

JUSTIFICATION FROM THE PATRISTIC PERIOD THROUGH LUTHER'S BREAKTHROUGH CONCERNING FAITH

In April 1948 Watchman Nee (d. 1972) told his co-workers: "In Luther we see the recovery of faith. However, Luther did not recover justification by faith. He only recovered faith; he was not so clear concerning justification" (CWWN 57:51). If we did not know and trust Brother Nee (as indeed some may not), we would easily view his statement as either full of hubris or short of understanding. After all, Martin Luther (d. 1546) is credited almost universally, by both his admirers and his detractors, as being the main one in history to promote justification by faith alone apart from works. But knowing and trusting Brother Nee, we should consider his observation carefully because, as we will see in this article, it is a piercing evaluation of Luther's contribution to the steadily progressing understanding of the divine truth in the Bible and one that will help us know more fully how God justifies His chosen ones for their salvation.

The impact of Martin Luther on the Christian church cannot easily be estimated, and it certainly cannot be limited to the impact of his understanding of justification by faith. Nonetheless, his most significant impact on the Christian church does lie in his understanding of justification by faith, which for him was "that central article of our teaching" (WA 40.III:335); "for when this article stands, the church stands; when it falls, the church falls" (WA 40.III:352). While he no doubt overestimated the value of justification in God's full salvation, and this has led to serious consequences today for many Christians, it was certainly the most important matter needing to be addressed in his day and the one matter that most hindered the progress of the believers at that time. Hence, his understanding of justification by faith deserves our particular attention here.

While most Christians commonly associate justification by faith with Martin Luther along with the Protestant Reformation that ensued from his stand against the Roman Catholic Church, there is ample treatment of this truth in those periods of the Christian church that precede him. It

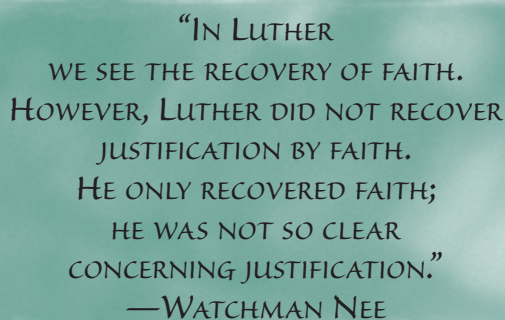
is fair to say that the relative nebulousness in the centuries before Luther concerning this important truth allowed a number of misunderstandings and even some distortions concerning it to enter in, and these, we say, compelled the Lord to raise up Luther to recover this truth for all the church. Therefore, before we consider Luther's understanding of justification by faith, we should briefly look into justification as taught in the writings of the church prior to Luther.

In the Patristic Period (Second through Sixth Centuries)

Some modern writers have cautioned against looking for a solidified understanding of justification in the patristic period, while other scholars have tried to establish that there is indeed a developed doctrine of justification even in those early centuries. The truth depends on one's perspective. If we use the Reformation and Christian thought thereafter as the standard for a solid understanding of justification, we will be hard pressed to find something with that clarity and emphasis in the writings of the second through sixth centuries. We agree with one scholar that "the claim that the Fathers held to a Protestant doctrine of justification is untenable" (Lane 187). But if we can imagine what many patristic writers might think, we will have to admit that they would take great exception to being characterized as having no solid and unified understanding of this basic and important doctrine. If anything, they might find odd the later emphasis on justification over other aspects of God's full spectrum of salvation and take exception to that. The church in the patristic era did indeed have some depth in its understanding of justification. As careful readers of the New Testament, like those in later periods of the church, the patristic writers could see the importance of justification in the apostles' teaching, especially in Paul, and did not ignore it. While they had other important concerns that demanded their attention, many readily attended to justification not simply by repeating Paul's key phrases but more

significantly by laying out in many aspects what they understood him to be saying.

Initially, in the second and early third centuries, what can be gleaned from Christian writers regarding justification is probably best characterized as early misconceptions. For Theophilus of Antioch the basis of God's salvation goes no further than human works under God's law, that is, what was understood among the Jews, even if his major intention is to show the uniqueness of the Christian "faith." For Justin Martyr the basis of God's salvation is reduced to active participation in the Logos (reason) that is instilled in every human being; thus, the uniqueness of faith is suppressed. Clement of Alexandria shows some improvement over his predecessors in that he recognizes the necessity of faith, but at the same time he is careful to assert that faith alone is not sufficient for God to save us. But in defense of these writers, we can say that these expressions concerning God's salvation are not major emphases in their writings and that these expressions are, at best, unguarded, indeliberate, and unfortunate (Campbell et al. 1:75-79).



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Beginning in the third century, we find more definite teaching on justification that shaped post-patristic understandings to a great extent. Some writers (Origen, Ambrose of Milan, Ambrosiaster, Augustine) understood justification as simply the forgiveness of past sins, and some construed baptism as the means of attaining the forgiveness of sins and therefore initial justification (Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, Augustine). In our view, these two notions fall short of a full and proper understanding of justification and confuse justification with other aspects of God's judicial redemption, but both notions have prevailed among some Christians to the present day. Because infant baptism was the common practice among the churches from the second century well into the sixteenth, the true significance of justification was occluded until confidence in the permanence of justification as bestowed in baptism began to erode (Campbell et al. 1:79-88).

But patristic writers also have much to say about certain more intrinsic aspects of justification—that it is by faith apart from works, that it is God's gift in grace, and that it results in certainty and even boasting for the believer—aspects that properly reflect the teaching of the New Testament. Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrosiaster in the Latin West and John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea in the Greek East give definite testimony of their understanding that justification is by faith apart from works. Hilary is noteworthy in this regard because it is in his *Commentary on Matthew* that he gives great attention to Paul's teaching on justification apart from works: that he does so in this work, of all places, demonstrates the indispensability of this notion in his understanding of justification (Williams 657). A very striking detail in John Chrysostom's understanding of justification is his recognition that there is an aspect of it that happens immediately. This aspect is related to his general understanding that justification is by faith alone apart from works. Along this line, throughout the patristic period there is an excellent thread of commentary on the thief on the cross as an illustration of justification apart from works. This thief, obviously apart from any prior justifying works, merely believed in Christ on the cross, and for that he was assured by the Lord of his salvation (Luke 23:39-43). Chrysostom offers perhaps the best presentation of this, but Origen and Cyril of Jerusalem likewise present the thief on the cross as evidence that justification is apart from works (Campbell et al. 1:88-102).

Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, Augustine, Jerome, Fulgentius of Ruspe, and John Chrysostom all speak of justification as God's gift in grace, a fact that is corollary to justification apart from works. This is Paul's point in Romans when he opposes grace to works: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not accounted according to grace, but according to what is due" (Rom. 4:4); and "if by grace, it is no longer out of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom. 11:6). Thus, he considers that justification, as a matter of grace from God, is not something that is given to human beings based on their works. This is, of course, the striking revelation in the gospel, and many patristic writers take definite note of this (Campbell et al. 1:102-105).

Further, certainty of one's justification before God will become a major issue (some would say *the* major issue) during the Reformation, and much effort will be spent in that later period to affirm the assurance of salvation based on God's justification. In the patristic period this issue was not much in focus, and therefore, it did not receive much attention. However, there are important and respected patristic writers who encouraged their readers to be certain of their justification before God and to even boast in

it, as Paul exhorts in Romans 5:1-2. Cyprian, in a treatise written after the persecution of the Roman emperor Decius and during a terrible plague, gives a particularly touching exhortation to his flock, encouraging them, in the face of such dangers and death, to be assured of their justification if they live by faith. Likewise, Hilary, in his same *Commentary on Matthew*, offers similar encouragement to those who are anxious about even the mundane things in human life. Indeed, Basil of Caesarea goes so far as to encourage boasting and exulting in the certainty of justification by faith, which is of God and through Christ (Campbell et al. 1:105-108).

Although we can find testimony for the assurance or certainty of justification in the patristic era, it was commonly held at the time that justification could nevertheless be forfeited through sin, and one could lose his or her salvation. In other words, justification was not a secure matter and needed to be guarded throughout a proper Christian life. The early writers Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century and Origen in the third express the view common at that time that God could and would revoke His initial justification if a believer did not maintain a sinless life before God. Thus, what we find in the patristic era on these points is a nebulous concept of assurance and a complete occlusion of security. The practical effect of this was that any consolation of assurance was undermined by all lack of security. It is hard to boast in the certainty of one's justification by God when there is always the possibility—or shall we say, the threat—that God will revoke it (Campbell et al. 1:108-110).

These general themes, however, do not constitute the main contribution of the patristic writers to the church's understanding of justification. That comes from Augustine, who at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries, began to mine the riches of Paul's thought concerning not only justification but also ancillary issues related to it, such as faith, grace, predestination, inherited sin, and the role of the human will. It is clearly evident that for this purpose the Lord prepared an extraordinary vessel, a man of much capacity, who combined the passion, tenderness, and zeal that produce mystic sensibilities with a logical and systematic mind that seeks to grasp divine truths. The teachings of Augustine mark a milestone in the historical development of Christian thought not only because of the truth that he explicated but also because of the clarity and emphasis with which he expressed it, to the extent that the interpretations of his writings dominated theological study in the West for the next thousand years. Related specifically to justification, he opened up the truths of the futility of merit for our righteousness, the absolute necessity of grace for our salvation,

grace and faith as free gifts from God, and the effectiveness of faith for our justification. For Augustine the truth of justification is captured in the Latin word *justificare*, that is, *justus facere*, 'making (fashioning, causing to be) righteous'. Justification is to make an unjust person just, that is, to make an unrighteous one righteous. What Augustine does not make clear, however, is the full implication of "making righteous" as it pertains to the event of justification. He sees righteousness in a believer as beginning not only with faith but also, or possibly more so, with the love in which faith operates, based on Paul's word in Galatians 5:6: "faith..., operating through love." A reader of Augustine may ask whether it is faith that justifies or the love in which faith operates. We find many passages that indeed affirm the former, but even these do not explicitly identify Augustine's conception of the role of love in our justification, for he often insists that the faith that justifies is precisely the faith that works through love. This lack of clarity became the source of great debate, and a great divide, in the understanding of justification among Christians particularly in the sixteenth century, a debate and a divide that continue to this day (Campbell et al. 1:110-127).

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Within a hundred years of Augustine's death in 430, his views on a number of issues were opposed and denounced by some, particularly in Gaul (corresponding roughly to modern-day France and Belgium). Caesarius of Arles, who took up Augustine's position on a number of issues, became the focus of scrutiny and condemnation. There were probably political motives at play here, but the teachings of Augustine were used as the more serious and more noble reason to try to limit the authority of Caesarius of Arles. To protect his influence and reputation, Caesarius countered in July 529 by convening the Second Council of Orange (in Gaul). The Second Council of Orange was a personal victory for Caesarius and a lasting triumph for Augustine's teaching on nature and grace not only in Gaul but also in the Western church. The decisions of this council affirm that God, as the Holy Spirit, gives grace first—that

is, grace prevenes—then human reaction in faith follows for justification by God. Nothing in a person's created nature will compel him or her to make even the slightest movement toward God in a way that deserves His justification, but God Himself as the Holy Spirit must infuse, illuminate, and inspire him or her to believe, desire, will, seek, choose, and accept God's justification. These matters, we feel, are sterling in worth and give Second Orange an eternal weight, for which we ought to be full of praise and thanks to the Lord. Yet this council was hardly a universal one: only thirteen bishops signed its decisions. But two years later Pope Boniface II confirmed the Second Council of Orange, giving it universal standing among Roman Catholics. Strangely enough, however, the Second Council of Orange seems to have fallen into obscurity after the tenth century and until the sixteenth, and thus, medieval theologians did not draw on its conclusions to support their understandings of justification. It is a lamentable irony of history that what had been endorsed by the Western church in the sixth century found no place to be authoritative until Luther's sixteenth century. But as we will see below, by this time Catholic theology had developed into a multitude of perspectives (Campbell et al. 1:127-134).

While some of the patristic writers understood simply that we are justified by faith alone, most did not consider deeply what faith really is, as later writers would. Nor did they, apart from Augustine to some extent, strain over the exact meaning of the word *justification*, as Lutherans, Catholics, and Reformed writers later would and still do today. The patristic writers, taken as a whole and probably representative of the understanding of leaders throughout the church then, realized and appreciated that justification before God depends on the bounty of His mercy and grace. Some writers may have misunderstood the exact value of human effort and merit in justification, but through the massive effort of Augustine a satisfactory understanding of even this issue was laid out in the church and was eventually adopted at Orange and endorsed by Boniface II. Thus, it would be an unfair characterization of the patristic period to say that there was no solid or even unified teaching on justification then. Theirs was not a Lutheran notion, nor a Reformed notion, nor indeed a Roman Catholic notion; but they had their notion of justification, which served their times, and during their times they preserved this item of truth adequately. Of course, while we can easily find individual writers whom we would not agree with on justification, some of the things in the patristic period correspond to what we hold today. But many things in their understanding fall short of the full knowledge of the truth concerning justification—a lack in seeing the union with Christ for justification, a mistaken identification of

baptism with justification, a lack of security in justification, to name a few. However, it would be unfair to try to press these writers beyond the boundaries of their understanding into realms of consideration that they never had or needed to have back then. They had other important concerns related to the truth (e.g., concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ) that demanded their attention and manifested them as great contenders for the faith. The Lord was to shine more light on justification in the later centuries and will reward others for bearing that light to the church, but we believe that many writers in the patristic era will also be rewarded for what they offered us on justification by faith through God's mercy and grace (Campbell et al. 1:134-136).

In the Medieval Period (Seventh through Sixteenth Centuries)

Despite the loss of the canons of the Second Council of Orange (529) for much of the medieval period, Augustine's own words and, more importantly, the words of Paul were not lost. While the nature of justification remained an open question during the Middle Ages, careful reading of Paul's Epistles, or of Augustine's writings based upon them, led many prominent medieval theologians to a clearer understanding of the basic truth concerning justification by faith. The progress made among the patristic writers was thus preserved in many medieval commentaries on Paul's Epistles and also in many of the most prominent medieval writers, including Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and Jean Gerson (d. 1429). These writers continued to insist that we are justified freely by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ apart from any merit or works of our own (Campbell et al. 1:140-150).

But despite this continuation of these generally patristic themes, one also finds in the medieval period the emergence of an intricate theology of justification that, regrettably, is in many respects an outworking, elaboration, and development of Augustine's mistaken understanding of justification as a making righteous by the infusion of loving faith. Due to their high regard for Augustine, medieval writers made his mistaken view the heart of their own understanding of justification and developed that view in sometimes excruciating detail. According to Thomas Aquinas—a good representative of the medieval consensus—faith justifies not because it unites us with Christ, the righteousness of God, but because faith is the first part of the righteousness that God infuses into the believer in justification. Faith is the beginning of this inherent righteousness, but it is not the consummation of this righteousness; love is also required for justification and is the main

part of the righteousness infused in justification. According to the consensus medieval view, then, faith alone without love is insufficient for justification, a view clearly at odds with the Scriptures. The Scriptures repeatedly insist that faith is indeed sufficient for justification and nowhere suggest that love is required for justification (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:26, 28, 30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24). We do not deny, of course, that faith and love are righteousness, but we do deny that they are the righteousness by which we are initially and eternally justified. Christ alone is the righteousness by which we are justified (1 Cor. 1:30). Justification is by faith because faith is produced by the transfusion of Christ into us and because faith brings us into an organic union with Christ as righteousness (Campbell et al. 1:150-154).

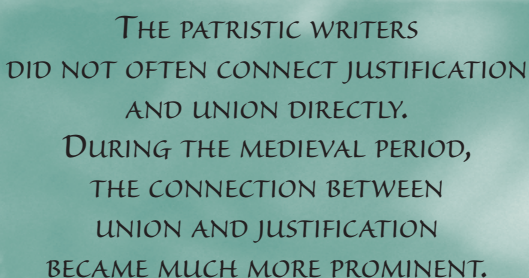
Despite this magnification of Augustine's mistaken view that justification is a making inherently righteous, we can affirm at least two points of the medieval consensus that we regard as genuine progress in the church's understanding of justification. The first is that Aquinas and many of his contemporaries clearly saw that there is a divine infusion that precedes our faith. Faith is not produced out of ourselves, nor is it the gift of a God who remains outside of us. God first gives Himself to us in grace and then produces faith within us by granting to us a participation in His own indwelling presence. A second point that we can affirm as genuine progress is the medieval insistence that union with Christ is central to justification, a theme that can scarcely be found in the patristic writers. Bernard of Clairvaux clearly connects justification and union with Christ: "It was to unite them with Himself that He was Himself made sin, who did no sin, that the body of sin might be destroyed in which sinners had once been incorporated, and that they might become righteousness in Him, being justified freely by His grace" (*LWSB* 4:439). Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) connects them even more strongly: "Abraham was *just*, because God's justice was in him. Christ is the true Justice that justifies everyone who is just. Thus, in every believer who is justified by faith it is necessary that Christ be present, who alone is the justification of those who are just" (190). The patristic writers often connected faith with justification and often connected faith with the believer's union with Christ but did not often connect justification and union directly. During the medieval period, the connection between union and justification became much more prominent, and we regard this development as one of the primary contributions of the medieval church to our understanding of the truth concerning justification. As we will see later in this article and in those to come, many others would pick up this connection between union and justification in a fruitful way (Campbell et al. 1:154-163).

An additional medieval development that would have long-standing negative implications for the understanding of justification was the close interweaving of justification with the sacrament of penance, in which penitent Christians confessed their sins to a priest, who then pronounced on them the forgiveness of sins. While patristic writers would generally point to baptism as the practicality of justification, most medieval theologians thought that the justification bestowed in baptism was easily lost and had to be regained repeatedly through the sacrament of penance. Justification in the medieval church was thus no longer understood as a one-time event in the life of the believer, the foundation of an entire life in Christ. Justification was now a repeated event, undergone as often as one lost the grace of justification. Medieval writers tended to think that such loss of grace was a common occurrence, requiring annual restoration, if not more often than that. In addition, medieval writers more strongly insisted that the sacrament of penance conferred the forgiveness not just of the church but of God Himself and that it did so only on the condition that the interior penitence of the penitent was sufficiently strong. The increased frequency of penance, the close conjunction of ecclesial and divine forgiveness, and the intensified attention to the interior disposition of penitence help to explain the fact that justification was much more on the minds of medieval writers and medieval Christians generally. Patristic writers did not often attend carefully to justification, perhaps because it was not, to them, a central concern for most believers. By the end of the medieval period, the situation had changed considerably. Justification was not only a central concern but was now, in many cases, the most central concern of the Christian life. Justification, which should serve as the firm foundation of the Christian life, had unfortunately become for many an uncertain and fleeting state.

This close connection of justification and the sacrament of penance has done great damage to the believers that could have been easily avoided by maintaining the clear distinction between justification and forgiveness of sins. In our view, forgiveness of sins is not itself a part of justification (see pages 11-13 in the biblical presentation article of this issue). While we recognize several different kinds of forgiveness in the Scriptures, we do not recognize a corresponding kind of justification for each. There is a forgiveness offered in baptism (Acts 2:38) and a forgiveness offered by the church (John 20:23), but these are nowhere described in the Scriptures as justifying. God alone is the One who justifies (Rom. 8:33), and He does so without any intermediary, whether the church or any of its members. Justification, then, is not through any sacrament, as the example of Abraham demonstrates. Abraham was first justified by faith and then received "the sign of circumcision, a seal of

the righteousness of the faith which he had while in uncircumcision" (Rom. 4:11). Paul directly identifies baptism as the New Testament reality of circumcision (Col. 2:11-12), and we take this to mean that even baptism does not effect our justification; rather, baptism follows faith, which alone justifies. Once justified by God on the basis of faith alone, the believers cannot lose their justified status before God, for God glorifies all whom He justifies (Rom. 8:30). The New Testament thus often speaks of justification as an event already secured at the initiation of the Christian life (Rom. 5:1). Justification by faith, then, is once for all and eternally secure (Campbell et al. 1:163-171).

Even more disturbing than the medieval identification of justification with the sacrament of penance is an increasing insistence among some late medieval writers and preachers that in some sense we can merit the grace of justification in the sacrament of penance. In clear disagreement with the



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canons of the Second Council of Orange (529), forgotten for much of the medieval period, many prominent late medieval writers came to hold that something is required of us, from our own natural capacities apart from God's grace, to merit the reception of justifying grace through the sacrament of penance. Some also taught that, once in grace, the gift of perseverance in grace (i.e., being preserved in grace until the end of one's life) and even eternal predestination to grace can be merited by our good use of the grace infused into us in justification. Only if we do our best to cooperate with the grace of justification, they taught, will God ensure that we die in grace and thus merit eternal glory (Campbell et al. 1:171-181).

Several prominent medieval theologians thankfully decried these views as adamantly as Luther later would. Thomas Bradwardine (d. 1349) fiercely opposed the teachings that God gives grace on account of merit, that we can open to the grace of God apart from the grace of God, and that God gives grace to those whom He sees will use it well. Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), too, opposed the teachings that we can merit entrance into grace and that we can merit

perseverance in grace. Martin Luther was thus by no means the first to resist those who taught that we can merit the grace of justification, and he happily recognized his debts to those who had preceded him. The Catholic Church ultimately condemned again the possibility of our meriting the grace of justification at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), as we will see in the Roman Catholic article (54-62 in this issue). It did so to a significant degree in response to the Protestant Reformers and the great release that their message offered to so many anxious consciences. We owe a debt not only to Luther and the other Reformers but also to these medieval writers, who encouraged and strengthened them to follow the Lord in His move at their time (Campbell et al. 1:181-185).

The medieval innovations regarding the sacrament of penance likewise did not go unnoticed or uncontested. John Wycliffe (d. 1384) argued that it is a grave error to require the sacrament of penance as necessary for salvation without any scriptural grounds for doing so, and he contended that the emphasis on confession to and absolution by a priest had the potential to distract the penitent from the true and inward repentance, which is before God alone. John Huss (d. 1415), too, was wary of too close a connection between the forgiveness of God and the absolution of the priest. The church's forgiveness, he insisted, is only valid insofar as it follows divine forgiveness. At the Council of Constance (1414-1418) a collection of propositions of John Wycliffe and John Huss were condemned, several related to the sacrament of penance. Huss was burnt at the stake. Wycliffe had already died, but the council ordered his bones removed from sacred ground, and they were later exhumed and burned. We can surely thank and praise the Lord for these martyred forerunners of the Reformation, who stood for the truth regardless of the opposition, often unto death. The time was not yet ripe for the Reformation that would ensue at the time of Luther, but the Lord continued to maintain many witnesses to the truth and anti-testimonies to the degradation that came in during the medieval period. The seeds that they sowed would blossom in Luther's Reformation, and for that alone we owe them our deepest gratitude (Campbell et al. 1:185-188).

What, then, shall we say about justification by faith as understood in the medieval West? On the one hand, significant progress was made regarding the truth of the dispensing of the Triune God that produces faith and regarding the truth that faith justifies because it unites the believers to Christ. This we surely applaud. On the other hand, the medieval church was limited in its success to hold on to the light concerning justification by faith that was delivered to the

apostles. While the apostles' understanding was by no means completely lost during the medieval period, there was a noticeable decline, particularly in the later medieval period. Increasing emphasis on the possibility and the requirement that the believers merit justification was not only against the clear teaching of the apostles but also took away the assurance of salvation that is so foundational to the believers' life in Christ. The medieval church thus inflicted great anxiety on the consciences of the believers under its care. This anxiety was further aggravated by the heightened sacramental context of the medieval understanding of justification. Justification was no longer understood to be a foundational experience in the Christian life, the entrance into all the riches of God's organic salvation. Instead, justification was understood to be frequently lost and restored through the sacrament of penance. The implications of justification thus weighed heavily on the minds of medieval Christians. Finally, even among those medieval theologians

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with a more adequate understanding of justification by faith, we find the mistaken view of justification as a making inherently righteous. This view, inherited from Augustine, was developed considerably throughout the medieval period and became, with its medieval accretions, the official Catholic view at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

The impact of these errors is hard to overestimate. Justification is the foundation of the Christian life and the entrance into all the riches of God's full salvation. When the primary concern of the believers is their eternal status before God, it is difficult for them to progress properly. Rather than being perpetually concerned for their eternal status before God, the believers ought to be occupied with growing in life for their transformation and building up in the Body of Christ. Only the Lord knows how many dear believers were hindered in their growth and development in the divine life and their participation in God's move in the church by being cheated of the peace, joy, and boldness that are the birthright of every believer. Regardless of the advances made during the medieval period in the understanding of justification, we cannot but agree that

a reformation was needed. Many late medieval Christians felt the need for reform but were waiting for the right time and the right person. That person, of course—the person the church needed and the person the Lord provided—was a German monk, steeped in tradition but tormented in conscience, named Martin Luther (Campbell et al. 1:188-189).

The Great Beginning of Recovery through Martin Luther

Martin Luther was a man acutely aware of his sins, as his biographers consistently recount. As a monk in an Augustinian cloister at Erfurt (in what is now Germany), he struggled with his sins and with the realization that he could never meet the righteous claims of God upon him. His apprehension about his sinfulness was fueled by nearly two years of reading the Scriptures in Erfurt (July 1505 through May 1507). But ten years later as a Doctor of Theology at Wittenberg, he formalized, at least initially, his understanding of sin in his *Lectures on Romans* (April 1515 through September 1516):

Either I have never understood, or else the scholastic theologians have not spoken sufficiently clearly about sin and grace, for they have been under the delusion that original sin, like actual sin, is entirely removed, as if these were items that can be entirely removed in the twinkling of an eye, as shadows before a light, although the ancient fathers Augustine and Ambrose spoke entirely differently and in the way Scripture does. But those men speak in the manner of Aristotle in his *Ethics*, when he bases sin and righteousness on works, both their performance or omission. But blessed Augustine says very clearly that "sin, or concupiscence, is forgiven in Baptism, not in the sense that it no longer exists, but in the sense that it is not imputed." (LW 25:260-261)

Luther takes exception to the view that original sin, first formulated in clearest terms by Augustine, is removed through baptism, and he looks to Augustine to support his understanding that sin is only forgiven in baptism but not taken away. He understood that sin remains after baptism and still constitutes human beings sinners throughout their whole lives. Thus, it is not sinful action but sin dwelling in the flesh that defines human beings as sinners and frames their entire existence as long as they live in mortal flesh. This was a significant denunciation of what had been taught in the main in the late medieval church (and before). For him sin was not simply external works but the inward opposition to God that we derive from the fall:

They [the pope with his bishops, theologians, monks, and all the rest] take mortal sin to be only the external work committed against the Law, such as murder, adultery, theft, etc. They did not see that ignorance, hatred,

and contempt of God in the heart, ingratitude, murmuring against God, and resistance to the will of God are also mortal sin, and that the flesh cannot think, say, or do anything except what is diabolical and opposed to God. (LW 26:125)

Luther further held the view that because of the sin rooted in human nature after the fall, human beings have no real choice between doing what is good and what is evil. He is famously credited with bringing into very strong relief the notion of the “bondage of the will” (LW 33:15-296), by which human beings are understood to be so corrupted by the fall of Adam that free will is something that exists in name only, that because of sin human will is now unable to choose God. The true and actual condition of human free will is that of a slave to sin, death, and Satan; it does not do, it cannot do, and it cannot even attempt to do what is acceptable to God. But what it can do actively is commit sin.

Certainly Luther’s view of sin was far more extensive than the predominant view of late medieval theology, and thus, it is not surprising that he condemned things that trivialized sin in any way. Early in his ministry this caused him to cry out against the profligate sale of indulgences, which were often presented to the common believers as if the mere purchase of a plenary indulgence would result in the forgiveness of sins apart from a life of repentance. It was this concern that motivated him to post his famous *Ninety-five Theses* on 31 October 1517. The heroic image of a young Luther defiantly nailing to a church door a proclamation to reform the whole church is far from accurate. But even after we demythologize the posting of the *Ninety-five Theses*, we must admit that it was indeed a first open assault in his long battle for reform. In Luther’s day and in Luther’s land, the church was active in the monetary sale of indulgences, and this trafficking in satisfaction for sins made the whole concept of indulgences even more abhorrent to him. In his *Ninety-five Theses* Luther sees the abuse of indulgences as extremely serious not simply because it is wrong according to truth in Scripture but because it deceives people into thinking that through them they are eternally secure. He contends that the false trust put in indulgences can instead lead to eternal damnation. The danger is that indulgences may convince a sinner that no repentance is needed for forgiveness of sins and that indulgences were often presented as such. Understanding the seriousness of sin, Luther rose up to sound the alarm against the abuse of indulgences. In his theses he contends for proper repentance for sins by the believers, and actually he has much more to say about that than he does about indulgences (Campbell et al. 1:193-200).

Luther came to understand sin as a much more serious

problem than most of his predecessors and contemporaries did, and he believed that part of the problem lay in an ignorance of sin that derives from sin itself. In his *Lectures on Romans* he speaks of sin as that which leaves human nature “so deeply curved in upon itself” (LW 25:291) that it is completely unaware of its depravity in using God’s gifts and even God Himself for its own sake. The fallen natural condition of human beings seeks self only and rejects God completely, which for Luther is the epitome of sin, and built into this sinful human condition, so to speak, is a complete ignorance of this condition. Thus, it is no wonder that the seriousness of sin had been so easily ignored in the church, in his estimation. The remedy to the inherent ignorance of sin in human beings, as he sees it, is the law. In *The Bondage of the Will* he writes:

It is the task, function, and effect of the law to be a light to the ignorant and blind, but such a light as reveals sickness, sin, evil, death, hell, the wrath of God, though it affords no help and brings no deliverance from these, but is content to have revealed them. Then, when a man becomes aware of the disease of sin, he is troubled, distressed, even in despair. (LW 33:261-262)

For Luther it is imperative that the law function in a full way of being preached actively in the church. His view on this matter would end up shaping the ministry of the Word in Lutheran congregations for centuries, and even today there are some Lutheran pastors who are committed to this use of the law in their preaching. But in Paul’s teaching, the law is to be less actively appropriated in the ministry to the church than what Luther teaches. Thus, we are compelled to say that while Luther’s views on the full extent of sin in human nature and on the intrinsic significance of the law in God’s economy accord with the apostles’ teaching, his use of the law in the ministry of the church goes beyond the teaching and practice of the apostles, and especially of Paul. Luther’s expectation was that the preaching of the law, even to the believers, should engender misery and despair, and this reflected his own experience with the law. But it was his own experience of distress and despair that eventually led him to understand and believe in the gospel in a new way, for which the descriptor *reformation* is certainly apt (Campbell et al. 1:200-204).

It is important to try to understand Luther’s anguish over sin, which he encountered throughout his lifetime, since this anguish, in his view, was not simply a negative feeling to try to escape from; it was a constant impetus that drove him toward the righteousness of God. Luther’s own term for this anguish was, in his Latin works, *tentatio*, which is usually translated “temptation.” This is probably the core notion for Luther since in his experience despair, anguish,

and doubt about God always led to temptation to mistrust and turn away from God. In his native German, however, he labels this anguish with the much more graphic word *Anfechtung*, which is not easy to translate into a single English word. Roland Bainton, a highly esteemed modern biographer of Luther, perhaps gives us the best help on this:

The word he used was *Anfechtung*, for which there is no English equivalent. It may be a trial sent by God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man. (42)

Luther applies *Anfechtung* to a broad range of Christian experiences, but what is germane to our consideration here is his understanding of it insofar as it motivates sinners toward the gospel. For him the *Anfechtung* that the law engenders should make sinners aware of their need for the gospel. As a young monk, Luther himself experienced this strong *Anfechtung* when he tried to deal with his sins through penance:

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession." Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it. In this way, by observing human traditions, I transgressed them even more; and by following the righteousness of the monastic order, I was never able to reach it. For, as Paul says, it is impossible for the conscience to find peace through the works of the Law, much less through human traditions, without the promise and the Gospel about Christ. (LW 27:13)

Luther followed the norms of Roman Catholic sacramental penance—contrition, confession, and satisfaction ("the assigned penances"). But his conscience was always tormented that he had not been contrite enough or that his confession had not been complete enough, and if either of these were so, then surely the assigned penances had not been effective and he was left unforgiven (Campbell et al. 1:204-210).

In considering Luther's recovery of justification by faith, his *Anfechtung* prior to his faith is key to understanding how he was brought to the most important revelation that he

received from the Lord. Near the end of his life, after he had taught often and written much on righteousness, faith, and justification, he recounts how, some three decades before, he came to see righteousness in a new way, which utterly changed him and, we know, ushered in the Reformation. In his *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*, published in 1545, a year before his death, he offers this account, which, though lengthy, shows how his *Anfechtung* served to drive him to see the righteousness of God in a new light:

Meanwhile, I had already during that year [1519] returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skilful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated [in the autumn of 1514] with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of

God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine’s *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God’s righteousness with which we are justified was taught. Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter. (LW 34:336-337)

Luther had been taught to understand the righteousness of God as that attribute in God that allows and indeed even compels Him to punish the ungodly, which, according to Paul, included everyone (Rom. 3:23; 5:12), but more pointedly, included Luther. Luther was convinced of his sinfulness before God and was certain that God was in every way right to be angry with him and to punish him. He had no faith in the effectiveness of the sacrament of penance for himself and especially in its third component, satisfaction, that is, the temporal punishments assigned by absolving priests. He had, no doubt, fallen prey to the devil’s temptation (or *tentatio*) to secretly malign God, to be angry with God, and to even hate God, and he certainly experienced deep anguish (or *Anfechtung*) because of his severely perturbed conscience. For him the gospel was no good news at all but only more bad news: miserable sinners, already lost eternally through original sin, are further oppressed by the Ten Commandments; now God adds to the pain, through the threat of righteousness and wrath revealed in the “gospel.” But this torment drove him to beat persistently on Paul’s words in Romans 1:17. His testimony is that by God’s mercy he was led to pay attention to the context of the troubling phrase *the righteousness of God* and to see that the righteousness of God that Paul speaks of here is related to faith. This is not the righteousness that inheres in God as an attribute within Himself and that compels eternal death for the ungodly; this is the righteousness that God gives as a gift through faith and that allows the believing recipient to live. This righteousness is not that which condemns and forebodes wrath; this righteousness is that which God applies to human beings to justify them by faith. It is not the righteousness within God that He actively exercises with appropriate wrath; it is the righteousness applied by Him to the believers, who passively receive it through faith and are thereby justified. Luther then understood that it is passive (or received)

righteousness that is revealed in the gospel, not active (or executed) righteousness as he had been taught.

Luther testifies to a real and substantial change in his being: his hatred of God turned to love. He recalls that he extolled the sweetness of the phrase *the righteousness of God* with a love that was as great as his former hatred for it, and he goes so far as to say that this phrase now came to be “truly the gate of paradise” for him. Can we take this to mean that this was Luther’s moment of salvation? Certainly some may scoff at this, but if there ever was a moment in Luther’s life when he was changed inwardly and henceforth believed in what God does instead of anguishing over what he could not do, it had to be this moment. Assuming this to be the case, the question arises, how much does Luther’s “salvation” depend on his experience of turning from hatred to love for God? The question is perhaps anachronistic because it reflects the essence of

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the later debate over justification. A Roman Catholic could seize on Luther’s testimony of overwhelming love for God along with his testimony, in the same breath, of his newfound faith in God as proof that justification depends not just on faith but also on the love that arises from faith. A Protestant could argue that it was what Luther believed, and only what he believed, that brought him to salvation and that the love that he experienced was not justifying at all; rather, love was simply proof that his faith, which alone justified him, was living, real, and operative within him. Given the whole of Luther’s teaching on justification, we know that he himself strongly insisted on faith alone as the basis for justification without reference to love at all, as he had pointedly said a decade before he penned his testimony: “Faith justifies without love and before love” (LW 26:137). Yet in that testimony of his own experience, which he relates near the end of his life in the vivid and genuine detail that is typical of any true believer’s memory of salvation, it is hard to separate faith and love. It is no wonder that theologians, including Luther himself, would later likewise strain over the role of faith and love in justification. Based on the order given in Luther’s account, faith

happens first then love, and both are quite real. But the real question is, when, or rather, based on what, does God actually justify a human being? To this very day that question is stridently debated (Campbell et al. 1:210-214).

In that same testimony Luther opens up the key notion in his own understanding of justification in a single word—*imputation*. His understanding of justification consists of two very distinct and necessary notions: imperfect faith grasping Christ as righteousness in the heart and God's imputation of this faith as perfect righteousness with His non-imputation of sin. This understanding (along with other important views about justification) is best expressed in his later *Lectures on Galatians*, given in 1531 and published in 1535 from notes principally taken by one of his editors. He explains:

Christian righteousness is to be defined properly and accurately, namely, that it is a trust in the Son of God or a trust of the heart in God through Christ. Here this clause is to be added to provide the differentia for the definition: "which faith is imputed as righteousness for the sake of Christ." For, as I have said, these two things make Christian righteousness perfect: The first is faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift and which formally believes in Christ; the second is that God reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness for the sake of Christ, His Son, who suffered for the sins of the world and in whom I begin to believe. On account of this faith in Christ God does not see the sin that still remains in me. For so long as I go on living in the flesh, there is certainly sin in me. But meanwhile Christ protects me under the shadow of His wings and spreads over me the wide heaven of the forgiveness of sins, under which I live in safety. This prevents God from seeing the sins that still cling to my flesh. My flesh distrusts God, is angry with Him, does not rejoice in Him, etc. But God overlooks these sins, and in His sight they are as though they were not sins. This is accomplished by imputation on account of the faith by which I begin to take hold of Christ; and on His account God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin, even though it really is sin. (LW 26:231-232)

The faith that is required is a trust in the Son of God, which Luther reframes as a trust in God's heart toward the sinner as manifested in Christ's person and work. But faith in the heart is not a sufficient definition of Christian righteousness, as he sees it. There is something else that needs to be added if we are to arrive at a full definition of Christian righteousness, and that is God's imputation, or reckoning, of that imperfect faith as perfect righteousness. The faith, he maintains, is something that God gives, and this faith takes hold of Christ, but this alone cannot make a sinner perfectly righteous, because this faith is still weak

due to the sin that remains in him or her. Again, we should remember that for Luther sin is never washed out of human beings as long as they are still living in the mortal flesh. Even though a sinner comes to trust in God's heart through Christ, sin is still there clinging to the flesh and sometimes even moving the sinner to distrust God, to be angry with Him, and to commit open sins. Thus, the faith that takes hold of Christ is, to Luther's mind, "imperfect faith" and therefore insufficient in itself to be called perfect righteousness. And further, the sin that still remains in the flesh speaks loudly against calling the sinner righteous. At best, this imperfect faith in the still imperfect sinner can be only imperfect righteousness, which is not enough to justify the sinner before God. But against all reason—as Luther emphasizes often—God considers and declares this "imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness" and that "[remaining] sin as not sin," basing His judgment on what Christ is and has done. The righteousness of faith is imperfect, and the sin really is sin, but on account of Christ God says that the righteousness is perfect and the sin is not sin. Thus, God justifies the sinner by imputing righteousness to him or her, not merely by what the sinner believes or takes hold of through faith.

As imperfect as it may be and as short as it comes to being the perfect righteousness by which God justifies, faith is a genuine righteousness even if it is imperfect, as Luther understands it, since faith apprehends Christ:

If it is true faith, it is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself.

Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ...Where the confidence of the heart is present, therefore, there Christ is present, in that very cloud and faith. This is the formal righteousness on account of which a man is justified; it is not on account of love, as the sophists say. In short, just as the sophists say that love forms and trains faith, so we say that it is Christ who forms and trains faith or who is the form of faith. Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life. (LW 26:129-130)

The Christ who lives in the believer is the true Christian righteousness, according to Luther, but again he does not understand this to be the complete picture of Christian justification. Christ dwelling in the believer as righteousness through faith serves as the basis for God to count the believer as righteous, that is, to justify him or her, and this imputation of righteousness, based on Christ as righteousness but nevertheless in addition to Christ as righteousness,

is what finally, effectively, and perfectly justifies a person. We should not take Luther to mean that there is some deficiency in Christ as righteousness. Such would be jumping to an unfair conclusion. Luther understands the deficiency not in Christ but in the believer's weak faith, which renders it an imperfect righteousness in need of perfecting imputation.

For Luther faith is necessary for justification but not sufficient; God's imputation of that faith as perfect righteousness is also necessary. Further, it is not difficult to see that, for Luther, even God's imputation of weak faith as perfect righteousness is insufficient. God's imputation also necessarily depends on His imputing of sin as not sin. Thus, ultimately, imputation is, at the base, a reckoning more concerning sin than concerning righteousness. That makes much sense, given Luther's innovative (at least to him) understanding of sin and the tremendous *Anfechtung* that this understanding brought down upon him.

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AS NOT SIN.

Therefore, according to Luther justification has two foci with three distinct elements: *faith* grasping *Christ* as righteousness within the believer and *God imputing* that imperfect faith as perfect righteousness from without. All three are necessary, and all three join together to bring about justification in Luther's view. In one further passage from his latter Galatians lectures, he offers a fuller presentation of his understanding:

Here it is to be noted that these three things are joined together: faith, Christ, and acceptance or imputation. Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses the gem. And whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteous. This is the means and the merit by which we obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness. "Because you believe in Me," God says, "and your faith takes hold of Christ, whom I have freely given to you as your Justifier and Savior, therefore be righteous." Thus God accepts you or accounts you righteous only on account of Christ, in whom you believe.

Now acceptance or imputation is extremely necessary,

first, because we are not yet purely righteous, but sin is still clinging to our flesh during this life. God cleanses this remnant of sin in our flesh. In addition, we are sometimes forsaken by the Holy Spirit, and we fall into sins, as did Peter, David, and other saints. Nevertheless, we always have recourse to this doctrine, that our sins are covered and that God does not want to hold us accountable for them (Rom. 4). This does not mean that there is no sin in us, as the sophists have taught when they said that we must go on doing good until we are no longer conscious of any sin; but sin is always present, and the godly feel it. But it is ignored and hidden in the sight of God, because Christ the Mediator stands between; because we take hold of Him by faith, all our sins are sins no longer. But where Christ and faith are not present, here there is no forgiveness of sins or hiding of sins. On the contrary, here there is the sheer imputation and condemnation of sins. Thus God wants to glorify His Son, and He Himself wants to be glorified in us through Him. (LW 26:132-133)

We should point out that in Luther's understanding of imputation he includes both past committed sins and remaining indwelling sin in God's reckoning of sin(s) as not sin. Above he mentions "forgiveness of sins or hiding of sins," which captures both aspects (Campbell et al. 1:214-219).

For Luther justification is not dependent on Christ as righteousness alone but requires, in addition, the imputation of our weak faith as perfect righteousness and the imputing away of the indwelling sin that remains in the believer. For him sin is ever the looming problem, and he feels compelled to account for the reality that for the believer both righteousness and sin somehow coexist, a reality that tradition before him assumes cannot exist. What he received from the teaching of the church before him was that in baptism original sin is removed and that what remains is concupiscence, which was understood not to be sin itself but a simmering inclination toward sin. Luther took exception to this view and maintained that sin is sin and remains as sin even after baptism. But this created the contradiction that both righteousness and sin pertain to the believer at the same time, and in his view on justification he provides a solution to the contradiction. Thus, from the time of his earlier Romans lectures he calls a Christian "at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man": *simul peccator et iustus* (LW 25:260). And in both his earlier and later lectures on Galatians he uses the more famous order for the epithet: "at the same time righteous and a sinner" (WA 2:497.13; 40.I:368.26). Sin remains in the believer in Luther's view, but it is not imputed as sin by God. While in both his earlier and later positions, non-imputation of sin is a factor in justification, in his later and final view it

features much more prominently as a necessary component of justification, which brings the imperfect righteousness of faith to its perfection before God.

The points here are indeed very fine. But we feel it is important to make them, for Luther's ultimate position sells Christ as righteousness short and places the final operation of justification in God's imputation of sin as not sin. That is, of course, in keeping with his deep *Anfechtung* concerning sin and in line with the view that sin is the primary problem with humankind. We believe that God is concerned negatively with sin, but His greater concern is positively with Christ the Son. In all things God intends for Christ to be preeminent (Col. 1:15-20), and we expect that in justification Christ as the righteousness of God, not the imputing of our weak faith as perfect righteousness or the imputing away of indwelling sin, must be the true and sufficient basis for justification. He was given by God to the believers as righteousness for their justification (1 Cor. 1:30). We do not take exception with Luther that God does not regard our sins, but we must disagree with him that in order to justify us God must additionally blind Himself to the sin that remains within us. No, Christ as the righteousness of God, whom the believers possess through faith, as Luther says—indeed, whom the believers are joined to as one through faith, as we prefer to say—is the sole basis of justification.

We agree with Luther that sin remains even after justification; we are indeed simultaneously righteous and sinners. But we do not have the same compulsion to solve the contradiction and to allow it to annul the justification that depends solely on Christ as righteousness; we do not have the same compulsion to expect that God imputes remaining sin as not sin. All past sins are forgiven through the death of Christ in initial repentance (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31), and all present and future sins are forgiven through later confession based on that same death (1 John 1:9). But even though indwelling sin remains (Rom. 7:17; 1 John 1:8), we do not see this as an impediment to God for His justification. Every believer, whether or not he or she knows it precisely or believes it precisely (or even denies it precisely), is joined to Christ (1 Cor. 6:17) as the righteousness of God through faith, and this is all that God needs to justify him or her. Then, what about indwelling sin? How does God get around it? He Himself, through the apostles, warns us not to deny that it exists. It is sin, and we should not regard it as not sin; thus, we do not think that He regards it as not sin. Sins that have been confessed and repented of are forgiven and forgotten by Him (Heb. 10:17), against all our logic regarding an all-knowing and unchanging God; but He does not need to

impute indwelling sin as not sin in order to justify those who have become one with Christ as His righteousness through faith. Of course, we agree with David and Paul: "Blessed are they whose lawlessnesses have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered over. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall by no means account sin" (Rom. 4:7-8; cf. Psalms 32:1-2). But the words in the first sentence must point to past sins ("lawlessnesses," "sins"), not indwelling sin, and the accounting of sin in the second sentence, which seems to encompass the whole condition of sin, "must be referred to the great final judgment" as this construction is usually future in the New Testament (Alford 2:349). Hence, indwelling sin does not seem to be in consideration in these verses. But even if it were, David and Paul refer *simply* to the Lord's not accounting sin to a person, not to His accounting sin *as not sin*. Luther's bias is that this is an accounting of sin as not sin, but Paul and David can, and should, be read to mean that the Lord simply does not take sin into account. That does not mean that He views it as not sin; it simply means that He does not take account of it when He justifies. But the important point here is not whether non-imputation of indwelling remaining sin occurs or not; the point is whether faith requires the additional imputing away of sin before it suffices for justification, as Luther has it, or not, as we maintain. In our view, Christ alone suffices in all things and particularly in justification, and the imputing away of indwelling sin, or even not taking account of it, is not the crucial condition for justification in our view. We see Christ as the righteousness of God for the believers' justification, and we expect that God does also. A person who believes has his or her sins forgiven at repentance, and faith brings that person into an organic union with Christ, who is the righteousness of God. That union through faith justifies because that Christ is now a believer's righteousness, not out of works in righteousness that he or she has done (Titus 3:5) but as "the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith" (Phil. 3:9). Sin certainly remains, but God takes no account of it, knowing that Christ "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3) on the cross and that every believer can and will be freed from this indwelling sin in time by Him as the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2).

Luther complains that a believer's faith is always a weak faith, made weak by indwelling sin, and therefore the righteousness that it possesses, even though it is Christ Himself as the righteousness of God, is an imperfect righteousness that God cannot justify. We agree that faith resides in the believers in degrees (cf. Rom. 14:1; 15:1; 1 Cor. 8:9; 9:22), implying that there is some weakness of faith in all believers because indwelling sin hinders faith. But this does not diminish the righteousness of God that is embodied in the

Christ who is possessed through even the weakest faith in Him: everyone who believes in Him (John 3:15-16; 6:40; 11:26; 12:46; Acts 10:43; 13:39; Rom. 1:16; 10:4, 11; 1 John 5:1)—Scripture adds no qualifications or exceptions—gains Him in this way for his or her justification. Luther was certainly right that our faith is weak, but he was certainly not right that the righteousness of faith is thus also weak, imperfect, and simply inchoate. Our faith is certainly a righteousness in and of itself, because to believe in God is the most right thing for a human being to do. But faith itself is not the righteousness that avails before God; the righteousness that avails before God is Christ Himself, to whom we have been wholly united through even the meagerest faith. The faith may be weak, but Christ the righteousness of God, who is at the same time the power of God, is not (1 Cor. 1:24). Luther wishes to shift the believers' attention outside of themselves to a God who is concerned above all things with sin and to allay their

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WITH CHRIST.*

Anfechtung with the notion that God in heaven above has been placated by the death of His Son. For Luther this alone suffices to alleviate the stress of sin upon the believer's conscience. But we maintain that God sees things somewhat differently because Christ as His very righteousness is within the believers through faith, even as weak as that faith may be because of indwelling sin, and He always smiles on His Son (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; 2 Pet. 1:17) and justifies those who are joined to Him. His attention is focused on Christ as His righteousness, not on the weakness of our faith or on our remaining sin. It is difficult for us to believe that God could see us, or anyone, in His Son and still require something more for approval before Him. What pleases the Father is not the absence—actual or imputed—of sin in us but the Christ in us. The Christ within us, even in opposition to indwelling sin (cf. Gal. 5:17), gives us greater relief from any *Anfechtung* that we may have because, as the One who alone pleases and satisfies God and who alone is the righteousness of God, He is with us, even in our hearts (Eph. 3:17; John 14:20; 15:4-5; 17:23, 26; Rom. 8:10).

For Luther imputation is God's act of reckoning something deficient in righteousness as something perfectly righteous in His sight. Even if we accept Luther's declarations concerning Christ as righteousness, we cannot ignore his insistence that indwelling sin makes the faith that grasps Christ as righteousness deficient for justification and that God must impute that deficient faith as a perfect righteousness that satisfies Him for our justification. This, we feel, is the flaw in his view, particularly as he presents it in his later writings. If, however, we admit that Christ as the righteousness of God is alone sufficient for our justification and that faith, regardless of how weak it is and in spite of the indwelling sin that remains after baptism, possesses Christ within us, then justification by God is not an act of reckoning something deficient in righteousness as perfectly righteous but an acknowledging and a taking account of a righteousness that is real, present, and joined to us inwardly through faith. It is based on an actual value of righteousness, not on a concession in valuation. It is not as if God sees a copper penny and calls it a gold bar; it is that God sees a gold bar and takes account of its full value. This, we believe, is why Paul uses a Greek word that refers to taking account of something (λογίζομαι, *logizomai*: Rom. 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24; Gal. 3:6). It is not that Paul means that God considers a deficient righteousness as perfect righteousness; he means that God takes account of Christ as righteousness, who was given to the believers by God and who is now joined to the believers through faith, and God acknowledges that the believers are righteous, that is, justified in His sight. *Imputation*, then, if we are forced to use the word at all, refers to God's acknowledgement of the positive reality of righteousness within the believers through their organic union with Christ. Indeed, this is not a righteousness that derives from themselves, either in their nature or through their actions; it is Christ Himself as righteousness joined to them through faith. It is not a righteousness that is external to the believers, as later Lutheran and Reformed theologians will insist in speaking of an alien righteousness. We are not inclined to shrink back from declaring the value of the Christ to whom we have been organically united as the righteousness of God simply because any notion of something within the believers may be construed as Roman Catholic error (which relies on love in the believers as the formal basis of justification). We believe that God gave Christ as His very righteousness to those who believe into Him, and through faith they are organically joined to Christ as God's righteousness, not in some union with Him externally but in a union that is instantiated and maintained by His being in us, and that God acknowledges, accounts, and validates the faith that grasps Christ and unites us to Him as the positive

reality of righteousness for our justification (Campbell et al. 1:224-229).

We should finally present in this article at least a brief evaluation of Luther's views on the assurance that a believer can have in his or her justification. While it is beyond the bounds of what we can cover in detail here, the truth concerning the assurance of salvation was first recovered through Luther's constant attention to it, and we should not completely pass over his important rediscovery of it. The assurance of salvation was not unknown before Luther, but like many uncontested issues, the teaching was not greatly emphasized. Over time there was a tendency to assume that a believer could not be absolutely certain of salvation apart from special divine revelation (as in Paul's case) until the final judgment, and this was what Luther inherited from many of his medieval predecessors. One of the ways that this understanding was upheld in the medieval period was by appealing to a particular interpretation of Ecclesiastes 9:1. But in 1518, in his *Lectures on Hebrews*, Luther objects to this understanding of the verse and, by extension, to the medieval position on assurance in justification:

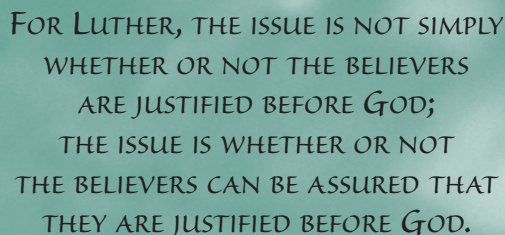
For this reason one must observe most prudently and circumspectly the opinion of those who apply the well-known statement in Eccles. 9:1, namely, "Man does not know whether he is worthy of love or of hatred," to the circumstances of the present hour in order that in this way they may make a man uncertain with regard to the mercy of God and the assurance of salvation. For this amounts to a complete overturning of Christ and of faith in Him. For Ecclesiastes is not speaking about present circumstances. No, it is speaking about perseverance and future circumstances, which are certain for no one, as the apostle says: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). And Rom. 11:20 says: "You stand through faith. Do not be high-minded"—that is, boast—"but fear." (LW 29:217-218)

Here Luther lays out in brief form his positions on two issues: assurance of salvation and perseverance (or security) in salvation. In a great turn from what he received from the medieval period, he advances the view that the believers can and should have the assurance of their salvation in "the present hour." He does this based on an implied, simple, and self-evident meaning of faith: if faith is assurance, then those who have faith must have assurance. For anyone—he means here the medieval schoolmen—to try to make the believers uncertain of their salvation is simply to try to overthrow the assurance that faith actually is.

Near the end of his life, in 1543, he speaks quite explicitly of faith as assurance, and here we can see clearly why throughout his life he insisted on assurance in one's salvation:

"Faith is the assurance" [Heb. 11:1]; in Greek, ὑπόστασις, which we have rendered in German: *Der Glaube ist eine gewisse Zuversicht* ("Faith is a definite assurance"). You cannot express this differently to a German if he is to comprehend it. For faith is and must be a confidence of the heart which does not waver, reel, tremble, fidget, or doubt but remains constant and is sure of itself...Such is... "one who is established, substantiated, supremely steadfast, made to stand, able to stand, sure passively as the Word of God is sure actively," as St. Paul declares in 2 Tim. 1:12: "I know whom I have believed, and I am sure, etc." (LW 15:272)

There can hardly be a stronger assessment of the assurance that faith gives to the believers than what Luther offers here, and this is the assurance that, he contends, a believer must have. It is interesting to note, especially in view of his



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denial of the security of salvation, that he cuts off Paul's quotation of 2 Timothy 1:12 where he does. The verse in fact ends with "I am sure that He is able to guard my deposit unto that day." It seems that Paul was more secure in his salvation than Luther was in his.

The second position that Luther lays out in the excerpt from his *Lectures on Hebrews* quoted above concerns perseverance in salvation. While Luther strongly maintains that the believers can be certain of their justification at any given point in time, he just as strongly asserts that no one can be certain that he or she will be preserved in faith throughout his or her lifetime, and he claims that such is the true meaning of Ecclesiastes 9:1. Salvation is not secure, as Luther sees it, since no one can be certain that he or she will not fall and that his or her faith will not fail. Assurance of salvation, therefore, is for the moment, not for the future.

The believers' assurance in God's acceptance based on Christ's death indeed becomes the bedrock of the Reformation and is without doubt the greatest truth recovered through Luther. For him, the issue is not simply whether or not the believers are justified before God—the church had long taught justification in one form or another, as we saw in the previous sections—the issue is whether or not the believers can be assured that they are justified before God. As far as the believers are concerned, the problem is not simply on God's side. There is also their side, where the problem is the fear and torment that God may actually be angry still and ready to punish eternally. The relief from this *Anfechtung* is just as much a benefit of the gospel for Luther as is actual justification before God; in fact, it is the gospel for Luther. His great stand is to deny the ministry of uncertainty that prevailed in the Christian church in his day and that held the believers, those who genuinely had faith in God because of the work of His Son, as captives to doubt, fear, and anguish (Campbell et al. 1:239-246).

We are grateful to the Lord for His use of Martin Luther in recovering justification by faith. But we must admit that Luther's actual usefulness lies in the recovery of the mere fact of justification by faith, not in the exact details of how God carries it out. Thus, Watchman Nee was correct in his assessment that Luther "was not so clear concerning justification" (CWWN 57:51). But it is fair to say that in Luther's day the mere fact of justification by faith needed to be recovered first, given the confusion that prevailed at the time. Against the backdrop of Roman Catholicism's use of indulgences to drug the consciences of the believers in regard to sin and the tendencies of late medieval scholasticism to promote works for acceptance before God, a major correction in the church was in order. Thankfully, the Lord raised up Luther to see that God justifies human beings only by faith, and this much alone was enough to turn the entire situation to a positive direction for God's economy. Of course, the challenge that Luther faced was in offering an exact explanation of how God justifies by faith. In this we follow Watchman Nee in saying that Luther was not so clear, and we are not alone with him in this assessment. As later articles in this issue will show, very many non-Lutheran writers, some very early on, take exception to Luther's view on the "mechanics" of justification, even while not denying the fact of justification by faith alone. Even many Lutheran teachers, some immediately after Luther's departure and others throughout the centuries since then, differ from him in his understanding of exactly how God justifies the believers. On the one hand, knowing simply that God justifies by faith alone is a great blessing to every believer, and it is due to the Lord's

operation in Luther for his unbending insistence on this point that we owe this blessing, each and every one of us who believe. But on the other hand, knowing exactly how God justifies us unveils to us how real, present, and inward Christ is to us as righteousness, how marvelously effective faith is in its operation within us, and how wise, not to mention how truly righteous, God is to justify those who simply believe and receive Christ as His righteousness within (Campbell et al. 1:229-230).

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