

BOOK REPORT:

HANS KÜNG, JUSTIFICATION

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for Prof. Brian McDermott, SJ

Jan. 5, 1982

Hans Küng, in his doctoral treatise "Justification, the Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection," endeavors to show that this pronouncedly Protestant theologian is fundamentally in agreement with Catholic teaching on the issue of justification, the burning issue in the Reformation. So much so, that there is no warrant for the division in the Church, despite important differences. Barth, in a letter to Küng, states that Küng has represented his views accurately, and that if what Küng has presented is indeed Catholic teaching, there is agreement, and we are divided in the same faith. Küng adduces evidence to show that his presentation of the Catholic view is at least a possible one.

BARTH'S DOCTRINE

First we must realize that Catholic theology proceeds from "below," influenced by Aristotelianism, while Barth's is from "above," influenced by German idealism. The former is static, the latter more dynamic and dilectic, as is Scripture. Though the theology of Justification lies at the root of the division in the Church, it is not the most important object of belief, which is the confession of Jesus Christ. From eternity, God chose himself in Christ in the form of a creature. Barth's theology is very Christocentric; it treats of God's one great work of creation, reconciliation and redemption (or consummation). Jesus is both the elected one and the rejected one of God; in him God ascribed to himself ^{the} reprobation man deserved and gave

to man undeserved life and election. God passed a sentence of death on man, the result of sin and God's justice, but God took man's place, in Christ, as ^{the} one judged. God was thus true to himself, did not violate his justice in acquitting man. He destroyed the man of sin and revealed sin for what it was: man's murder of his brother, destruction of himself and denial of God. Christ as judged one is also Judge. He died without us, in opposition to us, but pro nobis, in our place. God's election of him is his election of us.

Man did not cease to be a creature of God by sinning. He remained free to choose, but did not have freedom (here is one example of Barth's revision and deepening of the Reformation position). He was not totally corrupted, but his heart was, so he was also totally corrupted. In Christ, his history and justice become ours; we are all finally justified in him. We are a new creation in our incipient justification (an aspect of reconciliation); we are still unrighteous, but consummated justification is ours already (as an inheritance). God's pardoning obliterates sin, it is not an "as if." Here Barth deepens the forensic notion of the Reformers; the juridical pronouncement results in an ontological justice. Faith is the human counterpart to justification; it is the acceptance of God's verdict in obedience and trust. Barth believed that in Catholic teaching the sovereign character of the divine work was denied. Justification through faith, sanctification through love; our works are good only in Christ. Faith is the subjective realization of salvation, but it does not create its own object. It has a cognitive character,

yet a new being comes into existence. The just person is ontologically different from the sinner. From Christ faith gets a certain creative character. Barth thought that in the Romanist view there was a negation of the unity of grace, always new and free, and that it became our grace.

CATHOLIC TEACHING

Küng says that Barth petrifies Catholic teaching, especially as it is found in counter-attacks against heresies, which have polemical objectives; Catholic teaching is too rich to be found in one place. He also misses a faithful and obedient commitment (to authority) in Barth, who seems to decide things arbitrarily as an isolated man.

Against Luther and with Barth, justification is not considered the central dogma. God has one eternal decree and plan of salvation; redemption and consummation are grounded in creation. Death is the punishment for sin, but the sinner, despite God's threat, continues to exist for the sake of redemption. Christ annihilated the power of death, which now is the consummation of faith. Sin is against God incarnate. But free will is not destroyed because of it. On his own, without grace, all man has is sin; the good in us is due to Christ. The Catholics are with the Reformers in saying that without grace man is nothing (vs. Abelard), but against them and Baius in believing that even the sinner is still in Christ and that no one is absolutely without grace. Freedom lost is restored in Christ. There is no self-disposing autonomous good in the sinner; if there is some good, it is due to the redemptive power of Christ. No act of the sinner

is good in the sense of leading to salvation. So Barth really has more to reproach in the Catholic attitude than in its teaching. Sin is not peripheral for Catholics, so Barth's fundamental objection is unjust, just as Catholics are unjustified in saying Barth devalues man, the incarnation or the autonomy of creation. Barth is too polemic.

Grace is a personal, favorable disposition of God, it is God, not an entity. It refers to God primarily, not to us. Grace transforms man, but gratia creata is secondary, indicating the reality of change in the created sphere. We have a continuous dependence on grace; sanctifying grace is a disposition maintained in us by God. The declaring as just of the sinner does not follow real justification; God's word does what it signifies, it makes just. There are differences within Scripture's articulations itself. Trent only pronounced itself against Melanchthon's position that the declaration did not make the sinner just, putting the opposite emphasis. There is no double justification. In the death and resurrection of Christ the sinner is declared just. To this objective act is related a subjective realization. Catholics prefer "redemption" to "justification," but the terms are synonymous; if Barth were^{fully} aware of this, he would consider Trent differently. It is God's self-justification primarily; man is reconciled even before he changes his personal attitude; by this he appropriates reconciliation. Barth emphasized God's judgement, Trent justification in man. Trent prefaces^{the treatment of} subjective justification by treating (objective) redemption. Barth polemically protests too much against discussion of the process in man.

Man is just, not just externally (vs. the Reformation). There is a need for growth and uncertainty of salvation. We are justified fully in the final judgement. The sinful nature of man is taken away, but the history of his past sin remains (thus, simul iustus et peccator). What is untenable in Luther is considering justice only as hope, never as man's possession.

Trent is not against sola fide (with Aquinas); man can't justify himself. It is only against a certain interpretation, i.e., as subjective certitude, confidence of being saved. To these Catholics refer to as hope. We are certain God redeemed, but man's response is not certain. ¶ Barth emphasized alien justice in the real forgiveness of sins. What Catholics treat in justification, Barth treats in sanctification and vocation. Regarding faith, Barth is within the differences among Catholic schools. Trent's cooperari refers to subjective, not objective, salvation. This Barth misunderstands. God does it all, but not alone; we respond to his initiative. Only free will is able to receive it. Both God and man accomplish salvation (p.267)*. For Catholics, sanctification is an ontological holiness brought about by God; Protestants view it as ethical sanctification by man. Paul included both in justification, but stresses the forensic, while for him sanctification is also ethical and subjective. Justification must be operative in sanctification; Barth only quarrelled with reducing divine justification to human sanctification. Trent said about justification what the Reformers preferred to say about sanctification. Merit-talk is unscriptural, but Barth accepts the idea of reward. God is the judge, not man of himself.

*Westminster Press, 1981 ed.

For Barth, the main question was: Do Catholics seriously take justification as an act of God? For Catholics, it was: Does Barth consider justification as really justification of man? K ng concludes that Barth has no genuine argument for separation from the ancient Church. Barth's opposition to the ^{Roman} Church and her sacraments is based on fundamental Christology and theology of redemption problems. His starting points are sound, but he draws false consequences. His inclination is not error, however, just a variant, as occurs within Catholic theology. Further, Protestants have given up the extrinsic justice concept and accept a process in man. In an excursus, K ng makes the following points: the mystery of creation must be understood in the light of the incarnation; God has a single knowledge, so the Logos is known only as incarnate; Mary was chosen from eternity and God's immutability is dialectic; though he is immutable in himself, he can come to be in the other (Rahner).

COMMENTARY AND REFLECTIONS

First of all it must be said that Hans K ng brings a lot of work and material to his investigation; his book is a valuable contribution to ecumenism. He has studied Karl Barth, probably this century's greatest theologian, and has put Trent in a more complete and proper context. So that what he set out to do was important, even crucial for divided Christians, and his work is rather complete as far as its subject is concerned.

Actually, anyone somewhat familiar with Barth realizes that there is a great deal of concordance between him and Catholic teaching, at least when it is more or less enlightened. And cer-

tainly conciliar declarations, however polemical, seldom stray from a Scriptural understanding of our faith. Trent is no exception, and so it is not surprising that K ng's book shows agreement between good Catholic theology and Barth's work, which is a great synthesis of Christian belief. This must be said about Barth: he is an independent, original and profound thinker, very conditioned by Sacred Scripture --he can be relied on to convey the heart and mind of the hagiographers with great fidelity. It is wonderful to read and listen to this theologian coming from Scripture, freely propounding the Word of God. And for the Roman Catholic, who believes that Christ works and teaches in his Church under the guidance of her bishops, it is appealing to hear a "separated brother" echo so many of the Catholic Church's teachings.

However, both interlocutors have their serious problems. Barth's freedom is distorted by his anti-Romanism. It is surprising to see the effort he makes to incorporate most of the Roman traditions into his theology, e.g., confession of sins, role for the exemplary Christian (saints), canon law, etc. He does not want a skimpy Christian life. However, he absolutely rejects not only membership in the Roman Church, he^{also} has a great distrust for the teaching of this Church, for the Church as a whole, which is Christian despite itself. Its great sin is attempting to take possession of the Spirit, of grace, trying to take the place of Christ on earth, especially through his "vicar"; finally, being its own end instead of pointing to God as a servant, as Jesus himself does.

The Catholic Church has indeed been guilty of these things, and at the height of its decadence and crudity of greed, experienced the revolt of Luther and his followers. The doctrine of justification seems to be only a theological reflection --"rationalization" is probably too strong-- of much more operative and concrete realities, e.g., the selling of indulgences in such an exploitative manner, papal court corruption, trivialization and mechanization of the spiritual life, etc. The gist of the argument turned on the separation of the heavenly from the earthly, of God's justice from man's sinful condition. No longer was salvation to be placed in the hands of men, even Churchly men, but only on God. However, we believe this God does not reach us only immediately, but through other, sinful men like ourselves. Once the Protestants separated themselves from the Roman communion, which for its part began a process of sorely-needed conversion which has yet to reach more ultimate consequences, they isolated themselves from the divine guidance that is to be found more completely in the Catholic Church. A very different way of viewing Church organization, sacraments, etc. came into being. Only more recently have strides been made to see the other side more cordially and sympathetically. However, great differences remain. Most Protestants prefer to go their independent ways rather than submit to a monarch surrounded by a secretive court of political manipulators. Or so they can easily, if partially, be viewed. The onus is on "he who would be chiefest among you" to really show he is the servus servorum Dei. In the early Church this was more likely due to greater popular say on who would be

leader (cf. Schillebeeckx's book on ministry).

And so Küng's book is a valuable contribution in an area that is probably not the most significant for what he wants to accomplish, unity among Christians. Barth can read this book and refer to the notion of "crypto-Catholicism" as foolish. We are divided, even though in the same faith. And the cause of our division reflects what the Protestants emphasized: the sinfulness and corruption of man. Our common faith is due to the power of God's sovereign Word. Barth is a product of the sixteenth-century wound, and does his sublime theology as a wounded man, giving it its inclination. The Catholic magisterium, for its part, is still colored by the notion of a prerogative regarding God that de-humanizes its pronouncements, given them less the character of service than of autocracy. Still, for the Catholic they are authoritative, a real instrument of God which human corruption cannot render inefficacious. When the Church has had to define its faith, it has done so heeding the fact that God is sovereign, that we depend on him for everything, that justice comes only from him in Christ, that we do not save ourselves. A gifted theologian like Barth, rather independent of his forefathers in Reform, looks at man afresh and recognizes in God's creation someone not totally annulled, but a potential recipient of salvation. Barth remains antihumanistic, but he does not, cannot, consider God's work as illusory, as a pretense, or surreal, but as effective to create reality anew. The sinner pronounced just is really a new creature. In Christ, true God and true Man, his justice and history really become ours.

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Excellent work - you picked a lot in - grace, redemption for
and creation are the
and connections