

The Place and Time of Justification in the *Ordo Salutis* of John L. Girardeau
A Critique

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God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them. WCF 11:4

How and when are we justified? Biblical and Reformed theologians have in the past answered this in various ways. Some have posited that we are only justified in time, through faith. For these men, only in this manner can we describe the biblical doctrine of Justification. However, some other Reformed theologians have posited the idea that we can speak of a multiple justifications, as it were. These men held that we can speak of a justification in eternity, and a justification in time. The latter justification can be further divided into a justification of the elect when Christ died, was resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the Father, upon completion of his first advent, and then again, they say, we can speak of a justification of the elect obtained when the individual elect person believes. Taking a somewhat mediating position, John L. Girardeau settles for a position that rejects justification in eternity, while retaining a justification secured at the time of Christ's ascension. After this, he then locates another kind of justification which occurs when the penitent elect believes. Such is the answer he proffers to us for our consideration in his essay *The Federal Theology its Import and its Regulative Influence*.¹

For myself, however, I hold that we can only speak of a single justification which occurs in time, and is effected by the instrumentality of faith. I would hold that we ought not to speak of a justification apart from the category of saving faith. What I will endeavour to do then, in his brief response is to examine the *rationale* Girardeau invokes to sustain his claims regarding a twofold justification. My method will be to outline some of his controlling premises and assumptions, especially one. I will then set out my counter controlling premises and assumptions. After this I will review his primary arguments, critiquing them, indeed, refuting them.

Girardeau's controlling assumptions

It hardly needs to be noted that the major controlling theme in Girardeau's polemic is his precommitment to Reformed Federalism.² Yet having said that, I do not believe that Girardeau's rejection of the traditional distinction between the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace has a bearing on his point. If there is a bearing, I cannot discern it. I have yet to see any necessary connection between his rejection of that distinction, which collapses the Covenants of Redemption and Grace into one Covenant, his principal focus is upon the union of Christ, in the federal schema, with the elect. Girardeau wants to so connect Christ, the head of the federated community of the elect, with the body of that community, *viz.*, the elect. In a sense, this intimate connection could be described by using the language of predication. For, in a sense, Girardeau wants to say that whatever is predicated to Christ, specifically in that role as federal head, one can, indeed, must predicate to the body, that is, the elect. Thus, if we can speak of Christ being justified by God in the court of heaven upon his ascension, so, too, we must speak of the elect, in some sense, being justified in their federal or corporate head at the same time. To this end, Girardeau opts for an immediate imputation of justification of the elect, as opposed to a mediated justification which is obtained through the instrumentality of faith.

Having noted these things, the fundamental assumption that regulates Girardeau's thinking lies elsewhere. Indeed, it is not until the end of his composition that he alludes to this fundamental assumption. He expresses himself in a complex of arguments and predications. Wisdom counsels allowing the man to express himself in his own words:

Now if it be maintained that there is no justification previous to regeneration, it would follow that God confers the blessing of life, while, in every sense, he denounces the curse of death; that the principle of holiness is infused into the soul while, in every sense, it lies under the penalty of a condemning law; that it lives spiritually while legally dead, and that it is united by regenerated grace to Christ the source of life, whole yet the death sentence is, in no sense, removed. If it be said, that the difficulty is met by the consideration that regeneration and justification take place synchronously, it is obvious to reply, that regeneration may be, and no doubt sometimes is, effected in the case of infants, the difference in time being palpable between their new birth and their actual justification; and that in the case of adult elect sinners,

¹John L. Girardeau, *The Federal Theology its Import and its Regulative Influence*, ed., by J. Ligon Duncan (Greenville, South Carolina: Reformed Academic Press, 1994).

²I will assume that the reader is familiar with this doctrine, such that I do not need to delineate it biblically, theologically or historically.

their regeneration, in order of production, is a condition precedent to their actual justification, so that without its occurrence that justification could not be effected. The very question is, how regeneration can be effected *in order to* justification; how a sinner can be renewed in holiness before the removal of guilt and his deliverance from the curse.

These difficulties press still more heavily upon those who rejecting the doctrine of an immediate imputation of Christ's righteousness and an antecedent justification *in foro divino*, content that repentance, in the narrow sense of penitence, precedes actual justification. On that supposition, as it is inconceivable that a penitent soul could be destitute of the divine favor which implies pardon, and yet exercises penitence as a condition precedent to justification through which alone pardon is actually imparted, it must be regarded as at once and the same time actually pardoned and actually unpardoned; which is a contradiction.

It is evident that a sinner cannot be regenerated and perform holy acts, until in some sense his guilt is removed and his obligation to punishment remitted. In a word, he must be pardoned before he can be renewed and exert holy energies--not consciously pardoned, but pardoned representatively in Christ. Those who oppose this view are shut up to the necessity of holding, that an unpardoned, that is, a condemned, sinner is the recipient of the transcendent blessing of regeneration; that he then, as still unpardoned, puts forth holy exercise of faith, and is then for the first time pardoned and invested with a right to life.³

What does all that mean? It seems to me that his essential meaning comes to this: God cannot deal with a sinner, regeneratively while the sinner remains in an unjustified state. That is, God cannot dispense or impart the favours of his regenerating grace and life while the sinner is under the forensic curse of the law, bring down upon it, the due wrath of God. Humanly speaking, it would be as if I would be unable to deal with someone subject to my disfavour until the offending cause of that disfavour be removed. He follows this path, apparently because he fails to properly distinguish the love of complacency from the love of benevolence. For, seemingly, in his mind, love, all love, any love, must be wholly complacent love.⁴ Here then, it seems to me, lies the root of Girardeau's controlling axiom, from which his construction of immediate justification branches forth. In a word or two, this is Girardeau's controlling *either/or*, the hinge upon which his logic turns.

My controlling assumptions

In counterpoint to Girardeau, I would posit that we must regulate our categories by the biblical categories found in sacred scripture. Further, I would propose, contrary to Girardeau, that the law of parsimony⁵ demands that his doctrine of justification be rejected. I would argue that there is an alternative set of theological categories that well suit the data of scripture, and which avoid the needless multiplying entities beyond necessity. Further, I would hold that Girardeau's position violates the spirit of the Westminster Confession on two points. Firstly, chapter one says that all doctrines, not derived by self-evidential statements, must be derived by good and necessary consequence.⁶ Secondly, I would propose this his immediate justification is it odds with the spirit and intent of the confession regarding the timing of justification. Historically it is more than clear that positions analogous to Girardeau's were known, yet the writers sought to connect the time justification to the expression of personal saving faith. Aside from this, I would argue that Girardeau's categories are logically and biblically incoherent. Lastly, I note here that I assess Girardeau's statements and arguments as they stand, apart from any possible qualification found in some other work by Girardeau.

Response

The first thing to be noted is that Girardeau exceeds the language of scripture. Indeed, at no point does he adduce a scripture that directly supports his argument. His theological edifice is built on solely inferential grounds, which he

³Girardeau, pp., 41-2.

⁴Ibid., p., 26.

⁵Otherwise known as *Occam's razor*.

⁶It is well known that the phrase "good and necessary consequence" is a term borrowed from logic, and denotes properly consequential inferences, not just opinions, speculations, or guesses.

assumes have to be inferred because of the alleged dilemma (as noted above). Properly speaking, Scripture identifies the death and resurrection life of Christ as the basis or ground of our justification. Paul speaks clearly that Christ rose for my justification,⁷ which is not the same as saying I was justified in his rising. The preponderance of biblical references regarding justification locate justification in time, which is obtained by or through faith. There is only one other passage which seems to imply something otherwise, and only one other passage which has often been adduced to sustain a pre-temporal justification. The first passage is Romans 8:30, where Paul, writing in aorist tense, apparently locates a certain justification of the elect in eternity, along with predestination, calling, and glorification. Shedd on this verse notes that the implication is that all these acts are eternal and simultaneous, occurring within the divine mind. He then closes with the point: “all are equally certain.”⁸ The other verse often adduced as indirect justification for eternal justification is Rev 13:8, the lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world. What is interesting, however, is that Girardeau expressly rejects any recourse to eternal justification, calling that doctrine *antinomian*.⁹

Historically, there have been some who have maintained that we can speak of a multiple justification. Witsius, for example, held that justification was obtained via two means, *general* and *particular*. In regard to the general aspect of justification, he held that there is a form of justification secured in and by the institution of the Covenant of Redemption, in eternity past. And again, justification was obtained for the elect when Christ made full satisfaction for their sins, whereupon he was raised from the dead and transported to heaven. In regard to particular justification, this firstly happens when through faith, the believer is united to Christ, whereby passing from the state of condemnation to a state of grace. This act of justification occurs, says Witsius, in the court of heaven. Another form of justification occurs in the conscience of the believer, wherein he or she experiences the forgiveness of God.¹⁰

Thomas Boston discusses the timing of justification in his notes on the Marrow. He sums up the Westminsterian position well. While he personally does assert a virtual and actual justification, similar to Girardeau, he notes well the view the author of the Marrow:

Upon the whole, it is evident our author keeps the path trodden by orthodox divines on the subject; and though, in order to answer the objections of his adversary, he uses the school terms, of being justified in respect of God’s decree, meritoriously, and actually, agreeable to the practice of other sound divines; yet otherwise he begins and ends his decision of the controversy, by asserting in plain and simple terms, without any distinction at all, “That a man is not justified before he believes, or without faith.” So his answer amounts just to this, “That God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect; and Christ did, in the fulness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification nevertheless, they are not justified until the Holy Spirit doth in due time apply Christ to them.”¹¹

In Girardeau’s polemic the fundamental claim is that there is such a thing as a twofold justification, one virtual and the other actual. But here is the problem. For Girardeau, the virtual justification and the actual justification are different *kinds* of justification.¹² Indeed, not only are they different in kind, they are different in location. One is a justification in the court of heaven, here they are objectively justified. The other location is in the court of a man’s conscience, here

⁷C.f., Roms 5:9-10, Col 1:20.

⁸W.G.T. Shedd, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1980), p., 266. Shedd’s closing remark would indicate that the stress is on the certainty and infallibility of justification, not so much upon an actual forensic albeit pre-temporal justification.

⁹Girardeau, p., 21.

¹⁰Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (California: Den Dulk, 1990), Vol 1., pp., 415-17; Witsius goes on to speak of subsequent aspects of justification, but none of which concern us here. One wonders what Witsius would have thought regarding the calling of our eternal justification as an antinomian doctrine. Thomas Boston, in his notes on the Marrow, also acknowledged a virtual justification of the elect in the resurrection of Christ, and an actual justification of the elect when they actually believe.

¹¹Thomas Boston [ed], *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, by Edward Fisher (Edmonton AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), p., 157.

¹²Girardeau, p., 24

a man is subjectively justified.¹³ He notes that we must accept this virtual-actual dichotomy “otherwise the principle of representation is a figment and the term *representation* a sham.”¹⁴

Now comes his response to criticism of this virtual-actual dualism. He notes the possible objection, ‘how can it be then, if we are virtually justified in the court of heaven, the elect, prior to faith, are said to be subject to the wrath of God, subject to the condemnation of God.’¹⁵ His answer is to invoke a further distinction. Not only is there a virtual-actual justification, but there is also a virtual-actual condemnation. Hence, he says, the elect can be subject to actual wrath and condemnation, even while freed from virtual wrath and condemnation.¹⁶ But I would argue that this is logically incoherent. How could God actually punish someone who has been justified in the court of heaven? For it must be remembered, for Girardeau, virtual justification occurs in the *court* of heaven. Thus, it cannot be anything other than judicial and forensic justification. But forensic condemnation is the sole basis for actual condemnation from which issues wrath, in the form of punishment. I find it incoherent to imagine that I am forensically justified in the very *court* of heaven, and yet subject to the very actual condemnation of God, from the same court of heaven. Occam’s Razor comes to play too, for when the New Testament speaks of the wrath of God being poured out or abiding on unbelievers, even the elect unbelievers (Jn 3:18,36, Roms 1:18, and Eph 2:1-3), are we to interpose some extraneous concept of virtual versus actual condemnation in the case of the elect? Are we to imagine that Jesus, John or Paul had such a distinction in mind?

If it is hard to imagine that Jesus, John or Paul conceived of a virtual versus actual condemnation, can we likewise imagine that Paul, especially, had a “two kinds” concept of justification, wherein the second kind consisted in only a subjective justification in my conscience? Is that what Paul meant when he spoke of our justification by faith, whereby Christ’s righteousness is *credited* to us? *Credited* meaning: in my subjective self-consciousness, I am now justified from my own internal self-condemnatory conscience? For, in Pauline thought, from whence are we to imagine the accreditation coming, if not from the very *court* of heaven? Further, if what Girardeau says holds, then the justification obtained subjectively and by faith is no more than a justification from my guilt-*feelings*; that is, my *feeling* of condemnation before the Father.

What is the solution? Firstly, it is clear that the logic of either/or must be rejected. The logic there is that it is not possible for God to deal with someone in love if that someone is defiled and unholy. The logic here can be easily turned against Girardeau. For if what he claims is true, then how is that God could even consider us, in our bare election, as sinners, defiled, unholy, and yet contemplate us in this state? Surely, the logic demands an even prior contemplative justification, one that takes us back even into the stretches of eternity. For if God cannot even treat with me while I am forensically defiled and unholy, how can he even contemplate to treat with me forensically, as he contemplates even me a defiled and unholy creature? Why are we not forced to an eternal justification? One what basis does Girardeau stop the logic where he does?¹⁷

The solution is to note that Girardeau has wrongly collapsed the love of benevolence into the love of complacency. He in effect annuls the very heart and meaning of grace (*viz.*, that favour of God extended to the undeserving), and mercy (*viz.*, the favour that deals with the miserable and ill-deserving) . For Girardeau, we must be made deserving

¹³Ibid. p., 25

¹⁴Ibid., pp., 22-3.

¹⁵Ibid., 24. I have paraphrased the objection as cited by Girardeau.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷For all these reasons and for ones oft adduced by those holding to eternal justification, e.g., John Gill and Herman Hoeksema, the reasoning is incoherent. For in their thinking, the elect can not be subject to the wrath and favour of God at the same time, in any sense. But the very import of justification is a justification from condemnation, and so eternal or not, at some point, God contemplated us as sinners subject to condemning wrath, defiled, in need of justification. Thus an inescapable incongruity exists between supralapsarianism and eternal justification in the theology of Gill and Hoeksema. Both doctrines cannot stand side by side without negating the other.

before these favour can be extended. Biblically and theologically, the love of benevolence is that love which is irrespective of the merit or demerit of the object. The love of complacency, alternatively, is that love which delights in the moral worth of the recipient. Girardeau is right that as we stand in Christ, we loved by the latter. But yet, before we are actually united to Christ by faith, we are loved benevolently. Wherefore, in no way is God contradicting himself in dealing in favour with those condemned, and defiled. Thus, too, when Girardeau asks how can someone be “destitute of the divine favour which implies pardon and yet exercise penitence as a condition”¹⁸ by which that very favour of pardon is acquired,”¹⁹ he exhibits this very error of collapsing the love (or favour) of God into the love of complacency. By the love (or favour if you will) of benevolence, God imparts life which effects the sinners transference from the sphere of death, to the sphere of divine complacency, that favour which actually issues the pardon on account of Christ’s work for us. Nor must it be imagined that the physical (for want of a better term) connection of God’s Spirit with the sinner in the act of imparting new life imply a moral and thereupon complacent connection at that bare logical point; as if the mere physical touch stains God morally.

Furthermore, the controlling assumptions as expressed in the citation above contain many ambiguities. Girardeau asks how can God infuse holiness and the blessing of life in a soul which at the same time is condemned, “while the death sentence is, in no sense, removed.” He seems oblivious to the fact that it is the very act of creating the new life which removes the death sentence. As he even notes, the objector argues for a synchronous regeneration and justification. His statement about the infant regeneration-justification question, “the difference in time being palpable,” suggests he sees a temporal distinction where biblically there is only a logical distinction, wrapped in the mystery of God. He asks, “how a sinner can be renewed in holiness before the removal of guilt” demonstrates his gloss over the proper import of a temporally synchronous regeneration-justification event.

His closing comments in the citation is an argument that asserts that it is not possible for the unholy, forensically, to be the recipient of holy gifts: “It is evident that a sinner cannot be regenerated and perform holy acts, until in some sense his guilt is removed and his obligation to punishment remitted.” He has created a false either/or, a false dilemma. Using Occam’s Razor, the solution to the alleged dilemma is best answered by adopting the Westminsterian language of decretal justification (*i.e.*, the decree to justification) and actual justification. This position was well expressed in summary fashion by Boston in the above quotation regarding Fisher’s position. The language of decretal justification versus actual justification is truer to the language of Scripture.

Conclusion

What I have shown is that the hinging premises of Girardeau’s arguments are erroneous and groundless. His *dilemmas* are clearly more apparent than real. Further, his supporting counter that one can be virtually justified while actually condemned is incoherent. For justification, virtual or otherwise, and condemnation, again virtual or otherwise, both issue and flow from the very same court of heaven. There is no need to invoke the new theological category of virtual and actual condemnation. The more traditional construction, as exhibited in the Confession, therefore, makes for a more simple construction. Prior to faith, we are actually and really under the wrath of God, even though in terms of the eternal decree, we are contemplated as *in Christ*, with all that that phrase entails biblically. Faith is the instrument whereby we are removed from the sphere of divine wrath, and which transports us to the sphere of justification. Nor is it reasonable to assume that when Paul locates our justification by faith, he imagined a justification subjective and in the court of my conscience, as opposed to the court of heaven. At no point is his reordering of the *ordo*

¹⁸Another ambiguity here is his identifying penitence as the conditional (instrumental) for obtaining justification; it is faith and faith alone that is that condition. Is Girardeau seeing the *ordo salutis* in singularly temporal categories, against which he posits his *solution*? For note, he counters, “the unpardoned puts forth the holy exercise of faith... (p., 42). He imagines his opponents as advocating the unholy expressing a faith which obtains pardon (*i.e.*, holiness). Such a counter from Girardeau only makes sense under the supposition that he sees the *ordo salutis* as a temporal sequence (as well as logical).

¹⁹Girardeau, p., 41-2 (and as cited in the opening remarks of this paper).

salutis exegetically or theological necessary. Nor at any point is federal theology undermined, but rather it is properly established on sound exegetical and theological grounds.

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