

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, part 3

Concluding the last two weeks' 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.

Topic: Simultaneity:

To call Christians righteous and sinners at the same time prompts Cassidy's third "big" objection to JDDJ. He says flat-out: "not acceptable." Although "concupiscence remains in the baptized," he asserts in straight scholastic fashion, it "is not, properly speaking, sin." Thus for him "it remains difficult to see how...the anathemas of the Council of Trent on original sin and justification" do not still apply to this doctrine of simultaneity, and thus to the text of JDDJ which affirms it. He knows that the Reformation era conflict on the doctrine of sin [the "bad-news" flip-side of the "good news" of justification] is involved here. And he surely knows the neuralgic reaction ever since Augsburg that Lutherans have when they hear that "concupiscence is not really sin." Nevertheless I'll sidestep sin (ahem!) initially and come back to it later. Instead two other thoughts for starters.

One could meet Cassidy's complaint with just one Bible verse, the words of the despairing father of Mark 9:24, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." Anyone who makes the same confession with this anxious parent admits the lived experience

of faith and unfaith, righteous and sinner, at the same time. And the man of Mark 9 is no loner in the scriptures. He has co-confessors throughout the Bible. Christian lived experience verifies the simultaneity.

A more sophisticated angle would be to call attention to the pair of terms "righteous and sinner" as a paradox, not a contradiction. Cassidy sees them as an intolerable contradiction. But paradoxes are different. Paradoxes, if I remember my college logic correctly, are paired opposites that appear contradictory until one unpacks them to see that the conditions, the circumstances, of the two terms are not the same. Christ-connected sinners are righteous. Christ-disconnected sinners are not. That is the different set of conditions pertaining to each term. But can a sinner be connected and disconnected at the same time? If one can say "I believe, help my unbelief," it must be so. But how?

St. Paul's proposal for wrestling with this existential conundrum is to talk about two "selves" (his actual Greek term is "two egos") now present within his one skin. The Christ-connected self is a new creation, the other one, the "old" Paul is his lingering "old Adam." He has incontrovertible evidence for the presence of both selves in his daily experience. At times he cries out for deliverance—don't we all?—from the tug-of-war of this double identity. Doxology is his final word for survival in one such instance (Rom.7:25): "Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Since the righteous are Christ-connected by faith alone, this Christ-connecting faith and their chronic "old Adam's" unfaith are the opposites they carry within them. The conflict persists till the sinner self's final death on their dying day. Christians praying the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, asking for forgiveness "again" this day, admit the palpable

presence of both selves within them. Praying the fifth petition joins us to the proto-believer from Mark 9 and his faith-unfaith simultaneity. JBFA empowers people to that confession: Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief. If/when Cassidy is graced with an "Aha!" about JBFA as the Gospel's own criterion, his problem with simultaneity should disappear.

But as he says, the reality called sin is the deeper issue in the simultaneity issue. When he says "concupiscence in the baptized is not, properly speaking, sin," he's re-opening the can of worms. What is the "proper" way to speak of sin? Just how bad is it? Ay, there's the rub.

A story. The theology department at Valparaiso University in the late 50s and early 60s was a great place to be. Law-Gospel hermeneutics was enjoying a renaissance. We were experimenting with it in the "new curriculum" by using it in Biblical studies focused on the texts for the Sundays of the Church Year. The Sabbatheology series you can also get from this listserv is the latter-day product of that experimentation. And it was early ecumenics. Even before Vatican II we were in dialogue with the theology department of Notre Dame University, an hour's drive away up at South Bend IN. The presidents of our two universities, O.P.Kretzmann (VU) and Theodore Hesbergh (ND), personal friends from ancient days, once agreed—over cocktails, no doubt—that "our two theology departments ought to get together for conversation." And, lo, it came to pass. Typical of the early years of ecumenical dialogue the format was one of them and one of us presenting a paper on a topic. I'll never forget the one, maybe the first one, where the topic was "Original Sin." That should have been easy, since both sides agreed that there was such a thing. I don't remember who made the presentations for each side, most likely it was the dept. chairpersons. But I've not yet forgotten the ND dept. chair's response—either to Bob Bertram's paper or something he said in

the ensuing discussion—"It can't really be that bad, can it, Bob?"

Well how bad is it? If it takes the death and resurrection of the Messiah to "fix" it, it must be pretty bad. Nevertheless in some ecumenical circles Lutheran theology gets bad marks, very bad marks, for its pessimism about humankind. Augsburg set out the terms in Article 2, Original Sin. "All humans born after the fall of Adam are born in sin. That is, to say, they are without fear of God, without trust in God, but with concupiscence." Two items are absent, true fear of God and true trust in God. With fear absent, sinners disregard God's law. With faith absent they disregard God's promise. Replacing these elements now absent in a sinner's heart is concupiscence. What's concupiscence?

The Augsburgers thought they were using the term the same way the NT does with the Greek term that the Latin Bible translated "concupiscentia." The cupidity in the center of concupiscence in the Bible is heavy stuff. It is the yen, the drive, the urge for what today we might call the Sinatra syndrome: "I'm going to do it my way." One of Luther's favorite renderings was to see it as my own chronic incurvature into myself and all the stuff I call mine.

The scholastics didn't see it as quite that bad. Taking their cues more from Aristotle than the apostles, they saw concupiscence as the yens and drives of human psychosomatic existence. Thus they were initially "natural," no cause for alarm. Only when they got out of hand, inordinate (=beyond what is orderly), did they become sin. Then they became vices. Natural hunger became gluttony, natural self-esteem became pride, natural sexual attraction became lust, rightful need for rest became sloth, etc.

So the scholastics could argue, as Cassidy does here, that once

a sinner is baptized, baptismal grace starts putting order back where there had been disorder. Then it follows, that although concupiscence may still remain in the baptized, “properly speaking” it is not sin. The yens are being rescued from disorder by the ordering power of grace. The metaphysical medicine is healing what formerly was sick. The language of 12 Steps is appropriate. Sinners are not fully recovered, but are recovering. And if recovering, their diminishing disorder, their “concupiscence remaining,” is not “properly speaking” sin. Whatever it is, it is less than that. Still serious, it is not a “big deal.”

But, said the Augsburgers, if the chronic malady of the old Adam, my old Adam, is that I do not fear God’s critique, nor do I trust God’s promise, and in addition substitute “my way” for all that, then “concupiscence remaining in the baptized” is still a very big deal indeed. It is not fundamentally linked to psychosomatic pressures at all. Sin is instead a human heart saying no to God and yes (a big yes) to self. That could surface either in stringent control of my yens and drives, or flat out libertinism. At the heart of sin is the heart’s commitment to the Sinatra syndrome. That’s a big malady, and when it surfaces in our simultaneity there’s only one known Christian remedy, called JBFA, executing that sinner self and re-vivifying the Christic self.

Some years back I once complained to Bob Schultz about many students “not getting it” despite my efforts at promoting the JBFA criterion and distinguishing law from Gospel. Kindly not questioning my teaching as the cause of it all, Bob reminded me that besides “learning” such theology, students—and that’s all of us—need to experience the gospel’s rescue in our own lives before we’ve really “got it.” And even then it can slip away fast. This does not say that you “have to” have a Damascus experience to get the “aha!” But for some of us that appears to

be what it takes.

“Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief,” not only documents our simultaneity as really righteous and really sinners. It also signals the saving way to cope with it.

Next Thursday, d.v., back to the Seminex story.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder