

*The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology.* By Mark C. Mattes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, Paper, 198 pages.

Polemics is hardly a popular pursuit among fashionable theologians. In a day of constructive theologies driven toward ecumenical convergence if not consensus, facing up to the hard edge of the particularity of doctrine is not an enterprise that many theologians are inclined to take on. This is especially the case when it comes to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* has just celebrated its fifth anniversary with a variety of local, national and international festivities. Lutherans and Roman Catholics who have not whole-heartedly embraced JDDJ are looked upon as obstructionists. Actually, Lutheran theologian Mark C. Mattes spends very little time on the JDDJ. His book digs deeper as he seeks to accurately describe and access the place of the doctrine of justification in five living theologians. In doing so, Mattes provides a reliable roadmap to the twists and turns taken by representative Protestant theologians. In charting this terrain, he provides readers with a polemic against any reduction of the doctrine of justification as the critical feature of Christian theology that cannot be compromised by programs of ecumenism or ethics. Yet squarely facing the truth of justification will be of ultimate benefit to both ecumenical engagement and the grounding of ethics.

Eberhard Juengel is the first theologian examined. Of the five, Juengel is arguably the most complex. Coming at Luther by way of Hegel, Barth and Fuchs, Juengel sees justification as a "speech event" that has implications for the ontology of both God and human beings. Central Reformation themes are reworked to critique modernity's inability to distinguish "person" from "works." Justification, for Juengel, keeps humanity human. Juengel sees atheism as an apologetic ally in unmasking Platonic conceptions of God.

The doctrine of justification is highly experiential for Juengel. Mattes observes that this reveals a critical flaw- the privatization of God: "The privatization of God adopted by secularism and accepted by Juengel simply gives permission for the idea that there are no boundaries with respect to human endeavor, since the public realm can be seen to be divested of divine law, thus becoming a fertile field for the uninhibited self-development of the unencumbered, autopoietic self. Instead, we ought to affirm that the public realm is never, this side of the eschaton, divested of its idols of legitimation. Humanity will have some kind of faith. The true faith is that we owe our very being to God" (54).

Wolfhart Pannenberg works out a doctrine of justification structured by a dual commitment to an approach that sees the finite brought to eschatological participation in the infinite and a loyalty to ecumenical reconciliation. Pannenberg's metaphysical commitment to a teleology of convergence of all things in Christ leads him to speak of law and gospel as epochs in God's dealing with humanity while Luther sees law and gospel as interactive realities. Luther's view comes under criticism from Pannenberg as failing to do justice to what he sees as the participatory character of salvation. Building on the work of Tuomo Mannermaa, Pannenberg sees *theosis* as taking precedence over imputation.

Mattes faults Pannenberg for his insistence on a mimetic participation in the life of God which is expressive of the very synergism rejected by the Lutheran Reformation. In Mattes' reading, Pannenberg appears to have more in common with Aquinas than with Luther. This might lead to a theology useful for ecumenical endeavors but does not serve Christian proclamation: "The gospel is lost in a *contemplatio* by which to ground both metaphysics and ecumenics" (84).

Juergen Moltmann's work is guided by the theme of liberation. Justification for Moltmann is not a linguistic event determined by the speaking of a promissory word of forgiveness but the announcement of a reality that does not yet exist. It is justification by hope, not faith. The church is not the company of the forgiven but the assembly of those who are being transformed. If Pannenberg sought to make law and gospel sequential epochs, Moltmann seeks to unify them. In doing so, he confuses them: "Moltmann's *Schwaermer* view of the kingdom makes the proper distinction between law and gospel impossible, because it moralizes the gospel and makes the law the impetus for the self-realization of our compassion. Love here becomes a sign of the kingdom's advent. Consciences are wrongly directed to look at their compassion. This inflates the foolish, who actually magnify their prowess as compassionate, and manhandles the sensitive, who are all too much aware of their shortcomings" (100).

The sole non-Teutonic theologian examined in this volume is Robert W. Jenson. Mattes spots a mid-career shift in Jenson's thinking on justification. The early Jenson spoke of the "meta-linguistic" function of the doctrine. That is to say, the doctrine is the grammar of theological speech so that Christ is always the subject of the verbs of salvation. Hence the law must be distinguished from the word of promise. The later Jenson moves away from a forensic model of justification to an ontological view in keeping with his Trinitarian and ecumenical commitments. "For Jenson, the heart of theology should no longer be the attempt to distinguish law and gospel properly, but to speak on behalf of the church for the sake of its future visible unity, narrating the life of that one organic body as it increasingly grows into its proper place within God" (119). Hegelizing tendencies identified in Juengel, Pannenberg, and Moltmann are diagnosed in Jenson as well.

Oswald Bayer of Tuebingen is the final theologian to come under Mattes' scrutiny. Clearly Bayer comes closest to Luther's articulation of the doctrine of justification and is viewed by Mattes as the most promising of the five theologians examined. In Bayer's work, the doctrine of justification penetrates every article of faith in such a way as to become the "basis" and "boundary" for all of theology. Like Luther, Bayer sees the gospel as a performative word of *promissio* that accomplishes what it offers. Drawing on the work of Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), Bayer does the work of an apologist as he skillfully demonstrates how humanity engages futile attempts at justification of the self. His rigorous scholarship and his robust thinking challenges those who would see justification by faith alone as either a sectarian or antiquated theological category. Mattes treatment of Bayer is a fine introduction to a German theologian who deserves a wider hearing in the English-speaking world.

In his conclusion, Mattes observes "Other than Bayer, the theologians examined tend to ask the church to adopt agendas that confuse the church's mission. Thereby the church becomes a confessional church of many different, even conflictive confessions. Such fundamental theological pluralism within the church subverts the confessional loyalty that can foster the collegiality that could uphold a vibrant ministry in the midst of today's increasing individualism and secularism. The church's leadership tends to manage this theological diversity, mimicking the diversity within the American Academy of Religion. But such management can only be so successful. Various agendas compete with each other within the church, undermining the one distinctive agenda, delivering the promise, which would actually make a difference in the world. Under these circumstances of bureaucratically managed confessional pluralism, it becomes difficult to discern the shape of faithfulness, in opposition to faithlessness, with respect to Scripture and the church's confessions. The question of heresy has been overridden by the goal of novelty" (185). Mattes' book is engaging and vigorous as he demonstrates how elusive the doctrine of justification is not only within ecumenical dialogue but also among significant theologians who represent present Protestant thinking. For those tempted to over-estimate the significance of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* this book will be a sobering reminder of unfinished Reformation business (i.e. *simul iustus et peccator*) that cannot be effectively managed by church officialdom.

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