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"THE GIFT OF SALVATION": ITS FAILURE TO ADDRESS THE CRUX OF JUSTIFICATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1997, a group of evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics agreed upon a statement concerning the nature of salvation, which was subsequently published in *First Things* under the title, "The Gift of Salvation." A central aim of the discussions which led to this document was to find "firm agreement on the meaning of salvation, and especially the doctrine of justification" which had not been addressed in a 1994 statement known as "Evangelicals and Catholics Together."[1] The "Gift of Salvation" therefore takes its place alongside quite a number of recent attempts to find agreement between Catholics and Protestants on the doctrine of justification.[2] It is difficult to assess what impact the statement might have, given the informal nature of the discussions which produced it, the variety of the participants in it, the confessional diversity of evangelical Protestants toward whom it is addressed, and the response of the Vatican to the "Joint Declaration" of Lutherans and Catholics released in July of 1998. Moreover, additional statements from participants to the discussions have appeared, describing something of the meaning of various aspects of the "Gift of Salvation."[3]

Despite the priority which we ought to allow to "authorial intent," confessional statements such as this one do come to have lives of their own. It therefore seems fair to treat the document as it stands for what it says or does not say. In doing so, I do not intend to focus entirely upon faults which in my view appear within the "Gift of Salvation." I wish rather to use the document to highlight some of the basic issues at stake in Protestant dialogue with Catholics. I shall therefore briefly consider the way in which the "Gift of Salvation" addresses the doctrine of justification, and then set out several positions which I regard as fundamental to the current discussion.

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[1] See the introductory remarks by Richard John Neuhaus, "The Gift of Salvation," *First Things* 79 (January 1998) 20.

[2] E.g. the American Lutheran-Roman Catholic discussions published in 1984, those of German Lutherans and Catholics published in 1986, the 1987 Anglican-Roman Catholic statement, and the Joint Declaration on justification issued in 1997 by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

[3] E.g. Timothy George, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A New Initiative," *Christianity Today* 41 (December 8, 1997) 34–35.

II. THE GIFT OF SALVATION

As is well known, the gratuity of salvation has never been a matter of debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Both have *always* affirmed that salvation is a gift. The question has been *how* grace operates in justification. Does "justification" signify the transformation of the sinner by the grace of God? Or does it represent an unmerited divine verdict in favor of the sinner from which good works follow? Unfortunately, the central statement of the "Gift of Salvation" on justification fuses the two ideas:

> In justification, God, on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends, and by virtue of his declaration it is so.[4]

Rather than a direct declaration of what justification *is* and how it takes place, we find here a description of what takes place "in" it. While it is entirely right to think of justification as an event, we surely require a more definite indication of its nature in a statement such as this. Particularly problematic is the way in which the relation between the cross and the "event" of justification is left undefined. Implicitly, the divine declaration stands one step removed from the cross, even if it is said to take place "on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone." In other words, God appears here as the creator who speaks, but it is not clear that he acts as the ruler and judge who has righteous wrath against humanity. An adequate statement concerning justification surely requires a more definite indication of the relationship between the event of justification and the event of the cross. Especially at this point the "Gift of Salvation" fails to address the crux of justification.

Given the indistinct locus of justification, it is not surprising that the topic of faith is separated from it and treated in a subsequent paragraph. The question at stake, however, is whether or not "justification" is defined without remainder by "faith," whether faith alone is, so to speak, the second locus of justification, a sort of mirror, which reflects the cross and resurrection within the human being.

Finally, the statement combines the pronouncement of forgiveness and the idea of an inherent righteousness into an indistinguishable whole: we are "no longer (God's) rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends." In speaking in this way, "the Gift of Salvation" says nothing, because it says everything. On the one hand, the reality of the new obedience in believers has never been in doubt in Protestant confessions. It only has been distinguished from the verdict of righteousness, as the fruit is distinguished from the root. On the other hand, we might happily read the statement in manner which conforms with the Tridentine decree, finding the sole formal cause of justification in the transformation of the human being. I find it hard to think that this effort to speak of an all-comprehensive "meta-justification" will not suffer the same fate that the Regensburg formula of "double justification" suffered in the sixteenth century.[5]

[4] "Gift of Salvation" 21.

[5] Perhaps some of Calvin's heirs are only following in his footsteps in this regard, since he was able to give his approval to the Regensburg statement. Wilhelm Neuser has pointed to the Aristotelian

As we have just indicated, the discussion of "faith" appears in the immediately following paragraph:

> By faith, which is also the gift of God, we repent of our sins and freely adhere to the Gospel, the good news of God's saving work for us in Christ. By our response of faith to Christ, we enter into the blessings promised by the Gospel. Faith is not merely intellectual assent but an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life. We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).[6]

The lack of definition in the preceding paragraph spills over here. One wonders what precisely the "blessings promised by the Gospel" might be. Are they something more than the verdict of justification? As much as a Protestant must appreciate the acknowledgement that faith entails more than mere assent, the lack of clarity in the early part of the statement leaves the final declaration concerning "justification by faith alone" without substance. Does "faith" mean confidence that we are counted righteous on account of Christ's cross and resurrection alone? Or are we to read the "blessings of the Gospel" and the reference to faith as "issuing in a changed life" to mean that transforming love is included within justification? The first reading would mean that the Catholic dialogue partners have swept aside Trent and its anathemas. The second would mean that Protestant evangelicals have swept aside their historic confessions. I find it hard to think that either of these interpretations is possible. We appear to have here a statement which is sufficiently diffuse to satisfy everyone, without engaging the central issue of the meaning of the cross.

In fairness, it must be admitted that the participants indicate an "urgent" need for further discussion of such topics as

> . . . the historic uses of the language of justification as it relates to imputed and transformative righteousness; the normative status of justification in relation to all Christian doctrine; the assertion that while justification is by faith alone, the faith that receives salvation is never alone . . .[7]

Yet this admission itself is troubling, especially in the first and last items mentioned. Given the earlier statement we examined, this final qualifying comment seems to say that a conceptual distinction between "imputed" and "transformative" righteousness no longer applies. The only task that remains is to sort out the historic uses of *language* on justification. It is true that recent biblical scholarship has tended to obscure the distinction between "imputed" and "effective" righteousness. Whether it has rightly done so is another matter. The framers of this document have every right to include such a perspective in their statement, as in fact has been done in other joint statements.

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distinction between "person" and "work" which remains in Calvin's thought, and which led him to accept the formula of a double justification, "Calvins Urteil über den Rechtfertigungsartikel des Regenburger Buches," *Reformation und Humanismus* (ed. M. Greschat and J. F. G. Goeters; Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1969) 176–194.

[6] "Gift of Salvation" 21.

[7] Ibid. 22.

Nevertheless, if the "Gift of Salvation" is adopting such a position, it seems fair to ask that it clearly say so. Furthermore, one can hardly claim without further explanation that such a view stands in "agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone."

One does not know what to think with respect to the third topic reserved for future discussion. According to the earlier statement concerning justification within the document, the participants had agreed upon "justification by faith alone" in the sense of the Reformation traditions. To conclude the document with the indication that urgent discussion is required concerning "the assertion that while justification is by faith alone, the faith that receives salvation is never alone" is passing strange. It suggests exactly what we are arguing, that the present statement says nothing on the nature of justification. Whatever the future of this dialogue might be, it is surely fair to ask for a clearer statement of the matter.

III. THREE THESES ON JUSTIFICATION

It seems appropriate at this juncture to highlight some of the underlying issues at stake in current discussions of justification. I shall present my own convictions on thetical form, which at the very least has good historical precedents. I recognize that I am making rather large claims, which deserve more elaboration and defense than I can give them here. I offer them in the hope of bringing further clarity to the topic, and stirring others to further reflection. The theses which follow are by no means exhaustive. Other important matters deserve discussion, particularly the relationship of "justification" to the other ways the NT describes Christ's redeeming work. Nor are the following theses novel, or at least I hope that they are not. I intend only to bring a reminder of matters that belong to the Reformation tradition.

Thesis 1: To say that faith alone justifies is to say that our justification was accomplished outside of us, in Christ's cross and resurrection. For this reason, and in this sense, it is necessary to speak of justification by faith alone (sola fide).

As I have just indicated, in this affirmation I am saying nothing new. Any discussion of this point directly leads to the traditional *loci*, and the exegetical debates associated with them. According to the biblical witness, faith justifies on account of its object and content, namely the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ. This understanding of faith is especially apparent in Paul's letters, although it is certainly not limited to them. For Paul, "faith" is so closely bound to Christ and his work that he can speak of faith "coming" or "arriving" only with the coming of Christ (Gal 3:23, 25), and does so in the context of explicating Abraham's justifying faith in his letter to the Galatians. In Romans 1 and 3 he announces a righteousness given to faith, and indeed a propitiation through faith in Christ's blood (Rom 1:16–17; 3:21–22, 25–26), while in Romans 4 and 5 he describes justification as having taken place in Christ's blood and in his resurrection (Rom 4:25; 5:9). In Romans 10, faith alone and the bare confession of Jesus as crucified and risen secures the

salvation of anyone and everyone (Rom 10:9–13). In a similar way, in John's Gospel faith appears as a "seeing" of Christ and of his saving work (John 3:18–19; 6:40–46; 9:39–41; 12:36–46). Eternal life is granted to this bare faith (3:15; 3:36; 5:24; 6:29; 6:47). For the author of Hebrews, faith is a constant hearing and holding fast the message of Christ's saving work, a hearing which here and now gives us access to the presence of God and to the very heavenly Jerusalem itself, which is the goal of our earthly journey (Heb 2:1; 4:1–2, 14–16; 10:19–23).

I hardly need to repeat the traditional Protestant elaboration, that good works follow this faith necessarily. The faith which justifies is never alone, but is active in love since Christ himself is present in it (Gal 2:20–21; 5:6, 22–24). The issue at stake is not whether faith has works, but whether faith must be supplemented by charity in order to effect justification. To put it in another way, the question is whether faith is the engine which drives love or love is the engine which drives faith. The differing ways in which Protestants and Roman Catholics have defined this relation depend in large measure on differing, underlying anthropologies, to which we shall turn shortly. From another perspective, this question is answered already from the NT understanding that faith is defined by its object, Christ, in whom God's promises have come to fulfillment. Faith has works because Christ and his saving work are present and active within it.

We may amply illustrate this relation from Jas 2:20–26, a passage which has long been at the center of the debate on justification. With Timo Laato, and against Trent, we may observe that faith and works do not stand in an additive relation to one another in this context.[8] James feel free to say that a person is justified by works (Jas 2:23), just as Abraham and Rahab were justified by works, that is to say, by works alone (Jas 2:21, 25)! Of course, faith is not left out of consideration here. Faith worked within Abraham's works (Jas 2:22).[9] It came to its *own* perfection in these works. The words of Scripture which reckoned righteousness to Abraham therefore came to their fulfillment, just as prophecy comes to fulfillment (Jas 2:23–24).[10] There is much more to be said concerning the way in which James understands justification in this passage. Here I simply wish to underscore that according to the biblical understanding, including that of James, faith in Christ and his saving work has and produces its own works.

Thesis 2: There is a conceptual distinction in the biblical witness between the verdict of justification and the vindication which is associated with it, that is, between "forensic" and "effective" righteousness.

Since at least Ernst Käsemann's 1961 Oxford address on the "Righteousness of God in Paul's Thought," in which he interpreted the Pauline expression in terms of a "salvation-creating power," a growing number of biblical scholars

[8] Timo Laato, "Justification According to James: A Comparison with Paul," *TrinJ* (1997) 43–84.

[9] James uses συνεργέω to express *concursus* here, not supplementation. Cf. Rom 8:28; 2 Cor 1:11; 6:1.

[10] See Laato, "Justification" 68.

have concluded that Paul's language embraces both "forensic" and "effective" justification.[11] Nearly all the resistance to this interpretation of Paul came from the Bultmannian perspective and has largely subsided. We almost might say that this reading of Paul belongs to the so-called established results of biblical scholarship, to which almost everyone appeals without question or reflection. Obviously, if we accept this concept of a "meta-justification," we have set aside a fundamental point of disagreement between Protestant and Roman Catholic thought. It is fair to say, I think, that Käsemann's interpretation of Paul marks the movement of this question concerning the nature of justification from without to within the Protestant camp.

Although exegesis alone must decide the meaning of righteousness language in Paul's letters, at least two other aspects of Käsemann's thought deserve attention at this juncture. On the one hand, under the influence of Bultmann, Käsemann strips Paul's soteriology of any conception of Jesus' death as an atonement: the passage which speak in this manner represent an unassimilated remainder of early Christian tradition. This theology of justification without atonement means that all emphasis is laid upon the obedience of the godless human being which is effected through the reduction to nothing by Christ's cross and the power of the risen Lord. There is an underlying moralism here which does not match the biblical witness, or Käsemann's broader intent.[12] On the other hand, under the influence of Schlatter, Käsemann interprets justification in terms of God's faithfulness as Creator to his creation. I certainly do not wish to contest the connection between justification and the new creation in Paul's thought or its significance. Nevertheless, the elevation of God's faithfulness as creator to a hermeneutical key for the understanding of justification robs the "reduction to nothing" of any real meaning, and makes one wonder what significance the expression "*new* creation" might have had for Paul. Again here Käsemann introduces an element of moralism: the cross no longer effects the death of the sinner as the punishment for sin. It merely strips the godless of his godlessness. In opposition to Käsemann, and on this matter Schlatter as well, I would argue that God the Creator is to be understood in terms of his action in the cross, and not the cross in terms of God's activity as Creator: *crux probat omnia.*

The exegetical question concerning Paul's understanding of justification centers upon the manner in which he takes up the biblical tradition of a saving righteousness of God, particularly in Romans. In the end it can be resolved only by a survey of the usage of the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish tradition, in which we cannot engage here. I shall simply summarize findings which

[11] See Ernst Käsemann, "The 'Righteousness of God' in Paul," *New Testament Questions of Today* (trans. W. J. Montague; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 168–182, originally published as "Gottesgerechtigkeit bei Paulus," *ZTK* 58 (1961) 367–378. As the very title of Käseman's German essay indicates, Adolf Schlatter's interpretation of Paul and the Pauline expression stands behind his proposal.

[12] For a critique of Käsemann's theology of justification in this regard, see Paula Francis Matthew Zahl, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre Ernst Käsemanns* (Calwer Theologische Monographien 13; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1996) esp. 66–74.

shall appear in another format.[13] First, I find it difficult to think that in Romans Paul relied upon the notion of a "salvation-creating" power of God that entails the sort of "meta-justification" which is current in the literature. Paul's explication of our death to sin with Christ in Romans 6 would hardly have been necessary if he assumed that his addressees shared such an understanding of justification. Moreover, precisely in this passage Paul explains the origin and basis of the new obedience, not on the basis of a tradition of God's saving righteousness, but on the basis of Christ's cross and resurrection. Secondly, the common interpretation of God's righteousness as his saving "covenant faithfulness" is seriously misleading. A review of the usage of the Hebrew Scriptures shows quite clearly that the attribution of righteousness to God derives from the background of his "ruling and judging" and ultimately, I would argue, from the context of "creation," not from that of "covenant." This means in the first place that the idea of "God's righteousness" as it appears in the Psalms, the book of Isaiah and elsewhere cannot rightly be reduced to the mere idea of "salvation." God's righteousness involves his establishment of *justice* on behalf of his people. The executive and juridical functions are joined in God as ruler who does מִשְׁפָּט וּצְדָקָה. God's vindicating action, his "righteousness" implicitly entails his verdict on behalf of his people. Verdict and vindicating action are joined to one another in practice, even as they remain conceptually distinct. Neither in Paul, nor in the Hebrew Scriptures do we find a "meta-justification" in which the two ideas merge.

This background is quite evident in Psalm 98, the text to which Paul undoubtedly alludes when he speaks of the "righteousness of God" which has been revealed in the Gospel (Rom 1:17). The beginning of this psalm is often cited as an example of God's saving righteousness:

> Yahweh has made known his salvation.
> To the eyes of the nations he has *revealed his righteousness.*
> He has remembered his constant love and his faithfulness to
> the house of Israel.
> All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God
> (Ps 98:1–3).

We should not, however, lose sight of its conclusion:

> . . . Shout for joy before the king, Yahweh
> Let the sea and its fullness roar
> The world, and those who dwell in it
> Let the rivers clap their hands
> And the hills together shout with joy,
> Before the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth
> He shall judge the world in righteousness
> and the peoples with rectitude (Ps 98:6b–9).

[13] I have surveyed this usage in an article which is to appear in a forthcoming volume on Paul and early Judaism edited by D. A. Carson.

In the psalm, Yahweh is moved to action out of covenant faithfulness to his people. His action itself, however, cannot properly be called "covenantal." He rather acts as the king of creation (Ps 98:6), who judges and establishes justice in the earth. For this reason the elements of creation, the sea, the rivers and the hills celebrate his coming. His deliverance of Israel anticipates his "coming" to judge savingly on behalf of the world. The nations themselves may expect to receive the justice and equity which has been granted already to Israel (Ps 98:7–9). In Ps 98:2, "Yahweh's righteousness" signifies his verdict on Israel's behalf which is expressed in vindicating action. We have to do here not merely with salvation, but with saving justice. Without going into detail, I would argue that the same relation between verdict and vindication informs Paul's references to justification, as is particularly evident in Rom 4:25, where Paul speaks of Jesus having been "delivered up on account of our transgressions, and raised on account of our justification." The resurrection of Jesus Christ is our vindication, which bears the divine verdict on our behalf.[14]

Thesis 3: The human being is to be understood on the basis of the cross and resurrection, that is, as a sinner given over to condemnation and death and raised to life with Christ. The cross is not to be interpreted through a prior or independent understanding of the human being, that is, as an enablement and transformation of the creature.

The traditional dispute between Roman Catholics and Protestants on the definition of justification derives ultimately from differing understandings of the human being. I note that Paul O'Callaghan, a Roman Catholic scholar, concludes his recent, thorough and excellent survey of "the justification debate" with this very conclusion.[15] Put in simple terms, the question is whether our status as sinners comprehends the whole of what we are, or if our creaturehood—including our bearing the image of God—stands alongside and qualifies the reality of sin, as a sort of remainder. If we take the latter view, the grace of Christ may, or rather, *must* be infused, radiated or otherwise communicated so that the human being might be healed and transformed. It follows as a matter of course, that from the canons and decrees of Trent up to the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Roman Catholicism has understood "justification" as "not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner man," which establishes "cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom."[16]

If, however, we derive our understanding of the human being and the human condition from the cross and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God, it becomes clear that the judgments of God, his pronouncement of condemnation and his verdict of justification, determine all that we are and shall be. Here the justification of the sinner is simultaneously the justification of God

[14] I develop these ideas at greater length in a forthcoming book on justification in Paul's thought.

[15] Paul O'Callaghan, *Fides Christi: The Justification Debate* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1997) 249.

[16] §1989, §1993 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 536–537.

in his wrath against the sinner. Here we are reduced to nothing (*redigi ad nihilum*) without remainder in Christ's death. Here Christ's life is our life and justification. Here, in the ultimate sense, there is no transformation *in* our person, but rather a replacement *of* persons: "I have been crucified with Christ, I live, yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). This statement from Galatians is no isolated or incidental comment on Paul's part. It is central to his Gospel, and appears in varying forms elsewhere in his letters: we have been baptized into Christ's death to sin, and raised with him to a life of service to God (Rom 6:1–11); one died for all, therefore all died (2 Cor 5:14); if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17); God has raised us and seated us in heaven in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6). The list could go on. Such statements are not to be swept away as mere picturesque speech on the part of the apostle. Nor are they to be relativized by meaningless qualifiers such as being "positionally raised with Christ" or other forms of Protestant mysticism. Paul predicates them of persons who still were subject to sin, in whom the old Adam was all too present, and who have not yet been raised from the dead. Taken in their contexts and taken seriously, these Pauline affirmations lead inevitably to the recognition that we are *simul iusti et peccatores*, at once righteous and sinners. Of course, if we loose this confession from the context of faith and hope, it becomes blasphemous. Rightly understood, this acknowledgment of our present condition, which I take to be the central theme of Romans 7, does not at all allow laxity or indifference. Just the opposite: it exposes the true character of the battle in which we are engaged. By the work of the Spirit, the cross reenacts its triumph in us again and again. We wage war against our very conquered selves. This, after all, is what Paul means by "the flesh" and "the Spirit" being opposed to one another (Gal 5:16–26). Consequently, as an affirmation that the whole of our salvation has been accomplished in Christ outside us, the *simul* is absolutely essential.

I am not of the opinion, then, that the recent response of the Vatican to the Joint Declaration of Lutherans and Catholics is irrelevant to the statement known as the "Gift of Salvation."[17] The Vatican statement singles out in particular the debate as to whether the justified person is still a sinner, reiterating the traditional Catholic positions that (1) the concupiscence which remains in the baptized is not truly sin; (2) that the mercy of God enables the cooperation of the human being in justification. For these reasons, "it remains difficult to see how, in the current state of the presentation, given in the Joint Declaration, we can say that this doctrine on '*simul iustus et peccator*' is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine Decree on original sin and justification."[18] This directness is refreshing, and must be taken into account.

[17] Contra Richard John Neuhaus, "Setback in Rome," *First Things* (October 1998) 82.

[18] The citation is drawn from the fiirst point of clarification of the official Catholic Response to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, published on July 9, 1998, downloaded from http://lutheranworld.org. Since the initial Vatican response there has been an "annex" to the Joint Declaration, in which the problem of the *simul justus et peccator* has been set aside, the text of which is available at http://lutheranworld.org. Lutheran and Roman Catholic representatives

In agreement with this call from the Vatican for clarification in its dialogue with Lutherans, I would suggest that to an even greater degree the "Gift of Salvation" requires elaboration if it is to serve a useful purpose. Confessional clarity strengthens all of us for the tasks which lie before us, and provides the way to further dialogue by exposing our real differences. A debate on the basis of Scripture, which ends in disagreement, but which produces distinct statements on both sides, is far more fruitful than a document which is open to arbitrary interpretation.[19] While I do not wish to be unfair to the participants in the discussions which led to the "Gift of Salvation," I cannot see how the document represents progress. Perhaps they fell short of their stated aim of finding "firm agreement" on justification because of too great an eagerness to reach a statement upon which all could agree. My hope is not that discussions shall end, but that ongoing dialogue will be carried out with greater clarity, particularly on the part of Protestant evangelicals. Alister McGrath concludes his lengthy historical survey of the doctrine of justification with a quotation from an unexpected source, Goethe's Faust:

> What you have inherited from your fathers,
> acquire for yourself, so that you might possess it.[20]

Perhaps the most pressing need of the hour is for evangelicals to learn, know, understand and possess their own heritage in this article of the Gospel. Only then shall we be able to enter into dialogue with others rightly and safely.

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plan to sign the declaration on October 31, 1999, in Augsburg, Germany. It remains an open question as to whether even with this "annex" the Joint Declaration adequately deals with this theological difference.

[19] See the comments of Athina Lexutt, *Rechtfertigung im Gespräch: Das Rechtfertigungsverständnis in den Religionsgesprächen von Hagenau, Worms und Regensburg 1540/1541*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 64 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) 275–276.

[20] Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (1st ed.; 2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986) 2:191.