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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ROMAN AND REFORMED DOCTRINES OF JUSTIFICATION

by W. MARTIN SMYTH

IN these days of ecumenical dialogue it is important to keep our minds clear on the real issues at stake, and among these issues the doctrine of justification is crucial. The author of this study is a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and a member of the group of younger ministers of that Church which recently produced the symposium on the Westminster Confession of Faith entitled "Faith for Today" (of which, indeed, he was editor).

IN many ways theologians in the Roman and Protestant churches have much in common. For example, both hold tenaciously to a high view of the authority of Scripture, although the Church of Rome adds to it. In the doctrine of justification, however, we are at the watershed of the controversy. Here is the parting of the streams.

It might over-simplify the matter to say that the Roman doctrine of penance would be akin to the Reformed doctrine of justification, whilst the Roman doctrine of justification appertains more to the Reformed view of sanctification. Two other things should be borne in mind as we investigate this point. On the one hand it has been the habit for Roman apologists to take immature expressions of Protestant divines in their early period of development and use them as signifying the full content of their teaching. On the other, it is one thing to give the definitions of the Council of Trent as the heart of Roman theology and another thing to forget that primarily it was not the teaching of Trent against which the Reformation arose. The theology of Rome was in a mess and the Council of Trent sat for years, so that there is a vast difference in the teaching of the latter years from the jungle of the former.

The sixth session of the Council was devoted to justification and its findings are recorded in sixteen chapters and thirty-three canons, "characterized by vagueness and verbiage, confusion, obscurity, and unfairness".¹ Therein the dexterity and mental gymnastics of Rome are seen at their best. To some of the statements an ardent Gospel preacher could say, "Hallelujah",

¹ W. Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol. II, p. 12.

whilst to others the most die-hard liberal would raise a word of protest. Conflict, half truth, half error, pervade these chapters and an unguided person would soon make shipwreck upon them. No wonder an infallible father is needed as guide!

The commonly accepted meaning of "justify" for the Romanist is not "to acquit" but "to make just". It is generally acknowledged that it does mean to acquit but the other meaning is preferred. Writing of "acquit", J. A. Moehler records: "This sense, in the matter under consideration, is inadmissible because the question is not about just and innocent men, who have been wickedly brought before the judicial tribunal, but about men really and truly guilty, and unrighteous. Here we see the real signification of the Greek word above adduced, and of the corresponding Hebrew and Latin words, namely, 'to make just'".²

Herein lies much of the confusion between the two parties. Since Romanists look upon the forensic idea of justification as holding a 'legal fiction' and therefore not worthy to be included in morality they must of necessity teach an increase of justification which in reality is sanctification. Canon VIII of Trent runs: ". . . justification . . . is not the mere forgiveness of sins but also sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man, by the voluntary reception of grace and gifts; when the man from unrighteous becomes righteous, from an enemy becomes a friend, so as to be heir according to the hope of eternal life."

Men are therefore truly righteous and not only so counted. Righteousness is infused by the Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who are justified, and inheres in them. Canon XVII holds that "the righteousness which is called ours inasmuch as by it inhering in us we are justified, is also the righteousness of God, because infused into us by God through the merits of Christ."

Clearly that this is different from what we know to be the Reformed standpoint is further evidenced by Canon XI which pronounces anathema upon him who "shall say that men are justified by the mere imputation of Christ's righteousness, or by the mere remission of sins, exclusive of grace and charity which is shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, and is inherent in them, or also, that the grace by which we are justified is only the favour of God."

The *Catholic Dictionary* edited by Addis and Arnold makes it clear that our interpretation of the Tridentine Councils has been correct. "Catholics regard justification as an act by which a man

² J. A. Moehler, *Symbolism of Doctrinal Differences*, p. 105.

is really made just; Protestants, as one in which he is merely declared and reputed just, the merits of another—viz. Christ—being made over to his account”. “To the Catholic, sanctification and justification are the same thing—viz. of the act by which God makes a soul just and holy in his sight.”³

The Rev. N. Dimock has reminded us: “It is in the interests of true sanctification that we are bound jealously to guard the true doctrine with all its marvels of true justification.”⁴ We do well therefore to look at Deut. 25: 1, “then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked”. This simply shows the inadequacy of such an interpretation as that propounded by the Roman theologians. There are three grounds on which we criticize it.

In the first place, the language itself is forensic, and only a philosophical bias will make anyone deny it. In the passage quoted it is impossible to derive a sense of “make right” or else the wicked would be justified instead of condemned. Secondly, it is not really a fact that we are completely righteous and therefore justified because we are just. No man dares presume to be sufficiently righteous and claim to be right with God. This gave rise to the Reformation.

Martin Luther was held by his fellow-monks as a saint. Staupitz, Vicar-General of the Augustinian Order, on hearing his confession told him to go and come back when he had sinned. Luther, bowed down below a burden of sin and oppressed by a desire to know the righteousness of God, was led to recognize:

Not the labours of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands⁵.

It was this fact of justification by faith which broke the power of the superstitious and corrupt medieval Church and enabled men to sing out:

Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine.

Let it be clearly understood that the blessing of assurance, whilst not essential to salvation, is at least possible in this life. Paul's writings vibrate with the doctrine and the First Epistle of John was written “that ye may know ye have eternal life”.⁶

Thirdly, since the Bible teaches that we must be perfect to meet a holy God (“Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things

³ *Op. cit.*, Article on Justification.

⁴ *A Protestant Dictionary*, ed. C. H. H. Wright and C. Neil, article on Justification.

⁵ A. M. Toplady, *Rock of Ages*.

⁶ 1 John 5: 13.

which are written in the book of the law to do them"), it is evident that we cannot be accepted on the grounds of our own merit, for we have none. On the whole the Roman attitude has so degenerated that T. C. Hammond in *The New Creation* can scathingly write: "It was then the exception to have a pope that is not a saint. Now it is the exception to have a pope that is."⁸

We hold that justification can only be the act of sovereign grace applied in a moment of time to unworthy recipients. Moehler, following Duns Scotus, would seem to accept this interpretation at least in a modified way. "The act of justification, indeed, fills up only one portion of time; for the communication of a vital principle cannot be considered other than as consummated in a single moment."⁹

Faith is indeed set forth as a ground for justification but it is never calculated with good works. This is a fundamental misconception, for the biblical teaching is that we are justified *per fidem* rather than *propter fidem*. We, however, should not be pressed, as some Protestants have been, into denying a place for works as the evidence of saving faith in the believer for "it is ever accompanied with all the other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love."¹⁰

May we suggest that even the illustration of Abraham in Gen. 15 and Gal. 3 is evidence of the fact that the completion as well as the commencement of justification must be ascribed to faith. Abraham was not a novice when it is recorded for our instruction that his faith was imputed for righteousness. He had left Ur and followed the Lord for several years hitherto. This—a type of all believers—shows us the perpetual state of a believer as one who walks "by faith, not by sight".

The Roman scheme of justification can be supported by the plea that it avoids a mechanical scheme of salvation; yet it, on every score, comes under the denunciation of Paul who would call it "another gospel: which is not another".¹¹ As the Reformers would look at it, there is no pardon of sin at all in it: "it is the deletion of sin rather than its forgiveness".¹²

We would criticize Rome on her own ground of condemnation

⁷ Gal. 3: 10.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁹ *Symbolism of Doctrinal Differences*.

¹⁰ *Confession of Faith*, Chap. XI, Section ii.

¹¹ Gal. 1: 6, 7, 9.

¹² Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, p. 104.

of the Reformers' position. They say it is absurd to speak of transference of merit but in their own system such a transference is found both in their doctrines of baptism and indulgences. The treasury of merit which is found in Romanism and Buddhism is sufficient evidence of the fact that the principle of transference is found outside Reformed theology. "The doctrine of transference of human merits, or of the imputation of what saints and martyrs had merited, for the benefit of those to whom they might be applied, was a third step in the process which led on to the invention of Indulgences."¹³ It was appropriate that the perversion of this doctrine in the theory of Indulgences was one of the decisive factors in the Lutheran reformation.

Whilst baptism points to the act of regeneration through precious blood it should not be confused with justification. In it the Romanists hold that the merits of Christ are held on behalf of the one baptized so that in effect there is a transfer of merit. The Reformed position, giving due place to baptism, denies that justification is inseparably connected with it. It is connected with faith, so that "every believer is justified before, and even without being baptized, while many are baptized who are neither regenerated, nor justified, nor saved."¹⁴

Although the Reformers were first charged with novelty of doctrine, between the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 and that of Ratisbon in 1541, a remarkable change came over the policy of the Romanists. They toned down their denunciations and, following the lead of Erasmus, attempts were made at reconciliation. These attempts were doomed to failure because of the sophistry of some on the one hand and the sheer incompatibility of the viewpoints on the other.

One thing is significant in these conferences. The division was really caused over ambiguity concerning the place of faith. Buchanan shows us, following the article as preserved by Du Pin, that imputed righteousness was conceded to the Reformers. The article declares that righteousness "is imputed to us through Jesus Christ and His merits, and not by any perfection of righteousness which is inherent in us, as communicated to us by Jesus Christ. So that we are not just, or accepted by God, on account of our own works of righteousness, but we are reputed just on account of the merits of Jesus Christ only."¹⁵

¹³ Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁴ Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁵ Du Pin, quoted by Buchanan, p. 450, notes.

However, the reservation which permitted works a part in justification nullified the concessions and in the hardening of the controversy imputation was denied a place in Roman orthodoxy. May we be permitted to suggest that the Roman attitude on faith was true in so far as it appertained to sanctification but not to justification, where faith resting on Christ Jesus alone justifies.

No side was happy. The Elector of Saxony felt that the vital doctrine of *sola fide* was so far buried under explanations as to be meaningless. Cardinal Caraffa, later Pope Paul IV, accused Cardinal Contarini of betraying their side especially in regard to justification. The change is partly explained by the fact that men's minds were influenced by the truth of the Word of God. The Bishop of Vergerio is reported to have been converted in attempting to refute the doctrine, whilst Cardinal Cajetan approximated towards Luther in his commentary on Romans.

There can however be no honest compromise between the Roman and Reformed doctrine of justification. The resulting teaching of Trent has already been seen and the fact that seven months were spent on the vexed question of justification shows their pronouncements were not hasty, nor may we say unanimous. This partly explains their ambiguity. Some of the Council were deeply influenced either by the Reformers or older scholars whilst all Europe could test the decrees by the Word of God and decide for themselves their falsity or correctness. We could give lists of outstanding scholars who took the Reformed position and at the same time a list of those who opposed them. This would not help us in our study except to show how great a diversity there is even in the system known as Roman Catholicism. It is a good thing to remember that Rome's practical system is in many respects worse than the decrees of the Council of Trent.

The guarded statements of the council on the subjects of merit, the death of Christ and such like have given rise to a feeling that the Reformers misunderstood, and misrepresented her. This is to forget on the one hand that the Reformers were nearly all schooled in her system and were in their own right able men, and on the other, that the statements were cunningly framed after the controversy broke out and a settlement had failed to be reached.

There is one further distinction to be made. This is a division within Romanism of two parties, Old and New Popery as they have been called. The one follows the pre-reformation pattern whilst the other is transformed and appears trustworthy as an angel of light. They are still with us. Broadly speaking, the Old is the teaching reserved for the faithful and is found predominantly

in Roman Catholic countries, whilst the New is the polemic used for the more enlightened of the flock and generally amongst Protestants. Thus on this, as on practically all other points, it is difficult to have a common point of contact in polemics.

May we be permitted to emphasize once again that things which cannot be separated must be distinguished—thus justification and sanctification. In concluding our study we would emphatically deny any charge which suggests that we proclaim the impossibility of pardon and acceptance with God within Romanism. We do deny that any sinner was ever justified by his own righteousness and deplore the Roman teaching which encouraged men to rely on something other than the finished work of Christ.

Whilst Rome, identifying herself with the Body of Christ, declares, "No salvation without the Church", we, believing in the statement as pertaining to the Body purchased by the precious blood of Christ, the Church of the redeemed, assert: "No salvation without the Christ". This safeguards the vital doctrine of the Word for it witnesses to the fact:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness¹⁶,

whilst admitting the vital New Testament union with Christ and the actuality of the declarative word becoming a constitutive word. This would open further avenues of study but enough has been said to reflect the differences between the Romanizer and Reformer on this central doctrine of the Word of God.

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¹⁶ Edward Mote.