

Stephen Chester, Reading Paul with the Reformers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017):
Review article
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Stephen Chester has pulled off the seemingly impossible. A New Testament Scholar has written a book with learning, clarity and nuanced insight on Reformation Exegesis, a book from which Reformation experts can learn plenty. The purpose of the exploration of the Reformers—which occupies over two-thirds of the book—is to allow contemporary biblical scholarship to hear what the Reformers had to say about Paul, but also to receive a corrective in places where they have used their exegetical forebears as straw men. However there is no intention of re-pristinating the Reformation exegesis, and in fact Chester feels grateful to discoveries from Sanders, even Schweitzer, onwards. This is not only because our knowledge of Ancient Judaism since the 1970s has grown markedly, but also because Sanders promoted a ‘union in Christ’ or ‘participation’ as the key to Paul’s soteriology, and this will prove to be important for what Chester finds in the Reformers.

After giving a brief, but useful tour of the pre-Reformation approaches, in which Aquinas is shown to have re-worked Augustine, with reference to Galatians 5:6 (“it is for freedom Christ has set us free”), we learn that martyrdom was understood as freely chosen and hence *meritorious* suffering, but that ‘initial justification’ was considered to be totally gracious so that merits for non-martyrs were properly speaking the merits of Christ. Later nominalist theologians questioned this gratuity, believing that ‘sinners may congruously merit initial justification’ (102) and prepare themselves for it. However Luther’s break with such nominalism started in 1512 and was complete with the Roman lectures of 1515-16 (96). It is all God’s doing, even to the extent of a rejection of infused grace in Luther’s *Against Latomus* of 1521, which, as well shall see is a critical text for the evaluation of Luther’s thinking. ‘Relationship’ rather than habit and virtue was the keynote; it takes the cross to save, since the project of the human self is lost in ongoing covetousness and concupiscence.

The aim of the book’s first section is to demonstrate the consensus of the Reformers on Pauline theology (even if the second section will expose their disagreements.) The Reformers did *not* make a lot of anxiety and experience of guilt. By the time Luther came to Romans his personal anxiety was a thing of the distant past. Both he and Calvin taught that Paul thought he was doing rather well right up to the time he was converted. Again, it was not ‘conscience’ but the Word to which Luther was captive. ‘No longer is the human problem primarily the inability to want to do the good but also the inability of the conscience reliably to identify the good.’ (137) The conscience stood in need of help. Again, nor were the Reformers altogether against ceremonial law. There was a purpose to such ‘external things’ (as Luther makes clear in *On the Freedom of a Christian*) and they were divinely commanded. Calvin points out that Deut 27:26 in Galatians 3:10 talks about *all* the words—the ceremonial laws were not somehow lesser.

More importantly the Reformers did not simply teach ‘grace’ as something forensic, or if they did, then they were quick to add that ‘gift’ soon followed (as in Rom 5:15 and Gal 3:7), a gift that is infused in order to heal the soul. Yet this gift was already defined as ‘faith in Christ by Luther’, although Melancthon meant something different –and here we see the beginnings of the alleged tensions, which are to be resolved by making

Luther's lieutenant the exception in the triumvirate of Reformers. Melanchthon and some latter-day Protestants might well agree: 'That which is in the believer is not justifying grace, but faith, the means by which Christ and his saving benefits are received.' Fine, but what then is the gift of which Paul speaks? One observes a similar concern in John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2015.) As we approach the end of the first section ('Shared Convictions'), it is emphasized that we will see that internal differences between the Reformers arise in 'various expressions of the christological focus' (171). On this page there is an unfortunate repeated sentence: otherwise the presentation and proofing of the book seems first rate.

The second, middle section ('Individual Perspectives) is the heart of the book in more ways than one, where the focus is on Luther, Melanchthon and Calvin *in turn*. The 'apocalyptic' or 'participatory' Luther has much to offer, the author believes. The great late (1535) Galatians Commentary is where Luther dealt with the death of the self and replacement with the indwelling Christ. 'The justification of the individual is therefore an apocalyptic event that participates in and relies upon God's larger apocalyptic intervention in Christ for the redemption of the world' (188). This seems a little bit free-wheeling in its attempt to bring Luther into conversation with post-Käsemann (post-1970) discourse, but no matter. To add that the righteousness is not so much transferred from Christ to the believer, but rather that through association with the Righteous One the believer actually *has* these things seems truer to the idiom. It is *faith* that is effective through love (WA 40:2:36). Chester then turns to deal with 'the Finnish School' of Luther interpretation, which he praises for being aware of the reality of Christ's presence in the person of faith: for Luther there is not merely a subjective experience of God's effect on the believer. 'The Finnish view that for Luther justification encompasses renewal is plausible' (214), since there is a real oneness between the Word and the believer in faith.

According to Chester, that Luther was not a proponent of a forensic view of justification in the way that Melanchthon was can be seen in the postscript that Luther added to a letter to Johannes Brenz: 'I want him [Christ] to be the gift and teaching in himself; he does not say I give you the way, truth and life as if Christ stood outside of me and worked such things in me. He ought to be, dwell, live, speak in me, not through me or into me.' In other words Christ must be present for there to be justifying faith (albeit by an active divine presence). The alien aspect of righteousness is that Christ comes *from* outside. Whereas for Melanchthon in his 1532 Romans Commentary regeneration 'merely' meant the gift of faith by the Holy Spirit, which in turn has relational access to Christ. Once again, for Melanchthon, justification did not mean having new virtues, but 'it is understood as a matter of relation (*relative*), which refers to God's will of those who are approved and accepted by God' (237). It is always *accompanied* by the renewal of the Holy Spirit, but it is not same as that. Against Osiander, who after Luther's death claimed his position to be closer to Luther's than Melanchthon's was, the latter argued that God comforts and is present through his Word, and is the dwelling place of God by the Holy Spirit. Despite Karl Holl's claim, this is not a cold, Philippist 'legal fiction': in fact, in speaking about *affectus* Melanchthon encourages contrition as something needing to be whipped up, or at least encouraged by a form of 'mindfulness'. However for Melanchthon the Holy Spirit is not Christ.

Now Luther thought Christ literally became sin and ‘what is His becomes ours’ (Gal 3:14), so as ‘to transfer righteousness, life and blessing from Him to us’. There is a uniting in faith, which is more than just relating. As indicated back in the First Section, as well as grace there is gift which heals, as Luther states in reaction to the accusation that on his account, sinners are only fictionally righteous. (*Against Latomus*: WA 8:107,34-5: *Gratia quidem nullum ibi peccatum habet, quia persona tota placet, donum autem peccatum habet, quod expurget et expuget, sed et persona non placet sed habet gratiam, nisi ob donum hoc modo peccatum expurgare laborans. Deus non fictos, sed vero peccatores salvos facit, non fictum, sed verum peccatum moritficare docet.*) This is something that John Barclay has also recognized, that faith with the gift becomes a mode of human action. Where Luther writes this (*Sic fides, ut dixi, apprehendit et involvit Christum filium Dei pro nobis traditum, ut Paulus hic docet. Quo apprehenso per fidem habemus iustitiam et vitam*; LW26.177; WA 40.1. 297.30), the sense seems more that apprehending Christ delivered for us has, through faith, the ‘cash value’ of righteousness and life’, rather than that of personal cohabitation. However it might be better to recognize that in the Galatian Commentary the metaphors are not softly medicinal but are rather somewhat ‘violent’: there is less *gratia sanans* and more mortification and penitence. Despite the contrast set up between the two men by R. Schäfer in his article ‘Melanchthon’s interpretation of Romans 5.15’ in *Melanchthon & the Commentary* esp. 98-100, (and Chester’s appreciation of this), faith as laying hold of benefits while Christ works to mortify the ‘old man’ seems to be more what Luther intends. Does it require drawing a line between the two Wittenberg reformers? One needs to look more closely at Melanchthon. (‘Whereas in Melanchthon the gift is a consequence of the favor, Luther explains grace as the consequence of the gift (WA 8.107: ‘*persona non placet nec habet gratiam nisi ob donum hoc modo peccatum expurgare laborans.*’) Only when faith is trying to drive out sin can grace be reckoned to him (‘..donum vero, quod eum sanat a peccato (ibid: ‘...ut non tantum “per illum” aut “ab illo” sit iustitia, sed etiam “in illum”, ut *recht und Sünder zugleich.*’-ibid.) Even while accepting the Melanchthonian distinction Luther insists on a priority of ‘donum’ and renders that christologically. What perhaps is not brought out in the discussion is that this accords with what will become clear in *De servo arbitrio* (1525) that it requires an actual operation of grace for faith to arise, quite apart from *Christus praesens*. The Calvinist priority of regeneration is just around the corner.

Here is Chester’s judgement on this theme: ‘However, their understanding of the term δωρεά (*donum* /gift) in this verse is quite different from each other. Luther interprets the gift not only as the Holy Spirit but also in strongly Christological terms and this christological dimension he connects to justification.’ (252) Whereas Melanchthon thinks that through grace a believer ‘look to the Word and thus apprehends Christ the Mediator’(ibid), and the Spirit then follows. Luther identifies it with the presence of Christ in faith and as an intrinsic part of justification: ‘there is a sense in which the gift is a prerequisite for grace.’ (254) Instead Melanchthon places contrition as the step (*causa sine qua non*) before justification.

In the end, according to Chester, Melanchthon had an insufficiently Christological account of justification. It is essential for Melanchthon that works to be done if the Holy Spirit and faith are to be retained, ‘...but he does not speak like Luther as if to be active in works is constitutive of faith...Melanchthon’s relational account of justification differs significantly precisely because it does not rely on the presence of Christ in faith.’ (261)

They understand important Christological dimensions of justification differently. For Luther, Christ is present in faith. Justification encompasses the renewal of the believer expressed in works. For Melanchthon, justification means acceptance on account of Christ's sacrificial death.' This, argues Chester, has some connection with his selective method of 'commonplace' theology, or is at least simply due to his overlooking certain Pauline themes, not least 'union with Christ'. Melanchthon 'offers no direct response to Paul's vocabulary of participation in Christ.' (268)

Now it is true that Melanchthon was at pains to maintain both the objectivity of Christ's work and his externality and on the other hand, in what is said about the indwelling Spirit in John's gospel. He sees Romans 6 as about a moral union with Christ in his death, and as union through the Spirit. Yet in some sense the Christological' issue is a bit of a red herring. The question is whether it helps to describe even Luther, for whom there is not much talk of 'participation', either in 1521 or in the 1535 Galatians Commentary. What there is is a putting to death and being made alive in Christ: this is real and experiential for Luther, but it is not part of what saves: *that* is the looking to Christ's atoning death. The product of the 'gift' is a cancelling out of sinfulness in association with the second use of the law and thereby providing the foundation for ethical living. And it is the ethical living that Melanchthon is more explicit about. Believers are free to sin or to be obedient, even though they are not free to save themselves, or even co-operate in that in any way.

When it comes to Calvin, Chester stresses the 'logical dependency of sanctification on justification...grounded in union with Christ.' 'Justification cannot be logically prior to union with Christ itself since the gift of faith that unites those who receive it with Christ is logically prior both to the divine declaration of righteousness and to sanctifying regeneration.' 'For Calvin forensic justification is no less a participatory concept than sanctification' (269) Much is made here of Calvin's 1540 Romans commentary. For example on Rom 3:22 Calvin comments: *facti sumus Christi participes*. Yet the fuller context runs: 'Why is faith said to justify? Because it is the instrument of receiving Christ in whom righteousness is communicated to us. After we are made participants in Christ, we are not ourselves only righteous, but our works are considered to be righteous in the sight of God, on account that whatever is imperfect in them is wiped out by the blood of Christ.' (*Tum occurrat Christus oportet: qui, ut solus iustus est, ita suam iustitiam in nos transferendo iustos nos reddit. Nunc vides ut iustitia fidei iustitia Christi sit. Ut ergo iustificemur, causa efficiens est misericordia Dei: Christus, materia: verbum cum fide, instrumentum. Quare fides iustificare dicitur: quia instrumentum est recipiendi Christi, in quo nobis communicatur iustitia. Postquam facti sumus Christi participes, non ipsi solum iusti sumus, sed opera nostra iusta reputantur coram Deo: propterea scilicet, quia quidquid est in illis imperfectionis, obliteratur Christi sanguine.* [CO 49, 60].) Chester concludes that for Calvin only in union with Christ can one receive righteousness. 'Calvin does not say that it is the instrument by which righteousness is received. Instead, he says that it is the instrument by which Christ is received, and that righteousness is communicated in him...From such statements it is clear that Calvin conceived justification by faith in terms of union with Christ from the very outset of his exegetical career.' (271) But is there really so clear? Participation in Christ is only as meaningful as it allows righteousness to travel into the believer through Christ. It is righteousness that comes—it is Christ's own righteousness that is the material cause with word and faith as formal cause of righteousness. Faith is an instrument for this

transfer rather than a means of personal relating or sharing in Christ. Faith is of course glossed as *fiducia*; in the 1539 *Institutes* faith is defined as ‘a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us.’ Justification is life giving, for it is linked to sanctification through rising with Christ, that one accesses by communion with the death of Christ. ‘This “external mortification” means that “the elect have participation in the Son of God so that all their miseries that are in their own nature curses are made helpful for their salvation.’ (277) Vivification is ‘the good works of the believer enabled by the Holy Spirit.’ Whereas Erasmus noted that in Rom 6:11 *év* means ‘per’, Calvin keeps the Vulgate: *in Christo Iesu*. (CO 49,110: *Ut Christus excitatus est ad incorruptibilem vitam, ita vos Dei gratia renatos esse, ut totam vitam in sanctitate et iustitia traducatis: quando aeterna est semperque vigeat haec, qua renovati estis, spiritus sancti virtus. Caeterum retinere malui Pauli verba: in Christo Iesu, quam cum Erasmo vertere: per Christum: quia illo modo melius exprimitur insitio illa, quae nos unum cum Christo facit.*) To be placed in Christ, forming a union with him is indeed key for Calvin’s reading of Paul, but the idea is that mortification with Christ is the means to glorification. On Rom8:2 Calvin insists that sanctification and justification are ‘simultaneous’, because we cannot grasp Christ without sanctification. (*Inst* [French] 1541, 351: McKee transl.) Yet if one reads to the end of Calvin, any such union is only for those who are elect. There is some sort of ‘reciprocity’ if one is chosen, but only then.

We are told that Melanchthon was interested in the psychology of conversion with anguish giving way to peace, but the other two Reformers not so much. ‘However, both Luther and Calvin insist that repentance is only fully present in the experience of faith and not merely as its prelude.’ (343) So when N.T. Wright writes that the Reformers viewed Paul as one laid low by guilty conscience, it is only Melanchthon that has to plead guilty. This seems very unfair to Melanchthon. Luther and Calvin show ‘union with Christ’ to be the common Protestant view. Union, it is claimed, stops the externality of extrinsic righteousness from becoming a fiction. As Chester put it in his own 2009 article featured by John Barclay in *Paul and the Gift* (100, n.43), gift for Luther is faith in Christ: it is not just ‘favour’ (where Luther’s view is contrasted with that of Melanchthon.) Yet commenting on Rom 5:15 Luther asserts that *grace* is ‘an outward good, God’s favor, the opposite of wrath’. Yet in *Paul and the Gift* Barclay is keen to note that in Luther’s *Brief Instruction* Christ himself is ‘gift’ (and in the passage Barclay quotes extensively faith is clearly viewed as passive and receptive, not active.) It is perhaps more accurate to say that for Luther faith is the gift that corresponds to grace as God’s favour and that this is what works to change the person.

Perhaps the only slightly disappointing part of the book is where all that has gone on in the first 300 pages is made to speak to the current situation of Pauline studies. One can agree: Paul intended the gospel of grace to undercut all pretensions to righteousness, not just Jewish covenantal nomism. (Romans 2 is an ‘*a fortiori*’ argument on the basis of Romans1). Further, the recently faddish ‘faith of Jesus Christ’ issue has led to ‘neglect of the theme of proclamation and inadequate accounts of human faith. Moreover, N.T. Wright’s covenantal account of justification – a divine verdict concerning membership of God’s people – ‘represents a significant misinterpretation’, since the notion of release from sin is crucially overlooked, and one does long for more on hamartiology. Yet this is also a charge that could be leveled at this very book’s account of the Reformers, where

the Reformers on 'sin' is rather neglected: *tu quoque!* Chester diagnoses the weakness of the *New Perspective on Paul*, that in making so much about boundary-markers it possibly fails to distinguish between different proponents and hence targets. Stendahl was wrong to trace a line from Augustine through Luther to Freud: yes, possibly, but one needs to do more than just state that. There is also a lack of Catholic exegesis in any detail, whether Early Modern or contemporary, although that would have made the book even longer and even more demanding, and one might concede that the earliest Early Modern Catholic exegetes were not as significant for the history of Catholic theology and exegesis as the Protestant counterparts were for their tradition. There is not much sense of the living German-speaking history of interpretation. It is noteworthy that where page 364 speaks of 'staging the dialog' it refers to Luther and Calvin but not Melanchthon. Yet it seems to this reviewer that with his third use of the law, careful linguistic analysis and the dedication to the argument of a text against pressures of harmonization or from dogmatics, a scholar who was ready to change his mind (as Timothy Wengert has shown), and who resisted demonizing opponents, Melanchthon stands as a good example to all with his emphasis on a *moral* union with Christ.