

THE EXTERNALIZATION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: JUSTIFICATION IN THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

Martin Luther (d. 1546) was indisputably the leading personality of the Protestant Reformation, but he was not alone in the work of reform. Luther was surrounded by several co-workers, who adopted and developed this or that strand in Luther's teaching, making it the prominent feature of their competing accounts of justification. Through a series of confessional documents, authored not only by Luther but also by various of his co-workers, a distinctively Lutheran account of justification emerged, which differs from Luther's view in a number of important respects.

Luther's understanding of justification is, of course, an important contribution to the Lutheran view, but among the confessional documents that are now constitutive of Lutheran identity, Luther's written contribution is the shortest and the least prominent. The earliest confessional document of the Lutheran Church that addresses justification directly was written not by Luther but by Philipp Melanchthon (d. 1560), perhaps Luther's closest co-worker. The emperor Charles V had summoned the Lutherans to defend their call for reform at an imperial assembly in the city of Augsburg in 1530, and because Luther had been declared an outlaw ten years prior, Melanchthon was the primary Lutheran representative at the diet. Prepared primarily to defend their proposals for church reform, Melanchthon and those with him were greeted with an assault on Lutheran teaching. Melanchthon responded with a defense of those teachings in his 1530 Augsburg Confession. Catholics countered with their Confutation, and Melanchthon replied in turn with his substantial 1531 Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which includes by far the longest treatment of justification in the Lutheran confessional documents. In 1536 Pope Paul III called for a general council, insisting that Protestant representatives attend. In preparation for the council (which never took place as such), John Frederick I, Elector of Saxony, commissioned Luther to compose a final and definitive account of his own teaching. Luther offered such an account in the 1537 Smalcald Articles, which include no more than a short paragraph on justification by faith. After Luther's death in 1546, hidden rifts among his co-workers came to the surface, and open conflict broke out regarding justification and several other

important truths. Andreas Osiander (d. 1552), who claimed that Melanchthon and others had strayed from Luther's teaching, was at the heart of the earliest controversy concerning justification and became the target of nearly every one of Luther's other co-workers. The factiousness of this and other debates among Luther's co-workers before and after Luther's death threatened to tear the Lutheran Reformation to pieces. A variety of efforts to unite the Protestant churches in Germany finally culminated in the 1577 Formula of Concord, which includes a substantial treatment of justification by faith and a final resolution of the Osiandrian controversy. In 1580 the Formula of Concord was combined with three of Melanchthon's works (including the Augsburg Confession and its Apology), three of Luther's works (including his Smalcald Articles), and three creeds of the early church to become the Book of Concord. This Book of Concord was to become the doctrinal standard of the Lutheran Church and remains such to this day. To be a Lutheran does not necessarily mean to agree with Luther; to be a Lutheran means to subscribe to the Book of Concord (Campbell et al. 2:1-3).

The Augsburg Confession

Here we can only consider the Augsburg Confession, a somewhat all-inclusive document that began to serve and still serves as the basic statement of Lutheran belief. It consists of twenty-one "Articles on Faith and Doctrine" and another seventeen articles on church abuses that the Lutherans wished to correct. For our purposes here we will consider primarily Article IV, on justification, which reads:

Likewise, they [i.e., the Lutheran churches] teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness (Rom. 3[:21-26] and 4[:5]). (Kolb-Wengert 39, 41)

While the statement is brief, the main points concerning

the Lutheran understanding of justification are set forth in summary fashion. These notions are seminal here; they were developed more fully in later Lutheran writings, including in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. The first notion that is expressed is that human beings “cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works” but “are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith.” This echoes Luther’s main complaint against late medieval Catholicism. The negative statement—that justification is not by one’s own works—would not have bothered many Catholic theologians at the time, since they would have likewise asserted that one’s *own* works are insufficient before God. That was really not at issue, and Melancthon, the author of the Augsburg Confession, no doubt assumed that this was a common point among Catholic and Lutheran churches. What was at issue was the positive statement that follows, which concerns the actual basis of justification by God. For Catholics the generally accepted teaching was (and is) that God justifies by infusing love together with faith. For the Lutherans, the declaration in Article IV of

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the Confession is that faith suffices for justification without love. Thus, they asserted that God accounts only faith as justifying righteousness, not love giving a proper form to faith, as the Catholics said.

It is important to note the intrinsic difference between these two standards for justification because this difference motivates the debate between Catholics and Lutherans (with the Calvinists) to this very day. The core issue is what must be within a human being for God to justify him or her: for Catholics it must be faith operating through love that comes out of infused grace; for Lutherans it must be only faith. The Lutherans firmly held that anything beyond faith within a human being, even love motivated by grace, amounted to a kind of work that is accomplished by him or her. And if it is a work in any sense of the term, it cannot be the justification that Paul heralds, because he is so adamant that justification is apart from works (Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:2, 5; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:9). The Lutherans did not deny that faith operates through love, as Paul also teaches (Gal. 5:6), but they did deny that faith operating through love is what justifies a believer. The Catholics understood that God justifies, more fully, by faith operating through love. Thus, the Lutheran standard for justification was much more limited than that

of the Catholics. The Lutherans wanted to ensure that the believer possessed, and was therefore responsible for, nothing other than faith in order to be justified. The Catholics wanted to ensure that the believer contributed something in cooperation with the divine grace received through faith in order to be justified. The Lutheran insistence on only the minimum of faith for justification, and indeed on the rejection of anything beyond faith, served as their chief distinctive at Augsburg. Anything that gave even the slightest hint that something more than belief was required for justification was to be rejected, and this set the mold for all later Lutheran considerations about justification.

Article IV of the Confession also offers a statement on the particular faith that justifies: “They believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ” (Kolb-Wengert 41). For Luther and Melancthon, to be received into grace is to come under God’s gracious kindness and mercy (41n52), not to have something dispensed into human beings. For them grace is a disposition within God toward human beings that is gracious, kind, and merciful; it is not something of Himself given to them. To be justified, in their view, a person must believe that God receives him or her because He is graciously and mercifully inclined toward him or her. Further, one must also believe that God has forgiven his or her sins on account of Christ. Thus, justifying faith, the faith that God reckons as righteousness, is a belief in how God now views the believing one based on God’s forgiveness of sins on account of Christ. This belief is pointed at things external to the believer: God’s gracious inner disposition and His forgiveness on account of Christ; and being external to the believer, these things cannot in any way be construed as one’s “own powers, merits, or works.” For the Lutherans, even in the early period of the Augsburg Confession, justification had to rely on things external to the believer lest one might consider anything internal as something of one’s own self, of one’s own righteousness in some way.

In the Confession, as in all the later confessional writings of the Lutherans, God is said to justify those who believe that God has forgiven their sins “on account of Christ.” This phrase, very Lutheran in its particular application, refers to God’s perspective for the forgiveness of sins. He does not look at the sins of the sinner but at the sacrifice of the Savior, and on account of the Savior He righteously forgives the sinner who believes. Once again, the perspective is external to the believer (and rightly so insofar as it relates purely to the sacrifice for sins), and attention is turned away from what the believer is and does. All aspects of justification, according to the Augsburg Confession—Christ and His sacrifice, God’s grace (as His gracious disposition toward the believer), and God’s forgiveness—are resolutely understood to be outside of the believer, and thus, justification for the Lutherans was something completely external.

In considering justification in the Augsburg Confession, we may not easily be able to find fault, especially if we accept the notion that justification consists in the forgiveness of sins. Of course, this is not a novel understanding but one that reaches back as far as the patristic period. But as we have said in the Patristic article (18-21 in this issue), we do not accept that notion. Of course, the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sins is historical and external to the believers, even if it is apprehended by the faith within the believers. Thus, to say that God forgives our sins “on account of Christ” is certainly correct. And God’s gracious disposition is something within Him and external to the believers, if we wish to limit God’s grace to His internal disposition. (We do not wish to, but we can concede the point simply because God is indeed gracious in forgiving sins.) But to say that God justifies us *only* on the basis of His forgiveness of sins and therefore that justification consists in the forgiveness of sins falls short of a full and proper understanding of justification. Justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins, though this is certainly prerequisite to it and shows that God is righteous on His part (Rom. 3:26: “so that He might be righteous”). For our part, Christ Himself has become directly our righteousness for our justification (1 Cor. 1:30), not merely on account of His righteous human life and His redemptive death but by virtue of who He is as righteousness itself both as God and as man. Further, this Christ who is righteousness is made real to the believers and apprehended by them inwardly by faith, and thus, the believers are justified by faith because faith inwardly apprehends Christ as righteousness. This is certainly not something of themselves; it is not “by their own powers, merits, or works” as the Confession declares. But neither is it something external to them. The faith that justifies is not simply an assent to externalities, even if it is a strong trust with personal effect, as the Confession describes it (Kolb-Wengert 57). Faith is even more significantly a receiving (John 1:12), and what is received first by faith is Christ as righteousness for justification. While the prerequisite for justification is the forgiveness of sins accomplished by Christ on the cross and accepted by God externally to the believer, justification itself occurs when a believer’s faith apprehends and possesses Christ as righteousness inwardly. Thus, justification is not at all something that is external to the believers, even if it is indeed not an action, a virtue, a power, a merit, or a work that they themselves provide. Christ can be and is within the believers through faith in the gospel without this being something of the believers themselves.

In the Lutherans’ zeal to understand justification apart from works, they kept Christ outside of the believers in justification, and in doing so they made justification external to the believers. To them, there was great consolation of conscience (Kolb-Wengert 55) in claiming that the believers did not need to look within themselves for the basis of their justification. But what greater consolation can there be than Christ Himself within a believer as righteousness before

God, even apart from any living out of that righteousness by him or her? If Christ was righteous in His life and death and this could assuage one’s conscience, how much more will He Himself as righteousness within the very being of a believer offer even greater consolation! The gospel is not that God accepts the righteous Christ outside of you for your sins and that He justifies you when you assent to that. The gospel is that by faith you apprehend Christ as righteousness before God and therefore He justifies you. Surely faith believes in who Christ is and in what Christ did for the forgiveness of your sins, for which you must repent. But that faith does so much more than simply assent; that faith inwardly receives the full reality of righteousness in the person of Christ the God-man, and that faith, not merely in its ability to believe but more intrinsically in its facility to receive, justifies. This is truly good news with the greatest comfort (Campbell et al. 2:5-10).

The Osiandrian Controversy

For the most part the Augsburg Confession and its Apology established the Lutheran view of justification by faith for its adherents, and justification seemed to be a settled issue among the Lutherans by the end of 1531. There were other controversies, even great ones, that arose among Luther’s followers both before and after his death in 1546, but these do not relate directly to the topic at hand. What does relate, in a very significant way, is the teaching concerning justification by faith by Andreas Osiander (d. 1552), who attracted the attention, and the ire, of nearly all his contemporaries when he began to put forth his own views in October 1550. His views are significant not only in themselves but also for their effect on Lutheranism. His views on justification were at odds with much of what Luther and Melancthon had put forward, and due to his own insistence on proclaiming them and publicly setting them in opposition to Melancthon’s views particularly (he always claimed that he was faithful to Luther’s true views), he drew the ire, and the pens, of almost all Lutheran writers in his day. Eventually, his views served to galvanize the view of justification that has characterized Lutheranism since then, and he has gone down in history as one of the first defectors from the Reformation view of justification. The final confessional statement of the Lutherans, the Formula of Concord (published in the Book of Concord in 1580), took direct aim at Osiander in its Article III. John Calvin, on behalf of the Reformed churches, attempted to refute him “point-by-point” in the 1559 edition of his *Institutes*.

Unlike Philipp Melancthon, who emphasized the pronouncing aspect of justification based on forgiveness of sins, external to the believer, Osiander understood the declaration of righteousness to be based not just on forgiveness of sins but more importantly on the Christ who indwells the believers as righteousness through faith, as he declares in his *Disputatio de iustificatione*:

73. They teach things colder even than ice who teach that we are reputed to be righteous only on account of the remission of sins and not also on account of the righteousness of Christ dwelling in us through faith. (GA 9:444)

For Luther, Melancthon, and almost all other Lutheran teachers, the believers are reputed to be righteous based solely on account of what Christ has done to obtain the forgiveness of sins, and this basis is external to the believers. God disregards their unrighteousness and imputes Christ's righteousness to them for their justification. While Osiander does not completely deny this basis, he insists on a more intrinsic one: "the righteousness of Christ dwelling in us through faith," and this is his great departure from Lutheran teaching, for which he was and still is severely censured by Lutherans. But as we maintained throughout our evaluation of the traditions up through Luther (in the last article), the basis of our justification by God is indeed Christ Himself as righteousness dwelling in the believers through faith and not simply the One who is righteous externally. Hence, we certainly agree with Osiander's thesis 73 as he states it

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without elaboration. It is his elaboration, particularly of the phrase *the righteousness of Christ*, that is problematic for Lutherans and for us.

For Osiander the righteousness that justifies the believers is not something imputed externally to them by God, as Luther and Melancthon taught, nor is it the righteousness associated with Christ's humanity in His fulfilling the law during His living and by His death. Rather, it is particularly the righteousness of His eternal sonship, which is the same righteousness possessed by the Father and by the Holy Spirit. This stance eventually provoked an almost universal reaction from other Lutheran teachers for two reasons. First, by denying the righteousness associated with Christ's humanity as the basis of justification, Osiander seemed to be discounting the value of Christ's redemptive death in His humanity. If the believers are justified only by the righteousness of the eternal Son of God, why did Christ die on the cross, and for that matter, why did God become human in the first place? Second, because Osiander distinguished so forcefully between Christ's human righteousness and His righteousness as God, many took this as an opportunity to accuse

him of cleaving Christ into two persons, the Son of God and the man Jesus (the fifth-century Nestorian heresy).

In the eyes of other Lutheran teachers, to be justified was to be forgiven of one's sins, and thus, Christ's death on the cross was the cause of justification. Hence, His righteousness in His humanity was indispensable. That is not to say that Christ's divine righteousness was not just as important to them. The righteousness imputed by God to the believers for their justification was the righteousness of Christ as both God and man, but it was particularly His righteous act in death that served as the cause of their justification, in their view. But Osiander's focus on Christ in His divinity as the basis for righteousness dissolved the identification of justification with forgiveness of sins, an identification that lay at the very heart of the Lutheran view. Although it seemed as if Osiander's opponents simply seized on a theological technicality, albeit a massive one related to the very person of Christ and historically very significant, in actuality the technicality involved the essence of Lutheran justification, that is, the righteousness involved in Christ's action on the cross. Osiander persisted in isolating the divine righteousness of Christ from His human righteousness and in basing justification on the former rather than on both, and this persistence makes his account of justification incomplete.

Like the Lutherans, we believe that Osiander erred in holding only to Christ's divine righteousness for the believers' justification. The Christ given to the believers as righteousness is righteousness by virtue of His divinity and His humanity. No one, of course, contested the righteousness of His divinity, and no one doubted the righteousness of His humanity, not even Osiander. But while Osiander was right to teach that justification is not merely the forgiveness of sins but is more intrinsically the indwelling of Christ as righteousness, he made the mistake of assuming that Christ was the believers' righteousness by virtue of only His divinity. This flaw eventually derailed everything else in his understanding, and that was most unfortunate (Campbell et al. 2:15-24).

Justification as Forensic Declaration in Post-Concord Lutheranism

The publication of the Formula of Concord was one of the most important moments in the formation of Lutheran identity, setting the course for the development of Lutheran teaching for centuries to come. Post-Concord Lutherans had much to say about union with Christ, but the condemnation of Osiander's teaching resulted in a general suspicion among Lutherans of basing justification on union with Christ. The Formula of Concord identifies divine indwelling as a result, not the basis, of justification, and many Lutherans have taken this to imply that union with Christ is likewise a result of justification and not its basis:

To be sure, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the

eternal and essential righteousness, dwells through faith in the elect, who have become righteous through Christ and are reconciled with God. (For all Christians are temples of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who moves them to act properly.) However, this indwelling of God is not the righteousness of faith, which St. Paul treats [Rom. 1:17; 3:5, 22, 25; 2 Cor. 5:21] and calls *iustitia Dei* (that is, the righteousness of God), for the sake of which we are pronounced righteous before God. Rather, this indwelling is a result of the righteousness of faith which precedes it, and this righteousness [of faith] is nothing else than the forgiveness of sins and the acceptance of poor sinners by grace, only because of Christ's obedience and merit. (Kolb-Wengert 571-572)

There is much in Lutheran theology concerning the believers' union with Christ that is worthy of our attention, but we cannot consider it here, because the standard Lutheran position is that the believers' union with Christ is an effect rather than a cause of justification. Justification, in other words, is not based on an internal union with Christ; union with Christ is based on an external justification. According to Johannes Quenstedt (d. 1688), one of the most authoritative of the later Lutheran orthodox theologians,

Justification and regeneration are prior in order to the mystical union. For when, in regeneration, a man receives faith, and by faith is justified, then only does he begin to be mystically united to God. (Schmid 481)

This was the standard way of ordering justification and union among the Lutheran orthodox theologians, and it remains the standard Lutheran way of ordering the two to this day.

Lutheran theologians not only generally place union with Christ after justification but also often warn against basing justification on a preceding union. Francis Pieper (d. 1931), one of the most influential theologians among modern confessional Lutherans in the United States, has the following to say about mystical union:

The *unio mystica* is the result of justification. To make it the basis of justification means to mix sanctification into justification. All those who deny that the reconciliation of the world has been brought about through the vicarious satisfaction of Christ are forced to teach that justification is not based on Christ's vicarious work, but is the result of man's ingraftment into the Person of Christ. (2:410)

As we will see in the Reformed article (44-50 in this issue), the importance of union with Christ for justification became central to the Reformed tradition, more central than in any of the other major Christian traditions. Regrettably, many Lutherans have contended with the Reformed on this matter. Pieper, for instance, does not hide the fact that he has the Reformed ("Calvinists") in mind, among others, when he warns against basing justification on the Christ within the believers:

Here the way of the Lutheran Church and that of the Romanists, 'enthusiasts,' and consistent Calvinists diverges. The latter groups with one accord base justification on the Christ in us...

The Lutheran position is that justifying, saving faith deals only with the Christ *outside* us, or the Christ *for* us. The grace that justifying faith grasps is the gracious disposition of God (*favor Dei*) which is and remains in God's heart, but which He exhibits in the Gospel. (2:435-436)

The Lutheran tradition, for the most part, has thus marshaled its ranks against not only the Catholic account of justification but also the Reformed. Indeed, at least on the matter of the relationship between union and justification, Lutherans often imagine themselves to be the sole contenders for the wholly external character of justification by faith against both the Catholic and Reformed traditions.

This insistence that justification is entirely external and forensic, coupled with the fact that Lutherans regard justification by faith as the highest teaching in the Scriptures, has regrettably contributed to a lack of attention if not outright suspicion among Lutherans of anything internal in the life of the believer, whether preceding or following justification. In other words, the forensic character of the Lutheran understanding of justification has often tended to infect other areas of Christian teaching as well. According to Wilhelm Dantine (d. 1981):

Man's relationship to God bears a forensic character in its total breadth and fullness. On the basis of this insight we are absolutely forbidden from viewing the forensic aspect as only a partial truth, as one of several possible ways of viewing the relationship to God. We are thus forced into the fundamental discovery that the Bible sees the total relationship between God and man as forensically structured. (82)

For many Lutherans, then, all Christian teaching is fundamentally forensic.

There is much in the Lutheran tradition concerning the interior aspects of Christian life and experience. But attention to these interior aspects has generally declined over the centuries, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the exaltation of an entirely external justification is one of the major contributing factors to this decline. The seeds already sown in the Formula of Concord's resolution of the Osiandrian controversy have thus fully blossomed through the intervening centuries, resulting in one of the most external accounts of the Christian life among all the major Christian traditions (Campbell et al. 2:29-34).

The Assurance and Security of Salvation

Luther's teaching concerning the assurance (or certainty) of

salvation was challenged by a number of prominent Catholic critics during his lifetime. Luther never compromised on this great truth, and the Lutheran confessional documents join him in his stand. The Formula of Concord, for instance, says:

We believe, teach, and confess that in spite of the fact that until death a great deal of weakness and frailty still cling to those who believe in Christ and are truly reborn, they should not doubt their righteousness, which is reckoned to them through faith, nor the salvation of their souls, but they should regard it as certain that they have a gracious God for Christ's sake, on the basis of the promise and the Word of the holy gospel. (Kolb-Wengert 496)

We certainly commend the Lutheran tradition for being faithful to Luther and to the truth in this respect. The Lutheran tradition was the first to strongly uphold the assurance of salvation, and we are surely beneficiaries of this bold stand.

We must lament the fact, however, that neither Luther nor the Lutheran tradition embrace the security of salvation (Kolb-Wengert 579). According to the Lutheran tradition, the believers can know that they are justified, but they must constantly fear that they will lose this justification and be liable again to eternal condemnation. Johann Gerhard (d. 1637) thinks that the believers' fear should be great indeed, arguing that few persevere to the end: "Nothing should more effectively lead us to cast away false security than the thought of the comparatively small number of those who persevere to the end" (*Meditations* 167). While we applaud the Lutheran tradition for its stand against the Catholic ministry of doubt, we must lament the fact that it has replaced this ministry of doubt with its own ministry of fear.

The main argument that Lutherans use to defend their rejection of the security of salvation is the various scriptural passages that suggest faith can be lost, particularly those in 1 and 2 Timothy (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:19; 4:1; 5:8; 6:10; 2 Tim. 2:18). The most serious of these cases is that of Alexander and Hymenaeus. Paul tells us not only that they had "become shipwrecked regarding the faith" (1 Tim. 1:19-20) but also that Hymenaeus overthrew the faith of others (2 Tim. 2:17-18). Surely those who damage others and not only themselves are liable to more severe treatment, but Paul's language urges us to assume that even these two were not lost. Paul tells us that he "delivered [them] to Satan that they may be disciplined not to blaspheme" (1 Tim. 1:20). The word *discipline* is often clearly employed in the New Testament to describe the relationship between God and a believer and is never clearly employed in the New Testament to describe the relationship between God and an unbeliever. In fact, the word is often employed to describe the relationship between God as Father and the believers as His children (Heb. 12:5-9; cf. Deut. 8:5; Prov. 3:11-12). Given the particularly close connection between discipline and sonship, we should assume that Alexander and Hymenaeus retained faith, justification, and salvation, which are

the foundation of the believers' sonship. In addition, Paul's delivering of these two to Satan calls to mind the identical language of 1 Corinthians 5:5 regarding a heinous case of fornication: "...to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh." Later in the same chapter Paul prescribes the general rule: "I have written to you not to mingle with anyone who is called a brother, if he is a fornicator or a covetous man..." (1 Cor. 5:11). Here Paul implies that the sinning one he has delivered to Satan remains a brother. Neither this case nor the case of Alexander and Hymenaeus are cases of Paul's committing an unbeliever to eternal condemnation, a prerogative that surely belongs only to God. Rather, Paul is delivering these ones to Satan as an instrument of the Father's discipline.

Lutherans also appeal to more positive cases like that of Peter, who according to the Lutheran account lost faith and thus justification when he denied the Lord three times, later regaining faith and justification when he repented.

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According to Gerhard, "It is absurd to claim that the threefold denial of Peter, made not only with words but by calling on the Divine as his witness and by calling down curses on himself, could have existed together with true faith and the gracious indwelling of the Holy Spirit" (*Commonplaces* 20:262). We do not think it is absurd to claim that Peter's faith remained. In fact, we think it is necessary to claim this, for if Peter's faith truly failed, then the Lord's prayer for Peter—that his "faith would not fail" (Luke 22:32)—was ineffective. The Lord did not make petition that Peter's faith would not fail *permanently* (as Lutherans often insist); He made petition that it would not fail without further qualification. Even while Peter was openly and repeatedly denying the Lord, we must believe that the Lord's prayer for him was effective and that his faith remained. We believe that such faith has been given to all who genuinely believe into Christ for justification and that such precious faith cannot be eradicated regardless of what the believers do. Even if they temporarily deny the Lord before others, the Christ who has been infused into their being as faith remains permanently within them. Of course, even to deny Him before others is a serious matter. The Lord says that He will deny all those who deny Him (Matt. 10:33; Luke 12:9). But 2 Timothy 2:12 indicates that this

relates not to the believers' eternal salvation but to their status in the coming kingdom of God: "If we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us." Once Christ has been infused through the appearing of the God of glory in the preaching of the gospel to become our believing ability, He remains eternally within us for our justification even if we deny Him and deny the contents of the faith with our lips. He may deny to us the reward of the kingdom in the next age, and we must surely pray that it would not be so, but He will never deny that in Christ we are as righteous as God Himself is (Campbell et al. 2:41-49).

Frequency of Justification

According to the Lutheran tradition, faith does not justify before God merely at the moment that faith first arises; rather, faith continuously maintains the justified status throughout life. Because Lutherans teach that faith can fail and thus that justification by faith can fail, they consider the whole Christian life to be a constant struggle to maintain the faith that alone justifies before God. Luther himself had insisted, "Daily we sin, daily we are continually justified, just as a doctor is forced to heal sickness day by day until it is cured" (*LW* 34:191), and the Lutheran tradition has generally followed his lead in this regard.

According to Pieper, faith's laying hold of justification occurs day by day throughout the Christian life (even during sleep!): "The faith of a Christian...is a continuous act (*continuata actio*), by which he, asleep or awake, standing still or walking about, lays hold of the forgiveness of sins offered in the Gospel" (2:433). Eduard Preuss (d. 1904) contends that the believers should not settle for a justification that is renewed only daily or even hourly: "We would not consider it to be too often if we received forgiveness of sins twenty times every hour" (142-143). For Preuss, then, justification is or at least ought to be constantly on the minds of the believers. Justification is not the unshakable foundation of the Christian life; it is the constant concern of the Christian life precisely because it is so shakable. The believers are not constantly held up by their justification; rather, the believers must constantly hold up that justification lest it fall. For the Lutheran tradition, then, the more proper the believers are, the more they experience justification. The ideal Lutheran Christian is not justified once; the ideal Lutheran Christian would be justified at every waking moment and even in sleep.

We agree entirely that the believers require the continuous cleansing of the blood of Jesus from every sin (1 John 1:7), but we do not agree that their justification is likewise perpetual and continuous. Justification by faith is not the forgiveness of sins, even though there is an aspect of forgiveness of sins (namely, eternal forgiveness) that precedes justification by faith (Acts 13:38-39). While the Scriptures often speak of the believers' continual need for the forgiveness of sins, they

typically speak of justification by faith as a completed past event. In Romans 5:1 Paul speaks of "having been justified out of faith." In Romans 5:9 he speaks of "having now been justified in His blood." In Titus 3:7 he speaks of "having been justified by His grace." And in 1 Corinthians 6:11 he says that the Corinthians "were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." The fact that Paul frequently speaks of justification by faith as a past and completed event urges us to think of justification by faith in precisely the same way. Justification is a past and completed event, the unshakable and irreversible foundation of the Christian life, not a fleeting condition that must be repeatedly and continuously maintained (Campbell et al. 2:49-52).

Justification and the Sacraments

As we saw in the Patristic through Luther article (18-33 in this issue), justification was closely associated with the sacrament of baptism in the early church and became tightly interwoven with the sacrament of penance in the medieval West. This close connection between justification and the sacraments continues in the Lutheran tradition.

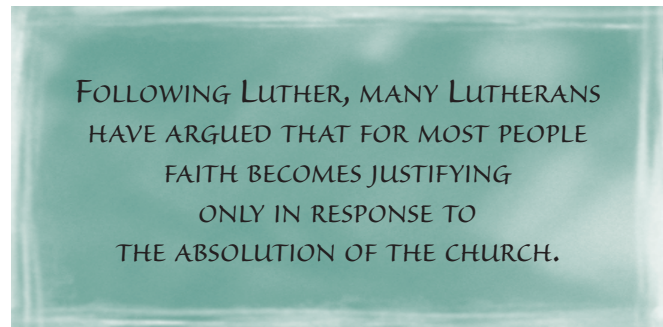
In his Large Catechism Luther identifies not only the gospel but also the sacraments and absolution of the church as the means by which the forgiveness of sins is conveyed: "Further we believe that in this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins, which takes place through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire gospel" (Kolb-Wengert 438). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, published in 1531, takes the same position, including absolution among the sacraments:

The sacraments are actually baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution (the sacrament of repentance). For these rites have the command of God and the promise of grace, which is the essence of the New Testament. (Kolb-Wengert 219)

The inclusion of absolution as a third sacrament of the church in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession may be surprising to some. Absolution is a reference to the sacrament of penance, or confession, offered through the church, which we have seen was the source of a great deal of Luther's *Anfechtung*. Still, despite all his torment Luther did not intend to dispense with the sacrament. Much to the contrary, he says, "I will allow no man to take private confession [i.e., confession to a priest privately] away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me" (*LW* 51:98). Even after his break with the Roman Catholic Church, Luther continued to confess his sins, always to an ordained minister, and seems to have done so regularly throughout the rest of his life and on his deathbed. Luther, in fact, argues that most people (including himself, it seems) do not have the adequate faith to confess to God alone: "One who has a strong,

firm faith that his sins are forgiven may let [private] confession go and confess to God alone. But how many have such a strong faith? Therefore, as I have said, I will not let this private confession be taken from me" (LW 51:99). Following Luther, many Lutherans have argued that for most people faith becomes justifying only in response to the absolution of the church.

Even during Luther's lifetime, one of his co-workers attempted to abolish private confession, and another attempted to abolish public confession. On both instances, Luther intervened and insisted that the two practices be allowed to continue. Private and corporate rites of absolution have thus often remained a distinctive feature of Lutheranism among all the Protestant traditions. In this respect at least, Lutherans continue to think of justification in similar ways to Catholics. Justification is not a one-time event at the beginning of the Christian life; rather, it is a frequent occurrence mediated to a significant degree through the church.



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When addressing the medieval intertwining of justification and the sacrament of penance, we set forth in brief our evaluation of this intertwining, and our evaluation there applies also to the Lutheran position. Justification is not the forgiveness of sins. Even though we constantly stand in need of forgiveness of sins, we do not thereby constantly stand in need of justification by faith. Similarly, while there is a forgiveness of sins in which the church plays an important role, there are no grounds in the Scriptures for the teaching that the church or any believer, ordained or not, plays a role in the justification of others. God is the One who justifies, and without scriptural warrant otherwise, we cannot presume to think that God does so through the church, through its sacraments, or through any of its members. The Lutheran Reformation was certainly a step in the right direction, but a fuller reformation would have dispensed with penance entirely (Campbell et al. 2:53-56).

The Importance of Justification by Faith

One final point that deserves our attention is the relative importance that the Lutheran tradition assigns to justification by faith not only within the broader compass of the divine revelation but also within the broader context of

the Christian life. The Lutheran tradition has for the most part trumpeted that the truth concerning justification by faith is the article by which the church stands or falls.

Luther himself did not coin this Lutheran catchphrase in its standard form, but the sentiment surely abounds in his writings: "When this article stands, the church stands; when it falls, the church falls" (WA 40.III:352). Late in life, Luther says, "The article concerning justification is master and prince, lord, ruler and judge over every kind of doctrine... Without this article the world is total death and darkness" (WA 39.I:205). We can perhaps excuse such statements in Luther's own ministry, for justification was certainly the particular truth God gave to him to trumpet at his time, and his circumstances required that he emphasize this foundational truth more than might otherwise be warranted. But once the victory had been won and the truth concerning justification had been worked into the church, this assuredly great truth ought to have been allotted its appropriate place in the divine revelation as a foundational rather than consummate truth. Regrettably, the Lutheran tradition has continued to maintain Luther's overemphasis. Pieper, for instance, claims that "the doctrine of justification by faith is...the most important doctrine of the Christian religion," constituting "the specific difference (*differentia specifica*) between the Christian religion and all other religions" (2:404). According to Pieper, the distinctive feature of Christianity that sets it apart from all other religions is not the Trinity or the incarnation but justification by faith. Pieper does not deny, of course, that these other teachings are essential to the Christian faith, but he argues that all these other teachings serve the cardinal teaching concerning justification by faith:

In Scripture all doctrines serve the doctrine of justification. Take the doctrine of Christ's Person and Office. Moved by His love toward men,...God, the great Philanthropist (Titus 3:4: The "love of God our Savior, toward man [φιλανθρωπία] appeared"), sent His own Son, not merely as a teacher of morals, but to perform a very specific function, to fulfill the Law and to give up His life in the stead of man in order that men might be justified by the suffering and obedience of the Son of God, without works of their own (Rom. 5:9-10, 18-19; 2 Cor. 5:21). Thus Christology serves merely as the substructure of the doctrine of justification...What is the Church? Scripture tells us that it is nothing else than the communion of those who believe the promise, that is, the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake (Gal. 4:21 ff.). What is the Christian ministry? It is the "ministration of righteousness" (2 Cor. 3:9), the office which teaches righteousness as coming from the Gospel, without the deeds of the Law. (2:513-514)

According to Pieper, all other Christian teachings are oriented toward justification by faith, they serve justification by faith, and they derive their ultimate significance and intelligibility only in relation to justification by faith.

We consider this a gross reduction of many of the great

truths revealed in God's Word. We certainly affirm, for instance, that the church is "the communion of those who believe the promise," but we must take exception to the claim that it is "nothing else" than this. The scriptural portrayal of the church is rich and multifaceted, and to suggest that it is nothing else than the communion of the justified is to greatly impoverish the teaching concerning the church. The church is also, among other things, the household and kingdom of God (Eph. 2:19), the Body and bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). The richness of these themes in the Scriptures compels us not to reduce them to statements ultimately about justification by faith. Similarly, Christ assuredly came "to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). But He also came "that they may have life and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Again, Lutherans might interpret this to mean merely that the believers have been saved from eternal condemnation through justification by faith, but the organic theme in the Scriptures is far too prominent to allow its total reduction to the judicial theme in those same Scriptures.

Pieper claims that justification by faith is not only the holding center of all Christian teaching but also the center of the Christian life: "Indeed, justification by faith represents the climax in man's earthly life, inasmuch as man in this life can reach no higher status" (2:405). In fact, some Lutherans warn against the notion that the believers can make progress in their Christian life. According to Gerhard Forde (d. 2005), "talk about sanctification is dangerous" because it tempts the believers to lose sight of the heart of the matter—God's unconditional promise of grace to those who believe (15).

This Lutheran sentiment conflicts acutely with the sentiment even of the apostle Paul, the great champion of justification by faith. After his astounding proclamation of justification by faith in the opening chapters of Romans, Paul tells us that "if we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled" (Rom. 5:10). Reconciliation is not the same thing as justification, but reconciliation and justification are closely related in Paul's understanding, and "having been reconciled" is clearly meant to mirror "having now been justified" in the preceding verse. The justification of the believers in Christ is an astonishing truth, but Paul speaks of a salvation in Christ's life that is "much more" even than this. In making such a comparison, the apostle Paul is not belittling the judicial component of salvation that he has just heralded; rather, he proclaims the even greater organic salvation for which justification by faith is only the foundation. This emphasis on life is consistent in the rest of Paul's Epistles, and we can hardly imagine Paul saying that justification by faith is the highest possible status of the believers and the church in this age. When the Father sends the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, He does not there cry "Gracious Judge!" but "Abba, Father!" (Gal. 4:6). And when the Son sings in the midst of the church, He does not hymn

with His beneficiaries to God the Judge but with His brothers to God His Father and theirs (Heb. 2:11-12). If anything, it is the relationship of life between the Father and His sons that is primary in the thought of the apostle Paul, to say nothing of the apostle John. Justification by faith is an important and precious truth, one worth contending for, but it is neither the peak of Christian teaching nor the summit of the Christian life.

The same emphasis on organic salvation can be seen also in the Lord's prayers regarding His believers. Surely, He continues to pray at least what He prayed on earth before His glorification, namely, that the believers would be in Him (John 17:21), that He would be in them (John 17:26), that the Father would "sanctify them in the truth" (John 17:17), that the believers might be with Him where He is and behold His transforming glory (John 17:24; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18), that they may be "perfected into one" (John 17:23), and that they "may be one" even as He and the Father are one (John 17:11).

"THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IS A SECT OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IS COMPLETELY SCRIPTURAL AND NECESSARY FOR SALVATION, BUT CONSIDERING JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH AS A PARTICULAR MINISTRY PRODUCED A SECT."—WITNESS LEE

The Lord undoubtedly prays for human beings to be justified, but their justification is not what is primarily on His mind and in His prayers, according to the Scriptures. The express prayers of the Lord as recorded in the New Testament indicate that His primary petitions for the believers regard not their judicial redemption but their organic salvation (i.e., sanctification and glorification) for His corporate expression (i.e., their being one even as the Father and the Son are one). And if this is what is primarily on His mind, it ought to be what is primarily on ours as well.

Luther's Reformation was a great service to the Christian church, irreversibly recovering the truth concerning justification by faith as the solid foundation of God's salvation and of His building. Tragically, rather than building on that foundation, the tradition that now bears his name has sought to repeatedly re-lay that same foundation and has at times even warned against building upon it (Campbell et al. 2:56-61).

Conclusion

Luther's Reformation was certainly a great beginning of recovery regarding the truth of justification by faith, but it was only a beginning. That beginning, regrettably, was not furthered by the tradition that now bears his name.

Lutherans have continued to boldly and firmly stand for the truth that justification is by faith alone, but they have stood wrongly in their understanding concerning both the nature and the basis of justification. The standard position of the Lutheran tradition is that justification is a forensic declaration of the forgiveness of sins based on a faith in the external work of Christ accomplished on the cross. We affirm, of course, both the forgiveness of sins and faith in the work of Christ. But faith justifies not primarily because it takes hold of the work of Christ accomplished externally to the believers but because it brings the believers into internal union with the person of Christ Himself, and justification is not the forgiveness of sins but the Father's approval that the believers who have been united to Christ by their faith now possess Christ as their righteousness before Him. Despite the flaws in his own view, Andreas Osiander rightly fought for a more intrinsic understanding of justification based on internal union with Christ, but the Formula of Concord's condemnation of his teaching galvanized the Lutheran commitment to a predominantly external and forensic account of justification.

Lutherans have not only wrongly understood the justification by faith for which they fight so valiantly; they have also wrongly emphasized it, often insisting that justification by faith is the pinnacle of Christian teaching and of the Christian life and warning the believers against the notion that they can make any real progress in God's salvation. Given the distorted emphasis that the Lutheran tradition places on justification, even to the detriment of further progress in God's full and organic salvation, we fully agree with Witness Lee's (d. 1997) assessment of this tradition:

The Lutheran Church is a sect of justification by faith. Justification by faith is completely scriptural and necessary for salvation, but considering justification by faith as a particular ministry produced a sect. (CWWL, 1988 1:615)

Luther's fight for justification by faith was a great gift to the Body of Christ, a genuine advance in the church's progressing understanding of the truth. But justification is neither the whole of the church's understanding of the truth nor the most important item of the truth. By holding to its particular gift and rejecting what God has given to others both before and after Luther's Reformation, the Lutheran tradition has closed itself to the fellowship of the one Body. In its attempt to be the guardian of the truth concerning justification by faith, the Lutheran tradition has instead become a sect of that truth, and this we surely lament. Thankfully, the seeds that Luther sowed have borne fruit outside of his own tradition. While the Lutheran tradition has made little to no progress in the understanding of justification since Luther's death, Luther's great beginning of recovery was more faithfully continued by that other great strand of Protestantism—those followers of John Calvin called "Reformed" (Campbell et al. 2:61-63).

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