

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Issues of the Reformation Reopened¹

DAVID W. HAY

A FRIEND OF MINE, remarking on all the exciting things that have been happening at the Second Vatican Council, summed up its meaning in the observation, "The Counter-Reformation is now over." I felt constrained to rejoin, "If that is so, the Reformation must be over too." Surely these two statements together describe what has come about or what is coming about before our eyes in this present moment of Church history. It will be clear then, that in speaking of reopening the issues of the Reformation I have no desire whatsoever to *prolong* the issues of the Reformation. We are now engaged in outgrowing the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation and I should like to contribute a mite to this process.

It is commonly said, accurately enough, that the formal principle of the Reformation was the sole authority of Scripture—*sola scriptura*—and the material principle was justification by faith—*sola fide*. The astonishing thing is that these two principles, which enshrine the whole meaning and necessity of the Reformation, can no longer be said to divide Protestants from the Church of Rome. Let us take a look first at the material principle.

1. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

We all know that Hans Küng, speaking for the Council of Trent, and Karl Barth, speaking for the Reformation, have agreed that each teaches the same thing.² Mercy and truth are met together; Geneva and Rome have kissed each other. Küng further has given to Geneva as a subsidiary consolation prize, in compensation for her loss of the sense of her uniqueness, an account of "Justification and Sanctification According to the New Testament," in which, by contrast with the Tridentine identification of justification with sanctification, he has taken the Reformed line of averring that in the New Testament these are two distinct though inseparable concepts.³ How long it will take for the stupendous theological findings of Küng and Barth to percolate down to the teachers and pews on either side it is hard to say, but they are clearly fraught with immense consequences. Writing of this matter in the *Ecumenical Review*, Karl Barth has expressed alarm that Reformed scholars seem much less willing to square up to the situation than Roman theologians, and he suggests that the real significance

1. An address given to a mixed group of Roman Catholic and Protestant seminarians in the Canadian School of Missions and Ecumenical Institute under the auspices of the Catholic Information Centre, Toronto, January, 1964, and again in Regis College in April.

2. *Christianity Divided*, ed. by D. J. Callahan, H. A. Oberman, and D. J. O'Hanlon (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), pp. 307f.

3. *Ibid.*

of Vaticanum Secundum may turn out to be that the true voice of Holy Scripture may come to be heard from Rome rather than from the Protestant world.⁴ Meantime let us take note of an encouraging fact. It may no longer be lightly said that *theology divides*. In introducing the article of Hans Küng to which I have just referred, the editor says that it illustrates the conviction expressed in his book on justification that "the most fruitful way for Catholic and Protestant theologians to meet is through joint study of the inspired Word of God."

Accepting the risk of not knowing Küng's book, one may hazard a few remarks that illustrate the relation between Trent and Geneva. Much of the seeming difference between them disappears on a simple recognition that the protagonists are not referring to the same thing when they use the word *justification*. It is semantically childish to take a Tridentine formula and call it false if we are giving the word a Reformed connotation instead of a Tridentine one. It is a hollow triumph for a Protestant to denounce the Roman teaching that a man can increase his justification by good works when it is actually saying, as Reformed theology also says, that we progress in *sanctification* by obedience. It would be correspondingly foolish for a Roman objector to say that justification cannot be only imputation of Christ's righteousness, on the ground that justification, which to the Roman means also sanctification, must be a real possession of the believer, and therefore more than a merely imputed righteousness. He would be ignoring the fact that Reformed theology uses the idea of imputation in order to insist, as Trent also insists, that justification in any sense must come entirely as a gift of God. Unfortunately there are Protestants who never get beyond the idea of imputation, and take it to mean that we can never have any righteousness of our own. Not knowing their own doctrine, they thereby exclude any real possibility of sanctification, and if they come to hear the Tridentine doctrine that in justification (which means sanctification) the believer is made *inherently righteous* they shake their heads at such pernicious teaching. It is a pity that they have never heard the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith that, while in justification righteousness is imputed to us, in satisfaction we become "really and personally holy"; or the statement of the Westminster Larger Catechism which, using the same shockingly (!) Thomistic language as Trent, says that in justification God "imputeth the righteousness of Christ, in sanctification his Spirit *infuseth grace*."⁵

On the Reformed side we can learn much from the Council of Trent's refusal to handle justification apart from baptism. The slogan "justification by faith" has had a very harmful effect in this respect, especially when the Reformed teaching has been sundered within itself and justification has been falsely regarded as an event by itself, followed as a separate event by sanctification. Justification is not an event, but a theological concept about

4. *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XV, 4 (July, 1963).

5. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 11:1; 13:1. *Larger Catechism*, Q.77.

one aspect of a complex event which is Christological, personal, and ecclesial. The total event is that of a man's integration into the Christ-body. In Reformed theology justification is a theological concept abstracting that part of the total event which is the divine causality in reference to man's sin. If we think of it as a separate act on God's part, we shall also think that it is accompanied by a separate act on man's part—faith—regarded as a purely interior act of mind and will. Apart from the very questionable psychology of such a notion, it will lead at once to making baptism irrelevant. Baptism will then become in principle an extra, profitable perhaps, and actually obligatory because divinely commanded, but at best a sign and seal of something already in fact possessed. At its lowest it will be reduced to a sign of the believer's faith: at best it will be a sign of God's faithfulness; but in either case it is "expendable." Here is one root of the loss of the reality of the Church in modern Protestantism against which Geddes Macgregor so bitterly and brilliantly complains.⁶

The divorce between justification and baptism will not be easily healed, particularly since we know men and women, such as Quakers and Salvationists, who are in Christ although they use no sacraments. But is it altogether hard to say what is amiss? The magnanimity of God is such that he will impart the maximum grace possible to those who do in some degree or other make use of the means of grace that bind us to the historical redemption in Christ. If we think that grace belongs only to an interior thing in us that we call our soul, we shall have an impoverished Christian life—impoverished because our bodies, our visible corporateness in Christ, the historical dimensions of redemption, and the whole earthly creation are not given their due place in it. At the heart of the matter, we shall have an impoverished Church and an impoverished Christian life because we are not properly related to the bodily humanity in which our Lord redeemed us, and our own humanity will not reach its fullest. If justification and sanctification mean *incorporation* into Christ in the fullest sense of that word, and this Christ is the Christ of the incarnation and the ascended body, how can incorporation happen save in a sacramental mode? It can otherwise happen only in a paler way by the paler signs of his body that we may unwittingly use, for no Christian can fail to make use at least of mental images of Christ's bodily things. As Rome and Geneva, surely through a supreme gift of God's mercy, explore together instead of as enemies the meaning of justification, it is much to be desired that we on the Genevan side pay diligent heed to Trent's success in preserving the integrity of Scripture at this point.

2. SCRIPTURA SOLA

Let us now look at the "formal principle" of the Reformation, which at that time expressed a basic opposition in theological *method*, but which is

6. Geddes Macgregor, *The Coming Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), *passim*.

now proving a remarkable medium of rapprochement. One of the most exciting events at the Vatican Council was the reference back of a schema couched in the language of a two-source theory of revelation, Scripture and Tradition. It is now argued by many Roman scholars that the Council of Trent did not mean to advance a view of that sort, that it rejected the formula *partim-partim*, and intended to give the primacy to Scripture.⁷ Others disagree, and the matter is under debate, but no reader of the Tridentine documents should fail to notice that Scripture is always the first authority appealed to. Many Reformed scholars on their part find the Scripture-only notion impossible to apply. Like all theological formulae that acquire the status of a slogan—just like justification by faith, in fact—it came to be a bludgeon for destroying as much truth as it preserved.

The principle did not originally have the arid meaning that some came to give it. Father Florovsky recounts with some glee the outburst of a Reformed minister at Lund who exclaimed, "It is not the Presbyterian tradition to pay any attention to tradition." The Reformers actually had a very high respect for ancient tradition.⁸ In successive editions of the *Institutes* Calvin multiplied his quotations from the fathers.⁹ The word *sola* does not mean that we are to attend to Scripture and nothing else, but that *normative* authority belongs to Scripture alone. All other helps are to be used to their utmost value, but the *control* is to reside first and last with Scripture. What the Reformers renounced was not tradition as such but all alleged *unwritten* tradition which some believed the Church to have as a secret deposit from the Apostles, on the basis of which they were pressing doctrines not found in Scripture or even inconsistent with Scripture. In no manner was the age-old wisdom and guidance of the Church to be neglected. It is hard to see that they were doing anything other than advancing what had always been the teaching of the Church Catholic upon the supremacy of Scripture. The benighted Presbyterian of F. Florovsky's story was only one of perhaps many who do not really know their own tradition. Even so, there is more to be said.

The Reformers taught that Scripture interprets Scripture, and their answer to the Roman *magisterium*—the authoritative teaching office of the Church—was put by the Westminster Divines in this way: "The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."¹⁰ How far does this take us? It is obvious that Scripture is not a computer into which one can feed one's questions and from which one can receive answers, and

7. G. W. H. Lampe and David M. Paton (eds.), *The Old and the New in the Church* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1961), pp. 20ff.; "Tradition as an issue in Contemporary Theology," by K. E. Skydsgaard.

8. Cf. F. Wendel, *Calvin: the Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, tr. by P. Mairet (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 35f.

9. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1954), pp. 43f.

10. 1:10.

obvious too that the Holy Spirit will not perform such a role. Human persons have to do it. The Westminster Divines therefore supplemented their doctrine of the magisterium of the Holy Spirit by their doctrine of church councils and the *teaching* elder (or minister), who are ministerially to serve the magistracy of the Holy Spirit. "It belongeth to synods and councils ministerially to determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience . . . which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his word."¹¹ Although the divine authority of church rulers does not go beyond declaring what the Spirit says in the Scriptures, the effect is that their judgments are delivered with the authority of the Spirit. This is strong doctrine, one must say. If the Pope were to be regarded as simply the mouthpiece of the Church, this doctrine would differ little, if anything, from the Roman. The idea that every believer has the right to interpret Scripture for himself is not a Reformed doctrine, although found among sectaries of that time and ours.

It thus came about that the Church rulers of the Reformation set up a new or revised tradition of the teaching of Scripture. In their confessional statements they provided the perspective from which Scripture was to be understood, screening its contents, one might say, so that what came out would be what they said should come out. It is only just to keep in mind that they had no intention whatever of controlling the meaning of Scripture. But as time went on their formulations became the binding tradition to which all interpretation of Scripture must conform. Few churches have been more rigidly tradition-bound than the churches of Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy.

This was how the matter worked out. Fairness again compels us to say that the Reformers were not formally inconsistent in setting up confessions alongside Scripture. Their doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture did not mean, as we have seen, that it did not need interpretation. Sufficiency meant that Scripture contained all things necessary for life and salvation and that there was neither need nor justification for having recourse to alleged unwritten tradition. Their confessions were, they believed, only transcripts or digests of what Scripture itself contained.

With our more critical self-awareness of what goes on in interpretation, we can make no such claim now. Rarely does Scripture itself interpret Scripture. Occasionally it might be said to do so. For example, much of the teaching of Scripture, including some of our Lord's, runs in the mould of salvation by works, for example, the Parable of the Last Judgment. This obscurity is explicitly taken up by St. Paul in teaching justification by faith and not by the works of the law. But where in Scripture is the principle of justification discussed in relation to baptism? Scripture provides material

for an answer, but not an answer. We are likely to adopt the answer that our church-tradition has consciously supplied or uncritically drifted into. The answer, whatever it be, will not be a simple declaration made by the Holy Ghost. Again, where does Scripture discuss the question whether the Holy Spirit is equal in power and glory to the Father and the Son? If the Councils had not taught us what to believe on this matter, few of us would be able to work out the right answer from the Bible. It is well known that before the Church declared itself upon that point it had previously to undergo a controversy with Arius that shook it to its depths, because the Arians were able to draw so effectually upon Scripture.¹²

Even if Scripture dealt explicitly with each and all of its obscurities, the *Scriptura sola* principle would not work, because Scripture is a time-bound book and no later person can read even a single phrase without supplying interpretative processes of his own. Nowadays, because of the self-searching development of scientific studies we are conscious to a degree impossible to the Reformers and their disputants of the critical character of interpretative processes, and just because we are not so self-confident in our findings, these findings are so much the more true and authoritative in their nature, and we have been led to a day in which Rome and Geneva can be of genuine service to one another in the Spirit. On the Reformed side, we are compelled to acknowledge that interpretation is possible to the Church's teachers only in so far as they participate in the same kind of authority as Scripture itself has, even in their dependence upon it, so that it is impossible to separate Scripture from the teaching authority of the Church's tradition that guides us in the true and full understanding of it. Oddly enough, to speak in this way is only to elaborate the Reformation principle of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*. To say that our full persuasion of the divine authority of Scripture is "from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts,"¹³ is to say that the Church's deliverances are the work of that Spirit, leading her into all truth, and that therefore we must listen to her teaching tradition as having the same kind of authority as Scripture, even while being dependent upon it. The numerous confessions of the Reformers, although they could not see this at the time, are but precipitates of developing tradition—visible demonstrations of the truth, *Scriptura nunquam sola*.¹⁴ To make and use confessions is to agree that Scripture must be accompanied by church tradition that is not a mere transcript of Scripture but shares in its authority. Indeed to prosecute theology at all is to be committed to this principle. As a recently lost friend of all our present endeavours, Gustave Weigel, wrote, "The old shibboleths which worked like a red flag on an irritated bull have lost their exciting power. *Sola Fides, sola scriptura*, are phrases which the Catholic is willing to accept, if they are understood in the light of Catholic

12. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958), pp. 229f.

13. W. C. F., 1:5.

14. J. J. Pelikan's phrase in *The Old and the New in the Church*, p. 38.

principles."¹⁵ An increasing band of Reformed scholars agree that it is only in this light that they can and ought to be understood!

3. THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

Let us take up in conclusion a matter that made the Reformers madder than any irritated bull, the sacrifice of the mass. With whom better can we start than John Knox, the Thundering Scot, as Geddes Macgregor has entitled him? Here are some of his words in connection with a general Convention of the whole Nobility of Scotland at Edinburgh in the middle of January, 1561, immediately after the death of the French King, Francis, husband of Mary, Queen of Scots.

In that assembly was Master Alexander Anderson, sub-principal of Aberdeen, a man more subtle and crafty than either learned or godly, called, who refused to dispute in his faith, abusing a place in Tertullian to cloak his ignorance. . . . While that the said Master Alexander denied that the priest took upon him Christ's office to offer for sin, as was alleged, a Mass book was produced, and in the beginning of the Canon were these words read: *Suscipe, Sancta Trinitas, hanc oblationem etc.* . . . "Now (said the reasoner), if to offer for the sins of the whole Kirk was not the office of Christ Jesus, yea, that office that to him only might and may appertain, let the Scripture judge. And if a vile knave, whom ye call the priest, proudly takes the same upon him, let your own book witness." The said Master Alexander answered, "Christ offered the propitiatory, and that could none do but he; but we offer the remembrance." Whereto it was answered, "We praise God, that ye have denied a sacrifice propitiatory to be in the Mass; and yet we offer to prove that, in more than a hundred places of your Papistical Doctors, this proposition is affirmed, 'The Mass is a sacrifice propitiatory.' But to the second part, where ye allege that ye offer Christ in remembrance, we ask, first, Unto whom do ye offer him? And next, By what authority ye are assured of well-doing? In God the Father, there falls no oblivion: and if ye will shift and say, That ye offer it not as God were forgetful, but as willing to apply Christ's merits to his Church, we demand of you, What power and commandment ye have so to do?" . . . The said Master Alexander being more than astonished, would have shifted; but then the Lords willed him to answer directly. Whereto he answered, "That he was better seen in philosophy, than in theology."¹⁶

It is clear that "the said Master Alexander Anderson" was not so ignorant as Knox made out or as his modesty caused him to say, for he unquestionably laid his finger on the very heart of the matter in speaking of the mass as a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice. Knox was the one who was not schooled to see the point. Following his master, John Calvin, he brushed the principle aside under too strong a revulsion from other expressions that were either false or misunderstood.¹⁷ Though rudely handled, the idea of

15. Gustave Weigel, *Catholic Theology in Dialogue* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 81.

16. John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, ed. by W. C. Dickinson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), Vol. I, pp. 352f.

17. *Institutes*, 4:18:10.

commemoration was not killed. It reappeared in a weakened form in the Westminster Confession of Faith and is clearly expressed in subsequent Presbyterian liturgies.

As Calvin explicitly tells us, he was anxious to eradicate the error and ill consequences of turning the Eucharist into an occasion at which Christ is slain anew. He saw no cure save by following Luther in making a sharp disjunction between the sacrifice of Calvary and the sacramental action. He did not heed the fact that it was just the disjunction of the two that had produced the trouble, and that to continue the disjunction, even in a more harmless form, was, in his own phrase, "to overthrow the very nature of a sacrament." Nevertheless he did it: "As great as the difference between giving and receiving, so great is the difference between the sacrifice and the sacrament of the supper."¹⁸ A sacrifice is, of course, an offering or gift of some kind to God, but since man can contribute nothing to his salvation, the sacrament could not in any sense, the Reformers thought, be a propitiatory sacrifice. All the emphasis was at this point to be upon receiving, save that we can consequently offer our praises and obedience. In this way the Reformers put a guardian hedge around the uniqueness of Christ's unrepeatable sacrifice on Calvary, enforcing once more the sole causality of God in our salvation.

The answer, however, was not adequate to the biblical testimony. The true solution is to close the gap between the sacrifice and the sacrament. Indeed this is the precise purpose of this type of biblical sign. It is a divinely appointed rite whereby the Holy Spirit closes the gap between the past and the present, without nullifying the priority that belongs to the past redemptive act. For a sacrament is *not* an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. It is an outward and visible sign of an *outward and visible*, that is to say, *historical* redemption. In its most important form, as with the Passover and the Eucharist, the biblical sign is an image or representation of the redemptive act, divinely inaugurated as an inherent revelatory element in that act, by which God's people are to be repeatedly reconstituted in that act. It takes the form of a memorial before or "reminder" to God as well as to the people. We must not, like John Knox, be put off by the anthropomorphism in the notion of reminding God, in whom certainly "there falls no oblivion." For, as Knox suspected might be the case, it is God himself who through his servant institutes the memorial as an act of accommodation by which to apply Christ's merits to his Church. That God should appoint the sign as a means of "reminding" himself is a mode of avouching to men his faithfulness and accessibility. Since the commemoration is made by God's authority in his sight, it is he himself who by his Spirit fills it with the whole action, power, and meaning of his redemptive act. As a better Scottish theologian than Knox has said, "The Commemoration takes precedence of the Reception." And again, "Christ in the Heavens is Himself the Memorial, the Anamnesis

18. *Ibid.*, 4:18:7.

before God, of His Passion and Death."¹⁹ But we should add that he has given us on earth an image of his offering in the heavenlies so that our worship may through the eternal Spirit contain everything that is in his. There should be no difficulty in this conception for anyone who accepts what scholars now speak of as the eschatological character of redemption. As the future *eschaton* is already by anticipation present to us in Christ, so also Calvary and the Resurrection, though past, are now eschatologically present to us. Indeed the future *eschaton* can now be present to us only because the presence of the past event guarantees its presence also. The sacraments (along with the Word) are the divine modes by which all these things become real in the Church through the Spirit. Far from extruding Christ's propitiation from the sacrament, it is this above all that we must insist on finding in it, as every faithful worshipper does, although very frequently his declared doctrine contains much less than he actually experiences.

Whether or not the Tridentine formulation provides a satisfactory expression of the propitiatory character of the Mass or not, one can only conclude that it helped to preserve a biblical emphasis that the Reformers had lost. Much Roman theologizing, it is true, continued thereafter to follow a wrong pattern. But these errors have been overcome through the vastly influential work of later Roman scholars, who have brought Roman thought back to the genuinely biblical line—so successfully indeed that Reformed scholars like Max Thurian have found their work of determining value.²⁰ From the Reformed side, Thurian's own recent work, *The Eucharistic Memorial in the Old and New Testaments*, has greatly advanced these studies, not to mention the liturgical importance of the Taizé Community itself.²¹

Lest one seem too ready to find error or inadequacy in the Reformers, it must be said on the other hand that we can neglect their work only at the risk of great peril to the Church. It is doubtful whether anything less than the theological revolution that they inaugurated could have apprised the Church of a danger in which she always stands and into which she had largely fallen in the west. The sacrificial framework into which the liturgy and life of the Church had come to be determined was not capable of embodying the Christian Gospel in its wholeness, and this must be said with all reverential regard for the truth that our Lord himself set the major act of the Church's worship in the sacrificial mode.

The problem is that the action of the Father is not forcefully represented in this framework, for the sacrificial analogue inevitably puts in the highlight the offering which is made from the manward side to the Father, and

19. H. J. Wotherspoon, *Religious Values in the Sacraments* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928), pp. 251, 239.

20. We print in this issue the first of two articles by Dr. Horton Davies on the liturgical movement, in which a short account of this work is given (Ed.).

21. London: Lutterworth Press, 1961. *Ecumenical Studies in Worship* (ed. by J. G. Davies and A. R. George), two parts.

he tends to be viewed in this picture as the one who receives and accepts the sacrifice. The major emphasis is action towards the Father rather than from him. Of course there is much else in the background. It is the Father who gives or sends the Son. The notion of Christ's descent upon the altar helps to keep this movement in view. But this is background. The balance of emphasis in the sacrificial framework, as the words of the liturgy show, seems unarguably to be in the other direction. Is it fanciful to guess that it was the strength of this suggestion that historically led to the error of viewing the Mass as a work which men ought to perform in order to placate the Father, and introduced all the religious insecurity of the later medieval period? The Reformation was necessary in order to recover the evangelical truth that the *Father* had already himself done all that was necessary for man's salvation, and the Reformers recast everything in order to make it clear that man's part was simply and gladly to receive. Surely the first and major thrust of the liturgy must be upon the Father's action towards man in the Son, not upon man's action in the Son towards the Father, although the second was, quite unjustifiably, lost by the Reformers. One must confess a doubt whether the sacrificial analogue by itself can adequately do this. Scripture provides us with additional analogues, such as the baptismal rite, instituted by the Lord himself so that we may die and rise with him, and others, like the *Christus Victor* theme, which are not rites and can be proclaimed only in the Word. At one place, in a daring flight of language for a wondrous truth, Scripture teaches that the real sacrifice is that of the Father himself (John 3:16). But to speak in this way is to burst open the language of sacrifice to say things that it cannot contain. Ultimately it was the need to make the sovereign character of grace apparent, that is, to make the gracious action of the Father paramount, that led under the Reformers to a revision of the emphasis of the liturgy. The question remains whether a sacrificial liturgy can encompass the whole catholic truth. The preached Word is needed to keep the action right.