

"Alister McGrath"

by Michael Bauman

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Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification

The first full-length treatment of its kind, McGrath's two-volume *Iustitia Dei* is "a bibliographical essay which records, correlates, and where possible extends the present state of scholarly work on the development of the Christian doctrine of justification." In volume 1 he outlines the development of the doctrine of justification within the Western theological tradition to the eve of the Reformation, and in volume 2 he traces it from the Reformation through the modern period. In so doing, McGrath intends, among other things, to correct two errors: (1) the misconstruing of the nature of late medieval theology, and (2) the imposition of a historically naive interpretation of Pelagianism upon the theologians prior to Luther— errors which McGrath addressed in less detail in *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.

As McGrath sees it, the doctrine of justification is the theological epicenter of the Christian church. It "encapsulates the essence of the Christian faith and proclamation, locating the essence of Christianity in the saving action of God towards mankind in Jesus Christ."¹⁶ That saving activity entails three propositions: (1) God is righteous; (2) man is a sinner; and (3) God justifies man. "The quintessence of the Christian doctrine of justification," says McGrath, "is that these three propositions do not form an inconsistent triad."¹⁷ Having thus defined the subject matter of his inquiry, McGrath carefully delineates the multiple nuances of the concept of righteousness in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin before turning his attention to the relevant portions of the works of Augustine, whom he considers the fountainhead of Western theological speculation on this topic.¹⁸

Unlike many theologians before him, Augustine rejected the Greek notion of $\alpha\upsilon\lambda\ \tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\iota\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$ and its Latin equivalent, *liberum arbitrium*, which before his time had dominated Christian thought on justification. He also rejected the correlation commonly perceived to exist between human moral effort and justification.¹⁹ Instead, as his lengthy quarrel with Pelagianism demonstrates, Augustine believed that an individual's justification is ultimately based upon God's eternal decree of predestination, that human faith is a gift from God, and that human free will is compromised by sin and unable to lead to justification unless it is liberated by grace.²⁰ According to McGrath, Augustine held that humans have free will, but not the power to accomplish good—"The free will is not lost, nor is it non-existent: it is merely incapacitated and may be healed by grace. In justification, the *liberum arbitrium captivatum* becomes *liberum arbitrium liberatum* by the action of healing grace."²¹ "Central to Augustine's doctrine of justification," McGrath stresses, "is his understanding of the 'righteousness of God,' *iustitia Dei*. The righteousness of God is not that righteousness by which he is himself righteous, but that by which he justifies sinners. The righteousness of God ... is so called because, by

bestowing it upon man, God makes him righteous.”²² Like some of the Greek theologians, Augustine conceived the scope and intention of justification to be “the restoration of the entire universe to its original order, established at creation.”²³

Augustine’s theology exercised considerable sway over much of the subsequent speculation concerning the doctrine of justification. In many ways medieval thought on this issue “may be regarded as a systematic attempt to restate and reformulate Augustine’s theology to meet the needs of the new era then developing.”²⁴ This was done by translating the Pauline/Augustinian taxonomy of the aspects of salvation into the language of legal and moral discourse.

The characteristic medieval concept of justification, McGrath observes, “refers not merely to the beginning of the Christian life, but also to its continuation and ultimate perfection, in which the Christian is made righteous . . . through a fundamental change in his nature, and not merely his status.”²⁵ This view, the systematic development of which began in earnest in the twelfth century, stands in contrast to the later Reformation conception, which carefully distinguished between justification and such other aspects of salvation as regeneration and sanctification. So different are the medieval and Reformed conceptions of justification that we must be careful not to tie them too closely together or to locate the notions of the latter too fully in the former.²⁶ Having issued this warning, McGrath suggests that the early medieval views of the *iustitia Dei* can be classified under three headings: the subjective, the objective, and the Pelagian. The subjective view, which McGrath connects to Ambrosiaster, identifies the *iustitia Dei* as the “righteousness by which God is himself righteous”; the objective view, originating with Augustine, identifies it as the righteousness that God gives to the justified sinner; and the Pelagian identifies it as “the divine attribute by which God rewards man according to his just deserts.”²⁷

Turning to Anselm’s later view, McGrath notes that both the *Proslogion* and the *Cur Deus homo?* assert that God’s mercy is rooted in his justice, and that God wills and does only what is in strictest agreement with his nature, a consideration which ought to be the controlling factor in our contemplation of the divine activity. This view gave way to the theory of *ius diaboli*, which contends that God was obligated to respect the devil’s rights to our fallen race. Christ’s death on the cross for our sin was, so to speak, a payment to Satan.

Aristotelian notions of justice made their way into scholastic theology by the mid-thirteenth century, thinkers such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas being their most notable proponents. In Thomas’s case they surfaced as opposition to the voluntarist conception of *iustitia Dei*, which, as expounded by theologians like Duns Scotus and Gabriel Biel, insisted upon “the priority of the divine will over any moral strictures by declaring that God’s will is essentially independent of what is right or wrong. . . . The divine will is thus the chief arbiter and principle of justice, establishing justice by its decisions, rather than acting on the basis of established justice.”²⁸ Thomas averred, by contrast, that the ultimate standard of justice is *sapientia*, right reason. “For Thomas, the deliverance of mankind through the death of Christ is the most appropriate mode of redemption, and can be established as such on rational grounds.”²⁹ The voluntarist notion, he believed, was both arbitrary and blasphemous.

With regard to the subjective appropriation of justification, “the medieval tradition followed Augustine of Hippo in insisting that man has a positive role to play.”³⁰ The precise nature of that role, however, was the subject of continued debate, centering primarily around three issues: (1) the nature of human free will, (2) “the necessity and nature of the proper disposition for justification,” and (3) the proper understanding and application of the axiom that “God will not deny grace to the man who does his best.”³¹ This discussion developed in conjunction with an equally important elaboration of sacramental theology, which understood justification as a process beginning in baptism and continuing in penance.³² By tying justification so closely to the sacramental life of the church, medieval theology began more strongly to assert that there is no justification outside the church.³³

After discussing the concepts of grace and of merit, McGrath directs his attention to the medieval debate surrounding the dialectic between divine freedom and divine obligation. For theologians of the *via moderna*, the soteriological upshot of this debate was that “the present established order, although radically contingent, is totally reliable. God is not obliged by any external constraints to justify man: however, having determined to do so by a free and uncoerced act of self-limitation, he abides by that decision.”³⁴

McGrath turns next to various perspectives on the relation between predestination and justification. He begins with Augustine’s view, which is, in essence, “that man’s *temporal* election, or justification, is the consequence of God’s *eternal* election, or predestination.”³⁵ Gottschalk later expanded Augustine’s view into double predestination, which was ardently opposed by both John Scotus Erigena and Hincmar of Rheims.³⁶ Later still, Duns Scotus argued that “predestination was an act of the divine *will* rather than the divine *intellect*,” the soteriological implications of which led William of Ockham to speculate that “reprobation is based upon a quality within man, rather than an act of divine will.”³⁷ Johannes Eck, Luther’s noted opponent at Leipzig, tended to “refer predestination to justification” by insisting that one may be assured concerning predestination by performing good works.³⁸

McGrath then delineates five major schools of thought concerning the doctrine of justification: the early Dominican school, the early Franciscan school, the later Franciscan school, the *via moderna*, and the heterogeneous Augustinian school.³⁹ He closes the first volume of *Iustitia Dei* with a brief account of both the continuities and discontinuities existing between the theology of the Middle Ages and that of the Reformation. The continuities he identifies largely as issues relating to the mode of justification; the discontinuities pertain primarily to its nature.

Volume 2 documents the development of the doctrine of justification within the Christian tradition from 1500 to the present, a period of remarkable diversity of opinion on this issue. According to McGrath, the Protestant doctrine of justification is characterized by three prominent features: (1) the definition of justification as “the forensic *declaration* that the believer is righteous ... rather than the process by which he is *made* righteous”; (2) the “deliberate and systematic distinction between *justification* and *sanctification* or *regeneration*”; and (3) the view of justifying righteousness “as the alien righteousness of Christ, external to man and imputed to him.”⁴⁰

McGrath describes the young Luther's understanding of the righteousness of God as "essentially identical to that of the *via moderna*."⁴¹ By 1515–16, however, Luther had made a decisive break with this theology on at least three fundamental points: Luther insisted that we are passive rather than active in our own justification; he insisted that human will is incapable of attaining righteousness apart from grace; and he rejected as Pelagian the notion that on our own we can do whatever there is in ourselves.⁴² Luther also asserted that "iustitia Dei is not to be understood as the righteousness by which God is himself just, but the righteousness by which he justifies the ungodly."⁴³ As McGrath encapsulates it, Luther's essential insight is that "God himself bestows upon man the gift of *fides Christi*."⁴⁴ The gospel has the effect of destroying all pretense of human righteousness by insisting that we must lay hold of a righteousness that is not our own—the *iustitia Christi aliena*.⁴⁵

After a brief comparison between the thought of Luther and Augustine on this point, McGrath turns to the early Lutherans' doctrine of justification. He describes, in turn, the Augustinianism of Andreas Karlstadt and Johann Bugenhagen, the forensic overtones of Philipp Melancthon's views, and the Osiandrist, Stancarist, antinomian, Majorist, and synergist controversies. McGrath then begins his survey of the early Reformed views on justification by noting the Erasmian moralism of Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and Johannes Oecolampadius. There follows a discussion of John Calvin's explicitly forensic conception that "man is not made righteous in justification, but is accepted as righteous ... on account of the righteousness of Christ outside of man." This view McGrath labels "extrinsicism."⁴⁶

In delineating the subsequent shape of the new scholasticism within Protestant orthodoxy and its attendant confessionalism, McGrath focuses on the theology of Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva, and the influence his theology had on the five articles of the Synod of Dort (1619) and on such prominent covenant theologians as Franciscus Gomarus, Johannes Wollebius, Zacharius Ursinus, and Johannes Cocceius. Their stance, in turn, was countered by the hypothetical universalism of Moses Amyraut of Saumur.⁴⁷ What the Canons of Dort were to Reformed thought in the seventeenth century, the Formula of Concord was to Lutheran theology. McGrath compares the theology of these two confessional traditions under three heads—the nature of justification, the objective grounds of justification, and the subjective appropriation of justification—and concludes that while the Lutheran and Reformed understandings of the first issue are similar, they differ significantly on the second and third.⁴⁸

The emergence of Pietism as a reaction to Lutheran orthodoxy McGrath characterizes as a consequence of insistence upon the active nature of faith. This in turn gave rise to the doctrine of Christian perfection and to Pietism's threefold rejection of vicarious atonement, imputed righteousness, and deathbed conversion, beliefs it considered inimical to piety.

Meanwhile, of course, Roman Catholic theologians were not idle. In examining developments within pre-Tridentine Catholicism, McGrath focuses on the "radically theocentric doctrine of justification" espoused by Juan de Valdés; on Gasparo Contarini's view that the "sacrifice of Christ upon the cross was more than adequate as a satisfaction for human sin"; on Johannes Gropper's "double righteousness" view, which some mistakenly label *duplex iustitiá* and on Italian evangelism, an undogmatic movement

characterized early on by strongly Augustinian and individualist beliefs.⁴⁹ Tridentine thought itself asserted that “free will is not destroyed, but is weakened by the Fall”; that “man is called through prevenient grace, without reference to his merits”; and that “faith is to be seen as the beginning of human salvation, the root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God.” Trent also carefully identified the causes of justification: the final cause, the glory of God and eternal life; the efficient cause, the mercy of God; the meritorious cause, the passion of Christ; the instrumental cause, the sacrament of baptism; and the formal cause, the righteousness of God.⁵⁰ In the wake of Trent, various controversies erupted within the Roman communion, of which McGrath singles out three for special attention: Baianism, Molinism, and Jansenism. Despite the divergent views represented in these controversies, post-Tridentine theology is characterized by two overarching features: the Roman Catholic Church “continued to regard justification as a process,” and it permitted the term *justification* itself to be “gradually eliminated from the homiletical and catechetical literature of Catholicism.”⁵¹

Though drawing inspiration from their continental counterparts, the English Reformers, such as William Tyndale, John Frith, and Thomas Cranmer, propagated their own distinctive views on justification, which McGrath describes as “essentially Augustinian.” They omitted “any reference to the concept of the imputation of righteousness,” and understood humans “to be *made* righteous by *faith onely*, with good works being the natural consequence of justifying faith.” In time this Augustinianism was tempered by “a Melanchthonian doctrine of justification *per solam fidem*.”⁵² Later in the sixteenth century, however, Richard Hooker’s more Calvinistic views on this particular issue gained prominence. He maintained, for example, that “God bestows upon man justifying and sanctifying righteousness . . . at one and the same time: the distinction between the two lies in the fact that the former is external to man, and imputed to him, while the latter is worked within him by the Holy Spirit.” Further, this justification ought to be “conceived Christologically, in terms of the appropriation of the personal presence of Christ within the believer through the Holy Spirit.”⁵³

Before turning his attention to John Henry Newman, McGrath examines the Arminianism of the Caroline divines, the experimental predestinarianism of their Puritan counterparts, and the federalism of Heinrich Bullinger and others. Newman’s views, McGrath insists, rest upon “an historical analysis of the doctrines of justification associated with Luther (and, to a much lesser extent, with Melanchthon), with Roman Catholic theologians such as Bellarmine and Vasquez, and with the Caroline divines.” Unfortunately, “Newman’s historico-theological analysis appears to be seriously and irredeemably inaccurate [and to] rest upon a fallacious interpretation” of all three sources, as well as on a concept of “the real presence of the Trinity within the soul of the justified believer,” a notion apparently drawn from the Greek Fathers.⁵⁴ That Newman’s analysis is indeed mistaken McGrath establishes with precision and in detail.⁵⁵

Modern discussion of the issues involved began with “the rise of anthropocentric theologies of justification.” Characteristic of the Enlightenment, these theologies tended to emphasize “the autonomy of man as moral agent” and exhibited great “optimism concerning the capacity of natural human faculties,” thus calling into question the doctrine of original sin that previously underlay all orthodox speculation on the matter.⁵⁶ In England these ideas were advanced first by philosophers like Edward Herbert (Baron

Herbert of Cherbury) and John Locke. They were succeeded by rationalists of various stripes and hues as well as by evangelicals and pietists.

In Germany the sequence was different. There rationalism followed Pietism and was deeply influenced by it. While the Enlightenment proved destructive of the orthodoxy of many, it was itself unable to withstand the withering critique aimed at it by such thinkers as Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Kant's "analysis of the concept of moral autonomy in the light of the principle of radical evil ... demonstrated the superficiality of the moralism of the Enlightenment," as did Schleiermacher's "rejection of the equation of religion and morality [and his] demonstration of the heteronomous character of man's soteriological resources."⁵⁷ In their wake, Albrecht Ritschl reintroduced a more objective soteriology based upon "the centrality of God's redemptive action in history, with its associated (and subsequent) human response and obligations." Ritschl viewed religions in general and Christianity in particular as fundamentally soteriological. Through the intrusion of Hellenistic metaphysics, however, Christianity had become corrupted into a christologically oriented religion.⁵⁸ Thus Ritschl not only was critical of Enlightenment soteriology, but also objected to orthodox formulations, especially their "judicial approach to justification and the concept of original sin."⁵⁹

Liberalism followed Ritschl, and Karl Barth followed liberalism—with a vengeance. Barth's theology, as McGrath describes it, is "an extended reflection upon the fact that God has spoken to man—*Deus dixit*—abrogating the epistemological chasm separating them in so doing."⁶⁰ Barth's theological system, as a result, is a progressive unfolding of the inner meaning and manifold implications of the fact that God has spoken. As such, it stands in contrast to the anthropocentricity of liberalism. But, observes McGrath, in Barth's system soteriology becomes a necessarily secondary consideration, one dwarfed by the fact of revelation.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Barth's modest soteriological concerns do bear a "remarkable degree of continuity" with the Enlightenment, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl, as well as "a close affinity with the theological framework of the liberal school, despite substantial differences."⁶²

McGrath draws three important conclusions from his study of justification:

1. There is a general consensus of the church that the human situation has been transformed through the action of God in Christ.
2. Although humans are generally understood to be involved in their justification in some manner, the action of God in transforming their situation is based upon the grace of God alone.
3. The development of the doctrine of justification has been neither linear nor continuous, but sporadic and episodic, as well as both relevant and urgent.⁶³

(Because space is limited, and because enough has been said already to indicate the nature and scope of McGrath's contribution to the study both of the Reformation and of related ages, issues, and movements, we shall only briefly mention three other significant texts. *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* is a detailed historical account of the theological and philosophical roots of Reformation thought; it points out both the continuity and discontinuity between early Protestant beliefs and their late

medieval antecedents. *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* aims to introduce students to Reformation-era theology and its relevance for today. *A Life of John Calvin* traces the origin, development, and influence of Calvin's theology and political thought.)⁶⁴

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¹Walter A. Elwell, *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, (electronic ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997, c1993).