

A Critical Review of John Henry Newman's Doctrine of Justification

Churchman 094/4 1980

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Cardinal John Henry Newman's work on justification is an exciting book and a joy to read. It was written by a man who was describing not only a theological position but also his own living faith in the Holy Trinity. Therefore, in contrast to the dull solidity of many theological tomes, Newman's work has the quality of attractive readability as well as solidity.

In what follows I shall attempt to do three things. First, I shall set the context in which Newman came to write his book. Secondly, I shall describe his doctrine of justification and contrast it with the traditional Roman Catholic and Protestant doctrines. Thirdly and finally, I shall raise several questions concerning Newman's treatment of the subject and of his sources.

1 The context

The Tractarian movement began in 1833. By 1837 suspicion of certain Tractarian doctrines was beginning to develop among churchmen of all kinds, and especially among evangelical churchmen. I have described this development elsewhere.¹ Edward B. Pusey, the Oxford professor of Hebrew, and John Henry Newman, the rector of the University Church in Oxford, were suspected of moving towards Roman Catholic views of divine grace and the sacraments. So the *Tracts for the Times* produced by the Tractarians were carefully studied for evidences of error and heresy.

During 1837 two letters from John Henry Newman, defending views expressed in the *Tracts on Baptism* by Pusey, appeared with lavish editorial comment in the *Christian Observer*, the monthly evangelical magazine. The second letter ended with a promise from Newman that he would write on justification. Commenting on this, the editor (C. S. Wilks) claimed that his readers eagerly awaited this production which related to 'far the most important of the questions at issue' between the doctrine of the *Tracts* and of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. Indeed, Wilks was convinced that the tendency of Tractarian teaching was towards the revival within the church of the Romanist doctrine of justification by infused righteousness. An opportunity to assert this conviction was provided by the publication of Faber's work on justification which attempted to prove, against Alexander Knox, the Irish lay theologian, and against Joseph Milner, the evangelical historian, that the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith was actually taught by the early Fathers, before its corruption in the medieval period.²

A long review of Faber's book appeared in the first three issues of the *Christian Observer* for 1838. The writer of it declared that he saw 'no substantial difference between the doctrine of Trent and the doctrines of Mr Knox and the Oxford Tracts.' In all three cases, 'by qualifications and blending scriptural truths with false inferences, error is often made to appear so plausible that it is not easy to attack.' So a controversy over the doctrine of justification and related truths was anticipated:

If the battles of the Reformation are to be fought over again, not with avowed Romanists but with professed Anglicans, who account popery their 'dear sister' and consider Protestantism as a rational neologian schism, the friends of the pure Gospel of Christ, unsophisticated by human devices, have only to take up the spiritual arms of their godly forefathers, and with the Bible in their hands to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.³

And this is what happened, the battle being fought by evangelicals according to traditional Protestant strategy learned in the lengthy Protestant-Catholic controversy, a controversy which had been given a new lease of life in Britain because of the religious and political problems of Ireland.

Newman did not send a third letter to the *Christian Observer* on the topic of justification. What he did do was to deliver a series of lectures on the subject in the Adam de Brome Chapel of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford. In due course he published these,⁴ and their content will be examined later. Here it is necessary to make several explanatory comments. First of all, Newman believed that neither the doctrine of the Council of Trent nor the classic Protestant expressions of justification were wholly correct. Secondly, Newman had come to a very high view of regeneration through his study of the Greek Fathers, especially from the writings of Athanasius. Regeneration was the impartation of the full presence of Christ, the Word made flesh, through the Holy Spirit into the soul. And, following the same Fathers, he had developed a high view of the place of baptism as God's means of bestowing the gift of regeneration. His study of justification was obviously affected by these deeply held views.⁵ Thirdly, Newman wanted to make clear that what the Tractarians taught was not contrary to the formularies of the Church of England and was in no way a means of fostering notions of human merit. He believed that what he taught was a religion of divine mercy and grace, not a religion of human merit.

2 The doctrine

Newman wrote: 'It is the fashion of the day to sever these two from one another, which God has joined, the seal and the impression, justification and renewal.'⁶ In the context of the controversy between Roman Catholic and Protestant, the relation between justification as God's declaration of the sinner as righteous in Christ, and justification as God's actually making the sinner righteous, had been unfortunately severed to the extent that the doctrines were regarded as being in opposition to each other. To illustrate the point, Newman used the example of the brazen serpent upon which the Israelites were condemned to gaze. 'Gazing on the Brazen Serpent did not heal; but God's giving invisibly the gift of health to those who gazed.' So likewise, 'Christ's Cross does not justify by being looked at, but by being applied; not by being gazed at in faith but by being actually set up within us, and that not by our act, but by God's invisible grace.'⁷ Having noted that Newman wanted to keep closely together the external and internal work of God, we must explore his understanding of their unity.

a) Justification as the glorious voice of the Lord declaring us to be righteous

Basing himself on clear Old Testament teaching, Newman argued that the word which proceeds from God's mouth does not return to him void, but accomplishes that which he pleases. God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light. Jesus, the Word made flesh, called Lazarus from the grave and Lazarus rose from the dead. Therefore when God 'utters the command, "Let the soul be just", it becomes just.'⁸ 'Justification is "the glorious Voice of the Lord" declaring us to be righteous.'⁹ That it is primarily a declaration, not a making, is sufficiently clear, Newman argued, from this one argument—that it is the Justification of a

sinner, of one who has been a sinner, ‘and the past cannot be reversed except by *accounting* it reversed.’¹⁰

Yet, as has already been indicated, it is not only a declaration about the past, it is also a declaration about the present. Concerning the past, justification ‘supposes a judicial process, that is, an accuser, a judgment seat and a prisoner’; thus God ‘declares, acknowledges, and accepts us as holy.’ He recognizes us as his own and ‘publicly repeals the sentence of wrath and penal statutes which lie against us.’¹¹

The declaration about the present is related to the power of the Word of the Lord. What is declared is brought into reality. Righteousness is placed in the human heart, for ‘the Voice of the Lord is mighty in operation, the Voice of the Lord is a glorious Voice.’ The soul is actually made righteous. Precisely how this is accomplished by the Lord we shall examine later.

Here is Newman’s own summary of this theme of the voice of the Lord:

It appears that justification is an announcement or fiat of Almighty God breaking upon the gloom of our natural state as the Creative Word upon chaos; that it *declares* the soul righteous, and in that declaration, on the one hand, conveys *pardon* for its past sins, and on the other *makes* it actually *righteous*. That it is a declaration, has been made evident from its including, as all allow, an amnesty for the past; for past sins are removable only by imputation of righteousness. And that it involves an actual creation in righteousness has been argued from the analogy of Almighty God’s doings in Scripture, in which we find His words were represented as effective.¹²

So he who is justified becomes just, or he who is declared righteous is thereby actually made righteous. Newman claimed that this teaching was in harmony with the Articles of Religion, numbers eleven and thirteen.

In another lecture he said the following:

The great benefit of justification, as all will allow, it is this one thing—the transference of the soul from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ. We may, if we will, divide this event into parts, and say that it is *both* pardon *and* renovation, but such a division is merely mental, and does not affect the transit (so to speak) itself, which is but one act. If a man is saved from drowning, you may, if you will, say he is *both* rescued from the water *and* brought into atmospheric air; this is a discrimination in words not in things. He cannot be brought out of the water, which he cannot breathe, *except* by entering the air which he can breathe. In like manner, there is in fact no middle state between a state of *wrath* and a state of *holiness*. In justifying, God takes away what is past, *by* bringing in what is new. He takes us out of the fire by lifting us in His everlasting hands, and enwrapping us in His own glory.¹³

What God has joined, says Newman, let not theologians divide asunder.

b) Justification as the presence of God in the soul

Newman asked the question: What is the difference, the real difference, between a justified man and a non-justified man? He believed that the typical Protestant answer was an answer without real substance, for it referred only to thoughts in God’s mind. As he put the matter:

If the only real difference between a justified man and a man unjustified, be Almighty God's thoughts concerning him, then those who are justified are justified from eternity, for God sees the end from the beginning. They are in a justified state even from the hour of their birth.¹⁴

Justification must be something real on earth! To say that 'our justification consists in union with Christ, or reconciliation with God, is an intelligible and fair answer',¹⁵ but it still does not tell us what is meant by this *union*. And this we surely need to know.

If we say that faith is that which unites the soul to Christ, that faith is the reality which is acceptable to God in the heart of the sinner, then the question arises: What is it about such faith that makes it acceptable to God? Why is it superior to unbelief? The answer must be the grace of God. By divine grace alone true faith exists and is acceptable to God. So if Protestants were to give a real answer they must speak in terms of union with Christ, internal faith and the grace of God in the soul. As matters stood, the traditional Protestant doctrine was 'a system of words without ideas and of distinctions without arguments.'¹⁶

Newman believed that the traditional Roman Catholic answer was a real or meaningful answer, but nevertheless not a true answer. This answer claims that justification is inherent righteousness, spiritual renovation. It is the *result* of the grace of God in the soul, or the sanctifying effects of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. Newman shared some of the disgust of Protestants at the way the grace of God was described in (popular?) contemporary Roman Catholicism. He claimed that it 'views or tends to view the influences of grace, not as the operations of a Living God, but as something to bargain about, and buy, and traffick with, as if religion were, not an approach to things above us, but a commerce with our equals concerning things we can master.'¹⁷ No doubt he was thinking of the way the sacraments were described and received. Nevertheless, inner renewal and spiritual renovation make sense and thus point to a real answer.

Why was this answer incorrect? A brief reply is that it referred to the results and not to the essence of justification, which is a heavenly gift. Newman amassed biblical references (such as Romans 5:17, which refers to 'the gift of righteousness') in order to show that righteousness is a gift and is a gift received in our hearts. Then he summarized his thoughts in these words:

That the righteousness, on which we are called righteous, or are justified, that in which justification results or consists, which conveys or applies the great gospel privileges, that this justifying principle, though within us, as it must be, if it is to separate us from the world, yet is not *of* us or *in* us, not any quality or act of our minds, not faith, not renovation, not obedience, not any thing cognizable by man, but a certain *divine* gift in which all these qualifications are included.¹⁸

Newman argued that it was possible to define this divine gift more precisely. 'I mean', he wrote, 'the habitation in us of God the Father and the Word Incarnate through the Holy Ghost.' To be justified is 'to receive the Divine Presence within us and be made a Temple of the Holy Ghost.'¹⁹ So we see how, for Newman, his high doctrine of regeneration is united with his doctrine of justification. Regeneration, the indwelling of God in the human soul, is part of, the human side of, justification. For what God declares in heaven he truly effects on earth.

Here is the heart of Newman's theology of salvation. Here is what made him rejoice—God himself living in our hearts. He claimed that:

Whatever blessings in detail we ascribe to justification, are ascribed in Scripture to this sacred indwelling. For instance, is justification *remission of sins*? The Gift of the Spirit conveys it, as is evident from the Scripture doctrine about Baptism: 'One Baptism for the remission of sins.' Is justification *adoption* into the family of God? In like manner the Spirit is expressly called the Spirit of adoption, 'the Spirit whereby we cry, Abba, Father.' Is justification *reconciliation* with God? St Paul says, 'Jesus Christ is in you, unless ye be reprobates.' Is justification *life*? The same Apostle says, 'Christ liveth in me.' Is justification given to *faith*? He also prays 'that Christ may dwell in' Christians' 'hearts by faith'. Does justification lead to holy *obedience*? Our Lord assures us that 'he that abideth in Him and He in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.' Is it through justification that we rejoice *in hope of the glory* of God? In like manner 'Christ in us' is said to be 'the hope of glory'. Christ then is our Righteousness by dwelling in us by the Spirit; He justifies us by entering into us. He continues to justify us by remaining in us. *This* is really and truly our justification, not faith, not holiness, not (much less) a mere imputation; but through God's mercy, the very Presence of Christ.²⁰

So the God who declares the soul justified, is the same God who also inhabits the soul. And the God who inhabits the soul is the God who was made man and who died for our sins and rose again for our justification.

Protestants may accuse Newman of making regeneration a part of justification, but they cannot deny the beauty, the spiritual power of his doctrine.

c) The place of baptism and faith as instruments of justification

The instrumental cause of justification is the means by which, or the channel through which, God actually achieves the justification of the sinner. Roman Catholics had traditionally spoken of baptism as the instrument through which grace was infused by the Spirit into the soul to achieve justification. Protestants had spoken of saving faith in the hearts of the sinners, by which union with Christ and therefore justification were achieved.

Newman accepted the statement of the eleventh Article that 'we are justified by *faith only*', and the words from the Homily of the Passion for Good Friday that 'the only mean and instrument of salvation required on our part is faith, that is to say, a sure trust and confidence in the mercies of God.'²¹ He argued that true faith, living faith, could only be found in a heart which loved God and man. So faith as the 'only mean and instrument' is to be understood as the sole mean in contrast to other graces, e.g. hope, love, and faithfulness. A further clarification is necessary: it is the sole *internal* instrument, not the sole instrument of any kind.

Newman had a high view of the sacraments and it is not surprising to find him asserting that baptism is the *external* instrument. 'Baptism might be the hand of the giver and faith the hand of the receiver'; and 'faith secures to the soul continually those gifts which baptism primarily conveys.'²²

We must note that Newman was addressing himself to a situation in which infant baptism was the norm. So he could say:

Faith, then, being the appointed representative of Baptism, derives its authority and virtue from that which it represents. It is justifying because of Baptism; it is the faith of the baptized, of the regenerate, that is, of the justified.²³

Thus faith is always, when considered as an instrument, secondary to baptism. Newman actually believed that this was also true with respect to adult conversion to Christianity. He quoted such texts as 'Be baptized every one of you for the remission of sins' (Acts 2:38) and noted the close connection in the New Testament between baptism and forgiveness of sins. Newman held that faith was different in quality before and after baptism. For baptism changed faith from a condition into an instrument, from a 'mere forerunner into its accredited representative.'²⁴ Faith 'is renewed in knowledge when Christ is imparted as a Spirit.'²⁵ Newman saw proof of this power in the description of the faith of the jailer in Acts.

Another point was made by Newman. He was ready to accept that 'by faith alone' is 'a lively mode of speech [figurative] for saying that we are justified neither by faith, nor by works, but by God only.'²⁶ He found this usage in Melancthon, the Homilies, Bishop Bull and others, but he believed that 'it was more adapted for the schools, than for the taste of a people like the English at the present day.'²⁷

Here is Newman's summary of the relationship between faith, the sacraments, love, and obedience:

Reserving to Baptism our new birth, and to the Eucharist the ultimate springs of the new life, and to Love what may be called its plastic power, and to obedience its being the atmosphere in which faith breathes, still the divinity appointed or (in other words) the mysterious virtue of Faith remains. It alone coalesces with the sacraments, brings them into effect, dissolves (as it were) their outward case, and through them unites the soul to God.²⁸

So faith both develops and sanctifies other graces, like salt in food or incense on sacrifices.

Newman was thus able to reconcile the seeming differences between the teaching of St Paul and St James. His view was that 'Justification comes *through* the Sacraments; is received by faith; consists in God's inward presence and lives in Obedience.'²⁹

I may add, in closing this section, that Newman provided an answer to the question 'How is the sinner justified?'. His answer made use of Athanasius (whose works he was translating in 1838), who as a representative of the eastern tradition was not so concerned with the question 'How . . .?' as westerners have been. However, though he was answering a question which the 'easterner' does not usually ask, I believe that he rightly understood the essence of the Greek doctrine of what we loosely call 'deification'.

3 Questions

In my exposition I confess that I have not done justice to the wide range of citations from Scripture made by Newman. I have attempted to state his theology as simply as possible, noting how it differed from the Roman and Protestant doctrines of his day. In this final section, since my space is limited, I intend only to ask questions of Newman's exposition from a Protestant viewpoint.

a) Did he rightly understand the Protestant doctrine?

In general terms the answer must be 'yes'. Where he may perhaps be criticized is for not emphasizing that regeneration and sanctification were regarded by many Protestants as necessary and important as justification. His interpretation of the Thirty-nine Articles is a subject for discussion, for he minimized their Protestantism.

b) Did he rightly understand the Homilies of the Church of England?

He saw in them no disagreement with his own teaching. Here we have a problem, for the Homilies were popular sermons meant for ordinary people and thus are in common-sense Elizabethan language, not in precise Latin. They lack the precision of a confession of faith.

c) Did he rightly understand the meaning of ‘righteousness’ (dikaiosune) in the Bible?

This is a complex question, since even today learned biblical scholars are not agreed on its meaning. The most serious criticism that can be made of Newman is that he did not do full justice to the forensic idea of justification.

d) Is Newman’s idea of justification—resting upon righteousness in the soul through Christ being present there—qualitatively different from the idea of justification resting upon the merits of Christ who is present in heaven? It is the one Christ truly in heaven and truly in the soul via the Spirit. Newman did not deny the former, but for the doctrine of justification affirmed the priority of the latter. Perhaps Newman allowed himself to be over-influenced by his ‘discovery’ that regeneration is the coming of God into the human soul.

Newman reissued the lectures in 1874 when he was a respected Roman Catholic.³⁰ The material is precisely the same, except for the addition of a new preface of about a thousand words and fourteen brief notes placed in square brackets at the bottom of appropriate pages (e.g. pp 31, 73, 101 etc.).

In the preface, written at the Oratory in Birmingham, he stated: ‘Unless the Author held in substance in 1874 what he published in 1838 he would not at this time be reprinting what he wrote as an Anglican; certainly not with so little added by way of safeguard.’³¹

The ‘little . . . by way of safeguard’ primarily concerned two views which he had expressed in 1838 and 1840 as being at variance with traditional Roman Catholicism and which he now realized (looking at the matter from within rather than from without) were not truly at variance. First he had given the impression that there was more than one *formal* cause of the justified state. Now he admitted that there was one formal cause and that was the inward, divine gift. However, he placed himself on the side of the early Fathers by claiming that he had not written with the precision of the logicians and schoolmen but in the orthodox yet less precise language of men such as Athanasius and Augustine. Therefore, what he had written was not truly at variance with Tridentine Catholicism. Secondly, he had allowed that one possible *formal* cause was the presence of the Lord in the soul of man. His defence here was to claim that he wrote in the same way as did the great mystical theologian, Dominikus Schramm (1722-97) of Bavaria. Again, he was not attempting to be a logician but a follower of the early Fathers, and he had thus not been in error.

It is obvious that Newman was at variance only with the scholastic exposition of Tridentine Catholicism because his mind did not easily work in the logical categories of scholasticism but in the warm devotional categories of the Fathers and mystics. This feature of his thought began in his Anglican period.

To conclude: Hans Küng believes that Newman’s doctrine is in harmony with Roman doctrine; further, he believes that Barth’s doctrine is in harmony with Roman doctrine. Does this mean that there is no substantial difference between Newman and Barth on justification? If not, what are the implications for us today?

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Endnotes:

- 1) Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology, 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott: London 1979).
- 2) G. S. Faber, *The Primitive Doctrine of Justification Investigated*, London 1837.
- 3) *Christian Observer*, 1838, pp 52 and 258.
- 4) J. H. Newman, *Lectures on Justification* (J. G. and F. Rivington: London 1838).
- 5) cf. T. L. Sheridan, *Newman on Justification* (Alba House: New York 1967). Sheridan traces the spiritual development of Newman in the 1820s from a moral earnestness common to evangelicals, to the adoption of the Athanasian doctrine of the gift of holiness in the soul through the presence of God—adherent rather than inherent righteousness.
- 6) Newman, op. cit., p 202.
- 7) *ibid.*, p 203.
- 8) *ibid.*, p 88.
- 9) *ibid.*, p 71.
- 10) *ibid.*, p 72.
- 11) *ibid.*, p 79.
- 12) *ibid.*, p 90.
- 13) *ibid.*, p 112.
- 14) *ibid.*, p 145.
- 15) *ibid.*, p 148.
- 16) *ibid.*, p 208. Newman's philosophy of language and reality is set out in his *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Burns and Oates: London 1870); new edition ed. C. H. Harrold, New York 1947. cf. Thomas Vargish, *Newman: The Contemplation of Mind* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1970).
- 17) Newman, *Lectures on Justification*, p 216.
- 18) *ibid.*, p 159.
- 19) *ibid.*, p 160.
- 20) *ibid.*, p 166.
- 21) *ibid.*, p 257.

- 22) *ibid.*, p 260.
- 23) *loc. cit.*
- 24) *ibid.*, p 276.
- 25) *ibid.*, p 277.
- 26) *ibid.*, p 279.
- 27) *ibid.*, p 281.
- 28) *ibid.*, p 271.
- 29) *ibid.*, p 318.
- 30) J. H. Newman, *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (Rivingtons: London 1874); (3rd ed.).
- 31) *ibid.*, p ix.

He continues to review developments in the various doctrines of justification as they proceeded through the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican schools of thought. McGrath writes about the "seriously and irredeemably inaccurate" historical and theological analyses that John Henry Cardinal Newman did of Luther's doctrine of Justification. That assessment "seriously and irredeemably inaccurate" is based on his review of Newman's 1837 Lectures on Justification. Newman's theology of justification rests primarily upon a historical analysis of the doctrines of justification associated with Luther (and to a much lesser extent, with Melancthon), with Roman Catholic theologians such as Bellarmine and Vasquez, and with the Caroline Divines.