

Lectures for Budapest: Lent/Spring 2004

Pentecostal Theological School

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Justification by Faith

The Joint Catholic – Lutheran declaration of October 1999 is also important for Catholic – Evangelical relations in general, as Evangelicals have followed Luther in accepting justification by faith. Evangelicals do not discuss some of the theological refinements in the same way as confessional Lutherans, but it is nonetheless a cardinal doctrine for Evangelicals.

While a minority of Lutheran scholars have rejected the Gemeinsame Erklärung, most have welcomed it. With Evangelicals, it is probably the other way round.

The Declaration

Purpose: “to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran Churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ.” (para. 5).

- It does not cover all that either Church teaches about justification;
- It encompasses a consensus on basic truths of this doctrine;
- It shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.

The shared understanding is attributed to listening together to the word of God in Scripture (para. 8 and para. 14). The Joint Declaration has 5 sections:

1. Biblical message of justification (5 paras).
2. The doctrine of justification as ecumenical problem (1 para.).
3. The common understanding of justification (5 paras.).
4. Explicating the common understanding of justification (21 paras.).
5. The significance and scope of the consensus reached (5 paras.).

Part 2 attributes the possibility of a consensus to (i) insights of recent biblical studies and (ii) modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma (para. 13). “the Churches neither take the condemnations lightly nor do they disavow their own past” (para. 7). Questions about repentance?

Key joint statements in Part 3 include:

“Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.” (para. 15).

“Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God’s gift ...” (para. 16).

Justification is then **by Christ through** faith.

Doctrine of Justification as criterion in para. 18. Both agree “it stand in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other.” (para. 18). Here we find the beginning of a methodology used throughout part 4:

When Lutherans emphasize ..., they do not deny

When Catholics X, they do not deny

This is an important methodology: honest, recognising the encounter between two different worlds, with their known emphases, their own concerns, their own fears. We move towards

agreement: first delineating major basic points where an agreed statement can be made; then indicating how different emphases remain but within limits. It is a recognition that the two sides are approaching the same reality from different starting points.

It is in part 4 that we see these different concerns brought out and an explanation given why they do not make impossible a basic consensus. Here we find some of the classic Catholic – Protestant contrasts (oppositions becoming contrasts?):

*Human sinfulness and incapacity versus human freedom.* Luther taught the bondage of the human will. Catholics have insisted on a human freedom. Protestants have a more negative view of fallen human nature than Catholics. The way through: “The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation, for as sinners they stand under God’s judgment, and are incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities. Justification takes place solely by God’s grace.” (para. 19). Explanation: Catholic, then Lutheran.

There are two Catholic – Protestant differences involved in the question of “total depravity” or “seriously damaged”:

- How serious is the damage done by sin?
  - Can we know God by unaided human reason?  
Catholic answer: we can know of the existence of God, though not easily (Vatican I). Calvinist answer (Karl Barth): No.
- Is God’s grace at work beyond the sphere of professed faith in Jesus?
  - Different attitudes to non-Christian religions  
Grace of Christ at work; there are “spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians” (*Nostra Aetate*, para. 2).

*Justification as non-imputation of sin (forgiveness) and as making righteous.*

Luther insisted that righteousness is only in Jesus Christ. Catholics insisted that the Christian is truly and interiorly graced by God. Hence the conflicts about imputation (forensic justification) and impartation (inner transformation). This difference flowed from the depravity conflict. “When persons come by faith to share in Christ, God no longer imputes to them their sin and through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love.” (para. 22).

Explanations: Lutheran then Catholic. The Lutheran explanation speaks of our righteousness being in Christ and only in Christ is one’s life renewed (para. 23). Catholic insistence on the renewal of the inner person does not deny that the gift of J “remains independent of human cooperation” (para. 24).

I think this is one of the weaker points in the GE, for it does not do justice to the Reformation sense of all being in Christ. More on this later.

*Justification by faith and through grace.* Here GE addresses “justification by faith alone”. “In the doctrine of ‘justification by faith alone’, a distinction but not a separation is made between justification itself and the renewal of one’s way of life that necessarily follows from justification and without which faith does not exist.” (para. 26). Explanations: Lutheran, then Catholic.

One of the issues here is the Catholic doctrine of created grace. In the era between Trent and Vatican Two, Catholics spoke of the grace of God as inhering in the Christian. The focus was all on created grace. There was very little mention of the Holy Spirit. It was also acknowledged that there is “uncreated grace” which is the indwelling Holy Spirit, but this was not given much attention in theology or in catechesis. Newman’s hymn:

“And that a higher gift than grace  
Should flesh and blood refine,  
God’s presence and his very self,  
And essence all divine.”

I accept as a Catholic that the actions of God *ad extra* always produce created effects, but the problems in the past arose from the focus on the created effects in themselves, apart from the greater gift of the indwelling presence of the Lord in the Spirit. The CCC has a section on Grace and Justification (paras. 1987 – 2029). But cf also para. 1266: “The Most Holy Trinity gives the baptized sanctifying grace, the grace of justification.” CCC speaks several times of “the grace of the Holy Spirit” but I have not yet found a clear statement of the relationship between the “uncreated” and the “created effects”.

“Thus justifying grace never becomes a human possession to which one could appeal over against God.” (para. 27). This is an important Catholic statement, because it rejects (corrects) attitudes that have been widespread among Catholics and which have provoked the Protestant objections. I think the document would have been stronger if it was mentioned that the Holy Spirit (and resulting effects in the believer) is being continually poured out from the Father, is ever in motion, so to speak, and is always being received in faith.

*The justified as sinner.* This represents another classical Catholic – Protestant opposition: Luther spoke of the Christian as “*simul justus et peccator*” [justified and a sinner at the same time]. Explanations: first Lutheran, then Catholic. “In Christ they are made just before God. Looking at themselves through the law, however, they recognize that they remain also totally sinners.” (Lutheran explanation, para. 29). Joint statement: “They also are continuously exposed to the power of sin still pressing its attacks (cf. Rom 6: 12 – 14) and are not exempt from a lifelong struggle against the contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam (cf. Gal 5: 16; Rom 7: 7 – 10). The justified also must ask God daily for forgiveness as in the Lord’s Prayer, are ever again called to conversion and penance, and are ever again granted forgiveness.” (para. 28).

*Law and Gospel.* This issue is more distinctively Lutheran, as most other Protestants did not follow Luther and the Lutherans on Law and Gospel. First Lutheran and then Catholic. The Lutherans say: “the law is demand and accusation”, that all sinners “stand under this accusation which uncovers their sin” so that in faith they will turn to “the mercy of God in Christ, which alone justifies them.” (para. 32).

*Assurance of Salvation.* “We confess together that the faithful can rely on the mercy and promises of God. In spite of their own weakness and the manifold threats to their faith, on the strength of Christ’s death and resurrection they can build on the effective promise of God’s grace in Word and sacrament and so be sure of this grace.” (para. 34). Here it contrasts the Reformers and then the Catholics. The Reformation emphasis is explained as follows, that “believers should not look to themselves, but look solely to Christ” (para. 35). Catholic explanation in para. 36.

*The good works of the justified.* Another Reformation battleground. Agreed: “We confess together that good works – a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love – follow justification and are its fruits.” (para. 37). Explanations: first Catholic, then Lutheran. The Catholic explanation says: “When Catholics affirm the ‘meritorious’ character of good works, they wish to say that, according to the biblical witness, a reward in heaven is promised to these works. Their intention is to emphasise the responsibility of persons for their actions, not to contest the character of those works as gifts” (para. 38). A Lutheran understanding of how reward should be understood follows (para. 39).

“The Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding basic truths.” (para. 40). Para. 41 says that the presentation of justification in GE does not fall under the condemnation of either the Council of Trent or the Lutheran confessions.

#### The Issue of Imputation and Impartation/Infusion

In the Lutheran tradition, our righteousness is totally in Christ (*extra nos*). But it is imputed to us, that is declared. This aspect is not adequately covered in GE (what does this mean in terms of the stated aims of GE?). “The entire semantic power of the forensic language of justification is employed to focus on the declarative dimension of the act of justification.”<sup>1</sup> Now the declaration towards us has effects. This declaration is part of the theology of the Word, and forms part of the Reformed theology of baptism. This understanding of justification is closely linked to the Lutheran understanding of the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*: for in Christ our justification is complete, in its declaration to us it is complete, but in its realization it is not complete (to the extent that it is realized, the Christian is *justus*; to the extent that it is not, the Christian is *peccator*).

I see this as compatible with a renewed Catholic understanding of baptism and the sacraments. The renewed element is the role of the Word of God in the sacrament, largely missing from the theology of Trent, which operated at the level of efficacious sacramental causality. (Theology: sacraments instituted by Christ: therefore unlike sacraments of OT the sacraments of NT are efficacious; only obstacles in recipients prevent reception of grace.) In a renewed sacramental understanding, the sacramental action is an embodiment of the Word: in other words, it is declaratory of Christ in relation to the person receiving the sacrament<sup>2</sup>. I see here that what classical Protestants would call “declaration”, the Catholic would call “sign”. The grace conferred is total in the declaration, in what is signified and symbolized, but it is limited and partial in its reception. In my understanding there is a lot in common here between a renewed Catholic biblical understanding and a Lutheran understanding of justification. But in a Catholic understanding of declaration, the declaration takes on incarnate (objective) form in the sign of baptism.

#### How relate to Pentecostal understanding?

Justification by faith seems to have been taken for granted in the Pentecostal movement, with the thorough-going faith emphasis being emphasised more than justification as such. In the Assemblies of God declaration of faith it includes a statement under The Salvation of Man: “man is saved by the washing of regeneration<sup>3</sup> and renewing of the Holy Ghost, and, being justified by grace through faith, he becomes an heir of God according to the hope of eternal life”<sup>4</sup> The Church of God (Cleveland) DF says: “That justification, regeneration, and the new birth are wrought by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ” (para. 5)<sup>5</sup>. The Apostolic Church (GB) says: “Justification and Sanctification of the believer through the finished work of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> ADDI: “Noi crediamo che la rigenerazione si riceve soltanto per la fede in Cristo.”<sup>7</sup> It is not mentioned in the DF of the Elim Pentecostal Church, which just says that “the Church consists of all persons who have been regenerated by the Holy Ghost, and made new creatures in Christ Jesus”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> De Chirico, p. 348.

<sup>2</sup> “The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God .... The preaching of the Word is required for the sacramental ministry itself, since the sacraments are sacraments of faith, drawing their origin and nourishment from the Word.” (CCC, para. 1122, citing Vatican Two, Priests, para. 4).

<sup>3</sup> Hollenweger’s five roots are: 1. The Black Oral Root; 2. The Catholic Root; 3. The Evangelical Root; 4. The Critical Root; and 5. The Ecumenical Root.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Hollenweger *The Pentecostals*, p. 514.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 517.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p. 518.

<sup>7</sup> Op.cit., p. 520.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 519.

The *forensic and imputed (extra nos)* emphasis seems to have been largely absent from Pentecostal thinking. This is no doubt at least partly due to its roots in the Holiness movement, in which there was a concern on a Protestant basis of faith to take up the Catholic concern for real heart-change sanctification. It was for this reason that many Holiness leaders took up and translated the works of some Catholic mystical writers like Madame Guyon, Archbishop Fenelon, Brother Lawrence and Lorenzo Scupoli. All this is also why Hollenweger speaks of a Catholic root among the five roots of Pentecostalism that he identifies in his book *Pentecostalism*. For Hollenweger, the Catholic root lies in Wesley's Perfectionism, which was partly influenced by his familiarity with the Fathers of the Church and with some Catholic mystical writings. However, it would not seem that the Holiness movement contributed much to a Protestant-Catholic reconciliation on the issues of justification and sanctification, no doubt because theology was not a major Holiness preoccupation. However, the Pentecostal focus on empowerment and on spiritual results also makes an interest in the forensic-imputed issue unlikely.

#### A Missing Dimension in Traditional Debate?

Another biblical dimension which seems to have been absent from both sides in the Reformation controversies is the reality of the "heavenlies". Paul says:

He "raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2: 6).

"For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." (Col. 3: 3).

In other words, our righteousness is in Christ in the heavenlies. "He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe." (Eph. 4: 10). In some sense, we Christians are already there with him. This adds another dimension to the reality of our justification and transformation: the righteousness of Christ is not just in the highest heavens in Christ, outside us, and then declared to us on earth. In some way, the Christian by being baptized into Christ's death is already caught up in his resurrection, and so is already established in Christ in the heavenly places. What was right in Luther's *extra nos* is safeguarded by Christ being in the highest place in the heavenlies. But in his mercy which attains even to our spirits gives us spiritually a place with him in the heavenlies, that can only be known and affirmed by faith.

The heavenlies as a reality coming to light and life in Pentecostal and charismatic traditions.