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Stephanie Falkowski

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, safalkowski@csbsju.edu

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DIFFERENT APPROACHES, DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS, SAME NONSENSE:
AQUINAS, LUTHER, AND WAYS JUSTIFICATION DOES NOT WORK

Stephanie Falkowski

There is a greater degree of consensus when it comes to stupidity than there is in truth. Denouncing an opinion as misguided and dangerous is far easier than articulating what is the correct opinion. This is the case with one of the fundamental issues argued over during the Reformation, i.e. justification. We will begin by considering how justification is defined, and then turn our focus to what, and who, determines the justification of a soul, and other characteristics of justification. Though the two admittedly have great differences in their premises and their ultimate interpretations, this exploration will focus on how they come to places of agreement, and in this, it will become clear that Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas both deliberate on the same universal aspect of Christian life and have the same understanding of what ought *not* be said of it.

First, let us consider how each defines the phenomenon in question – justification. Aquinas is particular in how defines terms, wanting to be precise as possible. The first article of question 113 is devoted to providing such a definition for justification, “a movement towards justice,” which in his mind is “deliverance from any sin.”¹ This is the only definition he discusses, arguing against a counterpoint which claims justification is not the remission of sins, rather than against a specific alternative definition.

One may have expected from one as fastidious as Luther an equally straightforward definition of justification to be found in his discussion of justification by faith alone in *On the Freedom of a Christian*, but this is not the case. This is perhaps due to Luther's focus on what faith does, rather than on justification alone. In Luther's system, faith has numerous benefits, and so justification is often mentioned as part of a list,² often with salvation and liberty, but also with other various ideas, "a treasure of great benefits"³ which he seems to want us to associate together with justification. Even in the several instances in which he does the word justification, usually in verb form, without one of these other phrases, it seems he is using it as shorthand to include such things as salvation and liberty. Whether he is conflating ideas, choosing to make associations between justification and other benefits of faith, or thinking the distinction is too obvious to mention or otherwise immaterial to his argument, Luther does not differentiate between them, nor define them precisely.

Therefore, while we are never told whether or not Luther agrees with the definition set forth in Thomas's *Summa Theologica*, it is worth noting that Thomas is writing about something very specific, whereas Luther is writing more generally, perhaps encompassing more than justification as Thomas would define it. Here, as with other aspects of their respective works, Luther and Aquinas do not disagree so much as they approach the topic differently.

Likewise, they come to another consensus about the nature of justification via differing reasoning – interiority. For Aquinas, there are four elements to justification: "an infusion of grace, a movement of the free will toward God in faith, a movement of the free will in recoil from sin, and the remission of guilt."⁴ All four take place inwardly. This inwardness leverages Aquinas' argument that "the justification of the ungodly...is the effect of operative grace," as one of the characteristics of operative grace, as Aquinas describes, is the "inward action of the will, in which the will is moved and God is the mover."⁵ In turn, exteriority would be a sign that the grace was not

operative, the distinction coming when “there is also an outward action.”⁶

Luther agrees that justification is something that occurs inwardly, but does arrive at this conclusion by thinking about what the process of justification entails as Aquinas does. Instead, he focuses on the effects of justification, and sees that it is something that happens in the soul, or to the inner man. He begins his argument by making the distinction between outer and inner men to explain that justification deals with the inner man. Because works “have nothing to do with this inner man,” he looks to what does affect the inner man.⁷ He finds this to be faith, since “faith can rule only in the inner man.”⁸ Despite coming to this conclusion from opposite angles, both Aquinas and Luther understand justification to be an internal happening, both dismissing the idea that any external effects are properly said to be part of justification.

What also must be considered with regards to justification is the role of faith, and here again, we find much agreement in the midst of the tension between Luther and Aquinas. For Aquinas, faith is intrinsically a part of justification. He insists, “a movement of faith is required for the justification of the ungodly.”⁹ The movement of free will is likewise required, but the importance of faith in justification is no less important, and is even related to it. Aquinas identifies the required movement of free will with “the movement of the mind by which it is turned to God,” and furthermore, “the first turning to God is by faith.”¹⁰

He also parses out what is meant by faith, as he is reluctant to equate it with knowledge, as he claims, “when a man knows God through natural knowledge, he is not turned to God.”¹¹ In addition, he feels it worth indicating the precise extent of faith necessary for justification, that being “that a man believe that God is the Justifier of men through the mystery of Christ.”¹²

Luther goes farther to insist that faith is the prerequisite

for justification. That justification is based in faith is something he admits, having “repeatedly said,” indeed over a dozen times in this treatise.¹³ He repeats it so often because it is so fundamental in his system of thought. True, he mostly argues this by means of proving the faults of justification by works, yet his system does make sense. For him, “faith alone, without works, justifies, frees, and saves,” because “God our Father has made all things depend on faith.”¹⁴ Justification may be just one of the things faith can accomplish, but Luther maintains that faith is the only route by which justification can occur.

Not only does this demonstrate how both Aquinas and Luther are in agreement that faith is crucial in justification, it also leads into what may be their greatest agreement – what justification is not. Luther starts his polemic from the basis of his recognition of something broken in the thought of other Christians, namely the opinion they were holding and propagating that people were justified on account of their own efforts. Luther is understandably uncomfortable with such a proposition. As he puts it, the logical end of this false opinion has a soul that “would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith.”¹⁵

However, Thomas Aquinas over two centuries earlier likewise precluded this opinion. The first thing he states in question 113 concerning the effects of grace, is that justification and merit belong to two separate categories, and should be reflected on separately. He bases this distinction in the claim that “the justification of the ungodly...is the effect of operative grace,” whereas “merit...is the effect of cooperative grace.”¹⁶ Since justification is pigeonholed as the effect of operative grace, God alone gets all the credit. This is interesting especially in that two of the four conditions necessary for justification may appear to be humanly willed, i.e. “the movement of the free will toward God in faith” and “a movement of the free will in recoil from sin.”¹⁷ Yet, Aquinas maintains that the will

does not move itself, but is moved, in such a way that the person in question is a passive participant, and is not credited for their effort. This entirely precludes Luther's concern about being justified by works – such a thing is not possible.

Now, while it is true that as Aquinas freely grants, “operative and co-operative grace are the same grace,” the problem of determining to whom the outcome of grace should be attributed is important enough to call for this somewhat arbitrary separation.¹⁸ It is worthy of notice that for Aquinas, regardless of whether something is best categorized as operative or cooperative, God is always involved. In this, he seems to disagree with Luther in the reasoning that recognizing human effort by necessity leads down the slippery slope to a soul that “would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith.”¹⁹ However, the question at hand is not merit, but justification. Though as I previously noted, Luther often groups justification together with salvation, when he uses the term justification, or justified, alone, he is usually speaking about that erroneous opinion he rails against in which people believe that they are meriting justification. As seen, in this, he is in complete agreement with Aquinas. Aquinas treats justification separately from merit; to combine the two is a category mistake.

As seen, Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas agree on many aspects of justification, though ultimately, the systems by which they attempt to make sense of God's actions are quite different. Yet even by different reasoning, they agree on important aspects of justification, such as the interior and faith based qualities. The two share much, especially in their disagreement of justification not being due to human effort. These points of agreement are important to understand, as they form a common, perhaps even universal, understanding of this piece of the Christian life. This displays the value of using different lenses, and different theological frameworks to reinforce truth. Understanding the commonalities between the systems of Lu-

ther and Aquinas reminds us by demonstration how much room there is for variation while still holding to a understanding more common than is often acknowledged or even looked for.

Notes

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Art. 1 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, ed. A. M. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 184.

2 Nearly half of all uses of justification (and related words justify, justified, justifies) in this text - 41 out of 86, or 48%, - are in conjunction with other words, most commonly salvation (and related words save, saved, etc.), though also the with words like liberated, made righteous, set free, made Christian, sanctified, endues with truth and peace, filled full with every good thing, made a child of God, etc. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, trans. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 277-316.

3 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, 282

4 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Art. 6 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 192.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 111. Art. 2 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 167.

6 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 111. Art. 2 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 167.

7 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, 280

8 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, 280

9 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Art. 4 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 189.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Art. 4 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 189.

11 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Art. 4 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 190.

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Art. 4 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 190.

- 13 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, 307
- 14 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, 282, 283
- 15 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, 280
- 16 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Prologue in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 182.
- 17 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 113. Art. 6 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 192.
- 18 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. Q 111. Art. 2 in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, 168.
- 19 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, 280