

The Evangelical—Catholic Accord: Justification by Faith or Justification by Faith Alone?

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When one considers the ecumenical dialogue that has transpired over the last couple of decades, an image of the perennial Star Trek nemesis, The Borg, comes to mind: “Resistance is futile – you will be assimilated!” There is no doubt that the winds of change in modern Western culture are blowing against the cherished convictions of many Bible believers who want to hold their ground on doctrine. Baby boomers, they tell us, do not like to make doctrine a divisive issue.¹ In addition, the various trends and movements which make up the postmodern mindset seem to have come to full bloom during this time. This way of looking at the world gives the boomers a reason to downplay doctrine – there is no such thing as objective truth so why should we fight about any lines of demarcation between one religious group as opposed to any other.

There are some good points to be made concerning some ecumenical dialogue. We sometimes do talk past our theological adversaries and misrepresent them at various points. Integrity demands that we not oppose error for wrong reasons or in the wrong way. We must oppose error for right reasons and in the right way. Whether we are Calvinists debating Wesleyanism, traditional dispensationalists questioning progressive dispensationalism, or conservative evangelicals analyzing Roman Catholicism, we must not attack straw men, but must indeed represent them fairly, do our exegetical homework in the Bible, and with loving firmness share our convictions with no hesitation. Sometimes this process requires that we actually talk to those with whom we disagree.

However, much of ecumenical dialogue seeks a minimalist creed of some kind to rally varying denominational and theological traditions. In doing so, the end result is that we can say that we have dialogued but nothing beyond that has been accomplished. Consequently, any statements showing agreement among the participating groups can easily be seen as an attempt to gloss over substantial areas of disagreement. It may also be the case that the disparate camps view the signed agreements as meaning different things. After all, postmodernism teaches us that the meaning of any written text is determined by the reader, not by authorial intent.

It is such concerns as these with respect to modern day attempts at ecumenicalism that leave many conservative evangelicals heartsick over the “faith once delivered to the saints.” A case in point is the attempt to remove (in ecumenical dialog) the doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) from its crucial place in the doctrine of salvation. This has not been done by any outright denial of the doctrine. As one author noted, even Pelagius, who denied original sin, championed justification by faith.² After all, the phrase “justified by faith” occurs in the Bible. How can one deny it? However, Pelagius did not believe in that doctrine as formulated in the Reformation and, in my judgment, taught in the Bible, especially in Pauline theology. It is my belief that this formulation of justification by faith *alone* is at the heart of the gospel which saves the soul.³ This prevents many evangelicals from yielding it up to the winds of ecumenical change. If an individual’s eternal destiny is at stake, we dare not equivocate on this issue. Unity,

¹ I use the “boomers” as an illustration only. They are a purely American phenomena while the question of ecumenical dialog is a world wide issue.

² Gerhard O. Forde, “Justification by Faith Alone. The Article by which the Church Stands or Falls?” *Dialog* 27 (1988): 260.

³ I would add here also the idea of *grace alone on the basis of Christ’s work alone as taught in the Bible alone.*

however noble in sentiment, cannot be subordinated to objective truth and reality. Without truth there can be no genuine unity.

With this in mind, I want to analyze recent discussions attempting to bring evangelicals and Roman Catholics together especially as such discussions relate to the doctrine of justification by faith.⁴ We will start with some basic definitions of justification by faith as that expression is used in Classical Protestantism and separately in Roman Catholicism. Then the way will be paved for addressing the ecumenical discussions directly. However, after evaluating those discussions, I believe it necessary to highlight some theological issues being raised in some circles which are being used to undermine the doctrine of justification by faith alone. These are the “issues behind the issue.” The conclusion will be a list of recommendations and reaffirmations which I feel necessary in the light of all of the discussion.

Justification by Faith in Classical Protestantism

One of the major contributions of the Reformation of the sixteenth century was the reaffirmation of the *forensic* nature of justification as taught by Paul in the New Testament. Of particular interest were the epistles to the Romans and Galatians. By the forensic nature of justification is meant the idea that God legally declares a sinner to be righteous based upon the work of Christ on the Cross. It is something external or extrinsic to the believer. What is at stake in this particular action is a right standing before God, not the actual transformation of the believer.

One should be careful to remember what the Reformers did not mean by this. They did not deny regeneration or rebirth. Furthermore, they did not teach that good works were unimportant. They simply viewed justification as *only* a beginning, albeit a forensic one. They strongly believed that a form of progressive sanctification followed and that the believer came to participate in many benefits because of a union with Christ that entailed some level of transformation. What the believer used to be, he no longer is. However, the Reformers would insist that all of these “by-products” of a relationship with Christ cannot be poured into the concept of justification. In short, justification cannot mean “to make righteous.” It only means “to declare righteous.”

The Reformers also concluded that this declaration was based on *faith alone* apart from works or good deeds. Good deeds in no way actualize any potential justification. Good deeds do not complete the declaration of righteousness before God. Faith and good works are not simply two things in the list of things, which taken together, cause one to be accepted before God.

Martin Luther read the words from Galatians 2:16-21 and commented

But we, by the grace of Christ, holding the article of justification, do assuredly know, that we are justified and reputed righteous before God by faith only in Christ. Therefore we do not mingle the law and grace, faith and works together; but we separate them far asunder. And this distinction or difference between the law and grace, let every true Christian mark diligently, and let him suffer the same to take place, not in letters and syllables, but in practice and inward experience: so that when he heareth that good works ought to be done, and that the example of Christ is to be followed, he may be able to judge rightly, and say, Well, all these things will I gladly do. What then followeth? Thou shalt then be saved and obtain everlasting life. Nay, not so. I grant, indeed,

⁴ I am going to intentionally bypass any discussions about views of bibliology. These are more foundational to the differences between Roman Catholics and evangelicals. However, the scope of this paper is more narrow.

that I ought to do good works, patiently to suffer troubles and afflictions, and to shed my blood also, if need be, for Christ's cause; but yet am I not justified, neither do I obtain salvation thereby.⁵

Luther goes on to make it clear that to add anything to faith in the requirements for justification is to take all credit away from Christ for what He has done.⁶ Consequently, justification was a forensic concept whose application was made to a believer only by faith in Christ.

Similarly, Luther's introduction to his commentary on Romans 4 states

Here the chapter refutes the unbelieving, arrogant Jews who tried to be justified by works. They labored under the delusion that their father Abraham was pictured to them as an example of work-righteousness. He therefore shows that Abraham was justified solely by faith without works.⁷

A man cannot be declared right before God by doing good deeds, but only and solely by faith. Justification by faith alone is set over against a works-righteousness. Luther is clear on this point. I believe he is clear because the biblical texts are clear.

John Calvin echoed the same sentiments relying largely on Romans and Galatians as did Luther.⁸ He defined justification as "the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."⁹ Calvin went on to clarify that the only means whereby a man could be justified was faith and faith alone: "But a great part of mankind imagine that righteousness is composed of faith and works. Let us also, to begin with, show that faith righteousness so differs from works righteousness that when one is established the other has to be overthrown."¹⁰

The Westminster Confession of Faith clearly summarizes the Reformation heritage on justification when it emphasizes imputation:

Those whom God effectually calleth he also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone: not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness: but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith: which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.¹¹

The Confession also stresses in its next section that faith is the "*alone* instrument of justification."¹²

⁵ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 156.

⁶ Ibid., p. 157.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, translated by J. Theodore Mueller, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), 65-66.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 725-54.

⁹ Ibid., 727.

¹⁰ Ibid., 743.

¹¹ This is section one of Article XI entitled "Of Justification." My copy is taken from G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964. I would disagree with the emphasis on the obedience of Christ, often called the "active obedience" of Christ. This is the view that Christ earned righteousness in his incarnational life (ministry life before resurrection) which is then imputed to believers. I see Jesus as demonstrating that he was already righteous. He did not have to earn anything which then was to be imputed to believers. One proof text often used by Reformed theologians is Roman 5:10. However, the passage is speaking of the resurrection life of Christ, not his incarnational life.

¹² Ibid.

Justification by Faith in Traditional Roman Catholicism

Roman Catholic opposition to Luther came to a head in the Council of Trent which began its first session in 1545.¹³ The Council's final statement on justification was handed down in January of 1547. There are several ideas espoused in the statement among which are the following:¹⁴

- Justification is not based only upon some legal imputation that is extrinsic to man.
- Justification refers to the fact that a man is "made righteous" not the fact that he is only "declared righteous."
- Justification requires good works as a necessary condition.¹⁵

It is important to note that in the Catholic development of the doctrine, the good works are often associated with the sacraments:

... in order to understand the pronouncements on the sacraments, one must remember that Trent understood justification in two ways: the first and second phases which Catholic scholars refer to as "initial" and "progressive" justification respectively. Baptism is operative in the first or initial justification, since grace to overcome original sin is "mediated" to us through baptism. Both the Eucharist and penance pertain to the second or progressive sense of justification, and such justification (i.e., righteousness) is said to be "increased" by participation in these sacraments. There is, of course, a third or "ultimate" stage of justification by which – providing one has not committed a mortal sin – one is allowed into heaven.¹⁶

Such an understanding confuses the evangelical who is used to talking in categories of justification, sanctification, and glorification. The Catholic terminology uses the word *justification* to deal with all three of these areas and ties each to some form of transformation in the believer and requires his ongoing participation in good works as defined by the Roman Catholic Church. It is tied to faith on the part of an individual as one of the necessary conditions to begin the process, but under no circumstances is it ever a justification by faith alone. It is also tied to grace since God is granting and conveying ability throughout the entire process. Thus, Roman Catholicism on paper can claim to have some view of salvation and justification by grace through faith. Using what an evangelical would be tempted to call "doublespeak," John Henry Newman, the famous 1845 Anglican convert to Catholicism wrote, "Whether we say we are justified by faith, or by works, or by sacraments, all these but mean this one doctrine that we are justified by grace which is given through sacraments, impenetrated by faith, manifest in works."¹⁷

¹³ For a decent synopsis of that Council see Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 408-11.

¹⁴ My summary is taken from Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Romans Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 224-26.

¹⁵ It is interesting that the Protestant understanding of assurance of salvation which is related to justification by faith alone was condemned by Trent as lacking humility. See *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 225-26. Also, see James G. McCarthy, *Gospel According to Rome*, (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 21-124.

¹⁷ John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification*, 303, cited in Carl Henry, "Justification: A Doctrine in Crisis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (March 1995): 60. The lectures given by Newman appear to be before his conversion to Catholicism but the ideas are easily suitable to his later position. For an old and interesting, but not necessarily agreeable, article on Newman's lectures on justification, see David Newsome, "Justification and Sanctification: Newman and the Evangelicals," *Journal of Theological Studies* 15 (1964): 32-53.

Carl Henry gives a good summary of the view of justification held by the Council of Trent in response to the Reformers:

The Council of Trent (1547) rejected the Reformers' view of justification. Contrary to their teaching it held that justification is "not a bare remission of sins, but also sanctification and the renewal of the inner man." It contended that justification is not only a declarative act of the remission of sins but also a transformist act of inner renewal and sanctification. Justification is therefore viewed as an aspect of sanctification. Salvation allegedly depends in part on an inherent righteousness that can be lost through deadly sins and depends also on good works that must accompany divine grace extended to the sinner.¹⁸

Thus, in the end, the Roman Catholic view is clearly an individual merit system for salvation. It cannot be harmonized with Paul's dichotomy: "if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Rom. 11:6). Justification is to Catholicism just a term for a variable status of the individual whose transformation is showing variable amounts of obedience and participation.

This traditional formulation of the Roman Catholic view of justification has not changed in recent years even since Vatican II. Notice the expression of Catholicism given by the more recent and liberal Karl Rahner:

For instance in the classic Protestant doctrine of justification the justification of man is only 'juridical'. It consists in the gracious will with which God regards the sinner, but ultimately speaking leaves him in his sinful condition. Now certainly another conception is involved in this with regard to the possibility of an 'immanent' consummation than in the Catholic doctrine of justification, in which grace pervades the essence of man from his very roots with divine influence, and thereby gives him the possibility of acting positively for his own salvation, and so implants in him a free and active tendency towards his own consummation. In other words in this Catholic doctrine the tendency towards consummation is much 'more immanent' than according to the Protestant conception.¹⁹

In spite of this ongoing use of justification as process and inner transformation, there is the attempt in ecumenical dialog to suggest that the essential view of the Reformers is not that far from Rome.

Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialog

Among the various discussions that have taken place between the Roman Catholic Church and other parties, the dialog with Lutherans is the most telling concerning the issue of justification by faith. The reason for this is that the teaching of justification by faith alone has, in Lutheran circles, been championed as the article by which the church stands or falls.²⁰ In fact, we owe the Lutherans a debt of gratitude for keeping, perhaps moving, the issue of justification by faith alone to the front in the discussions. Prior to 1983 justification had received little attention. Even when it was mentioned, it was "usually only as a springboard for jumping into other substantive issues between the dialogue partners."²¹ However, in September 1983, the U. S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue published a 24,000 word document entitled "Justification

¹⁸ Henry, 59.

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. X, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 280.

²⁰ See Forde, 260-67.

²¹ Robert K. Welsh, "Justification by Faith: The Critical 'Principle' for an Ecumenical Theology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23 (Summer 1986): 504-505.

by Faith” which culminated five years of meetings and discussions. From that point on the issue of justification has been called the “critical principle” for all theological discussions between Catholics and Protestants aiming at ecumenical unity.²² Responses to the document have been mixed, of course.²³ After reviewing this history, I am surprised at Chuck Colson’s surprise when ECT 1 (to be discussed below) was not well received.²⁴

The most interesting defense of justification by faith alone in the Lutheran-Catholic context comes from Gerhard Forde.²⁵ In defending a forensic aspect to justification (although not limiting it to a forensic aspect), he comments that

Probing beneath the surface and reflecting a bit on the classical texts [Reformers] makes it apparent that justification and the associated ideas of imputation, reckoning, forgiving of sins, assume a primary place for the reformers because they involve a quite particular use of language: They *do* what they *say*. They promise, pronounce, declare, decree, establish, decide, the issue they are talking about. They do not just talk *about* or describe salvation, they actually *give* it. The propensity for forensic language was due not just to a love for legal terminology and metaphor, but to the fact that such language does the actual judgment, issues the acquittal from the judge. Wilhelm Dantine has argued cogently for the priority of justification language precisely because of the predominance of the idea of judgment in Scripture. Whenever one turns in the Bible, God is the judge; and it is before him we shall have to stand at last.²⁶

To Forde, justification language was language that “does what it says.” He warns that “If the church forgets how to speak the language demanded by justification, the language which actually does what it says, then the church will fall and become totally irrelevant.”²⁷

Concerning how such issues of importance were handled in the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, Forde laments, “The frustrating aspect of the dialogue over these matters was simply the lack of fruitful dialogue about them, the seeming reluctance to engage the issues in a useful or helpful manner. We seem to grope for formulations that obscure rather than reveal the issues.”²⁸ He adds, “The need for further dialogue was duly noted. But the difficulty in virtually all ecumenical dialogues, as far as I can see, is that with few exceptions there appears to be a general unwillingness even to discuss such issues.”²⁹ Could it be that issues such as justification are so basic to the theological position that to give it up or redefine it altogether would be to eliminate it and the overall theological position with it? In other words, to have genuine ecumenical agreement with Catholics on this issue do I essentially have to stop being a Protestant or evangelical?

ECT 1

²² Ibid., 505.

²³ On the side of seeing a growing convergence between the Lutherans and Catholics would be Harding Meyer (Protestant) and Kenan B. Osborne. See Harding Meyer, “Church and Justification: The Lutheran/Catholic Dialogue,” *Dialog* 34 (1995): 213-19. On the side of seeing continuing problems and doubtful convergence would be Gerhard Forde. See Gerhard Forde, “The Exodus from Virtue to Grace: Justification by Faith Today,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 32-44 and the earlier article cited on justification.

²⁴ Randy Frame, “Evangelicals, Catholics Issue Salvation Accord,” *Christianity Today*, January 12, 1998.

²⁵ I picked Forde’s responses here because of their conservative nature. Although his involvement in the ecumenical dialog means he is probably a mainline Lutheran, his stand on justification by faith was at times refreshing. Throughout the paper no references to a particular person’s views are meant to stand for an entire movement. It is readily recognized that each tradition is multi-faceted.

²⁶ Forde, *Exodus*, 40-41.

²⁷ Ibid., 41.

²⁸ Forde, *Justification*, 262.

²⁹ Ibid.

In May of 1994, a group of evangelicals and Roman Catholics, headed up by Charles Colson and Richard Neuhaus, issued a statement entitled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.” This statement has commonly been called ECT or, more recently, ECT 1. The group who issued the statement was trying to find “common convictions about Christian faith and mission” and seemed to have a sincere desire to deal with sinful resentments between the two groups. A sensed community had been building up in the two groups due to shared participation in the pro-life movement and in charismatic renewal.³⁰ However, the statement produced a firestorm of disagreement from both evangelicals and Catholics who felt that the doctrine of the two camps, especially the doctrine of salvation, was not served well in the discussion. Consequently, a later statement was issued known as ECT 2 dealing with the doctrine of salvation.

ECT 2

The ECT 2 statement, entitled “The Gift of Salvation” (January 1998), is the second statement issued by a group headed up by Chuck Colson and Richard John Neuhaus which purports to be an accord showing some convergence among Roman Catholics and evangelicals on the doctrine of salvation. As such, it does speak briefly to the issue of justification by faith. Nineteen evangelicals signed the statement as well as sixteen Roman Catholics. All of those who lent their names to the statement affirm with the document the idea that they are not speaking for their respective religious communities, but only as individuals speaking to their communities. It appears to be a document that is trying to influence future direction.

Paragraphs seven and eight of the statement give an excellent summary about **justification** with which very few, if any, evangelicals would have trouble, at least in the broad strokes.³¹ The highlights would be the following:

- Justification is central and crucial to the Bible account of the doctrine of salvation.
- Justification is not earned by good works or merits on our part.
- Justification is a gift from God based on “sheer” graciousness out of love.
- The gospel (death and resurrection of Christ) forms the basis for our justification.
- Justification is basically forensic – we are “declared” no longer rebellious enemies.
- This declaration is on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone.
- Justification is received through faith (even quotes Eph. 2:8).
- Justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*) in keeping with the Reformation tradition.

These points seem to harmonize well with Pauline soteriology. The last point is a bit surprising in light of the discussion earlier about the traditional Roman Catholic position against *sola fide*.

At this place in the declaration, the only potential hazard is the statement in **paragraph eight** that “faith is not merely intellectual assent but an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life.” These words would be challenged

³⁰ Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), xi. See also, Keith A. Fournier, *A House Divided: Evangelicals and Catholics Together – A Winning Alliance for the 21st Century*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994).

³¹ I am numbering the paragraphs based upon my copy of the statement taken from the web site at <http://www.onebody.org/gift.htm>.

by some evangelicals and would certainly be fodder for multiple definitions with respect to the meaning of *intellectual assent, whole person, and a changed life*. I am thinking here of the Lordship Salvation controversy. While it is out of place to discuss this dispute here, I am compelled to mention that my reading has forced me to conclude that any concord between Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism will have a harder time including those in the Grace camp. The reason for that is the sharper distinction that is made between justification and sanctification. Gerhard Forde, from a Protestant perspective, insightfully helps our understanding here:

Justification by faith has always been an embattled doctrine – from within and without. That is only to be expected, perhaps, for it is a pugnacious doctrine. Yet from Paul’s Galatian opponents, to Pelagius, to post-reformation anxiety about “good works,” to more current fears about “cheap grace,” the litany of complaint has had a rather consistent and boring sameness: It is just too dangerous a doctrine for the harsh and practical realities of the world. It is too antinomian: What will happen to virtue and morals if people hear that they are justified by faith alone? At least one must not push it too hard. If it is taught at all, it must be antiseptically isolated theologically so that one can get on with the *real* business of the Christian life: sanctification. Traditional systematic questions have concentrated mostly on this sort of point. Does not justification by faith alone lead to false security, false individualism, and internality? Does it not foster a fatal split between faith and works, justification and justice, private salvation and social concern? . . . In sum, traditional questions both from without and within betray a persistent anxiety about the doctrine over against ethics, moral progress, and virtue.³²

It appears that the Colson-Neuhaus forces have not written sensitively with all evangelicals in mind. Based on the above, it may be that they simply cannot do so. Paragraph eighteen does, however, acknowledge differences within both traditions they are trying to bring together.

Paragraph eleven on sanctification brings similar questions to mind:

Sanctification is not fully accomplished at the beginning of our life in Christ, but is progressively furthered as we struggle, with God’s grace and help, against adversity and temptation. In this struggle we are assured that Christ’s grace will be sufficient for us, enabling us to persevere to the end. When we fail, we can still turn to God in humble repentance and confidently ask for, and receive, his forgiveness.

The first sentence above may not be problematic. However, a Roman Catholic might see the word *grace* as referring to a provision which God has made available that the believer dips into by participation in the sacraments or other activities associated with obedience. The idea of perseverance in the second sentence divides the evangelical camp. It would be hard for a traditional Catholic to look at that as a statement of eternal security or guaranteed progressive holiness. Thus, the statement appears to yield little hope for unifying the two parties in any substantial way, especially if the same language might be interpreted in multiple ways. Can I be sure that the Roman Catholics who signed the accord view the wording differently than the Protestants who joined them? I believe the answer to that question is a qualified “yes” as later statements in the “Gift of Salvation” will show below.

Paragraph twelve addresses the issue of **assurance of salvation**. The problem I have with the statement is its relative as opposed to absolute nature: “While we dare not presume upon the grace of God, the promise of God in Christ is utterly reliable, and faith in that promise overcomes anxiety about our eternal future.” The warning not to presume upon the grace of God seems to disallow any absolute certitude of salvation or justification. In other words, a person should never say beyond a shadow of a doubt that he knows that he is saved and justified. This

³² Forde, *Exodus*, 33.

language comes from the Roman Catholic side of the discussion (even though some on the Lordship salvation side of the debate within evangelicalism might sign up to it).

Because the Reformers laid such stress on the concept of assurance of salvation Trent was forced to deal with the subject. Subsequently, they issued “An explicit condemnation of the Lutheran doctrine of assurance as an assertion contrary to proper Christian humility.” However, “In many ways Roman dogmatics has pointed out that Rome’s rejection of personal assurance of salvation does not mean the proclamation of a religion of uninterrupted anxiety.” Thus, for the Roman Catholic “There is an intermediate position between the assurance of faith and doubt. This position is that of moral certainty which excludes any anxiety and despair.” Since grace is cooperative – at least concerning the second phase of justification – one can forfeit one’s salvation. Thus, Christians can be said to have “relative,” not absolute, certainty of salvation.³³

This version of relative assurance of salvation is actually no assurance at all. The best I could hope to know is that I am saved for the moment. For all future moments, my salvation and justification are open questions. The statement from ECT 2, paragraph twelve, opens one up to this dilemma. The invocation of 1 Peter 1:5 (believers “through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation to be revealed in the last time”) in the last sentence of the paragraph strengthens the statement on assurance but needs explication in context.³⁴

The most problematic statement in ECT 2 can be found in **paragraph seventeen**. It states “While we rejoice in the unity we have discovered and are confident of the fundamental truths about the gift of salvation we have affirmed, we recognize that there are necessarily interrelated questions that require further and urgent exploration.” In other words, the job has not been finished with the issuing of ECT 2. Such acknowledgment of limitations is wise and to be applauded. However, notice the list that is provided of doctrines to be explored further in the ecumenical dialogue:

- the meaning of baptismal regeneration
- the Eucharist
- sacramental grace
- the historic uses of the language of justification as it relates to imputed and transformative righteousness
- the normative status of justification in relation to all Christian doctrine
- the assertion that while justification is by faith alone, the faith that receives salvation is never alone (mentioned in the Westminster Confession of Faith)
- diverse understandings of merit, reward, purgatory, and indulgences
- Marian devotion and the assistance of the saints in the life of salvation
- the possibility of salvation for those who have not been evangelized

When one looks at this list, he has to wonder. What were they discussing when they met together? How can their earlier statements of agreement, especially the one on *sola fide*, be harmonized with all of these being open questions. To be open on baptismal regeneration is to deny a current belief in *sola fide*. To be open to the Eucharist or other sacraments increasing

³³ Geisler, 448.

³⁴ The next issue I would want to raise about ECT 2 is paragraph sixteen’s insistence on religious liberty. This seems to be counter to the entire history of Roman Catholicism and would need some explanation on the part of the Roman Catholic signers. Because it is a side issue to justification I will not deal with it here.

justification and taking away sin is to deny *sola fide* once again. How can all of these be open questions and there be any consensus on the doctrine of salvation?

This leads perhaps to the suggestion that the Roman Catholic men who signed the accord were looking at the wording in a different way with different meaning than their evangelical counterparts. If this is true, then the document is meaningless as to substance and actual agreement. Even giving the Catholic participants the benefit of the doubt one has to concur that

Among the concerns critics have expressed is that public statements do not accurately represent the Catholic church. According to the argument, the evangelical public might be wrongly led to believe the Catholic church has conformed to a Reformational position on justification when, in fact, the only ones who have changed are the handful of people who sign these documents.³⁵

These questions raised by the text of the accord itself are especially troublesome since the last paragraph (nineteen) asserts that the Catholic signers view themselves as “conscientiously faithful to the teaching of the Catholic Church.”

Perhaps a personal anecdote will be helpful. Several years ago I worked with a friend who was deeply devoted to his church which was the Campbellite Church of Christ. He believed that you had to be baptized in the right church by the right people and obey the right rules given by the right people in order to go to heaven. It was truly a miserable way to try to practice the Christian faith. At lunch together one day, we shared our views with each other and he tried to minimize the difference between the two of us. I stopped him and asked, “Do you realize how serious this is? What we believe means that you believe I am going to hell and that I believe you are going to hell.” Unless one opts for a generalist universalism or some post-modern multiple choice, he has no other option (of course, from God’s point of view there is only one option!). Roman Catholicism is not much different than the Campbellites in principle. Then, what is the loving thing to do? Come up with an obscure statement that glosses over these serious differences? Naked honesty is the best approach to demonstrate true love in such a situation. Perhaps our rush to show agreement has some good motivation behind it. We do need to stand together on moral issues in our culture.³⁶ But in order to do that, do I really need to affirm theological agreement where there really is none? I think the answer is self-evident.

Current Theological Issues

In the discussion on convergence between Catholicism and evangelicalism, there are some exegetical, theological, and hermeneutical issues lurking in the background. They are the “issues behind the issues” alluded to earlier. It is hard to tell if some of the interpretation is driven by ecumenical desires or if the various views lead one to be open to dialog. Perhaps a reciprocal relationship exists as various parties are caught up in the *zeitgeist* or spirit of the age. While the discussion below is not complete, it does attempt to explore some basic ideas such as the “new perspective” on Paul, the rejection of propitiation, and adjustments that have been made in historical theology which accommodate, intentionally or unintentionally, the movement toward ecumenical unity.

The **first issue** that must be addressed is the so-called “**new perspective**” which stems from a modern reevaluation of Pauline thought.

³⁵ Frame, *Christianity Today*.

³⁶ I am thinking here of the abortion question in particular.

Since the Reformation, most scholarship has tried to locate the center of Paul's thought in the doctrine of justification by faith. This approach, which traces its roots to Augustine, treated Paul dogmatically and interpreted his theology and his ethics in doctrinal terms. As we near the end of the 20th century, the virtual consensus among scholars is that this image of Paul as a systematic theologian is inaccurate. Paul was a preacher and interpreter of the gospel and not a dogmatic theologian. His letters should not be studied as though they were written to be timeless theological treatises, but rather must be understood within their social context. More importantly, scholars argue, Paul must be understood within his social and religious context.³⁷

The writer above invokes a false dichotomy between theology and ethics. However, it expresses the sentiment of the majority of Pauline scholars today. In this reevaluation that has taken place, much attention has been focused on the "new perspective" as found in the writings of E. P. Sanders, especially his seminal work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977).³⁸ Sanders' thesis, for which he coined the term "covenantal nomism," was that we have misread Paul's attack on Judaizers in Galatians and have forced the sixteenth-century Reformation debate into the Romans 4 passage (especially verses 4 and 5). While there are some good elements in Sanders presentation which I will not go into here,³⁹ the overall thrust for our present discussion is that he believed that the Judaism of Paul's day accepted a form of justification by faith as taught in Romans 4:4-5. Furthermore, Paul, in this view, was not reacting to any works-righteousness that was present in Judaism. Judaism simply could not be characterized in this way.

Earlier discussions had paved the way for Sanders' assessment. W. D. Davies taught that

... even if we could accurately characterize Rabbinic Judaism as entirely a religion of works we must deprecate that approach to our problem which exaggerates the antithesis between Pauline Christianity as a religion of Faith and the Spirit and Rabbinic Judaism as a religion of obedience and the Torah, and which has elevated the doctrine of Justification by Faith to the primary place in Paul's thought. In some contexts justification is merely one metaphor among many others employed by Paul to describe his deliverance through Christ, and we are not justified in petrifying a metaphor into a dogma.⁴⁰

The refreshing aspect of the reevaluation is that it takes Paul's Jewishness seriously. Much of the Pauline scholarship of the previous generation had practically treated Paul as a Gentile. However, this new perspective on Paul has been taken to extremes which so downplay the doctrine of justification by faith that the forensic nature of it has been significantly lost.

This loss is seen acutely in the writings of James Dunn who has written a recent massive tome on Pauline theology.⁴¹ Dunn comments:

³⁷ James B. Martin-Schramm, "Justification and the Center of Paul's Ethics," *Dialog* 33 (1994): 106.

³⁸ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

³⁹ David Wenham comments that "Sanders and others have offered a strong and sustained challenge to many traditional readings of Paul, seeing Paul not as a Luther-figure wrestling with human guilt, but as a Jewish Christian wrestling with the question of the ingathering of the Gentiles. This and other new perspectives on Paul must from now on influence any discussion of Jesus and Paul," *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. Wenham is much more balanced than Sanders or James Dunn (see below). The guilt question is part of Paul's presentation in Rom. 1-2 and throughout his own writings Paul refers to the conscience more than any other writer.

⁴⁰ W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), 221-22.

⁴¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). See also James D. G. Dunn, "The Theology of Galatians" in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. I, edited by Jouette M. Bassler, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 125-46.

In affirming justification by faith, Paul set it against justification . . . “from works of the law.” The traditional understanding of the phrase within Protestant theology is that it denoted good works done as an attempt to gain or achieve righteousness. The interpretation is wholly understandable, particularly in light of Rom. 4. 4-5, where the “works” in view . . . seem to be explained as “working for reward” and set in antithesis to “not working but [simply] believing.” . . .

The problem with the traditional view, however, emerges from “the new perspective.” For as we have seen, the suggestion that Judaism typically taught that righteousness had to be *achieved* by law-keeping is a fairly fundamental misperception of “covenantal nomism.” And our investigation of Paul’s perspective on his own pre-Christian attitudes and practice has only strengthened the view that Paul the Pharisee enjoyed a sense of participating in Israel’s covenant righteousness as attested and maintained (not earned) by his devoutness and faithfulness. Presumably the resolution to the debate between the old perspective and the new lies in clarification of the distinction between *achieving* righteousness and *maintaining* righteousness.⁴²

Dunn’s comments miss the point. The Reformers would say that any attempt to maintain righteousness after salvation is a repeat of the Galatian mistake whether the Judaizers were Jews outside or inside the Church. Again, there is trouble harmonizing Dunn’s statement with Rom. 11:6 but little trouble harmonizing his statement in principle with Roman Catholic views of justification. He argues that to justify means to make righteous as well as declare righteous, but his emphasis appears to be on the latter.⁴³

One can be a little suspicious of Dunn’s motivation on this score. Note his rather strongly worded hostility to the traditional doctrine of justification:

But behind the Catholic-Protestant debate, and obscured by it, was the more fundamental issue of Christianity’s relation to Judaism, in particular the relation of Paul’s gospel and theology to his ancestral religion. Two factors made it impossible for that situation to persist. One was Vatican II, and in effect the removal of most of the old Catholic-Protestant agenda as no longer at issue. The other was the Holocaust and its continuing reverberations in Christian theology. If post-Vatican II theology could no longer simply restate the old debate between Protestant and Catholic in the traditional terms, post-Holocaust theology could not longer stomach the denigration of historic Judaism which had been the dark-side-of-the-moon corollary to the Christian doctrine of justification.⁴⁴

In short, it seems that Dunn blames the traditional Protestant understanding of justification by faith alone as hindering Jewish-Christian ecumenical dialogue.

One mistake that Dunn makes, following Sanders, is to rely on Rabbinic Judaism and the Apocrypha more heavily than on the Gospels to determine elements of first-century Judaism. The Gospels portray a mixed Judaism with several strands. The debate over supernaturalism between the Saducees and the Pharisees is one example. It also appears that in the matter of salvation and acceptance before God that some Jews thought that they were accepted simply on the basis of their ethnic background (and presumed life within the covenant community). For example, John the Baptist scolded some of the Pharisees and Saducees when they came to be baptized: “And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Mt. 3:9).

Yet other Jews seemed to be relying upon self-righteousness or self-achievement. Recall Jesus’ parable in Luke 18:9-14 where he compares the prayers of a self-righteous Pharisee and a humble tax-collector. The first prayed a braggadocious prayer while the tax-collector admitted sin

⁴² Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 354. See also, Francis H. Agnew, “Paul’s Theological Adversary in the Doctrine of Justification by Faith: A Contribution to Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25 (1988): 538-554.

⁴³ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 344.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

and asked for propitiation (a concept we will deal with below). Notice that Luke introduces this story with the words, “And He [Jesus] told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” Consequently, it is wrong to assume that there was within Judaism no strand of salvation by works or self-effort that Paul could be reacting to in his theological arguing of Romans or his pastoral concern of Galatians. Thus, the “new perspective,” while correctly emphasizing some continuity between Paul and Judaism, has been taken to the extreme and, in so doing, has incorrectly downplayed the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone as taught in the Reformers.

A **second issue** that must be understood and which is a corollary of the “new perspective” (at least as it is explained in Dunn) is the current downplaying of **the doctrine of propitiation**. If the forensic nature of justification is doubted or downplayed, there must be repetition of the same movement with respect to the issue of propitiation. Propitiation is defined in the Reformation tradition as the satisfaction of divine wrath upon sin. As such it constitutes a punishment, i.e., it is a legal concept just like justification. If justification is rejected for being too legal, then propitiation as a description of the atonement would naturally be rejected as well. This is precisely what we find in Dunn’s discussion of Romans 3:25:

Should we translate “expiation” or “propitiation”? The problem with the latter is that it invariably evokes the idea of appeasing God, whereas in Rom. 3.25 Paul explicitly states that it is God himself who provided the *hilasterion*. More to the point, Hebrew usage contrasts markedly with common Greek usage on this precise point. Characteristically in Greek usage the human being is the active subject and God is the object: the human action propitiates God. But in Hebrew usage God is never the object of the key verb (*kipper*). Properly speaking, in the Israelite cult, God is never “propitiated” or “appeased.” The objective of the atoning act is rather the removal of *sin* – that is, either by purifying the person or object, or by wiping out the sin. Atonement is characteristically made “for” a person or “for sin.” And it can be said that it is God himself who expiates the sin (or for the sin). Of course, the atoning act thus removes the sin which provoked God’s wrath, but it does so by acting on the sin rather than on God. The imagery is more of the removal of a corrosive stain or the neutralization of a life-threatening virus than of anger appeased by punishment.⁴⁵

Dunn’s position is consistent with standard English usage. One **expiates** a thing (impersonal) such as sin. One **propitiates** a person. Of course, the determination is made by the best translation of the underlying family of words in Greek and Hebrew. The mistake which Dunn makes here is to set up an “either/or” proposition. The interpretation of the passage as a whole must be expiation or propitiation. However, a “both/and” which he opts for in so many other places could be used here. Could not the sin that is removed in the passage be so removed by a propitious act? The real rub for those like Dunn is a perception of God which keeps him [Dunn] from allowing God’s anger to be at the center of the Atonement.⁴⁶

The actual evidence from the word studies can be found in the tremendous work by Leon Morris entitled *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (1956).⁴⁷ Chapter four studies the words

⁴⁵ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁶ Dunn’s words give lip service to the idea of dealing with God’s wrath, but expiation gets emphasis almost to the exclusion of propitiation. This problem is evident also in the writings of Charles Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1976), 194-217, and John Miley, *The Atonement in Christ*, (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1879), a standard Wesleyan book on atonement from the late nineteenth century. This Wesleyan or Arminian view of the atonement sees the satisfaction of only public justice (governmental view) rather than a satisfaction of the wrath of God upon an individual (individual retributive view).

⁴⁷ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956). A later work gives popular treatment to the same issues without the technical jargon. See *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983).

and concepts in the Old Testament. Chapter five studies them in the New Testament. Morris' correct conclusion is quite different than Dunn's. Instead, the idea of the penal satisfaction against individual sin (which idea includes the satisfaction of the wrath of God or individual retribution) is well established. The overwhelming focus of God as angry against sin and one who will stand as judge supports the legal side of the terminology. The issue actually comes down to what has become the Arminian view of the atonement (governmental view) versus the Calvinist view of the atonement (penal substitution). It would seem that earlier hints that a removal of Reformational emphasis upon justification by faith alone goes hand in hand with an Arminian view of the atonement. Furthermore, this more Arminian view of the atonement seems to allow for more discussion across the lines of faith as the ecumenical movement desires.

A **third issue** is the **revision of historical theology** that has taken place with respect to the teaching of **justification by faith alone**. Usually this has been done by asserting the specific historical context of the Reformers who were dealing with medieval ideas including those of individual guilt. It is usually then said that such issues are no longer present in our culture so that harmony between Catholics and evangelicals is more likely on such issues. Robert Welsh comments that

In order to understand how disagreements over justification that were once irresolvable may now not be church-dividing, the document [Lutheran-Catholic] rehearses several features not only of the Reformation conflict itself but also of its medieval background and of its later developments as a major theological principle of the church. One is helped to see that much of the Reformation debate as it developed in the sixteenth century was a continuing struggle within the church around this key theological concept; it was often one of degree or emphasis, not a rejection of the tradition itself.⁴⁸

In other words, in the days of the Reformation it was not a big deal and now it is even less in significance. It is hard to see how such a minor issue could wreak so much havoc on Western civilization in the sixteenth century. Pannenberg seems to agree with Welsh in light of today's "increased awareness of the specific historical conditions surrounding the Reformation's focus on this subject and of the distance between the cultural situation of the sixteenth century and that of modernity."⁴⁹ Hans Küng, a liberal and ecumenical Roman Catholic scholar, notes that

Ever since the days of Martin Luther and the Council of Trent, one of the tenets of faith . . . a basic obstacle to understanding between Catholics and Protestants, has always been the *justification of the sinner* not on the grounds of good deeds but solely of faith and trust. If we could show that there was a convergence or, *a fortiori*, a consensus here, that would go a long way toward healing the split in the Church.

My work on Barth aimed at showing just this: that in the doctrine of justification, seen as a whole, we can recognize a fundamental agreement between the teaching of Karl Barth [Protestant] and the teaching properly understood, of the Catholic Church; and that from this perspective there was no further basis for a schism between Protestants and Catholics.⁵⁰

Küng's overt inter-faith agenda makes one take his statements with a grain of salt. Although he addresses justification in several of his works, it is interesting that he never broaches the topic in his book *On Being a Christian*.⁵¹ It is important that evangelicals take note of the attitudes of men like Welsh, Pannenberg, and Küng. What they tell us is that the modern debate is not just a

⁴⁸ Welsh, 508.

⁴⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Doctrine of Justification in Ecumenical Dialogue," *Dialog* 31 (1992): 136.

⁵⁰ Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 267.

⁵¹ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

debate about exegesis, but one about historical perspective. It is similar to the Rogers-McKim proposal on inerrancy which suggested that inerrancy was a recent invention of the Princetonian Fathers. In this case, the idea is advanced that justification by faith alone has been misunderstood as to the level of disagreement that has actually been there all along. Evangelicals must be prepared to defend an accurate view of historical theology as well as perform well in exegetical discussions.

Recommendations

As a result of this analysis, there are several recommendations that can be made to pastors and ministers of the true Gospel who believe in justification by faith and faith alone:

- Evangelical pastors must renew their commitment to the forensic element in the idea of justification – the *declaration* that a person is declared righteous apart from himself based upon the work of Christ on the Cross.
- As a corollary, pastors must renew their study and commitment to the forensic element known as *propitiation* which goes to the heart of the nature of the atonement. This is, in essence, a commitment to a more Calvinistic way of looking at the atonement as opposed to an Arminian or Governmental way.
- Pastors must be preachers of *genuine grace*. Nothing in the way of good works or deeds should be added to the requirements of justification other than faith and faith alone. Pastors should read widely enough so that attempts to redefine these terms will not catch them or their congregations off guard.
- What each of the points above means in a concrete way is a reaffirmation of the teachings of Paul in **Romans and Galatians**. Pastors may need to spend more time in these books during these days.
- Evangelical students of **history** should rise up with additional studies which demonstrate the universality of some of the issues the Reformation dealt with such as guilt and conscience. The **actual historical issues** of the Reformation should be reaffirmed and should be tied to the exegetical differences that existed and continue to exist between the two camps.

In the end, we all need the doctrinal backbone of the Reformers who were willing to place their lives on the line for the sake of objective, exegetical, biblical truth.