

The Anglican Doctrine of Justification

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WHEN a doctrine has been formulated symbolically, an historical discussion of it might appear at first sight to be no longer necessary. Some doctrinal treatment is, of course, both legitimate and even indispensable, for even the most essential teaching must be related to modern needs and contemporary controversy. But what the doctrine is, its meaning, its setting, its relationship to similar or conflicting opinions: these things are matters of fact which can be settled, as it might seem, by even the most general appeal to contemporary documents and circumstances.

Unfortunately in the case of the Anglican doctrine of Justification the matter is not nearly so simple as that. The statement of Anglican teaching has been given clearly and forcibly in Article XI and related Articles: and to that extent the question is plain enough to a plain (and some would add an honest) man. But quite apart from those who openly dislike and often misunderstand the Article and the associated teaching—theologians whose criticisms and suggested amendments need to be countered by the most thorough doctrinal discussion—there have also arisen within the last few decades historical dogmaticians who have attempted first to challenge and then to overthrow the accepted and traditional interpretation of the apparently plain assertions of the symbol itself. Two main claims are made: first, that those who framed this Article desired an inclusive rather than an exclusive pronouncement; and second, that by their phrasing, emphasis and silences they made sufficient concessions to non-Protestant opinion to avoid a definite Reformed allegiance. By constant repetition it has been hoped to make good these claims, quite irrespective of their historical validity.

Now claims of this kind depend ultimately upon historical interpretation rather than upon historical facts. For that reason, in answer to such conceptions, it is not sufficient to rely merely upon the facts themselves or upon a consensus of commonly agreed interpretation. The number and the variety of facts are so great, and their inter-relatedness sometimes so complicated, that there is need of a constant investigation, sifting and presentation of the material in order that the truth behind the facts may be better known and better understood. But even an individual fact can be a highly complex matter, more particularly when it is a fact of opinion rather than merely one of action. However carefully an opinion may be worded, it always remains open to unwitting or wilful misunderstanding, and in their precisest details the views of any man are known only to God. Indeed, in matters of this sort the historian can often state only strong probabilities and not absolute facts. On the other hand, when the known evidence tends exclusively or almost exclusively in the one direction, the strong probability does amount to a moral and impelling certainty, and the fuller the evidence the less excuse there is for evading its plain message.

In the case of Justification, almost the whole of the available material seems even at first sight to support the traditional understanding, and to that extent opponents are driven to find their support in the intricacies of exegesis or intention. Thus the primary document, the Article itself, is a good specimen of the many Protestant statements upon this subject. Its language and ideas have obvious affinities with both the Lutheran and the Reformed confessions. In its internal development, from the formularies of the reign of Henry, it bears evident marks of the abandonment of the Scholastic and later the Tridentine definitions. The Ten Articles of 1537 and the Bishops' Book of the same year would hardly rank as Protestant productions, but in both of them there was a clear pressure of Lutheran opinion, not least in the matter of Justification. They marked, in fact, a transitional stage. The King's Book of 1553 constituted something of a set-back in points of detail (in the understanding of faith, for example), but not all the ground gained was there given up, and in the closing years of Henry's reign a variety of causes contributed to a steady if not official restoration of the position. The productions which followed under Edward VI, the Service-books, the Catechisms and finally the Forty-two Articles of 1543, all testified to a whole-hearted acceptance of the main Protestant positions, and in the matter of Justification there was no retreat in 1563 and 1571.

The primary evidence is worth studying in detail, but in addition to it there is an abundance of secondary material which has considerable confirmatory value. Large numbers of Anglicans wrote at large on the question of Justification. These included a few openly condemned as heretics, Tyndale for example, but also many others who in positions of authority and power were responsible for both the first movement of reform and also the eventual settlement under Elizabeth. Cranmer, Latimer and Coverdale all wrote on the subject, as did also Jewell, Grindal and Sandys. Even Hooker preached a sermon on Justification which, in spite of its distinctive terminology, can only be classified as a Reformed statement.

I

The thorough investigation of all this mass of evidence is obviously beyond the scope of a single article. Yet something can still be done, for there is one document which has claims to be considered a representative Anglican statement of the period, and which forms, therefore, a convenient canon by which to measure traditional and novel interpretations. This document has four striking advantages. It was written in 1547 or earlier, in the very first days of the Edwardian régime, and prior to the supposed Continental invasion frequently blamed for the 'extremism' of the fifties. Again, it was composed not as a private opinion but as a public utterance, to be "read and declared by all parsons, vicars and curates in their churches where they have cure". Third, it came in all likelihood from the hand of the Archbishop, and it certainly went forth with his express approval. Finally, it was a work to which the Articles themselves accorded almost symbolical status,

both generally in Article XXXV and more specifically in Article XI. This document is, of course, the Homily of Salvation, together with the supporting Declaration of Faith and Sermon of Good Works.

The first thing which we notice about these Homilies is that their definitions of Justification and Faith belong distinctly to the Protestant family. In this respect they distinguish themselves sharply both from the mediating definitions of the King's Book and the clear-cut and exclusive terminology newly adopted at Trent. Justification, for instance, is equated at once with the forgiveness of sins and the acquisition of righteousness before God.¹ This is in line with the common confessional descriptions,² and although the phrase 'to make righteous' is used, it is evident that the righteousness referred to is not inherent but imputed. Thus it is spoken of as a righteousness 'received of God's mercy and Christ's merits, embraced by faith, and taken, accepted and allowed of God, for our perfect and full justification'.³ With regard to faith, a distinction is made, as in the King's Book, between the faith which is intellectual belief or assent, and justifying faith, which is here described as 'a sure trust and confidence in God's merciful promises'.⁴ The distinction corresponds, of course, to that made by the Scholastics between an unformed faith and a faith perfected by charity (*fides informis* and *fides formata*). The similarity need not surprise us, for we find it in all the Reformed confessions,⁵ and it is due to the fact that the Scholastics and the Reformers built upon a common Scriptural foundation. The similarity is obvious, but it is equally obvious that in the Homily the distinction is drawn in the Protestant rather than the Scholastic manner. Mere assent is not of itself a partial preparation for justification, but it is dead and unavailing.⁶ A "true and lively" faith does involve assent, but is an act or movement not merely of the mind but of the whole being of man. It is, in fact, a personal response and attachment to Jesus Christ, a trust and confidence directed to God Himself rather than to facts and dogmas, and therefore carrying with it a necessary response both of love and obedience.⁷

The definitions are Reformed, and so, too, is the underlying principle. First and last the Homily of Salvation aims to establish and to safeguard the primacy of the grace and redemptive activity of God. Thus a long passage is devoted to the mediatorial work of Christ without which there could be no salvation—a passage which follows closely both in thought and language a similar passage in the *Loci Communes* of Melancthon.⁸ Man in his ruin and helplessness is left wholly dependent upon the prior mercy and work of God. He himself can do nothing but believe, and even his faith is not "an only work without God", but the gift of God,⁹ kindled in his being by the Holy Ghost.¹⁰ It is true that a lively faith does carry with it many good things, repentance, hope, love, dread and the fear of God, but it is stressed that all these "are shut out from the office of justifying".¹¹

¹ *Homilies*, Oxford, 1840, p. 17.

² *Cf.* Belgic XXIII

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴ *Homilies*, p. 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Cf.* Belgic Conf. XXII.

⁷ *Homilies*, p. 17.

⁸ *Cf.* Belgic XXIV.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23, p. 25.

¹¹ *Homilies*, p. 23.

Being "unperfect", even the best works of men "are not able to deserve our justification",¹² or in the words of the Belgic Confession "are of no account towards our justification".¹³ Faith itself is not a ground or cause of justification, only the instrument whereby to lay hold of or appropriate it. All human effort is, in fact, taken away, and "the merit and deserving of our justification is ascribed unto Christ only, and His most precious blood-shedding".¹⁴

It is this jealousy for the primacy and fulness of the work of Christ which leads the Homily to defend the statement "by faith alone", which was later incorporated in the Article. It is true that the phrase is not directly used in the Scripture, but we must use it, partly because it corresponds with the plain teaching both of the New Testament and the Fathers, and partly because it safeguards the essential truth that justification is the office of God and not of man.¹⁵ Only if we refuse to allow anything else to have a part in justifying can we make it plain that Christ and Christ alone can "make us, of unjust, just before God".¹⁶ The doctrine, "by faith alone", serves, in fact, to humble man and to exalt God: "to express the weakness of man, and the goodness of God; the great infirmity of ourselves, and the might and power of God; the imperfectness of our own works, and the most abundant grace of our Saviour Christ".¹⁷ Time and again this point is taken up and stressed in the Homily. Nothing is more important than to realise that nothing of ours, not even faith, can contribute to our justification before God. It is "through the only merits and deservings of His Son Jesus Christ that God doth justify us". The constant repetition was necessary because this was the point which the Romanists never could or did grasp. They thought of faith always in semi-Pelagian fashion as that which makes possible the reception of saving grace. And for that reason they could never understand the insistence upon "faith alone". If faith could be described as a necessary and, in some sense, contributory pre-requisite, then why not repentance, why not charity, why not the fear of God? Indeed, how could there be faith without these other virtues? But the Reformers had no desire to select and to exalt faith in this fashion as the one pre-eminent and indispensable requirement. They insisted upon "faith alone" for the very opposite reason, in order to rob man of any pretensions of righteousness or any hope of self-justification, even in the very smallest degree. Christ and Christ alone was the cause and the ground of salvation, and faith became necessary only as the simple looking to Christ and reposing upon Him, not as itself a contributory cause or ground.

The jealousy for God's honour made necessary the safeguard "by faith alone", but it also led inevitably to an ascribing to Christ not only of our remission but also of our righteousness. It is here, perhaps, that we see most clearly the difference between the Scholastic and the Reformed understanding. According to the Scholastics and Tridentines, baptismal or penitential grace made us righteous by washing away the stains of all former sins. Thus cleansed, we were

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴ *Homilies*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Homilies*, p. 25.

¹³ Belgic XXIV.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

challenged to go out and maintain our righteousness, assisted, of course, by the co-operating grace of the Holy Spirit. The righteousness of justification was thus conceived of negatively, as a non-imputation of sin. And the problem of justification arose constantly during the Christian life, as new and often serious sins were committed.

The Reformers, however, were not content with this largely negative conception, which seemed to restrict the large promises of God in the Gospel. Justification for them included not only a negative divesting of sin, but also a positive clothing with Christ our Righteousness. As the Augustana had it, justification meant the attaining of righteousness as well as the forgiveness of sins.¹⁸ Or as the Belgic Confession stated it later: "Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works, which He hath done for us in our stead, is our Righteousness".¹⁹ Now Article XI hints plainly at a similar positive understanding, for it speaks of our "being accounted righteous before God".²⁰ The Homily, however, brings out this aspect of salvation in no obscure or uncertain fashion. Thus in the first definition justification is described as a righteousness which we receive from God.²¹ Again, in the section dealing with Christ's redemptive work, it is emphasised that for believers Christ not only "paid the ransom by His death", but He also "fulfilled the law by His life".²² The negative aspect is not overlooked, for forgiveness of sins is a principal part of justification, but even this forgiveness is all-inclusive, extending "as well to our original sin" "as to all actual sin committed by us after baptism".²³ Christ supplies, however, a positive righteousness as well as a negative, for in Him and through Him every Christian man can now be called a fulfiller of the law, "forasmuch as that which their infirmity lacked, Christ's justice hath supplied".²⁴ The question of the supposed unreality of such a righteousness did not occur to the Reformers, for they regarded justification as in any case not merely a legal declaration but a creative act of God. In addition, faith as part of that act so linked the believer with Christ, that he participated before God in Christ's death to sin and His resurrection to righteousness.

II

A characteristic feature of this understanding was the note of assurance which it carried with it. Strangely enough the Lutheran Confessions had let slip this assurance, partly because of their confusion with regard to sacramental grace, and partly because they wished to guard against that licentious presumption which could easily be substituted for true faith.²⁵ The Reformed statements covered themselves by distinguishing between a feigned profession and that true faith which is the work of the Spirit, but they believed, too, that genuine faith carries with it the inward conviction of the reliability of God's promises. The Heidelberg Catechism defines faith as a

¹⁸ Augsburg IV ('Vergebung der Sünde und Gerechtigkeit erlangen')

¹⁹ Belgic Conf. XXII.

²⁰ Art. XI: *Justi coram Deo reputamur.*

²¹ Homilies, p. 17.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 20

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 17, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20

²⁵ Cf. Augsburg VI; Formula of Concord IV.

hearty trust,²⁶ and because that trust is directed to Christ and not to ourselves assurance becomes a possibility and even a duty. The Homily does not discuss this question of assurance in so many words, for to do so might have involved contradiction with the traditional or Lutheran discussion of the King's Book.²⁷ But the insistence upon the primacy of God's work, the definition of faith as sure confidence, the extension of remission to all sin for which there is repentance, and the maintenance of that perfect righteousness of the believer which is to be found in Christ: all these point to that sober and evangelical teaching of assurance which is a mark of Reformed, and surely also of New Testament, theology. Naturally, assurance as thus understood is not an arrogant claim to perfection. Few were more conscious of their own worthlessness and frailty than the XVI century Reformers. It was rather an unshaken confidence in the mercy of God and the prevailing efficacy of the work of Christ. These guaranteed both the constant renewal of spiritual graces and the preservation of the true believer to everlasting life.

It might be argued, however, that this stress upon the primacy of God's work, and the assurance which it gives, must result both logically and practically in a carelessness with regard to Christian conduct and duties. The fear of such a result was largely responsible for the suspicion and even hostility with which traditionalists greeted the uncompromising and often exaggerated statements of Luther. The position was further complicated when some extremists did begin to teach, not merely that good works are not necessary, but that they may even be detrimental to our standing before God.²⁸ Yet the Reformers themselves, informed by the Scriptures, never appreciated the supposed logic of the Antinomian position. The fact is, of course, that the Romanist fear of Antinomianism was justified only on the basis of the Romanist definitions. If intellectual assent could lead to justification apart from other virtues (i.e. mere faith, or *fides informis*), then clearly the door was opened wide for licence of the worst sort, and the doctrine of assurance completed the confusion by destroying the elaborate discipline of the penitential system. But if faith were more than assent, if it were a personal relationship which carried within itself its own dynamic of obedience, love and service, then the fears of the Romanists were obviously groundless. The mediaeval logic: I am saved by believing, therefore I need not work, gave way before the logic of the New Testament and the historic faith: I am justified through believing, therefore I must work.

It was this latter logic, at any rate, which underlay all the Protestant Confessions from Augsburg to the Thirty-Nine Articles. Augsburg had stated it in this form: "Also they teach that this faith should bring forth good works",²⁹ and the later formularies re-echoed the primary assertion: "It is impossible that this holy faith should be unfruitful in man";³⁰ "Good works . . . are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification".³¹ The faith here spoken of was not, of

²⁶ Heidelberg Catechism Qu. XXI.

²⁷ The King's Book: 'Of Faith'.

²⁸ Cf. Formula of Concord IV

²⁹ Belgic Conf. XXIV.

³⁰ Augsburg VI.

³¹ Article XII.

course, the dead faith which is mere assent to a creed or dogma. It was the warm and living faith which is a personal relationship with Christ Himself, the faith which is shewn by its works, or, as Paul himself puts it, which worketh by charity.

That the Anglicans saw no necessity for Antinomianism nor true logic in its deductions is testified plainly in Article XII, but the position set out even more clearly and forcibly both in the Homily of Salvation and in the two succeeding Homilies, of Faith and of Good Works. Not only is the general emphasis here the same as that of many Continental writings and symbols, but even in points of detail the Homilies take care to preserve the general truth of justification even while drawing attention to the interconnectedness of genuine faith with a life of sanctification and service. We may consider first, perhaps, the nature of the connection as the Homilies presented it, and then indicate briefly the points at which misinterpretations and false deductions were scrupulously marked off and avoided.

The theme was first introduced in the closing paragraphs of the Homily of Salvation. The doctrine "by faith alone" had been stated and defended, but attention was now called to the "office and duty of a Christian man unto God", that which "we on our part must render unto God again for His great mercy and goodness".³³ In this connection the distinction was again drawn between a dead faith, which even the devils have, and that genuine faith which alone avails to justification. The one is a bare assent to the truth of Christian facts and doctrines, the other "a sure confidence in God's merciful promises . . . whereof doth follow a loving heart to obey His commandments".³⁴ Now this genuine faith and an ungodly life are clearly incompatible, for the man who hates the commandments of God cannot inwardly believe in God, and the man who does inwardly believe must, by virtue of that fact, love the commandments. In other words, love and obedience, while they do not add to faith, are both implicit in it: and obedience and love involve a right attitude to our fellowmen and an acceptance of all the great principles of the law.³⁵ It is concluded, then, that far from destroying good works faith "moves us to render ourselves unto God wholly, with all our will, heart, might and power, and to serve Him in all good deeds".³⁶

The subject was taken up again and elaborated in the two succeeding sermons. The essential principles were here repeated, and texts from James and Paul were introduced in order to demonstrate that mere belief and a living and active faith are quite different.³⁷ Faith, properly speaking, goes much deeper than either assent or profession. It is an inward persuasion and conviction which involves the whole being and activity of man. For that reason, where it is present, it results necessarily in the fruits of holy life and good works. Antinomianism thus rests on a misunderstanding which is also a self-deception.

Illustrations were given from the Old Testament scriptures to show how this teaching works out in practice. Thus Noah believed in God,

³³ Homilies, p. 25 f.

³⁴ Homilies, pp. 25, 26.

³⁵ Loc. cit.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 27-8.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

and for that reason he built the ark. Abraham believed in God, and his faith drove him "to forsake his country, and all his friends, and to go into a far country, there to dwell among strangers". Moses believed in God, and "this faith so wrought in his heart, that he refused to be taken for king Pharaoh his daughter's son, and to have great inheritance in Egypt, thinking it better with the people of God to have affliction and sorrow, than with naughty men in sin to live pleasantly for a time".³⁷ These men all had the same faith as the Christian, although without the fulness of knowledge, and because of their faith they were constrained to fashion their lives in accordance with the divine will. Without such constraint, their profession of belief would have been proved empty, for "true, lively and Christian faith is a thing of perfect virtue, of wonderful operation or working, and strength, bringing forth all good motions and good works".³⁸

But if a good life is necessary to faith, is it not also necessary to justification, as that which makes faith perfect? The Homily not only avoids any such conclusion, but takes great pains to guard against it. Faith and works are both necessary, but they operate in different spheres, and the necessity is different. Faith has to do with salvation as justification, the imputing of a righteousness which is perfect but not inherent. Works have to do with salvation as sanctification, the attaining in the power of faith of a righteousness which is inherent but not perfect. The necessity of faith is a necessity of cause: faith is the instrument by which the work of Christ is appropriated by the individual. The necessity of good works is a necessity of consequence: good works are the result and expression of faith in its conforming of the mind and life to the likeness of Jesus Christ. To neither faith nor works can be ascribed the same fundamental necessity as to the redemptive activity of God, for this is the ground not only of the salvation, but also of the faith and the resulting obedience. We may say, then, that faith is of higher necessity than works, but we do not destroy works, and we are not weighing one part of human achievement against another. We aim rather to give the sole glory to God: for faith is the gift of God.

The Homily does not express the truth quite in these terms, but it certainly maintains the truth itself. Thus it lays down unequivocally that while good works are a necessary fruit of faith, and so constitute "the trial of our Christian profession",³⁹ yet for those very reasons there can never be "any true good done without faith". Apart from faith the Christian life can be neither begun nor continued, and no attempts at works can ever be "accepted or pleasant unto God" unless they proceed from faith.⁴⁰ They may appear to be good before men, but they are not so when "measured . . . by the ends and intents, for the which they were done".⁴¹ This is, of course, thoroughly in line with the teaching of the Article, that "works done before the grace of Christ . . . are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ",⁴² and it accords fully with such

³⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

³⁸ Homilies, p. 27.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴² Article XIII.

statements as that of the Scots Confession, that "guide warkes . . . be this onlie, that are done in faith".⁴⁵ This does not mean, of course, that faith itself is a first and pre-eminent work. It means rather that it is the God-given response of faith which alone creates the possibility of a life truly pleasing in the sight of Almighty God.

In a previous connection we have already noted that the works which proceed from faith can add nothing to justification.⁴⁶ It may be noted further, however, that according to the Homily there may in exceptional circumstances be salvation without works, but there can never be salvation without faith.⁴⁷ The example cited is that of the dying thief: "I can shew a man that by faith without works lived, and came to heaven".⁴⁸ The thief believed truly in Christ, yet his faith never expressed itself outwardly in reformation of life. Had the thief lived, then that outward reformation must have followed if his faith were genuine, but justification was secured without it. The converse could never have been true, however, for no attempt at reformation could secure his justification without faith. The reason is that such an attempt could not replace the work of Christ in the forgiveness of sin, nor indeed could it lead to a true and wholehearted obedience, which is dependent upon the establishment first of a right inward relationship with God. The conclusion is, then, "that faith by itself saved him, but works by themselves never justified any man".⁴⁷ Faith operated in a different and prior sphere, and it has a different and prior necessity.

There is one final point. The works, which are the fruit of faith, are not merely 'religious' works in the mediaeval sense of the term. That is to say, they do not consist only in the following of ecclesiastical or monastic ordinances: ceremonial, masses, apparel, beads, image-worship, meats, penances or vows.⁴⁹ A false theology had associated merit with these external observances, but a true understanding led to that personal faith which introduces us to the very heart and will of God, and thus to the doing of the weightier matters of the law. The works which are the fruit of faith are the fulfilment of the great moral principles which underlie both the Old Testament revelation and the teaching of Christ. Like all the Reformed statements the Homilies maintained the eternal validity of the Ten Commandments as the expression of the will of God. Faith freed us from bondage to external law, but it enslaved the heart and mind to Christ. The new covenant was inward, but the outward law still remained as the guide and counsellor of the believer in his working out of the life of obedience.

Surveying again these three remarkable Homilies, we surely cannot avoid some very definite and important conclusions. First, there can be no doubt that the Homilies are thoroughly scriptural, not only by virtue of copious quotation, but rather by their understanding of the whole rhythm of faith and life as we find it especially in the New Testament. Second, there is an essential kinship between the thought

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⁴⁵ Scots Conf. XIV

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴⁸ Homilies, p. 19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 47 f., esp., pp. 50-53.