

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

Justification Between Scripture and Tradition

George Vandeveld

INTRODUCTION

This consultation between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Fellowship is a happy occasion. All who love the Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of which there is only One (however differently its nature and unity may be conceived), and who are deeply committed to the mission of the church in our world cannot but be pained by the divisions that make it difficult if not impossible for the world to see and believe that Jesus was sent by the Father.

To many Evangelicals, consultations with representatives of 'Rome' seem like a huge leap beyond conversations among representatives of different strands of Protestantism. Indeed, in view of the historical and confessional gap, many Evangelicals would give a very low priority to conversation with the Roman Catholic Church. While it makes good sense to give more immediate and concerted attention to one's nearer neighbours, one's Protestant siblings, cousins, and nieces (witness the WEF), a case can be made for giving at least equal attention to conversations with Rome. Giving priority to our immediate cousins usually means that in practice we never get to what is ranked second or third. Yet there is ample reason to end such neglect.

From an historical perspective, the Roman Catholic Church is our mother. Certainly for Calvin and Luther the Roman Catholic communion was simply 'the Church', which they wished to reform and restore. Even after the break they considered this Church as their mother.¹ If problems with siblings and cousins deserve our attention, how much more do problems with our 'mother'? The modern practice of disowning one's parents by 'parental divorce' is not a viable option within the church. Sooner or later in our journey, Paul's question begins to haunt us: is Christ divided? Whatever the weight of these missiological, historical, and Christological arguments for consultations may be, Christ's

¹ Luther, see Oberman, *Dawn*, Calvin, see reply to Sadeleto. In my teen years a book that made a deep impression on me was written by Hegger, who had left the Priesthood in the Catholic Church. The title: *Moeder, Ik Klaag U Aan*, 'Mother, I accuse you.'

injunctions demand that we do not talk *about* an entire community of fellow believers—especially when that talk is critical²—without talking *with* that community.³

Although the issues of tradition, the authority of Scripture, and justification by faith are obvious topics for consultations between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, one may wonder whether such confessional-theological subject matters are the best place to begin a discussion. Often so-called ‘non-theological factors’ play a more direct and obvious role in relations between Christian communions. In a setting where the Roman Catholic Church is dominant, Evangelicals often feel marginalized, if not oppressed. In a relatively new suburb of Manila, for example, an Evangelical Protestant group is prevented from worshipping in a facility which was built by the developer for the use of all Christian communions. On the other hand, often in these and other situations, Roman Catholic believers express great concern over the ‘proselytizing’ strategies of Evangelicals, who approach the Roman Catholic believers as ‘sacramentalized but not evangelized’. Other practical Evangelical concerns would provide equally urgent topics of discussion: the syncretism manifest in popular religion, the role of Mary, papal authority. It is not surprising that the Evangelical statement on contemporary Roman Catholicism, which is in part the occasion for the present consultation, does not deal with justification by faith until the seventh chapter—*after* dealing with issues such as Rome’s approach to other churches, religious liberty, Mary, and the Papacy.⁴ Furthermore, beneath and through concerns about specific issues, Evangelical-Catholic relations are often marred by misunderstanding, suspicion, and distrust.

Nevertheless, the topics before us are eminently worthy of common scrutiny. As the German Lutheran-Roman Catholic Working Group puts it, ‘Every consensus not based on a real consensus on the doctrine of justification is built on sand.’⁵ Applying this to our initial discussions, one might say, positively, that a deeper understanding of one another’s approach to and comprehension of the chosen topics will be highly beneficial for the mutual relations between the two faith communities.

If any encouragement on this journey be needed, the words of [p. 130](#) George Carey, now Archbishop of Canterbury, provide just that:

If I may be so bold as to address my fellow Evangelicals, I venture to say to them that as on this issue of the doctrine of justification by faith we should note the great desire of Catholic theologians to understand and learn from Protestants, so we too must endeavour to understand Catholic perspectives and enter into sympathetic dialogue. It’s all too easy to hide behind precious shibboleths of our faith, signposts of our historical pilgrimage—but our journey is to Christ and with Christ. Surely if our ecumenical theology is done in

² As in Paul G. Schrotenboer, ed., *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

³ As was done in Basil Meeking and John Stott, *The Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, 1977–1984* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Hereafter *ERCDOM*.

⁴ By far the most space is devoted to a discussion of the ‘place of Mary’, *Roman Catholicism*, pp. 3141 (‘The Place of Mary’), 87–93 (‘John Paul II and Mary’).

⁵ Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Lehrverurteilung—kirkentrennend? I: Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute* (Freiburg, i. Br.: Herder, 1986), 43. Cf. George Tavard, *Justification by Faith: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983), pp. 119–111.

his light and for his glory, we shall move away from the bitternesses of the past into the unity of the Spirit which is God's desire for his broken Church.⁶

TRADITION

Vatican-Genevan Convergence

Since the paper by Avery Dulles will deal directly with the issue of Scripture and Tradition, the focus of this paper will be the doctrine of justification by faith—with the issue of Scripture and tradition as its context. This context will be provided by a brief consideration of two key documents, one Catholic, the other Protestant, which were promulgated at about the same time. The first is the 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' (*Dei Verbum*) of the Second Vatican Council, written in 1963, discussed, revised, and adopted in 1964. The second is the document 'Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions', of the Fourth Conference on Faith and Order, which was held in Montreal in 1963.

While Trent's teaching that the truth of the gospel is 'contained in the written books and unwritten traditions ...' (DS 1501)⁷ could be interpreted as espousing a two-source theory of revelation,⁸ Vatican II clearly gives primacy to the Scriptures. Here an entire original draft schema that was called 'On the Sources of Revelation' (*De Fontibus Revelationis*) was rejected. In its place came a new schema. It too joins Scripture with tradition by a simple 'and'. Furthermore, *sola Scriptura* is rejected. Yet it does so with particular reference to the certainty of faith. As to revelation itself, the Council avoids the notion of two 'sources' of revelation. Scripture and tradition are said to 'flow from the same divine well-springs' and 'in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end' (DV, 9). Elsewhere sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture are said to form 'one Sacred deposit of the word of God' (DV, 10). Although the task of authentically interpreting the word [p. 131](#) of God is accorded to the official teaching office of the church, the Council insists that the *magisterium* does not stand 'above the word but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on ...' (DV, 10).

Clearly, this is a vast improvement on the original schema. Yet, from a Protestant-Evangelical perspective, the continued juxtapositioning of Scripture and tradition, the call to treat them with 'the same sense of devotion and reverence' (DV, 9), and the inclusion of both Scripture and tradition in 'the word of God' that is said to be supreme over the church is troublesome. For Evangelicals much depends on whether the tradition that is to be venerated is strictly interpretative, as many claim. In that case Scripture is in effect supreme, for authentic interpretation proves to be such when it truly serves that which is interpreted. But then, how can one have the *same* sense of devotion and reverence for Scripture and tradition? And how can the 'Sacred Scripture together with Sacred Tradition' be called 'the supreme rule of faith' (DV, 21)?

⁶ George Carey, 'Justification and Roman Catholicism', in J. I. Packer, *et al.*, *Here We Stand: Justification by Faith Today* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), p. 136.

⁷ While the Denziger Schönmetzer numbering will be used, it will be cited as translated in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Poupis (New York, Alba, 1982).

⁸ Yves Congar, drawing on the work of Joseph Geiselman, argues that in substituting the simple *et* for the *partim-partim* terminology contained in the first draft, the Council decided only that Scripture and tradition are 'the two forms under which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is communicated ...', without determining their interrelation (*Tradition and Traditions*, p. 165).

The World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal distinguished between Tradition, tradition, and traditions. By 'Tradition', in the upper case, it meant 'the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation to the church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church'. By 'tradition', in the lower case, it meant 'the traditionary process', i.e. the process of handing down the faith. 'Traditions', in the plural refers to 'the diversity of forms of expression and also to what we call confessional traditions, for instance the Lutheran tradition or the Reformed tradition' (50).⁹ Traditions are historical manifestations of the one Tradition (47)—though they can also be impoverishments or distortions of it (48).

In this two-fold possibility—manifestation or distortion—the pressing problem of the relation of tradition and interpretation to normativity confronts us once again. Simply to insist on the interpretative, and therefore subordinate, role of tradition does not solve the problem at hand. The intent of that insistence is to ensure that the word of God, rather than human traditions, governs life. Yet the Word that holds sway can be no other than an *interpreted* word. History is replete with examples of appeals to the Scriptures for the defence of certain practices, racism, for example, when in fact a cultural ideology governs the interpretation. The Scriptures that are meant to lead all human thoughts captive to Christ are in constant danger of themselves being taken captive by human thought. This dilemma is evident in these deliberations by the Commission on Faith and Order:

The Tradition in its written form, as Holy Scripture ... has to be interpreted by the Church in ever new situations. Such interpretation of the Tradition is to be found in the crystallization of tradition in the creeds, the liturgical forms of the sacraments and p. 132 other forms of worship, and also in the preaching of the Word and in the theological expositions of the Church's doctrine. A mere reiteration of the words of Holy Scripture would be a betrayal of the Gospel which has to be made understandable and has to convey a challenge to the world. The necessity of interpretation raises again the question of the criterion for the genuine Tradition. Throughout the history of the Church the criterion has been sought in the Holy Scriptures rightly interpreted. But what is 'right interpretation'? (50 & 51)

In answer to this question, the report considers one obvious suggestion: 'right interpretation ... is that interpretation which is guided by the Holy Spirit.' True as that answer is, the Report immediately concedes that 'this does not solve the problem of criterion'. It then suggests that what is needed is a hermeneutical principle. Interestingly enough, it allows almost a dozen candidates to pass the reviewing stand—each of them representing a specific *tradition*! Thus, the report has come full circle: from Tradition to the need of interpretation, to need of right interpretation, to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to a hermeneutical principle, and finally, to the variegated principles offered by various traditions. Tradition appears to be a closed, perhaps vicious, circle. Who or what can deliver us out of this labyrinth?

Evangelicals too are increasingly aware of the important place of tradition. They are likely to smile in self-recognition upon hearing the comment, 'It has been the tradition in my church not to attribute any weight to tradition.'¹⁰ While remaining critical of the Roman Catholic position, Clark Pinnock, for example, acknowledges that 'Protestant as

⁹ 'Scripture, Tradition and Traditions', in P.C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer ed. *The Fourth Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, (New York: Association Press, 1964), pp. 50–61. Parenthetical numbers in the text refer by paragraph to this document.

¹⁰ *The Fourth Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, P. C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer ed. (New York: Association Press, 1964), p. 51.

well as Catholic beliefs are ecclesiastically shaped' and speaks of 'a reawakening of a deep respect for tradition as an interpretive guide and doctrinal safeguard'.¹¹

The 'Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission' of about a decade ago indicates the mutual appreciation of the role of tradition. Pointing to the danger of arbitrary 'individualistic exegesis', the report grants that 'The Scriptures must be interpreted within the community of Christ, which is the Church.' From there it is a small step to acknowledging that this interpreting matrix includes that which is handed down from the past: 'Many of our leaders belong to the past. Both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have inherited a rich legacy of tradition. We cherish creeds, confessions and conciliar statements. We peruse the writings of the Fathers of the Church. We read their books and commentaries.'¹² p. 133

Authority—Christ's and the Texts

Before moving to the topic of justification there is a basic point that needs to be highlighted. It concerns the concept of authority itself. Invoking 'the authority of Scripture' readily conjures up the notion of a 'court of appeal', often the highest, or last, court of appeal. This metaphor, of course, immediately places us in a polemical, quasi-judicial setting. Here debate, controversy, adversaries, argument, and judgment are the stock-in-trade. This is neither surprising, nor necessarily illegitimate. From earliest times the church has been embroiled in debate, for example, over the nature of Christ, the trinity, grace and free will. In the midst of subsequent schisms, debate within the broken church seems to have become the order of the day. Little wonder, then, that questions concerning valid sources of authority and legitimate courts of appeal themselves generate heated debate.

Yet, we need to step back from these associations for a moment and place the issue of 'authority' in a larger context. The *Scriptura* which the Reformers prefixed with *sola* testify to authority of a different kind. They speak of one who, on completing his redemptive mission, declares that all authority is given to him. This is crucial. It means that the source and seat of authority is Christ. Further, that authority stands as the link between his completed mission and his continuing mission: go and make disciples. In other words, the heart of authority resides, not first of all in a book, but in a person. The living *locus* of such authority is the mission field (which lies first of all in our own backyards). The theological discussion table is only a derivative *locus*. The authority about which the church is primarily concerned, then, is that of Christ. Though that point seems obvious, it has momentous implications for our discussion. For the question at stake for all partners in a consultation such as this is not first of all, 'What source of authority do we use?' But, 'How is the unique authority of the Author of life and new life most effectively fostered among God's people?' It is in this context that the issue of the authority of Scripture and the role of tradition has its crucial significance.

With the link between the authority of Scripture and the Author of salvation, we arrive immediately at the heart of the Reformation. The *solas* that soon began to function as polemical weapons arose out of the struggle of a soul seeking the presence and peace of the gospel in a church situation that placed major obstacles on the pathway to peace.

¹¹ Clark H. Pinnock, 'How I Use Tradition in Doing Theology', *TSF Bulletin* (September-October, 1982), pp. 3, 4. See also the response by Avery Dulles in the January-February, 1983, edition (pp. 5-6).

¹² ERCDOM, p. 22. By contrast, the WEF statement on Catholicism seems to acknowledge the role of tradition among evangelicals only *de facto* and *in malem partim*: '... often we have also set our evangelical traditions above Scripture. In many instances our lip service to biblical authority contradicts the predominant place we give to our denominational and historical baggage' (*Catholicism*, p. 48).

Justification by faith was not first of all a theological statement but an experience of forgiveness and peace that had been blocked by the practice of and promises surrounding penance. In struggling his way through practical issues concerning the role of the church in 'mediating' salvation, Luther rediscovered the centrality of the Scriptures. But its centrality stood entirely in the service of the centrality of Christ and his authority.

Biblical authority, therefore, is crucial to the Reformers, for the sake of, in the service of, Christ's [p. 134](#) authority. This inextricable relationship and irreversible priority becomes all the more significant in that the Scriptures do not mediate Christ's authority as a bridge between the teachings of a long dead founder and subsequent generations of followers. The claim to 'all authority' is followed by the assurance of presence: 'I will be with you ...' In other words, the Reformation was not a debate concerning two disparate principles—one 'formal', the other 'material'—namely, *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*. Rather the struggles summed up in these slogans converge in the *sola gratia* which is found only in Christ. 'When the Reformation spoke of the "sola Scriptura", it meant to keep alive the question concerning the relationship with the Lord through the Gospel.'¹³ It is his authoritative and healing presence that is at stake. The issues revolve around the presence and revelation of Christ today.¹⁴ The question is, how does Christ 'choose to reveal himself' ([Mt. 11:27](#)) today, to whom, and how can we know? The issue of the Reformation concerns the manner and means of Christ's presence.¹⁵

JUSTIFICATION

Turning now to the doctrine of justification, it may be well to ponder the following Catholic catechetical instruction:

Q. What is justification?

A. It is a grace which makes us friends of God.

Q. Can a sinner merit this justifying grace?

A. No, he cannot; because all the good works which the sinner performs whilst he is in a state of mortal sin, are dead works, which have no merit sufficient to justify.

Q. Is it an article of the Catholic faith, that the sinner, in mortal sin, cannot merit the grace of justification?

A. Yes; it is decreed in the seventh chap. of the sixth session of the Council of Trent, that neither faith, nor good works, preceding justification, can merit the grace of justification.

Q. How then is the sinner justified?

A. He is justified gratuitously by the pure mercy of God, not on account of his own or any human merit, but purely through the merits of Jesus Christ; for Jesus Christ is our only mediator of redemption, who alone, by his passion and death, has reconciled us to his Father.

¹³ G. C. Berkouwer, *Vatikaans Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie* (Kamen: Kok, 1964), p. 119.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger is entirely right, therefore, when he points out that we cannot deal with Scripture and tradition as such, but must go 'behind' them to the over-arching reality of revelation, the 'inner source, ... the living word of God from which scripture and tradition spring and without which their significance for faith cannot be understood' (Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*. Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1966, p. 34).

¹⁵ See Ratzinger's formulation: 'The question of the way in which the word of revelation uttered in Christ remains present in history and reaches men is one of the fundamental questions which split western Christendom in the age of the Reformation' (*ibid.*, p. 26).

- Q. Why then do Protestants charge us with believing, that the sinner can merit the remission of his sins? p. 135
- A. Their ignorance of the Catholic doctrine is the cause of this, as well as many other false charges.¹⁶

Consultations and dialogues are built on the conviction that ignorance at this level is not of the variety that Pope Pius IX, in a different context, considered to be both invincible and inculpable (DS, 28651). Certainly after the publication of the report of the US Lutheran—Catholic dialogue,¹⁷ ignorance regarding the mutual understanding of justification by the heirs of this divisive controversy is obviously ‘vincible’ and therefore culpable. ‘Anyone who wishes to deal with the dialogue between Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians on justification will have to make this document his point of departure.’¹⁸ If this is so, those engaged in an Evangelical—Roman Catholic Consultation have good reason to make this dialogue the centrepiece of discussion.

First we will present the essential points of convergence or consensus, then the remaining points of difference and divergence. Subsequently, we will try to analyse and assess the nature, and possible grounds, of the agreement and disagreement. We will then conclude with some remarks on the significance of the remaining differences.

Convergences

The US dialogue concludes with what it calls ‘a fundamental affirmation’. It expresses a basic conviction in both positive and negative terms: ‘our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God’s merciful action in Christ is made known: we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God’s promise and saving work in Christ’ (157). In the previous section, the report articulates the core of this agreement in twelve points. It affirms that Christ ‘is the source, centre, and norm of Christian life’, that he is such as God’s free gift. It uses juridical language by maintaining that ‘to be saved one must be judged righteous and be righteous’ (156). In a final ‘declaration’, some of these points are reiterated, especially the primacy of grace and the gift character of grace (161).

This agreement is reason for rejoicing. Yet, the report itself is candid as to what has been achieved and what has not. On the basis of the agreements, it speaks of having reached ‘fundamental consensus on the gospel’ (164). Yet, the document also grants that this consensus is not simply an agreement on justification by faith which the Reformers espoused. The report summarizes the Reformed view succinctly: ‘God accepts that sinners are righteous for Christ’s sake on the basis of faith alone’ (157).

Taking the affirmation of the ‘fundamental p. 136 consensus on the gospel’ at face value, this discrepancy between the consensus and the reformational doctrine of justification by faith comes as somewhat of a surprise. For both Luther and Calvin, it would be impossible to contemplate a gap between the gospel and justification by faith. They are identical. Or, more accurately, justification by faith articulates most pointedly the gospel as *gospel*. This is clear even when Luther describes his breakthrough in understanding the meaning of the righteousness of God’:

¹⁶ Stephen Keenan, *Doctrinal Catechism*, pp. 138–139.

¹⁷ H. George Anderson, *et al.*, eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985). The dialogue report was published in various forms, among them in *Origins* 13 (1983): 277–304. The document will be cited by paragraph numbers, which appear in parentheses in the text.

¹⁸ Alister McGrath, ‘Justification: the New Ecumenical Debate’, *Themelios* 13 (1988): 43.

Then, finally, God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith ... Now I felt as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise.¹⁹

The difference between the consensus on the gospel and the reformational understanding of justification becomes somewhat more clear when in its chapter on 'Reflections and Interpretations', the US document describes differences between Lutherans and Catholics on several issues (pars. 97–121). One concerns 'forensic justification'. To safeguard the unconditional character of God's grace, Lutherans understand justification as the imputation of Christ's righteousness. This is considered to be an alien righteousness, that of Christ, by which a sinner is accounted righteousness by faith (par. 98). Though Catholics also insist that grace is unconditioned, i.e., originates entirely in God's merciful will, they do affirm 'conditions' that are the effect of God's grace. These play a role in the process of justification in that they 'condition the created effects of his powerful decrees' (par. 99).

In a subsequent paragraph this difference is formulated in terms of the relation between 'the remission of sins and the transformation wrought by grace'. Catholics have generally seen the infusion of grace as the basis for forgiveness, while for Lutherans God's gracious act of justifying sinners is the ground for continuous renewal (par. 101). This difference carries over into the approach to the Lutheran adage 'simul justus et peccator'. Catholics are wary of this expression, for in spite of the continuing presence of sins in the justified, grace does take hold and can be called 'inherent righteousness' (pars. 102–102). In other words, in a Christian, grace inheres and has primacy in a way that sin does not.

Further clarification regarding what is not included in the fundamental consensus is provided by the section dealing with the role of faith. *Sola fide* is affirmed within the Catholic tradition by appealing to the Tridentine denial that 'nothing prior to the free gift of faith merits justification and that all God's saving gifts come through Christ alone' (105; cf DS, 1532). At the same time it reaffirms the Catholic view that to be justifying such faith needs to be animated by love (par. 105). By contrast, the Lutheran view of p. 137 faith is described as living faith, which, by clinging to Christ and the gospel promise, alone justifies. 'Love always springs from such faith, but is among the works of the law, which do not justify' (106). From this perspective, Lutherans express their concerns about the Catholic approach. Primarily they fear that on this construction Pelagian notions of cooperation reassert themselves. It is interesting to note that Catholic attestations that such cooperation 'is itself a gift of grace' fail to allay Lutheran fears (par. 106).

Similar differences come to expression on the two other substantive points, namely, 'merit' (pars. 108–112) and 'satisfaction' (109–116). Regarding merit, Lutherans fear that it leads to an undermining of the 'unconditional character of God's word' (110).

Contrasting Perspectives

These points of difference are not simply enumerated on their own. The great merit of this report lies in pushing beyond these particular issues to an underlying pattern or approach. The document speaks variously of 'contrasting concerns and patterns of thought' (94), 'different patterns of thought and discourse' (96), and 'contrasting theological perspectives and structures of thought' (121). The significant issue for any difference, but especially underlying differences, is their status. The report is rather

¹⁹ WA 54, 1983, as cited in Hans Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 1964, p. 27.

tentative on this score. It suggests that they ‘may in part be complementary and, even if at times in unavoidable tension, not necessarily divisive’ (94).

The US document delineates these differences in a helpful way. First of all it concerns a difference in focus or emphasis. Lutherans focus on the ‘absolute priority of God’s redeeming word in Jesus’ to sinners. This summoning grace excludes all human conditions; only faith in the address of promise is required for the fulfilment of the promise (95). The contrasting Catholic concern is then formulated in a highly interesting way: ‘Catholics, while not rejecting the absolute priority of God’s saving action, are generally speaking more concerned with acknowledging the efficacy of God’s saving work in the renewal and sanctification of the created order, an efficacy which Lutherans, for their part, do not deny’ (ibid.). This formulation is striking in that what one emphasizes the other does not wish to deny. In fact, as stated, this is far too weak. Lutherans insist that the gospel message ‘does what it proclaims ...; it effects the reality of which it speaks’ (88). The ‘sole’ Lutheran concern, one might say, is the full efficacy of grace. The key to this formulation lies, of course, not so much in a lesser or greater emphasis on the efficacy of grace—‘more concerned’ versus ‘do not deny’—but on the manner of this efficacy and whether the effect as described (‘the renewal and sanctification of the created order’) constitutes ‘justification’.

This difference concerning the manner and scope of justification can be contrasted as a ‘transformationalist’ and a ‘declarative’ or ‘proclamatory’ [p. 138](#) model of justification.²⁰ The former refers to the transformation and renewal of life that is brought about ‘through God’s infusion of saving grace’ (par. 96).²¹ Here the document appeals to the adage, ‘(G)race does not destroy but perfects nature.’ The manner of justification is infusion; its content and scope, ‘sanctification’. The Lutheran approach, by contrast, focuses on justification understood as God’s declaration of righteousness in Christ, and, as such, justification is strictly distinguished from sanctification.

Justification by Faith as Criterion

So far we have considered only the discussion on the doctrine itself. The document pays considerable attention to an equally important issue, namely, its use. The question here concerns the role of justification by faith as a criterion in the church. This reflects the traditional Lutheran insistence that justification by faith constitutes the ‘*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*’. Must all else in the doctrine and the life of the church be tested for its compatibility with the doctrine of justification by faith?

In the dialogue, Lutherans and Catholics come to what it calls ‘incomplete convergence’ (152). Catholics agree on the need to test the practices, structures, and theologies of the church by the extent to which they help or hinder ‘the proclamation of God’s free and merciful promises in Christ Jesus which can be rightly received only through faith’ (153). The *incomplete* character of this convergence lies in the application of this criterion, namely, ‘which beliefs, practices, and structures pass the test’ (ibid.). This incomplete convergence raises interesting questions. On the one hand, the measure of convergence is momentous, for the formulation of the content of the criterion (‘the proclamation of God’s free and merciful promises ...’), is a direct quotation from a

²⁰ The term ‘transformationalist model’ is contrasted in the report to a ‘model of simultaneity’ (pars. 8, 25, 154, 158; cf. 96). Par. 90 speaks of the ‘proclamatory character of justification’ (cf. the description in pars. 25, 96, 158, 159). George Carey uses the terms ‘transformation’ and ‘declaration’ to describe this contrast; see ‘Justification and Roman Catholicism’ in J.I. Packer, et al., *Here we Stand: Justification by Faith Today* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), pp. 121–122.

²¹ Earlier it described this process as ‘a progressive transformation under the power of grace’ (par. 25).

paragraph articulating the *Lutheran* understanding of justification by faith (28)—which, interestingly enough, lies *outside* the consensus (157). On the other hand, this disagreement on whether ‘purgatory, the papacy and cult of the saints’ pass the test (153) raises questions concerning the reason for the disagreement. Is the reason a different understanding of the yardstick or a different understanding of the matters tested, or both? In any case, it is clear that the agreement concerns justification only as *a* criterion, not *the* criterion for the authenticity of the church (see 160).²² p. 139

It is striking that while some hail this consensus as an ecumenical landmark,²³ others speak of an ‘impasse’.²⁴

The central issue that continues to vex the dialogue on justification concerns differences regarding the interrelation of God’s grace and human response. Roger Haight provides a lucid description of this difference:

The reasons for the differences between Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologies of grace ... lie below the surface within fundamentally different paradigms of interpretation. The theological tradition from Augustine to Aquinas sees grace working in and transforming human freedom. In Luther, human freedom is minimized to leave complete room for the total priority and gratuity of God’s gracious forgiveness. Grace is identified as Christ and God’s Word, and faith’s passivity means that human justification is always the justice of another, Christ, with whom the Christian is united. In contrast to this, a constant underlying theme in Trent’s Decree on Justification, while granting the priority and gratuity of grace, deals with human responsibility and freedom.²⁵

Haight presents the two different paradigms as wishing to do justice to both the priority and gratuity of grace. The important difference then lies in the role given to human freedom and responsibility. But perhaps the description of grace on both sides in terms of ‘gratuity and priority’ is too general to pinpoint the difference adequately. This can be demonstrated by examining the way in which the primacy of grace is articulated from the viewpoint of this general conception of grace.

The Radicality of Sin and the Eccentricity of Faith

The obvious way to safeguard the primacy of grace from the general viewpoint is to assert its priority and primacy. Within this framework, Trent sounds its own *sola gratia*. Even the beginning of justification ‘must be attributed to God’s prevenient grace through Jesus Christ’, which ‘awakens’ and ‘assists’ the one turning to God (DS 1525, 1553), and once in the state of grace, Christ’s strength ‘precedes, accompanies and follows’ the believer’s good works. (DS 1546). Furthermore when the five causes of justification are enumerated human activity comes into view only insofar as baptism is called the ‘sacrament of faith’. The focus, however, is on God’s action. The final cause is God’s glory; the efficient cause, the merciful God; the meritorious cause, the satisfaction of the cross of Christ; the instrumental cause, baptism; the only formal cause, the justice of God which becomes ours as a gift. Trent insists, moreover that, nothing is prior to justification ‘whether faith or

²² Gerald Forde, one of the participants in the dialogue, makes this point. ‘Justification by Faith Alone: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls?’ in Joseph A. Burgess, ed., *In Search of Christian Unity: Basic Consensus/Basic Differences* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 65.

²³ Alister McGrath, ‘Justification: the New Ecumenical Debate’, *Themelios* 13 (1988): 43.

²⁴ Gerhard Forde, p. 68.

²⁵ Roger Haight, ‘Sin and Grace’, in Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Vol. II (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 120.

works, merits the grace of justification' (DS 1532) and warns against reliance on or glory in self 'instead of in the Lord', who 'wants His own gifts to be their merits' (DS 1548).

Contemporary ecumenical dialogues p. 140 pick up and reassert this priority and primacy of grace.²⁶ This gives rise to the question: what then was at stake in the reformation debates? The issue is not, as Haight suggest, differences over the degree of human involvement in salvation, with Protestants wishing to minimize the human factor. This turns the issue into one of quantity. Rather, the issue is, what is the quality, the nature, of the human 'factor'? On this issue, the Reformers' judgment is intrinsically linked to their understanding of justification as the 'cutting edge' of salvation, i.e., the point at which those enmeshed in sin are placed in a situation where they are fully 'right with God'.

It is in relation to that key issue that Luther, for example, radically excludes human contribution. This is summed up most aptly when he insists that 'what precedes grace is not a disposition but indisposition and rebellion'.²⁷ Paradoxical language often fails to clarify. Yet, on this issue one can hardly avoid it. Faith, though crucial (*sola fide*), is by nature self-discounting. This is so because it arises in a situation of non-faith, worse, of enmity. As such, it is entirely other-directed, namely to the mercy of God. This mercy includes the judgment, the saving diagnosis, that human beings outside of God's grace are not simply incomplete, but lost. Faith does not meet the justifying God partway. Rather, it springs from justification. It is entirely 'derivative'.²⁸ Or, to use an odious term, faith is utterly parasitic.

This self-discounting, other-directed, derivative character of faith runs like a golden thread through Calvin's elaboration of salvation in the *Institutes*.²⁹ Especially poignant is his depiction of faith with respect to sight and hearing:

Therefore, righteousness must either depart from us or works must not be brought into account, but faith alone must have place, whose nature it is to prick up the ears and close the eyes—that is, to be intent upon the promise alone and to turn thought away from all worth or merit of man (III, xiii, 4).

Elsewhere he insists that 'every particle of our salvation stands thus outside of us'. Accordingly, he asks, '(W)hy is it that we still trust or glory in works?' (III, xiv, 17). This of course echoes the familiar Lutheran *extra nos* theme, but it is especially significant in Calvin because the heart and soul of his theology lies not in the *extra nos* as such, nor in the *pro nobis* but in the *in nobis*. At the heart of his soteriology is the theme of union with Christ. Yet at critical points in the discussion p. 141 regarding the human role in justification by faith he is adamant about the *extra nos*.

What explains *this* 'minimalization' of the human 'factor'? Certainly not a desire to eliminate human action. After all, a basic summons sounds throughout Calvin's work, namely, the summons to faith. It is not a question of minimalization, maximalization or

²⁶ C-M (UK), ARCIC II, L-C VII.

²⁷ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), p. 97. More striking still is the conclusion, defended under his tutelage—totally contradicting the nominalist maxim 'facere quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam': 'the man who does what is in him sins' (ibid., 98).

²⁸ Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 26, 27.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969). This work will be cited in the text by book, chapter, and paragraph number.

elimination. In fact, in summing up the causes of justification, Calvin, in contrast to Trent, speaks directly of faith as the 'formal or instrumental cause' (III, xiv, 17). The identification of this 'cause' is all the more striking, occurring, as it does, in the same paragraph where he insists that every particle of our salvation lies outside ourselves.

As mentioned earlier, the point is not the degree of human involvement but the futility and sinfulness of human action outside of Christ. Rather than considering the human action as a co-determining factor in justification, Calvin sees the sinner, dead, unrighteous, lost. To speak of human activity before justification as a bridge, however, narrow, is meaningless for Calvin: '... whatever a man thinks, plans, or carries out before he is reconciled to God through faith is accursed, not only of no value for righteousness, but surely deserving condemnation' (III, xiv, 4). It is on the basis of this grave judgment on the human condition that he extols the gratuity of grace: 'By this confession we deprive man of all righteousness, even to the slightest particle, until by mercy alone, he is reborn into the hope of eternal life ...' (III, xiv, 5). What the gracious God finds, in Calvin's view, is not human potentialities—however damaged, weakened, or wounded—but death. 'For Scripture everywhere proclaims that God finds nothing in man to arouse him to do good to him but that he comes to man in his free generosity. For what can a dead man do to attain life?' (*ibid.*). As Carl Braaten puts it from a Lutheran perspective, '... we have no remaining capacity to trigger off the event which effects justification.'³⁰ If this is an accurate depiction of the human situation, by itself the emphasis on the priority and gratuity of grace fails to plumb the peculiarity of grace and faith—even when the gift character of faith itself is underscored. For, as G.C. Berkouwer succinctly formulates the matter: At issue is not the *origin*, but *function* of faith.³¹

We have explored Calvin's understanding at some length to attempt to demonstrate that the point of the Reformers' understanding of justification is not adequately captured in a somewhat general affirmation of the primacy and gratuity of grace. Rather justification by faith was designed to deliver 'the death blow to all human co-operation at the very beginning, the root, of salvation'.³² What is the nature and significance of the different p. 142 approaches to justification? It can indeed be described as one of emphasis. While the one emphasizes the drama of the threshold situation between death and life, the other emphasizes the process of renewal across the threshold. Let us for the sake of the argument grant that this is an accurate depiction.³³ The question remains, does this difference in emphasis not reflect a different estimation of the human condition this side of the threshold, and therefore of the radicality of the required operation called grace? Further, when 'grace' is affirmed to be necessary in preparation for justification, how is it that a 'grace' other than that of 'justification' is necessary to overcome the initial inertia? It is in the act of justification that the devastating (and therefore saving) diagnosis of the sinful condition is delivered as well as the remedy for sin. What grace or human action

³⁰ Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 27.

³¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *De Sakramenten* (Kampen: Kok, 1954), p. 249; cf. *idem.*, *Geloof en Rechtvaardiging*, pp. 45, 188.

³² Klaas Runia, 'Justification and Roman Catholicism', in D. A. Carson, ed., *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 114.

³³ It is in fact highly one-sided, since the Reformers were equally concerned (Calvin for that matter was *primarily* concerned) about the new life in Christ.

can there be 'before' this justification that prepares for the threshold experience? What other than justification can be the 'creative cause of faith'?³⁴

Let us suppose that the foregoing describes significant differences more or less accurately. The identification of these differences cannot mean the end of the discussion. The more important question is, how significant are these differences? Do they justify the 'splendid isolation' in which the two faith communities live? Do remaining differences regarding justification justify continuing division?³⁵ What is the significance of differences among communions in comparison to our common foundation, namely, Jesus Christ?

JUSTIFICATION, SCRIPTURE, AND TRADITION

Justification as Judge

Exploring this question forces us to look beyond justification and biblical authority. More accurately, it forces us to look at the interconnection between these and the 'lived reality' of being the church of Jesus Christ. Jean-Marie Tillard is convinced that 'justification by faith' is not *the* basic divisive issue. 'It is related to a more fundamental issue. The problem lies in the relation between Christ, Church and the Word of God.'³⁶ What Tillard has in mind is the 'instrumental role' of the church in salvation. Once more we are very close to the issue of Scripture and Tradition. Tillard maintains that it is 'impossible to hear the Word of God without hearing it in the voice of the Church'.³⁷ Though coming from God, the Word 'is revealed through a process in which the community itself, in the Old and the New Covenant, is profoundly involved and p. 143 plays an important role'.³⁸ The 'basic divisive problem', according to Tillard, 'is the conception of the nature of the Church'.³⁹

In considering the possibility that the underlying differences are ecclesiological, it is crucial to keep in mind Tillard's statement that the issue of justification is 'related' to a more fundamental issue. If we do not observe this relation, the danger is great that we discuss issues in isolation, leaving one behind in order to move to another. To lose the connection is to fail to reap the full fruit of ecumenical discussions. In fact, as Pesch suggests, taking seriously the ecclesiological consequences of the doctrine of justification is the condition for speaking of harmony regarding the doctrine itself.⁴⁰

What are the ecclesiological consequences of the doctrine of justification by faith? Here its criterion function returns. According to Pesch, the 'office of judge' (*Richteramt*) is constitutive for the justification doctrine.⁴¹ Invoking this doctrine as the criterion for the life of the church, Pesch raises some incisive questions. He asks, for example, whether, for its members, the church does not make itself a demanded 'work' in such a way that it in

³⁴ See Braaten, *Justification*, p. 38.

³⁵ Otto Hermann Pesch, *Gerechtfertigt aus Glauben: Luthers Frage und die Kirche* (Freiburg, im Br.: Herder, 1982), p. 32–33: 'Wir sind uns in der Rechtfertigungs lehre nicht enig. Zu Fragen bleibt: sind wir uns kirchentrenned uneinig?'

³⁶ J.-M. R. Tillard, 'We Are Different', *Midstream* 25 (1986): 281.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁴⁰ *Gerechtfertigt aus Glauben*, p. 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

fact identifies itself with the grace of God that comes wholly from the outside.⁴² Although such questions seem harsh, Pesch calls the critical function of this doctrine a liberating force. This comes into play whenever the church in its influence on believers concretely hinders, or even prevents, their living 'by faith alone'.⁴³ Pesch summarizes the critical force of this doctrine as ensuring the 'self-relativizing' of the church.⁴⁴ He gives this criterion broad scope and radical sway: All church structures and all official authority relations—even if we were to have them from Jesus' own mouth—must nevertheless remain radically relative. They are relative with reference to that which is the church's very *raison d'être*: the relativity of the instrument with reference to that for which it is used and with reference to the one who uses it.⁴⁵ The alternative to giving the doctrine of justification this judging function, according to Pesch, is a church which '*fundamentally* and in its own *self-understanding* withdraws from the judging criterion of the justification article'.⁴⁶

George Tavard is, if anything, even more radical in the application of this criterion. On its basis, he insists, 'the entire edifice of Catholic thought since the sixteenth century stands in need of reconstruction'.⁴⁷ Not only thought is subject to this criterion. As 'the core of the Gospel', justification by faith necessarily becomes the touchstone of all subsequent affirmations and proclamations. p. 144 In its light the Church must reform itself. Sacramental theology and practice, liturgical worship, ethical principles and their applications, and the structure and nature of ministerial authority must be reviewed, reassessed and, where necessary reconstructed.⁴⁸

Here we arrive at the point where authority of Scripture and the doctrine of justification by faith converge. This becomes crystal clear by the way in which Tavard, in the next sentence, appeals to Vatican II: 'This may well be done in the spirit of Vatican Council II, which declared, "The magisterium is not above God's Word ..." (DV, 10)'.

I have cited Catholic theologians at some length to indicate how radically altered the present situation is from that of the sixteenth century. One cannot dismiss these as merely minority voices. Pesch and Tavard, though not representative of all Catholic theology, are hardly minor figures. Furthermore, one cannot minimize their views as merely 'theological opinion'. The movement towards the suspension of the mutual doctrinal condemnations at the time of the Reformation is taking place under the official auspices of the Catholic (and Lutheran) church. Moreover, Catholic theologians are not 'freelancers'. The Vatican Decree on Ecumenism officially calls theologians to the task of reforming the church: '... their primary duty is to make an honest and careful appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and achieved in the Catholic household itself, in order that

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 41–42.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 50; because the latter is no option, Pesch concludes that we are one in the doctrine of justification (pp. 59–51).

⁴⁷ George H. Tavard, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983), p. 110.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 111.

its life may bear witness more loyally and luminously to the teachings and ordinances which have been handed down from Christ through the apostles.’⁴⁹

Textual ‘Over-Against’

As noted earlier *Dei Verbum*’s insistence on the subservience of the magisterium to the Word, as well as the Ecumenical Degree’s call for reform on the basis of the tradition handed down from Christ through the apostles, would be more reassuring to Evangelical ears if the primacy of Scripture in discerning authentic tradition were clearly identified.

Even if one accepts the organic interrelationship between revelation, Scripture, and tradition, and thus rejects every simplistic *sola Scriptura* appeal that wrenches the written word from its living matrix of revelation and tradition, the Scripture must be accorded its unique ‘over-against’ role.⁵⁰ This is crucial, for this status of Scripture is the concrete index of the fact that, by virtue of its transcendence and holiness, God’s grace is not at our disposal.⁵¹ God’s revelation is, indeed, given into our hands and is meant to be handed on. Yet, to ensure that it is *God’s* revelation that is handed on, a norm, a criterion is needed. James B. Torrance raises the critical question in this regard: ‘In what way does Revelation come to us through tradition? There are right ways and wrong ways of interpreting this, and this is where the ecumenical debate lies today.’⁵² He insists that ‘it is one thing to say that the Church is the sphere of the Spirit of truth (“... who leads us into all truth”), or to say that the Church is possessed by the Spirit. It is another to say that the Church possesses the Spirit and therefore possesses the truth in herself.’⁵³ Presumably, no one in the Roman Catholic tradition would make such claims. The real question is: what are the best safeguards against acting as if one were the possessor?

On this issue, Matthias Handel’s massive study of the role of Scripture in Faith and Order documents provides some helpful insights. He emphasizes that the church stands first of all in a ‘hearing and receiving tradition’. If the church aspires to an appropriate reception of tradition, it must open itself ever anew to the witness of Scripture.⁵⁴ This means that the church constantly places itself under the judgment of Scripture.

The heirs of the Reformation must always be prepared to face the ‘radical question’ it asks Rome. Yves Congar formulates this question as follows: ‘Does the Catholic Church not identify itself with the norm, situating it within itself? Consequently, it has no confrontation, nor Lord, no dialogue except with itself.’⁵⁵ In the same vein, K.E. Skjoldsgaard argues for the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between the

⁴⁹ *Unitaris Redintegratio*, 4; on this issue, see Margaret O’Gara. ‘On the road toward unity: The present dialogue among the churches’, *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* vol. 48; 1993, pp. 18–40, esp. 32–50.

⁵⁰ See Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, p.83) (p.88 in Dutch edition).

⁵¹ Cf. Siegfried Wiederhofer, ‘Grundprobleme des theologischen Traditionsbegriffs’, *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 112 (1990): 2021.

⁵² James B. Torrance, ‘Authority, Scripture and Tradition’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 87 (1987): 246.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁴ Matthias Haudel, *Die Bibel und die Einheit der Kirchen: Eine Untersuchung der Studien von ‘Glauben und Kirchenverfassung’* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), p. 378; cf. 391. The phrase ‘hörenden und empfangenden Tradition’ is that of Anton Houtepen. I have access only to the English edition: ‘Reception, Tradition, Communion’, in Max Thurian, *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), p. 150.

⁵⁵ Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, tr. David Smith (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 33.

Word of God and tradition, understood as human response: ‘The history of the Church has shown that they must necessarily be carefully distinguished, otherwise the Church would become its own legislator, and finally its own Lord.’⁵⁶ The over-against of the Word of God, which the supremacy of the canon is meant to maintain, targets subjectivism of whatever type. From the point of view of the Reformers, the Roman Church appears to fall into a collective subjectivism: the church as a whole led by the official teaching office, determines the truth—witness the decisions of 1854 and 1950 regarding Mary. From the Catholic point of view, Luther appears to fall into an individualistic subjectivism: a solitary individual dares to claim that his interpretation is the true interpretation of the Scriptures—witness the ongoing divisions in the church.⁵⁷ p. 146

It is striking that even in literary theory the integrity and primacy of the text needs to be asserted against its post-modern dissolution. Walter A. Davis, for example, insists that it is still possible to say [for example], that Shakespeare measures me rather than the other way around; that the great writers offer us the possibility of a humanity we can attain only through the most strenuous efforts of self-overcoming; and that it is a good thing to be ‘the humble servant of the text’ (rather than ‘the force that brings the text into being’) when the text has the power to lead us beyond the narrow range of our self-serving beliefs and our self-protective emotions.⁵⁸

If it is crucial to maintain the givenness, primacy, and normativity of the text in the case of the literary greats of our culture, it is *a fortiori* true of a text that the church has received as canon, as rule and norm for her faith.

Canon within Canon as Criterion?

We have moved from justification by faith as central criterion for the authenticity of faith and the church to the role of Scripture as judge of tradition. This shift raises the question concerning the relationship between Scripture and its content. Specifically, the question arises whether the authority of Scripture in relationship to tradition is adequately maintained by the right reception and a thorough-going application of ‘justification by faith’. More specifically still, is it in fact not Scripture, but a specific content of Scripture that is the decisive criterion for faithfulness to the gospel? Certainly, Luther’s difficulties with the recalcitrant epistle of James suggests an appeal to ‘a canon within the canon’. In that case, it is again not the Scriptures but a specific interpretation of Scripture that becomes the criterion of authenticity. Thus another—Lutheran—tradition becomes the measure of Scripture.

Perhaps a distinction between ‘necessary’ and ‘sufficient’ criteria is helpful. Arguably, justification by faith is a necessary criterion, a judge that calls into question all church practices that in any way detract from the sheer gratuity and radicality of grace. Justification by faith, however, is not a sufficient criterion for guiding the church. This is clear from the New Testament itself. Not even all of Paul’s letters elaborate justification by faith. Furthermore, quite apart from James (which need not be understood as incompatible with Romans), other letters do not so much as mention this doctrine. The example of the First letter of John is instructive.

⁵⁶ K. E. Skydsgaard, ‘Tradition as an Issue in Contemporary Theology’, and ‘Traditions’, in *The Old and the New in the Church* (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 33–34.

⁵⁷ Joseph Lortz describes the Protestant approach as ‘ein starker Dogmatismus im Subjektivismus, ein subjektiver Dogmatismus’. Quoted in Heiko Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, p. 285, n. 57.

⁵⁸ Walter A. Davis, ‘Offending the Profession (After Peter Handke)’, *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1984): 716–717.

Obviously one does not find the doctrine of justification by faith articulated in this letter. At the same time, it is filled with a variety of criteria for testing the authenticity of the Christian community. They [p. 147](#) range from keeping Christ's commandments or word, to loving one's brother, to committing sin or denying that one commits sin, to remaining with the community, to having the Spirit, to confessing that Jesus has come in the flesh.

Even this partial list of John's tests of authenticity suggests a bewildering variety of criteria. Yet there is a common strand and a common anchorage. The common strand consists of guarding that which the community has heard from the beginning ([2:24](#); [4:6](#); [5:6-12](#)). The common anchorage is Jesus Christ come in the flesh ([3:22-23](#); [4:2-3](#); [5:1](#)). Of course, the thread is connected to the anchor: What we have seen with our eyes, heard with our ears, touched with our hands—that we, as faithful witnesses, declare to you. In other words, the key to the authenticity, the apostolicity of the church is none other than the person Jesus and his mission, including especially his death and the shedding of his blood ([3:16](#); [4:10](#); [5:6](#)). This central theme is communicated by the apostolic testimony. In receiving the Scriptures as canon the church recognizes this vital strand and indispensable anchor.

Today the fullness of Christ as testified to in the Scriptures is the measure of the church. Justification by faith, therefore, is a necessary criterion. It ensures that the cutting edge of the gospel, as we called it earlier, truly cuts to the quick all pride, presumption, and claims to authority that do not administer the authority of Christ—everything that observes his promised presence and the radicality of his mission *for* and *through* the church.

Justification by faith cannot, however, be a sufficient criterion for the authentic life and walk of the people of God, the body of Christ. Salvation in Christ is too rich, too deep and broad, to be captured by the soteriological cutting edge of the gospel articulated in Justification by Faith. In the absence of a single, well-defined principle as criterion of authenticity, it becomes of the utmost importance that the church clearly affirms and submits to the Scripture as supreme norm.⁵⁹ Without this, there is no defence against tradition becoming more than interpretive, more than receptive. Without the over-against of the Scriptures the church succumbs to [p. 148](#) the illusion that it is exempt from the call of *semper reformanda*.

To insist on a clear affirmation of and submission to the primacy of Scripture as norm is not necessarily to revert to a simplistic pitting of Scripture against tradition. As indicated earlier, scriptural authority does not function without interpretation, and interpretation takes place within a tradition. But if, as we confess, the Scriptures and their meaning are not at our disposal, the church needs to submit constantly to the correction and the reproof of these writings.

⁵⁹ Carl J. Peter has pleaded for a 'critical principle' in addition to justification by faith. He calls it the 'Principle of Respect for the Divine in its Concrete Realizations'. (Carl J. Peter, 'Justification by Faith and the Need of Another Critical Principle', *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, et al., p. 310). This other principle refers to what many Roman Catholic theologians rightly point out, namely, that Revelation always involves human mediation (see the citations from Tillard above, as well as the fine discussion of this issue by Joseph Ratzinger in *Revelation and Tradition*, pp. 26–49). In the light of this, Wiederhofer speaks of a dialectic relationship between these two aspects of revelation (*op. cit.*). Important as it is to recognize that in a significant sense revelation *includes* the recipient, it is crucial to recognize that revelation comes *to* the church. The 'inclusion', in fact, plays a proper role only in the recognition of the primacy and supremacy of the 'coming to'. Peter's idea of a *complementary* principle and Wiederhofer's elaboration of a *dialectic* relationship suggests a state of equilibrium or reciprocity which does not do justice to the 'imbalance' of the 'coming to'. The insistence on the supremacy of Scripture as norm is an attempt to respect this 'imbalance'.

A Response to George Vandeveld

George H. Tavard

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