctrine; for, when we discuss the cause, we must look nowhere else but to the mercy of God, and there we must stop. But although works tend in no way to the cause of justification, yet, when the elect sons of God were justified freely by faith, at the same time their works are esteemed righteous by the same gratuitous liberality. Thus it still remains true, that 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 which it bears. The proposition, that **faith without works justifies by itself**, is **false**, because faith without works is void. But **if the clause "without works" is joined with the word "justifies,"** the proposition will be **true**. **Therefore faith cannot justify when it is without works, because it is dead, and a mere fiction.** He who is born of God is just, as John says. (1 John v. 18.) Thus **faith can be no more separated from works than the sun from his heat: yet faith justifies without works**, because works form no reason for our justification; but faith alone reconciles us to God, and causes him to love us, not in ourselves, but in his only-begotten Son.

Taken by itself, Calvin considers the statement "faith without works justifies" to be **ambiguous**. It "needs prudence and sound interpretation"; it is "true yet false," depending on the way it is read. Pinpointed grammatically, Calvin is saying:

- a) when the prepositional phrase "without works" is taken **adverbially**, that is, as modifying the **verb** "justifies," then the statement "faith without works justifies," is **true** (faith is the sole instrument of justification);

*When Calvin speaks of "works" in this passage he has in view, as the plural shows, the believer's obedience done over time, in other words, seen in terms of God's work in the believer, sanctification as ongoing or progressive, what he regularly includes with "regeneration."

b) when “without works” is taken **adjectivally**, that is, with the **noun** “faith” (= “without-works faith”), then the same statement is **false**.

By itself (faith-alone!), Calvin asserts, faith does not justify, “because faith without works is void.” Again he says, “faith cannot justify when it is without works, because it is dead and a mere fiction.” He is saying in effect, to focus the balance of his remarks: “faith, with its works, justifies without works”; or also, “with-works faith (or “not-without-works faith”) justifies without works.”

In this passage Calvin is on the proverbial razor’s edge, where we occasionally find ourselves in sound theologizing. Certainly, he is not saying here what he emphatically denies elsewhere, that one must do a certain amount of good works or obey God for a certain amount of time before one can be justified. Rather, his comments highlight what is expressed later in the *Westminster Confession*, namely that faith as “the alone instrument of justification” is “not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love” or, more importantly, Paul’s characterization of **justifying** faith as “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6; cited by the WCF at this point). Here, in a particularly striking and instructive way, Calvin accents how **inseparable** (yet distinct) good works are from faith, as the alone instrument of justification. Such works are – I would not hesitate to add for Calvin, although he does not say so explicitly here – are necessary as “the fruits and evidences of a true and lively [that is, justifying] faith” (WCF, 16:2).

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