

The Four Causes of Salvation

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book III, 14.17-21, English updated and emphasis added.

The four causes of salvation explained: efficient, material, instrumental, and final

17. But if we attend to **the four kinds of causes which philosophers bring under our view in regard to effects**, we shall find that not one of them is applicable to works as a cause of salvation.

The efficient cause of our eternal salvation the Scripture uniformly proclaims to be the mercy and free love of the heavenly Father towards us;

the material cause to be Christ, with the obedience by which He purchased righteousness for us;

and what can **the formal or instrumental cause** be but faith?

John includes the three in one sentence when he says, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

The Apostle [Paul], moreover, declares that **the final cause** is the demonstration of the divine righteousness and the praise of His goodness. There also he distinctly mentions the other three causes; for he thus speaks to the Romans: “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace” (Romans 3:23, 24).

You have here **the head and primary source** [i.e., the efficient cause]— God has embraced us with free mercy.

The next words are, “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus;” this is as it were **the material cause** by which righteousness is procured for us.

“Whom God has set forth to be a propitiation through faith.” Faith is thus **the instrumental cause** by which righteousness is applied to us.

He lastly subjoins **the final cause** when he says, “To declare at this time His righteousness; that He might be just, and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus.”

And to show by the way that this righteousness consists in reconciliation, he says that Christ was “set forth to be a propitiation.”

Thus also, in the Epistle to the Ephesians, he tells us that we are received into the favor of God by mere mercy; that this is done by the intervention of Christ; that it is apprehended by faith; the end of all being that the glory of the divine goodness may be fully displayed.

When we see that all the parts of our salvation thus exist without [outside of] us, what ground can we have for glorying or confiding in our works? Neither as to the efficient nor the final cause can the most sworn enemies of divine grace raise any controversy with us unless they would abjure the whole of Scripture. In regard to the material or formal cause they make a gloss, as if they held that our works divide the merit with faith and

the righteousness of Christ. But here also Scripture reclaims, simply affirming that Christ is both righteousness and life, and that the blessing of justification is possessed by faith alone. . . .

. . . when Scripture intimates that the good works of believers are causes why the Lord does them good, we must still understand the meaning so as to hold unshaken what has previously been said, namely, that **the efficient cause of our salvation** is placed in the love of God the Father; **the material cause** in the obedience of the Son; **the instrumental cause** in the illumination of the Spirit, that is, in faith; and **the final cause** in the praise of the divine goodness.