

DECLARATION ON JUSTIFICATION –FIVE THESES FROM FREE TO BELIEVE

The doctrine of Justification was the decisive breaking point which sparked off the Reformation and has sometimes been seen as the central dividing issue between Catholics and Protestants. John Calvin described justification as the “main hinge on which religion hangs.” As part therefore of the search for an ecumenical rapprochement the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999, issued a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). It states that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." The document was endorsed unanimously by the World Methodist Council in 2006, the Anglican Consultative Council in 2016 and recently by the Mission Council of the United Reformed Church.

It might seem unecumenical to do anything other than rejoice in and affirm this document. Free to Believe is wholly committed to the ecumenical vision but wishes to challenge and dissent.

THESIS ONE – JUSTIFICATION IS NOT THE CENTRAL ISSUE FOR ECUMENISM

The doctrine of Justification was at the origin of the Reformation but it is doubtful if it was the major issue at stake between Protestants and Catholics. Luther faced a degraded version of Catholic teaching which would generally be repudiated. Even at the Diet of Augsburg Melancthon, always more conciliatory than Luther, established considerable common ground with the Catholic representatives who were ready to agree that salvation came ‘by faith and grace, not by works alone’. Indeed no reputable medieval theologian believed people could be saved ‘by works alone.’ Today very few people find this issue significant or meaningful. The real dividing issues are matters such as the infallibility of the Pope, the nature of the Eucharist, the authority structure of the Catholic Church, the ordination of women and the full acceptance of the sexuality of gay people. It is salutary to remember that the Catholic Church has yet to change its view that Protestant churches are an “ecclesial community,” not a church so no sharing of communion is possible. That is a real and terrible scandal. Real ecumenical progress will involve facing these issues not simply one where we can find a common form of words.

THESIS TWO – THIS IS CHURCH TALKING TO CHURCH WHEN THE CHURCH NEEDS TO INTERACT WITH THE WORLD

Anyone who has tried to read the document will know how very boring it is. It is a political document intended to allow churches to feel better about themselves, rather like the kind of fudged agreement which European Union bureaucrats produce to reconcile the divergent opinions of member states. It is, in the very worst sense, a churchy document, dealing with matters which no-one outside the churches and few people in them find significant. As such it is a vivid illustration of the decay of the ecumenical movement which so often now, rather than being world changing, centres on work done with very little visibility by church functionaries, in what Martin Marty calls ‘ecumenism by committee’. In this it typifies

ecumenical theology, always talking at a church–church interface when the real action is to be had at the church-world interface. In a real sense this is a tragic document.

THESIS THREE – THE DOCTRINE OF GRACE IS A WONDER

At the heart of the Gospel is the wonder of a gracious God and the miracle of redeeming grace. If Jesus is the human face of God then the gospel is one of grace. We don't deserve God's love. We can't earn it. All we can do is receive it with grateful hearts. We are all hugely imperfect. As Kant said, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made". But God's love is for us just as we are and whoever we are. All his life Jesus seemed to go out of his way to include those who were excluded by social custom, conventional morality, and theological orthodoxy, and the point is always grace - an amazing grace that challenges all our operating assumptions, a theology that reveals a God quite unlike the gods of popular religion. Christianity dares to teach that God's love is unconditional. As William Sloane Coffin says "There is more mercy in God than sin in us."

It was this that Martin Luther experienced. It was this which Paul Tillich so wonderfully spoke of, "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life... Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted'". This radical inclusive love is the authentic note of the Christian Gospel today and always. Expressing such love in a divided, torn world is our great task together as a Church.

THESES FOUR THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION IS SIMPLY UNTRUE

The problem with the statement on Justification is not simply its excruciating dullness it is that it includes within it something else – a denial of any meaningful human free will. Luther was committed to a Radical Augustinianism in which we are incapable of goodness. "I do not wish to be given free will or to have anything left in my power by which I could endeavour to be saved" (On the Enslaved Will, 121). It is dispute over this question which led him to denounce Erasmus as "a viper" (in debate Luther had something of Donald J. Trump about him). Luther is emphatic that we are unable to co-operate with grace or play any part in our own salvation.

The key section in JFFJ is as follows:

We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation, for as sinners they stand under God's judgment and are incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities. Justification takes place solely by God's grace. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together, it is true to say:

20. *When Catholics say that persons "cooperate" in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God's justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.*

21. *According to Lutheran teaching, human beings are incapable of cooperating in their salvation, because as sinners they actively oppose God and his saving action. Lutherans do not deny that a person can reject the working of grace. When they emphasize that a person can only receive (mere passive) justification, they mean thereby to exclude any possibility of contributing to one's own justification, but do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God's Word.*

This is certainly a correct interpretation of Luther and would be consistent with the Reformed doctrine of double predestination. The implication is that any searching for God which goes on in our lives, or choice we think we make to commit our lives to God, is entirely down to God's grace. I very much doubt if this is the perceived experience of Christian people. Without some spark of human freedom and possibility we are not human beings at all, simply automatons. Human struggles are real; we participate in them and have to play our part in faith. When the prodigal son "came to himself" and said, "I will get up and go to my father" (Luke 15: 17-18) he is making own free response to God's grace or the story becomes meaningless. Without some element of freedom there is no humanity at all, nor any deity worth the name.

To deny our ability to seek and to choose is contrary to the central meaning of Christian theology in which to make space for human freedom God must be *deus absconditus*, a hidden God, who can none the less be found. As John Hick puts it, "We must as finite and imperfect creatures, have the freedom partially or wholly to shut God out of our lives as well as to welcome God into them" (*Fifth Dimension*, 38). As Milton said, "For so I created them free and free they must remain" (*Paradise Lost*).

THESIS FIVE - CHURCHES ARE NOT ALWAYS VERY INTERESTED IN THE TRUTH

It is interesting to reflect how churches unanimously pass resolutions affirming doctrines that many believers would not recognise as an authentic picture of Christian experience and which confirm the very worst suspicions sceptics have as to the intellectual incoherence of Christian faith. Could it be that churches are sometimes not inclined to intellectual honesty?

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