

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, part 2

Continuing last week's discussion of the June 25 "Clarifications" on the Catholic – Lutheran "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" [JDDJ] coming from Edward Cassidy, the Vatican's chief Ecumenical Officer.

Last week's [ThTh #10](#) focused on one of Edward Cassidy's three major theological objections to the text of JDDJ, viz., it fails to mention human "cooperation with grace" when describing God's justification of sinners. Today's ThTh #11 and next week's #12 look at the other two items he didn't like in JDDJ. One was the formula "at the same time righteous and sinner" which he calls "not acceptable." We'll treat that next week. The other was the "difficulty" of speaking of justification "as criterion for the life and practice of the Church." For Lutherans it has been THE criterion for such assessments. Cassidy wants it integrated "into the fundamental criterion of the 'rule of faith,'" namely, the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas "rooted in the living Church and its sacramental life."

The Criterion Question

Let's pick up from last week's concluding paragraph: For the Augsburg Confessors justification by faith alone [JBFA] was not a doctrine strictly speaking, but a hermeneutic, a recommended way, for doing all preaching and teaching. The Augsburgers speak fundamentally of only one doctrine, that is the Gospel itself. "Doctrina evangelii" is their Latin technical term, "the doctrine [singular] of the Gospel." JBFA, they claim, is the Gospel's own criterion for how to preach and teach that one

Gospel so that it comes across as the radical good news it really is.

It sounds as though Cassidy has a manifold notion of “doctrine” in mind when he make his clarification here. For him JBFA is one doctrine alongside other important doctrines. Consequently it appears as though JDDJ in reflecting the Lutheran hype for justification as criterion says too much. It is making JBFA the most important doctrine of all. But that can’t be right, can it? If so, what about the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, hammered out in centuries of hard debate in the era of the early church? Don’t they have equal, even prior, claim to being “the fundamental criterion of the ‘rule of faith’?” Seems to make sense. But only if you think of JBFA “just” as a doctrine, even granting it to be a (or even THE) “fundamental” doctrine.

During my year as guest prof in Australia (1994) I heard stories about the German confessional theologian, Hermann Sasse, who had come downunder after World War II and taught for years at the same seminary where I now was. One told of a Kaffeeklatsch in the faculty lounge where colleagues were bantering the question: How often in your ministry have you actually preached on the doctrine of JBFA? Most allowed as how they hadn’t done it enough. Sasse generated gasps by asserting that he had never ever preached that doctrine in a sermon. And why not? Because it is the criterion, he said, for preaching on whatever theme(s) a Biblical text presents. You measure how “good” your sermon was by asking how the Good News you offered your hearers was the sort that renders sinners righteous before God when they trust it. Even if you should mention the words JBFA, you don’t seek to have your hearers “believe” the doctrine of justification by faith, but to “be” justified by faith in Christ.

Granted, there are Lutherans today who don’t know or practice what Sasse said. Pity. So Cassidy is not alone in his

(mis)reading of JBFA as criterion. It could also be that the Lutherans on the dialogue team—for whatever reasons—weren't all that clear on this one themselves. More than one Lutheran theologian I know, unhappy with the final text of JDDJ, pointed to its fuzziness here. Lutherans on the dialogue team—at least the unfuzzy ones—could have picked up in advance on Cassidy's concern, also registered by earlier Roman respondents, for the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas of the ancient "rule of faith." Don't they have ancient and "fundamental" place when we're talking about criteria? Yes, but how do you articulate that?

Here's my suggestion. The ancient church dogmas are fundamental to the faith, but not intended as things to be believed about God and about Christ. They are not "credenda," things that must be believed. Rather they are "praedicanda," things that must be in preaching if that preaching is to be Gospel. One of Sasse's earlier colleagues at the German University of Erlangen, Werner Elert (my own teacher for one semester there), called the church's dogma the "Sollgehalt des Kerygmas," i.e., what's "got to" be in preaching, if it's to be "Christian" preaching. The Trinitarian and Christological dogmas are the ancient church's specs for how God must be talked about and how Christ must be articulated, in order that God-talk and Christ-talk both come across as "Good News" that sinners can trust.

A few weeks ago in ThTh I mentioned the "whiz-kid" class of 1952 from Concordia Seminary. One of those worthies, whom I probably shouldn't identify, never tired of reminding us that JBFA was (ahem!) a "bullshit detector." Once you grasped JBFA, he claimed, you could readily detect when someone was adding something "smelly" to the Gospel, putting something extra into the package whereby sinners get justified before God. The actual Gospel "plus this, or plus that," is what Paul is fighting in many of his epistles. The Augsburgers saw themselves in a

similar situation, signalled by the scholastic rhetoric of “faith plus reward for works.” Their JBFA detector immediately started beeping when it sniffed this “other” Gospel.

It’s not just past heretics or rank outsiders who propose “Gospel-plussing.” Today’s church too is full of such proposals, each of which recommends an addendum to bring us to a “fulness” not yet, not quite, granted in JBFA. The format is: Gospel-plus this Spirit-experience, Gospel-plus this liturgical practice, Gospel-plus this rigorous (or libertine) lifestyle, Gospel-plus this form of church governance, etc. It is the “A” of the JBFA detector that picks up the BS signal. Does faith in Christ and that faith alone justify sinners, or are there add-ons? JBFA detects the add-ons.

The hassle at Augsburg 1530 was not about “grace alone.” Both parties subscribed to that formula—though grace meant something different for each. But it was on the “sola fide” (faith alone) that the Augsburgers riled their critics. And the language of the Roman Confutation of the Augsburg Confession that followed immediately after the AC was presented makes that perfectly clear. More than once the Confutators level the charge: “their [sc. the Augsburgers] ascription of justification to faith alone is diametrically opposite the truth of the Gospel, by which works are not excluded.” The Council of Trent 20-plus years later repeats the charge and adds an anathema to it.

Is this clear either-or—either faith alone or faith plus something—still the one coming from Cassidy? A respondent to last week’s ThTh wondered whether Cassidy’s claim, “eternal life [is] one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits,” might be urging us to distinguish, but not separate, justification and sanctification—and that’s surely OK. Maybe so, but will Cassidy’s claim pass the JBFA detector?

Helpful for me in my first years teaching at Valparaiso University for getting a better handle on JBFA was Robert Schultz's work of that time, the late 1950s, on the term justification in 16th century jurisprudence and theology. At root it was understood literally: to make justice, to do the right thing. When you talked about justifying a convicted criminal, you were describing the process whereby he received justice, his due reward. If his was a capital crime, his justification was his execution.

So when the Augsburg confessors—all of them laity, most of them leaders in the politics and law of their lands—talk about the justification of sinners, they are thinking of the execution, the rightful death, of sinners. When they then talk about JBFA, they envisioned a sinner undergoing execution “by faith alone.” And what, pray tell, could that mean? Read Romans 6 where St. Paul says the same thing: sinners joined to Christ in Baptism are being put to death. That's execution.

But it's an execution of sinners “with a twist.” The twist comes from their faith-connection to the one with whom they are being executed. In this justification process—because of that connection—the sinner dies and is restored to life as well. How can that be? The law, even God's law, disallows anyone else being executed for my crime. So something more than God's law is at work here. Of course, it's law AND Gospel, recompense AND promise. In Christ's “sweet-swap” with sinners, his “being sin for us,” our legal justification-execution is being carried out as he dies.

But here the law is caught in a bind, for the one being executed is simultaneously the second person of the Trinity . Although the law “must” carry out this execution, in doing so it rebels against the One who created it, its own Lord, the one here being executed. By executing Christ the law discredits itself. Thus

Christ is indeed “the end of the law.” Good Friday is both law and the end of the law. Call it promise.

Christ dying in our place abrogates that self-same law that always accuses sinners. God raising him from the dead signals that law’s Lord confirms the abrogation. Thereby the second half of the sweet-swap comes true. Christ is vindicated at Easter, shown to be righteous after all for having befriended sinners. Identically righteous are those sinners who swap with him. Because God raised him from the sinner’s execution, Christ-trusters expect the same. Their grounds for such audacious faith? His offer, his promise that it is so, that promise “alone.” “Faith alone” is trusting that promise alone—with no add-ons. No add-ons needed; no add-ons allowed. That’s JBFA as criterion for God-talk, Christ-talk, justification-talk—in short, for everything preached and taught that claims to be Christian.

Next time, d.v., simultaneity.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. I’ll be away from Email access from July 31 to August 15. The next two numbers of ThTh (12 & 13) are in the pipeline for delivery on their proper dates. Should you need to contact someone about ThTh before 15 Aug, do so with Robin Morgan, Crossings Web supervisor. She’s at RobinJMorgan@Compuserve.com Cheers! EHS