

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGIES BEHIND THE LUTHERAN/ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE STATEMENT ON JUSTIFICATION

The moderator introduced the seminar by giving a brief explanation of the theme and the procedures to be followed. Then the two presenters, Robert W. Jenson (henceforth RJ) of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and Carl J. Peter (henceforth CP) of The Catholic University of America delivered short opening statements to focus or begin the discussion.

RJ began by suggesting that while there was not an anthropology "behind" the Reformation doctrine of justification, there was one that "followed" it. We must be straight about which doctrine of justification we have in mind. There is a "doctrine of justification that is a straightforwardly anthropological doctrine." This refers to a step on the path from sin to holiness; it is described with markedly similar results by Protestant and Roman Catholic thinkers; and it surfaces in the Roman Catholic/Lutheran dialogue statement. Then there is the properly Reformatory doctrine. This is the doctrine defined "by the 4th article of the *Augsburg Confession* and the 4th article of the confession's *Apology*. This is a doctrine of the sort we would now call 'hermeneutic,' a *prescription* for the Church's *proclamation* . . . So speak of Christ and of your and your hearers' lives that the righteousness your speech opens is the sort that pertains to faith rather than the sort that pertains to works." This difference is correlated with the difference between "law" and "promise." " 'Law' poses a future to the hearer, stipulates the conditions of that future's realization, and leaves those conditions' own realization to the hearer. 'Promise' poses a future to the hearer, stipulates the conditions of that future's realization, and takes those conditions' own realization on the speaker."

The gospel is a promise that, unlike our human promises, is not mitigated by conditions. Another way to unpack this is to say that what is true of God's gifts must be true of the word about God's gifts. "The word in the Church must be *graceful* in its linguistic mode. That is, it must be unmitigated promise." And when the Church's message is spoken, the only possible response is faith — or unfaith. One consequence of this is that my freedom is not grounded in itself but rather "in the word I hear, and that precisely in its address-character . . . I am free, not by what I *possess* as myself but by what I *hear of* myself." And one possible line that follows this is that "all anthropologies that interpret the human person by the category of 'substance' — as do all scholastic anthropologies — are simply false."

In his opening remarks, CP noted that the common anthropological concern that underlies the Lutheran/Roman Catholic statement on justification and comes to expression in it "has to do with trust, hope, and reliance." "In whom does one hope as a Christian? For what? Why in that one and for that good rather than in another and for something else? . . . Here the Lutheran concern that we trust God alone because of Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone came to the fore. Here too the Roman Catholic concern is that ultimate hope in God alone not exclude penultimate hope in other realities: be they people, practices, or even institutions."

Lutherans and Roman Catholics have their fears too. Because historically human beings have too often confused the horizons of God and of creatures, the Lutherans have fears, and they use "justification by faith alone as a criterion or norm with which to test churchly discourse and practice to see whether it is conducive to peoples' placing their trust and hope unwarrantedly in something or someone other than God." However, Catholics fear that "there is also danger of missing the divine gift, of calling the latter something far less than it is. The human is tempted both to idolatry and to blasphemy. Institutional concern to avoid both is called for by the anthropologies of the consensus statement *Justification by Faith*."

The different anthropologies are evident in the text. Roman Catholics are still prepared to think of justification as conversion or process that is free and that results in a change that is real, internal and relational. "Lutherans still wonder whether such a view does not lead to a *partim-partim* portrayal of God and the human being; whether it does not result in the pride of works-righteousness or torment of conscience. . . ." The differences have not been resolved theologically to the complete satisfaction of either side. However, these anthropologies are closer to one another than either is to many current reductionist views of the human. And they do not seem sufficiently different "either as doctrines or as critical principles to call for continued division of the churches." However, CP concluded that "it is urgently required that the language of unconditionality used to describe justification by faith when the latter is proposed as a criterion or norm by Lutherans be unpacked lest it be seriously misunderstood."

Most of the discussion the first day ranged about the question of the conditionality or unconditionality of God's promise of justification and salvation. Thus much of it was in the form of difficulties presented to RJ. Some of these follow. Is not faith being made a condition for justification? RJ answered that the Reformation concern was with the proclamation of the Church: what am I to say as a preacher of the gospel, or how should the Church so speak as to present the gospel as promise? For Lutherans faith is not a condition, though they think Catholics condition justification on works, of which faith is one. One participant noted that the Lutheran view can seem deterministic and antinomian,

while the Catholic view can seem to be works-righteousness and to be Pelagianism. When asked what conditions are being excluded by "unconditionality," RJ answered that unconditionality excludes everything — antecedent, simultaneous and subsequent conditions. If you approach the question from the side or from an observer viewpoint, you may see conditions; but from the viewpoint of the proclamation of the Church, what is excluded is ambiguity. To the question of what the Lutherans do with the parable of the sower, RJ answered that they interpret it as a warning to those for whom the gospel message does not resonate. What makes the gospel resonate has implications for something like a double predestination found in Luther and Thomas. We cannot get God off the hook when we ask why some believe and some do not.

The moderator asked RJ whether the Lutheran view on unconditionality has similarities to Thomas' view that while God moves the will with unfailing efficacy to do good (see *De ver.* 2.14, ad 5), it may fail to gain its effect because the human will may fail. RJ said that from an observer viewpoint this position and Luther's position are similar (though Luther is not so interested in the efficacy of God's grace as in the unconditionality of the gospel promise). But the observer position is inappropriate. All Lutherans say that the primary locus of theology is the reflection of the preacher on what he is to say or do. How do I speak so that my words convey the promise character of the gospel? There is one way of preaching the Gospel that is indeed gospel and another that is law. CP replied that we are going to be judged by what we do. God's readiness to forgive admits of conditions. Another participant noted that the problem seems to be in the 'alone.' It is difficult for us not to read scripture with the eyes of metaphysicians.

RJ said that if the union of churches is to depend on anthropological agreement it is a long way off, but there is not much agreement on these issues even within each of the churches. With reference to justification, the important thing is that you have here a critique of churchly practice. When the gospel is honest to itself, it has to sound that way; with such things as indulgences and private masses at the time of the Reformation, it did not sound that way. The Reformation failed because three-quarters of the western church rejected this critique. But if the Lutherans are let back in, they will continue the critique. CP replied that there is also a counter critique. Lutherans should not make their critique so strong that the new obedience is excluded; a respect for the holy where it can be found is equally necessary. RJ noted that if justification is called the "sole critique for judging," it is not the only dogma. But on the point of justification by faith as critique there can be no compromise. The fears that Catholics expressed became true when Lutherans became a denomination; critique functioned in a vacuum and ate away at the substance. But Lutherans did not leave the church; they were thrown out.

To begin the next day's session of the seminar, the moderator raised several questions that the preceding discussion left hanging. Two of these questions seemed to evoke most of the discussion, and so the discussion

will be summarized around these questions. The first of these is the following. Granted that God's promise of grace frequently receives no acceptance, how does one explain this? Is part of the explanation a doctrine of double predestination, or is it rather a doctrine that God's grace is such that it can be resisted? In an introductory statement, CP recalled that in Romans 9-11 Paul recounts God's fidelity to his word and yet shows that his word is such that he can stretch out his hand all the day long and receive no acceptance from those to whom he offers his gift. There is a place for distinction between God as enabling and God as accomplishing in human freedom. The doctrine of double predestination is not to be accepted; God relates to failure in a way different than to accomplishment. RJ noted that for Thomas predestination came in as a subheading under God's providence. In classical Lutheranism it appeared in a different location. The Reformation concern was not for the efficacy of grace so much as for the straightforwardness of gospel promise rather than law. The doctrine of predestination arises in reference to the unconditionality of the gospel. God's love for you is certain because Christ has risen. Your salvation depends on God's will, so the Lutherans have to acknowledge that there is an obverse correlate to this. But they do not have confessional unity on this issue. RJ stated that he is not sure that he and CP disagree on this; he is agnostic on the question whether there is anyone in hell or on the negative side of God's predestination. The discussion later picked this up. For example, one participant noted that Origen and Augustine differed on this question. Augustine is more orthodox but Origen is more Christian. And the West is held hostage to Augustine who says that you cannot have a God who in the world of original sin saves everyone. The tendency to universalism today (e.g., in Rahner) was noted. RJ added that we would like to have a picture of God in which we see the problems of justice and love are reconciled. Luther said that our image of God shifts between God as sheer love and uncertainty that there is a just will behind things. We are to flee from one to the other.

A second question considered during this session concerned the plausibility today of the doctrine of justification by faith and not by works. Does it answer the human question central to human anxiety and concerns today as it did in previous ages? Can its validity be made plausible today by simply repeating the way it was presented in the past, or is it necessary for it to be proclaimed and taught within a different context today if it is to be plausible? CP note that the problem the reformers faced was the problem of the meaning of life, and that that problem remains central today. One way of posing this question today is in the context of liberation, though CP expressed a preference for a theology of history. RJ asserted the continuing plausibility of the doctrine, and agreed that the reformation question could be stretched to the question of whether life has meaning.

In the following discussion one participant was not as sanguine about the plausibility of the doctrine. He noted that the reaction of ordinary

Catholics to the doctrine is at times simple bewilderment. Also, Juan Segundo attacked the traditional concentration on personal justification as obscuring social concerns; Leonardo Boff expressed preference for the context of liberation over that of justification for the treatment of theological anthropology; and in the morning session, Rahner's position had been called a "Catholic Pelagianism." One response to the fear thus expressed was that the doctrine does not exclude works; we cooperate with God or we do not. One participant suggested that the implausibility of the doctrine today may be due to our market-place mentality in which money is something earned; thus people may well think that justification is to be earned as well. Another participant stated that justification by faith is an expression of an experience, and if one does not have the experience the expression is not plausible. The fundamental Christian experience is that of being loved by God. It is impossible to earn God's love; the experience is that we do not earn it; we have to accept God's love if it is to transform us. If this is preached as law, people will always think that they have not received God's love.

One participant pointed out that a recent Gallup survey showed that in the USA there is not a correlation between regular Church attendance and growth in ethical life; frequent church-goers are as likely to commit adultery and cheat on their income taxes as those who do not attend church regularly. So the question was posed about how to get Christians to the point of transformation. RJ pointed to Martin Luther King as one who preached the gospel in a way that had a transforming effect upon people. The gospel promise does not lack ethical content. The point is that there is a way of conveying this ethical content as gospel and there is a way of conveying it as law — counter to gospel and as condition. It is the certainty of the kingdom that evokes action or transformation, as it is the unconditionality of a marriage promise that has a transforming effect on the spouse. Counter to this, some recalled that the gospel also contains warnings of punishment and conditions for forgiveness — namely, that one forgive others. The instance of M.L. King's preachings, one person remarked, shows us that the preaching of the gospel today is plausible when it conveys a promise of transformation of the individual and of society here in history. CP added that there seems to be in the Lutheran psyche a suspicion of penultimate hopes, whereas Catholics want to make more room for objects of penultimate hope. On this note the discussion ended, and there was a brief group reflection on a possible topic for next year's seminar in theological anthropology.

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