The Doctrine in the Continental Reformers

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To be set to discourse on the doctrine of justification in the Continental Reformers in forty minutes makes me experience something of the frustration and despair that I imagine the spirit of the wicked steward Tregeagle felt, when he was commanded to empty Dozmary Pool on Bodmin Moor with a limpet shell with a hole in it. Since any sort of completeness is out of the question, I have rather attempted to portray the spirit, or essence, of the doctrine, than to set out even its chief features. It has also been necessary, for the sake of brevity, to posit without proof the existence of a doctrine of justification common, at any rate, to the two greatest Reformers, Luther and Calvin. We must here take it for granted that, along with a good many differences of approach and detail, they were fundamentally in agreement.

I

The Meaning of the Reformation Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone.

"*We explain justification as an acceptance, by which God receives us into his favour, and esteems us as righteous; and we say that it consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.*"

In this classical definition of justification, taken from Calvin's *Institutio*, we see three members, which we will seek to understand in sequence.

First, he says that justification is "an acceptance, by which God receives us into his favour, and esteems us righteous". It is at once obvious that Calvin is here talking about a certain activity of *God*. In this sentence God reigns as the divine Subject—*God* accepts us, *God* receives us into His favour, *God* esteems us as righteous. Justification is the act of God, initiated and carried through by Him, and by Him alone. In this act man is in no sense a fellow-worker with God. We neither take the first step towards this reconciliation—but are called by God while we are still lying dead in the grave of our sin—nor assist in its prosecution. In justification God is the active Subject, man the passive object. "It is God that justifieth."

Although, however, this is the fundamental principle of the doctrine, we find one great Reformer in whom the emphasis is obscured. Melanchthon, in the first edition of his *Loci Communes*, can write for some pages about justification as forgiveness without once making it clear that this is God's action as the Lord. "We are justified," he says, "when mortified by the Law, we are raised up by the Word of grace that is promised in Christ, or in the gospel that forgives sins; and when we cling to Christ nothing doubting but that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness, that his satisfaction is our expiation,

that his resurrection is ours. In a word, nothing doubting that our sins are forgiven and that God loves and cherishes us". There are certainly many admirable features in this definition—not least its Christological emphasis; but you will have noticed that the subject is no longer God, but man: "*we* are justified; *we* are raised up; *we* cling to Christ". We become the subject, even if the passive subject: God in Christ simply the agent of our salvation. And, as Karl Holl points out, this becomes the common approach of Lutheran orthodoxy, leading the way to seventeenth and eighteenth century pietism. (Reformed orthodoxy, by the way, well schooled by Calvin, never lost sight of this truth.) But Luther himself is not to be charged with being the father of this aberration. It is true that, because he commonly thinks in terms of pastoral theology, he looks at the doctrine from the point of view of the man who is to be justified. Yet he all the time looks upon justification as the action of God. "Here is to be noted," he says in his Commentary on Galatians, "that these three things, faith, Christ, acceptation or imputation, must be joined together. Faith taketh hold upon Christ, and hath him present, and holdeth him inclosed. . . . And whosoever shall be found having this confidence in Christ apprehended in the heart, him will God account for righteous. This is the means, and this is the merit whereby wee attaine the remission of sinnes and righteousnesse. Because thou beleevest in mee, saith the Lord, and thy faith laieth hold upon Christ, whom I have freely given unto thee that hee might be thy mediatour and high Priest, therefore be thou justified and righteous. Wherefore God doth accept or account us as righteous, onely for our faith in Christ." Very different, you will agree, from Melanchthon. The emphasis is the same as in Calvin. "It is God that justifieth."

"*God receives us into his favour.*" There is here pre-supposed a choice on the part of God. He acts freely and is not compelled to justify man. He could, with perfect justice, have condemned him. The Reformers take in all seriousness the deadliness of sin and the wrath of God. As sinners we deserve nothing but condemnation. And, moreover, we are sinners, not merely partially, as if much good were mingled with the bad, but totally. The classical phrase *total corruption* is meant to be taken quite literally. Man is so vitiated by sin, i.e. by pride, unbelief and general unrelatedness to God—that he can do nothing that is not sin—i.e. committed in pride, unbelief and ungodliness. Dr. Torrance has brought out more strongly the demonic nature of sin, by speaking of *total perversity*, a term that fits better the Reformers' concept of sin. Man is totally perverse and deserves the wrath of God, but instead God loves us and receives us into His favour. In justification God chooses man. He destroys the former relationship of estrangement and enmity and sets up the new relationship of love. The God who justifies the sinner is the God who repenteth him of the evil. He puts off, as Luther would say, His strange office as the Accuser who faces us with our sin and lays upon us the fear of judgment and the burden of our earthy mortality, and He becomes a most loving Father to us, blessing us with every spiritual blessing, and showing the exceeding riches of His grace in kindness towards us. "God receives us into His favour."

" *God esteems us as righteous.*" In justification, as Evangelicals have been taught ever since they could say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in the vulgar tongue, God, the accusing Judge before whose tribunal we are summoned to render account, does not *make* us righteous but *accounts* us as righteous. If we were innocent of sin, then God, who is just, would acquit us. But we are guilty—and yet God acquits us. We are not righteous. We have been, we are and we remain sinners, quite unrighteous. But God esteems us as righteous. Here is no case of *either/or*—either a sinner, or righteous—but of *both/and*, both a sinner and righteous—*simul peccator, simul iustus.* " Justification, therefore," says Calvin, " is nothing other than an acquittal from guilt of the accused person, as though his innocence had been proved".

The insistence of the Reformers upon this point is thrown into relief by the two chief contemporary attacks on it—those of Osiander and the Council of Trent. As they are similar, we will consider only Osiander. His fundamental idea of justification is that we are justified on account of a union with Christ which amounted to a participation in His essence ; or rather, to an infusion of His essence into our nature. But the essence of Christ is perfectly righteous. Therefore, by virtue of this righteous essence within us, we are ourselves righteous and so can be justified by God. We are made righteous in order that we may be declared righteous. This brought down the wrath of Melanchthon and Calvin upon his head. Although justification and regeneration cannot be separated, the proper distinction between them must be observed. We are justified, not because we are regenerate (either by the infusion of the righteous essence of Christ or by the usual and Biblical way), but by free pardon for our sins and by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

We have so far tried to understand what acceptance means, considered purely by itself. But we have done this only in order to make this part of the question stand out the more clearly and emphatically. As it stands, our paper so far has been contrary to the Reformation position. For to be accepted by God means to be accepted in the Beloved. Without this, all that we have said would have been precisely un-Christian. And so we must go on to ask what it means that justification " consists in . . . the imputation of the righteousness of Christ."

Justification is founded upon the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Both His obedience and His sacrifice include His whole life on earth and His dying. He lived His life and freely accepted His death in obedience to the will of His Father ; and also His whole life, as well as His dying, was the sacrificial offering demanded by God in the Law. Moreover, the obedience and the sacrifice of our Lord are so closely related as to be almost one, as later Calvinism saw very clearly. Calvin himself also connects them closely : " Now, in answer to the query, how Christ, by the abolition of our sins, has destroyed the enmity between God and us, and procured a righteousness to render him favourable and propitious to us, it may be replied in general, that he accomplished it for us by the whole course of his obedience. . . . And, indeed, his voluntary submission is the principal circum-

stance even in his death ; because the sacrifice, unless freely offered, would have been unavailable to the acquisition of righteousness". By this representative obedience, both active and passive, of the Mediator, He merits or procures or wins for us forgiveness of sins and righteousness.

Thus, justification is founded upon the work of Christ. And it is realised by our union with Him. " As long as there is a separation between Christ and us," says Calvin, " all that he suffered and performed for the salvation of mankind is useless and unavailing to us. To communicate to us what he received from his Father, he must therefore become ours and dwell within us." This union with Christ is by the Holy Spirit—or, conversely, by faith. To believe in Christ is to become one with Him. But if one with Him, then both He and we participate in the properties of the other. Everything that is ours belongs also to Him, and all that is His belongs to us. Luther set this out under the image of marriage. " Faith not only leads to the soul being made like unto the divine Word . . . but it unites the soul with Christ as a bride with her bridegroom. From this marriage it follows . . . that Christ and the soul become one body ; and in this they have all things common, be they good or ill, so that what belongs to Christ now belongs to the believing soul, and what belongs to the soul now belongs to Christ. Since Christ possesses every good and blessedness, these now belong to the soul. Since the soul is burdened with sin and wretchedness, these now become Christ's." God imputes to Christ our sin, laying it upon Him on the Cross, making the sinless one to be sin for us. And this sin Christ freely accepts and destroys it utterly. To us God imputes the perfect and righteous obedience of Christ, thus accepting us in Him and in His righteousness. (See *Institutio* III. xi. 2.)

II

Faith and Works.

The opposite of faith must be regarded in the widest sense as self-righteousness ; that is to say, man's various attempts to justify himself and his actions to himself and before God.

St. Paul asserts justification by faith in Jesus Christ in opposition to the contemporary Judaizing doctrine of justification by faith and the law. He establishes as his principle : " We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law". Fifteen hundred years later Martin Luther, who has learnt from the Scriptures and from St. Augustine that " the just shall live by faith", asserts justification only by faith in Jesus Christ, in opposition to the contemporary ecclesiastical practice of promising forgiveness and eternal life as a reward for righteousness of character and good works.

Are we to say that these two attacks on " works " were necessary when they were delivered, but passed away with their particular theological situations? Or that this affirmation of faith and denial of works is to be applied only to such blatant abuses of the Faith as St. Peter's lapse at Antioch, or the stupid Tetzel's preaching of indulgences in Southern Germany in the year 1517?

According to the Reformers, St. Paul's exclusion of the works of the law must be applied to every human activity whatsoever, without

exception. St. Paul, says Calvin, " neither speaks of ceremonies only, nor specifically of any external work, but includes all the merits of works which can possibly be imagined." This exclusiveness Luther, with one of those brilliant theological insights which are so characteristic of his thinking, expresses by the word *alone*, which in this context can only be compared in importance with the diphthong of Nicaea. So he renders *Romans* iii. 28 : " So we reckon that a man is justified without the works of the law, by faith alone". Let us see how he justifies this translation : " In *Romans* iii., I know right well that the word *solum* was not in the Greek or Latin text. . . . At the same time, the sense of it is there and . . . the word belongs there if the translation is to be clear and strong. I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek. . . . But it is the nature of our German language that in speaking of two things, one of which is admitted and the other denied, we use the word *only* with the word *not* or *no*. . . . I was not only relying on the nature of the languages and following that when, in *Romans* iii. I inserted the word *solum*, only ; but the text itself and the sense of St. Paul demanded it and forced it upon me. He is dealing in that passage with the main point of Christian doctrine, viz., that we are justified by faith in Christ, without any works of the law, and he cuts away all works so completely, as even to say that the works of the law, though it is God's law and his Word, do not help us to righteousness. . . . But when works are so completely cut away, the meaning of it must be that faith alone justifies".

All human works are excluded ; and the term " human works " covers every quality or activity of man. Goodness of life and all the virtues ; worship and piety ; all loving, heroic or beautiful actions and all noble aspirations are alike incapable of justifying us before God. Reliance upon them, however modestly and with whatever good taste it is expressed, is self-righteousness, and self-righteousness is the opponent of the justification of God. Self-justification is an inward attitude of sufficiency which needs nothing or which can do all things. As such it is the opposite of justification by faith. For it is of the essence of that faith that it can do nothing, that it possesses nothing and that it needs everything. " We are indeed beggars," wrote Luther at the end of his life. Faith is hunger and thirst ; it is emptiness and desire ; it is coming to God with empty hands and praying Him to supply our needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus. Our works are excluded, faith is established.

When, however, we say that works are excluded, we must beware that we do not at the same time both divide Christ and destroy faith. Justification, although it consists in the *declaration* of the righteousness of the sinner in Jesus Christ and does not in itself constitute an inward change in him, must not be severed from this inward change, which is regeneration : " the grace of justification is inseparable from regeneration, although they are distinct things " (Calvin). The Christ in whom we are justified must not be divided from the Christ in whom we are sanctified. The faith in Jesus Christ by which we are justified is none other than the faith by which we receive eternal life. And, moreover, faith bears within itself the seed which will come to fruition in good works. Faith and love belong together ; the only

faith which the Reformers considered worthy of the name was not a bare assent to revealed Truth, but a faith which is fruitful with the works of love. Thus, to affirm that works are left out of the scheme, or even minimised, is a very myopic judgment. What the Reformers were careful to do was to observe the true order of faith and works, and the distinction between them, while at the same time stressing their inseparableness. You will remember Luther's famous words—made more famous in this country by their influence on John Wesley—on the works of faith in his preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. He speaks no less decisively in a passage in the Commentary on Galatians : " When we have thus taught faith in Christ, then doe we teach also good workes. Because thou hast laied hold upon Christ by Faith, through whom thou art made righteous, beginne now to worke well. Love God and thy neighbour, call upon God, give thankes unto him, praise him, confesse him. These are good works indeed, which flow out of this faith and this cheerfulnesse conceived in the heart, for that wee have remission of sinnes freely by Christ".

III

Faith and the Glory of Christ.

The formula " by faith alone " is to be asserted, not because of the intrinsic value of faith itself, but on account of the uniqueness and worth of its object, Jesus Christ. The glory of Christ demands the affirmation of " by faith alone " : the denial of " by faith alone " carries with it the denial of Jesus Christ.

We will have recourse here to two sources, both of which misunderstand and mislike the doctrine that we are propounding. The first is J. P. Whitney's appendix on " Justification by Faith " in *The History of the Reformation* ; the second is the more recent report on *Catholicity*.

1. Whitney's interpretation of the Reformation concept of faith is that it is partly a man's conviction that he is saved and partly an emotion : " Luther, for instance, enlarged St. Paul's ' justification by faith ' into ' justification by faith *alone* ' : taken along with the dangerous assertion that man's salvation depended upon his own conviction of its truth this expression became mischievous " (p. 507). And again : " like the assertion of salvation by works, it was too likely to limit its view to man and man's own view of his position, for it made man's feelings the central point, hence it shut out the conception of God and His grace which it was originally meant to emphasize " (p. 507). Faith is here conceived of as having self-sufficiency of its own, whether as a conviction or as a feeling. It is regarded without reference to its object.

2. Next for *Catholicity*, that report which shows its authors to have been, as far as their exposition of Reformation doctrine goes, great imaginative theologians. They tell us that " in Protestantism there has been misinterpretation of the Biblical truth of Justification by Faith", and they express this misinterpretation thus : " A man is saved by faith alone : so long as he is in this attitude of faith, all is well. Must he not then set himself to seek to maintain the faith-relationship with God ? But where this is sought outside the framework of the sacramental life, and apart from the objectivity of the

Eucharistic action, the endeavour to renew the faith-relationship will always tend to drop back into subjectivism and the cultivating of religious feelings" (p. 25). Leaving aside the misunderstandings about perseverance and the sacraments, we see again this inability to conceive of a relationship with God which is not set up by the individual himself. Faith is again regarded as self-sufficient, as a work of the law. They would make the Reformers say, not "It is God that justifieth", but "Man justifies himself before God by his faith".

When they talk about faith, however, the emphasis of the Reformers, is, in fact, not placed upon faith itself and certainly nŏt upon man, the subject of faith, but upon Jesus Christ, the object of faith. They therefore assert that faith is not to be prized on its own account, but solely on account of its object. Thus Calvin, in replying to Osiander: "His objection, that the power of justifying belongs not to faith itself, but only as it receives Christ, I readily admit. For if faith were to justify of itself, or by an intrinsic efficacy, as they say, it could never, being always weak and imperfect, effect this but in part; and thus it would be a defective justification, which would only confer on us a partial salvation" (III. xi. 7). Luther puts it even more strongly: "Faith apprehendeth Jesus Christ, who is the forme which adorneth and furnisheth faith as the colour adorneth and beautifieth the wall. . . . Christ is the object of faith, yea rather, even in faith Christ himselfe is present. Faith therefore is a certaine obscure knowledge, or rather darknesse which seeth nothing, and yet Christ apprehended by faith, sitteth in this darknesse" (*Galatians*, p. 64b)[1]. Paul Althaus expresses this concept of faith in an apt phrase: "I know not whether I believe; but I know in whom I believe." So the Reformers, although they insist on the personal nature of faith, never dream of giving to faith the power to justify. God justifies us in Jesus Christ. "Why, then," asks Calvin, "are we justified by faith? Because by faith we apprehend the righteousness of Christ" (*Inst.* III. xvi. 1).

It is often said that the Reformers rediscovered the New Testament doctrine of faith. Important as it is, this is only secondary. The real discovery of Luther was that of the New Testament Christ. Both he and Calvin complain bitterly that Christ had been hidden and obscured in mediaeval theology, which had substituted a false Christ in place of the New Testament witness—partly by making Christ a judge, partly by destroying His uniqueness as the one Mediator. The Reformers say that the office of Jesus Christ is to save, and that He *alone* saves, and that He *totally* saves those who are *totally* lost. God gives His Son to be the total and sufficient Saviour. In Christ He reconciles the world unto Himself; and because Christ has been *completely* obedient to the will of God and has made an entire sacrifice for our sins, this reconciliation is not partial but complete and entire. In this Lamb and His salvation is neither spot nor blemish. Thus it is the work of Christ which excludes the works of men. Without Christ altogether, we should need to justify ourselves somehow or other

[1] I am aware, of course, that Calvin would have expressed himself very differently indeed, and would have been suspicious of such a paradox as "obscure knowledge". But Luther and Calvin are at one in this main point of faith being nothing without its object.

before God; if Christ had made only a partial reconciliation between us and God, we should need to supply what was lacking in our salvation; but because Christ is "a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world", there is nothing left in our salvation for us to achieve.

Now, since the sufficiency of the work of Christ leaves no room for the works of man as the instrument of justification, we are driven back to nothing, emptiness, hunger and thirst—by which expressions, you will remember, we described *faith*. Faith is no work, for it adds nothing to what Christ has done for us. It is our participation, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the work of Christ. It is for this reason that we say that the uniqueness and worth of Jesus Christ as the object of faith demands the affirmation of *by faith alone*. If we were to refuse this word *alone*, it would mean that we were not merely introducing another element besides faith into justification, but another element beside Jesus Christ. Thus we should be detracting from the glory of Christ, and destroying the New Testament insistence upon His uniqueness as Mediator.

Finally, if this is true, then Luther was right in calling this the doctrine by which the Church stands and without which it falls. For the Church is founded upon Jesus Christ, and upon Him as He appears in the witness of the prophets and apostles. Therefore, if *justification by faith alone* is synonymous with *justification by Christ alone*, the Church destroys her foundation if she denies this doctrine. "If the foundation of the Church," says Calvin, "be the doctrine of the prophets and apostles, which enjoins believers to place their salvation in Christ alone, how can the building stand any longer, when that doctrine is taken away?" (Inst. IV. ii. 1). Hence we must say that the word *alone* in this formula is to be regarded as the dividing point between the true and the apparent Church—and that not only historically but permanently.

The Doctrine To-day

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THIS paper makes no pretensions to being a learned contribution to the theological study of the subject. It is written not from the point of view of the pure theologian but rather from that of the parish priest. For theology is in danger when it is studied and discussed purely for its own sake. If our theology is to be living, it must have men and women in mind at every point, and the indispensable link between the two is the minister of the Gospel in his pulpit and his parish. Our task then is to try to discover what we to-day mean by the doctrine of justification by faith, what is its place in the total Gospel, and how it is to be related to the other truths of the Gospel, especially those which are being recovered by our contemporaries, that we may be better able to interpret and present it to ordinary Christians.