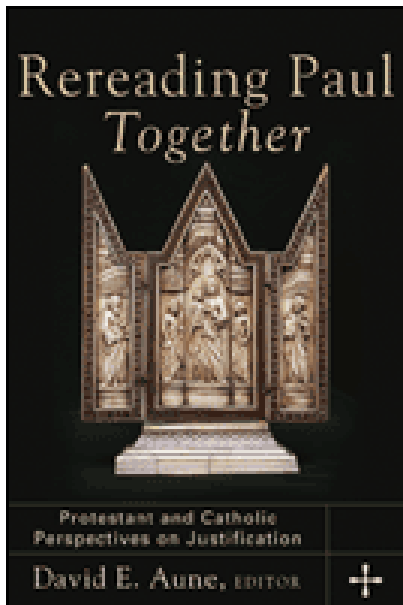


RBL 02/2008



Aune, David E., ed.

Rereading Paul Together: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Justification

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. Pp. 270. Paper. \$24.99. ISBN 080102840x.

Philip F. Esler

Arts and Humanities Research Council
Bristol, United Kingdom

On 31 October 1999 the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church ratified their Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This was a momentous event in the history of Christianity in the modern period, the culmination of thirty years of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. Not only did the declaration embody an agreement between the two churches on the doctrine that lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, but it was the first time that such a document had ever been ratified by Lutherans and Roman Catholics, and it contained a mutual lifting of condemnations each church had leveled on the other during the sixteenth century. For Christians everywhere (including the present reviewer, a Roman Catholic with a strong regard for the Lutheran tradition), the declaration was and is a cause of great satisfaction, not to say deep joy.

During 1– 2 February 2002, an important colloquium on the declaration took place at the University of Notre Dame, jointly sponsored by that university and Valparaiso University and entitled “Rereading Paul Together: A Colloquium on the Modern Critical Study and Teaching of Pauline Theology in an Educational and Ecumenical Context.” This volume is a collection of revised versions of papers delivered at that colloquium and two essays commissioned later.

The essays included are as follows: David G. Truemper, "Introduction to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification"; Susan K. Wood, "Catholic Reception of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (commissioned after the colloquium); Michael Root, "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: A Lutheran Systematic Theological Perspective"; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Justification by Faith in Pauline Thought: A Catholic View"; Richard E. DeMaris, "Can We Reread Paul Together Any Longer? Joseph A. Fitzmyer's View of Pauline Justification in Context"; John Reumann, "Justification by Faith in Pauline Thought: A Lutheran View"; Margaret M. Mitchell, "A Conversation among Friends: A Roman Catholic Response to John Reumann"; David M. Rylaarsdam, "Interpretations of Paul in the Early Church"; Randall C. Zachman, "Medieval and Reformation Readings of Paul"; and, the longest essay and written after the colloquium, David E. Aune, "Recent Readings of Paul Relating to Justification by Faith."

The essays are full of interest and insight and are all written with commendable clarity. They are significant for their discussion of the history and nature of the dialogue that led to the declaration, on the character of the agreement it contains, on how it relates to the historical criticism now practiced by both Protestants and Roman Catholics as a joint enterprise, on what Paul has to say about justification in the light of recent scholarship, and, finally, on what role remains for joint Lutheran-Catholic rereading of Paul now that the declaration is a reality. Rather than summarize the contributions *seriatim*, I will restrict this review to considering elements of them that relate to these broad areas and to providing my own view on some of the issues. While it would have helped if the declaration itself had been reproduced in the volume, the text is easily accessible on the Web or in printed form.

The ecumenical dialogue that led to the declaration did not take the path of compromise around a lowest common denominator but was built on confessional commitments to the truth. To get there the participants adopted a vital hermeneutical rule: "you may not condemn another's position unless and until you have stated the opposing position in language that the opponent/partner affirms and approves" (David Truemper, 39). Great efforts were made to discern catholic and apostolic truth and to avoid, or to dig beneath, phrases, formulae, and slogans stamped with the contingency of particular periods. No one who contemplates the painstaking discussions over three decades by men and women of goodwill that climaxed with this agreement could fail to be impressed by the extent to which they were guided by a common Spirit, or see in this an exemplar of fruitful dialogue.

The principal area of consensus in the declaration is section 15:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. *Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.* (emphasis added)

With these *verba mirabilia* (especially the italicized section) five centuries' clanging discord between Lutherans and Catholics is largely over.

Yet the declaration proceeds by stating aspects of the doctrine of justification that both churches agree they hold in common, such as in section 15 (just quoted), while also including other statements that express particular ways (but not in conflict with the common assertion or unacceptable to the other party) that Lutherans or Roman Catholics understand this doctrine. Thus, the declaration represents what David Truemper calls "differentiated consensus" (42), not uniformity of formula or emphasis (see sections 40–43 of the declaration). This is extremely sensible and leaves open the possibility of further Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on issues where there are real differences (see Michael Root, 62) and which the declaration itself states stand in need of further clarification: the authority of scripture, ecclesiology, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, the sacraments, and the relationship between justification and social ethics (section 43). I will suggest another area further below. As Susan Wood notes (59), the declaration does not bring Lutherans and Roman Catholics into full communion with one another, but it is a historic event in the lives of the two communities with far-reaching implications for ongoing cooperation.

One interesting area of disagreement is whether justification by faith is the sole criterion of Christian faith or one among several. The former view is held by many Lutherans (although not all, as seen in the way Michael Root subjects other Lutherans who subscribe to this view to a rigorous critique and in John Reumann's careful discussion on 110–13). The latter view is a typically Catholic view; in this volume Joseph Fitzmyer identifies ten effects of the Christ-event expressed under ten images (such as justification, salvation, reconciliation, redemption, sanctification, new creation, and so on), a result he equates with a decahedron, one totality but with ten panels, so that at any moment Paul could focus on one of them (82). Margaret Mitchell suggests, however, that the ten features that Fitzmyer so isolates do not represent different effects of the Christ-event but are rather diverse metaphorical foci Paul uses to express the single, salvific reality of Christ's death;

thus, they can be seen as templates or transparencies that can be overlaid on what for Paul is “the singly central Christ-event” (144).

This question is related to the extent to which justification/righteousness by faith was the core of Paul’s own theology. There are references in the book to critics such as Käsemann (83) who said yes and to others (82) who said no (e.g., Schweitzer, who regarded it as a “subsidiary crater” in Pauline thought). No one in the volume recognizes that there is a huge obstacle to regarding such language as central to Paul (at least throughout the entirety of his career) in 1 Thessalonians, for here, with Paul apparently writing to an audience made up entirely or overwhelmingly of non-Judean ex-idolaters (1:9), we find richly elaborated theological thought that is reliant, for example, on the language of sanctification (*hagiasmos*, *hagiadzō*; 4:3, 4, 7; 5:23) and not on justification/righteousness language. Even more telling, at one point we observe the apostle actually redacting such language out of his Old Testament source, when he replaces “righteousness” in relation to the breastplate with “faith and love” (5:8; the reference being to Isa 59:17 or Wis 5:18).

It is possible, however, that justification/righteousness language was more significant to Paul when the problem of the proper relationship between Judeans and non-Judeans in his communities, or those (as in Rome) to whom he wished to travel was, or might become, an issue. From the evidence of Galatians most clearly, and also from Romans and Philippians, it is highly probable that Paul adapted justification/righteousness language to his proclamation of the gospel of Christ to counter its use by his opponents (actual or potential) in connection with their insistence on circumcision for non-Judean believers. I summarize his approach like this: “You think you will be justified/acquire righteousness by becoming a Judean? I will show you righteousness by another route, through faith in Christ!”

As well as the theological realities in play here, the elephant in the room (still unspotted by many New Testament critics) is the issue of identity and the way groups define themselves against outgroups. In Israelite tradition righteousness was a glittering prize of being a Judean/Israelite and was not a badge of identity of non-Judeans, a message vividly conveyed in the wisdom literature, most notably in the antithetical proverbs contrasting the *dikaïos* with the *asebês* (and his sinful ilk) that characterize Ps 36 (LXX) and Prov 10–15. In Galatians Paul audaciously wrenches righteousness (and the exalted identity it represents) away from circumcised Judeans and applies it to those who believe in Christ, so that it now characterizes and exalts *their* identity.

Several authors in this volume note that the agreement in the declaration was only achieved because of Lutheran and Catholic biblical critics working together in close analysis of the texts, a process that showed that both Lutheran and Tridentine theologians

in the sixteenth century had been too absolute in their views of what the Bible taught (this is the view of Raymond Brown cited at 97).

For some critics, the common enterprise of biblical criticism has gone too far. Thus Richard DeMaris begins his essay with the apprehension of Luke Timothy Johnson that if Roman Catholics participate in much the same historical criticism of the Bible as Protestants, the exegesis of Catholic critics may lack anything distinctively Catholic (95–96). For DeMaris, a view like that of Johnson “sparks suspicion and discourages collaboration” (98). A further worry for the present reviewer is that the more Catholic a critic tries to make his or her exegesis, the less historical it will become. Christians who are confident of their distinctive identities, comfortable in their own denominational skins, should not fear that working jointly with other Christians on the historical meaning of the Bible threatens what they hold dear.

But such joint working is probably becoming more and not less challenging. One issue of some moment (see Richard DeMaris, 100–105, and John Reumann, 115–19) is that much of the biblical analysis represented in the declaration occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, before Pauline research (and New Testament criticism generally) took off in many new directions. As for Paul, the revolution effected by E. P. Sanders’s *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), the basis of the so-called “New Perspective” (it is hardly that now), was only then getting under way and would lead to a certain decentering of justification by faith (102–3). Moreover, in a broader context, the social sciences were only then beginning to make their appearance. In his essay David Aune charts many of the developments in Pauline scholarship that have occurred since the work that led to the declaration was undertaken. Yet even Aune (who rightly notes he will be selective [188]) does not address a fundamental challenge to ways of thinking about Paul posed by recent work on group and individual identities. How different the Pauline corpus looks, for example, if, under the influence of social-scientific ideas, we first eschew inapt discourse about “Jews” as members of a religion “Judaism” facing “Christians” who belong to a religion “Christianity.” How different it looks if we then focus instead on “Judeans” as members of an ethnic group (admittedly with a strong cultic and “religious” dimension), like fifty or so other ethnic groups in their world (see the *Contra Apionem* of Josephus), encountering in the Christ-movement (probably as early as the 30s of the first century C.E.) people who embodied a quite different and very threatening transethnic identity focusing on faith in Christ as savior and with a domestic focus.

Probably too much can be made of this scholarly revolution in relation to the declaration itself. Even if Pauline scholarship had moved on by the date the declaration was ratified, it had still done its work. Common understanding on an issue that had long been viciously divisive had been reached and mutual condemnations revoked. These achievements stand

whether Pauline scholarship was then changing fast or not. On the other hand, these new advances—including the social-science-prompted necessity of recognizing the role of ethnic and transethnic identities in understanding Paul’s message—are clearly relevant to how Lutherans and Catholics now continue with their dialogue. I will return to this issue below.

What of Paul? Focus tends to fix on his use of the verb *dikaiō*. The universal view in this volume (see, e.g., Joseph Fitzmyer, 83–84) and in most New Testament scholarship is that the verb *dikaiō* is used in the Septuagint in a “forensic” or “judicial” sense and carries such a meaning in Galatians and Romans. On one view (common among Lutherans) is that it means “acquit, vindicate, declare innocent, justify.” Catholics, however, often prefer to translate the verb as “make righteous.” Yet there is actually little difference here, since in an honor-oriented culture where one’s status depended on public opinion a declaration by a person or persons in authority as to one’s status necessarily entailed one’s acquisition of that status.

There is, however, a significant problem with a judicial interpretation of *dikaiō*. One of the data we must take into account in interpreting Galatians and Roman is that Paul uses three words: *dikaïos*, *dikaïosynē*, and *dikaiō*. There is a strong attraction, surely, in seeing here a single semantic field. Since *dikaïos* (for which there are hundreds of Old Testament examples) is naturally viewed as someone who is “righteous” and *dikaïosynē* is the state of being such, with no necessary judicial connections whatever, where does this leave the allegedly judicial meaning of *dikaiō*? Is there a nonjudicial interpretation of *dikaiō* available? As a one-time trial lawyer, the present reviewer has always found it curious that New Testament critics were so enthusiastic for the alleged judicial use of *dikaiō* and so unwilling to look for nonjudicial cases. While most of the instances of *dikaiō* are either judicial literally or metaphorically, some are not. One striking instance of the nonjudicial sense is found in Gen 38:26, and others occur at Jer 3:11 and Ezek 16:51–52 (thrice). The most interesting, and germane, instances, however, occur in the apocryphal wisdom text Sirach (to which there are several allusions in Paul’s letters). In these examples (Sir 1:21; 7:5; 10:29; 13:22; 18:22; 23:11; 26:29 NS 34:5) the question is whether a person will be regarded as, or will be or become, righteous in a general sense (without reference to judicial proceedings, literal or metaphorical). This usage then allows a close linkage to be made with *dikaïos* and *dikaïosynē*. This meaning for the verb allows us to postulate that all three words contribute to Paul’s attempt to create for his non-Judean Christ-followers a group identity just as illustrious as that possessed by Judeans, by virtue of his appropriating and reworking a central semantic field used by Judeans to characterize and extol their identity in contradistinction to that of outgroups.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification is a momentous achievement and a milestone in Lutheran-Catholic (and indeed in Protestant-Catholic) relationships. But what now? Where does this leave future joint Lutheran-Catholic rereadings of Paul? Is the job done? Does the onward progression of Pauline scholarship mean the task has become too difficult or even too threatening to particular denominational self-understandings?

The present reviewer is optimistic on this front. Historical criticism was and will remain of fundamental importance in the life of the Christian churches. It should be undertaken in a way that recognizes that we all come to these texts with denominational presuppositions, but without any concern that we have somehow failed our tradition if our exegesis is not stamped with its theological views.

Why are history and historical criticism important? Just as intercultural dialogue and understanding today attempt to comprehend the other in his or her context and distance from us, so too does historical criticism seek to penetrate what our ancestors in faith really meant when they wrote these texts to be read aloud in gatherings of the Christ-movement. Although complete understanding of the meaning of those communications is impossible, that is equally true of communication with people from different cultures today. Still, we make the effort, and, at a pragmatic level, enough meaning passes for it to be well worthwhile. Furthermore, history matters for how we understand Christ personally and theologically. This is a big area, but Karl Rahner once expressed the issue very well in *Theological Investigations* (8:3–23). Rahner noted that the eternity in which the risen Christ now exists is really the accomplishment and completion of history, so that we encounter him in the “eternal and enduring reality of his *history*, and, precisely as the one who has lived through this history” does he serve as mediator. The historical investigations of New Testament texts must remain at the heart of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue.

In fact, recent historical exegesis that draws on social-scientific insights into the construction and maintenance of individual and group identities holds the promise of breathing new life into the exercise. The plausibility structures that the Christian denominations created for themselves in the Reformation and post-Reformation period, and in which their members confidently knew who they were, have never been weaker. We live in an era when the West is experiencing powerful forces toward secularization, when the pressures on the planet and the need to find solutions to them that bring justice to all of the world’s population have never been more urgent, when other religions and religious movements are expanding rapidly, and when it has never been easier to encounter people of other cultures (either actually or virtually). In such a context, the pressures on Christians to understand who they are, to have a confident grip on their

identity and the resources it provides for responding to these challenges, have never been more acute. At such a moment, let us, each bearing the riches of our particular denominational traditions, go back to Paul and, in genuine dialogue of the sort that culminated in 1999 in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, learn from him what it means to forge a strong identity built on Christ in the face of other competing identities.