

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 21

Volume 21 • Number 2 • April 1997

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

A Response to George Vandeveld

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Professor Vandeveld's paper looks at the possibility of a dialogue between contemporary Evangelicals and Catholics on the doctrine of Justification, which was one of the major points of contention in the sixteenth century between the Reformers and the leaders and theologians of the Roman Catholic Church. In this perspective the paper outlines the teaching of the Council of Trent on Justification, along with those of Lutheranism and of John Calvin, who has himself been the chief source and model of the Evangelical interpretation of Scripture.

It also suggests an original approach to Justification, from the point of view of the relation between Scripture and Justification, the two poles of the Reformation which, borrowing language from Aristotle, Lutheran theologians came to call its formal and material principles. Accordingly, the paper surveys the Catholic understanding of Tradition and of its role in the interpretation of Scripture, and it seeks for the point where the Evangelical reading differs from the Catholic one.

This approach is promising if it brings the two parties, if not yet to a solution of differences, at least to a better mutual understanding, which is a necessary first step in the process of a fruitful dialogue. This approach assumes that the fundamental problem between Evangelicals and Catholics lies precisely in the way Justification (along with its sequel, sanctification) is related to Scripture in the theological methods of the two parties, Catholics placing Tradition alongside of Scripture, if not as a complement, at least as a necessary principle of interpretation, Evangelicals starting from the *Scriptura sola* of the Reformation.

There is here a hidden difficulty. In spite of what could have been expected from the heirs of the scholastic traditions who were present at Trent, the Council that marked the start of the counter-reformation did not use the Aristotelian language of form and matter in this area. It assumed in passing, and without stressing it, a scholastic analysis of p. 150 sacraments in terms of matter and form (as in the decree of session 14, in 1551, on 'extreme unction' DS, n.1695). But it did not view the Christian life and doctrine in a hylomorphic perspective. It did not speak of a formal and a material cause of faith, of justification, of salvation, or of orthodoxy. At the fourth session (1545) the books of Scripture were recognized as the source of correct doctrine. And since Scripture records apostolic traditions, these—written or unwritten—were recognized at the same time; and they were said to be held 'with the same affection of piety'. The council did not identify any of the 'unwritten traditions' that were thus placed on a par with the Scriptures. Yet it narrowed the field of these traditions through three qualifications: the traditions must refer to doctrine (not to points of discipline, that may change with circumstances); they must derive from the apostles themselves (traditions that arose later having no apostolic

authority); and they must have reached all the way to the present (obsolete traditions remaining obsolete).

At the sixth session (1547) the 'Justification of the impious' was described as the fundamental grace, imparted in baptism, that is the beginning of Christian life and sanctification. While evidence for the doctrine of Justification was found in Scripture (that is cited through the entire decree), no attempt was made to relate Justification and Scripture in terms of matter and form. Indeed, as is noted by George Vandeveld, chapter 7 lists five causes of Justification: final (the glory of God), efficient (God), meritorious (satisfaction by the cross of Christ), instrumental (baptism), and formal ('the justice of God which becomes ours as gift'). Yet nowhere does the council speak of the relationship between Scripture and Justification in terms of mutual causality.

Had the Tridentine fathers adopted a hylomorphic standpoint inspired by the philosophy of Aristotle, they presumably would have seen Justification as the form (in keeping with the determination that the *justitia Dei* that is freely bestowed on sinners acts as the formal cause of their Justification) and Scripture as the matter (in keeping with the fact that Scripture is constituted by material writings, that need to be, so to say, reshaped by the discovery of their meaning, in the light of Christian experience). This, however, is the reverse of the standard Lutheran language concerning the two principles of the Reformation, according to which Scripture is the form and Justification the matter.

This discrepancy in the philosophical perspective of medieval and Lutheran scholasticism may be symptomatic of common misunderstandings between Catholic theologians and the followers of the Reformation. If Justification is the formal principle, it is the justifying, gratuitous action of God in regard to sinful man (the *impius* of the Council of Trent) that regulates the reading of Scripture, God's salvific action in Christ provides the correct hermeneutical key. The way to know this salvific action is necessarily twofold. One may 'hear' about it, since p. 151 faith 'comes from hearing' (as noted in ch. 6 of Trent). Yet one may truly grasp the meaning of this message, the gospel, only under the impact of salvific grace, notably, though not exclusively, as grace is experienced in the sacraments, that are then properly called 'sacraments of faith'. The experience of salvation, as described, let us say, in the epistle to the Romans, may then act as a 'canon within the canon' (a modern expression that was of course not used at Trent). It provides the key to the understanding of Scripture. In this case, however, Scripture must be taken in the medieval sense of *sacra pagina*, as that which has been written for our salvation in the books of divine revelation.

If, however, the formal and material principles are reversed, as happened in Lutheran theology, it is Scripture that informs Justification. Yet form is still by definition the spiritual principle and matter the material that is shaped by the form. In this case Scripture cannot be taken in its materiality, as a text to be read. If it is the active principle of the divine action by which the sinner is saved through faith, it can be no other than the revealing and saving Word of God, which infinitely exceeds the letter in which it is expressed. The letter of Scripture, *pagina*, has authority only when, in Calvin's language, its sense is attested by the interior testimony of the Holy Spirit. The letter needs to be understood in the Spirit. Such an understanding is not given or guaranteed by transmission (tradition) or by the decisions of an institutional magisterium, but only by the Spirit, whose witness is given in the hearts of the faithful. In order to avoid private interpretations that can well be contradictory, the faithful, including ministers and teachers, should always eagerly compare their reading of Scripture with the witness of the other believers. By the same token, however, in order to be the material principle that will receive the form of the Word of God, Justification cannot remain an unthematic experience of God's grace. It has to be embodied in a doctrine, a confession, a formulation,

to which the Word of God, read in Scripture or preached from Scripture, will give life. And such a doctrine may logically act as the standard of belief, the heart of the gospel, *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*.

Thus it is that two different perspectives have characterized the theologies of Catholicism and those of the Reformation. But the situation at the end of the twentieth century is not that of the sixteenth. Contemporary dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics (especially at the international level and the national dialogues in the USA and in Germany) have achieved such a high degree of understanding and even agreement that one may now envisage a joint declaration that the anathemas of the sixteenth century regarding Justification—in the Council of Trent and in the *Formula of Concord*—have become truly obsolete, however justified they may have been in their time.

However, there has been no ongoing systematic dialogue between Evangelicals (in the American sense of the term) and Roman Catholics. And it is not to be expected that Evangelicals, belonging as they p. 152 do to a wide range of Churches, should be convinced simply by the findings of Lutheran/Roman Catholic research. The decree of the council of Trent on Justification therefore remains a stumbling block for a large part of the Christian world, as it still does for the more conservative forms of Lutheranism that remain outside the Lutheran World Federation.

George Vandeveld's effort to pinpoint the problem between Evangelicals and Catholics today is solidly based on the available documentation. It is formulated with great sensitivity to the issues as these appear on both sides. As I see it, however, the central question today between Evangelicals and Catholics is neither Justification nor Scripture/Tradition as these were debated in the sixteenth century. For Evangelicalism owes more to Calvinism than to Lutheranism. And the historical debate between Lutherans and Catholics that was the setting for the Council of Trent took place before the full development of Calvinism as a doctrine and as an ecclesial organization. Insofar therefore as it varies from the Lutheran/Catholic discussions, the problem refers in part to the differences that distinguish Lutheran and Calvinist theological emphases and interpretations. Unfortunately, while Luther's theology has been the object of extensive studies by Catholic authors in this century, neither Calvin nor the Calvinism of the seventeenth century—the inspiration for much of contemporary Evangelical thought—has been widely investigated in Catholic circles, in spite of a few pioneering studies, notably by Alexandre Ganoczy.

There is still, I believe, a great confusion among ecumenically-minded Catholics about the Evangelicals and their theology. And this is not entirely the Catholics' fault. On the one hand, Evangelicals have often over-simplified the positions of the Reformers and misunderstood the teaching of the Council of Trent, especially in regard to the apostolic traditions. On the other hand, the 'clear affirmation of and submission to the primacy of Scripture as norm', that lies, as George Vandeveld points out, at the core of Evangelicalism, becomes ambiguous when biblical interpretation wavers between classical readings that come from Luther or Calvin and modern readings that were pioneered by Liberal Protestants.

Admittedly, Evangelicals may well be confused by Roman Catholic theologians, and even by the treatment of Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition at Vatican Council II (decree *Dei Verbum*). In the first place, some of the sequels of Vatican II in the Catholic Church show that the lessons of the Council, though officially received, are not yet fully operative. And this puts in question the actual process of authority in the concrete life of the Catholic Church. In the second place, Catholic theologians are not of one mind in regard to the nature of the issues in the ecumenical dialogues.

Thus I do not myself think that a satisfactory solution can emerge from the recognition of a second principle ('respect for the Divine in its Concrete Realizations'), as was argued by the late Carl Peter in a p. 153 perspective that was largely inspired by Paul Tillich's wish to balance 'the Protestant principle and the Catholic substance'. For we would then be back at the question of the mutual relations between two principles, and we might again differ about which should be the form and which the matter. In fact, the search for an underlying principle has exercised the minds of many scholars in the last decades, thanks to a recurring, yet to me fallacious, interest in unearthing 'the basic difference' between Protestantism and Catholicism. Such a search assumes that the truth of a church or a confession of faith does not lie on the surface of what is taught and affirmed, but in some subconscious or metatheological assumption. Yet this runs counter to the axiom that Bossuet found at work in the Reformed Churches of his time, and which he approved as a basic principle of dialogue: 'It is a maxim that has been constantly established among them, that in this matter one should not consider the consequences that one may draw from a doctrine, but simply what is confessed and affirmed by the person who teaches it' (*Exposition de la doctrine catholique sur les matières de controverse*, section II).

The problems that divide Evangelicals and Catholics can be solved only on the basis of a deeper study, to be done in common, of what Justification by faith entails for the life, the structure, and the ongoing purification of the church that was envisaged at Vatican Council II (*Ecclesia ... sancta simul et semper purificanda: Lumen gentium*, n.8). But no joint investigation can be truly fruitful unless it is inspired by a sincere desire for reconciliation. And this may still be the largest hurdle.

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Meeting Between Representatives of the World Evangelical Fellowship and The Roman Catholic Church

Venice, Italy, 21–25 October 1993

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