

Justification: the new ecumenical debate*

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We are grateful for this article to Dr McGrath, who is a particular expert on the subject of justification, having written a major two-volume work Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification (CUP, 1986). He is also author of ARCIC II and Justification: an Evangelical Anglican Assessment (Latimer House, Oxford, 1987) and of the new Justification by Faith: An Introduction (Zondervan/Marshall, 1988). Dr McGrath, who teaches at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, has written several other significant works in recent years which Themelios readers should be aware of, including Luther's Theology of the Cross (Blackwells, 1985), The Making of Modern German Christianity (Blackwells, 1986) and The Enigma of the Cross (Hodder, 1987).

In recent years a number of ecumenical discussions have focused on the doctrine of justification by faith. On 30 September 1983 the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue group released a 24,000-word document which represented the fruit of six years of discussions on the doctrine of justification. This document, entitled *Justification by Faith*, is by far the most important ecumenical document to deal with the theme of justification to date, and represents a landmark in ecumenical discussions. Anyone who wishes to deal with the dialogue between Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians on justification will have to make this document his point of departure. This has been followed by the report of the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II), entitled *Salvation and the Church*, published on 22 January 1987. In this article we propose to examine some difficulties in the modern discussion of justification, with particular reference to these documents.¹

The European Reformation of the sixteenth century saw the battle-lines drawn between Roman Catholics and Protestants over the doctrine of justification by faith alone. For the Protestant Reformers, the doctrine of justification was the 'article by which the church stands or falls'. The Roman Catholic church, in their view, had fallen over this doctrine, and thus lost its credibility as a genuinely Christian church. For the Reformers, this more than adequately justified breaking away from the medieval church, in order to return to the authentic teaching of Scripture. The Reformers, by reclaiming the insights of the NT and Augustine of Hippo, were able to claim that they had recovered the biblical doctrine of justification by faith.²

But what were the differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant teachings on justification in the sixteenth century? We may make an immediate distinction between two types of differences: differences which were actually nothing more than *misunderstandings* (where both sides were saying more or less the same thing, but misunderstood

each other); and differences which were disagreements (where both sides understood precisely what the other was saying, and regarded it as unacceptable). We shall consider both these types of differences.

Sixteenth-century misunderstandings

It is obvious that both Protestants and Roman Catholics agreed on the following, although their discussion of them was confused by some difficulties which we shall note below.

1. We cannot take the initiative in beginning the Christian life – it is God who moves first. Original sin prevents our finding our way back to God unaided by grace. Popular Catholic religion in the later Middle Ages was obsessed with the doctrine of justification by works, however, pointing to a radical divergence between what theologians taught and what the common people believed!
2. The foundation of the Christian life is the work of Christ, and not anything which we ourselves can do. Once more, popular Catholic piety tended to lay considerable emphasis upon merit, and showed an obsessional interest in the various ways in which this merit could be gained and stored, rather like funds in a bank account.
3. Although the Christian life is not begun on the basis of good works, good works are the natural result of and expression of genuine Christian faith.
4. The Christian life takes place at the communal, and not just the individual, level. By beginning the Christian life, the believer finds himself within a community of faith.

None of these points was the subject of dispute between theologians in the sixteenth century – the difficulties arose primarily in relation to how these points were expressed.

An excellent example of these difficulties is provided by the term 'justification' itself. Following St Augustine of Hippo, the Council of Trent defined justification in terms of 'making righteous'. Trent's comprehensive definition of justification makes it clear that 'justification' includes both the initiation and the subsequent development of the Christian life, as the believer grows in holiness and righteousness. Augustine's interpretation of the post-classical Latin term *iustificare* as *iustum facere* reveals his celebrated etymological shortcomings, although the importance of this point would not be appreciated until the sixteenth century.³

On the basis of the new advances in philology associated with the Renaissance, and especially the new interest in the Hebrew text of the OT, both Lutheran and Reformed theologians recognized that the verb 'to justify' was forensic, meaning 'to declare or pronounce to be righteous', and *not* 'to make righteous'.⁴ Although the Reformers had a great respect for Augustine, they had no hesitation in criticizing him when the direct study of the Hebrew and Greek texts of Scripture

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showed him to be wrong – and Augustine's definition of what justification itself actually was came to be recognized as a classical case of an error arising from the use of the Latin version of Scripture, rather than Scripture in its original language.

The Reformers therefore rejected the predominant tradition of the western church concerning the meaning of the term 'justification' – and by doing so, added considerably to the difficulties of the sixteenth century debates on justification. For the simple fact was that Protestants and Roman Catholics used the term 'justification' to mean rather different things. For the Protestant, 'justification' refers to the external pronouncement on the part of God that the sinner is regarded as righteous in his sight (*coram Deo*), thus marking the beginning of the Christian life. For the Roman Catholic – who, in this matter, continues the common teaching of the western church, deriving from Augustine – 'justification' means both the *event* by which the Christian life is initiated and the *process* by which the believer is regenerated. In other words, Trent understands by 'justification' what the Protestant understands by 'justification' and 'sanctification' or 'regeneration' taken together. This semantic difference led to enormous confusion at the time, as it still does to this day.

To illustrate this point, consider the following two statements: 1. We are justified by faith alone. 2. We are justified by faith and by holiness of life.

In terms of popular polemics, the former is generally identified as the Protestant, and the latter as the Roman Catholic, position. To the Protestant, the first statement stipulates that the Christian life is begun through faith alone – which is obviously right, in that it corresponds to the NT teaching on the matter. To the Roman Catholic, however, the same statement implies that the Christian life is begun through faith alone *and continued* in faith alone – which is obviously a travesty of the NT teaching on the matter, which makes explicit reference to the Christian life being continued in holiness, obedience and good works.

Now consider the second statement. To the Roman Catholic, this would mean that the Christian life is *begun* through faith, and *continued* in holiness of life – which is obviously an excellent summary of the NT teaching on the matter. To the Protestant, however, the same statement means something very different: that the Christian life is *begun* through faith and holiness of life – which is virtually Pelagian, and a gross distortion of the NT teaching on the matter. In fact, it will be obvious that the first statement (understood in the Protestant sense) and the second (understood in the Roman Catholic sense) are actually saying more or less the same thing – but the convergence is obscured by the different understandings of the term 'justification'. This point has been made frequently in most ecumenical discussions of justification, ARCIC II included.

It will, of course, be obvious that Protestant theologians were not for one moment suggesting that it was possible to be justified without being sanctified: they were simply insisting upon a *notional distinction* between the two concepts, distinguishing *at the conceptual level* two ideas which had hitherto been regarded as essentially the same thing. On the

basis of their new and more reliable knowledge of Hebrew philology, the new understanding of justification was totally justified, making correction of Augustine on this point acceptable. Although the Reformers vigorously upheld Augustine's ideas on grace, they felt perfectly free to correct his interpretation of Scripture where it was based upon bad Hebrew!

Sixteenth-century disagreements

As we noted in the previous section of the article, there was an important degree of agreement between Protestants and Roman Catholics on the doctrine of justification in the sixteenth century. Perhaps we could summarize the situation by suggesting that both were committed to anti-Pelagian Christocentric theologies of justification. Nevertheless, alongside this real, if obscured, agreement was genuine disagreement, where each side understood perfectly well what the other was saying, and took exception to it. It is here that the real focus of the Reformation controversies is to be found. Two matters were regarded as being of central importance at the time:

1. The nature of justifying righteousness (sometimes also referred to in the period 1575-1700 as the 'formal cause of justification').
2. The question of assurance (which is closely linked with the nature of justifying righteousness).

We have space only to consider the first of these two questions.

The nature of justifying righteousness

Luther insisted that justifying righteousness was *iustitia aliena Christi*, an 'alien righteousness of Christ' – a righteousness which was extrinsic to the believer, covering him protectively in much the same way as a mother hen might cover her chicks with her wing.⁵ Substantially the same position was taken up by both Lutheran and Reformed theologians, who held that justifying righteousness is not a righteousness inherent to the individual, but one outside him. God effects our justification from outside us, prior to effecting our renewal within us. The righteousness of justification was perfect and imputed, whereas that of sanctification was imperfect and inherent. The point which the Reformers wished to emphasize was that the righteousness of the saints was permanently imperfect, and therefore could not function as the basis of the divine verdict of justification. We are accepted on the basis of a perfect righteousness – the righteousness of Christ.

The Council of Trent, however, meeting in 1546-7 to formulate the Roman Catholic response to the Reformation doctrines of justification, insisted that the single formal cause of justification was an inherent righteousness, a righteousness within the believer. Although stressing that this righteousness was provided by God, Trent equally insisted that it was located within the believer as part of his person. The Reformers found this idea inconsistent: if God's verdict of justification was not to be a legal fiction, it would have to be based upon a perfect righteousness – and if this righteousness was inherent to the believer, how could Trent speak of a believer growing in righteousness when he already possessed

a perfect righteousness? It seemed to the Reformers that any inherent righteousness was, by its very nature, imperfect and in need of supplementation – and the imputation of the alien righteousness of Christ dealt with this difficulty.

For the Reformers, it was necessary to know that one was a Christian, that the Christian life had indeed begun, that one had been forgiven and accepted by God – and on the basis of this conviction, the living of the Christian life, with all its opportunities, responsibilities and challenges, could proceed. Being justified on the basis of the external righteousness of Christ meant that all that needed to be done for an individual's justification had been done by God – and so the believer could rest assured that he *had* been accepted and forgiven. The Reformers could not see how Trent ensured that the individual was accepted, despite being a sinner. For if the believer possessed the perfect righteousness which ensured his justification, he could no longer be a sinner – and yet experience (as well as the penitential system of the Catholic church!) suggested that believers continually sinned. For the Reformers, the Tridentine doctrine of justification was profoundly inadequate, in that it could not account for the fact that the believer was really accepted before God while still remaining a sinner. The Reformers were convinced that Trent taught a profoundly inadequate doctrine of justification as a result. The famous phrase, due to Luther, sums up this precious insight with brilliance and verbal economy: *simul iustus et peccator*, 'righteous and a sinner at one and the same time'. Luther is one of the few theologians ever to have grasped and articulated the simple fact that God loves and accepts us just as we are – not as we *might* be, or *will* be, but as he finds us.

As the Tridentine debates on justification make clear, Trent recognized exactly what Protestant theologians were saying on this matter – and explicitly rejected it. Although a number of theologians present at Trent clearly sympathized with the Protestant position, they were outnumbered and outmanoeuvred by their colleagues. This was no misunderstanding, but a deliberate, weighed and explicit rejection of the Protestant position.

Here, then, is an area where there was genuine and apparently insuperable disagreement between Trent and the Reformers in the sixteenth century. As even the most superficial survey of Protestant and Roman Catholic polemical writings from 1550 onwards makes clear, it is in relation to these two questions – the nature of justifying righteousness and the question of assurance – that the real divisions were perceived to lie. It is thus of some considerable interest to note that it was precisely these two questions (originally not on Trent's agenda, incidentally – they had to be added later, when it was obvious that they could not be avoided) which caused the long delay in the formulation of the decree on justification. (Indeed, at one point it seemed that Trent would not be able to say *anything* about the question of assurance, so difficult was it proving to reach agreement.)

It will therefore be clear that any attempts to engage with the *real* differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics over the doctrine of justification must be addressed to these two questions, which *historically* were regarded as central. There is little to be gained from recapitulating what

was agreed in the sixteenth century (although that agreement was, of course, obscured by polemics and terminological differences), unless it can be shown that these two issues are no longer of any importance.

But what did the Anglican theologians of the Elizabethan Settlement make of these differences? We are very fortunate to have at our disposal an excellent study of this question from the pen of the Anglican Bishop of South Carolina, Fitz Allison. In his book *The Rise of Moralism*,⁶ Allison shows how Anglican divine after Anglican divine of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries declares that the doctrine of justification (and, more specifically, the question of the nature of justifying righteousness) is *the* issue at stake between the Church of England and Rome. Thus for Richard Hooker, 'the grand question, which hangeth yet in controversy between us and the Church of Rome, is about the matter of justifying righteousness'. Similarly, John Davenant's *Disputatio de Iustitia habituali et actuali* (1631) – noted, incidentally, by the writers of *Salvation and the Church* – represents a sustained attack upon the Roman Catholic polemicist Robert Bellarmine's views on the nature of justifying righteousness. Both Bellarmine and Davenant are agreed that the crucial question dividing Catholics and Anglicans was that of the nature of justifying righteousness.⁷

A central disagreement which must therefore be dealt with thoroughly in any ecumenical discussion of justification is this: is justifying righteousness *external* (the Protestant position), *internal* (the Roman Catholic position), or *both* (the position adopted at the abortive Diet of Regensburg in 1541, and repudiated by both Protestants and Roman Catholics in the sixteenth century)?

So what has the recent ecumenical debate on justification achieved? In view of the fact that the most recent contribution to this debate is the ARCIC II document *Salvation and the Church*, we shall attempt to answer this question with specific reference to this document.⁸ In many ways, however, this document illustrates recent trends in this discussion, and the comments which follow will be of relevance beyond the limits of the Anglican-Roman Catholic discussion of justification.

Earlier, we noted two main types of controversy concerning justification in the sixteenth century: those which reflected *simple misunderstandings* (in which both sides were saying basically the same thing, but weren't aware of it at the time), and those which represented *genuine disagreement* (where each side knew what the other was saying, and didn't agree with it). The document *Justification by Faith* represents an excellent example of how both types of controversy can be dealt with – not necessarily leading to their resolution, but at least setting them in perspective in order that real points of convergence may be identified.

Salvation and the Church greatly assists contemporary dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics by summarizing the main points of agreement between the churches, which were often obscured by controversy in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (§§3, 9-24). It is very helpful to have these misunderstandings clarified. It is shown that both churches are agreed that 'even the very first movements which lead to justification, such as repentance,

the desire for forgiveness and even faith itself, are the work of God' (§24); that justification is an 'unmerited' gift of God (§24); that our justification leads to our recreation and hence to good works as the fruit of our new freedom in Christ (§19); and that justification involves being incorporated into the community of the church (§25), rather than a solitary life of faith. Although none of these points was actually the subject of real disagreement in the sixteenth century, it is helpful to have absurd caricatures of both the Reformation view of justification and its Roman Catholic counterpart disarmed. The document rightly points out the tendency to produce caricatures or stereotypes of doctrines with which one disagrees (§8), and it is to be hoped that this document will dispel some of the absurdities which have lingered on within both Roman Catholic and Anglican circles concerning each other's ideological heritage. Incidentally, most of these absurdities, it must be said, date from the nineteenth century.

Personally, I regard ecumenical discussions of this type to be so important that it is inappropriate to 'rock the boat' by implying that certain pressing questions have not been discussed adequately, or perhaps have been quietly set to one side. Nevertheless, I think four questions have to be asked. I would not like to suggest that these questions imply criticism of ARCIC II, but simply a need for clarification. If these questions can be clarified satisfactorily, then no criticism need result; if, on the other hand, it is evident that no clarification is forthcoming, or that ARCIC II is taking refuge in terminological flexibility to minimize theological disagreement, then criticism is both demanded and deserved. Let me identify these questions.

1. What sort of justifying righteousness are we talking about? Earlier, we noted the centrality of this question to the sixteenth-century debates on justification. ARCIC II seems to treat this question as unimportant. It is not dealt with in the discussion. The brief historical analysis of the Reformation debate on justification makes no reference to the importance of this question. It is simply not addressed. Certainly, ARCIC II points to the way in which some sixteenth-century misunderstandings have been resolved – but when it comes to addressing real points of disagreement, ARCIC seems reluctant to recognize their force. The Reformation debate on the nature of justifying righteousness, of such central importance to late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Anglican criticisms of Roman Catholicism, is studiously set to one side.

2. Merit

The document's statements on merit require considerable clarification. The following paragraph (§24) apparently explicitly excludes the possibility of meriting justification.

The language of merit and good works, therefore, when properly understood, in no way implies that human beings, once justified, are able to put God in their debt. Still less does it imply that justification itself is anything but a totally unmerited gift.

This statement, however, avoids a serious difficulty dating from the sixteenth century – the Roman Catholic distinction between *two types of merit*.⁹ This is complicated, but requires attention.

The medieval period saw a distinction develop between merit in the strict sense of the word ('condign merit') and

merit in a weaker sense of the word ('congruous merit'). No medieval theologian suggested that an individual could merit his justification in the strict sense of the word – in other words, earning justification. But some theologians, especially Franciscans, argued that an individual could do certain things (such as performing good works) which made it 'appropriate' for God to justify him. God was placed under a moral, rather than a legal, obligation to justify such an individual. The Reformers were, as might be expected, totally opposed to the idea that one could merit justification, in *either* sense of the word. With this important point in mind, let us consider the statement of ARCIC II cited above.

Does this statement mean that the Commission excludes the traditional and contemporary Franciscan teaching that it is possible to merit justification congruously? Once more, we must raise a question about the membership of ARCIC II: while fully recognizing the difficulties attending the selection of members, the history of the doctrine of justification, especially the proceedings of the Council of Trent, would indicate the need for a Franciscan theologian to be included. The Franciscans' fiercest opponents at Trent on such questions as whether justification can be merited and the possibility of assurance were, of course, the Dominicans. The Commission is fortunate to have two Dominican members – but why exclude Franciscans, when they have such a distinctive contribution to make to such a debate? Is not the Roman Catholic contingent somewhat unrepresentative as a result, especially when viewed in the light of the schools of thought present at the Tridentine debates on justification? In the present writer's opinion, the exclusion of Franciscans from ARCIC II is just as unpardonable as the continuing under-representation of evangelicals on the Anglican side.

Let us then lay down a question which needs clarification. Is ARCIC II saying that justification cannot be merited *congruously*? If not, it will give considerable offence to Anglican evangelicals, who feel that the idea of merit, especially merit prior to justification, is odious. Furthermore, the sixteenth-century debates did not concern whether someone could earn justification – after all, this was simply Pelagianism, as both sides knew. The debate, especially as it involved Luther and Calvin, centred on the concept of congruous merit – a more subtle concept of merit. If on the other hand, ARCIC II is saying that justification *cannot* be merited congruously, we may naturally ask why those who happen to disagree with this view on the Roman Catholic side appear to have been excluded from representation, and whether ARCIC II's statements on this aspect of the doctrine of justification may in any sense be said to be representative of the full spectrum of Catholic opinion. Was the Roman Catholic side preselected in order to exclude the theological school which, traditionally, is most opposed to the Reformation insights concerning merit and justification? Perhaps ARCIC II would care to clarify its position on congruous merit. I think that, until ARCIC II clarifies this point, we cannot regard them as having made any contribution to this aspect of the debate on justification.

3. Indulgences

In a final section, the document moves on to deal with 'The Church and Salvation'. This is by far the weakest section of the document. The entire discussion of the bearing of the doctrine of justification upon the life of the church – in other

words, the *practical* questions, which so aroused the Reformers — is abstract and unfocused. It is in this section that we have every right to look for, and find, a discussion of indulgences. After all, the historical origins of the Lutheran Reformation are linked with this practice, and there appears to be some degree of confusion within modern Catholic theology as to what the role of indulgences actually is. It is therefore of considerable importance that we have a *magisterial* pronouncement on indulgences — in other words, not just the views of some individual Roman Catholic theologians (the reliability of which varies considerably!), but an authoritative statement by the teaching office of the Roman Catholic church as to what the function of indulgences actually is. ARCIC II cannot flee from history: attention must be given to the question of what was actually at stake in the indulgences controversy of the sixteenth century, and how such differences may be, or have been, resolved.

As John Frith, the greatest of the neglected English Reformers, pointed out, the doctrine of justification by faith necessarily called the doctrine of purgatory into question. Indulgences, purgatory and prayer for the dead (which *Salvation and the Church* apparently brings into the debate at §22, for reasons which are not clear) — all these ideas and practices, brought into the discussion on account of the broadening of the theme from 'justification' to 'salvation and the church', point to areas of continuing divergence. As one leading Lutheran ecumenist points out, the question of how the doctrine of purgatory may be reinterpreted or revised in the modern period is an inevitable part of any genuine engagement with the doctrine of justification. 'Catholic interpretations of purgatory leave Lutherans with nagging questions: was Christ's work insufficient, and do our works somehow have merit?' Paul VI may have refined Trent's stipulations on indulgences — but the basic framework it presupposes (purgatory and purgatorial penalties, for instance) remains as unacceptable to Protestants, whether Anglican or otherwise, as it has always been.

Once more, the wisdom of *Justification by Faith* must be noted. In discussing the question of how an individual may be said to apply the satisfaction of Christ, this document noted:

Further study will be needed to determine whether and how far Lutherans and Catholics can agree on these points, which have far-reaching ramifications for traditionally disputed doctrines such as the sacrament of penance, Masses for special intentions, indulgences and purgatory. These questions demand more thorough exploration than they have yet received in this or other dialogues.

It is a pity that ARCIC II did not seize this opportunity to pursue this study, with a view to clarifying the bearing of the doctrine of justification (or 'salvation') on these beliefs and practices. ARCIC II must elucidate the indulgence question, clarifying its relation to the doctrines of justification and purgatory. It is at this point that the interaction of theology (the doctrine of justification) and the life of the church (for example, the practices of praying for the dead, the obtaining of indulgences, and so forth) becomes clear, indicating that the doctrine of justification cannot be discussed in a purely theoretical manner. It must be grounded in the life and practice of the church. ARCIC II has failed to deal with such matters, even though its unilateral extension of its brief to include 'salvation' rather than 'justification', as well as the doctrine of the church as it bears upon these matters, would

indicate that such discussion was necessary. It may well be the case, of course, that ARCIC II was laying down a marker for future further discussion of the question of indulgences — in which case we must encourage them to make public their deliberations.

Indulgences is not some obscure and antiquated sixteenth-century practice which can be dismissed as no longer of any importance or relevance in ecumenical discussion. The modern Roman Catholic teaching on indulgences has been stated and clarified in three documents, dating from 1967 (*Indulgentiarum doctrina*, of Paul VI), 1968 (*The new Enchiridion of Indulgences*, issued by the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary), and the new Code of Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church, dating from 1983 — and this last, it must be noted, was not taken into account by the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Group, simply because it had not appeared by the time their deliberations on justification were complete. Let me quote two canons from this new code of canon law.

992. An indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven as far as their guilt is concerned. This remission the faithful, with the proper dispositions and under certain determined conditions, acquire through the intervention of the church which, as minister of the redemption, authoritatively dispenses and applies the treasury of the satisfaction won by Christ and the saints.

994. The faithful can gain partial or plenary indulgences for themselves or apply them for the dead by way of suffrage.

The casual reader of ARCIC II's report might gain the impression that the sixteenth-century debate on indulgences had led to the matter being resolved. Yet here we have the same basic ideas being restated in substantially the same form within the last few years! How, one wonders, can agreement be reached when this matter is so obviously outstanding?

It seems to me that there is only one answer to this question, and that it rests upon a single phrase in §32. 'We believe that our two communions are agreed on *the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation*.' This phrase, 'the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation', seems to hold the key to ARCIC II's approach to the sixteenth-century debate on justification, in that it seems that indulgences are not to be regarded as an essential aspect of the doctrine of salvation. I think we must ask ARCIC II to be very honest on this point, and ask this very specific question, to which we have a right to a very specific answer: are the 1983 canons on indulgences an *essential* aspect of the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation? I think ARCIC II would say 'No'. But as a historian, I have to suggest that the sixteenth-century answer given by the Roman Catholic church to its Protestant critics, in England and elsewhere, was rather different. After all, John Frith was burned at Smithfield in 1533 for denying that purgatory was a necessary dogma.

4. *The relation to history*

This point brings me to my fourth observation and request for clarification. The document appears somewhat reluctant to address the real disagreements which classical Anglican theologians perceived to exist between themselves and Rome. The emphasis placed by Anglican theologians of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries upon the nature of justifying righteousness as the central issue, even the 'grand question which hangeth yet in controversy',