



STATEMENT DC-172

VIEWPOINT

Thoughts on the Conflict over Justification

by **Carl F. H. Henry**

Late 20th century theology is taking a remarkable turn in respect to the doctrine of justification by faith. Whereas Protestant modernists (liberals) earlier in this century redefined or discarded it, the doctrine is now resurfacing as a crucial term of theological debate among evangelical and Roman Catholic scholars who, amid differences, are demanding its more precise formulation.

Modernist theologians had no indispensable role for the doctrine of justification by faith. Some twisted the doctrine to signify noncognitive relationships of the believer to God as Subject. Many considered Christ's substitutionary death for sinners a barbaric belief. They disowned transcendent supernatural revelation and redemption, and disavowed Christ's mediatorial death for sinners. They dismissed the divine declaration of justification as an artificial grafting upon the New Testament of forensic conceptions derived from courts of law.

In stark contrast, the historic Roman Catholic formulation of justification has insisted on sin and grace. From Augustine onward many Catholic theologians confessed that God grounds salvation in a divine act of favor shown in Christ. In this strand of Catholic tradition some modern scholars would locate a pre-Reformation exposition of justification by faith, one that anticipated the Reformers, although admittedly paralleled at times by a somewhat antithetical view.

The weakness of what ultimately was to become prevalent Catholic doctrine — as the Protestant Reformers focused it — is that although overtly formulated in terms of "justification by grace alone," it seriously compromised New Testament teaching. It viewed justification not alone as a divine *act* of acquittal that calls for sinful humanity's trust, but additionally as an *activity* whereby God makes sinful man acceptable to Himself.

There were at best, therefore, two facets of the medieval exposition of justification. One focused broadly on justification by grace through faith, while the other embraced also an unbiblical emphasis on human works. Professor Gunther Bornkamm incisively warns against the latter: "We must guard against the misunderstanding especially in Catholic theology (though Protestantism is far from exempt) that only faith made perfect in love leads to justification. This represents a serious distortion of the relationship between faith, love and justification....Love is not...an additional prerequisite for receiving salvation..."¹

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

The Reformers' counteremphasis centered on the sinner's divine justification by grace alone through faith. The Reformers appealed to the decisive authority of the Bible to establish the legitimacy or illegitimacy of statements in medieval church (Scholastic) writings, and they rejected any undue stress on works in correlation with justification.

The Reformers did not, any more than the apostles Paul and James, dismiss the necessity of good works that flow from faith. They affirmed the indispensable role of Scripture and of the Holy Spirit in engendering and sustaining faith. The emphasis that faith stands in essential linkage to godly works has firm apostolic precedent. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "By faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope" (Gal. 5:5). The apostle is speaking to sinners justified by faith alone through the substitutionary mediation of Christ, and pointing them to the indwelling Holy Spirit who conforms believers to the life of love in which faith expresses itself in expectation of ultimate perfection.

Medieval Catholicism held that justifying faith makes one righteous and that such inner transformation is a condition of justification. But the apostle never declares that our love (hardly ideal prior to transformation by the Spirit) is a *prerequisite* of justification.

Luther wrote often of the importance of justification by faith alone. The critical issue is whether God received sinners as sinners or only as saints. Luther's response was unequivocal: as *sinners!* Jesus came to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance (Matt. 9:13). The apostle Paul spoke of the self-revealing God as "Him that justifieth *the ungodly*" (Rom. 4:5). Our works contribute nothing to our justification.

This doctrine — that God loves the sinner — is offensive not only to many Catholics but to many Jews as well, and even to some evangelicals. Some who affirm sinless perfection teach that without good works one can forfeit the love of God. But the apostle Paul, discussing circumcision, wrote to the Galatians that virtue is not a prerequisite to salvation (Gal. 5:2–5). The Christian is righteous *in Christ alone*; in himself he remains a sinner.

Justification has been called the backbone of Paul's exposition of the gospel. The apostle rooted his life and ministry in the divinely given knowledge of his own justification. God had relieved him of the law's condemnation (Gal. 2:15–21). Justification is God's basic blessing to sinners, pardoning a condemnatory past and assuring the contrite of coming glory. God justifies the sinner to be sure without violation of divine justice: Christ satisfied the claims of the law by bearing its penalty in our place (Rom. 3:25–26). He who personally "knew no sin" was voluntarily punished as a sinner in our stead. Christ's righteousness, in short, is by faith imputed to us.

The Reformers affirmed the full authority of the Bible. They were prepared to accept in Catholic tradition *only* what Scripture authorizes. The Catholic church rejected the Reformation emphasis on both the Bible alone ("sola scriptura") and on faith alone ("sola fide"). It excommunicated Luther, who sought to remain in its ranks in the interest of reform, while it accommodated critics who deplored the Roman church's very existence. The church defended its institutional vices, many of which it later rectified or moderated. Yet the basic issue was not moral and institutional corruption alone, but the legitimacy of established and inherited church doctrine as well. In the doctrinal decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) the Roman church officially approved and canonized the doctrine of justification by faith-and-works, and thus condemned what had earlier been one strand in its own message, justification by faith.

The opportunity that the Reformers offered of a reformed church that would remain unified and universal was therefore rejected. A historic moment for theological dialogue and a major opportunity for doctrinal understanding were squandered. In consequence, evangelical-Catholic dialogue must now begin with Trent. Trent cannot be bypassed as merely the time-bound echo of one spectrum of influential Catholic dogmatics, since it expresses church doctrine that Rome identified as authoritative and irreformable.

For four centuries Reformers and Romanists have engaged in polemical warfare, without always doing full honor to each other's concerns. And the situation has not improved in today's more ecumenical environment. For example, ecumenists from both camps have pointed out how Thomas Aquinas stressed that God takes the initiative in human

salvation. No meritorious works on our part can precede the gift of grace, he taught. Salvation is unmerited by sinners. God takes us as we are — apart from any preparation for grace on our part by our natural powers. What more could the Reformers and evangelical Christians desire?, they ask.

The fact is, however, that for Thomism human merit is not excluded after all; salvation occurs at the end of a long process of endeavor and is, in part, earned. For Thomas justification is not yet salvation, but only prefatory; a new relationship with God is necessary on the basis of works and merit, including sacramental observance. Salvation can be lost.

Luther did not deny that the Scholastics taught grace; he objected to Scholastic misunderstanding of it. Luther regarded grace and merit as mutually exclusive. Thomas viewed grace and righteousness as if they were qualities or substances that can be infused — something divinely poured into the soul to make the sinner righteous and worthy of salvation. Contrary to this emphasis on "making righteous," Luther declared grace to be the favor of God shown in a new divine-human relationship. He gave no quarter to theological speculation that, while grace is initially unmerited, man can merit the increase of grace and/or merit its restoration after a lapse.

Neorthodox Reformed theologian Karl Barth warned that to ignore the mutual relationship of justification and sanctification can lead to misrepresenting them intellectually and to costly errors in practice. It can also encourage the notion of cheap grace. Sanctification is God's aim, he stressed, and the ultimate consequence also. Yet, as opposed to Trent, justification is a divine work done for men. The Catholic teaching on justification, he protested, portrays the church as a salvific institution. It introduces acts of human preparation and divine-human cooperation, considers baptism an instrumental cause of salvation, and improperly links justification and sanctification.

To appraise theological differences with such candor as Barth's is perturbing to many ecclesiastical observers because disunity among professing Christians coincides with a crisis of culture wherein naturalistic and postmodern influences threaten to overwhelm surviving remnants of the Hebrew-Christian heritage. Many Christian apologists are thus reluctant to speak of relations between churches and denominations in terms of polemical argumentation and differences.

Discussion of decisively important doctrines like justification by faith ought indeed not take place apart from a sense of genuine regret that such deep ecclesiastical differences remain among those who proclaim redemption in Christ. Theological conversation may best proceed initially not in terms of what divides the Christian movement internally but rather in terms of what unites Christians against the secular world. For secularism threatens to engulf all of modern thought and life and to obliterate surviving Christian values. Yet to do this with theological integrity, any agenda must inevitably, as Barth noted, include "matters like Transubstantiation, the Sacrifice of the Mass, Mary, and the infallible papacy."² And, we would add, justification.

Much as American evangelicals are to be shamed for neglecting an interest in ecclesiastical unity, there nonetheless are limits to the concerns that can be overlooked if one is any longer to speak convincingly about overcoming disunity in line with Jesus' plea for oneness (John 17). To fail to list justification by faith among the theological priorities would disastrously rob the discussion of unity of one of Christianity's most critical components.

To be sure, the multiplication of Catholics who are now breaking completely with all salvific significance for works, and are embracing justification through grace alone by faith alone, has immense evangelistic and apologetic significance. This is all the more the case when Catholic priests and theologians privately join the movement away from the positions of Trent. But serious theological conversation seems stripped in advance of decisive importance by the fact that Rome views her dogmatic formulations as infallible.

The Catholic theologian Hans Küng, in his doctoral dissertation on Barth's view of justification, concluded that between Catholic and Barthian doctrines there is a "fundamental" though not "total" agreement, and that their disagreement "would not warrant a division in the Church."³

In a letter to Küng, Barth expressed "considerable amazement" over Küng's verdict that Barth's view of justification objectively concurs "on all points with the correctly understood teaching of the Roman Catholic Church."⁴ Barth tributes Küng for accurately presenting his view. But he questions whether Küng's claims regarding the Catholic view of justification are reliable.

Barth asks where we are to find in Catholic history and literature, and prior to Küng's claims, Barth's (and supposedly Rome's) identical view of "freedom, of grace, of juridico-real justification and its realization and foundation in Christ's death, of the formulae simul justus et peccator and sole fide," and so on?⁵ How could this identity, Barth inquires, "have been so long obscured" both outside and inside the church?⁶

For over 400 years the two contenders — Roman and Reformed — have hurled at each other charges and countercharges, aware that the exposition of justification is a critical turning point in their theologies, and insisting that an irenic compromise of truth would be more scandalous than disunity. In light of contemporary pressures for Christian traditions to form a united front against the encroaching anarchy of moral relativism, certain fundamental questions must be considered long and hard: Is unity more important than doctrinal fidelity on an issue that appeared neither in the classic ecumenical creeds nor in the "five points" of American fundamentalism? Does this absence of historical visibility in any way reduce the doctrine's importance for a correct understanding of Christianity and for the nature of the Christian life? Dare we disregard the apostle Paul's warning to the Galatians?

Carl F. H. Henry is a leading evangelical theologian and author of 38 books. He was founding editor of *Christianity Today*.

NOTES

¹Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, Eng. tr. by D. M. G. Stalker of the German volume *Paulus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 153.

²Quoted in Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964), xxii.

³Küng, xi–xii.

⁴*Ibid.*, xix.

⁵*Ibid.*, xx.

⁶*Ibid.*, xxi.