The Theology of Ernst Käsemann – II

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Although Ernst Käsemann's magisterial commentary on the Epistle to the Romans proved to be open to review and patient of analysis without much explicit reference to the doctrine of justification (of *New Blackfriars* March 1981), the author himself undoubtedly regards this famous Lutheran insight as the key to his reading of Paul. What is not so clear, however, is whether Käsemann's understanding of justification in Paul has much to do with what Catholics have usually supposed that Lutherans mean. In fact Käsemann may well have offered a reading of Paul which cuts the ground from underneath the central point of contention at the Reformation. His version of the doctrine of justification in his reading of the Epistle to the Romans may therefore have greater ecumenical effects in the long run than many agreed statements. And this is not the only way in which his work is likely to prove increasingly productive, as the young Swiss Calvinist scholar Pierre Gisel brings out in the first major systematic account of Käsemann's writings.[1]

1 The doctrine of justification is not one with which Catholics are generally at ease. The word is seldom mentioned in Catholic sermons. Salvation, grace, sanctification, yes – that is a chain of notions with familiar Catholic resonances, and clearly they pinpoint the area at issue. But talk of justification, as of predestination, sounds like Protestant jargon. Many Catholics are surprised to hear that the Council of Trent did not (as they suppose) merely condemn Luther's teaching but actually worked out, with considerable thoroughness, and sanctioned with great solemnity in 1547, a Catholic doctrine of justification which has formed part of the official teaching of the Catholic Church ever since.

It will do no harm to begin by recalling what Catholics think that Protestants who go on about "justification" are committed to believing. The picture differs little from that mirrored in the anathemas of the Council of Trent, to which references are added in brackets.

The sinner is justified by faith alone, in the sense that no responsive movement on his part is required at all (canon 9). There is no question of human freedom's being moved and awakened by God so that it co-operates with God's awakening call by the assent by which one opens oneself for the grace of justification, nor is it

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possible for one to dissent – like some inanimate object one contributes nothing at all but remains totally passive (canon 4). This is not surprising because, after all, with the sin of Adam, human free will has been lost and is entirely extinct (canon 5). Indeed, what people do prior to justification is *all* nothing but sin (canon 7). The protestant doctrine is thus thought to rest on a pessimistic view according to which sinful man is no longer human; he is not simply deprived but is totally depraved. Furthermore, nothing happens personally to the justified sinner: we are justified through the imputation of Christ's justice alone, without any grace being imparted to us so that we might have a change of heart and become new beings (canon 11). Justifying faith is nothing but the confidence (*fiducia*) that God remits sins for Christ's sake (canon 12). All you have to do is to believe with certainty and you are forgiven (canon 13). The individual has this subjective certainty that he has obtained the grace of God. Finally, so Catholics generally think, the Protestant doctrine includes a certain antinomianism: nothing is commanded in the gospel except faith (canon 19); God has given Jesus Christ to us as a redeemer in whom we are to trust but not as a lawgiver whom we are to obey (canon 21).

The Council of Trent did its best to come to grips with Lutheran doctrine. There were never more than sixty prelates present at this stage (1546-7), out of over four hundred bishops who remained in communion with Rome. But they worked hard, along with forty or so theologians, for about six months, to produce a Catholic doctrine of justification. The final text, ironically enough, owes a good deal to a draft made by Girolamo Seripando (1492-1563), the superior general of the Hermits of St Augustine, Luther's own order. He was one of several bishops and theologians delated to Rome for supposed Lutheran sympathies.

The Tridentine picture of the Lutheran doctrine still holds Catholics in its spell. But Käsemann, in his commentary, reaffirming what he first said in a lecture delivered in Oxford in 1961, argues that Paul's doctrine of justification is simply a reformulation of the primitive Christian proclamation of the kingdom of God.[2] The "righteousness of God" in Paul speaks of the God who brings the world under his sovereignty in the death/resurrection of Jesus Christ. The problem in the Reformation controversies always bore on the relationship between God as giver of the grace of justification and the gift as received on the human side. To Protestants it has seemed essential to protect the sovereignty of God over against the Catholic view which (as they think) makes the gift of grace into a human possession. Catholics fear, on the other hand, that the Lutheran emphasis on the divine righteousness makes nothing of the gift of grace as received. Now Käsemann points out that

there is no need to choose between grace as sovereignty and grace as gift. The gospel revealed and given to Christians remains the power of God (cf *Romans*, p 28, citing Romans 1:16-17). Thomas Aquinas said much the same thing. Christ is God's gift for us, and in us, and no less our Lord. It is only as gift personally accepted that Christ's lordship over the Christian is recognized. Through the gift of Christ's body, as Käsemann says, we are simultaneously incorporated into the sphere of the lordship (*Herrschaftsbereich*) of Christ's body. For Paul, "there is no gift which does not also challenge us to responsibility, thereby showing itself as a power over us and creating a space of service for us".

In the Oxford lecture Käsemann spoke of the "dialectic" in the Pauline doctrine of justification: "the indissoluble connection of power and gift within the conception of the divine righteousness" (p 174). As he goes on to say: "The key to this whole Pauline viewpoint is that power is always seeking to realize itself in action and must indeed do so. It does this with the greatest effect when it no longer remains external to us but enters into us and, as the apostle says, makes us its members".

The concept of justification bears, then, on this Lutheran reading, upon the manifestation of God's sovereignty over the world which is acknowledged in the practice of obedience to the lordship of Christ. That is surely an emphasis with which Catholics may be satisfied. It cuts the ground from underneath the old controversies by returning us to the more basic conviction that Jesus is Lord. But Käsemann also seeks to eliminate the individualism that marks (so he allows) the traditional Protestant doctrine.

2 Käsemann is very insistent that God's sovereignty is over the *world:* "a purely individualistic interpretation of justification cannot be legitimately constructed from the Apostle's own teaching". *Wem gehört die Erde?* – To whom does the Earth belong? This is the question Käsemann likes to put. He puts it with passion to the existentialist exegesis of his master Bultmann which seems to focus on the individual only. He rages against the Lutheran failure in 1933 to resist National Socialism, on the grounds that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world. Käsemann continually returns to the Revelation to John, arguing that the apocalyptic element is precisely what grounds Christianity in the materiality of history. The New Testament is not concerned only with the individual. A certain philosophical idealism that characterizes bourgeois society, so Käsemann says, has put the autonomous person in the centre of the world and sought to interpret history accordingly: "The illusion of such a view is recognized by Marxism, and could have been seen through long ago from the Bible". He continues as follows: "Man is not simply the agent and subject of history, for

as he belongs decisively to nature, so he is also the object and theatre of history as it happens, determined not merely by the Thou who encounters him but just as much by all the anonymous powers that we have to include in the larger concept of 'world'".[3]

Apocalyptic literature, ancient and modern, often discloses a sectarian myopia and disparagement of mundane realities. Käsemann insists, however, that the apocalyptic eschatology which is characteristic of the Bible offers a vision of a cosmic order of justice by which all institutions and structures are judged. In a famous lecture given in 1960 he argued that "apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology".[4] On that occasion he linked his argument with, or even based it essentially upon, certain sayings attributed by Matthew to Jesus which Käsemann seeks to identify as "sentences of holy law": a type of prophetic judgement uttered by inspired members of the primitive Christian community on the strength of the supposed proximity of the Day of Judgment, the "apocalypse". The very existence of such pronouncements by ecstatic prophets has not seemed evident to other readers of the New Testament. It is not difficult, however, to show that the first Christians had, as Paul writes in the oldest text to have survived, "turned . . . to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1: 9-10). Käsemann writes as follows: "The return of Jesus in the role of the heavenly Son of Man is indeed the central hope which the original disciples derived directly from the Easter experience and constitutes, as such, their own peculiar Easter faith". The Easter faith of the first disciples was hopeful expectation of the Parousia. He goes on: "Thus it was relatively late before the Easter event was restricted to Jesus himself; originally it was understood as the beginning of the general resurrection and interpreted accordingly in apocalyptic terms and not as an isolated miracle". The route to understanding the New Testament is blocked if this expectation of a re-creation of the world by a general resurrection from the dead is ignored.

So far this is familiar enough. But Käsemann's insistence on apocalypticism is directed polemically against the Bultmann school and, beyond them, against the whole Christian tendency to play down the social and political side of the New Testament. It is only the apocalyptic perspective that enables the Christian to take seriously the materiality of history. The Bultmann school, with their demythologizing of the New Testament, restrict the scope of the gospel to the personal existence of the individual, conceived of along Cartesian lines as independent of social and historical relationships. More generally, however, the suppression or dissipation of the apocalyptic perspective leads to a form of practical docet-

ism which refuses to allow the lordship of Christ to engage bodily with the crude materiality of the historical order.

The Revelation to John had a hard road into the Bible. While it was the most frequently cited of all the future canonical texts in the second century its authority was increasingly contested from the middle of the third century, especially in the East, where it is missing in several canonical lists and in most of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament until the ninth/tenth century. No doubt the long struggle against Montanism made the orthodox wary of the major Christian apocalyptic text. It could be taken into the canon only when the radical apocalypticists had been sent out of communion. Neutered by allegorizing it could become spiritual reading in the monasteries. Joachim of Fiore, the saintly and idiosyncratic Cistercian abbot, reopened the Pandora's box of Christian eschatology in the twelfth century but died peacefully, although some of his views were subsequently condemned by the Lateran Council in 1215. It was only with Jan Hus (burned at the stake in 1415) and Thomas Münzer (tortured and executed by the victorious Lutheran princes in 1525 during the Peasants' Revolt) that an apocalyptic radicalism reappeared which threatened the political and ecclesiastical order. The great Reformers did not like the Apocalypse. Martin Luther, whose passionate hatred of the Anabaptists contributed to the defeat of the German peasants and Münzer's death, had no time for it. The Apocalypse is one of the few books of the New Testament on which Calvin did not write a commentary.

It is only with the work of Franz Overbeck, Johannes Weiss, and Albert Schweitzer, that the apocalyptic roots of Christianity returned to view. None of them was able to make anything positive of the discovery. The Liberal Protestant image of Jesus as a good man yielded to what seemed the more historically accurate picture of Jesus as an eschatological prophet. Weiss went back to Liberalism, while Schweitzer and Overbeck, concluding that Jesus was mistaken in his apocalyptic expectations, went off into "reverence for life" and a form of post-Christianity respectively. The so-called "Dialectical Theology" of Barth and the early Bultmann, on the other hand, put eschatology at the centre of Christianity; but, for all their talk of judgment, whether as "crisis" or as "decision", it soon became clear that the eschatological moment is the *hic et nunc*, the present in which one accepts one's existence as a gift entirely at God's disposal, with all that this might imply – but it has nothing directly to do with a real future related to social and political history. In fact the "eschatological challenge" becomes separated from the merely "apocalyptic imagery". All along the line, then, the apocalyptic side of the New Testament is either ex-

plained away into harmlessness or abandoned to outsiders and heretics.

Käsemann – "as one who is fond of keeping out of step" – has a lot of sympathy with outsiders and heretics and knows how much they have contributed to the truth of the gospel. For all his official Lutheran partiality for Paul he has a most un-Lutheran admiration for that John who was exiled to Patmos (Rev 1:9): "Patmos is not an idyllic haven of rest for retired scholars who look back on a hard-working life of piety and integrity, and who, fatigued and already half withdrawn from the madding crowd, give themselves up to all kinds of dreams. Patmos is the place for exiled rebels deprived of their eager activity, and with every idly spent hour burning into their marrow. For over there on the mainland world history is moving, and the churches are spent and either do not see it or try to come to terms with it. They praise Christ as the Lord of heaven, and do not hear him saying to them: 'The world and all that is in it is mine'. They know the first commandment, and they think it is enough if they keep themselves unspottted from the world, although the Anti-christ has to be faced squarely if one is to keep alive. They take comfort from the resurrection, and do not know that it begins here and now with the sovereignty of Jesus in the midst of his enemies and with the glorious freedom of God's children who, being ostracised, despise the mark of the beast under the *Pax Romana*".[5]

The lines along which Käsemann would interpret the Book of Revelation are plain enough from that quotation, although he has not offered us a full-scale commentary. But, as Pierre Gisel demonstrates in detail, what he is doing, as an exegete, trained in the Bultmann school, is to reach back to the generation of Overbeck, Weiss and Schweitzer to pick up the results of their historical studies of primitive Christian eschatology and to employ them to subvert the individualism and tendency towards subjective idealism in Dialectical Theology. Briefly, the picture is as follows. When historians, or theologians with historical methods, at last got to work critically on the Scriptures, after the Enlightenment and in the first wave of positivism, they inevitably operated with the unexamined distinction between (objective) facts and (subjective) values and assumed that the facts and the truth were the same thing. By the close of the nineteenth century, however, the observable facts and the truth claimed were drifting inexorably apart. Positivism, or what the Germans call *Historizismus*, had led to an impasse, in Protestant exegesis at any rate. Theologians began to make distinctions between the Jesus who might be reconstructed by the historian and the Jesus in whom a disciple might have faith. In 1892, for instance, Martin Kähler (a systematic theologian and not an exegete)

published a set of essays attacking books on "the so-called historical Jesus", *der sogenannte historische Jesus,* arguing that these supposedly "purely factual historical accounts" were just as much speculative exercises as the classical dogmatic Christology against which they were reacting. He offered the "real" Christ – *der geschichtliche biblische Christus:* the Christ neither of Christian dogma nor of historical research but the Christ of the Bible as preached.

The distinction between what is "historisch" (open to historical investigation) and what is "geschichtlich" (pregnant with historic significance), or between observation and interpretation, could not be sustained for long (one might have thought in 1892, but how wildly optimistic one would have been). The arrival of Barth, Bultmann and others, in the early 'twenties, tilted the dualism in favour of "significance". Barth's exposition of the Epistle to the Romans is a "powerful" interpretation, but he is almost contemptuous in his neglect of scholarly exegesis. Bultmann, although he spent his long life in the nitty-gritty of historical investigation of the composition of the New Testament literature (while Barth went off into reconstructing dogmatic theology), made it clear in his little *Jesus* book of 1926 that he also took for granted an almost unbridgeable hiatus between history and faith. The importance of Käsemann, then, is that he insists on "the theological relevance of the historical", *die theologische Relevanz des Historischen,* to cite his own slogan, which means that he rejects the rigid dichotomy between ("objective") historical facts and (necessarily subjective) theological significance within which so much Protestant theological work has been trapped since the Enlightenment. (That is not Catholic triumphalism; it is still unsettled whether Catholic theology will learn from Protestant mistakes or have to go through yet another "Modernist" crisis.)

Käsemann is, as a good student of the Bultmann school, perfectly happy to demythologize the apocalyptic language of the New Testament. His (after all) very simple point is that, mythological as apocalyptic writing certainly is, it is a view of *history* – which means that it is altogether too simple to translate it into existentialism: "this viewpoint", as Käsemann says, "allows the continuity of history to disintegrate into a series of more or less unconnected situations, reduces God's future to man's openness to the future, sees the present primarily in terms of the challenge made to us and the past ultimately as the mock-up or the model of the decision we have to face". To demythologize Christian apocalyptic writing, according to Käsemann, would be to accept the sovereignty over history of the crucified Christ. "Who is to think internationally, *weltpolitisch*", he asks, if not those who preach God's reign on earth?" But as he goes on to say, in reproach to his

own Lutheran brethren: "Even in Protestantism, the incense of the mystery religions blocks out our view and our freedom of thought and action. What is the extent of our solidarity with all those who are downtrodden and who have been murdered by tyrants? How deeply are we moved by the cries for avenging justice, which, after all, have a legitimate place in the Bible? How much do we hunger and thirst for righteousness, which not only restores the dead to life, but proclaims a new earth and has chosen us to prepare the way for it"?

3 Some of Ernst Käsemann's ideas will be familiar to those who have read (for example) the work of Jürgen Moltmann, whom he is proud to refer to as his pupil (and the reference has not been repudiated). But, since he has not published any single book which communicates at once, at least in any obvious and accessible way, the coherence as well as the many-sidedness of his thinking, the general impression among students of theology (if there is much impression at all) is of a maverick. His early work on the Pauline concept of the body (1933), on "God's people on the march" in the Letter to the Hebrews (1939), and on Paul's legitimacy as an apostle in Second Corinthians (1942), very substantial as they all are, and the basis of his reputation as an exegete, have not been translated into English,[6] but even in Germany they have been overshadowed by his later polemical essays, several of which can easily seem dazzling squibs. He is, for instance, the good Bultmann student who turned on his master in a famous lecture at the Bultmann school reunion in 1953 and accused him in effect of radical docetism, with his conception of Christian faith as "faith in the exalted Lord for which the Jesus of history as such is no longer considered of decisive importance". Again, in 1963 during the Faith and Order conference at Montreal, he devoted his invited lecture to insisting on difference as necessary for unity in the Church, going beyond the point at which many ecumenists then could follow. In 1951, in an even more provocative essay, he suggested that the *author* of the Johannine Epistles was the "heretic" and not the people whom he attacks. It is true that he likes a fight – "tensions are part of life even in Christianity, and only dead Christians stop annoying each other". He thinks of theological work as essentially *militant* – and of course the same old battles have to be refought in every generation over somewhat different ground and that is no cause either for surprise or for fatigue. He has done more than anyone else in the past thirty years to establish the platitude that "the" theology of the New Testament is a constellation of rival and not altogether compatible theologies – the gospel was originally syncretic. But the system in Käsemann's multiple polemic has now been carefully exhibited by Pierre Gisel in such a way that his

work begins to disclose its great potential for the next twenty or thirty years.

What Käsemann's work should help theologians to think goes (briefly) as follows. The happy immediacy with tradition, with the past, and particularly with the Christian past and so with the truth, which characterized the pre-critical age, collapsed irretrievably at the Enlightenment (which does not mean that the news has reached everybody yet): to have a sense of history is to be aware of our distance from the past. But even as theologians gave up reading off truth naively from tradition they substituted the practice of finding truth either in facts or in ideas (being either positivists or idealists), without realizing that both facts and ideas are historically conditioned and therefore never "pure" or immediately perceptible. Käsemann's discovery, on our theological behalf, is that the generation of the great biblical scholars as well as the generation of Barth and Bultmann were equally trapped in the dream of direct access to unmediated truth. Whether we hold that words picture things, or that words express ideas, as if it were in either case just as simple as that, then we remain prisoners of this anti-historical way of making out the truth. We have to begin with the *production* of our texts and with their *function* in the groups in which they were composed. Theology is thus initially a work of historical reconstruction. Truth is accessible only by the roundabout methods of filling in background, showing up related social and political interests and pressures, and so on, and necessarily taking risks with imaginative hypotheses which will often be disproved. Truth is never immediately evident. That is the obvious contribution of the great nineteenth-century invention of historical scholarship, *Wissenschaft, Gründlichkeit* and all that. But, for Käsemann, truth is always to be *fought for*. Thus he takes up the Barthian plea. Theology is always also, as Christian, a work of contesting idolatry. Wherever we are there is *Aberglaube*, superstition, false faith; and the power and the point of Christian faith, *Glaube*, is always to discern and combat such *Aberglaube*. The paradigm of theological work is thus the Epistle to the Romans; this is certainly what Käsemann's commentary is meant to bring out. And this fusion of historical scholarship with prophetic militancy would not only retrieve both late nineteenth-century positivism and early twentieth-century existentialism for an effective theology *now*, which would be neither antiquarian monographs nor passionate pamphleteering. It would also be a working out of Käsemann's understanding of the Pauline doctrine of justification, in the sense of the sovereignty of God *over the world and all its gods* (and so socially and politically), and the sovereignty of God *in the lordship of Jesus Christ crucified* (and so identified with all the unjustly

persecuted and oppressed).

1 *Vérité et histoire: la théologie dans la modernité. Ernst Käsemann*, by Pierre Gisel. Editions Beauchesne, Paris, 1977. pp 675 £11.65
2 *New Testament Questions of Today*, by Ernst Käsemann (1969), chapter VII
3 *Jesus means Freedom: a polemical survey of the New Testament* (1969), chapter 6
4 *New Testament Questions*, chapter IV
5 *Jesus means Freedom*, chapter 6
6 A fair amount of Käsemann's work is available in good translations. Besides the commentary on Romans and the two books listed above there are three others: *Essays on New Testament Themes* (1964), *The Testament of Jesus: a study of the Gospel of John in the light of Chapter 17* (1968), and *Perspectives on Paul* (1971) all of which seem at present to be out of print.

A Simple Argument for Faith Requiring Reasons

Geoffrey Scarre

A view very commonly encountered in contemporary philosophy of religion is that it is a mistake to expect that faith[1] should be capable of rational defence. The roots of the conception of faith as lacking rational defensibility lie far back in the history of the Church (see for instance St Paul's remarks on faith as foolishness in I Cor 1), but it is only in the last two centuries that deep pessimism has set in about the prospects of finding really convincing *a priori* or *a posteriori* arguments in support of faith. This slide from conviction that faith is rationally warranted has not, of course, been a wholly or even mainly negative phenomenon, for it has stimulated an awareness of commissive and emotional aspects of faith which is proving very valuable in the life of the Church. The importance and profundity of much recent writing about faith is something I have no wish to dispute; yet I want to argue that it is a mistake to represent faith as requiring no support from reason, and I shall urge we are only entitled to that faith we can defend.

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