TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

REVERSING BABEL: A CALVINIST

READING OF THE TRIDENTINE DOCTRINE OF MERIT

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I. Alternative Languages

The nature of the schism which divided the Reformed and Roman Catholic communions is one of greatly complicated origins which cannot easily be subsumed under differences which were purely theological. Much less were they differences over discrete doctrines. One might easily argue that the pervasive corruption of the Medieval Church, the philosophical paradigm shift away from Aristotle and the Schoolmen, the political force of centralization in and around the Holy Roman Empire, the multiplication of phenomena such as the Peasants Revolt (1524-1525) and the harsh oppression of the burgeoning Hugenot communions by the Roman Catholic establishment in France played at least as much a part in widening the gulf between Rome and Geneva as did the "solas" of Protestant orthodoxy. This observation does not serve to undermine the centrality of the theological concerns of the players on both sides but it does take seriously the theological point that humans do not perfectly mirror the simplicity of will that is an attribute of their Triune creator.

Once the division became an established condition, the antipathy shared by each party for the other precluded any meaningful ecumenical dialogue and each tradition slowly developed in isolation from the other and along distinct vectors away from the central point of the original schism. The resulting condition in the wake of the Reformation is that, as with the builders of Babel, there is less and less commonality in theological language for each Christian tradition to draw from when addressing and critiquing the other. As in the previous observation, this need not undermine the ecumenical project as a laudable and biblical goal. It must, however, serve to caution us that we must do considerable and, more importantly, *charitable* translation of Roman tradition's theological language *before* critiquing that tradition on our own terms. In what follows, I will be exploring a discrete aspect of Catholic dogma on the nature of merit as formulated at the Council of Trent. This doctrine has proved to be a considerable source of frustration for Reformed respondents to Roman Catholicism since Calvin's *Antidote*[1]. While I believe that there are significant differences in Roman Catholic and Reformed soteriologies (specifically in the different perspectives held by these traditions relating to the perseverance of the saints, the precise nature of sacramental efficacy, and the place and mission of Mary), I am persuaded by the notion that these differences have been exacerbated and overplayed precisely because we lack commonality in underlying theological vocabulary. A lack of attention to this problem provides at least a partial explanation for the failure of many recent Presbyterian/Reformed evaluations of Roman Catholic theology[2]. Because of this, I will

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[1] *Acts of the Council of Trent: With the Antidote*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (1851), in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

[2] A notable example is the publication of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals entitled "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals: The Alliance Response to the Second ECT

be attempting what I will call a "Calvinist" reading of formulas of Trent. In doing this I wish to be deliberately irenic and directed both toward appreciating the differing perspective that the Roman Catholic tradition offers, and removing some unnecessary obstacles preventing a common articulation of human salvation between the two traditions.

In attempting this kind of reading I am aware of the danger of reading my own tradition into another creating a unity where it may not authentically exist. This reading of Trent, therefore, makes no pretense of being the only reading nor am I suggesting that it is the most common reading among Roman Catholics. I do believe that it represents one *possible* reading which, in consultation with some representative modern Catholic treatments, hopefully avoids misrepresentation. There is some warrant for interpretive creativity, of course, because there is no single "Roman Catholic theology" of justification[3]. Even the Council of Trent, considered by many Protestant readers to be unassailably monolithic, was composed of various representatives from a number of Roman Catholic orders who individually espoused different and sometimes, *contradictory* understandings of merit[4]. It must be appreciated, therefore, that the formulations of Trent were deliberately purposed to refute existing errors concerning the doctrine of justification and to provide a response to the growing influence of the Reformation. They emphatically did not consolidate the varied theologies represented at the Council. The product of the Council, then, is a doctrine of justification that is *purposely* ambiguous and solicitous of interpretation at critical points.

II. Merit: The Pre-Tridentine Legacy

The historical discussion of merit in the pre-Tridentine church fell out in a consideration of two questions. The first is the question of whether one can merit initial justification (or what Calvin simply termed justification). The second is whether one may merit "second justification" which is increase of divine grace leading to eternal life (what Calvin termed santification leading to perseverance) subsequent to his or her initial justification. An understanding of the pre-Tridentine thought concerning these questions is crucial when considering what was being said in (the infamous) Session 6.

Document, 'The Gift of Salvation'" (1998), available online at http://www.AllianceNet.org/pub/articles/AppealToEvangelicals.html

[3] Allister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998) 272-3. This remains true for Roman developments since the Council of Trent. See, for example the various treatments of the doctrine of Justification in Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, trans. Thomas Collins, et al (New York, Nelson, 1964), Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans Wm. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1995), and Robert Sungenis, *Not by Faith Alone: A Biblical Study of the Catholic Doctrine of Justification* (Santa Barbara: Queenship, 1997).

[4] McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 250-73.

A. The Augustinian Understanding of Merit and Pelagian Self-Justification

While the notions of merit which the Tridentine fathers inherited were quite diverse, all of the official theologies that persevered through the Church into the Renaissance and Reformation period shared a common Augustinian root. It was from the Bishop of Hippo Regius that the Catholic fathers learned the famous dictum, "When God crowns our merits he crowns nothing but his own works.[5]" This understanding forever framed the Church's definition of merit in such a way as to distance the true faith from the errors of "self-justification" associated with Pelagianism. The Augustinian view was officially canonized by the Council of Orange in A.D. 529[6]. Whatever may be said regarding the various post-Augustinian theologies of merit, what may not be said is that they commend to the Church a belief that a human being, unaided by divine grace, can strictly merit for himself or herself "initial justification" or "eternal life and the increase of grace." This Pelagian notion was eliminated from consideration prior to Trent. It was also explicitly affirmed by Trent in these words from Canon 1: "If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be anathema[7]."

Given this settled question, however, the natural question arose as to how one could continue to affirm the biblical promises of merit/reward as well as a biblical understanding of free will without reasserting what had been condemned as heretical.

B. The semantics of "meritum"

One of the unfortunate obstacles that the Church has had to contend with throughout its history is the inherent slippage in the sense of critical theological terms as Holy Scripture has been translated from the Hebraic milleu of the Old and New Testaments to the Hellenistic world of the early Fathers to the Latin environs of Medieval theologians. The theological term "merit" is a striking example of this phenomenon. As Allister McGrath has demonstrated, the Greek word μερομαι has an adjectival quality (i.e. "meritorious") the Latin translation of this word, *meritum* is a participial form whose nearest approximation in English is "to deserve". The importance of this nuance of meaning is that a thing can only be "meritorious" in the estimation of another. The estimation, therefore, is extrinsic to the thing itself. With the Latin term, however, there

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[5] *Epistle* 194, 5, 19. Cited in McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 28.

[6] The definitions of Orange were surprisingly exhaustive in their exclusion of any notion of human merit apart from grace. The council excludes this *meritum sine gratia* at the level of action (Canon 6), the level of notion (Canon 7), and the level of affection Canon 25). See "The Council of Orange (529)" in John Leith, ed. *The Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 37-45.

[7] *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Trans. J. J. Schroeder (Rockford, Ill.: Tan, 1978) 42.

is a subtle shift in that "to deserve" transfers the focus to the intrinsic quality in the thing that *requires* its meritorious estimation in the eyes of the other[8]. The following two sentences demonstrate this subtle shift:

> The soldier was decorated for *meritorious* conduct.

> The soldier *merited* decoration for his conduct.

One immediately notices that the verbal sense activated by the second sentence shifts the focus from the evaluation given to the soldier by his superior to the obligatory claim that the soldier had to his decoration. It is precisely on the issue *of divine obligation* that the subsequent Latin formulations of the theology of merit turned.

C. "Meritum de condigno" and "meritum de congruo"

In the latter twelfth century, a distinction came to be made between two senses of the word *meritum* that closely mirrored the differences which arose when the Greek was translated into the Latin. These senses were distinguished by the terms, *meritum de condigno* and *meritum de congruo*. By *meritum de condigno* the theologians meant merit in the strict Latin sense that it obliged God to grant either initial justification or eternal life. By the term *meritum de congruo*, "merit" is given a weaker force that recognizes the disparity existing between God and man as well as the disproportionate nature of the eternal reward for temporal works of righteousness. By virtue of his condescending graciousness, God reckons the works that a human being does by grace as really being his or her own and thus, because he has promised a reward to those who perform works of righteousness, "appropriately" (*de congruo*) grants it to them.

The result of this distinction was to allow Medieval theologians to preserve the concept of merit while at the same time granting that only Christ could properly be said to merit eternal life in the "condign" sense of the word. This move effectively distanced the Church from Pelagian notions of merit while maintaining a commitment to the promises of eternal reward for works of righteousness in Holy Scripture and to the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance.

D. Meriting Initial Justification vs. Meriting the Increase of Grace and Eternal Life

The primary question that developed from this distinction between congruity and condignity is just where each notion of merit was to be placed in the process of justification (*processus iustificationis*). On this question there were two primary schools of thought. The Franciscans of the Medieval period believed that it was possible to merit initial justification *de congruo*[9]. This they did with an impressive degree of consistency whether they regarded themselves primarily as disciples of Bonaventure or of Duns Scotus. The Franciscan understanding of the process of justification began with the

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[8] McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 14.

[9] Ibid. 111.

notion of "prevenient" grace which was understood to be a natural or common grace granted by God to all human beings on the basis of his universal salvific will. This prevenient grace includes graces which are both external and operative as well as those which are internal and cooperative. Examples of externally operative graces are found in such things as the general revelation of God's invisible attributes in nature (cf. Rom. 1:20) and the universal free offer of the Gospel in a sermon. Examples of the internally cooperative graces are found in natural acts of love and charity which are present even in unregenerate persons by virtue of their being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*, cf. Gen. 1:26). Proceeding on the axiom of that God will not deny grace to the one who does what is in him (*Facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*)[10], the Franciscan theologians believed that a person could prepare himself or herself and thereby "merit" (*meritum conguro*) the created grace of initial justification by performing works of righteousness in response to the external and in cooperation with the internal prevenient graces. Against the charge that this was nothing more than a reintroduction of Pelagianism, the Franciscans maintained that these preparatory good works are mingled with sinfulness and imperfection to such an extent that God is merely acting in accordance (*de congruo*) with mercy, love and his promise that he would not cast out the one who comes to him (John 6:37). They considered it appropriate, therefore, that God graciously rewards these first movements toward faith with justification.

Unlike the Franciscans, the Medieval Dominicans, were more loyal to mature teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas as expressed in his *Summa Theologica*[11]. Thomas did not distinguish between uncreated grace and created grace in the same way that the Franciscans did. Rather, he spoke of nature and grace[12]. In doing this, he labeled those things that the Franciscans called examples of uncreated grace merely as "natural". St. Thomas strongly rejected that a human being could merit initial justification in either *de congruo* or the *de condigno* senses justification. He regarded an unregenerate human being as corrupted by virtue of original sin and therefore unable to attain to the merit of initial justification:

> The nature of grace is repugnant to reward of works, according to Rom. 4:4:
> 'Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned according to grace but

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[10] Cf. Origen, "For ourselves, we maintain that human nature is in no way able to seek after God, or to attain a clear knowledge of Him without the help of Him whom it seeks. *He makes Himself known to those who, after doing all that their powers will allow, confess that they need help from Him, who discovers Himself to those whom He approves*, in so far as it is possible for man and the soul still dwelling in the body to know God." *Contra Celsum* VII, 42 (Italics mine).

[11] *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920); available from http:// newadvent.org/ summa/211403.htm, IaIIae, 116.

[12] Ibid., IaIIae, 116.

according to debt.' Now a man merits what is reckoned to him according to debt, as the reward of his works. Hence a man may not merit the first grace.[13]"

While maintaining their differences on the question of initial justification, the medieval Catholic theologians achieved a remarkable unity on the question of whether a human being can merit the increase of grace (or the increase of justification) and eternal life subsequent to initial justification. Following Thomas and others, the pre-Tridentine theologians held that the increase of grace and eternal life are merited by a believer in *both* the *de condigno* and *de congruo* senses of the term. First, in recognition of the fact that we do not a possess a simplicity of will, and thus are plagued with inconsistency and duplicity, God has graciously condescended and promised to us the reward of eternal life. He does this on the basis that the believer (of free will) does "that which lies within" (*Facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*). God then overlooks the imperfections in the believer's efforts and judges them to be *congruently* meritorious. Thomas writes,

> If it is considered as regards the substance of the work, and inasmuch as it springs from the free-will, there can be no condignity because of the very great inequality. But there is congruity, on account of an equality of proportion: for it would seem congruous that, if a man does what he can, God should reward him according to the excellence of his power[14].

Secondly, the medieval theologians reckoned that by virtue of the mystical union which believers share with Christ through the Holy Spirit, and by virtue of their status as adopted children, Christ himself works within the justified believer in such a way that His works are reckoned as being truly the believer's works as well. On this basis, the works of righteousness done in the grace and power of the indwelling Spirit are regarded as *condignly* meritorious. In the same section, Thomas writes,

> If, however, we speak of a meritorious work, inasmuch as it proceeds from the grace of the Holy Ghost moving us to life everlasting, it is meritorious of life everlasting condignly. For thus the value of its merit depends upon the power of the Holy Ghost moving us to life everlasting according to Jn. 4:14: 'Shall become in him a fount of water springing up into life everlasting.' And the worth of the work depends on the dignity of grace, whereby a man, being made a partaker of the Divine Nature, is adopted as a son of God, to whom the inheritance is due by right of adoption, according to Rm. 8:17: 'If sons, heirs also.'[15]

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 114.

[15] Ibid.

III. The Theology of Merit in the Tridentine Decrees on Justification

When on January 13, 1547 the Tridentine fathers presented the decrees and canons of Session 6, they did so with a firm grounding in their medieval heritage. The final decrees recognize three states of justification (*status iustificationis*) promoting the notion that justification is an operative *process* from new birth through maturity and perfection rather than a punctilliar event associated identified with initial justification. The first nine chapters discuss initial justification or the process by which a sinner is translated from the status of a sinner to that of a righteous child. Chapters 10-13 deal with "second justification" or how a human once justified increases in righteousness and increases his or her received justification. Chapters 14-17, then, deal with the event where one may forfeit justification and regain it through the sacrament of penance. Finally, a list of 33 canons are appended to the decrees to distinguish their positive teaching from the errors which they are intended to refute.

What is immediately surprising about the final presentation of Session 6 is the subtle distinctions and nuances so readily at hand in the in the Medieval schoolmen are noticeably absent. The authors of the formulations of Trent deliberately avoided scholastic language in favor of biblical language. A prime example of this tendency is the decrees and canons touching the doctrine of merit. The distinction between *meritum condigno* and *meritum congruo*, for example, is never invoked. In its place are a number of biblical quotations and allusions regarding the adoption of believers and the recompense granted for obedience. Also absent is an official determination on what the Church would teach concerning the congruent merit of initial justification. The most glaring point of divergence between the two major Medieval schools surprisingly left ambiguous in the final document. This tendency in the in the Council understandably left the responding Reformed and Lutheran theologians of the day with a frustrating degree of ambiguity as to which Roman Catholic tradition they were responding to.

A. Governing Metaphors of Justification: Filial Adoption vs. Forensic Decree

When making examination and critique of any of the particulars of the decrees and canons on the doctrine of justification in Session 6, it must be kept in mind that the authors were working with a metaphorical description of justification that was pervasively *filial* rather than *forensic*. When human beings lose their innocence by the transgression of Adam, therefore, they become *children* of wrath [emphasis mine][16]. Salvation, then, is accomplished in the meritorious work of Jesus Christ, the *Son* of God who makes both Jews and Gentiles to obtain righteousness and *adoption of sons* [emphasis mine][17]. The Tridentine definition of justification then becomes,

> . . .a translation from that state in which man is born a *child* of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the *adoption* of the *sons* of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior. This translation however cannot, since the promulgation of the

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[16] *CDCT*, 6.1, 30.

[17] Ibid., 6.2, 30.

Gospel, be effected except through the laver of regeneration or its desire [emphasis mine][18]."

Considered from this perspective we might propose that "justification" for the Tridentine fathers *equals* filial adoption and translation to divine sonship. The theological implications of justification that follow in the decrees and canons must then be seen as extensions of this root metaphor.

This orientation has implications for the Tridentine doctrine of God. At Trent, God as Father takes precedence over God as King and Judge. This immediately distances the Council from Theodore Beza. Whereas the underlying root metaphor of forensic justification necessitated a sharp distinction between imputed righteousness declared on the basis of the merits of Christ (justification) and imparted righteousness progressively worked into the believer (sanctification), the root metaphor operative at Trent allowed them to be subsumed under the single category of justification understood as adoption. As Chapter 7 states, justification is not the mere forgiveness of sins,

> . . .but also Sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man, through the voluntary reception of grace and gifts; whereby an unjust man becomes just and from being an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an *heir* according to hope of life everlasting [emphasis mine][19].

While it is true that the Tridentine fathers affirmed something like the Protestant notion of imputed righteousness by admitting, "For though no one can be just except he to whom the merits of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ are communicated[20]," they link this righteousness to the [filial] love for God which is, "diffused by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who are justified, and inheres in them[21]." A failure to appreciate this linguistic distinction and a confusion of the differing paradigms from which both the Tridentine fathers and the reformers were operating remains a persistent source of confusion among Roman Catholics and Protestants to date.

B. The Merits of Christ and Initial Justification

The first word on merit in Session 6 sets a Christological tone for all of the discussion of merit in that it gives preeminence to the merits of Christ in his incarnation and passion. Chapter 3 states that the only persons who are justified before God are those to whom the merit of his passion are communicated. As human beings, "contract a proper unrighteousness" by virtue of being conceived as children of Adam, the grace by which they are made righteous is communicated through the new birth given "through the merit

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[18] Ibid., 6.4, 31.

[19] Ibid., 6.7, 33.

[20] Ibid., 6.7, 34.

[21] Ibid.

of his [Christ's] passion[22]". Again, note the filial context in which merit is presented by use of the phrase "new birth". In chapter 7, this theme is further elucidated by labeling the meritorious cause of justification as, "his most beloved, only-begotten, our Lord Jesus Christ, who when we were enemies, for the exceeding charity wherewith he loved us, merited for us justification by his most holy passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father[23]."

Having established the context and ground of a theology of merit, Trent then goes on to discuss the initial justification of a sinner and the notion of merit that should govern the commencement of salvation. In chapter 5, the Tridentine fathers recognize a period of preparation that takes place prior to initial justification[24]. How long this period may be, the Tridentine fathers do not indicate, however, one must keep in mind that the notion of evangelism-conversion-baptism which was commonplace the that time was a *process* with a highly developed liturgical structure. Any adult who desired to convert to Christianity first made request of the local priest and then assented to participate in a period of instruction and inquiry called the catechumenate. This period continued until the candidate was sufficiently prepared to receive baptism and reception into the faith at Easter vigil. Such a liturgical pattern, while seeming overly formal and foreign to some modern American Protestants, was the long established practice of the 16th century Church. It was in keeping with the pastoral concerns of the council, therefore, to present the formulations on justification in this way[25]. Of this period of preparation, the council declared that the sinner is called by the prevenient grace of God,

> . . .without any merits on their part, they are called; that they who by sin had been cut off from God, may be disposed through his quickening and helping grace to convert themselves to their own justification by freely assenting to and cooperating with that grace[26].

In other words, human decision and the willingness to act in requesting reception into the catechumenate and the subsequent preparation for baptism are preceded by the grace of Christ. This outpouring of grace culminating in receptivity to the calling of the Word and Spirit is not itself a result of any prior meritorious action on the human agent's part.

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[22] Ibid., 6.3, 31.

[23] Ibid., 6.3, 33.

[24] Ibid., 6.6, 31.

[25] Incidently, this practice fell into disuse for a period of time and was resurrected in the decrees of Vatican II. In the years since re-presenting this *Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* (RCIA), both Roman Catholic and Protestant parishes have adopted the practice to great effect. For a presentation and advocacy of the process from a noted Evangelical see Ronald Webber, *Liturgical Evangelism: Worship as Outreach and Nurture* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Moorehouse, 1986).

[26] Ibid., 6.5, 31-2.

One might legitimately ask what this "cooperation" with the prevenient grace looks like in actual practice. Chapter 5 continues by stating that,

> While God touches the heart of man by the illumination of the Holy Ghost, man himself neither does absolutely nothing while receiving that inspiration, since he can also reject it, nor yet is he able by his own free will and without the grace of God to move himself to justice in his sight.[27]

In other words the tension between God's operation and human cooperation is maintained and the human is reckoned as cooperative by the mere fact that he or she does not sinfully *reject* the gracious action and calling of the Word and Spirit. In practice this would be a catechumen proceeding from the free offer of the Gospel and not rejecting baptism. Whether this cooperation can itself be regarded as congruently meritorious toward salvation as was held by the Franciscans in the assembly, is a question that is not resolved. Presumably this position is approved and falls within the boundaries of Roman Catholic orthodoxy in that it is not a doctrine *specifically* excluded[28]. The strong emphasis in the language on the gracious character of God's action and the bare minimum of non-rejection required by the human agent, however, evokes a reading more in keeping with the teaching of Thomas and his Dominican disciples.

It would seem that here is one place where we find a seam separating the Roman Catholic and Calvinist formulations. While the language of chapter 5 certainly minimizes the human contribution, Rome does seem to be vulnerable to some criticism from Protestants in that she makes human consent or rejection of grace seem determinative (in a carefully nuanced sense) for initial justification. While this is a point that requires further exploration and dialogue, I might suggest a few possible Catholic responses that might help to assuage the Protestant concern. First, Trent emphasized that, "faith is the beginning (*initium*) of human salvation, the foundation (*fundamentum*), and the root (*radix*) of *all* justification [emphasis mine][29]. Any positive movement in salvation, therefore, must be understood as the product of prior grace. Secondly, the formulation of preparation is deliberately worded to give the impression that the positive movement toward baptism, *and* the avoidance of sinful rejection, constitute *a single movement of faith*, which for Trent includes faith, hope, and love (see discussion below). Chapter 7 states that "when aroused and aided by divine grace, receiving faith by hearing, they are moved freely toward God *believing* to be true what has been divinely revealed and promised.[emphasis mine][30]" Later in the same paragraph it states that they are,

> . . .raised to *hope*, trusting that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake; and they begin to *love* him as the fountain of all justice and on that account *are*

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[27] Ibid.

[28] McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* 268.

[29] *CDCT*, 6.8, 34-5.

[30] Ibid, 6.7, 32.

moved against sin by a certain hatred and detestation, that is, by that repentance that must be performed before baptism [emphasis mine]*[31]*.

Thirdly, Trent would argue that faith itself is a gift which makes God the operative initiator of the human responsiveness to his call and removes the accusation that it is anything like a "work" that is added to faith. Finally, it should be kept in mind that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are mysteriously related in the body of divinity. The fact that, Calvinists, operating from a highly developed decretal theology, have strongly affirmed the irresistibility of grace, need not invalidate an equally strong affirmation of the free and faithful response-*ability* on the part of human beings who are aroused and aided by grace. The two notions are perspectively related to one another and highlight the richness of Gospel truth. Both Calvinists and Roman Catholics witness the same phenomena of a human agent, aroused by a "temporary faith", but refusing to enter into the fullness of saving faith[32]. While it is unfortunate that Trent terms this scenario as a *rejection* such as could give the impression that grace has failed, there is an important sense in which it is indeed a rejection and is properly and biblically called such (cf. Luke 10:16). We can account for this by noting that Roman Catholics ground their description of salvation in the event as it appears to the eyes while Calvinists tend to articulate the doctrine against the backdrop of the immutable decrees of God. Trent is at all points strongly motivated to guard against a notion of justification that resembles Bonhoeffer's "cheap grace". In guarding the notion of free human response the Tridentine fathers seem to be making the same counterpoint as the Apostle James when he argued that we are justified by what we do and not by faith alone (James 2:26).

Considered as a unit, the first nine chapters on the justification of the believer are resoundingly negative concerning the possibility that a human being may merit (*condigno*) initial justification. This is to be expected considering that justification is for the Tridentine fathers an operative grace whereby righteousness is given through the new birth. From this filial perspective, the benefits of Christ's passion are communicated to the believer in the same way that children receive eye and hair color by virtue of natural birth from their parents. The grace of initial justification inheres *in* them because Christ the Son inheres in them by the Holy Spirit. His righteousness, therefore, is *in* them but is not, in the strict sense, *of* them. The characteristics that make the Christian resemble the Father are derived from him and yet are an integral part of their new nature as children and co-heirs with Christ.

C. Meriting the Increase of Justification: Faith in Christ or Faith in Works

Beginning in the chapter 10, Trent takes up the topic of the increase of justification. The fathers who were present had affirmed the operative character of the grace leading to initial justification apart from any human merits, thus muting the notion of human

[31] Ibid.

[32] Consider, for example Calvins treatment of "temporary faith" in his commentary on Hebrews 6, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews,* trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, Baker, repr. 1996) 138.

response. When taking up the topic of the increase of justification, however, the doctrine of merit is boldly asserted. Once justified by the prior action of grace and the gift of regeneration, Trent teaches that believers are then to increase their received justification through, "faith cooperating with good works[33]." Upon reading this, the question must be asked what it means for faith to be cooperative. Does this mingling of faith and works leave the believer to rely on the merit of his or her own works or the merits of Christ for justification? Asked in a different way, is Trent guilty of leaving the believer left to complete in the flesh what was begun by the Spirit (Gal. 3:3)?

To answer this question properly, one must again consider the theological perspective of the Catholic fathers on the nature of justification. For Trent, justification is a holistic *process* rather than a punctilliar moment in the life of a believer. The believer begins this process at initial justification but it is consummated only in the eschaton and the final judgment. Because of the underlying difference of perspective at Trent, the definition of faith is different as well. The nature of saving faith (or justifying faith) is qualified and defined in light of complete process of salvation to include faith and hope and love. As Chapter 7 states, "For faith, unless hope and charity be added to it, neither unites man perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of his body[34]."

The Tridentine fathers deliberately avoided the traditional labels of "formed" and "unformed" faith which were drawn from Aristotelian metaphysical categories, but the concept from which they are drawn is instructive when examining this aspect of the formula. According to Medieval dogma, "unformed" faith was simply intellectual faith or a belief in the truths of the Gospel devoid of personal commitment and appropriation by the will. "Formed" faith, however, was a faith that included these qualities. Apparently the notion of "faith" in this passage is the narrowly intellectual sense of the word relating it to "unformed" faith[35]. Justifying faith, or the faith that unites believers with Christ, must therefore be defined as faith *plus* hope *plus* love[36]. Traditionally Protestants have interpreted these qualities of the Catholic definition to be *extrinsically* related to each other with the result that, to be justifying, works of charity must be added *extra nos* in order for it to be sufficient. Understandably, the Protestant objection, therefore, has been that these works detract from the sufficiency of faith as the instrumental cause of justification thereby introducing a semi-Pelagian "faith-plus-works" notion of salvation through the back door[37].

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[33] *CDCT*, 6.10, 36.

[34] Ibid. 6.7, 34.

[35] This rings a strikingly similar note to the Lutheran understanding of the *fides historica*.

[36] See a discussion of this topic by noted Evangelical-turned-Roman Catholic, James Akin, "Justification: 'By Faith Alone?'" *Nazareth Resource Library* [home page on-line]; available from http://www.cin.org/users/james/files/faith_al.htm.

[37] See for example the comments of Reformed apologist, R.C. Sproul, "The Council of Trent tried to steer a course on the razor's edge between semi-Pelagianism and

While this is a possible reading of Trent, it need not be the only reading. In fact, as Jesuit theologian Avery (now Cardinal) Dulles has suggested it is possibly a misreading[38]. Dulles, quoting Karl Rahner states,

> Yet, as developed by Scholastic authors, the distinction of the three theological virtues sometimes tended to 'obscure the totality of the single and basic act of justification which God's grace bestows on man freely and as freedom. . . .' A faith not animated by love would not be a response to the gospel; even as faith would be defective[39].

Later in the same section, Dulles, following Otto Pesch states, ". . .charity is an inner moment of living faith, and thus the Thomistic thesis that justifying faith must be enlivened by charity does not really contradict the Lutheran thesis of justification by faith alone.[40]" It seems, therefore that the virtues of faith, hope, and love, which together define the Tridentine notion of saving faith are capable of being understood as being *intrinsically* related to one another in much the same way that the Reformers defined saving faith as knowledge (*notitia*), assent (*assensus*), and volition (*fiducia*). As Joel Garver has stated "Faith works *itself* out in love[41]."

When the Tridentine fathers come to their final and clearest teaching on the doctrine of merit in chapter 16, they have this notion in mind: Eternal life is offered *both* because it is "a grace promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus[42]," *and* because it is "a reward promised by God himself, to be faithfully given to their good works and merits[43]." In this way, the Tridentine fathers are able to maintain both the gratuitous nature of salvation while maintaining fidelity to the biblical assertions that God rewards the works of righteousness done in faith. They do this by giving a prominent role to the believer's union with Christ by the Spirit in the same manner as did St. Thomas. By virtue of this mystical union which believers share with Christ through the Holy Spirit

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Reformed thought. It is arguable that they cut themselves on that razor." *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 141.

[38] "Justification in Contemporary Catholic Theology," in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in DialogueVII*, ed. by H.George Anderson, et al (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

[39] Ibid., 266.

[40] Ibid.

[41] "On the Catholic Question," *LaSalle University* (1999) [homepage online]; available from http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/ACE.html, 16. I am grateful to Joel for his help in understanding and appreciating Roman Catholic theology better. His influence, though not extensively quoted, is central to the views presented here.

[42] *CDCT*, 6.16, 41.

[43] Ibid.

and by virtue of their status as adopted children, Christ *himself* works within the believer in such a way that his works in and through them are reckoned as being truly theirs as well. Chapter 16 further states,

> For Christ Jesus *himself*, as the head into the members and the vine into the branches, continually infused strength into those justified, which strength always precedes, accompanies and follows their good works, and without which they could not in any manner be pleasing and meritorious before God, we must believe that nothing further is wanting to those justified 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 states of this life and to have truly merited eternal life to be obtained in its [due] time[44].

Because of this Trent can conclude, "far be it that a Christian should either trust or glory in himself and not in the Lord, whose bounty toward all men is so great that He wishes the things that are His gifts to be their merits[45]."

IV. Conclusion: Augustine, Trent, and Calvin

This final point returns us to the original Augustinian origins of the doctrine of merit that were later affirmed and elucidated by St. Thomas. This ontological conception of merit as a participation in the divine nature by virtue of the believer's union with Christ is a far cry from any proposal that God is obligated to the believer on account of the intrinsic value of his or her works. It also goes some distance in answering what was Calvin's strongest objection to the notion of merit. For Calvin it was offensive that the imperfect works offered by believer could ever be expected to satisfy the just demands of a holy God and thus *obligate* him to reward them with eternal life. Ironically the answer of the Tridentine fathers could be the same answer that he himself would offer when discussing the value of the merits of Christ. In the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin states, "Apart from God's good pleasure, Christ could not merit anything; but did so because he had been appointed to appease God's wrath with his sacrifice, and to blot out our transgressions with his obedience[46]. Roman Catholics, I believe, could answer (in fidelity to Trent) that it belongs to the gracious nature of salvation that God has chosen to reckon the faith of his children working in acts of charity as the instrument of his reward in spite of their imperfections. It is not the perfection of the works that God rewards, but that those works are the works of Christ who is truly at work within them. It is his own merits that God rewards and so, as St. Augustine says, "crowns his own gifts".

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[44] Ibid., 6.16, 41.

[45] Ibid.

[46] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminister, 1960) II, 17, 1; 529.