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- **Rapprochement between the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in the Doctrine of Justification: Danger or hope?**<sup>1</sup>
- *Annäherung zwischen der römisch-katholischen und den protestantischen Kirchen in der Rechtfertigungslehre: Gefahr oder Hoffnung?*
- *Rapprochement entre l'Église Catholique Romaine et les Églises Protestantes sur la doctrine de la justification. Danger ou espoir de règlement?*

**E. Hahn**, Tübingen

## RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article expose à grands traits les différences importantes entre la conception de la justification par la foi chez Martin Luther et la réaction de l'Église Catholique Romaine lors du Concile de Trente. Pour Luther, la doctrine de la justification par la foi n'était pas une simple doctrine parmi d'autres, mais le critère décisif de toute doctrine par lequel la vérité de chaque déclaration de foi doit être jugée. Si cette doctrine est édulcorée, il en va de même de la foi, de la vie et des actes de tout chrétien, comme de l'Église dans son ensemble. Tandis que Luther insiste sur le sola fide, le concile de Trente comprend la foi comme fides caritate formata. Les œuvres démontrent l'authenticité de la foi. Les discussions*

*entre les Églises au cours des dernières années sur le sujet de l'unité ont eu pour but de surmonter les divisions du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle par une nouvelle compréhension de la position de chacun. Il reste à savoir si on a simplement glissé sur les différences ou si les problèmes ont réellement été résolus, si le fossé entre les Églises s'étend jusqu'au fondement, ou si l'on est seulement en présence de différentes formes d'expression de la même foi. Ce débat devrait faire sentir aux chrétiens protestants la nécessité de traiter la justification du pécheur par la grâce de Dieu, non pas comme un point de doctrine comme un autre, mais comme le centre de la proclamation et de l'enseignement chrétiens, comme le thème de la foi chrétienne et comme le message d'espoir pour le monde entier.*

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

*In dem Artikel werden zunächst die schwerwiegenden Unterschiede zwischen der Darlegung der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und der Reaktion der römisch-katholischen Kirche auf dem Konzil von Trient skizziert. Für Luther ist der Artikel von der Rechtfertigung*

*nicht ein Lehrstück neben anderen, sondern das Kriterium jeder Lehre, an dem sich die Sachgemässheit aller Glaubensaussagen entscheidet. Wird die Rechtfertigung verfehlt, so ist Glaube, Leben und Handeln des einzelnen Christen wie der Kirche als ganzer verfehlt. Wo Luther die Bedeutung des sola fide einschärft, versteht das*

*Tridentinum den Glauben als fides charitate formata: erst die Werke erweisen den Glauben als echt.*

*Die Einigungsverhandeln zwischen den Kirchen in den letzten Jahren zielen darauf, durch ein neues Verständnis der jeweiligen Position die Gräben des 16. Jahrhunderts zu überbrücken. Dabei bleibt die Frage offen, ob hier Unterschiede lediglich vertuscht oder wirklich aufgehoben werden, ob der Riss zwischen den Kirchen durch das Fundament geht oder ob er nur unterschiedliche Auslegungsformen des einen Glaubens betrifft. Angesichts des*

*ungebrochenen römischen Traditionsprinzips wäre hier vor allem die durch die Trienter Anathematismen gesetzte geistliche Wirklichkeit zu bedenken.*

*Protestantische Christen sollten sich durch die Debatte verpflichtet sehen, die Rechtfertigung des Sünders durch die Gnade Gottes nicht als konfessionelles Spezialthema zu behandeln, sondern als das Thema des christlichen Lebens aufs neue ins Zentrum von Verkündigung und Lehre zu rücken, als Botschaft der Hoffnung für alle Welt.*

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## 1. Introduction

The topic which we are dealing with asks a question which will be answered at the end. But the topic also includes a statement that contains quite a surprise. This surprise we find in the term '*rapprochement*'. There is no question that the documents published in recent years by various ecumenical commissions testify to a remarkable convergence between the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches of the Reformation. On the other hand, looking at the documents of the 16th century, the term '*rapprochement*' with regard to each side's teaching on justification would seem highly inappropriate. What we find there is the exact opposite of *rapprochement*. The term *anathema / damnamus* is frequently used, indicating the exclusion of the opponent as a heretic, his separation from the church and the fellowship of the believers, handing him over to God's eternal judgement.

If we speak of *rapprochement* today, we must reckon with the enormous gap left to us from Reformation times. The question 'danger or hope?' indicates that the bridging of this gap in our times might not be wholly desirable in view of the importance of the doctrine of justification for Christianity.

These introductory remarks open the way for our presentation of this topic. In Parts 1 and 2 we will deal with Luther's

understanding of justification and the reaction of the Council of Trent to the Reformation. In Part 3 we will outline the findings of the ecumenical commission on justification in Germany, first published in 1986. In Part 4 some reactions to this document will be presented and finally the initial question will be answered.

## 2. Martin Luther on justification

'The justification article is the master and principal, lord, leader and judge of all kinds of doctrine. It preserves and governs every doctrine within the Church and upholds our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utterly death and darkness.'<sup>2</sup> It is only this article that makes us theologians. It is by this article that the Church stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). Concentrating on justification, the Church is indicating her centre as well as her boundaries. It is here and here alone that the subject of theology is being defined: The subject of theology is sinful man, accused and lost, and the God who justifies and saves this man of sin. Whatever is disputed and discussed in theology apart from this subject is error and poison.'<sup>3</sup>

This means that justification is not one doctrine among others, but here we find the point from which our life can be properly viewed before the holy God. On the way in which we define this point that

everything else in Christian faith and theology depends. Through justification we come to understand who God is, what Christ has done for us, what the work of the Holy Spirit means, who man is, and what the weight of sin signifies. Justification is strictly eschatologically oriented: everyone will stand before God the creator and judge. In this sense, the daily confession of sins is meant to prepare for this final appearance before God. The preaching of the law discloses our situation before God: human beings have broken the first commandment, in failing to put their entire trust in God, our Father. Out of this basic transgression follow all the other transgressions of God's commandments. The law also reveals God's judgment upon the sinner. From this revelation we can only flee to Christ's cross—the way which is opened by the Gospel.

This understanding of justification put Luther in a position in which he had to fight on two different fronts. A. Peters calls them 'the monks' front and the peasants' front'.<sup>4</sup> Towards the first, Luther emphasizes grace as the free gift of God. Justification does not mean: God is just and he wants me to become as just as he is through my own endeavour. Rather, God is just and through Christ he imparts this divine justice to me, without any contribution of mine—my own contribution being only my sin. This is the *admirabile commercium*, the 'miraculous exchange', as explained in 'On the freedom of a Christian Man (1520)':<sup>5</sup> 'The rich, noble, pious bridegroom Christ marries the poor, despised, bad little prostitute (the human soul)'; everything that belongs to Christ, all his riches and glory, is given to this bride, and everything that belongs to her, the sin, is given to Christ, the bridegroom. What a happy household this will be, as Christ's justice is far too strong for the bride's sins. The marriage ring between the two is faith.<sup>6</sup> Luther also defines faith as *fides apprehensiva Christi*—'the faith that apprehends Christ'.<sup>7</sup>

Justification by faith alone, without works, has always been criticized as

destroying Christian ethics. The consequences of misunderstanding justification as libertinism can be seen on the other front, that of the peasants, the antinomian front. Even the believer needs the revealing law of God, because he remains a sinner, although Christ's righteousness is counted in his favour. Therefore sin is not only forgiven, it also must be thrown out. Entering daily into one's baptism means that we are called to consider ourselves dead towards sin (Rom 6:11). Christ has brought us not only *gratia*, but also *donum*, the gift of the Holy Spirit who fights against sin. Therefore the two sides cannot be separated: for Christ's sake we are declared righteous and we are made righteous; imputed and effective justification are one and the same, only seen from different angles.

Justification is the only way to give peace to the tormented conscience, because it is based on the *extra nos* of Christ's work. It is the only way to encounter certainty of faith, because it does not depend on man's works that are never sufficient, but on Christ's death and resurrection. As God is faithful, we can rely completely on His promise.

While justification was gained by Christ on the cross, it would be of no use to us if it were not distributed and administered. This happens through the proclamation of the gospel, through the word of absolution following the confession and through the Lord's Supper. Through these means, the exalted Christ himself in the power of the Holy Spirit distributes the fruit of his death and resurrection to the believer.

### **3. Justification at the Council of Trent (1545–1563): *Decretum on justification* (6th session: Jan 13, 1547)**

The effect of the Reformation made this council—in the eyes of the Catholic Church—necessary. There was general disorder: monasteries were being dissolved; few people knew any more what they should believe or preach. Therefore, the intention was to strengthen Roman

Catholic faith by declaring what a true Roman Christian must believe and by refuting what they considered the heresies of the Reformation.

It should be noted that not everything that is said is binding Roman Catholic dogma. The first part is formed by 16 *capita* (chapters) that serve as the source and background for the following 33 *canones* (canons) that alone are dogma in the sense that their acceptance is obligatory, necessary for salvation, for the true Roman Catholic Christian.<sup>8</sup> “The sacrosanct, ecumenical and general Council of Trent undertakes to expose ... the true and healthy doctrine of justification, as it was taught by Christ Jesus, transmitted by the apostles, preserved continuously by the Catholic Church through the suggestion of the Holy Spirit. And she most strictly forbids that anyone in future should dare to believe, preach or teach differently than prescribed and declared by this present decretum.”<sup>9</sup>

The most important topics are the question of free will (ch. 1), the necessity of a preparation to receive grace and justification (chs. 5–6.), grace as an inherent quality, faith as *fides charitate formata* (ch. 7), certainty of salvation (ch. 9.12), the merit of good works (ch. 16). The council’s criticism of the Reformation teaching on justification can be summed up in these terms: ‘No freedom, no real ‘new being’, no ethics, no merits, no Church (baptism!).’<sup>10</sup>

The quotation of three canons is meant to illustrate the dimension of the gap between Roman Catholic and Protestant teaching: can. 12: ‘Whoever says that justifying faith is nothing else than trust in divine mercy that forgives the sins for Christ’s sake; or that it is this trust alone by which we are saved: *anathema sit*, shall be anathematized’.

Can. 24: ‘Whoever says that the received justification is not preserved neither enlarged before God by good works, but that these works are merely the fruits and signs of the justification received, and not also the reason for its increase: *anathema sit*.

Can. 30: ‘Whoever says that each re-

pentant sinner, after having received the grace of justification, is acquitted of his guilt and of his eternal penalty in the sense that there is no room for any temporal penalty which has to be paid either in this time or in the future in purgatory, before the access to the reign of heaven will be opened: *anathema sit*.’<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. The endeavour of the ecumenical commission concerning justification, sacraments and office

It would be wrong to think that affirmations such as the ones quoted are clear enough to perpetuate the gap between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Churches, and that only a withdrawal from such condemnations could open the way for a rapprochement. This, however, is impossible on the Roman Catholic side, since the canons, which get their authority through the Holy Spirit who guides the Church through the apostles and finally through Christ himself, are meant to be binding. And yet the ecumenical commission comes to the conclusion: ‘Concerning the understanding of the justification of the sinner the mutual declarations of anathematization of the 16th century—with the effect of separation between the churches - no longer apply to the partner of today.’<sup>12</sup> The commission has adopted a procedure which is marked by the following questions: ‘Against whom is a particular condemnation directed? Has this condemnation really met the actual historical situation? Does it apply to the situation of the partner today? If so, what is the rank and importance of the remaining difference?’<sup>13</sup>

Broadly speaking, therefore, the commission states a change in the relationship between the Churches, brought about by the ecumenical movement and the II Vatican Council, a growing understanding within Biblical scholarship, as well as in the areas of Church History and History of Doctrine; very often, the condemnations of the 16th century were made out of misunderstanding or ignorance of the other’s position.<sup>14</sup> Seven areas are being examined: ‘the depravity of hu-

man nature', 'concupiscence', 'humanity as passively receiving God's grace', 'inward or outward justification' (effective or forensic), 'faith alone and good works', 'certainty of salvation', 'merit',<sup>15</sup> leading to the already mentioned conclusion that—judged theologically—there are no more reasons for the separation of the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Churches on the basis of the doctrine of justification.

### **5. Reactions to the document published by the ecumenical commission**

Among the very many contributions that were provoked by this document, one must be mentioned especially. It was written in 1989 by Jörg Baur, Professor of Theology at Göttingen, under the title: 'Do we agree on justification?'<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the many positive reactions, this is a harsh criticism of the method and the results of the document. Baur doesn't hesitate to use strong irony, unusual in this kind of theological debate, e.g. when he speaks of 'Tintenfischökumenik' (ecumenism of the octopus)<sup>17</sup>—obscuring the matter (as with octopus-ink) instead of getting the questions clear!

Baur's main point of criticism concerns the hermeneutical procedure of the document. The authors try to find out whether the two sides have understood each other correctly or not, then offer a new understanding of the issue. Therefore the document presents a 'hermeneutic of the hermeneutic'. What is missing, however, is the question whether the two sides have understood the issue of justification correctly or not. Baur deplores that for this reason the real confrontation—between sinful man and the holy God—does not come into focus. He reminds the reader that the Council of Trent didn't speak of lesser differences, rather: 'Rome saw in Reformation justification another God than its own, who acted completely differently from the Roman Catholic God.'<sup>18</sup>

His conclusion is that the different positions regarding God and man are funda-

mentally contrary: 'The difference exists at the root. Both God and the Christian are defined differently.'<sup>19</sup> Whereas the Council of Trent views man as a partner in justification, with God's grace and man's own activity working together,<sup>20</sup> in the Lutheran Reformation, justification is God's work alone, and the Christian is only a creation out of nothing, a *creatura verbi*, under the condemning word of the law and the creating power of the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

Baur's booklet again has provoked quite a number of critical reactions. One of the main questions dealt with has to do with the significance of the differences: Does the gap split the foundation or is it a gap on a less fundamental level?<sup>22</sup>

The majority of Lutheran theologians would say: No, the gap is not fundamental, but it can be bridged, even if there remain a number of problems to be solved. But the unity of the Church is possible on the basis of this document. This of course takes us back to the initial question: Does this approach mean danger or hope for our situation as organisations working within the Lutheran Church?

When we look at the history of the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Churches, when we consider the consequences that the teaching of justification has had in them, we can only say: The gap remains until this very day. The idea of cooperation between man and God in the area of salvation is widespread among Roman Catholic believers. Whether this popular Catholicism is in accordance with its theological interpretation is quite another story. We should also recognize that there are Christians within the Roman Catholic Church who believe in Jesus Christ according to Reformation teaching! However, the problem remains: The Catholic principle of tradition makes a real break with the old and a completely new beginning virtually impossible. Therefore, we will only get new interpretations of old dogmas. The danger is that in this process the fundamental questions will not be exposed but rather concealed.

However, we should also ask the opposite question: How many Protestant Christians really know justification by

faith, how many live as those that are justified by faith and how many of them are in reality following some kind of synergism? Therefore it is extremely important that we make use of this opportunity now that justification has come back into the centre of discussion. We must proclaim justification by faith to the people we meet within the contexts in which we work. We should not do this as if it were a Lutheran speciality but as what it really is: as the gospel message of freedom from sin, death and the devil through Jesus Christ. It is in this (and in this alone!) that our topic brings hope to the communities and the societies in which we live and serve.

### Notes

- 1 Paper presented at the theological consultation of EURIM (European Inner Missions within the Lutheran church), 27.–30.10.1996, at Svendborg, Denmark.
- 2 WA 39 I,205,2 (author's translation).
- 3 WA 40 II,328,17.
- 4 Cf. A.Peters, *Rechtfertigung, Handbuch Systematischer Theologie* 12, Gütersloh 21990, 35.
- 5 WA 7,20ff.
- 6 Cf. *ibid.* 26.25.
- 7 Cf. WA 39 I,82, thes. 12 (cf. Peters, *loc. cit.* 41, ref. 48)
- 8 This does not apply to disciplinary *canones*, however: cf. O.H.Pesch, *Das Konzil von Trient (1545–1563) und die Folgen*,

- in: O.H.Pesch, A.Peters, *Einführung in die Lehre von Gnade und Rechtfertigung*, Darmstadt<sup>2</sup> 1989, 173.
- 9 Cf. Denzinger (ed. P.Hünemann), *Enchiridion symbolorum ...*, Freiburg et al.,<sup>37</sup> 1991, 1520.
  - 10 Pesch, *op. cit.* 208.
  - 11 Cf. Denzinger, *op. cit.* 1562.1574.1580.
  - 12 Cf. K.Lehmann, W.Pannenberg, *Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend?*, Vol. 1, Freiburg/Göttingen<sup>3</sup> 1986, 74.
  - 13 Lehmann, *op. cit.* 15.
  - 14 Cf. *ibid.* 48.
  - 15 Cf. *ibid.* 35ff.48ff.
  - 16 *Einig in Sachen Rechtfertigung?*, Tübingen 1989.
  - 17 Cf. *op. cit.* 23.
  - 18 *Ibid.* 32.
  - 19 *Ibid.* 109.
  - 20 Cf. *ibid.* 65.
  - 21 Cf. *ibid.* 53.
  - 22 Cf. Pöhlmann, H.G., 'Trennt die Rechtfertigungslehre wirklich noch die Konfessionen?', in: H.Schütte (Ed.), *Einig in der Lehre von der Rechtfertigung*, Paderborn 1990, 16f. Cf. also: Kühn, U./Pesch, O.H., *Rechtfertigung im Disput*, Tübingen 1991; Lange, D. (ed.), *Überholte Verurteilungen?*, Göttingen 1991; Mannerma, T., 'Einig in Sachen Rechtfertigung?', *ThR* 55 (1990), 325–335; Pfnür, V., 'Verworfen und ausgeschlossen wegen der Lehre von der Gnade und Rechtfertigung?' in: H.Schütte (Ed.), *Einig in der Lehre von der Rechtfertigung*, Paderborn 1990, 43–62; Schütte, H., 'Ökumenisches Verständnis der Rechtfertigungslehre in: Idem. (Ed.), *Einig in der Lehre von der Rechtfertigung*, Paderborn 1990, 63–83.

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