

A Book Review. “The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology” by Mark C. Mattes

Colleagues,

You ought to know about this book—and with this rambling review I’d like to tease many of you into (buying and) reading it. Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Mark C. Mattes.

THE ROLE OF JUSTIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY.

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004). 198pp. Paper. US\$25.

Mark Mattes has given us a major work, in at least three ways. 1) He puts the theology of five superstar Protestants of our time—four Germans, one American—under the microscope to determine how faithful they are to the fundamental criterion [“discrimen” is the Latin word he likes] which they all claim to acknowledge, justification by faith alone. 2) He does so with a competence that puts him at home inside the complex theologies of these five—Eberhard Juengel, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Juergen Moltmann, Robert Jenson and Oswald Bayer. Four Germans and one American (Jenson). I know a little bit about this quintet, have met four of them over the years. But MM “talks

shop” with them as though they grew up on the same block. I marvel. 3) As for that “discrimen” by which he tests them, Mattes knows what justification-by-faith (and its flipside corollary, a law-promise hermeneutic) is all about in Reformation theology. He uses it masterfully to test the superstars. The first four fail the test; Bayer does not. That “Aha!” about the justification criterion and how to use it—where did MM get that? Apparently Gerhard Forde at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, MN) mentored him in that direction during his own seminary days.

It’s a masterful work, but by no means an easy read. Initially because the five theologians Mattes analyzes aren’t easy to read. They manufacture jaw-breaker vocabulary as they go along. [How did Jesus get by using mostly street talk?] So when Mattes says about Eberhard Juengel, “He claims that language mediates experience and truth (which is metaphorical, not discursive, and capable of pluriform meanings and referentialities), even disclosing God’s grace – God coming into experience via an ‘analogy of advent,’” you may well gulp on first reading.

But that is Mattesian plainspeak, his dumbing down for us what is Juengel-speak: “to understand [truth] much more primordially as that interruption of the ontological cohesion of the (created) world (the cohesion of its actuality), through which we attain to the position of being over against our world so that something like ‘adaequatio intellectus et rei’ becomes possible. For this elementary interruption of the cohesion of our actuality ought to contain within itself an even more primordial correspondence and unconditioned trustworthiness. Is invocation of God this kind of elemental interruption of our life and so of the world?” (31) Imagine what that sounds like in Juengel’s original German!

All five of the theologians MM presents to us are no easy

reads. I still cannot understand why there are (apparently) no “nickel words” for doing serious theology in German. Reminds me of this: Years ago I translated a small piece by Vatican II German superstar Karl Rahner for English publication. Later I told a German Roman friend that I’d done so. His comment: “We’re still waiting for someone to translate Rahner into German!” Here’s one wild thought: the four Germans presented here carved out their professorial careers at universities in Tuebingen and Heidelberg. The Neckar River runs through both towns. Is it something in the water?

Unlikely. For American-born Jenson, himself nurtured over the years on German theology, is scarcely less daunting with his rhetoric. Sample: “Since our Lord’s self-identity is constituted in dramatic coherence, it is established not from the beginning but from the end, not at birth but at death, not in persistence but in anticipation. The biblical God is not eternally himself in that he persistently instantiates a beginning in which he is all he ever will be; he is eternally himself in that he unrestrictedly anticipates an end in which he will be all he ever could be.” (123).

Mattes never complains about such matters. Apparently because he can and does also operate in the verbal world of the theologians he’s wrestling with. But I digress. Enough about theologian-speak that sheds darkness rather than light. That’s my tick, not Mattes’. Fifty years ago this summer Marie and I went to Hamburg University (on HER Fulbright scholarship!)-for my plunge into grad work in German theology. So I can cope-sortuv-but not always as a happy coper.

Back to Mark Mattes.

1. His basic outline: First chapter is on “Justification’s Role in Theology.” Here’s his axiom: “Theology needs to

take leave of the quest for system and affirm its role as the art of discerning how to deliver the promise." System is not a dirty word per se. MM's own "system" has the promise at the "hub" (his favored term) and it all flows from and back to that. The "systems" that are no-no's are the mega-systems that seek to fit all reality under some one conceptual umbrella—Hegel's dialectic now in a number of modern formats, the rationality that (allegedly) dominates academe whereby universities lay claim to universality, to covering all the bases. At root they may resemble the hub-system that MM calls for, the difference being that there is a different promise at that hub-center, an "other" gospel. So they are incapable of "discerning how to deliver THE promise." If the other gospels in these mega-systems could be divested of their soteriological pretensions, they might themselves be save-able – and be rightfully affirmed by theology grounded in the promissory hub of justification.

2. Then comes a chapter each on the five theologians. They fall into two categories. Three of them—Juengel, Pannenberg and Moltmann—strive to be Justification theologians in "theological strategies of accommodation." That means they seek to make justification-theology commendable to the university-worlds of cultured intellectuals in which they work, an increasingly post-Christian world ever since the Enlightenment. That agenda recalls Schleiermacher's 200-year old "Speeches on Religion [addressed] to the Cultured Intellectuals who Despise Her." Hence the term "accommodation." They strive to make justification theology compatible, yes commendable, to the agendas that today's VIPs hold dear. There is little evidence that Schleiermacher met any success in his attempt at accommodation. In a footnote MM cites John Leith's parallel observation: "German

university theology . . . fascinates many American theologians today. . . . Yet those who are fascinated with this theology have not . . . taken seriously the ineffectiveness of this theology in Germany itself and in Europe. Why has this theology so little effect on the vitality of a declining church in Europe and so little impact on social and political life? Every seminary professor needs a reality check—is the theology of the university preachable so that it can sustain congregations over a period of time?” Such theology is, of course, preachable. It happens every Sunday. But if it is not “promise-preaching,” MM claims, it’s not God’s gospel; and if it’s not God’s gospel, there is only one other option. So where do such preachers get this unpromising stuff? From their teachers. If seminary profs don’t know how to put the promise at the hub, their students won’t learn it either. MM doesn’t get that harsh, but I’m not contradicting his message.

3. Juengel does his accommodation with “Justification in the Theology of the Speech Event.” Contemporary linguistic philosophy is the big umbrella under which he places justification . Pannenberg with “Justification in the Theology of the Metaphysical One” seeks to “map reality [that’s what metaphysics is] so as to show how God fits on this map” and do so in a way that, he thinks, will commend God to contemporary despisers of religion. Moltmann with “Justification in the Theology of Liberation” comes off sounding less arcane. Liberation—we’ve all heard about that. His focus is ethics—doing the right thing to make a better world. No dictionary needed to understand that. With his theology of hope and of the crucified God Moltmann holds before us God’s design and energy for the world’s future. His own hope is to galvanize us as ethical agents for

transforming our broken world into that “future pure world of righteous social transactions.”

4. What happens to the promise, and to justification, in these three accommodationist paradigms is not good news. Mattes shows this with step by step skill and convincing argument. For the details you will have to read for yourself. The “Platzregen” (Luther’s metaphor for the promise—a passing thunder-shower) moves on when the people getting rained on opt for other agendas.
5. Two of MM’s quintet, Jenson and Bayer, are non-accommodationists. They see the major umbrellas of today’s culture—including academic culture—as “other gospels” and thus dismiss any strategies of accommodation. Mattes calls Jenson’s brand of non-accommodation as “Justification in the Theology of the Perfected Church.” Early in his teaching career Jenson held justification-by-faith to be the hub, and together with his then colleague Eric Gritsch, wrote the classic textbook: “Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings” (1976). He’s now moved beyond “Lutheran sectarianism” to a bi-focal ellipse of the Trinitarian dogma together with the ecumenics of the church catholic. The church catholic, not the academy nor any other manifestation of a culture that has “lost-its-story,” is the community within which language exists for “presenting the reality of [the Triune] God.” The axiom is: “Trinity is the abbreviated church, and church is the extended Trinity.” In the process of moving away from the Lutheran law-promise paradigm to this Trinitarian catholic ellipse, Jenson has re-appropriated from medieval scholasticism the hermeneutic of nature-grace. So it was a surprise to some of us that he was chosen as the keynoter for the recent Aarhus (Denmark) conference on the “Future of Lutheran Theology.” His lecture title:

“Triune Grace.”

There were at least four from this Crossings listserve who attended that conference. We ought not to have been surprised. The conference-planners had already told us in thesis #5 of the preparatory materials: “The distinction between law and gospel belongs properly to the first-order level of divine address and human response [i.e., God’s promise proclaimed and faith trusting it]. The law-gospel dialectic should not be abstracted from this concrete situation and should not be used as a theological principle that necessarily structures all doctrinal expositions of Christian faith” [a.k.a. “second-order” theological discourse]. MM’s book argues for the exact opposite and demonstrates what happens to the promise in second-order theologies that adopt thesis #5. It disappears and an alternate hub replaces it.

No surprise, Jenson doesn’t pass the “discrimen” test.

- 6. Finally MM’s fifth theologian, non-accommodationist Oswald Bayer. Bayer links justification to “The Theology of the Speech Act.” The fundamental speech-act comes from the promising God, not only for first-level faith—God talking to us—but then also for second-level theological reflection—our own talking about God talking to us. Our cultural worlds offer no larger blueprint where such promissory speech will fit in. “It is conflict with the world, not accommodation, that is constitutive for theology.” Even within God’s own speech, whereby sinners are justified, there is conflict: law and promise are two very different, yes, contradicting, speeches. What these differing speeches do to sinners, mortification and vivification, do not fit under some larger systematic umbrella of generic God-talk. The one place they do come together is in Christ on the cross. The “theology of the*

cross" is the promissory antithesis to all other theologies, which inevitably morph into theologies of glory. >From just this much you can see why Bayer becomes MM's ally for reclaiming justification's role in theology today.

7. In the final chapter, "Justification as the 'Discrimen' of Theology," MM puts it all together. "Discrimen" in Latin = a dividing line. A marker that designates which side of the fence you are on. Thus in transferred meaning "turning-point, critical moment." [A much less sophisticated rendering came from one of the (losing) leaders during the Wars of Missouri back in the 1970s: "Justification by faith alone is our Lutheran bullshit detector."] But back to the Latin "discrimen." The 13 pages of this concluding chapter and the 17 of the first chapter are worth the price of the book. Though I would not recommend skipping the heavy seas of the five analytic chapters, they do take work. In the first and last chapters Mattes articulates the contours of his own systematic theology using justification as the hub – for both first- and second-level theological discourse. In these thirty pages he gives us a grand view. Which, by the way, is the venue of his daily work, Grand View [Lutheran] College in Des Moines, Iowa. Like the biblical Bethlehem, it may be one of the small colleges of the ELCA, but in Lutheran theology it is hardly the least.

I cannot conclude better than does Dennis Bielfeldt on the book's back cover: "Mark Mattes . . . argues that justification should be the hub of a confessionally based theology decentering academic construction in favor of the discernment of faith. In his analysis of Juengel, Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Jenson, Mattes adroitly describes the general trajectories of what goes wrong in Lutheran theology when justification is taken to ground first-order proclamation [=Sunday sermons] but

not second-order theological reflection [the Monday-to-Friday seminary classroom]. He makes clear throughout that a properly robust view of justification conflicts with much ecumenical ecclesiology currently popular within North American Lutheran circles. This important book deserves to be read by all those interested in the future of Lutheran theology in North America."

To which I say: Agreed. And not only in North America, but throughout the ecumenical ecclesia.

Peace & joy!

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