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Justification – ‘Making Just’ or ‘Declaring Just’?

A neglected aspect of the ecumenical discussion on justification

ALISTER McGRATH

‘How is a man justified before God?’ It is generally agreed that it was Luther’s conviction that the Roman Catholic church of his day lapsed into a form of Pelagianism, rather than his distaste for papal power, which resulted in the movement we call the Reformation.¹ But it is open to debate whether the Roman Catholic church of the day actually had lapsed into Pelagianism,² as Luther does not appear to have appreciated the strongly anti-Pelagian structure of the Thomist, and particularly the Scotist, doctrines of justification. However, the Council of Trent (1545–63) specifically anathematised a series of propositions which it considered Pelagian. The result is, as Küng has shown, that both Karl Barth and Trent teach a strongly anti-Pelagian Christocentric doctrine of justification.³ Nevertheless, the question of how man is justified before God does not exhaust the question of justification. Indeed, as we have shown elsewhere, it is highly doubtful whether Küng has demonstrated anything other than that Barth and Trent both hold that justification is primarily a divine act arising through the work of Christ.⁴ There are at least four areas in which Barth and Trent are in serious disagreement: namely, the nature of justification; the freedom of the will; the nature of election; and the assurance of salvation. Küng fails to ask the crucial question, which is this: What do Barth and Trent have in common that Calvin and Trent do not also have in common? The answer to this question is that Barth and Trent have considerably *less* in common than Calvin and Trent. Indeed, the retrospective pronouncement by Vatican I that the papal constitution *Unigenitus* (published on 8 September 1713) is infallible has made agreement highly improbable, for the constitution condemned 101 propositions culled from the works of the French Jansenist Pasquier Quesnel, many of which correspond to the Reformed teaching on the matters involved. In the present study, we propose to single out a neglected aspect of the sixteenth-century controversy on justification—the question of the nature of justification. What does it mean to say that a man is justified? It is a trivial matter for Roman Catholic,

Anglican and Reformed theologians to agree that man is justified by a divine act of grace through Christ, for to fail to accept this would be to deny the doctrine of their churches as laid down by the Council of Trent, Orange II, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the various confessions of the Reformed churches, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith. Indeed, a Christocentric, anti-Pelagian doctrine of justification is one of the few aspects of Christian doctrine that is common to the western churches. But what is the difference between the unjustified and the justified? What happens in justification? What *is* justification? It is one thing to agree how something occurs; it is quite another to agree on what the entity in question actually *is*.

The Latin term *iustificatio* is post-Classical, and almost entirely restricted to theological usage. Augustine's etymology of the term *iustificari* is 'to make righteous', apparently treating *-ficari* as the unstressed form of *facere*, as in *sanctificatio*, *vivificatio* and *glorificatio*. Augustine has an all-embracing concept of justification, including both the event of justification, brought about by operative grace, and the process of justification, brought about by co-operative grace. Man's righteousness, obtained in justification, is inherent and not imputed; it is not external and alien to him, but a part of his being, localized within him. A later development of this concept of the nature of man's righteousness is Augustine's inclusion of the Greek concept of deification in his soteriology.⁵ The justified sinner is really righteous, participating in the divine life, and thereby becoming deified. It is utterly alien to Augustine's thought to speak of a forensic doctrine of justification, or of imputed righteousness in the Reformed sense of the term. The later patristic writers followed Augustine in their understanding of the nature of justification. Indeed, it seems that this understanding of the nature of justification passed into the vernacular. The most convenient vernacular works to study are the Old English homilies of Wulfstan and Ælfric. Wulfstan does not mention the term 'justification' in the course of his homilies, and it is chiefly with the works of Ælfric that we are concerned. The Old English church was generally able to express Christian ideas by giving new meanings to existing words, or by forming new compounds of already existing terms. Occasionally, this proved to be impossible, and loan words were introduced: e.g. *dēofol* (for Latin *diabolus*), and *bisceop* (for Latin *episcopus*). The Old English terms were frequently literal translations of their Latin equivalents: e.g. *gecyrrednyss* for the Latin *conversio*. The Norman conquest was responsible for the subsequent disappearance of many of the Old English theological terms: e.g. *hōel* (salvation) and *ārist* (resurrection). Others have survived: e.g. *God*, *hoefen*, and *hel*. The Old English term for justification suffered the former fate: *gerihtwísung* became replaced by the Middle English *iustification*, and *gerihtwísian* by *iustifien*, both presumably deriving from the Old French *justification* and *justifier* respectively. Ælfric

regularly translates *iustificatio* by *gerihtwísung*, and in this he appears to be following what may be a traditional interpretation of the Latin text. The Old English term is neither a loan word, nor is it a literal equivalent. The Old English is therefore an interpretation of the Latin *iustificatio*—but what interpretation? It is clear that the initial *geriht-* corresponds to *iust-*, but it is not clear whether the final *-wísung* is declarative or factative. The former is unlikely, as Ælfric uses the phrase *rihtwise getaelde* to mean ‘accounted righteous’.

A second source for the vernacular translation of *iustificatio* is the *Vulfla*, the Gothic Bible. Although the value of this source is seriously diminished by its fragmentary character—Romans 1:1–6:22 are missing, as well as other important passages—it is possible to demonstrate that the Gothic interpretation of *iustificari* is *raihts wairthan*, ‘to become righteous’.⁶ In this, the Gothic appears to be following the general Augustinian tradition in interpreting *-ficari* as the unstressed form of *facere*.

This understanding of justification can be shown to have been retained by all the scholastic writers up to the Council of Trent. The differences of opinion on the question of justification which existed between the Dominican and Franciscan orders chiefly related to the questions of predestination, original righteousness, and especially the question of congruous merit, but the basic meaning of the term ‘justification’ as ‘making righteous’ remained. In the early scholastic period, this ‘making righteous’ was generally understood to occur by the infusion of a habit of justice, which was something real existing within the soul. It is not clear what role the habit of justice played in later scholastic doctrines of justification, due to the increased emphasis placed on the extrinsic denomination of divine acceptance; however, it is clear that justification continued to be understood in factative, not declarative, terms. This understanding of justification was endorsed by the Council of Trent. The agreement between Trent and Augustine on this matter has been appreciated for some time by Anglicans: e.g. as illustrated by Barrow’s remark, cited by Newman, ‘St Austin and some others of the Fathers do use the word (justification) commonly according to the sense of the Tridentine Council.’⁷ Justification does not refer merely to the beginning of the Christian life, but to its continuation and ultimate perfection. Man is made righteous in his justification, and increases in righteousness during the course of his Christian life.

The Reformers, however, were highly critical of Augustine’s teaching on inherent righteousness. Although Luther appears to have retained the concept of justification as both event and process—*feri est iustificatio*⁸—he rejected Augustine’s interpretation of imputed righteousness.⁹ For Luther, man’s righteousness was alien to him, since it was the righteousness of another—Christ. The purpose of the gospel was not to make man righteous, but to break down whatever

righteousness that man had in order that the righteousness of another, the *iustitia aliena Christi*, might take its place. The justified sinner must always return to the righteousness of Christ, as he becomes more and more aware of his own sinfulness, more and more weak, and learns to trust more and more in Christ. Justification is a process, a 'kind of beginning of his creation', *initium aliquod creaturae eius*. The whole process of justification, under which sanctification is subsumed, is about a Christian growing and turning to God: 'We are not yet made righteous, but our righteousness rests upon hope.'¹⁰ Like a man under the care of a physician, the Christian is sick in fact, but healthy in hope.

However, later Protestantism distinguished between justification as an event—God's declaration of the sinner's righteousness—and sanctification as the process of regeneration. This distinction appears to have originated with Melancthon, who distinguished between the forensic pronouncement which is justification, and the inseparable, but distinct, process of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. The term *imputatio* is understood to mean 'declare' or 'pronounce'—but not 'make'. It is quite probable that Melancthon 'borrowed' this concept of imputation from Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum* of 1516. Erasmus' edition of the Greek New Testament was accompanied by extensive notes justifying a new Latin translation added by Erasmus to the Greek text. Whereas the Vulgate rendered Romans 4:3 as *Credidit Abraham deo et reputatum est illi ad iustitiam*, Erasmus translated the Greek as *Credidit aut Abraham deo et imputatum est ei ad iustitiam*. The potentially forensic concept of justification which could result from this new translation was noted by Erasmus himself, who remarked that the Jurisconsults used the term *acceptilation* in the same sense,¹¹ 'acceptilation' being the remission of a debt by a purely verbal pronouncement on the part of the creditor. Calvin also rejected Augustine's concept of inherent righteousness. Man's righteousness is always alien to him, always outside him, always in Christ. Augustine's understanding of the nature of justification cannot be accepted: 'The sentiment of Augustine, or at least his way of expressing it, cannot be wholly approved of.'¹² Calvin himself regarded justification and sanctification as being necessary consequences of the believer's *insitio in Christum*. Although justification and sanctification are distinct, they are inseparable. Calvin understands justification to be a forensic term: 'God justifies us by pardoning us, and thus . . . justification is opposed to accusation, this antithesis clearly showing that this way of speaking is derived from forensic use.'¹³ Justification is an act of judgement on the part of God, by which he recognizes that sinners have communion with the one righteous man, Jesus Christ: not that act of judgement by which he recognizes that sinners have become righteous through the infusion of a habit of justice.¹⁴ There is no basis within man for any such verdict of pardon, so the righteousness necessary for such a verdict must come from outside man. God can therefore only acquit

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man by attributing to him the righteousness of Christ.¹⁵ 'We are righteous in Christ alone.'¹⁶ This insistence upon the distinction between the forensic pronouncement of justification and the process of regeneration or sanctification can be illustrated from every major writer from the Reformed and Lutheran schools during the period known as Orthodoxy. Indeed, the distinction is so characteristic of Lutheran and Reformed Orthodoxy that it can be regarded as the cardinal feature of Protestant doctrines of justification.

For the Roman Catholic, justification marks not only the beginning of the Christian life, but also its continuation and perfection. For the Protestant, justification marks the beginning of the Christian life—and no more. As Bishop J. C. Ryle remarked,¹⁷ 'I am persuaded that one great cause of the darkness and uncomfortable feelings of many well-meaning people in the matter of religion is their habit of confounding, and not distinguishing, justification and sanctification. It can never be too strongly impressed on our minds that they are two separate things.' The righteousness which a Christian acquires through sanctification must not be confused with the perfect, but alien, righteousness by which he is justified. The fundamental difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant doctrines of justification must be considered to be the concept of righteousness involved. For the Catholic, justifying righteousness is the inherent righteousness infused by the action of the Holy Spirit; for the Protestant, justifying righteousness is the alien righteousness of Christ, imputed to the believer, which is never his own. To use the appropriate terms, the Roman Catholic teaches that the verdict of justification is analytic, i.e. based on something in the person who is justified; the Protestant teaches that the verdict of justification is synthetic, i.e. based on something not present in the person justified, but which must be provided from without. There is no *via media*, as was demonstrated by the failure of the doctrines of double justification associated with Pighius, Contarini and Bucer to gain general support.¹⁸

It is therefore of interest to ask which of the two teachings can be regarded as approximating more closely to the biblical material. The twentieth century has seen a burgeoning of the scholarly literature concerning the semantics of both the New and Old Testament writings. As we have shown elsewhere, the weight of scholarly opinion must now be considered to lie in favour of the basic meaning of *sedeq* and cognates, particularly the verb in the Hi'phil, as having a forensic sense.¹⁹ However, rather than develop this point here, we propose to show how the increasing awareness of the forensic character of the Old Testament concept of justification has affected the exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans by a leading Anglo-Catholic theologian.

Norman Powell Williams (1883–1943), chaplain-fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, and later Lady Margaret professor of divinity at the same university, may be considered to have been the last great Anglo-

Catholic theologian of the present century. Although his fame chiefly rests upon his 1924 Bampton lectures, published as *The Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin*, and to a lesser extent upon his 1930 work, *The Grace of God*, his most important work is the as yet unpublished 'Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans'.²⁰ This work, the only major commentary on Romans ever to have been produced by an Anglo-Catholic, is notable for its deliberate and systematic exposition of a doctrine of forensic justification, thus marking a complete break with earlier Anglo-Catholic theologians, such as Gore and Newman. Williams makes two divisions within the order of salvation: justification and sanctification. Whereas earlier Anglo-Catholic theologians had understood justification as comprehending the whole of Christian existence, Williams insists that justification is but 'the wicket-gate admitting to the Christian life'.²¹ Thus, whereas the word *dikaïoun*, conventionally but unfortunately translated as 'to justify', has in biblical Greek the general meaning 'to deem, declare, or admit someone to be righteous, or in the right', St Paul has superimposed upon this a particular and highly technical sense, which restricts the normal reference of the word to the verdict of 'not guilty' which God, for Christ's sake, pronounces upon the penitent non-Christian when he makes the act of faith. 'It is thus the gateway to the Christian life, not a part or an event in that Christian life itself—a gateway which in the nature of things can only be passed once in a lifetime, and once for all.'²² Williams' understanding of Paul's use of the term 'justification'—as a restriction of the more general sense of the term, as used in biblical Greek—allows him to accommodate Romans 4 with James 2.²³ Whereas Paul uses the verb *dikaïoun* in the restricted sense noted above, James uses it in the more general sense, meaning 'to deem to be in the right'. Whilst the Pauline term, which is best translated into English as 'to be acquitted',²⁴ necessarily refers to the absolution of a sinner, the more general sense of the Greek term, as used by James, has no such specific reference. Thus, as used by James, the term merely refers to the estimation in which Abraham was held by God, i.e. God reckoned Abraham to be righteous because of his works. However, Abraham was not *acquitted* by God on account of his works—and therein lies the distinction between the use of the terms in Paul and James.

Having established the meaning of the term 'justification' as used by Paul, Williams proceeds to determine the meaning of cognate terms. The most important of these is the tantalizing 'righteousness of God', *dikaïosynē theou*, which Williams discusses when commenting on Romans 1:17. The entire section is here reproduced:²⁵

But what is 'God's righteousness'? Is it the sum of God's own moral attributes; his own intrinsic goodness and holiness? Or is it one of those attributes, the specific attribute of justice? Or is the genitive *theou*, not

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possessive, but subjective, so that 'God's righteousness' would mean 'the state of righteousness bestowed by God upon man'? If this latter interpretation be accepted, the further question arises of whether the 'righteousness' bestowed by God is meant by St Paul to be conceived *ethically*, i.e. as real and substantial virtue or holiness, or *forensically*, as the technical *status* of being 'righteous', that is, of being in right relations with God, or of having no outstanding accounts with him. It will be observed that 'righteousness' in the technical forensic sense merely means the state of having been forgiven, or absolved from the guilt of past sins, and does not necessarily imply that the person so forgiven possesses a high degree of settled virtue ('righteousness' in the ethical sense); although truly repentant and forgiven, he may merely be at the beginning of the road of moral progress.

Noting that the meaning of 'righteousness', *dikaiosynē*, is necessarily determined by that of its cognate 'to justify', *dikaion*, Williams continues:²⁶

This word (i.e. *dikaion*) in our opinion, can only mean 'to declare righteous', 'pronounce to be righteous'—in other words, 'to absolve' or 'forgive'. We therefore understand *dikaiosynē theou* as meaning 'the *status* of "righteousness"', that is, of freedom from the guilt of past sins, which is *bestowed* by God—or, more simply, 'God's forgiveness'.

The significance of Williams' commentary on Romans lies in the question it raises. As noted above, the commentary represents the only significant biblical commentary on the part of a leading Anglo-Catholic theologian in the present century, showing familiarity with the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, as well as with the rabbinical literature. It is therefore of the utmost significance that Williams considers Paul's doctrine of justification to be forensic, marking the beginning of the Christian life, a singular event which can never, by the very nature of things, be repeated. The question raised is this: Can any Catholic theologian maintain a doctrine of justification by inherent righteousness, whilst at the same time being familiar with the Hebrew, rabbinical, and New Testament material which form the necessary basis for any such doctrine? William's massive commentary suggests that such is not the case. It is also of interest to speculate on the consequences for Anglo-Catholicism had this massive work been published.²⁷ At present, the work seems doomed to lie in the great repository of Christ Church until some future scholar, more interested in N. P. Williams than in St Paul, persuades some benevolent publisher to allow it to see the light of day.

* * * *

In conclusion, we may ask that the current ecumenical discussions on justification pay attention to the question of what justification itself

means, instead of concentrating on matters on which agreement can be expected as a matter of course: for example, in asserting the Christocentric or anti-Pelagian character of any 'ecumenical' doctrine of justification. Much work remains to be done; let us hope that it is done, and is not overlooked for the sake of convenience.

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NOTES

- 1 For the development of the doctrine of justification within the western theological tradition, see the three volumes of my *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Doctrine of Justification* (to be published shortly by James Clarke, Cambridge).
- 2 See my article, 'The Anti-Pelagian Structure of "Nominalist" Doctrines of Justification' in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, Vol. 57 (1981) pp.107-19.
- 3 Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (Burns and Oates, London 1964).
- 4 See my article, 'Justification: Barth, Trent and Küng' in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 34 (1981) pp.517-29.
- 5 For what follows, see the detailed discussion in *Iustitia Dei*, Volume I.
- 6 The best translation of *wairthan* appears to be the German *werden*, which can be justified on philological grounds. The word is often used to translate the Greek *ginesthai*. (It must be stressed that the Gothic Bible was translated directly from the Greek, and not from intermediate Latin versions.)
- 7 J. H. Newman, *Lectures on Justification* (Rivingtons, London 1874) (3rd edn) p.395. For an evangelical assessment of Newman's own doctrine of justification, see Peter Toon, 'A Critical Review of John Henry Newman's Doctrine of Justification', in *Churchman* 94, 1980, pp.335-44.
- 8 *Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Hermann Böhlaus, Weimar 1883) Vol. 56, 442.3.
- 9 *ibid.*, 56, 186.14-20.
- 10 *ibid.*, 40/2.24.2 'sicut nondum sumus iustificati, et tamen sumus iustificati, sed iustitia nostra pendet adhuc in spe.' On Luther's doctrine of justification, see A. Peters, *Glaube und Werk. Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre im Lichte der Heiligen Schrift* (Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Berlin 1967).
- 11 D. Erasmus, *Novum Instrumentum omne* (Basel, 1516) 429. 'Accepto fert: logizētai, id est acceptum fert. Est autem acceptum ferre, debere, sive pro accepto habere quod non acceperis, quae apud iure consultos vocatur acceptilatio.'
- 12 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, chapter xi, 15.
- 13 *ibid.*, III.xi.11. . . loquendi formam a forensi usu. . .
- 14 For example, see *ibid.*, II.xiv.12.
- 15 *ibid.*, III.xi.23.
- 16 *ibid.*, III.xi.3.
- 17 J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Evangelical Press, Welwyn 1979) p.30.
- 18 See my *Iustitia Dei*, Vol. II, for an exhaustive discussion.
- 19 See *ibid.*, Vol. I, for details.
- 20 Copies of this unpublished manuscript may be seen at the library of the Divinity School, Cambridge, the library of the Faculty of Theology, Oxford, and the library of the Episcopal School of Divinity, Harvard, USA. The original is housed in the

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library of Christ Church, Oxford. This commentary, which formed Williams' life work, was edited by A. M. Farrer, and his foreword indicates that it was ready for publication in 1948.

- 21 'Commentary', 229. References are to Farrer's page numbers, inscribed on the manuscript.
- 22 *ibid.*, 214.
- 23 *ibid.*, 213-28. Additional note D. Abraham's justification in Romans 4 and in the epistle of James.
- 24 *ibid.*, 214.
- 25 *ibid.*, 84-5.
- 26 *ibid.*, 85. Farrer notes that Williams intended to give a detailed treatment of this very question in his general introduction, which should have been a 'theological masterpiece' (foreword, *ibid.*, 2). However, this remained unfinished at Williams' death. Its conclusions on justification may be deduced from the references to it within the text of the commentary itself.
- 27 For a discussion of the development of Anglo-Catholic doctrines of justification from the Anglo-Catholic divines to N. P. Williams, see my *Iustitia Dei*, Volume III.