

ROMISH DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION*

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The Romish doctrine is set forth in the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent (Session VI, “Decree Concerning Justification”) and is summed up in Chapters VI and VII. The doctrine is set forth in terms of the various *causes*. The *final* cause is the glory of God and of Christ; the *efficient* cause is the merciful God who washes and sanctifies; the *meritorious* cause is the Lord Jesus Christ who merited justification by his passion and made satisfaction to the Father for us; the *instrumental* cause is the sacrament of baptism; the *formal* cause is the justice of God by which we are made just and consists in the infusion of sanctifying grace. Though

the canons do not speak expressly of the *predisposing* or *preparatory* cause, yet the teaching of the two chapters referred to imply the same and define this cause in terms of faith, fear, hope, love, and contrition.

With reference to what is called the *meritorious* cause, Rome is insistent that Christ by his merits and satisfaction has procured for us the grace of justification. But this is not to be construed as meaning that it is by the righteousness and obedience of Christ that we are justified. Canon X while, on the one hand, insisting that Christ by his righteousness merited for us to be justified, yet, on the other hand, pronounces its anathema upon anyone who says that it is by that righteousness we are formally just. This distinction becomes clear when we bear in mind that, for Rome, justification is not a forensic or declarative act but consists in the sanctification and renewal of the inward man. Negatively, justification consists in the remission of sin and, positively, in the renewal of the soul. But the causal relation of these two elements in justification is that by the renewal of the soul, that is by regeneration, “a man’s sins are blotted out and he becomes truly just” (Joseph Pohle ed. Arthur Preuss: *Dogmatic Theology*, VII, St. Louis, 1934, p. 303).

It is on this doctrine of justification as consisting in sanctification and renewal, the infusion of righteousness and sanctifying grace, that the polemic of Rome turns, and it is preeminently at this point that the issue between the Romish and Protestant positions must be joined. If anything has been demonstrated by the foregoing study of the usage both in the Old Testament and in the New it is that justification is a term of forensic import and refers to the judgment conceived and registered with reference to judicial status. It is strange that Rome should be so reluctant to recognize this. For even if Rome admitted that justification as to its *nature* is forensic, she could still retain what belongs to the essence of her position, namely, that the ground upon which this favourable judgment of God rests is not the righteousness and obedience of Christ but righteousness infused, inwrought, and outwrought in the works which are the fruit of *fides formata*, namely, faith informed with charity. This admission would reorient, of course, the terms of Rome's polemic as also of the anti-Romish Protestant polemic. But the crux of the controversy would still be the question of infused righteousness versus the vicarious and imputed righteousness of Christ. However, Rome is adamant in her insistence that justification is to be

defined as *consisting* in sanctification and renewal, the impartation of sanctifying grace, after the pattern of the decrees of Trent. Hence it is necessary to join issue with Rome on both questions, namely, the *nature* and the *ground* of justification.

Rome's polemic is directed most vigorously against the tenet that we are justified by faith alone. This is necessitated by her conception of the nature of justification and, more particularly, by her view of the progressive character of justification and of the merits accruing to the believer from the works of faith. Here again the divergence of Rome from the sustained witness of Scripture to the effect that we are justified by faith apart from works is most patent. If anything is apparent from the evidence with which we have dealt in the commentary and in the foregoing pages of this appendix it is that "faith" is accorded the instrumental agency in connection with justification. Nothing should serve to expose the fallacy of Rome's doctrine more effectively than the incompatibility of this sustained emphasis upon faith with the Romish emphasis upon works and the merit accruing therefrom. It is symptomatic of the total discrepancy between Rome's position and the teaching of Scripture that baptism should be conceived of as the instrumental cause. The efficiency that Scripture accords to faith Rome accords to baptism. Is it not sufficient to make suspect any such formulation of the doctrine of justification to ask the question: where is baptism brought into such relation to that act of God denoted by the terms of which the term "justify" is the proper rendering? In contrast, how frequently is faith, to the express exclusion of works, brought into this relation to justification!

Rome errs in its failure to recognize the precise character of justification as an act of God in the sphere of putative and declarative judgment. In this respect the Romish doctrine is directly counter to the pervasive import of the term “justify” and its cognates in the usage of Scripture. Justification is thus confused with regeneration, renovation, and sanctification. The effect is that the distinctiveness of the grand article of justification by grace through faith is eliminated from the gospel. From this failure to reckon with justification in its true and distinguishing character arises a series of correlative deviations and distortions. The righteousness of Christ’s obedience, in the nature of the case, cannot sustain to justification any other relation than that which it sustains to regeneration and sanctification—it is

not the righteousness by which we are justified. And this is a denial that impinges directly upon the teaching of Paul in Rom. 5:17, 18, 19; II Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9, not to speak of other relevant biblical data. Again, faith is displaced from the position which the pervasive witness of Scripture demands, namely, that it is faith, by reason of its specific character in distinction from works as well as from all the other graces of the Spirit, and faith alone that is brought into the instrumental relation to justification. Furthermore, the emphasis of Scripture upon the purely gratuitous character of justification is made of no effect in the Romish construction because the place accorded to human satisfaction and merit violates the concept of grace. And, finally, the definitive character of justification is rejected in favour of justification as an intrinsic process in virtue of which, as the Council of Trent affirmed, the justified increase in the righteousness received in justification and are still further justified (Chapter X). It is apparent how the various aspects of the Romish doctrine cohere with one another and how the basic error of failure to recognize the distinguishing character and grace of justification has made it not only possible but necessary for Rome to controvert what is set forth so patently in the witness of Scripture.

*Source: *The Epistles to the Romans* (NICNT), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968, p. 359-362.

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