

John Owen's Doctrine of Union with Christ in Relation to His Contributions to Seventeenth Century Debates Concerning Eternal Justification

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Abstract

In 1649, Richard Baxter accused John Owen of teaching eternal justification, whereby the elect are justified from eternity, rather than when they believe in Christ. More recently, Hans Boersma has also argued that Owen taught justification prior to faith. Through an historical examination of Owen's doctrines of justification and union with Christ, I demonstrate that he distinguishes various types of union with Christ: decretal, forensic, and mystical. He is thus able to maintain a mainstream Reformed Orthodox doctrine of justification by faith, whilst also maintaining that faith is a gift of God, purchased by Christ, and applied through Christ.

Union with Christ and justification are both central themes in the work of Puritan theologian John Owen (1616-83). His most complete account of justification is found in *The Doctrine of justification by faith* (1677).¹ Although he wrote no comparable work on union with

¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols (London: Johnston & Hunter, 1850-55), v. 1-400.

Christ, Owen discusses it throughout his corpus.² C. F. Allison explains the link between these two doctrines in Owen's thought:

A sinner in justification becomes truly righteous as he becomes a member of Christ whose righteousness is thereupon imputed to him in such union. A justified person is truly righteous, then, because he is *in Christ*. Owen places more explicit emphasis on this union with Christ than...perhaps...anyone of the period with the exception of John Donne.³

Owen regarded himself as expounding the central tenets of the Reformed doctrine of justification, whilst acknowledging that the tradition was not monolithic regarding the details.⁴ However, he is not without detractors. In an appendix to *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), Richard Baxter accused him of teaching eternal justification, whereby the elect are justified in Christ from eternity, not, as in the standard Reformed view, from the moment they believe in Christ.⁵ More recently, Hans Boersma, in his discussion of Owen's response to Baxter's accusations,⁶ accuses Owen of expounding an incoherent *ordo salutis*, particularly of failing adequately to account for the place and timing of union with Christ in relation to faith and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. In a review of Carl Trueman's monograph on Owen,⁷ Boersma repeats his accusation, stating, 'It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that with Owen history is in danger of being swallowed up by eternity.'⁸

By expounding Owen's teaching on union with Christ and eternal justification in its historical setting, I shall examine whether these criticisms are fair. I shall argue that Owen faithfully teaches the

² Owen, *Works*, i. 355-74; iii. 463-67, 478, 513-27; iv. 383-86; v. 175-80, 196, 208-217; x. 468-71; xi.336-41; xiii. 22-25; xxi. 142-60.

³ C. F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: the Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (London: SPCK, 1966), 175.

⁴ Owen, *Works*, v. 60-64.

⁵ Richard Baxter, *Aphorismes of Justification* (London, 1649), ii. 146ff.

⁶ Hans Boersma, *A Hot Peppercorn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification in Its Seventeenth Century Context of Controversy* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1993), 104-108.

⁷ Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

⁸ Hans Boersma, 'Review of The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology, by Carl R. Trueman', *EQ* 73 (2001), 267-69, at 269.

Reformed doctrine of justification, although the precise manner in which he does so is sensitive to theological developments among Reformed theologians in mid-seventeenth century England.

The English Puritans generally followed the Reformed Orthodox doctrine of justification. Baxter, however, was idiosyncratic. His view stemmed, at least in part, from a desire to solve contemporary disagreements.⁹ He hoped to provide a 'middle way' between the Reformed doctrine of justification and that of the Arminians.¹⁰ The key to Baxter's doctrine is that there are two covenants, with distinct conditions: the covenant of works and the new covenant.¹¹ For Baxter, righteousness is conformity to the law, the condition of the covenant, and only a righteous man is judicially justifiable.¹² Christ's righteousness is indirectly necessary for justification, because by it he fulfilled the covenant of works and so upheld God's honour and merited our reward.¹³ However, it is not the formal cause of justification.¹⁴ Christ's fulfilling the covenant of works made it possible for God to enter into a new covenant with mankind. Thus, Christ's righteousness is a necessary ground of justification. However, the 'law' of the new covenant is faith, which is therefore the personal righteousness required for justification. J. I. Packer explains:

Had it not been for Christ's obedience, the new covenant would never have been made, the law of works would still be in force, and all would be condemned under its terms. Christ's fulfilment of that law was therefore essential for the justification of anyone. But a man only qualifies for pardon under the new covenant when he believes. And his faith, as such...constitutes him righteous.¹⁵

Justification is a forensic act of God, but does not involve the imputation of Christ's righteousness personally to the believer; rather

⁹ J. I. Packer, *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 242.

¹⁰ Cf. Richard Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (London, 1675); Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 25; Packer, *Redemption*, 242-47.

¹¹ Baxter, *Catholick Theologie*, I.ii.27-51.

¹² Baxter, *Catholick Theologie*, I.ii.70.

¹³ Richard Baxter, *Of Justification* (London, 1658), 262-63.

¹⁴ Cf. Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 243-45.

¹⁵ Packer, *Redemption*, 258.

the believer's faith is imputed.¹⁶ 'This is *evangelical* righteousness. Unlike the first, it is the believer's own', and is no less necessary to justification than Christ's righteousness, although it occupies a subordinate position.¹⁷

Baxter circumvented the Reformed dispute over whether the elect are justified by Christ's passive righteousness only, or also by his active righteousness, arguing that it was based on the wrong view of the relationship of Christ's righteousness to the elect. For him, the appropriate point of dispute concerned, 'How the righteousness of Christ is made ours'.¹⁸ He offered a number of reasons why it is mistaken to believe that Christ's righteousness is imputed to the elect on the basis of their union with him. Two are pertinent here.¹⁹ First, 'It supposeth us to have been in Christ, at least in legall title, before we did beleeve, or were born; and that not onely in a generall and conditionall sense as all men, but in a speciall as the justified'.²⁰ The imputation of Christ's righteousness through union with Christ necessitates a doctrine of eternal justification. Second, 'It seemeth to ascribe to God a mistaking judgement, as to esteem us to have been in Christ when we were not, and to have done and suffered in him, what we did not.'²¹ On the assumption that one denies eternal justification, God is mistaken to count the believer as if they had been in Christ when he died.

Thus, according to Baxter, the standard Reformed view, of which Owen was a representative, faced the difficulty of explaining how God could reckon the elect as having been in Christ, and so having suffered what Christ suffered, without falling into a doctrine of eternal justification. Baxter believed he had highlighted systematic pressures within the Reformed doctrine of justification, particularly as it relates to the believer's union with Christ, which led logically to a doctrine of justification prior to faith. It is therefore important that we

¹⁶ Baxter, *Aphorismes*, i. 226-27.; *Of Justification*, 268; *Catholick Theologie*, I.ii.64, 66.

¹⁷ Baxter, *Of Justification*, 268, italics in original.

¹⁸ Baxter, *Aphorismes*, i. 45.

¹⁹ The other objections relate less to the function of imputation (how one receives Christ's benefits), and more to the nature of the atonement (issues of justice, guilt, penalty, etc.; on which see Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 245-54; Trueman, *Claims*, 211-24).

²⁰ Baxter, *Aphorismes*, i. 46.

²¹ Baxter, *Aphorismes*, i. 47.

understand what the doctrine of eternal justification involved.

The doctrine appears to have been limited to certain seventeenth century English and Dutch Reformed divines. It was popularised in England in the 1640s by Tobias Crisp, John Eaton, and John Saltmarsh,²² but was not confined to those on the extreme fringes of Protestant theology.²³ The primary concerns of adherents were to magnify the freeness of God's grace,²⁴ and to assure those who doubted their justification.²⁵ Put simply, eternal justification is the view that God not only chose the elect in eternity, he also justified them in eternity.

As in the standard Reformed definition, advocates of eternal justification argued that the ground of justification is Christ's obedience and suffering, imputed to the elect, their sins being imputed to him.²⁶ Thus, in both views, Christ alone justifies. However, exponents of eternal justification argued that mainstream Reformed divines could not consistently maintain that Christ alone justifies because of the instrumental role they accorded to faith. So Crisp: 'Is faith Christ himself? If not, then Christ must have a partner to justifie, or else Faith doth not justifie, but Christ alone doth it. Nay, I say more, Christ doth justifie a person before he doth believe.'²⁷

For Crisp, the new covenant is different from other biblical covenants because the others have stipulations, conditions on both sides. However, on humanity's side, the new covenant is entirely unconditional. All conditions having been met in Christ, the justified sinner has no part to play in his salvation, and faith is not the condition of the covenant.²⁸ Faith is not irrelevant, but it does not fulfil the instrumental role assigned to it in the classic Reformed

²² John Eaton, *The Honey-Combe of Free Iustification by Christ Alone* (London, 1642); John Saltmarsh, *Free Grace* (London, 1646); Saltmarsh, *Sparkles of Glory* (London, 1647); Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted*, 2 vols (London, 1690 [1643]); cf. Packer, *Redemption*, 248.

²³ Trueman, *Claims*, 28. On eternal justification, see Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 66-135; Packer, *Redemption*, 248-251; Trueman, *Claims*, 28, 207-210.

²⁴ Saltmarsh, *Free Grace*; Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 93-95.

²⁵ Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 431; Saltmarsh, *Free Grace*, 91ff.

²⁶ Saltmarsh, *Free Grace*, 143.

²⁷ Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 85.

²⁸ Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 80-85.

doctrine of justification. Rather, 'it serves for the manifestation of that justification which Christ puts upon a Person by himself alone.' The favourite proof-text, which appears time and again, is Hebrews 11:1: 'Faith is...the evidence of things not seen'. Faith is not, therefore, 'the condition without which we receive not benefit from Christ', it simply reveals the believer's justified status:

A man is justified, and that by Christ alone, but it is not known to him, it is an unseen thing. Well, how shall he see this, and know that it is so? The Text saith, *Faith is an evidence*, Faith gives evidence to this thing, Faith makes it known, by Faith we come to apprehend it.²⁹

Only in this sense is justification 'by faith'. There is no moment when an elect person is an object of God's wrath, for unbelief does not hinder them from having a part in Christ, although everyone who is elect and therefore justified will eventually come to faith.

In a later sermon, Crisp explicitly makes the link to union with Christ. From its beginnings, Reformed theology held that one receives Christ's benefits only when united to him by faith, which is the gift of the Spirit.³⁰ However, for advocates of eternal justification, 'faith is not the instrument radically to unite Christ and the Soul together, but rather is the fruit that follows and flows from Christ the root, being united before hand to the person that do believe'.³¹ As

²⁹ Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 85.

³⁰ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), l.xxvi.1-2, 14; xxvii.10; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20-21 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), III.x; III.xi.10; John Davenant, *A Treatise on Justification*, trans. Josiah Allport, 2 vols (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1844), 237-38.; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr, trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992-97), XV.viii.8-9; XVI.iii.5, 8; Zacharius Ursinus, *A Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Gillard (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, n.d.), 177-78., 270, 331; Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification: Two Theological Loci*, The Peter Martyr Library, vol. 8, ed. and trans. Frank M. James III (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2003), 160; Herman Witsius *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank (London: R. Baynes, 1822), III.viii.31-32., 47-56.

³¹ Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 597, cf. 607-18; Saltmarsh, *Free Grace*, 156.

with justification, faith has only declarative, evidencing power; it does not effect union instrumentally, for it flows from union. Crisp argues that John 15:4-5 demonstrates that faith is a fruit of union with Christ the vine and thus must follow union with him. If faith came before union, the branch would bear fruit before being in the vine, which directly contradicts Christ's words.³²

Crisp then asks a series of questions, which we must eventually put to Owen:

Is faith the gift of Christ or no?...Doth Christ beget faith in us by vertue of our being united unto him? and shall this faith beget that union of which it was but a fruit? From whence shall persons that do believe before they are united unto Christ, receive this faith of theirs? They are not yet united unto Christ, and therefore it cannot come from him, for we can have nothing of Christ but by vertue of union, and then it proceeds not from the spirit of Christ neither for we partake of that only by vertue of union with him too; From whence should it come then?³³

Crisp's point is simple. No-one can exercise faith in and of themselves. At Calvary, Christ effectually merited salvation for the elect, which necessarily includes the gift of faith. The elect receive every spiritual blessing in Christ, including faith, otherwise whence faith? Thus, it would seem that, on Crisp's Reformed assumptions about human inability and the receipt of all blessings in Christ, faith must be a gift of God that follows and rests upon union with Christ. However, this union with Christ is not effected in time; rather the elect are united to him from before creation, for although redemption was accomplished in time, the elect were chosen in Christ before time.³⁴ Therefore, the elect, being united to Christ from eternity past, are justified from eternity past; justification collapses into the decree of election, and this on the basis of union with Christ.

Although eternal justification shared many features with the Reformed doctrine of justification, in its view of the timing of justification and the place of faith it represented a novel departure from mainstream Reformed thought. In particular, by denying the instrumentality of faith, it compromised the Protestant emphasis on

³² Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 598-99.

³³ Crisp, *Christ Alone*, 599.

³⁴ Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 115-16, 123-24.

sola fide. There is no trace of eternal justification in the early Reformers; they did not adhere to the doctrine; moreover, as Curt Daniel notes, ‘the Reformers said precious little (if anything at all)’ about the subject.³⁵ This silence suggests that it was not an issue for the generations immediately after the Reformation. When Turretin, towards the end of the High Orthodox period, addressed the question,³⁶ he acknowledged that some of his Reformed contemporaries differed over the issue. However, he denied justification from eternity, arguing that it takes place ‘in this life in the moment of effectual calling’.³⁷ It is not entirely clear which mainstream Reformed theologians advocated justification prior to faith. William Twisse did,³⁸ but although William Ames and Herman Witsius are sometimes cited as advocates³⁹ this seems less likely. Both use equivocal language at times, with Ames asserting that the covenant of redemption ‘was a kind of advance application of our redemption and deliverance of us to our surety and our surety to us.’⁴⁰ Nevertheless, both insist that the elect receive Christ’s blessings only when spiritually united to him, and that this is accomplished by calling.⁴¹ How these statements can be reconciled is not entirely clear, but it at least raises a question over whether they really advocated eternal justification. When the issue was addressed confessionally, the Westminster Divines stated that, although God decreed from eternity to justify the elect, ‘they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them’.⁴²

For a theologian such as John Owen, who argued for an historic Reformed understanding of justification and regarded the doctrine of justification as centrally important because it described how one could stand before a holy God, the accusation that he held to eternal

³⁵ Kurt Daniel, ‘Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill’, unpubl. PhD Diss. (University of Edinburgh, 1983), i. 322.

³⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, XVI.ix.

³⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, XVI.ix.8.

³⁸ Cf. Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 80-88; Trueman, *Claims*, 209.

³⁹ Daniel, ‘Hyper-Calvinism’, i. 370, 380; Trueman, *Claims*, 209, following Daniel’s list.

⁴⁰ Ames, *Marrow*, I.xxiv.3.

⁴¹ Ames *Marrow*, I.xxvi.2-3; Witsius, *Economy*, III.viii.56.

⁴² WCF, xi.4; cf. Savoy Declaration, xi.4.

justification would have been a particularly serious charge. In common with advocates of eternal justification, Owen argued that on the cross Christ purchased all spiritual blessings for the elect, including faith.⁴³ He also agreed the elect receive all of Christ's benefits only in union with him:

God communicates nothing in a way of grace unto any but in and by the person of Christ, as the mediator and head of the church.... Whatever is wrought in believers by the *Spirit of Christ*, it is in their *union* to the person of Christ, and by virtue thereof.⁴⁴

Union with Christ is thus the immediate ground of justification.⁴⁵ However, this is also common ground that he shared with mainstream Reformed Orthodoxy. Moreover, where Owen differed from advocates of eternal justification, on the relationship of faith to union with Christ, he sided with the Reformed tradition, for, as we shall see, he regarded faith as instrumental to union. Therefore, in the light of this background, we must investigate whether Owen can sustain the case that faith is a blessing received through Christ, but prior to actual union with Christ (which happens simultaneously with the gift of righteousness), whilst maintaining that faith is instrumental to justification.

As we have seen, in 1649, Richard Baxter accused Owen of teaching eternal justification. Owen responded a year later in *Of the Death of Christ*,⁴⁶ in which he addresses two issues raised by Baxter. The first concerns the nature of the payment made by Christ,⁴⁷ the second, the issue of justification before faith.⁴⁸ Only the latter need concern us here.⁴⁹ Owen denies ever having advocated 'actual and absolute' justification before believing,⁵⁰ although, as we shall see, he does advocate partial justification logically, if not temporally, prior to faith. Nevertheless, 'absolute, complete, pactional justification',

⁴³ Owen, *Works*, x. 253-58.

⁴⁴ Owen, *Works*, iii. 515-16, italics in original.

⁴⁵ Owen, *Works*, v. 175ff.

⁴⁶ Owen, *Works*, x. 429-79.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Works*, x. 437-449.

⁴⁸ Owen, *Works*, x. 449-479.

⁴⁹ On the former, see Trueman, *Claims*, 206-26.

⁵⁰ Owen, *Works*, x. 449.

defined as 'an act of favour quitting the sinner from the guilt of sin, charged by the accusation of the law, terminated in the conscience of a sinner' follows faith 'in order of nature'.⁵¹ To establish this, Owen makes a number of theological moves. He first rules out justification from eternity, then justification from the time of Christ's satisfaction, before discussing precisely how Christ and his benefits are applied to the elect.

Owen starts with 'the eternal acts of the will of God towards us, antecedent to all or any consideration of the death of Christ'.⁵² In so doing, he closes the door to justification from eternity. Owen regards the decree of election as the cause of Christ's satisfaction, and the foundation for the whole covenant of grace.⁵³ However, in contrast to Crisp and Saltmarsh, he insists that although prior to the cross the elect are beloved, elected, and ordained to eternal life, their actual condition remains unchanged by the decree of election alone.⁵⁴ He offers three proofs.

First, if the decree of election of itself caused a change in the elect, the decree of reprobation must also work a change in those appointed for condemnation. This is not the case, or they would already be suffering the consequences of the decree, and would merely need to be made aware of the fact.

Second, God's eternal purpose is not the same as the mighty act of his power. God's decrees guarantee the certain futurition of the events decreed, but they do not accomplish their actual existence. In so distinguishing God's decrees from his actions, Owen stands in the western catholic mainstream. For example, Aquinas, whilst not using the language of decrees, discusses the issue in relation to God's knowledge. According to Aquinas, God's knowledge, joined to his will, causes all things. Answering the objection that as God's will is eternal, creatures must be eternal, he argues that 'The knowledge of God is the cause of things according as things are in His knowledge. Now that things should be eternal was not in the knowledge of God; hence although the knowledge of God is eternal, it does not follow

⁵¹ Owen, *Works*, x. 453.

⁵² Owen, *Works*, x. 454.

⁵³ Owen, *Works*, x. 455.

⁵⁴ Owen, *Works*, x. 456-57.

that creatures are eternal.⁵⁵ The distinction between God's decrees and acts is standard in Reformed Orthodoxy.⁵⁶ Turretin, having used the distinction in his discussion of the divine decrees, explicitly applies it to eternal justification in a manner parallel to Owen:

although we do not deny that our justification was decreed even from eternity (as nothing takes place in time which was not constituted by [God] from eternity), still we do not think (speaking accurately) justification itself can be called eternal. The decree of justification is one thing; justification itself another.... The will or decree to justify certain persons is indeed eternal and precedes faith itself, but actual justification takes place in time and follows faith.⁵⁷

Third, Owen notes that Scripture places all humans, prior to faith, in the same condition: guilty and under God's wrath (citing Rom. 3:9, 19; Eph. 2:3; Jn. 3:36). Commenting on this, he explicitly addresses the claims of advocates of eternal justification: 'The condition of all in unregeneracy is really one and the same. Those who think it is a mistaken apprehension in the elect to think so, are certainly too much mistaken in that apprehension.'⁵⁸ As a mainstream Reformed theologian, Owen held that Scripture provides the only infallible rule for interpreting Scripture; he therefore refused to allow deductions from one strand of biblical teaching (election in Christ) to neuter another strand (the condition of the elect prior to regeneration).

Thus, although the elect are chosen in Christ, this does not, of itself, justify them: there is no justification from eternity. Moreover, not only are they as yet unjustified by virtue of God's electing love alone, they do not even have the right to justification. God appointed that the fruit of his love would be received in and by Christ; thus, the right to justification would be made out to the elect only on the death of Christ.⁵⁹

However, although Owen has ruled out eternal justification, there

⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby, trans. Thomas Gilby and others, 61 vols (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964-73), Ia.q.14.a.8.

⁵⁶ For example, Ames, *Marrow*, I.vii.37; cf. also I.vii.7 with I.viii.8; Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology*, trans. Federick Reyroux (London: R. B. Seeley & W. Burnside, 1834), III.2; Turretin, *Institutes*, IV.ii.10; WCF, iii.6.

⁵⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, XVI.ix.3.

⁵⁸ Owen, *Works*, x. 457.

⁵⁹ Owen, *Works*, x. 457.

remains the possibility of justification from the time of Christ's satisfaction. In *Justification by Faith*, Owen argues that Christ suffered as his people's representative: 'in his suffering he bare the person of the church...Christ and believers are one mystical person, one spiritually-animated body, head and members. Hence, what he did and suffered is imputed unto them.'⁶⁰ Moreover, Owen regards union with Christ as the principal ground of imputation:⁶¹ the foundation for the justice of penal substitution is that Christ and his Church are one mystical person. Hence, what is true of Christ is true also of his body: the church suffered in him when he suffered for the church. However, it therefore appears that mystical union functions in a parallel way for the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners when they are justified and the imputation of their sins to him when he made atonement. This appears to leave open the door for justification from the moment Christ made atonement, that is, justification prior to faith. Nevertheless, Owen insists that one must not 'assent to one part of the gospel unto the exclusion of another';⁶² God's design in the covenant is that Christ's righteousness be communicated to the elect by faith;⁶³ faith thus precedes justification.

When Christ died, God laid all the sins of the elect on him. Yet, notwithstanding this 'full, plenary satisfaction', all people equally are born children of wrath. Therefore,

on the only making of that satisfaction, no one for whom it was made in the design of God can be said to have suffered in Christ, nor to have an interest in his satisfaction, nor by any way or means to be made partaker of it antecedently unto another act of God in its imputation unto him.'⁶⁴

Although Christ's payment was perfect and sufficient, the elect do not receive its benefits until he is made theirs. Not that the future application of his benefits is uncertain – it is 'sure and steadfast' in the purposes of God – but the immediate foundation of the imputation of Christ's satisfaction and righteousness is 'our actual coalescency into one mystical person with him by faith.... Our actual interest in the

⁶⁰ Owen, *Works*, x. 214.

⁶¹ Owen, *Works*, v. 176, 196, 208-10.

⁶² Owen, *Works*, v. 214, also 216.

⁶³ Owen, *Works*, v. 214-15.

⁶⁴ Owen, *Works*, v. 216-17.

satisfaction of Christ depends on our actual insertion into his mystical body by faith, according to the appointment of God.⁶⁵

Thus, justification does not occur until the elect are united to Christ by faith, and this occurs according to God's appointment, at the time of his choosing. At the time of Christ's death, he and the elect are one mystical person, not because the Spirit has already knit them together, but only in the intention of God. As Christ died, God knew for whom he was dying and so counted their sin to Christ as though they were already one person. Yet, only at the point of faith are the elect inserted into Christ's mystical body; only then is his suffering and obedience imputed to them. In all of this, God's will is the integrating factor.⁶⁶ He willed that Christ should make satisfaction for the elect, that Christ's satisfaction should be applied to the elect, and that accomplishment and application should happen at separate points in time. As Trueman notes, 'Owen does not use Christ's objective satisfaction as some kind of logical axiom which forces him into placing the actual justification of individuals in eternity or at the moment of Christ's death.'⁶⁷

In contrast to Saltmarsh, Owen also demonstrates a far more nuanced account of union with Christ. Saltmarsh treats union with Christ in eternal election as identical with mystical union, which provides the immediate ground of justification. Owen, however, acknowledges that full, mystical union occurs only by faith. From eternity, the relationship between Christ and the elect exists in the intention and will of God, but does not exist as an actual union; we might describe the elect as *decretally* united to Christ. Thus, although the elect are chosen 'in Christ' and although, *contra* Baxter, their relation to him in God's will secures the justice of the atonement, this is not, for Owen, the same as saying that the elect have always been united with Christ in an undifferentiated fashion.

Owen offers a more detailed set of arguments against justification from the time of the atonement in *Of the Death of Christ*.⁶⁸ According to Owen, although God's will toward the elect was not changed upon

⁶⁵ Owen, *Works*, v. 218.

⁶⁶ Trueman, *Claims*, 213.

⁶⁷ Trueman, *Claims*, 213.

⁶⁸ Cf. Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 103-108; Trueman, *Claims*, 218-220.

the death of Christ, for he is immutable,⁶⁹ Christ's death nevertheless changed the status of the elect. On the basis of Christ's merit, founded on God's free engagement with his Son in the covenant of redemption, God is obliged to deliver them from the curse *ipso facto*.⁷⁰ Therefore, because of Christ's satisfaction, God is able to make out the benefits Christ purchased, without any other conditions needing to be fulfilled.⁷¹ In particular, Christ purchased the condition of the covenant, faith; hence, from the time of the atonement, the elect have an absolute right to justification.⁷² Nevertheless, although they have a right to justification, they do not yet have a present enjoyment of it. To establish this, Owen makes a number of distinctions.

First, although Christ's death is the efficient cause of justification, it is a moral, not a physical cause.⁷³ Physical causes produce their effects immediately in time. However, moral causes do not. Nor do they have 'any immediate influence' on their effects. A third thing always intervenes, 'namely, proportion, constitution, law, covenant', which 'takes in the cause and lets out the effect'.⁷⁴ In the case of Christ's death, the thing that intervenes is 'that relation, coherence, and causality that the Lord hath appointed between the several effects, or rather parts of the same effect, of the death of Christ'.⁷⁵ All the effects of Christ's death, including intermediate effects such as faith, are immediate, but with an immediacy appropriate for a moral, not a physical cause. Hence, although Christ's death is the immediate cause of justification, there can be a delay between its purchase and its application.

Second, Owen distinguishes a present right to salvation from present possession of salvation. God made out the stipulations of the covenant of grace *sub termino*. They are therefore stipulations regarding something that is still future, although in contrast to stipulations *sub conditione*, they are a future certainty; they are not

⁶⁹ Owen, *Works*, x. 458; cf. 451-53.

⁷⁰ Owen, *Works*, x. 449-50, 464-65.

⁷¹ Owen, *Works*, x. 458.

⁷² Owen, *Works*, x. 449-50; cf. 232-36, 247-58.

⁷³ Owen, *Works*, x. 459-62.

⁷⁴ Owen, *Works*, x. 459.

⁷⁵ Owen, *Works*, x. 461.

based on an uncertain condition.⁷⁶ However, although the elect have a right to justification, they do not yet have possession, because there are two different kinds of right: *ius in re* and *ius ad rem*. *Ius in re* is the right a father has to his estate: it is a present possession, of which he cannot justly be deprived. *Ius ad rem* is the right a son has to his father's estate; he does not yet possess it, but will do on his father's death. Upon the death of Christ, the elect do not yet have a right to justification *in re*. However, they do have a right to justification *ad rem* and *sub termino*. Thus, they have an absolute right, with no further conditions required, Christ having done all that is necessary for their justification. Nevertheless, they are not yet in possession; on the death of Christ, the elect are not yet justified:

Notwithstanding the right granted them for whom Christ died, upon his death, to a better state and condition in due time, — that is, in the season suiting the infinitely wise sovereignty of God, — yet as to the present condition, in point of enjoyment, they are not actually differenced from others. Their prayers are an abomination to the Lord, Proverbs 28:9; all things are to them unclean, Titus 1:15; they are under the power of Satan, Ephesians 2:2; in bondage unto death, Hebrews 2:15; obnoxious to the curse and condemning power of the law in the conscience, Galatians 3:13; having sin reigning in them, Romans 6:17, etc.⁷⁷

Therefore, Owen has ruled out justification from the time of Christ's satisfaction. The question now becomes how the elect come to possess it.

Owen reaffirms that all spiritual blessings are bestowed for Christ's sake, and by his merit and intercession alone. These blessings are made out *sub termino*, but are not given over 'unless, in order of nature, Christ be first reckoned unto us':⁷⁸ Christ is imputed 'unto ungodly, unbelieving sinners for whom he died, so far as to account him theirs, and to bestow faith and grace upon them for his sake.'⁷⁹ Thus, Christ is, in some sense, given to sinners before they believe, 'Else why is faith given [to one sinner] at this instant for Christ's sake, and not to another, for whom he also died?' Faith,

⁷⁶ Owen, *Works*, x. 465.

⁷⁷ Owen, *Works*, x. 468-69.

⁷⁸ Owen, *Works*, x. 469.

⁷⁹ Owen, *Works*, x. 469.

purchased by Christ, is given to the sinner for Christ's sake, so Owen 'cannot conceive how any thing should be made out to me for Christ, and Christ himself not be given to me, he being "made unto us of God, righteousness", 1 Corinthians 1:30'. Again, 'That we should be blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ, and yet Christ not be ours in a peculiar manner before the bestowing of those blessings on us, is somewhat strange. Yea, he must be our Christ before it is given to us for him to believe'.⁸⁰ Thus, for Owen some kind of union with Christ takes place *prior* to faith. However, it must be emphasised that Owen is no longer speaking in temporal categories. Whereas before he was concerned to ensure a temporal separation between the moment of Christ's satisfaction and the moment of justification, he is now speaking of an 'order of nature',⁸¹ a logical, rather than temporal, sequence. Each of the events that he will now detail occur at the same point in time, even though they are related in a chain of logical cause and effect.

However, if union with Christ takes place even logically prior to faith, Owen faces a problem, for he claims that faith is instrumental in uniting someone to Christ. Yet, how can union precede faith, if faith is instrumental to union? Owen is aware of this difficulty, but answers, 'Christ is ours before and after believing in a different sense. He who is made ours in an act of God's love, that for him we may have faith, may be found and made ours in a promise of reconciliation by believing.'⁸² Owen posits a *forensic* union with Christ prior to faith, perhaps better described as an imputation of Christ. This imputation occurs when, at the time of his choosing, God justifies a sinner on the basis of the antecedent decretal union. It consists in the Father reckoning Christ to them, and giving him to them, and with him faith. However, full, reconciling union does not happen until, on the basis of the imputation of Christ, the sinner believes. Only at this point can they be regarded as truly united to Christ in the *totus Christus*. In Owen's scheme, forensic union is therefore a true, legal relationship with Christ, but falls short of full, justifying, mystical union.

⁸⁰ Owen, *Works*, x. 470.

⁸¹ Owen, *Works*, x. 469, cf. 453.

⁸² Owen, *Works*, x. 470.

Thus, Owen's position answers Crisp's rhetorical questions without following his departure from the Reformed tradition in placing union prior to faith. Crisp argues that faith flows from union, and so cannot be the human instrument by which union is accomplished. In contrast, Owen distinguishes full union with Christ following faith, and forensic union, the imputation of Christ prior to faith, on which ground faith is given. Faith is therefore a gift of God, purchased by Christ and applied through Christ; at the point of application it is not received without reference to Christ; yet it does not have to follow full, mystical union, and so can maintain its role as instrumental in laying hold of Christ.

Owen also regards part of justification as occurring before faith, although here he is more tentative. Given the context, it is likely that he is still referring to an order of nature, rather than a temporal order:

I offer, also, whether absolution from the guilt of sin and obligation unto death, though not as terminated in the conscience for complete justification, do not precede our actual believing; for what is that love of God which through Christ is effectual to bestow faith upon the unbelieving? and how can so great love, in the actual exercise of it, producing the most distinguishing mercies, consist with any such act of God's will as at the same instant should bind that person under the guilt of sin?⁸³

Owen suggests that this may be what is meant by the justification of the ungodly. However, he affirms that 'Absolution in heaven, and justification, differ as part and whole', and that, only when the sinner believes, do they receive 'a full soul-freeing discharge', for forgiveness of sin is received by faith alone.⁸⁴

Owen may be exploiting the Reformed Orthodox distinction between active and passive justification.⁸⁵ Active justification is God's conferral of justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness; passive justification is one's reception and application of it by faith. Ursinus speaks of a twofold application of Christ's righteousness, one

⁸³ Owen, *Works*, x. 470.

⁸⁴ Owen, *Works*, x. 470-71.

⁸⁵ Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: a History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 232; cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, XVI.vii.1; XVI.ix.9; Ursinus, *Commentary*, 330-31; Witsius, *Economy*, III.viii.59-61.

in respect to God, the other in respect to us: the former is God's imputation of Christ's righteousness; the latter the believer's act 'in which we are fully persuaded that it is imputed and given unto us.'⁸⁶ The two concur in the formal act of justification, and the former is of no account without the latter. Nevertheless, in order of nature, passive justification follows active, and active justification precedes faith.

[O]ur application of the righteousness of Christ is from God; for he first imputes it unto us, and then works faith in us, by which we apply unto ourselves that which is imputed; from which it appears that the application of God precedes that which we make, (which is of faith) and is the cause of it, although it is not without ours'.⁸⁷

Thus, Owen's division of justification into absolution in heaven and complete justification terminated in the conscience is not novel, although his terminology is different from that of Ursinus.

Owen was faced with the charge of eternal justification, arising from a misunderstanding of his radically Christ-centred soteriology, wherein Christ is alone sufficient for both the accomplishment and the application of redemption. He sought a solution that kept Christ central at every stage, whilst taking seriously the Reformed Orthodox doctrine concerning the instrumentality of faith in union with Christ and justification. He denied any form of justification at a point in time before faith, and also denied full justification logically prior to believing. For Owen, union with Christ and justification are both processes that commence before faith, but are only completed when the sinner believes. In this sense, faith is instrumental for full justification and full, mystical union with Christ. The reckoning of Christ to the believer, and active justification, are both necessary before faith is bestowed. Nevertheless, for Owen, this process is not a temporal sequence, but is one event, within which he distinguishes a logical relationship between the component parts.

Discussing this passage, Hans Boersma has diagrammed Owen's position as in diagram 1.⁸⁸ Boersma believes that the *ius ad rem* is based on two conflicting foundations: first, the covenant of

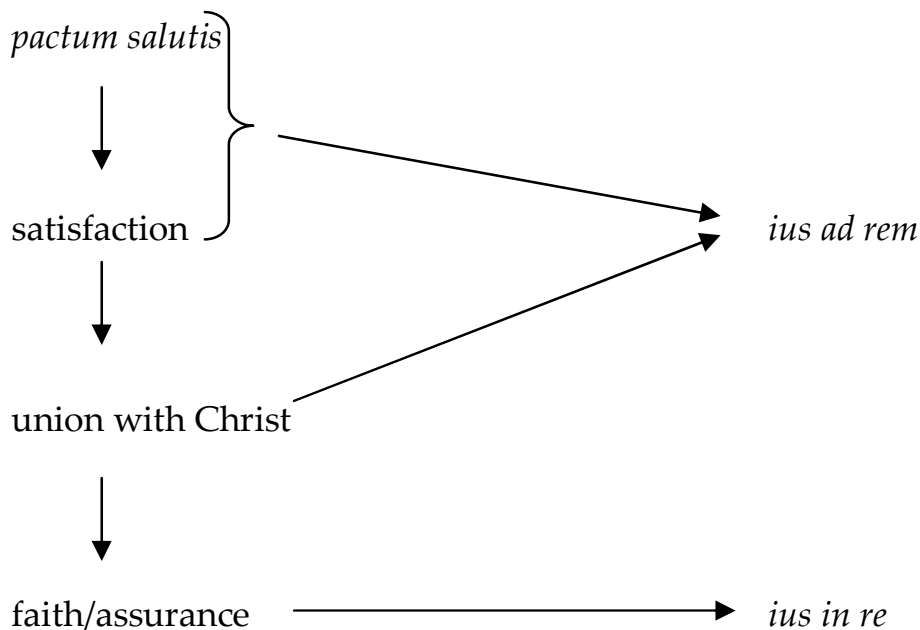
⁸⁶ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 330.

⁸⁷ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 330.

⁸⁸ Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 108.

redemption as it finds fruition in the atonement; second, union with Christ. He argues that Owen has two irreconcilable thought patterns: first, that the benefits of Christ's death are immediate, with no conditions required; second, that no benefit can be given to us unless we are first united to Christ. Owen has, ultimately, failed to separate the *ius ad rem* from the *ius in re* because, 'Having isolated the *ius ad rem* he is uncertain as to its position in the process of justification.'

Diagram 1



Nevertheless, Boersma appears to have misunderstood Owen's position in two ways. First, Boersma regards union with Christ as providing the *ius ad rem*. However, in this, he fails sufficiently to distinguish the different types of union that Owen describes. Boersma does not acknowledge Owen's distinction between forensic union and full, mystical union; he therefore argues that Owen believes the latter occurs prior to faith, which he does not; as we have seen, Owen holds that only forensic union occurs prior to faith. However, even were the union in question full, mystical union, rather than forensic union, Boersma's analysis would imply that there is a time delay between union and the actual receipt of righteousness, because he claims that union with Christ provides a *ius ad rem*, which is given temporally prior to the actual possession of righteousness. It is true that Owen uses the *ad rem* / *in re* distinction to separate the

atonement from justification temporally, to deny justification from the moment of the atonement. However, he is clear that when the allotted time elapses and God unites Christ to sinners, although there are a number of events, which follow a particular order, it is an order of nature.⁸⁹ The events following the imputation of Christ to sinners make up a logical sequence, not a temporal one; there is no separation in time between Christ being reckoned to the sinner and faith. Hence, in terms of Owen's *ad rem / in re* distinction, they must be considered as a single package, granting the beneficiaries *ius in re*.

Boersma also misrepresents the precise role of faith. Although he acknowledges that Owen distinguishes the senses in which people are related to Christ before and after believing, Boersma argues that only assurance is lacking prior to faith. Citing Joel Beeke, he suggests that, at this early stage in his career, Owen reduced faith to assurance.⁹⁰ However, Beeke's claim is more modest. Quoting the questions on faith in Owen's two catechisms (1645),⁹¹ Beeke observes that both demonstrate that, for early Owen, faith and assurance are inseparable: 'assurance is part and parcel of faith'.⁹² This is very different from the claim that faith and assurance are identified, and it is Beeke's, not Boersma's position that finds support from Owen's Greater Catechism, which defines justifying faith as 'A gracious resting upon the free promises of God in Jesus Christ for mercy, with a firm persuasion of the heart that God is a reconciled Father unto us...'.⁹³ In *The Death of Death* (1647), Owen distinguishes faith and assurance.⁹⁴ Discussing what a sinner must believe to be saved, Owen offers a 'ladder' of beliefs: (1) he must repent and believe the gospel; (2) he must recognise the inseparable connection between faith and salvation; (3) he must be convicted by the Spirit of his personal need of a Redeemer; (4) there must be 'a serious full recumbency and rolling of the soul upon Christ in the promise of the gospel'. Assurance then follows: 'after all this, and not before, it lies upon a

⁸⁹ Owen, *Works*, x. 453, 469.

⁹⁰ Boersma, *Peppercorn*, 108.

⁹¹ Owen, *Works*, i. 463-94.

⁹² Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 213-14.

⁹³ Owen, *Works*, i. 486.

⁹⁴ Owen, *Works*, x. 407-408.

believer to assure his soul...of the good will and eternal love of God to him...in particular.⁹⁵ This need not mean that Owen believes that faith and assurance can be separated in the formal act of believing; nevertheless, he clearly does distinguish faith and assurance.

Therefore, when in *Of the Death of Christ* Owen speaks of what is lacking prior to faith, there is no reason to infer that only assurance is lacking. Prior to faith, justification is lacking in three ways:

1. It wants that act of pardoning mercy on the part of God which is to be terminated and completed in the conscience of the sinner; this lies in the promise.
2. It wants the heart's persuasion concerning the truth and goodness of the promise, and the mercy held out in the promise.
3. It wants the soul's rolling itself upon Christ, and receiving of Christ as the author and finisher of that mercy, an all-sufficient Saviour to them that believe. So that by faith alone we obtain and receive the forgiveness of sin; for notwithstanding any antecedent act of God concerning us, in and for Christ, we do not actually receive a complete soul-freeing discharge until we believe.⁹⁶

Perhaps point two can be taken to refer to assurance, but the act of pardoning mercy on God's part, and the soul's rolling onto Christ to receive him as author of mercy probably refer to more than simply assurance. This is confirmed by what Owen says in *The Death of Death* about assurance *following*, and being distinct from, the soul's rolling itself onto Christ as Saviour.

When Owen adds that one receives forgiveness by faith alone, receiving a complete soul-freeing discharge only upon believing, it sounds like faith is instrumental in justification. Owen had made this explicit in *The Death of Death*: 'Faith is the cause of pardon of sin; but what cause? in what kind? Why, merely as an instrument, apprehending the righteousness of Christ.'⁹⁷ In describing faith as an instrument to apprehend Christ's righteousness, Owen employs terminology that seems practically to have had the status of a textbook definition among the Reformed. This language can be traced back at least as far as Ursinus: 'our *faith is the instrumental cause* [of justification], apprehending and applying to ourselves the

⁹⁵ Owen, *Works*, x. 408.

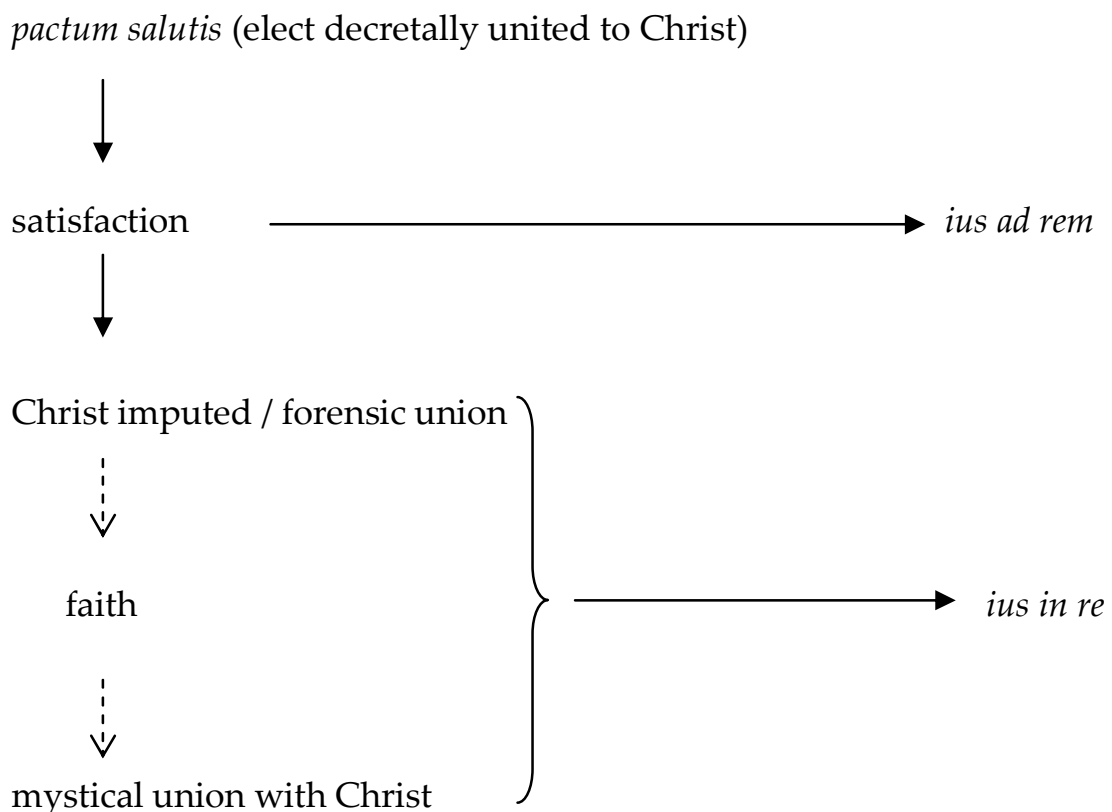
⁹⁶ Owen, *Works*, x. 471-72.

⁹⁷ Owen, *Works*, x. 252.

righteousness of Christ.⁹⁸ Towards the end of the period of High Orthodoxy, Witsius states that the Reformed 'affirm, that we are justified by [faith] as by it we apprehend Christ, are united to him, and embrace his righteousness.'⁹⁹ As we saw above, advocates of eternal justification rejected the idea that faith is instrumental to justification. Therefore, we can conclude that Owen's view of faith's role in justification follows that of Reformed Orthodoxy more generally. Faith does not merely manifest a prior justification; it instrumentally receives the justifying righteousness of Christ that God has imputed. Thus, although justification is, for Owen, a process that begins, logically, prior to faith, its completion is only grasped by the faith received working instrumentally fully to receive all of Christ's benefits.

Therefore, we can modify Boersma's scheme as in diagram 2.

Diagram 2



⁹⁸ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 331, italics in original; cf. Ames, *Marrow*, II.xxvii.14; Turretin, *Institutes*, XVI.vii.5, 7; XVI.ix.9.

⁹⁹ Witsius, *Economy*, III.viii.51.

For Owen, the elect are *decretally* united to Christ in the *pactum salutis*, which provides the foundation both for Christ's satisfaction and for the imputation of Christ to the sinner, but, as we have seen, does not yet provide a *ius ad rem*. At the time of Christ's satisfaction, God acts on the basis of the decretal union and imputes the sins of the elect to Christ. This grants the *ius ad rem*. Later, at the moment of justification, God imputes Christ to the elect sinner in a *forensic* union, on the basis of which, God grants the sinner faith. Through this faith, the believer is *mystically* united to Christ. In this diagram, solid arrows indicate stages separated by time; broken arrows indicate stages related in a logical sequence, but occurring at the same point in time. Therefore, *contra* Boersma, Owen does successfully distinguish *ius ad rem* from *ius in re*. Although the *ius in re* is comprised of stages in logical sequence, temporally it is one event. The climax of this sequence is mystical union with Christ, and, as in Reformed Orthodoxy generally, full justification follows and is grounded upon union, which itself is received by faith.

Arguably, Baxter's accusations, and Owen's complex description of the application of Christ, stem from Owen's determination to be Christ-centred at every point. Although God's will governs the process of justification, it focuses on Christ through the *pactum salutis*, his satisfaction, and the need for union with him to receive his benefits. Owen could have moved Christ from the centre of his system, either by arguing that Christ did not purchase faith, it being self-generated by the believer, or by arguing that faith, once purchased, is applied without explicit reference to Christ. Had he done so, other problems for his system would have arisen – relating to the particularity and unconditionality of redemption on the one hand and inseparable trinitarian operations on the other – but the precise set of difficulties faced by his theology would have been resolved.

In short, Owen's contribution to seventeenth century debates on eternal justification demonstrates that because, for him, Christ is central to salvation at every stage, union with Christ holds a central place in his doctrine of justification. In common with the Reformed consensus of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Owen held that Christ, according to God's will, on the basis of the covenant of

redemption, purchased all that was required for the salvation of the elect, including faith, when he died as their federal representative and substitute. At God's appointed time, the Holy Spirit unites elect sinners to Christ by faith. This mystical union provides the immediate ground for the imputation of Christ's righteousness and non-imputation of their sins, so God is able justly to declare them righteous.

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