

AN ANALYSIS OF REV. KERSTEN'S VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION IN RELATION TO TIME IN HIS *REFORMED DOGMATICS*

The Westminster Confession of Faith states: “God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, (Gal. 3:8, 1 Pet. 1:2, 19–20, Rom. 8:30) and Christ did, in the fulness of time, die for their sins, and rise for their justification: (Gal. 4:4, 1 Tim. 2:6, Rom. 4:25) nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them. (Col. 1:21–22, Gal. 2:16, Tit. 3:4–7).”

How does Rev. Gerrit Hendrik Kersten's treatment of justification with respect to time compare with the above statement? This is very relevant, because Rev. Kersten was instrumental in the formation of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, and many point to Rev. Kersten's treatment of justification as a rationale for applying the “hyper-Calvinist” label on him.

Before seeking to address the question itself, let me first offer some prefatory remarks:

- Since Rev. Kersten's phraseology is not the same as the Westminster Confession's on this topic, how one views Rev. Kersten will almost inevitably color how one interprets him on this issue. Obviously, if his phraseology were exactly the same as the Confession's, then one could readily deduce that his view on justification with respect to time is substantively the same as the Confession's. But his phraseology is not the same, so the question necessarily arises.
- It is possible for two parties to hold to the same substantive position even if their phraseology is not the same. To take a simple non-theological example, the greetings “hi” and “hello” substantively mean the same thing, even if the phraseology differs.
- The Westminster Confession's phraseology and treatment on this topic are complex and not simple, inasmuch as it speaks of “from all eternity”, the time of Christ's resurrection, and a time in the elect believer's life when the Holy Spirit applies “Christ unto them”, in relation to the general issue of justification. It does not limit its treatment just to one point in time, and in truth neither does scripture.
- With respect to time, the Westminster Confession answers three questions:
 1. When was justification decreed by God? “from all eternity”
 2. When was justification fully earned and accomplished? the time of Christ's resurrection
 3. When was justification actually applied? a time in the elect believer's life (specifically, upon saving faith of the believer through the Spirit's regeneration of the believer)

Given the above remarks, in order to answer the question (“How does Rev. Kersten's treatment of justification with respect to time compare with the above statement?”), I would ask how it seems Rev. Kersten would answer these three questions, given what he writes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*:

1. When was justification decreed by God?

2. When was justification fully earned and accomplished?
3. When was justification actually applied?

Rev. Kersten seems to answer that third question on pages 421-422 of *Reformed Dogmatics*:

“They [elect believers-JPM] must be translated out of the state of condemnation into the state of reconciliation with God. This takes place in their justification by faith, without which no one can receive any comfort from the justification that takes place objectively in Christ before faith...Scripture lays full emphasis upon the fact that the elect sinner is justified by faith...Thus Scripture clearly teaches us that in justification by faith the elect sinner is brought out of the unreconciled state in which he is by nature, into a state of peace with God...Before this *subjective* justification every person is an object of God’s eternal wrath from the time of his conception...we maintain that in justification there is an actual change of state.”

Based upon the above, it seems Rev. Kersten’s answer to the third question is the same as the Westminster Confession’s:

When was justification actually applied? a time in the elect believer’s life (specifically, upon saving faith of the believer through the Spirit’s regeneration of the believer)

Now let’s consider the second question and how Rev. Kersten answers it on p. 420-421 of *Reformed Dogmatics*:

“Since the elect were counted in Christ when He presented Himself as a debtor to the righteousness of God, and the sins were avenged in Him, likewise the elect were justified in Him when He was justified in His resurrection from the dead...That justification did not only concern Christ as Surety, but with Him all His elect, who were reckoned and were justified in His resurrection...”

Based upon the above, it seems Rev. Kersten’s answer to the second question is the same as the Westminster Confession’s:

When was justification fully earned and accomplished? the time of Christ’s resurrection

Now let’s consider the first question and how Rev. Kersten answers it on pp. 416-420 of *Reformed Dogmatics*:

“It [justification- JPM] lies unshakably firm in the decree and in the covenant of God from before the foundation of the world. Yet the subjective justification in time by faith is necessary...”

Based upon the above, it seems Rev. Kersten’s answer to the first question is the same as the Westminster Confession’s:

When was justification decreed by God? “from all eternity”

So it would seem Rev. Kersten’s answer to the three questions is the same as the Westminster Confession’s and hence Rev. Kersten’s view of justification with respect to time is substantively the same as the Westminster Confession’s, at least with respect to these three questions. This would be consistent with the fact that Rev. Kersten asserted his doctrinal agreement with the Westminster Confession, and hence desired a form of fraternal relations or merger between the NRC and the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. (On the issue of such fraternal relations or merger, I believe it should not have happened then or now, but not because of this issue. There are various official differences, especially related to worship, but also on some other issues [such as who one may marry], where the differences between the two denominations are such as not to permit such merger without negative ramifications and covenant-breaking on the part of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. At the same time, there are certain practices of the NRC [like their Christian schools] where the NRC is frankly more commendable than the FPCS. I am not seeking to enter here into the matter of which denomination is “better”.)

Many would yet rebut that Rev. Kersten agrees with the Westminster Confession on this topic as follows: even though Rev. Kersten agrees with the Westminster Confession in his answer to the three questions, yet he contradicts it by asserting, “the elect were ordained *and justified* [italics are mine- JPM] from eternity” (p. 419 of *Reformed Dogmatics*). In contrast, the Westminster Confession says “nevertheless” with respect to the time of justification, and hence contrasts it with “from eternity” and the time of Christ’s resurrection.

I respond that we need to determine what Rev. Kersten meant by asserting that the elect believers are “justified from eternity”, given that Rev. Kersten acknowledges that in time elect believers are under God’s wrath until the time of their Spirit-wrought faith. The answer seems to lie on what he writes on p. 420: “In God’s decree the elect are justified from eternity. In this lies the firm ground of justification by faith. Although their conscience often accuses, although their faith often wavers, the acquittal of God’s people can never be broken. It lies unshakably firm in the decree and in the covenant of God from before the foundation of the world.” So he is asserting that “the acquittal of God’s people” was decreed from eternity and covenanted from eternity. The Westminster Confession agrees it was decreed from eternity, for it says, “God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all of the elect.” The Westminster Confession also agrees it was covenanted from all eternity, for it says in chapter 8 on “of Christ the Mediator”, “It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus...to be the Mediator between God and man...the Head and Savior of His Church...unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed.” This is speaking of one and the same divine transaction described in Westminster Larger Catechism question and answer 31: “The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as His seed.” Rev. Kersten would hence argue that since “the acquittal of God’s people” was decreed from eternity and covenanted from eternity, this is one and the same as asserting that they are “justified from eternity”.

This raises both a philosophical question and a linguistic question.

Regarding the philosophical question, if the elect are not actually justified until the elect person has Spirit-wrought faith, then how can his acquittal be effectively transacted by decree and covenant “from eternity”? My own view is that this seeming difficulty for us humans to understand is because we are finite creatures confined within time, whereas the infinite God is both within time and outside of time. For God all of time is His creation (even as all of space is too), and all of time for Him is as but as a moment. So outside of time, or in other words “from eternity”, the decree and covenant have been transacted by God, but within time the transaction is not applied until the elect sinner has faith. Substantively, Rev. Kersten is correct in asserting that the elect are acquitted in Christ from all eternity, for the divine covenantal transaction effecting their acquittal was in place from all eternity.

Regarding the linguistic question, I would certainly acknowledge Rev. Kersten’s phraseology is different from the Westminster Confession’s. I would even say I think the Westminster Confession’s phraseology is correct given the *common* definition of “justification” and Rev. Kersten’s is wrong *if* one assumes that common definition. (Rev. Kersten seems to be using a definition like “acquitted by God in Christ, both considered outside of time and in time”, whereas the common one such as found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is this: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”) This common Westminster phraseology (which is also the phraseology of the Belgic Confession) reserves the term “justification” for what happens within time upon faith in the believer, and it uses other terms to describe what is the case outside of time (i.e., “from eternity”), namely related to the decree and covenant of God. I prefer the Westminster’s phraseology because it sticks closer to the scriptural use of language on this topic, and since justification is accomplished and applied within time, it avoids word inconsistencies that I think raise challenges for Rev. Kersten’s phraseology- challenges that can be avoided. Since we are justified by faith alone, and that faith is necessarily lodged in time, it is most linguistically correct and consistent to lodge the definition of “justification” within time too, and not to try to expand its definition so as to accommodate what occurs outside of time in the divine covenant of redemption. Nevertheless, I fail to see where Rev. Kersten has a substantively different conception on the matter from that in the Westminster Confession. Rev. Kersten’s conception of the matter is the same, but his semantics are different. In stating that “the elect were...justified from eternity”, Rev. Kersten substantively means by that what he states on p. 420: “It [justification- JPM] lies unshakably firm in the decree and in the covenant of God from before the foundation of the world”, which is true. Rev. Kersten rejected both the Arminian and antinomian errors on this topic, as did the Westminster Confession. To read hyper-Calvinism into Rev. Kersten on this topic, in my opinion, is simply unfair, and ignores much of what he writes. I do not think it is fair in this case to turn what is really a semantic difference (or more precisely, an abnormal use of semantics on the part of Rev. Kersten) into a soteriological difference. But for those determined to label Rev. Kersten as a “hyper-

Calvinist” [i.e., one having a substantively different conception of salvation from the normal Calvinistic one, generally denying the necessity and responsibility of personal faith], I doubt anything I write would persuade them otherwise.