

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH 1517–2017

WHAT HAS CHANGED?¹

Anthony N. S. Lane
(tony.lane@lst.ac.uk)

Summary

Justification was a key issue at the Reformation, and Protestants and Catholics have polarised over it. There was a brief moment of agreement at the Regensburg Colloquy in 1541, but this was swept away by the Council of Trent, whose Decree on Justification (1547) took care to demarcate itself from Protestantism. Hans Küng initiated a new approach, seeking points of agreement rather than difference. That approach eventually gave birth to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999). This does not pretend that no differences remain but claims that they are acceptable. It is fruitful to consider the differing concerns of each side.

The focus of this paper is what may or may not have changed in Protestant–Catholic relations on justification, not the changing picture of modern biblical studies. In particular, I will not be looking at the New Perspectives (plural) on Paul nor at John Barclay’s recent magnum (if not maximum) opus.²

1. Justification in the Reformation

The year 2017 was, of course, the 500th anniversary of Luther’s posting of the 95 Theses, traditionally regarded as the beginning of the Reformation. On 31 October 1517 he posted the theses to the Archbishop of Mainz and may or may not have nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The theses dealt primarily with the

¹ This is a revised version of the 2017 Tyndale Lecture on Historical Theology, in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Luther’s 95 Theses.

² J. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

issues of indulgences and Purgatory. There was no mention of the doctrine of justification. Subsequently, of course, justification became a big issue and justification by faith alone is one of the great slogans of the Reformation. But the Protestant doctrine of justification in its classical form, as expounded by Melancthon (Lutheran) and Calvin (Reformed), for example, did not emerge until the 1520s.³

Before going further, I should note a significant imbalance when it comes to debates on justification. As already stated, justification is a very important doctrine for most Protestants, especially confessional Protestants and Evangelicals. By contrast, it is a slight exaggeration to say that it is of interest to Roman Catholics only when they are engaged in dialogue with Protestants. To illustrate this claim, I will refer to two documents. At the Council of Trent the leaders of the council reported to Rome that ‘the significance of this Council in the theological sphere lies chiefly in the article on justification, in fact this is the most important item the Council has to deal with’.⁴ But for the inner life of the Catholic Church the doctrine was not very important. In 1566, Pope Pius V promulgated the so-called Roman Catechism, drawn from the decrees of the Council of Trent. This contains only scattered passing references to justification, mostly in the context of teaching on the sacraments.⁵ The sacramental system is as central to this catechism as the doctrine of justification is peripheral and the need to offer satisfaction for our sins receives the sustained exposition denied to justification. We will return to this point.

2. Justification: Polemic and Dialogue

For most of the last half a millennium Protestants and Catholics have engaged in polemics over the doctrine of justification. Protestants have often portrayed the difference between the two sides as justification by faith versus justification by works. This is a caricature with a germ of truth. James affirms that we are justified not by faith alone but by

³ For the early development of the Protestant doctrine, see A. E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (3rd edn; Cambridge: CUP, 2005): 208--65.

⁴ Cited in H. Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent* (2 vols; London: Thomas Nelson, 1957, 1961), 2: 171.

⁵ J. Donovan, trans, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (Dublin: W. Folds & Son, 1829): 65--66, 90, 111, 138, 141, 149, 152, 181, 184, 346, 505--506.

works (Jas 2:24). Catholic theology has generally incorporated a role for justification by works in its wider doctrine of justification. Protestants, by contrast, have generally left the impression that James, as a New Testament author, is allowed to get away with speaking of justification by works, but woe betide anyone who later dares to follow him. At one and the same time James is excused for the language and Roman Catholics are lambasted for it!⁶

Catholics have tended to caricature Protestants as if their doctrine of justification by faith alone made works unnecessary. For example, the noted Catholic scholar Étienne Gilson commented that:

for the first time, with the Reformation, there appeared this conception of a grace that saves a man without changing him, of a justice that redeems corrupted nature without restoring it, of a Christ who pardons the sinner for self-inflicted wounds but does not heal them'.⁷

I have yet to discover any serious Protestant theologian who would teach this. The misunderstanding comes from a failure to recognise that while many Protestants traditionally see *justification* as purely forensic, as referring to our legal standing before God, they do not for a moment imagine that *salvation* is purely forensic. Salvation embraces both justification (acquittal by God) and sanctification (inner renewal leading to love and good works). Or, to put it differently, when the Reformers distinguished between forensic justification and transformative sanctification, to say that justification is forensic amounts to little more than the statement that ‘the forensic side of salvation is forensic’.

While Protestants and Catholics have argued over justification for many centuries, this has not proved to be the hardest topic on which to reach agreement. In 1541 a surprising common agreement was achieved, though not all accepted it. In 1999 the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. We will look at these two in turn.

⁶ It is also worth noting that justification by works is not completely absent from Protestant teaching. I have a research student working on ‘Justification by Works in Calvin’s Theology’.

⁷ E. Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1936): 421.

3. The Regensburg Colloquy (1541)⁸

In the middle decades of the sixteenth century many colloquies were convened with the aim of healing the Reformation divide, mostly in the Holy Roman Empire (predominantly Germany). There were many motivations for the attempt. While many today suppose that when Jesus prayed that his church might be one (John 17) what he really meant was ‘let there be a competing market of hundreds of different denominations’, this was not how it was understood in the sixteenth century. There was a belief that the church was meant to be one and that division was a scandal. The Reformers’ aim was not to found a new church in opposition to the Catholic Church (let alone a plethora of churches) but to reform the Catholic Church. The desired outcome was not a church or churches to which people might belong were they so to desire, but a single church in each locality to which all citizens would belong. The Anabaptists had a very different aim, of course, but they were not involved in the colloquies. There was also the need for the Holy Roman Empire to be united in opposition to the Turks, who were seeking to capture Vienna. Finally, the aim was to avert civil war. This was a real danger and in due course Germany was devastated by the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) between Catholics and Protestants.

The greatest chance of success came at Regensburg in 1541. A religious colloquy was held in which three Catholic and three Protestant debaters/negotiators met with the aim of drawing up a common agreement. They discussed a draft document called the Regensburg Book, or (more accurately) the Worms Book, which contained twenty-three articles (of similar length to biblical chapters) covering a range of topics. The Protestant debaters were Martin Bucer, Philipp Melanchthon and Johann Pistorius. The Catholics were Johann Gropper, Johann Eck and Julius Pflug.

On 27 April the first four articles (on human innocence before the fall, free choice, the cause of sin, and original sin) were quickly agreed. The fifth article, on justification, was discussed from 28 April to 2 May. Eck and Melanchthon both found the draft version unsatisfactory and it was eventually agreed it should be set aside and that there be free discussion to draw up a new article. Eventually, on 2 May, a version was produced to which all the parties gave their

⁸ I have almost completed a book entitled *Regensburg Article 5 on Justification: Inconsistent Patchwork or Substance of True Doctrine?* to be published by OUP.

consent. The initial response was predominantly positive and there was great optimism for the outcome of the colloquy.

The joy and the hope engendered were to be short lived. The colloquy soon began to founder, but that was because of differences concerning *other* doctrines, such as the infallibility of councils and transubstantiation, not because of shortcomings in the statement on justification. The issue that caused *all* of the colloquies to fail was that of authority.⁹ For the Protestants, the test of all doctrine was Scripture, and they could not accept anything that in their view contradicted Scripture. For the Catholics, the test of all doctrine was the teaching authority of the church, and they could not accept anything contrary to the established teachings of popes or councils. Agreement on individual doctrines was possible, but the differences over authority meant that agreement was not possible across the board.

So, what does Article 5 teach? Catholics and Protestants were offering two contrasting models of justification. The Protestant teaching was that God accepts us as righteous because Christ's righteousness is reckoned or imputed to our account. That is, we are acceptable to God not because of anything that we have done, nor indeed because of the change that God brings about within us, but because of what Christ has done for us on the cross. We are acceptable not for what we are (which remains imperfect), but in Christ. The Catholic teaching, by contrast, was that justification is about God changing us by the Holy Spirit and thus making us acceptable to himself. At baptism/conversion we are transformed within by the grace of God, which makes us pleasing or acceptable and brings about within us an inherent righteousness. Thus we have the contrast between the Protestant view that we become acceptable on the basis of *imputed* righteousness (the righteousness of Christ reckoned to our account) and the Catholic view that we become righteous through Christ's righteousness being imparted to us or infused in us through an inner change which gives us an *inherent* righteousness. The key contribution of Regensburg was to insist that with conversion we receive *both* of these: inherent *and* imputed righteousness. The terminology was new, but imputed and inherent righteousness basically refer to what Protestants call justification and sanctification. Also, Article 5 crucially

⁹ H. Jedin, 'An welchen Gegensätzen sind die vortridentinischen Religionsgespräche zwischen Katholiken und Protestanten gescheitert?', *Theologie und Glaube* 48 (1958): 50--55.

taught that we can have confidence before God not because of our inherent righteousness, which remains imperfect, but because Christ's righteousness is imputed to us.

Reactions to Article 5 were mixed. Calvin, who was present but not one of the debaters, saw it as a remarkable achievement retaining 'the substance of the true doctrine' and containing nothing not found in 'our writings'.¹⁰ Luther, who was not present, saw it as a patchwork of conflicting ideas.¹¹ On the Catholic side, some defended it vigorously, and those who objected mostly complained that it was ambiguous, not that it was unorthodox. Both sides agreed that further explanation was necessary. They were concerned not so much about the content of Article 5 as fear of how the other side would exploit it.

The goal of the colloquy was agreement across the board, not on one article only. The enthusiasm that greeted Article 5 was enthusiasm for the prospect of agreement across the board, not enthusiasm for the idea of agreeing in one point only. As with negotiations within the European Union today, 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed' – any concessions made in negotiations do not come into force until the entire deal is agreed. Events were soon to prove how unrealistic this was. After the breakdown of the colloquy those who had been willing to make concessions were criticised by their own sides. On all sides, conciliation gave way to recrimination as the participants published works focusing not on the limited agreement reached but on the reasons for the failure of the colloquy. Bucer, however, published a work entitled *On the True Reconciliation and Union of the Churches in Doctrine, Ceremonies and Discipline* in which he devotes 105 pages to expounding and defending Article 5.¹²

¹⁰ In a letter to Farel of 11 May 1541. G. Baum, E. Cunit, and E. Reuss, eds, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* (Braunschweig and Berlin: Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 11: 215-16; H. Beveridge, ed., *Selected Works of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 4: 260.

¹¹ E.g. in Luther and Bugenhagen to Johann Friedrich (10/11 May) in WA Br. 9:406-409, the original of which is in Luther's hand.

¹² M. Bucer, *De vera ecclesiarum in doctrina, ceremoniis, et disciplina reconciliatione et compositione* (Strassburg: W. Rihel, 1542): fols. 164a-216a.

4. The Council of Trent (1545–63)

The breakdown of the Regensburg Colloquy revealed the irreconcilable nature of the split between the two sides. Conciliation and negotiation had failed. The need now was for clear lines of demarcation. It was with this aim in mind that the Council of Trent (1545–63) was called. This set out to define Roman Catholic dogma in a firmly anti-Protestant manner, as in its Decree on Justification (1547).¹³

What does Trent teach? Space precludes a full account, but a few key points can be mentioned. There were repeated attempts to include the Regensburg idea of double righteousness in the Tridentine decree but these were all rebuffed and the final version states that:

the sole formal cause [of justification] is the righteousness of God ... by which we are renewed in the spirit of our mind (Eph. 4:23). Thus we are not merely considered to be righteous but are truly called righteous and are righteous (ch. 7).¹⁴

This is usually taken to mean that we are justified by inherent righteousness.¹⁵ The decree goes on to state that:

We must believe that nothing further is wanting to the justified, to prevent their being accounted to have, by those works which have been done in God, fully satisfied the divine law according to the state of this life, and to have truly merited eternal life, to be obtained also in its due time, so long as they depart in a state of grace. (ch. 16).

5. From Polemic to Dialogue

Where justification is concerned, the transition from polemics to ecumenical dialogue came with Hans Küng's doctoral thesis, 'Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection' (1957).¹⁶ This made the remarkable claim that Barth's theology of justification is compatible with Catholic teaching. Barth responded with the confession that *if* Catholic teaching is as Küng expounds it,

¹³ I have expounded this in A. N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (London & New York: T. & T. Clark, 2002): 60--85.

¹⁴ Translations of the decree are my own, based on earlier translations.

¹⁵ See Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*: 71--75.

¹⁶ London: Burns & Oates, 1964. On this, see Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*: 87--91.

then ‘I must certainly admit that my view of justification agrees with the Roman Catholic view; if only for the reason that the Roman Catholic teaching would then be most strikingly in accord with mine!’¹⁷

Many have questioned the historical accuracy of Küng’s thesis. More significant for our present topic, however, is the fact that it was warmly received by Catholic scholars, with favourable reviews from, among others, Karl Rahner¹⁸ and Joseph Ratzinger.¹⁹

Roman Catholics subsequently engaged in a whole series of ecumenical dialogues with Lutherans especially but also with others such as Anglicans and Evangelicals.²⁰

6. Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999)²¹

The climax of these dialogues came with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, the preparation of which took most of the 1990s. It was first published in 1997, but the initial reception was not very encouraging. In January 1998, a group of over 150 German theology professors, led by Gerhard Ebeling and Eberhard Jüngel, signed a statement opposing it. In June 1998, however, the Lutheran World Federation published its official Response to the declaration, based on the overwhelmingly positive responses received from member churches round the world. The same month the Vatican also published its official Response to the declaration, demanding further clarification on a number of issues. An Annex was composed that set out to elucidate the points that were raised by each side in their official Responses to the original declaration. This Annex is a significant document and includes the statement, accepted by both sides, that we are justified by faith alone and by grace alone.

Eventually, on Reformation Day, 31 October 1999, at Augsburg, the Joint Declaration – together with an ‘Official Common Statement’ to

¹⁷ Hans Küng, *Justification*: xvii–xviii.

¹⁸ K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (vol. 4; London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Seabury, 1966): 192–98.

¹⁹ *Theologische Revue* 54 (1958): 30–35.

²⁰ On these, see Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic–Protestant Dialogue*: 91–119.

²¹ Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic–Protestant Dialogue*: 119–26.

which was attached the aforementioned Annex – was signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (by Cardinal Cassidy on behalf of Pope John Paul II).

The Joint Declaration sets out a ‘Common Understanding of Justification’ (§§14–18), expressing shared convictions:

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. (§15)

The bulk of the declaration is found in the fourth section, ‘Explicating the Common Understanding of Justification’ (§§19–39), which focuses on seven issues: human powerlessness and sin in relation to justification; justification as forgiveness of sins and making righteous; justification by faith and through grace; the justified as sinner; law and gospel; assurance of salvation; and the good works of the justified. They tackle these issues one by one, using a helpful method. For each issue, a preliminary paragraph of ‘joint confession’ (‘We confess together’) sets out their shared convictions. This is then followed by separate paragraphs stating how Lutherans and Catholics each understand this joint confession. Therefore they affirm a common core of joint confession without pretending that there are no remaining differences.

There is a brief final section entitled ‘The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached’ (§§40–44).

The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this *Declaration* shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification ... are acceptable. (§40)

The Joint Declaration adopts the approach of ‘mutual affirmation and admonition’. If each side remains within the limits set by the commonly agreed statement, the remaining differences are not great enough to warrant mutual anathema (§§40–41). At an earlier stage it is affirmed that the relevant ‘doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today’s partner’ (§13).

Some have argued that the commonly agreed statements of belief offer no more than a minimal core of basic Christian belief. This is not fair, but there is no pretence that significant differences do not remain

between Catholic and Lutheran doctrines of justification, and these are enumerated, focusing especially on ecclesiological issues: ‘ecclesiology, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, the sacraments’ (§43).

This document is uniquely significant in that unlike all the other documents it has been solemnly ratified by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation at the highest level. On the other hand, it is not the most satisfactory document from the point of view of teasing out the real points of difference, for which in my view the 1983 document *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII: Justification by Faith* remains unsurpassed.²²

Considerable progress has been made by the Joint Declaration. Misunderstandings have been cleared up and the two sides have drawn together, each listening to the concerns of the other. It claims to have reached ‘a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification’ (§40). The crucial test of this will be its reception. How has it been received so far by Lutherans and Catholics, and others? And is each side willing not just to approve of the agreement but to embrace it in its own teaching of justification? It is to these questions we now turn.

7. Reception of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

We will consider four points: the acceptance of the Joint Declaration by other churches; its impact on further dialogue on related topics; and its reception by, firstly, Lutherans and, secondly, Roman Catholics.

7.1 By Others

The World Methodist Council took immediate steps to join in the achievement of the Joint Declaration and after due process in 2006 approved a brief ‘Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification’, leading to an ‘Official Common Affirmation’ together with the signatories of the Joint Declaration in Seoul. In April 2016 the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Lusaka welcomed and affirmed the substance of the Joint Declaration. In July 2017, during its General Council, the general

²² H. G. Anderson, T. A. Murph, and J. A. Burgess, eds, *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches signed a declaration accepting formal association to the Joint Declaration. This took place in the Stadtkirche (Town Church) at Wittenberg, where Luther regularly preached.²³

7.2 The Hope of Eternal Life (Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue XI)

The *American Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue* series has yielded an eleventh volume entitled *The Hope of Eternal Life*, approved in 2010 after five years of meetings and preparation.²⁴ This builds on the foundation of the Joint Declaration in two ways, following the same basic method and tackling issues remaining from the Joint Declaration, such as satisfaction, purgatory, prayer for the dead, masses for the dead, and indulgences (§§1–8, 156–271).

As with all such ecumenical documents, the big question is whether the Joint Declaration will make any difference to the way in which Lutherans and Catholics *teach* the doctrine of justification. Here, the training of the next generation of clergy is crucial. To seek an answer, I questioned a number of Lutheran and Catholic scholars (mostly teaching or having recently taught theology in seminaries or universities affiliated to either confession), and have received a substantial number of replies.²⁵ There were ten Lutheran replies representing Tübingen University and eight Evangelical Lutheran Church of America seminaries. I heard from fourteen Catholic scholars with experience of a variety of institutions. These included six Catholic universities in the USA, Belgium, and Rome (the Gregorian University), plus a variety of British institutions. My Catholic respondents also included an archbishop based in Rome and lecturers at non-Catholic institutions. Some respondents also shared information about how others taught the topic. This was not a proper scientific survey, but, given the wide range of respondents and institutions represented, the results are significant.

²³ <http://religionnews.com/2017/07/06/reformed-churches-endorse-catholic-lutheran-accord-on-key-reformation-dispute>.

²⁴ L. G. Almen and R. J. Sklba, *The Hope of Eternal Life: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue XI* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011).

²⁵ For a fuller account of this, see A. N. S. Lane, 'Justification' in P. G. McPartlan and G. Wainwright, eds, *Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies* (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming), currently available online at <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600847.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199600847-e-20>.

7.3 By Lutherans

There are three points to be made about the Lutheran responses. The first is that the Joint Declaration was agreed by the Lutheran World Federation, a substantial body representing many but by no means all Lutherans. The LWF tends to represent the more liberal wing of Lutheranism and it does not include strongly confessional Lutherans like those in the Missouri Synod. These have rejected the Joint Declaration.

Secondly, the LWF does not have the authority among Lutherans that the Vatican does for Roman Catholics.

Thirdly, and following from this, there is a range of opinion among those teaching in Lutheran seminaries. In six of the eight ELCA seminaries substantial attention has been devoted to the Joint Declaration, regarding it positively; in one, it receives minimal attention; in another it is regarded with some suspicion. In at least one of the seminaries where it is taught positively there is also teaching against it. It was in Germany that the greatest Lutheran opposition to the Joint Declaration came, in the 1990s, and, according to my Tübingen informant, this has made very little difference to what is taught in the Lutheran faculties in Germany. So, the picture that emerges is that the Joint Declaration has been received mostly, but no means entirely, positively in US ELCA seminaries, and mostly negatively in German Lutheran theological faculties.

7.4 By Roman Catholics

The Joint Declaration was signed by Cardinal Cassidy on behalf of Pope John Paul II. The Vatican has an authority for the Roman Catholic Church that the LWF does not have for Lutheranism. Therefore, unlike the Lutherans, Roman Catholic theologians all accept this new document put forward with the Pope's approval – at least, that is what I would have expected, but the reality is somewhat different.

The first inkling of this difference came when I engaged in an e-mail debate with a rather traditional Roman Catholic friend who teaches in a major British university. He was not impressed with the *Joint Declaration* and argued that it glossed over the fact that the sacramental system is central for Roman Catholics in a way that is true for only a tiny number of Protestants. This is essentially the point that I made at the beginning of this essay about the role (or lack of role) for

justification in the Roman Catechism. The debate ended when I commented that he obviously didn't agree with the pope, and I prematurely thought that I had won the debate. My recent survey of Roman Catholic scholars has made me realise that his view is in fact more representative than I had thought.

The Joint Declaration is taught positively in four of the five Catholic universities named and is mentioned positively in the fifth. One of the American professors states that 'it has had an enormous impact on Catholic teaching on grace and specifically on the theology of justification', a view echoed by others. On the other hand, two of my respondents from Catholic institutions were distinctly hostile to the Joint Declaration. Another Catholic respondent applauded the document for producing greater openness on both sides, but suspected that many who accept the Joint Declaration might continue to teach as before with no change. Another comment was that justification has today for many been pushed aside by issues such as women priests and gay marriage.²⁶ There are lingering questions about the status of the Joint Declaration. All recognise that there is no Lutheran Magisterium to tell Lutherans what to believe, but some of my respondents (from both sides) questioned the doctrinal authority of the Joint Declaration for Catholics, asking how much magisterial weight it has as a 'non-infallible' text. There is a penetrating critique from a Catholic perspective written by Christopher Malloy.²⁷

The picture that emerges is mixed. The Joint Declaration has not simply been ignored but has achieved a considerable degree of acceptance on both sides and is widely taught in courses on grace and justification. On the other hand, by no means all Lutheran institutions teach it positively, and there remains a significant level of opposition on both sides. The mixed nature of the picture is illustrated by a recent event. On 26 June 2016 Pope Francis gave an interview in which he spoke of Luther:

I think that the intentions of Martin Luther were not mistaken. He was a reformer. Perhaps some methods were not correct. But in that time, if we read the story of the Pastor, a German Lutheran who then converted when he saw reality – he became Catholic – in that time, the Church was

²⁶ My Protestant respondent from Germany also observed that Lutheran teaching on justification today is more influenced by contemporary ethical issues.

²⁷ C. Malloy, *Engrafted into Christ: A Critique of the Joint Declaration* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

not exactly a model to imitate. There was corruption in the Church, there was worldliness, attachment to money, to power ... and this he protested. Then he was intelligent and took some steps forward justifying, and because he did this. And today Lutherans and Catholics, Protestants, all of us agree on the doctrine of justification. On this point, which is very important, he did not err.²⁸

Not all Catholics welcomed this. One blogger expressed his disagreement in forceful terms. ‘No, no, no. Now see, this infuriates me as an apologist (and former Protestant). It is one thing to have to correct this nonsense when it comes from the late Anglican bishop Tony Palmer. But from the pope? I defend the poor man, but at times he exasperates me.’ After listing many points where Luther’s teaching has been condemned, he concludes:

There are important differences between Protestants and Catholics, and ecumenism is of no use if we don’t treat them honestly. We can’t just pretend they are not there and wish them away. If Luther ‘did not err,’ did the Church err? Should we all become Protestants? Trent was right; Leo X was right. Luther did indeed err; and in this particular statement, so did Pope Francis. I love Pope Francis; he’s my Father; but no, no, no. He was wrong.²⁹

8. What Has Changed?

So, it was not the doctrine of justification that provoked the Reformation. What about today? Is it not the key point of difference? As a student in the 1960s I heard Cardinal Suenens give a talk on the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and ecumenism. He told the story of how he approached one of the Protestant delegates at the Council and asked him ‘What is it that divides us?’ The response was just two names: Peter and Mary, i.e. the authority of the papacy and the role given to the Virgin Mary. I think that this was a very profound response. He did not mention justification.

But what about the doctrine of justification? Has the situation changed? The biggest change is in attitudes across the divide. The

²⁸ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-pope-francis-inflight-press-conference-from-armenia-45222>. In places, the syntax is incoherent, reflecting the fact that this was an extempore interview, not a prepared speech. For a Protestant critique of Francis’s view of justification, see <http://vaticanfiles.org/2017/11/143-where-does-popefrancis-stand-on-the-doctrine-of-justification>.

²⁹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scottericalt/pope-francis-is-wrong-about-luther-and-justification>.

pontificate of Pope John XXIII (1958–63) and the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) altered the relationship from one of polemical hostility to one of friendly dialogue. Instead of seeking to present the other side in the worst possible light the goal now is to better understand one another and to seek points of agreement. Of course, there is always the danger of a dishonest fudging of differences, and occasionally this error has been made, but the great majority of the time the dialogue has been conducted with honesty and integrity.

Another change has helped here. In the sixteenth century the goal was for complete agreement. The Council of Trent produced a book-length collection of documents and all Catholics were expected to assent fully to everything. The Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) is likewise book-length and in at least a substantial portion of Lutheranism full assent was required. The Reformed produced many confessions of faith and in Scotland, for example, full assent to the book-length *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) was required. Centuries of experience have taught most Christians to accept that fellowship does not need to be based upon joint subscription to a book-length confession. The Evangelical movement has been in the forefront here and a body like the Tyndale Fellowship is united not by total agreement but by common affirmation of a brief doctrinal basis of some 300 words.³⁰ Being united in the gospel does not require seeing eye to eye on infant baptism, predestination, or eschatological timetables, so does it require seeing eye to eye on justification?

It is not a binary choice between agreeing and disagreeing on justification. I have long belonged to a church whose views on infant baptism I don't fully agree with, and indeed was until recently chairman of the elders. But I could not conceive of belonging to a church that did not practise baptism. It is one thing to disagree over details of the eschatological timetable, quite another to deny that Christ is coming again. So, the question is not 'Do we require agreement on justification?' but 'How full must the agreement on justification be?' or 'What is the acceptable range of diversity on the doctrine of justification?' Orthodoxy is not everyone standing on the same spot but remaining within an acceptable range of views. As President Lyndon

³⁰ <https://academic.tyndalehouse.com/doctrinal-basis>.

Johnson is widely reputed to have said, ‘If two people agree on everything, you may be sure that one of them is doing the thinking.’³¹

This is to affirm the *method* of the Joint Declaration. That document declares that there is a common shared core and that the differences between the Lutheran and Catholic developments of that are not sufficient to justify dividing the church. Such an approach will not satisfy hard-line confessional theologians. Those Roman Catholics who regard the Council of Trent as the abiding norm of orthodoxy tend to be dismissive of the Joint Declaration and do not regard the Lutheran exposition in that document as acceptable. Confessional Lutherans who hold to the Formula of Concord are equally unlikely to be impressed. But what of those Evangelicals who regard it as stretching the bounds of credulity to believe that one lengthy sixteenth- or seventeenth-century document just happens to be inerrant and all the others are flawed? Before answering this, we must step back and consider two prior issues

9. Language and Concerns³²

What is the status of our theological language? Do our doctrines partake of the precision of mathematical formulae? If so, there can be no scope for diversity. If a list of numbers adds up to 315, all other answers are simply wrong. To approach theology this way would imply an extreme and naive form of realism foreign to the way in which the discipline actually works. It is sometimes encountered in the person who thinks that quoting one biblical passage settles an issue, ignoring all the rest of what Scripture says. If this naive approach were true, there would be no hope of reconciling a document that proclaimed justification by faith alone with another that denies it. I am referring, of course, not to the Reformers and Trent but to Paul and James.

If our theological language is not like mathematical formulae, what is it like? It is not purely subjective, like some forms of abstract art, but a description of a reality that is out there such that one can meaningfully ask whether or not it adequately describes that reality.

³¹ Also attributed to that most prolific of authors, Anonymous, by E. K. Rowell and *Leadership Journal* (eds), *1001 Quotes, Illustrations and Humorous Stories* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008): 33.

³² On this, see Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic–Protestant Dialogue*: 128–32.

But it does not describe it in the same way as, for example, Pythagoras's theorem or Boyle's law. We should compare our theologies not with mathematical or scientific formulae but with models or maps of reality. Even in science there is sometimes the need for apparently contradictory models to be held in tension, as with viewing light both as particles and as waves. The Bible teaches much about the doctrine of justification but not in a systematic form and not using technical language. Paul comes the nearest to this in Romans, but the New Testament includes James, whose doctrine is manifestly different from Paul's, though not, I believe, ultimately incompatible with it.³³ The task of Christian theology is to produce a coherent account of the doctrine which does justice to the full range of biblical teaching. There are a number of different ways in which this can be done. To ask which is the single correct way is not necessarily the most helpful approach. It might be better to ask what are the strengths and weaknesses of each model, recognising that all are likely to have their weak points, while recognising that some may be simply false.

Some of those who deny that there is convergence between Protestant and Catholic appear to think that it suffices to show a verbal difference between the two sides. Thus, if one side says that justification refers to our status before God and the other side refers it to the whole process of salvation, there is an irreconcilable disagreement. If one side says that grace refers to God's favour and the other side refers it to the work of the Holy Spirit within us there is an irreconcilable disagreement. If one side affirms justification by faith alone and the other side denies it there is an irreconcilable disagreement regardless of whether the two sides mean the same thing by 'justification' and 'faith'. If one side maintains that the justified Christian remains a sinner and the other side denies it there is an irreconcilable disagreement regardless of what meaning is given to the word 'sinner'. And so on. Harnack rightly says of such antitheses that they are 'all merely half-truths'.³⁴ It is not that the individual affirmations are untrue, but that they express only part of the truth and need to be held in harmony with other truths.

³³ For two discussions of the relation between them, see R. J. Bauckham, *James* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999): 113--40; M. A. Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000): 179--83.

³⁴ A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (vol. 7; New York: Russell & Russell, 1958): 58.

To suppose that to describe the opposing views in verbally incompatible ways is to have demonstrated an irreconcilable difference assumes a naive form of linguistic realism. If (as no one disputes) the two sides meant different things by key terms, that leaves open the possibility that verbally contradictory statements *may* in fact be compatible. Of course, it may well turn out that the statements remain resolutely incompatible and one must beware lest the different use of words be used as a smokescreen to veil real conflict. We must avoid the lazy approach of either assuming that verbal difference implies contradiction or assuming that it is explained solely by the different use of words. We need to examine carefully what each side is saying and to ask at each stage whether their verbally contradictory statements are equivalent, contradictory, or compatible.

Given that there may be more than one acceptable way of stating the doctrine of justification, it is helpful to examine the *concerns* of each side. The various dialogue documents are good at doing this. For the Reformers, the concern was to emphasise the seriousness of sin and the gratuity of salvation. They emphasised our dependence upon God's grace and mercy. For their Catholic opponents, the concern was to stress the reality of the transformation brought by grace/the Holy Spirit as well as the need for and the value of good works.

These two sets of concerns are not necessarily incompatible. As I have studied this subject I have not ceased to hold a Protestant doctrine of justification, but I have been made much more sensitive to areas that are of concern to Roman Catholics. For example, I have been made aware that some Protestant formulations that emphasise human sin and our dependence upon mercy may go so far that they can be accused of belittling the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The two sets of concerns point in opposite directions and the danger of a polemical approach is that the two sides lurch towards opposing extremes.

10. Models and Concerns

I referred earlier to two contrasting models for justification. The Protestant teaching was that God accepts us as righteous because Christ's righteousness is reckoned or imputed to our account. That is, we are acceptable to God not because of anything that we have done, nor indeed because of the change that God brings about within us, but

because of what Christ has done for us on the cross. We are acceptable not for what we are (which remains imperfect) but in Christ. Alongside this, Protestants affirmed that justification and sanctification are inseparable and that while justification is not *by* works, there is no justification *without* works. Does this model satisfy Catholic concerns? Once they get over the caricature that Protestantism teaches that God leaves us unchanged, Catholics can recognise that Protestants teach the transformation brought by the Holy Spirit, though they may well think that Protestants underestimate the extent of this. (Part of the problem lies in differing understandings of sin.) They can accept that Protestants stress the need for good works, though they may think that the meritorious value of these works is underestimated.

The Catholic teaching, by contrast, was that justification is about God changing us by the Holy Spirit and thus making us acceptable to himself. At baptism/conversion we are transformed within by the grace of God which makes us pleasing or acceptable and brings about within us an inherent righteousness. This inherent righteousness gives birth to good works and the Christian also has a righteousness of works. Some Catholics claim that inherent righteousness is perfect but the righteousness of works is not. Does this model satisfy Protestant concerns? The gratuity of salvation and dependence upon God's grace is maintained to the extent that the meritorious cause of justification is Christ and the cross and our good works are all enabled by grace. The Protestant is liable to think, however, that the claim that we can 'fully satisfy the divine law according to the state of this life' and 'truly merit eternal life' by our works represents a failure to take sufficiently seriously the seriousness of sin and our dependence upon God's mercy. Calvin's judgement on the Tridentine fathers was that 'for them scarcely anything short of murder is a sin; whoredom is a trivial mistake – the foulest lusts praiseworthy trials of virtue, a hidden wound of the conscience, a mere bagatelle' (on canon 30).³⁵ This is, of course, a gross caricature, but like all good caricatures it does make a serious point: that Catholics do not recognise as sin all that Protestants would. In particular, the concupiscence or lust that remains in Christians is seen by Trent as coming from sin and inclining to sin but not as itself sin.

³⁵ Beveridge, ed., *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 3: 160–61.

11. The Stages of Justification

Many accounts of justification differentiate between different stages of justification and I think this is helpful. Here I shall briefly mention four.

1) Prior to conversion. Outside of Christ our attempts to be justified by works are doomed to failure. Paul argues this in Romans 1–3: ‘By the works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin’ (3:20). This point is relatively uncontroversial in Catholic–Protestant dialogue.

2) Conversion. Here occurs what Catholics (following Paul) call the justification of the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). At the time of the Reformation Catholic scholars repeatedly acknowledged the truth of justification by faith alone, without works, at this stage, though they also warned against the danger of this being misunderstood by ordinary folk. The Tridentine decree states that the instrumental cause of justification is ‘the sacrament of baptism (the sacrament of faith) without which [faith] no one was ever justified’ (ch. 7).

3) Christian life. The Tridentine decree states that justification needs to increase and that the godly ‘increase in that righteousness which they have received through the grace of Christ, faith cooperating with good works, and are more and more justified, as it is written: “He that is righteous, let him be further justified” (Rev. 22:11)’. James 2:24 is also cited (ch. 10). This is plainly contrary to the Protestant view that being justified, like being pregnant, is binary – either one is or one isn’t. Or is it? For Trent, justification embraces (in Protestant terms) both justification and sanctification. The account of the increase in justification is basically describing what Protestants call sanctification. Calvin comments about this stage that we are not justified *by works*, but also not justified *without works*. The mainstream Reformers all acknowledged that works are necessary for salvation.

4) Final judgement. The New Testament is clear throughout that the criterion in the final judgement is our works, what we have done.

I would suggest that more consciously differentiating between these four stages, rather than speaking generically about justification, might bring greater clarity to our discussions.

12. Conclusion

What has changed? It would be wrong to suggest that there remain no differences between Catholics and Protestants over justification, but the differences are by no means as acute as they once were. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the switch from polemics to dialogue means that rather than seeking to magnify the differences, the concern now is to remove misunderstandings and seek as much common ground as possible. Secondly, it is true to say that today, as at Regensburg, the drawing closer together has happened almost entirely because of greater openness by Catholics to the Protestant view. This reflects the fact, noted above, that for Catholics the main interest in justification is as an issue to be resolved with Protestants, which means that concessions are worth making in the hope that progress can be made on the issues that really matter (for Catholics).