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Justification: An Ecumenical Study

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Justification: An Ecumenical Study

George H. Tavard

New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1983

137 pp., \$11.35 paperback

While Paul Hacker (*The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion* [Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970]) regards Luther's theology as a fundamental perversion of the gospel, in the eyes of another contemporary Catholic scholar, Luther's Christocentric character of grace and justification is unimpeachable from the standpoint of Paul (p. 66).

After the manner of Augustine and the Scholastics in I Thessalonians 4:2-12, the readers are exhorted "to practice their faith as a kind of new law leading to sanctification" (p. 12). In Athens (Acts 17:16ff), Paul discovered the inadequacy of his apologetics. It transformed the manner in which Paul had understood the implications of his Damascus experience (p. 13). Romans, together with Galatians and I and II Corinthians, mark the change in Paul's theology. The grace of God is given gratuitously. Justification is the gift of grace received by faith (p. 14).

However, the full impact of Paul's Athenian experience was lost in the bustling growth of the church in the first centuries (p. 17). Emphasis was placed on the human capacity to prepare for the gift of grace. In Augustine, there was an insight into the meaning of the gospel as explained by Paul. Yet in the Middle Ages, by and large, faith was regarded as a mere preparation for receiving grace emphasizing man's ability *facere quod in se est* (to do what is in him). Thus justification was submerged in the concept of progressive sanctification as characteristic of salvation.

The author credits Luther with the rediscovery of Pauline theology basing his argument chiefly on Luther's two commentaries on Galatians of 1519 and 1535 respectively (pp. 49ff).

In the former commentary, the author maintains, Luther argues that the Christian message witnesses to the transformation of sinner into saint. Yet this is effected not by obedience but precisely by faith, for the gospel preaches that sins have been forgiven by Christ. "Everyone who believes in Christ is just, not yet in reality, but in hope. He has begun to be justified and saved."

Did Luther's doctrine change later? Though the commentary of 1535 is more polemical, the difference is not in what Luther says but how he says it (pp. 58ff). He now stresses that faith is a force changing persons. Faith is always active in love. Using forensic language, humans are justified by the imputation of Christ's righteousness but also renewed by the Holy Spirit who begets a new life.

In rejecting Luther, the Tridentine Fathers, Tavard maintains, did not realize "that they were not functioning at the religious depth of Luther's central concern" (p. 71). If they had, "Luther's teaching could easily have

become the official Catholic doctrine" (p. 79). The clash with Luther follows chiefly from the "ambiguity of the conciliar concern for both living faith and intellectual belief" (ibid.). Had the Council realized "that the fruits of justification are implicitly given in justification itself, then the difference with Luther would have remained minimal" (ibid.).

Among Protestants, Tavard says that the Wesleyan movement has broken the unanimity of Protestantism (p. 92). Though moved at first by Luther's Preface to the letter to the Romans (the so-called Aldersgate experience), he later commented on Luther's commentary on Galatians that he was utterly ashamed of this book because, in his eyes, "Luther speaks blasphemously of good works and the law of God" (p. 88). Actually, Wesley restored the scholastic teaching of *facere quod in se est* as "a condition for faith and thereby for justification" (p. 89).

In conclusion, the author says, seemingly Luther's doctrine of justification by grace through faith has had little impact on the church whether Lutheran or Catholic. Yet "the time may have come in the contemporary ecumenical dialogue... for making a new effort to understand the meaning of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and its right place at the heart of Christian life and thought" (p. 113).

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What Are They Saying About the Grace of Christ?

Brian O. McDermott, S.J.

Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984

65 pp. with bibliography, \$3.95 U.S.

Someone looking for an introduction to contemporary Catholic theology would not go far wrong with Paulist Press's *What Are They Saying About...?* series, and Brian O. McDermott's contribution is no exception. The book will introduce the reader to what recent Catholic theologians (especially Küng, Rahner, and Schillebeeckx) have to say about grace. Yet this small book is more than an introduction; it is itself a contribution toward the development of an ecumenical theology of grace that is both Catholic and Protestant.

In McDermott's explorations of grace in the process of growth into eschatological completion, he is most assuredly Catholic in foundation and expression. Since his catholicism is solidly Augustinian in orientation, theologians who are descendants of Luther or Calvin will not be uncomfortable with his basic points. This is seen both in the friendly attitude toward Karl Barth and in the use of the work of Ernest Becker, whose psychology owes much to Kierkegaard and, therefore, Luther.