

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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John H. Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant Robert L. Reymond

In his article, "Aquinas Was a Protestant," which appeared in the May 1994 issue of *Tabletalk*, the popular monthly devotional publication of Ligonier Ministries, Inc., edited by R. C. Sproul, Jr., Dr. John H. Gerstner¹ declared that Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) "was a medieval Protestant teaching the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone" (13)—indeed, that he "taught the biblical doctrine of justification" (14)²—and that he was "one of Protestantism's greatest theologians" (14).

While Gerstner acknowledged that Augustine did not adequately develop the forensic element in justification, he asserted that Aquinas "was not led astray" but "with Augustine taught the biblical doctrine of justification so that if the Roman church had followed Aquinas the Reformation would not have been absolutely necessary" (14).³ Gerstner also called the supposition, drawn by both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians alike, that Aquinas was a "modern tridentine

Romanist" a "pernicious error" (14). He drew these conclusions because, he said, "Aquinas taught a doctrine of *iustificatio impii*, a justification of the impious" (14).⁴

What is surprising — indeed, quite startling — about Dr. Gerstner's assessment of Aquinas is that in this same article he admits that Aquinas (1) "unfortunately attributed...undue power to the sacraments" (13-14); (2) understood *iustificatio impii* in terms of "remission and infusion of sanctifying grace" (14); and (3) "does not state the 'imputation' of Christ's righteousness" (14). But in spite of these doctrinal deficiencies, Dr. Gerstner believed that Aquinas' teaching on justification is still "essentially the biblical (and Reformation) doctrine" (14).

Far from Aquinas' understanding of justification being rejected "with horror, as Protestant" by the Council of Trent (Gerstner, 52), it was precisely how Rome's counter-Reformation Council of Trent construed justification.⁵ If Aquinas' writings erred so "horribly" — in the very area where the Reformers were attacking Romish theology — by siding with the Reformers, it is difficult to understand why the Reformers never claimed him or why Rome raised him in 1567, four years after the close of the Council of Trent, to the dignity of "Doctor of the Church" and regards him to this day as the *Doctor Angelicus*. David S. Schaff's remarks, found in Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*, clearly are more on the mark:

In the teachings of Thomas Aquinas we have, with one or two exceptions [the Protestant doctrine of justification not being one of them—RLR] the doctrinal tenets of the Latin Church in their perfect exposition as we have them in the Decrees of the Council of Trent in their final statement.... [T]he theology of the Angelic Doctor and the theology of the Roman Catholic Church are identical in all particulars except the immaculate conception. He who understands Thomas understands the mediaeval theology at its best and will be in

¹ In keeping with my habit of permitting living authors, particularly living evangelical authors, to see what I am writing about their scholarly assertions prior to publication, I sent Dr. Gerstner this response to his article and requested that he carefully peruse it and indicate to me any place where he thought I may have misrepresented his view or had betrayed my main objective—to speak the truth in love. However, Dr. Gerstner entered into the presence of his Lord in March 1996 before he had the opportunity to respond. I deeply regret that I and my readers will not have the benefit of his reactions. (An earlier version of this essay appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Volume 59, 1997, pages 113-121. — Editor.)

² The Reformation (and Biblical) doctrine of justification by faith alone is beautifully captured by the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 33, "What is justification?" : "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."

³ Apparently Dr. Gerstner would have disagreed with Carl F. H. Henry's recent assessment of these two theologians: "Augustine (354-430) conflated the immediate act of justification with the process of sanctification and consequently misrepresented justification as a 'making righteous.' Thomas Aquinas...also viewed justifying grace as a supernatural quality infused into the sinner. Justification he depicted in terms of operative divine grace transmitted in the sacraments. The Roman Church's elevation of Thomism as its official theology proliferated the view that justification is an inner state dependent upon sacramental observance" ("Justification: A Doctrine in Crisis," *JETS* 38/1 [March 1995] 58).

⁴ Aquinas' use of the phrase *iustificatio impii* means nothing in itself; it is the language of the Latin Vulgate at *Romans 4:5: qui iustificat impium*. It is what he says "justification of the impious" is that is all-important, and in this area Thomas' theology of justification is defective.

⁵ See the "Decree Concerning Justification," particularly Chapters VII-X and Canons 9-12, Council of Trent, Sixth Session.

possession of the doctrinal system of the Roman Church... No distinction was made by the mediaeval theologians between the doctrine of justification and the doctrine of sanctification, such as is made by Protestant theologians. Justification was treated as a process of making the sinner righteous, and not as a judicial sentence by which he was declared to be righteous....

Although several of Paul's statements in the *Epistle to the Romans* are quoted by Thomas Aquinas, neither he nor the other Schoolmen rise to the idea that it is upon the [condition] of faith that a man is justified. Faith is a virtue, not a justifying principle, and is treated at the side of hope and love.⁶

In sum, it is this supernatural and intermediary change in human nature, according to Aquinas, rather than Christ's alien righteousness (*iustitia Christi aliena*), which is the basis of justification.

Dr. Gerstner explained the absence of any mention in Aquinas of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect sinner this way: "[The imputation of Christ's righteousness] is implied by the infusion of sanctifying grace which would never have been infused into an unjustified soul" (14, emphasis supplied).⁷ And he traces the "pernicious error"⁸ that everyone

(except, apparently, Dr. Gerstner himself) commits about Aquinas being a "modern tridentine Romanist" to the fact that Aquinas "mention[s] infusion in connection with justification" (14). "But," Dr. Gerstner declared, "so do Protestants, though they do not commonly use that term *infusion*" (14). Here Dr. Gerstner said in effect that "Protestants do and Protestants don't"—that is to say, that they mention infusion in connection with justification but they do not use the term when they mention it! I say again, all this is quite startling, coming as it did from a renowned Reformed church historian who knew and accepted the Protestant doctrine of justification.⁹

Dr. Gerstner went on to fault in quick succession several Protestant theologians by name for what he represented as their sub-biblical view of justification. He took to task Kenneth Foreman, who wrote in the 1955 "Extension" to *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, for stressing that justification "does not refer to the state of man, only to his status," and for saying that justification "is nothing done to the man, it is God's way of looking at him." Dr. Gerstner declared Foreman's first statement to be true enough ("True, [justification] does not 'refer to the state of man,'" 15), but then he obviated any real significance in his concession by saying: "but it does not exclude it" either (15). He faulted Foreman's second statement, saying: "If nothing were done to the man, God would not look at him as justified" (15). Now one could agree with Dr. Gerstner here if he had gone on to say that what God did to the sinner in justifying him was to constitute him righteous in His sight by the divine act of imputation, but this is not what he said. Rather, what God does to the sinner, Dr. Gerstner said, is to regenerate him ("He is a regenerate man though God 'looks at him' as still among the *impii*!", 15, emphasis original) — an assertion that is not part of the Biblical definition of justification, and which, if left as is, injects the same confusion into the meaning of justification that the Reformers had to address in the sixteenth century.

Gerstner criticized as illogical J. P. Simpson, who wrote the article on justification in *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, for saying that the term *justification* "implies a personal status or relationship, and not a subjective experience," and rejoined by saying: "But what is faith if not a 'subjective experience'?" (15). He then went on to say that it is this "big little slip" on Simpson's part that "throws his whole subsequent historical survey somewhat out of kilter, including Aquinas' view" (15). But it is Dr. Gerstner who is confused here. While faith in Jesus Christ, as a (Spirit-wrought) mental act, is surely a subjective experience, it is not justification *per se* and it is not what the Bible means by justification. Faith is the necessary *instrument* to justification while justification — a constituting and declarative act — is the inevitable divine response to the sinner's faith in Jesus Christ. Dr. Gerstner could not deny that Aquinas wrote in his *Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 100, article 12, that

Calvin declared that the definition of justification which the Council of Trent proffered at length "contains nothing else than the trite dogma of the schools [of which Aquinas was the most mature representative—RLR]: that men are justified partly by the grace of God and partly by their own works" ("On the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent," *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 reprint of Calvin's Tracts], 3, 108.

⁹ One can only guess at the reason that lies behind Dr. Gerstner's apologetic for a "Protestant" Aquinas in the area of justification, but one who knows of Dr. Gerstner's admiration of Thomistic natural theology cannot help but wonder if it was not his appreciation of the contribution which Aquinas' dichotomistic nature/grace scheme made to his own apologetic system that drove him to try to "save" Aquinas *in toto* for Protestantism.

⁶ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960 reproduction of the 1907 edition), V, 662, 675, 754, 756. Alistair E. McGrath (*Luther's Theology of the Cross* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1985], 82) also writes: "During the thirteenth century the concept of a created habit of grace [a permanent disposition within the believer, as distinct from the external influence of grace]...had become inextricably linked with the discussion of the mode of man's justification before God. The concept appeared to provide a solution to a dilemma which the theological renaissance of the twelfth century had highlighted: in what manner can God be said to dwell in the souls of the justified?... St. Thomas...located the solution to the problem as lying in the concept of a created habit which, although essentially indistinguishable from God, nevertheless remains an entity created within the human soul by him. Underlying the implication of a created habit of grace in justification is a particular concept of causality. For St. Thomas,...the nature of grace, sin and divine acceptance were such that a created habit of grace was necessary in justification by the very nature of things."

⁷ Dr. Gerstner said here in so many words that Aquinas believed that the soul would first have to be justified (in the Protestant sense) before God would infuse it with sanctifying grace. I am unaware of any place in his writings where Aquinas states this. To the contrary, he regularly declares that the infusion of grace and the movement of free choice toward God and away from sin is "in the order of nature" first required for the justification of the ungodly (*Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 113, article 8). Rome regularly denies as a matter of course what Dr. Gerstner said here of Aquinas.

⁸ These "pernicious errorists" would of necessity include the two great Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, for neither of them claimed Aquinas for the Reformation cause. Indeed, Luther, with characteristic bombast, spoke of him as "the fountain [*Brunn*] and original soup [*Grundsuppe*] of all heresy, error, and Gospel havoc [*aller Ketzerei, Irrthumb und Vertilgung des Evangelium*], as his books bear witness" (Schaff, *History*, V, 676). It has been argued, as does H. Denifle (*Luther und Luthertum in der erste Entwicklung* [Mainz: 1906, 2nd edition], I.2.535-56), that Luther, being the late medieval Augustinian that he was and educated within the *via moderna*, that is, within Occamism's metaphysical nominalism, knew only the early medieval theology, including Aquinas, from the historical sections of Gabriel Biel's *Collectorium* which had distorted the theology of the earlier medieval period. Thus Luther, Denifle argues, was prejudiced against "catholic" theology in general and the *via antiqua*, that is, Thomism's and Scotism's metaphysical realism, of the thirteenth century in particular. But Luther could and did read Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* for himself, as his statement suggests.

...justification [properly so called] may be taken in two ways. First, according as man is made just by becoming possessed of the habit of justice; secondly, according as he does works of justice, so that in this sense justification is nothing else than the execution of justice. Now justice, like the other virtues, may denote either the acquired or the infused virtue.... The acquired virtue is caused by works; but the infused virtue [of the execution of justice] is caused by God Himself through His grace. The latter is true justice, of which we are speaking now, and in respect of which a man is said to be just before God, according to Rom. 4.2.¹⁰

If nothing more were to be said in response to this citation, one must surely insist that Aquinas committed grave exegetical error here, for the one thing Paul did not mean in *Romans* 4:2ff. is that the respect in which a man is said to be just before God is that of an “infused righteousness.” Rather, the respect in which Paul declares that a man is just before God is through Christ’s imputed or “credited” righteousness, which is made clear throughout *Romans* 4 by Paul’s sustained employment of the verb *logizomai* (“count, reckon, credit, look upon as”):

Romans 4:3: “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited [*elogisthe*] to him as righteousness.”

Romans 4:4: “...when a man works, his wages are not credited [*ou logizetai*] to him as a gift, but as an obligation.”

Romans 4:5: “...to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly,¹¹ his faith is credited [*logizetai*] as righteousness.”

Romans 4:6: “...the man to whom God credits [*logizetai*] righteousness apart from works.”

Romans 4:8: “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count [*ou me logisetai*] against him.”

Romans 4:9: “We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited [*elogisthe*] to him as righteousness.”

Romans 4:10: “Under what circumstances was it credited [*elogisthe*]?”

Romans 4:11: “...[Abraham] is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited [*logisthenai*] to them.”

Romans 4:22: “This is why ‘it was credited [*elogisthe*] to him as righteousness.”

Romans 4:23-24: “The words ‘it was credited [*elogisthe*] to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit [*logizesthai*]

righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

But more can be said. It was directly from the Schoolmen, including Aquinas,¹² that Trent derived its teaching of the condign and congruous merit of good works.¹³ But whereas Rome, still following Trent today,¹⁴ affirms that it is fitting for God to reward the saints’ congruous merit with eternal salvation, Paul and the Reformers¹⁵ taught that the Bible’s doctrine of grace puts all talk of human works and merit in any sense of the word, save for Christ’s, off limits as worthy of or as earning salvation.

Dr. Gerstner also approved the Roman Catholic scholar Michael Root’s faulting of Alister E. McGrath for saying that Protestants understand justification as “‘strictly’ a legal declaration of righteousness which works no ‘real change’ in the believer” (52). When Root stated that according to “every Reformation theologian I know, however, coming to faith in the justifying righteousness of Christ constitutes a momentous change in the believer,” Dr. Gerstner declared that Root is only demonstrating that he understood “historic Protestant justification” better than some Protestant theologians do, including McGrath apparently (52). But again, this is to confuse

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 114, article 3, wrote: “If...we speak of a meritorious work according as it proceeds from the grace of the Holy Spirit moving us to life everlasting, it is meritorious of life everlasting condignly.” It must also be observed that the very fact that *Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 113, in which Aquinas sets forth his doctrine of the justification of the ungodly, is followed immediately by question 114, “Of Merit, Which is the Effect of Co-operating Grace,” — is alone sufficient indication that he was thinking about justification as a medieval Schoolman and not as a pre-Reformation “Protestant.”

¹³ The Council of Trent stated in its Sixth Session, Chapter XVI: “...to those who *work well unto the end* and trust in God, eternal life is offered, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, and as a *reward* promised by God Himself, *to be faithfully given to their good works and merits*...nothing further is wanting to those justified [in Rome’s sense of the word] to prevent them from being considered to have, *by those very works* which have been done in God, *fully satisfied the divine law* according to the state of this life and *to have truly merited eternal life*” (emphasis supplied).

¹⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) declares: “The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that *God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace*. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man’s free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful...Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow *true merit* on us as a result of God’s gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us ‘co-heirs’ with Christ and worthy of obtaining ‘the promised inheritance of eternal life.’ The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness” (paragraphs 2008, 2009).

¹⁵ Luther declared: “These arguments of the Scholastics about the merit of congruence and of worthiness (*de merito congrui et condigni*) are nothing but vain figments and dreamy speculations of idle folk about worthless stuff. Yet they form the foundation of the papacy, and on them it rests to this very day. For this is what every monk imagines: By observing the sacred duties of my order I can earn the grace of congruence, but by the works I do after I have received this grace I can accumulate a merit so great that it will not only be enough to bring me to eternal life but enough to sell and give it to others.” Luther wrote further: “There is no such thing as merit; but all who are justified are justified for nothing (*gratis*), and this is credited to no one but to the grace of God.” Again Luther stated: “For Christ alone it is proper to help and save others with His merits and works. The works of others are of benefit to no one, not to themselves either; for the statement stands: ‘The just shall live by faith’ (*Rom. 1:17*).” (*What Luther Says: An Anthology* [Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959], II, 921-922).

¹⁰ Cited from *Thomas Aquinas: II*, Vol. 20 in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed., Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 285.

¹¹ On the basis of Paul’s statement here to the effect that God “justifies the ungodly”—the same Greek phrase as is used in the LXX in *Exodus* 23:7 and *Isaiah* 5:23 of corrupt judgments which God will not tolerate—J. I. Packer declared that Paul’s doctrine of justification is a “startling doctrine” (“Justification,” *EDT*, 595). Not only does Paul declare that God does it but also that He does it in a manner designed “to demonstrate His justice” (*Romans* 3:25-26). Of course, Paul relieves what otherwise would be a problem of theodicy by teaching that God justifies the ungodly on just grounds, namely, that the claims of God’s law upon them have been fully satisfied by Jesus Christ acting and dying in their stead.

coming to faith in the justifying righteousness of Christ with the act of justification itself, which follows logically upon one's coming to faith and which, as McGrath stated, is strictly a legal declaration of righteousness which in and of itself works no "real change" in the believer. It is not McGrath, therefore, who has failed to distinguish carefully the Protestant doctrine of justification from regeneration, faith and sanctification. Regrettably, it was Dr. Gerstner who confused all these doctrines when he wrote:

...when Jesus Christ unites Himself with an elect soul, that person is so united with Him that his regenerated soul trusts Christ for eternal salvation, his sins' guilt is remitted, and divine righteousness received. *In this act* [!] instantly and forever after, the soul believes and obeys Jesus Christ [14].

Dr. Gerstner here described union with Christ, regeneration (which is the Spirit's work), faith in Christ (which while it is produced by the Spirit is nevertheless the sinner's act and is always accompanied by repentance), forgiveness (which is the Father's act), the "reception" of divine righteousness (which is hardly the Protestant definition of justification according to which the sinner does not subjectively "receive" divine righteousness; rather, God declares it about or reckons it to him), and forever-after-obedience on the saved soul's part, which are six aspects of the Reformed *ordo salutis*, as "this act" — a grave and confusing over-simplification!

Of course, what Dr. Gerstner was concerned to underscore throughout his article — and this is another reason why he is so enamored of Aquinas whom he believed was saying the same thing—is the inseparability of justification and sanctification in the saved person's experience. Dr. Gerstner hoped thereby to combat Antinomianism. His concern about Antinomianism was proper, but the way he made his case (1) sacrificed the Biblical meaning of justification on the altar of sanctification and works; (2) was an erroneous reading of Aquinas;¹⁶ and (3) confused distinct soteriological concepts that must always be distinguished in theological writing for the sake of accurate communication of the redemptive truth revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

While no sound Protestant theologian would deny that progressive sanctification is the inevitable and immediate concomitant to justification (effected, however, not by the Father's justifying act but by the Spirit's regenerating act) and that in this sense justification and sanctification "can never be separated," I know of no sound Protestant theologian either who would bring the notion, much less the term, of the infusion of sanctifying grace into his definition of justification. Dr. Gerstner did this when he insisted, with Aquinas, that justification includes the state of man, his regeneration, his coming to faith, and his "forever-after-obedience."¹⁷ And to do what Dr. Gerstner did is to commit "pernicious error," for such

¹⁶ Dr. Gerstner was asking us to believe that for seven hundred years no one except the Council of Trent read Aquinas correctly (and that Council, he avers, was "horrified" at what it read and rejected him), and that it is he who was again reading Aquinas aright. Stranger things have happened in church history, I suppose, but I cannot think of one offhand. One may be pardoned were he to conclude that it is far more likely that it was Dr. Gerstner who was misreading Aquinas.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards in his "Five Discourses on Important Subjects, Concerning the Soul's Eternal Salvation," the first of which treats "Justification by Faith Alone," writes: "...in truth, obedience has no concern in justification, any otherwise than as an expression of faith" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], I, 642).

teaching, against Scripture, means that one can never know in this life whether he is justified, thereby dishonoring the Savior, and thus eliminates the full assurance to which, according to Scripture, justification should lead through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, when Dr. Gerstner concluded his article by urging his readers "forward to the Reformation, to Thomas Aquinas, to the New Testament, to JUSTIFICATION BY CHRIST ALONE BY A FAITH THAT IS NOT ALONE" (52), without also saying that faith is the alone instrument of justification, he fosters the confusion that justification is by faith and works and fails to exhibit the special care the *Westminster Confession of Faith* exhibits when it declares: "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love" (XI/ii).

No, Aquinas was not a medieval Protestant teaching the Biblical and Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. Rather, Aquinas taught that justification was the making of the sinner righteous by means of the sacraments of baptism and the Mass as well as by acts of penance. Nor was he "one of Protestantism's greatest theologians"—for the reasons already noted as well as for others which could have been. Rather, Aquinas was the Schoolmen's purest and maturest representative of medieval Latin theology and of Rome's sacerdotal system. He stressed the primacy of grace in the movement from sinner to saint, but his explanation of justification (*Summa Theologica*, II, 1, question 113) continued to rely upon the standard four-part schema which went back to Peter of Poitiers' *Sentences* (III. 2) in which justification is represented as a *processus iustificationis* entailing the infusion of grace, the movement of the soul, arising from grace and free will, from a state of guilt to a state of righteousness, contrition, and the forgiveness of sins.

Dr. Gerstner asserted, as we have already noted, that "if the Roman church had followed Aquinas the Reformation would not have been absolutely necessary" (14). In fact, Rome endorsed the theology of Aquinas (not exclusively, of course), and the Reformation was indeed necessary because it did. G. C. Berkouwer wrote of the "polite aloofness" which exists between Pauline thought and Roman Catholicism:

The neglect of Paul in the middle ages was not the result of a direct denial of his significance. Paul's letters did not go untouched. *Thomas Aquinas has left us a commentary on Romans. But one need only lay this commentary alongside of that of Luther to become aware of the profound difference between them.* The words of Paul were exegeted by Roman Catholic scholars, but they were not allowed to function in their original, radically evangelical power. It was first in the Reformation that the old words of Paul came through again in unprecedented religious clarity. They unleashed a storm over Europe, and yet brought peace and comfort to a generation of restless souls.¹⁸

With sixteenth-century Rome's doctrine of justification, following as it did the theological thought of Thomas Aquinas (among others), the Reformation was very much a necessity, and every informed Christian thanks God for it. Dr. Gerstner's article, with its confusing representation of justification and how

¹⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 64-65 (emphasis supplied).

it is obtained, will perplex many who are not prepared to think about these issues discerningly.