I Get Mail or Concerning Justification and Doctrinal Development

A reader left some comments on an essay I'd written a few years ago entitled [Anglican Reflections on Justification by Faith](). Unfortunately, an adequate response required more space than would fit in a comment box. Here's my response to the first comment:

> *Very good article. Some Reformers identified the doctrine of justification as the "article by which the church stands or falls" and Luther himself said something very similar. Yet, as you indicate, the Reformation understanding of justification as 1) forensic and 2) distinct from sanctification was a genuine doctrinal development. Alister McGrath agreed with this assessment saying that the Reformation understanding was a "theological novum." Herein lies the problem: if the reformed view of justification is a theological novum and it is central to our understanding of salvation, then it would seem that the church had erred on a central doctrine for 1500 years; indeed, it would seem that the church only began to "stand" with this theological discovery. So, I'm curious as to why you would label the Reformers view of justification as Doctrinal Development 1 instead of Doctrinal Development 2 (designations that you used in an essay on DD). Thanks. Steve*

Steve,

Three different issues need to be addressed here. First is the notion of doctrinal development itself. What constitutes a genuine as opposed to an illegitimate doctrinal development? Second concerns the question of whether justification by grace through faith is a genuine doctrinal development or rather an illegitimate development. Third, if justification is the article by which the church stands or falls, was it the case that the church "erred on a central doctrine for 1500 years"?

(1) So what constitutes a "doctrinal development"? A doctrinal development takes place when the church affirms as definitive a doctrinal position that had not been clearly articulated previously. In a very real sense, by definition, all doctrinal developments are "theological *novi*," and it is for this reason that they often meet with opposition. Primary examples would be the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. Nicea affirmed dogmatically that Jesus Christ is *homoousios* (of the same nature or "consubstantial") with the Father. Chalcedon affirmed what became the official dogma concerning the incarnation — that Jesus Christ is one divine person with two natures, one divine and one human. Some resisted *homoousios* on the grounds that it was not a biblical expression, and that it was suspect as being "Sabellian." Nestorians and monophysites/miaphysites rejected Chalcedon for opposite reasons. Nestorians rejected the language of "one person" because they suspected it was monophysite, while monophysites rejected Chalcedon because they suspected it of Nestorianism.

(2) In terms of J. B. Mozley's distinction between "Development 1" and "Development 2," Development 1 (as I wrote in an [earlier essay](#)) is "the necessary logical unfolding of what is already clearly present in the New Testament." If what the NT teaches about Jesus Christ is correct, that he is the "Word made flesh" (John 1:1, 14) who "existed in the form of God," yet took on the "form of a servant" (Phil. 2:1-11), through whom God created the world (Col. 1:16), in whom the "fullness of Deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9), then *homoousios* follows as a legitimate and necessary doctrinal development. Similarly, if Jesus Christ is One, "God become human," and not simply a human being in whom God is especially present, then Chalcedon necessarily follows.

In contrast, "Development 2 is genuinely new development that is not simply the necessary articulation of what is said explicitly in the Scriptures." As I mentioned in the earlier essay, examples of "Development 2" would be the Roman Catholic Marian dogmas and the infallibility of the papacy. Development 2 "adds something genuinely new to the content of faith."

(3) I would add some further qualifications to the nature of genuine developments. While developments are by necessity "theological *novi*," they do not appear from nowhere. There are (almost?) always anticipations in the previous tradition of the church, but there are also ambiguities. These ambiguities can be ignored until a theological crisis forces the church to make a definitive affirmation in order to clarify the ambiguity. So, although church Fathers like Ireneaus clearly affirmed the deity of Christ, there was also a tendency toward "subordinationism" among many of the fathers as well. Before Nicea, many of the church fathers affirmed that Jesus was greater than creation, was in some sense "God," but was also in some manner less than the Father. Arius's affirmation that the Word is a creature and not the Creator forced the church to definitively reject subordinationism. If Jesus Christ is fully God, then he must be of the same "substance as," and

cannot be "less than" the Father. Similarly, the failure of pre-Chalcedonian theologians to clearly distinguish between person and nature in the incarnation eventually led to the impasses between Alexandrian and Antiochene theologians: Alexandrians affirmed that if Christ is one, then he must have one divine/human nature. Antiochenes affirmed that if Christ is both fully human and fully divine, then he must be a conjunction of divine and human natures. There are clear anticipations of Chalcedon in Cyril of Alexandria, but Chalcedon affirmed a distinction between person and nature that Cyril had not clearly articulated.

(4) It is also possible for developments to take place that continue to be church-dividing. Examples would include the difference between the West's affirmation of the *filioque* and the East's affirmation of the distinction between the divine "essence" and "energies," One of the reasons that I am a Western Christian, specifically, an Anglican, and not (Eastern) Orthodox is that I am convinced that the *filioque* is a legitimate (and indeed necessary) doctrinal development, while I regard the essence/energies distinction as mistaken.

(5) Note also in this regard that one of the distinctives of doctrinal development is the introduction of previously unacknowledged distinctions in order to resolve theological impasses, and that asking the proper theological question can lead to the definitive distinctions. Athanasius insisted that the key theological question was "whether Christ is Creator or creature?," and the *homoousios* provided a formula to maintain the distinction between Creator and creature. Cyril insisted tha the key theological question concerned "whether Christ was God become human or a grace-filled human being?," that is, whether the union of Christ was ontological or merely moral, and the distinction between one divine person and two natures (one divine, one human) formulated that distinction. From the Western perspective, the *filioque* is necessary to distinguish between the Son and the Spirit: if the divine persons are

identified in terms of relations of origin, and both the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father, then necessarily there must be some difference between the way that the Son and the Spirit proceed, or the second and third persons are indistinguishable. On the other hand, the Orthodox introduced a distinction between the divine essence and energies that the West finds problematic because it would seem to compromise the divine simplicity.

(6) One of the ironies of doctrinal developments is that, while they are, in a certain sense, "theological *novi*," once articulated, they are always "articles by which the church stands or falls." So, before Nicea, the ambiguity of affirming both the deity of Christ along with subordinationist language was possible; afterwards, subordinationism was rejected as heresy because it conflicted with affirming the full deity of Christ. Before Chalcedon, failures to distinguish clearly between person and nature were permissible; after Chalcedon, a clear distinction between Christ's single divine person and his two human and divine natures was necessary in order to avoid the mutual heresies of Nestorianism and monophysitism. Both Nicea and Chalcedon are necessary because if Christ is not fully divine, he cannot save; if he is not fully human, he cannot save *us*.

Each of the above six points has some bearing on my claim that the Reformation understanding of justification, and specifically, the distinction between justification and sanctification, is a "genuine doctrinal development."

(1) The Reformation formulation of justification is a "theological *novum*," but this is true by definition of all doctrinal developments. The reason why a clear distinction between justification and sanctification had not been previously formulated is that this had not previously been raised as an issue in the church that necessitated a dogmatic definition. There were reasons for this, e.g., the absence of the kinds of controversies in the East that led to the Western

rejection of Pelagianism, the misleading Vulgate translation of Greek *dikaiosune* (to declare righteous) as Latin *justificare* (to make righteous). In a manner similar to the way that Arianism and Nestorianism led to crises concerning Christology in the patristic period, numerous factors in the late Medieval Western Church led to the crisis concerning justification: (1) the combination of Nominalism with a semi-Pelagian theology of grace (William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel); (2) anxieties concerning assurance of salvation connected with the Medieval penitential system; (3) a highly penitential spirituality following the Black Death; (4) the crisis concerning the sale of indulgences; (5) recognition following the publication of Erasmus's Greek NT that *dikaiousune* is a forensic term.

As with the previous Christological crises during the patristic era, once the crisis arose, a definitive decision had to be made. The Reformers represented one response, while the Council of Trent equally represented a different response. In the sense that both the Reformation and Trent are different responses to the same theological crisis, both are examples of doctrinal development and both are thus "theological *novi*." The issue of development of doctrine concerns which was the appropriate response. (There is a parallel here to Eastern/Western disagreements concerning the *filioque* and the essence/energies distinction. In each case, doctrinal developments that were not universally accepted resulted in permanent ecclesial disagreement.)

(2) Is the Reformation distinction between justification and sanctification an authentic doctrinal development in the sense of an articulation of something already present in Scripture (Development 1), or, rather, something genuinely new in the sense of an "addition," an articulation of something that is not already found in Scripture (Development 2)?

As noted in my essay, the Reformation understanding is rooted in three theological affirmations all found in Scripture: (1)

the union between Christ and the Church. (This is a theme found throughout the NT and affirmed in the tradition of the church); (2) Justification and sanctification as two aspects of union with Christ, each dealing with a separate aspect of the problem of sin: guilt and forgiveness (justification); transformation and cleansing from indwelling sin, conformity to Christ's righteousness in holiness (sanctification). (As with union with Christ, forgiveness of sin and holiness are themes found throughout Scripture and the tradition of the church); (3) The distinction between justification as a forensic declaration and sanctification as not merely forensic but a genuine transformation. This distinction is based on the apostle Paul's use of different terminology: *dikaiosune*, which is courtroom language, translated "justification" or "righteousness" and *hagiosmos* translated "sanctification" or "holiness."

As I noted in my original essay, distinction (3) is recognized by all modern biblical scholars (including Roman Catholics), but was not noticed in the Latin West before the Reformation because the Vulgate misleadingly translated *dikaiosune* as *justificare*. If the Reformation is a development of doctrine, it is not a case of Development 2 as a new doctrine adding something to Scripture, but is rather an articulation based on a distinction found in the biblical text itself. To the extent that Trent continued to insist on defining justification as "to make righteous," and conflated justification and sanctification, it failed to acknowledge a distinction that is in the biblical text. Trent's failure to recognize this distinction has affinities to earlier failures of those during the patristic period to recognize the necessity of making new distinctions (such as the Nicene language of *homoousios* or the Chalcedonian distinction between persons and nature), rather refusing to go beyond an earlier position when it was no longer capable of addressing issues raised by a new crisis.

3) Granted that the Reformation understanding of justification

is a development, one would not expect to find it spelled out explicitly in pre-Reformation writers — otherwise it would not be a development.

Nonetheless, as with other doctrinal developments, there are anticipations of the Reformation position in the tradition. Reformers such as Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel, and Richard Hooker pointed to language in the church fathers that (at the least) anticipates justification by faith. Irenaeus regularly uses pauline language of justification by faith, and his emphasis on salvation as "progress" joins together a notion of participation (union with Christ) with sanctification language (Against Heresies 2.28.3; 4.13.4; 2.26.1; 1.25.5). The Reformers' affinities to Augustine are well-known; I would also point to Medieval figures such as Walter Hilton, whose distinction in *The Ladder of Perfection* between an initial faith and a later progression in holiness sounds much like the Reformation distinction between justification and sanctification, as well as Thomas Aquinas, whose close reading of the apostle Paul, discussion of the "new law" as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and friendship with Christ, and statements such as that without the Holy Spirit, even the "law of the NT would kill," at times sounds surprisingly like Luther.

(4) As with Nicea and Chalcedon, and later with Eastern/Western disagreements about such matters as the *filioque*, the Reformation understanding of justification has been church-dividing. As with these earlier developments that also led to division, the development itself is not necessarily problematic. The crucial question concerns which attempt to resolve a theological crisis that had not existed previously was the more legitimate response to the problem, which represented the best hermeneutical attempt to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture — in this case, whether Trent or the Reformers?

(5) As with previous theological disagreements that led to

doctrinal development, the crucial disagreement concerning the Reformation was eventually able to be formulated in a question or several related questions that led to making crucial distinctions. The questions were: Is the "formal cause" of justification the alien righteousness of Christ (something outside us), or rather, "infused righteousness," something inside us? Is my right-standing before God a matter of looking entirely outside myself and my own moral efforts, depending only on what Jesus Christ has done for me in his atoning work? Or do I hope to be righteous before God by looking to how well I have cooperated with Christ, looking inside myself for evidence of good works, and basing my standing on the quality of those good works? And the crucial distinction was that between justification as a forensic declaration (imputation) and sanctification as a genuine participation in Christ's holiness (infusion). To refuse the distinction between justification and sanctification is necessarily to understand the "formal cause" of my salvation in terms of something "inside me" (infused grace), and my righteous-standing before God as based on the quality of my cooperation.

(6) Is justification by faith the "article by which the Church stands or falls," and, if so, does this imply that "the church had erred in a central doctrine for 1500 years"?

I would suggest that there are several "articles by which the Church stands or falls," and that the ecumenical Councils articulated some of these: the deity of Christ (Nicea), the proper understanding of Christ's person and natures (Chalcedon), the doctrine of the Trinity. That these doctrines were not carefully formulated for several hundred years after the close of the NT canon does not imply that the "church had erred" for several hundred years before Nicea or Chalcedon. To the contrary, what became the official doctrine of the Church at the ecumenical councils was already present both in Scripture and in the earlier teaching of Church Fathers such as Irenaeus; however, it took a number of theological crises

to achieve a precise formulation of what it was that the Church believed about Jesus Christ as fully divine and fully human and the doctrine of God as three in one. Were the incarnation and the Trinity always doctrines on which the church "stood of fell"? Yes, but it took the ecumenical councils to spell out carefully what this meant.

In the same way, I would suggest that a proper understanding of the doctrine of grace is a matter on which the church stands or falls, and that means a proper understanding of the relation between justification and sanctification. It was the theological crises that occasioned the Protestant Reformation that led to the careful distinctions between justification and sanctification that were spelled out by the Reformers in a genuine development of doctrine. As I wrote in my original essay, "Justification by grace alone through faith alone is a summary way of saying that Jesus Christ saves. . . . [J]ustification is Christ's work, not ours. In faith, we look away from ourselves and our own moral efforts, to receive a salvation that is entirely a gift of the triune God." No more than Nicea and Chalcedon imply that the "church had erred" in a fundamental manner for several hundred years before the ecumenical councils, does the Reformation imply that the "church had erred" concerning the doctrines of grace for 1500 years. However, as with Nicea and Chalcedon, fundamental instabilities in the church's earlier formulations eventually led to a theological crisis in which new theological affirmations were necessary (a "development of doctrine"), and new distinctions needed to be made in order to address the crisis. Once those distinctions were spelled out, to refuse the distinctions would indeed to be mistaken on a matter on which the church stands or falls. Fortunately, the church stands on the reality of Christ's person and saving work, and not necessarily on our proper articulation of doctrines of soteriology or grace. (In other words, even those who do not affirm that we are justified by grace alone through faith in Christ alone can still have saving faith in the Christ who

justifies.)