

Imputed and Imparted Righteousness

1. Article XI of the Anglican Articles of 1571 says that we are accounted (reputamur) righteous before God only for (propter) the merit of Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. This language is close to that of the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg (1530), art. IV. The Council of Trent strongly preferred to speak of salvation as achieved by the forgiveness and regenerating grace of Christ, transforming the individual member of the Church through the impartation of Christ's righteousness and merits. Trent feared that a Protestant stress on 'mere imputation' not only had the theoretical disadvantage of making God's act of acquittal appear a legal fiction but also issued in the practical demerit of producing antinomianism. Trent felt, with reason, that there were already enough Christians sitting back in idleness, rejoicing to have been baptized but then participating neither in the continuing worship of the Church nor in the discipleship and suffering to which the way of the Cross calls all Christ's people.

2. The Protestants felt strongly that to make a believer's actual 'inherent'\* righteousness the ground of salvation was to rest on an imperfect foundation, to encourage the believer either to rely proudly on the merits of his personal achievements or (more seriously still) to agonise in neurotic misery on the improbability of his or her salvation. There was some Protestant inclination to equate the imperfection or insufficiency of good works with their irrelevance to salvation, but this tendency was soon checked, and nowhere more strongly than among the Anglican theologians. Cranmer's early Homily on Salvation (1542)

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\* Inherent is a slippery and misleading term. 'Inherent righteousness' is no quality with which the soul is naturally or innately endowed, but is a spiritual quality of character formed as the personal grace of the Spirit trains the soul.

explains that the saying 'we are justified by faith only' means a denial that the merit of our imperfect works can suffice for justification, but not a denial that the believer's necessary duty is to do good works. Hooker and Davenant both affirm the reality of inherent or imparted righteousness, but qualify this by observing that even the best of what we have and are also has that which needs to be pardoned. They conclude that the final ground of justification can only be that, to penitent and believing souls, God imputes the merits of Christ.

3. Trent excludes the doctrine of 'mere imputation' if and when it is wholly divorced from transforming grace and sanctifying charity (VI canon 11, DS 1561). The Anglican theologians who expound justification take pains to deny this divorce. Hooker and Davenant, who are the most "Protestant" among them, take for granted a theoretical distinction between justification as God's declaration of acquittal and sanctification as an impartation by grace of the righteousness of Christ. But both deny that between justification and sanctification there is any separation in time, or that saving faith can be divorced from hope and love. The distinction is in the mind, not in the heart at prayer before Christ's Cross. Although Davenant insists (against Bellarmine) that the ultimate ground (or 'formal cause') of justification lies in God's acquittal and the imputation of Christ's righteousness, yet he defends imputation from being an unreal fiction. 'We grant the form of justification to be that by which man is not only accounted and pronounced justified before God, but is made or constituted so'. (Davenant ip. 231). So while the imputed righteousness of Christ is the ultimate cause of justification, its immediate fruit is imparted righteousness, both actual and habitual.

4. The unconditional proposition 'Christ's righteousness is imputed to us' occurs neither in Scripture nor in the vast majority of reformed confessions of

faith; and the doctrine of imputation had to be defended against the exaggerated notion that there is no condition of repentance, faith, forgiveness, leading to goodness of life. To Bull this notion seemed as dangerous as the doctrine that contrition is not necessary for absolution.

5. The essence of the matter as the Anglicans saw it is that if we become or are made good, that is because we have been, and continue to be, forgiven. Hence the deep religious importance to them of Imputed Righteousness. It is at first sight paradoxical that to the Reformation nothing seemed of deeper religious significance than this doctrine, while to the Roman Catholic tradition nothing seemed more vital than the Sacrifice of the Mass; and in essence that declared the same truth.