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Volume 44 Number 3

Editorials	Editor's Note	7
	It's a Great Time to Be the Church <i>Dale Meyer</i>	8
Articles	Paul's Turn to Christ in Romans <i>Mark Seifrid</i>	15
	Justification in the Early Church <i>David R. Maxwell</i>	25
	The Creedal Logic of Justification in Martin Luther <i>Erik H. Herrmann</i>	41
	Luther on Justification: Relevant or Irrelevant? <i>Mark Mattes</i>	59
Homiletical Helps	Here We Stand: A Reformation Sermon on Romans 5:1-2 <i>David Peter</i>	79
Reviews		87

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Editorials

Editor's Note

A number of years ago, Oswald Bayer published a little volume entitled, *Living by Faith* (Eerdmans, 2003). He opened the book by observing how the need to justify ourselves is a perennial concern for human creatures: we continually seek to justify ourselves and our actions in everyday life. This can be seen even in the ways we apologize, “I’m sorry, I was just trying to . . .” Our entire lives are led under the compulsion to prove ourselves and get the approval of others, even God. But no amount of explaining can do this. Before God there is only the passive righteousness of faith. Why? Because as God’s (fallen) creatures we are by definition dependent upon God and God’s creative and re-creative word. In other words, we live by faith in what God says about us and promises to us.

Erik Herrmann picked up these themes in his sermon preached in the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus, on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, with this insightful observation: other religions and philosophies have their own sacred scriptures, sacred rites and rituals, and forms of “grace.” Christianity is unique in placing central importance on faith as the means for apprehending salvation.

For these reasons, both theological and historical, our 2017 Theological Symposium centered on the theme “The Just Shall Live by Faith: The Reformation Word for Life Then and Now.” Several of the plenaries from that symposium comprise this issue of the *Concordia Journal*. These articles consider the place and relevance of justification by faith within the church’s preaching and life from the New Testament up until the present day.

Mark Seifrid mines fresh insights for our preaching of justification today from the inexhaustible depths of St. Paul’s theology. David Maxwell takes up the shopworn claims from ecumenists that the early church did not use the language of justification and shows that justification is indeed a prominent feature of Cyril of Alexandria’s theology. Erik Herrmann delves into the Reformation by showing how justification runs like a thread through all three articles of the creed. Finally, Mark Mattes brings us to the present day by exploring the relevance of the church’s teaching on justification in a world shaped by ecumenism, secularism, epicureanism, and gnosticism.

As you can surmise, our authors and the faculty of Concordia Seminary believe not only that the teaching of justification remains the “article upon which the church stands and falls” but that it continues to be the message that our world desperately needs as much today as when Martin Luther first posted his ninety-five theses in 1517.

Charles P. Arand
Dean of Theological Research and Publication

It's a Great Time to Be the Church

Seminarians are familiar with my refrain, “It’s a great time to be getting into the ministry.” When I’m guest preaching I sometimes use a variation, “It’s a great time to be the church.” One time an older woman asked how I could say that. She had reasons. Her congregation was obviously struggling, despite the efforts of a fine pastor and committed laity. “How can you say it’s a great time to be the church?” My answer was because we’re the church of Jesus Christ, a statement of faith, not sight (2 Cor 5:7). If we truly believe what we confess about Jesus, that he has overcome sin and death and is the living and soon returning Lord of all, how can we not say it’s a great time to be getting into ministry and be the church? Or are we what Parker Palmer calls “functional atheists”?¹

True, these are tough times for the institutional church. Consider the changes swirling faster and faster around us: Multi-culturalism, identity politics, sexual revolution, bioethical changes, economic disparity, distrust of institutions, and so much more. The institutional church is feeling the downward pull of the vortex. Our church’s confession of Christ is no longer in sync with what most Americans believe. The Barna Group identified five popular beliefs about Jesus:

- The vast majority of Americans believe Jesus was a real person.
- Younger generations are increasingly less likely to believe Jesus was God.
- Americans are divided on whether Jesus was sinless.
- Most Americans say they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ.
- People are conflicted between “Jesus” and “good deeds” as the way to heaven.

In summary, Barna president David Kinnaman says, “Americans’ dedication to Jesus is, in most cases, a mile wide and an inch deep.”² I suspect you pastors see some of these changes in your own parishioners.

Another unsettling change is popular morality, what Barna calls “Me-Centered Morality.” Here are some statements Barna put to Americans.

- *The best way to find yourself is by looking within yourself.* 91% of US adults agree. 76% of practicing Christians agree.

Editor's note

This is a composite of essays Dr. Meyer delivered at several district conventions this summer.

- *People should not criticize someone else's life choices.* 89% of Americans agree and 76% of practicing Christians agree.
- *To be fulfilled in life, you should pursue the things you desire most.* 86% of Americans and 72% of churchgoers agree.
- *The highest goal of life is to enjoy it as much as possible.* 84% of US adults and 67% of practicing Christians agree.

Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons summarize: “While we wring our hands about secularism spreading through culture, a majority of churchgoing Christians have embraced corrupt, me-centered theology.”³ Again, aren't you seeing this in some members of your congregation?

Me-centered morality with a Jesus who is not my Lord is a symptom of America's rampant individualism. The invention of the printing press began to foster individualism and in today's culture of instant digital communication, American life is individualism on steroids.⁴ Yuval Levin describes the effects of individualism we're experiencing today. Note the effects upon institutions, including the church.

Individualism involves the corrosion of people's sense of themselves as defined by a variety of strong affiliations and unchosen bonds and its replacement by a sense that all connections are matters of individual choice and preference. It breaks up clusters of people into more isolated individuals held together by more casual affinities and more utilitarian relationships—each best understood in relation to the needs and wants of the individual. Politically such individualism tends to weaken mediating power centers that stand between the individual and the nation as a whole—from families to local communities (including local governments), religious institutions, fraternal bodies, civil-society organizations, labor groups, and the small and medium-sized businesses that make up much of the private economy.⁵

All this is causing us what Erik Teller calls “cultural angst.”⁶ No wonder older Americans who remember the mid-twentieth century are nostalgic for a time long past.⁷ Can you hear nostalgia and anxiety in the older members of your congregation? I think Peggy Noonan captured it perfectly. She had just reread a book by Dean Acheson, secretary of state under President Harry Truman. Acheson reflected on the newness of the global order after World War II and Noonan applies it to our own time. “Everyone's in the dark looking for the switch. When you're in the middle of history the meaning of things is usually unclear. . . . In real time most things are obscure.” Then she quotes Acheson, “Only slowly did it dawn upon us that the whole world structure and order that we had inherited from the nineteenth century was gone.”⁸

Here is where we make a turn, or as homileticians call it, a “move.” The move is

from looking and lamenting based on sociological changes to a theological analysis. If Noonan says “Everyone’s in the dark looking for the switch,” don’t you and I know the Light? “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:13). “In your light do we see light” (Ps 36:9). In his light the cultural changes that grieve us—“Christian” America is gone, institutions are failing, we’re nostalgic for the country and church’s past—are blessings in disguise because they remind us, or teach us for the first time, what it means to have faith in Jesus Christ. Older LCMS Americans grew up in “Christian” America. People knew you were supposed to go to church on Sunday, were biblically literate, knew the church’s message about Jesus, and generally accepted Judeo-Christian morality. Whether they were sincere is another question, but American culture was nominally Christian. The things of God and the things of man were homogenized; the clear distinctions between the two were blurred. Not that it was a bad time, but each age has its subtleties that tempt us and the homogenization of the two kingdoms could easily blur the distinctive nature of the Christian faith, that we follow Jesus Christ whatever the culture around us may be. Now the distinctiveness of the two kingdoms is evident, and while it is disconcerting to many who remember “the good old days,” it is a blessing in disguise because it leads us to understand, teach, and preach anew the distinguishing difference of following Jesus Christ as Lord.

We are fully in a culture of man-centered life and thought, a raw expression of our idolatrous rebellion against God. Recall Barna’s findings cited earlier about “me-centered morality.” One telling example: The best way to find yourself is by *looking within yourself*. 91% of US adults agree. 76% of practicing Christians agree. That is man turned in on himself; *Incurvatus in se*. Heather Choate-Davis has identified some of the consequences of me-centered life: Promiscuity, consumerism, obesity, narcissism, apathy, greed. Since the modern American thinks himself/herself god, problems result. “Chaos ‘bounces back’ to the modern man in the form of increasing anxiety and depression.” “Our self-centeredness turns our fellow man into our competition.” “We therefore create ‘safe’ and undemanding simulations of community for ourselves through technology.”⁹ This is the law of God at work. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18). “The law works the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.”¹⁰ While the appropriate response of humankind to the shambles of me-centered life should be fear of God—not fear in the sense of reverence but fear in the sense of terror, that God is letting us have the desserts of our idolatry of self—that’s not happening. Indeed, we are living in a time of anxiety and general fearfulness but it is not focused outside of self and toward God the Creator and Judge of all, and our only Savior. We shouldn’t miss what Romans is teaching us. *We see the institutional church marginalized in our time but God is not marginalized.* He is as active as ever through his law, and we pastors should let our people know how

God is at work through the law.

The law is our diagnostic tool for life in today's culture. In "Christian" America you could say, "We are sinners" and most everyone knew what you meant. Christian concepts and language are no longer understood. Sin is a lost concept, self-righteousness prevails, and there's no desperate looking for a Savior. Compare it to a financial sheet. In mid-twentieth-century "Christian" America you could go straight to the bottom line, we are sinners and Jesus is our Savior. Today we have to go through the accounting of God's law line by line, explaining what the law of God teaches and showing how our disobedience results in all the problems and dysfunctions of today's society. Choate-Davis quotes C. S. Lewis: "As a result of our obliviousness to sin, 'Christianity now has to preach the diagnosis—in itself very bad news—before it can win a hearing for the cure.'"¹¹ How to gain these insights? Because I use it in a class on Law/Gospel polarity, I'm partial to Martin Chemnitz's treatment of the Ten Commandments in his *Loci Theologici*, but there are other books, like Choate-Davis's and C. S. Lewis's and many more. The point is for us to become more adept at using the law to diagnose what's going on for our own lives of faith and for our public ministry so that we might all hear and then speak a gospel that applies forgiveness where the law has mortally wounded.

Congregations are ideally suited for this mission to America, to be the translators of Christian concepts and language to people groping in the dark without the Light of the world. Quoted earlier, Levin's work is sociological, but like other observers of American culture, he sees the church as well positioned to make a difference.

The ultimate soul-forming institutions in a free society are frequently religious institutions. Traditional religion offers a direct challenge to the ethic of the age of fracture. Religious commitments command us to a mixture of responsibility, sympathy, lawfulness, and righteousness that align our wants with our duties. They help form us to be free.

Putting them (soul-forming institutions) within the reach of as many of our fellow citizens as possible must be among our highest and most pressing civic callings.¹²

The mission of pastors and laypeople together is to turn people out from themselves to Jesus Christ. Although most Americans think of faith as a subjective internal feeling, Christian faith looks outward to the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Notice how external the gospel is: "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached *to you*, which *you received*, *in which* you stand, and *by which* you are being saved, *if you hold fast to the word I preached to you*—unless you believed in vain" (1 Cor 15:1–2). The image of reaching out to God in Christ occurs often in the Lutheran Confessions. For example, "Faith *lays hold of* God's grace in Christ, and through it a person is justified."¹³ This is the "Light from Above," as our Seminary

motto puts it. “For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

A closing thought. How old were you on 9/11? I was 55. It was one of many historic events burned into who I am. My first memory of a national crisis was the Cuban Missile Crisis, but more came as the years went by. The assassination of President Kennedy, the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the wars in the Middle East, and more. Along with this, I look back and see the things we have lost in the institutional church in America and in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Much of it grieves me, but consider this: Most of today’s seminarians were five, six, seven years old on 9/11. Older people look back with grief at what has been lost. Younger Christians are looking ahead with hope. That’s true not only for seminarians but also for the young people in your congregations who are looking forward to whatever vocations they will pursue in life. That’s how it goes from generation to generation, the Lord raising up new earthly leaders for this new time in his church. That’s a statement of faith that our parishioners need to hear as much as those still groping in the dark without Jesus. Indeed, it’s a great time to be the church!

Dale A. Meyer
President

Endnotes

- 1 “Functional atheism . . . the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.” Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Josey Bass, 2000), 88.
- 2 *Barna Trends* 2017, 178–179.
- 3 *Barna Trends* 2017, 53.
- 4 On the effects of the printing press, see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.
- 5 Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic* (New York: Basic, 2016), 99–100.
- 6 See Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 187.
- 7 Levin on nostalgia, 185–186: “Our frustration is driven in part by a failure of diagnosis—a failure of self-knowledge, which in turn is rooted in a widespread nostalgia for midcentury America. This nostalgia distorts our understanding of where we are and how we got here, thereby blinding us to some defining features of the present. . . . That nostalgia therefore makes it difficult not only to see a path out of our economic and social challenges but also to see a way past our divisions and to recover some genuine unity amid our raucous, fractured diversity.”
- 8 *Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2017.
- 9 Heather Choate-Davis, *Man Turned in on Himself* (Icktank Press, 2014), 44.
- 10 Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 23.
- 11 Choate-Davis, 43.
- 12 Levin, 204–205.
- 13 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III, 41.

Articles

Paul's Turn to Christ in Romans

Mark Seifrid



Mark Seifrid is a professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. He has published major works on

justification in the New Testament and a commentary on 2 Corinthians, and is currently writing a commentary on Galatians. He has published numerous articles on Pauline theology and the doctrine of justification—in particular articulating a Lutheran view of justification as drawn from the Pauline Epistles.

Being justified by faith, therefore, we have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to have the introduction to this grace in which we have come to stand, and we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Paul's announcement of our justification and peace with God in Romans 5:1–2 generally has been understood as a straightforward development of his argument

concerning Abraham's justifying faith in Romans 4:1–25. Just as Abraham was justified by faith, so we who believe are likewise justified. The argument is assumed to be straightforward and anthropological, oriented to the response of the human being to the gospel. Nearly all English versions thus interpret the opening participial construction as a causal statement centered on the response of the human being: "Therefore, *since* we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God."¹ Without question, Paul's opening affirmation in Romans 5 takes up his preceding description of Abraham's faith. Yet within that description of Abraham's faith an abrupt turn appears that anticipates a decisive change in Paul's argument. It is that turn—a turn

Editor's note

This essay was first presented at the 2017 Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

*Paul locates both our
justifying faith and Jesus’s
justifying resurrection
in the Creator’s word of
promise.*

Scripture, Paul goes on to say, was written not for Abraham’s sake alone, but also “for our sake, who were going to believe in the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Rom 4:23–24). Paul’s argument concerning the message of faith and Jewish advantage appears to be complete. Both Jews and Gentiles are included among those, “who believe in the One who raised Jesus.” But then Paul adds a closing description of Jesus that turns the direction of the argument: “who was delivered up for the sake of our transgressions and raised for the sake of our justification” (Rom 4:25). He introduces a second description of justification based on the resurrection of Jesus. On the one hand, according to the preceding argument in Romans 4, righteousness is reckoned to those who believe. On the other hand, according to Paul’s final statement, our justification is secured by Jesus’s resurrection. Paul juxtaposes these two descriptions of justification without explaining their connection to one another. All that is clear is that they are bound together in Jesus.

One might suppose, of course, that Paul simply understands the resurrection of Jesus to provide the opportunity for faith in God. But this explanation does not account for the peculiar nature of Paul’s language. Why does Paul suddenly leave the language of faith behind and speak of our justification as effected by Jesus’s resurrection? Why does he add this confession of Jesus to an argument that would seem complete without it?

As abrupt and surprising as Paul’s “turn to Christ” might be, it is anticipated in his preceding argument. In the preceding verse, in his naming God as the object of faith, Paul describes Jesus with the honorific, “our Lord,” which becomes the refrain announcing Christ’s saving lordship that punctuates his following argument.² Already in the present context, it may be understood to bear this salvific connotation. Furthermore, in his naming God the “One who raised Jesus, our Lord, from the dead” Paul recalls his earlier characterization of the God whom Abraham believed: “the God who makes alive the dead, and calls into being those things that are not” (Rom 4:17). Abraham’s faith was not determinative in itself. Behind and before it stood the word of the Creator. In the very moment the promise was spoken, Abraham had been appointed “the father of many nations.” Time was no longer of the essence. Abraham already was so “in the presence of the One, who makes alive the dead

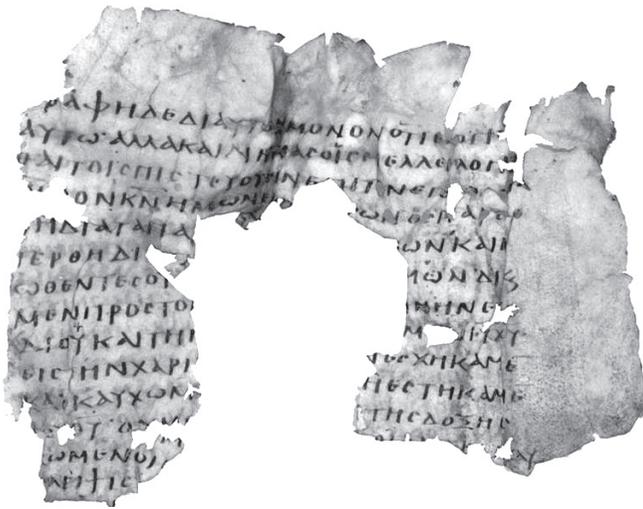
to Christ—that I wish to explore.

At the conclusion of Romans 4, Paul summarizes his description of Abraham’s faith by returning to his opening appeal to the word of Genesis 15:6: Abraham believed so that he might become the father of many nations (Rom 4:18). This faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness (Rom 4:3, 23; Gn 15:6). This word of

and calls the things that are not” (Rom 4:17). As Paul makes clear, Abraham’s faith was necessary. It was true obedience. But more fundamentally, it was a necessary result of the word of the Creator. Once again, then, in the context with which we are concerned, Paul characterizes God. As we have noted, he does so by recalling his earlier language: God is “the One who raised Jesus from the dead” (Rom 4:24). This closing identification of God as Creator anticipates the shift in Paul’s argument in the following verse. In recollecting his prior characterization of God as Creator, Paul implicitly links Jesus’s resurrection to the fulfillment of the Creator’s word of promise. In this light, it becomes clear that Paul locates both our justifying faith and Jesus’s justifying resurrection in the Creator’s word of promise. Like Abraham, we are justified by faith. Yet from a more fundamental perspective, our justification is grounded in Jesus’s resurrection, just as Abraham’s faith was grounded in the effective word of the Creator.

Paul’s re-presentation of justification as grounded in Jesus’s resurrection marks a “turn to Christ” within the argument in Romans, which he immediately takes up in Romans 5:1–2. As we have noted, most, if not all English versions assume that Paul’s reference here to “being justified by faith” represents a summary of Paul’s argument concerning justifying faith in Romans 4. They consequently render the clause as causal: “Therefore, *since* we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” As we have seen, the problem with this assumption is that Paul has just interjected a declaration concerning Jesus’s justifying resurrection into his argument that reflects a significant strand of his preceding argument. He speaks not only of Abraham’s faith, but also of the promise of the Creator that finds its fulfillment in Jesus’s resurrection. Both of these ideas come to expression in his concluding words in Romans 4:24–25. Might we not expect them both to appear in Romans 5:1? The verse itself is bipartite: “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace toward God through our Lord, Jesus Christ.”³ As interpreters agree, our “being justified by faith” recalls our “believing in the one who raised Jesus, our Lord, from the dead” (Rom 4:24). Should we not then understand our “peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ” as a restatement of Jesus’s having been raised for our justification (Rom 4:25)? In this case, the relationship between the opening participial clause (“being justified by faith”) and the main clause (“we have peace with God”) should not be understood as that of cause and effect. Instead, we may read Paul as clarifying the relationship between his two preceding statements concerning faith and Christ. Our “peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ” is the ground of “being justified *by faith*.” Romans 5:1 is not an analytic statement, but a synthetic statement in which Paul articulates the relationship between the work of God in Christ and the human response of faith. Our response of faith, as necessary as it is, has been worked by God in the resurrection of Jesus, in which our peace with God—the overcoming of our enmity toward him—has been effected.

The immediate context of Romans 5 supports this reading of Romans 5:1.



The so-called Wyman fragment of the 3rd-century Greek codex of Romans (see endnote 6) (Credit: Wikimedia Commons).

In Romans 5:2, Paul expands his description of Christ as the source and ground of faith in a parallel statement. Through Christ, “we also have the introduction to this grace in which we stand.” Not only our peace with God, but also our very *introduction* or *access* (προσσωγωγή) “into this grace” has been given to us through Christ. As is apparent from the

English versions, the noun (προσσωγωγή) may be understood here to express either an action of believers (“an entering into grace”) or an action of God through Christ (“an introduction into grace”).⁴ The latter is to be preferred: the action Paul ascribes to believers in his continuing statement is a *standing* in grace, not an entering into it. Not only has our “peace with God” been effected through Christ, but through Christ we have been introduced into this grace of peace with God. Paul presents our “peace with God”—our reconciliation with God—as a “grace” in which we stand.⁵

I have omitted a phrase in Romans 5:2 that appears in our English versions, “through whom we have entrance *by faith* into this grace in which we stand.” The phrase *by faith* is textually uncertain and is marked as such by both the NA28 and UBS5. There are good reasons, both external and internal, to think that it does not represent the initial text.⁶ If this judgment holds, as I think it does, Paul’s turn to Christ in Romans 5:1–2 becomes even clearer. He speaks of God’s saving action in Christ as a comprehensive reality, attributing not only our peace with God, but also our very entrance into that grace to God’s saving work in Christ.

Regardless of how one assesses this variant, Paul’s argument in Romans 5:1–2 clearly takes a decisive turn to Christ. He suddenly places Christ at the center of the action. This move stands in contrast to Paul’s “theo-logical” orientation in the entire argument of Romans 1–4, including Romans 4:25: the passives “[Jesus] was delivered up” and “he was raised” are obviously divine passives. God is at the center of the action, as has been the case up to this point in the letter. It is *God’s* righteousness that has been revealed in the gospel (Rom 1:17). It is *God* who has revealed his wrath from

heaven (Rom 1:18). It is *God* who will judge human secrets at the last day (Rom 2:16). It is *God* whose oracles the Jewish people have disbelieved and whose truth abounds in the lie of human unbelief (Rom 3:2–4). The faith of Abraham and the faith of all of his seed, both Jew and Gentile, is faith in *God*. God is the central figure throughout these chapters.⁷ In Romans 5:1, Paul turns to Christ.

Paul's turn to Christ does not displace God. Instead it places Christ alongside God *within* his role as the One who has worked our salvation. To use the language of Richard Bauckham, Paul presents Christ as sharing in the divine identity.⁸ This shift is especially apparent in the opening and closing of Paul's argument in Romans 5–8.⁹ Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5:6). Yet it is God, who commends his own love toward us in Christ's death (Rom 5:8). The gift that overcomes Adam's transgression is at once the grace of God and the gift by the grace of Christ, "the one human being" (Rom 5:15). The love of Christ is omnipotent: nothing can separate us from it (Rom 8:35). Yet it is the very love of God that is present in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Rom 8:32, 39).¹⁰ In Romans 5–8, Paul cannot speak of Christ without speaking of God and, even more significantly, cannot speak of God without speaking of Christ.¹¹ Christ, the human being, savingly acts as God. God savingly acts in Jesus, the human being.

Paul's turn to Christ bears another significant dimension. It specifically has to do with Jesus's death and resurrection, of which Paul speaks in his introductory statement in Romans 4:25. It is the crucified and risen Lord who stands at the center of Paul's argument throughout Romans 5–8.¹² Where Paul speaks of the death of Christ in these chapters, he speaks of the crucified Lord now risen. Where he speaks of the risen Lord, he speaks of the crucified Christ. In correspondence to Romans 4:25, Paul's emphasis falls on the resurrection, as is especially apparent in his diorthotic description of Christ in Romans 8:34: "Who is the one who condemns? Is it Christ Jesus, the One who died—or rather—who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us?" The effect of Jesus's saving death is, for Paul, located in Jesus the risen Lord. His saving work cannot be separated from his saving person.

As we have noted, Paul's emphasis on Jesus's lordship appears in the summary statements that appear at the conclusion of each movement of Paul's argument: "through (or 'in') Christ Jesus, our Lord."¹³ In these summaries, Paul repeatedly takes up his turn to Christ in Romans 4:25 and 5:1.¹⁴ In them he also underscores his saving message: Christ is the vehicle and location of God's saving work. Eternal life is given through and in Christ Jesus, *our Lord*. In speaking in this way, Paul repeatedly ascribes the name of God to Jesus, just as he does later in Romans 10:13, "whoever shall call upon the name of the *Lord* shall be saved."¹⁵

Paul's opening theological orientation in the letter has its correlate in Paul's insistence on justification by faith with its universal scope. The gospel is the power of *God* for salvation for *everyone* who believes, because *God's* righteousness is revealed in it. Righteousness is reckoned to those who believe in *the One* who raised Jesus

(Rom 4:24). After Romans 4:24, the risen Lord becomes the theme of the argument. Romans 1–4 is all about faith. Romans 5–8 is all about Jesus. The universal scope of the gospel is not thereby banished, but its particularity, its location in Jesus, now comes to expression.¹⁶ Up until Romans 4:25, Paul refers to Christ only twice in the body of the letter.¹⁷ In Romans 5–8, Paul speaks only of Christ and only once refers to faith directly, and that in reference to Christ: “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we also shall live with him” (Rom 6:8).¹⁸

The significance of Paul’s shift from faith to Christ becomes apparent when we consider the larger purpose of his argument in the first part of the letter. In Romans, Paul is introducing his apostolic mission to a circle of house-churches in Rome that he did not plant. In Romans 1–4, he is presenting the aim of that mission primarily to his Jewish-Christian readers in Rome, and defending it against possible objections. Paul’s focus on faith and his emphasis on the universal scope of the gospel arise from this concern, as does the lengthy discussion of Abraham’s faith in Romans 4. As Paul informs his readers both in the opening of the letter and in the closing, as well as more than once in-between, he has been called as an apostle in order to effect, “the obedience of faith” among “all the Gentiles” (Rom 1:5; 16:26).¹⁹ Faith, according to Paul, is the one, true obedience that God requires of all human beings, both Jew and Greek. This understanding appears at a decisive point in Paul’s discussion of Abraham: Abraham is the “father of circumcision” not to those who are merely circumcised, but to those who “conform to the footsteps of the faith of our father, Abraham, that was (present) in (his) uncircumcision” (Rom 4:12). Paul’s following description of Abraham’s heroic faith corresponds to this understanding of faith as obedience. Faith is the saving obedience that God requires.

If, then, faith is obedience—indeed, saving obedience—am I then saved by my obedience? Paul obviously understands faith as a human response of obedience toward God, as is clear throughout Romans 1–4, and especially in his pointed appeal to Isaiah 53:1 later in the letter: “But not all *obeyed* the gospel, for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has *believed* our message?’” (Rom 10:16). Yet, as we have seen, in Romans 4:25, Paul locates the ground of this obedience of faith in God’s raising Jesus from the dead. The risen Lord is the vehicle of God’s grace, through which God has granted us righteousness and life.²⁰ In Romans 6, Paul takes up the spatial metaphor “in Christ” he has introduced in Romans 5:2. Those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death (Rom 6:3). Being joined to Christ, we share in the hope of the resurrection, a hope that bears an earthly dimension. We walk in the newness of life—the life of the eschaton—a newness in which the members of our body become weapons of righteousness for God (Rom 6:4, 13). We have been placed within Christ’s death and resurrection and have been made to be new persons.²¹

This passivity of our persons in God’s saving work does not exclude our action. It grounds it. Paul goes on to speak of the conversion of the Roman Christians as *their* response to the proclamation of the gospel: “Thanks be to God, that when you were

slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart, the pattern of teaching to which you were delivered, being liberated from sin, you were enslaved to righteousness” (Rom 6:17). Now Paul presents the Roman Christians as dramatically active: they came to obey God from the heart. He characterizes their coming to faith as the fundamental act of obedience that is the very aim of his apostolic mission (Rom 1:5).

It remains clear, however, that this act of obedience has taken place in Christ. It is a paradox and a wonder that the Roman Christians, who were slaves of sin, have come to obey God. Paul emphasizes their passivity by inverting the expected formula for their conversion: it is not that the gospel tradition was delivered to them, it was they who were delivered over to the gospel (Rom 6:17–18). Passivity does not exclude, but includes activity, the activity of response. God’s justifying work in Christ’s resurrection creates a “place” within the world in which faith, the one true obedience that God requires, is a present reality.²² Our new obedience is the new reality of Christ’s justifying resurrection.

*If, then, faith is
obedience—indeed, saving
obedience—am I then
saved by my obedience?*

Paul’s “location” of justifying faith in Christ bears at least two implications, the significance of which cannot be overestimated. In the first place, as we have seen, Paul’s location of justification in Christ provides a comprehensive answer to the question as to why *faith* is not a work or does not count as cause of our justification. Reformational Christianity has consistently maintained, of course, that our faith does not function in this way. Justification takes place *per fidem, propter Christum*. This judgment is then defended by insisting that the divine reckoning takes place by grace, and that the human act of believing is therewith excluded from consideration. The condition of the human being under original sin likewise excludes the idea that we might accomplish such obedience. True enough. Yet it is not clear that these considerations finally resolve the problem, which largely results from defining justification in anthropological terms. Paul however—and Luther after him—grounds the justification of the human being in Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. As we have seen, this grounding becomes apparent in Romans 5–8. Paul’s anthropology is the inverse side of his Christology: he understands the human being from God’s work in Christ, and not the other way around. Luther echoes the apostle, when he asserts that Christ is God’s grace and righteousness, and not merely their cause. For Luther, as well as for Paul, Christ does not merely give the gift of salvation and righteousness and remain outside of us. Christ is present in the gift, “just as the radiance of the sun and the heat of a fire is not there, where the sun and the fire are not there.”²³ This Christ-centered understanding of justification, which forms the substance of Romans 1–8, provides a rich, deep and well-grounded understanding of the place of faith within the whole of God’s saving work in Christ, and especially in justification.

Justifying faith is a “living, active thing” created in the resurrection of Jesus, which lives in “grasping” the risen Christ and God’s saving work in him.²⁴

Paul’s “location” of justification in Christ thus opens the connection between justification and Christian living in a clear and direct way. Luther’s own reformational discovery entailed the recognition that the path of humiliation, by which the old human being in Adam is put to death, so that the new human being emerges, was not a matter of our performance. It is a matter of God’s performance for us in the crucified and risen Christ. This insight did not mean for him that the active life of the Christian—in love toward the neighbor and self-discipline—was thereby rendered unnecessary. Precisely the opposite. Nor did it change Luther’s insight that the Christian life is fundamentally a *vita passiva*, by which God communicates himself to us in Christ through suffering and deliverance. Both of these perspectives, however, were put in their proper place, namely, the “place” created by the righteousness of God in the crucified and risen Christ.

Endnotes

- 1 ESV, NIV, NRSV, CSB, inter alia. The Lutherbibel (2017) follows the same pattern. See, however, the *Einheitsübersetzung* (1979), “Gerechtmacht aus Glauben, haben wir Frieden mit Gott durch Jesus Christus, unseren Herrn.”
- 2 Rom 5:21; 6:23; 7:25; 8:39. Cf. Rom 1:4, 7.
- 3 It is also more natural to take the inferential οὖν as related to the finite verb and not to the participle, the parallel form of Rom 5:9 notwithstanding. One may take the participle as modal.
- 4 Cf. Eph 2:14–22, esp. 3:18, which offers a remarkable theological parallel to Rom 5:1–2 with its announcement of Christ as “our peace,” the overcoming of enmity, and the effecting of reconciliation, and the effecting of προσαγωγή to the Father, through Christ, by one Spirit. In this context προσαγωγή most likely signifies God’s work, not the action of human beings. In contrast, in Eph 3:12 the προσαγωγή might well be conceived as human action, although this reading is not entirely clear.
- 5 It is not impossible that with his reference to προσαγωγή and to our “standing” that Paul subtly introduces cultic imagery, as he has done already in Rom 3:25 with his reference to Christ as ἱλαστήριον. If this allusion is present, it anticipates Paul’s exhortation to the Roman believers in Rom 12:1 to “present your body as a sacrifice.” It likewise would be closely related to his description of his apostolic mission as a priestly service by which the Gentiles become an acceptable offering to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:16).
- 6 The apparent absence of the phrase in the pre-Constantinian majuscule 0220 (the Wyman fragment) counts strongly against its originality, its appearance in Sinaiticus and other significant witnesses notwithstanding. Vaticanus itself lacks τῇ πίστει in 5:2. The phrase may have been added either inadvertently, or, perhaps, intentionally in recollection of Eph 3:12 (ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν παρορησίαν καὶ προσαγωγήν ἐν πεποιθήσει διὰ τῆς πίστεως αὐτοῦ). It is hard to imagine a scribal motive for the omission of the phrase, stylistic considerations notwithstanding. Naturally, it is possible that it was overlooked by a copyist, but not likely. Interestingly, 0220 has the indicative ἔχομεν in Rom 5:1 (as do the first correctors of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) instead of the hortatory ἔχωμεν represented by Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, and other important witnesses. It is tempting to think that this exhortation and the introduction of a reference to faith in Rom 5:2 are correlated, both representing the tendency to find moral injunctions in Paul. The shift from the story of Abraham’s faith to Christian living and the inferential nature of Rom 5:1 (δικαιωθέντες οὖν ἐκ πίστεως) resemble the turn to parenthesis in Rom 12:1 and other Pauline letters.

This similarity may have furthered the scribal tendency to find exhortations. On 0220 see the brief note in David C. Parker, “The Majuscule Manuscripts of the New Testament,” *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research Essays on the Status Quaestionis* SD 46; eds. B. D. Ehrman and M. W. Holmes (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2013), 49.

- 7 These observations call into question both sides of the debate concerning πίστις Χριστοῦ in Rom 3:22, 26: Jesus appears neither in the role of actor nor as the object of faith in this context.
- 8 Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
- 9 Rom 5:1–21; 8:35–39.
- 10 Again here, as in Rom 4:25, Paul recalls the story of Abraham, inverting the narrative and displacing the Aqedah (Gn 22:1–19) with God's delivering up of his Son.
- 11 See J. Gnllka, *Der Kolosserbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1980), 61 (on Col 1:15): “If one draws the conclusion—which in itself is true—that one can no longer speak of God without having to speak of Christ, it would be more fitting to formulate the matter inversely and positively: the one who speaks of Christ speaks of God.”
- 12 Rom 5:6–10; 5:15–19 (albeit, indirectly); 6:1–11; 7:4–6; 8:31–34.
- 13 Rom 5:21; 6:23; 7:25; 8:39; also Rom 5:1, 11. It is worth observing the correlation of the varying forms of Paul's summaries. When he speaks of salvation as having been effected *through* Christ, the reference to Jesus appears first: διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν (Rom 5:21; 7:25; also Rom 5:1, 11). When he speaks of salvation as being “located” in Christ he places the honorific “Christ” first: ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν (Rom 6:23; 8:39). This pattern does not hold up outside of Romans (1 Cor 6:11; but see 1 Cor 15:31; Eph 3:11) and there are a number of references in varying forms to “our Lord, Jesus”). Nevertheless, it is plausible that in placing the name of Jesus first, Paul emphasizes the humanity of the Lord through whom God works salvation, when placing “Christ” first he emphasizes the divine identity of the Lord.
- 14 Even in Rom 5:9, where Paul speaks of our “now having been justified by (Christ's) blood,” he does not leave the risen Lord out of view. Paul's argument is that if we have now been justified by *his* blood, we shall all the more be delivered *through him* from God's wrath. Christ, to whom Paul refers with both of these pronouns, remains the Lord (i.e. the risen Lord) who appears in Rom 5:1. Furthermore, Paul's following reference to Christ's death takes *nearly*, but not quite the same form: “if, being enemies, we were reconciled to God *through* the death of his Son, shall we not much more be saved *by* his life?” Rom (5:10). Paul's description of us as enemies as well as the normal usage of the passive κατηλλάγημεν indicate that it is our enmity toward God that has been overcome. It has been overcome *through* Christ's death. Paul has significantly inverted the prepositions he used in Rom 5:9: while we have been justified “by” (or “in”) Christ's blood, we have been reconciled “through” the death of God's Son. This diction is exactly what one would expect. “Reconciliation,” the doing away of our enmity toward God, implies not only forgiveness, but the re-creation of our persons. That new creation implies not merely the death of Christ, but also Christ's resurrection, the “life” of Christ to which Paul refers in the second part of the verse. The parallelism between Rom 5:9 and 10 further suggests a close relation between “justification” (Rom 5:9) and “reconciliation” (Rom 5:10). Is it not possible, or in fact likely, that Paul here alludes to his earlier description of the crucified and risen Christ as God's “mercy-seat (by his blood)” (Rom 3:25). “Being justified now by (Christ's) blood” in this case does not refer merely to the past event, but also to the crucified Lord, now risen
- 15 LXX/MT Joel 3:5; ET 2:32. It is not without significance that, in contrast to Rom 1–4 (and likewise Rom 5–8, which lacks references to faith), “Jesus, the Lord” finally appears as the object of faith in Rom 10:9–17.
- 16 At certain points, Paul underscores the Jewish particularity of Christ (Rom 1:3; 9:5; 15:3, 12).
- 17 The first reference in Rom 2:16 is indirect: through Christ, God will judge the world. It anticipates Paul's references to Christ's saving lordship in Rom 5–8, in which he understands Christ's role as judge to be integral (Rom 14:7–12). The second exception proves the rule: in Rom 3:21–26 Paul here restates his opening announcement of the Gospel in terms of God's work in Christ (Rom 1:16–17). His twofold announce-

ment of the gospel anticipates the form of the entire argument of Rom 1-8.

- 18 In an indirect way, Paul's language of our knowledge of God's work and in Christ and our "reckoning ourselves to be dead to sin" in the same context naturally refer to faith (Rom 6:1-14).
- 19 Cf. Rom 6:17; 10:16; 15:18; 16:19.
- 20 This understanding is the substance of Paul's first summary statement in Rom 5:21. We have noted the remarkable christology of Rom 5: Christ died on behalf of the ungodly. In his death God manifests God's own love (Rom 5:6, 8). It is the gift of his grace that overcomes Adam's transgression (Rom 5:15). Yet Paul also presents Christ as human in Rom 5: his obedience "establishes the many as righteous" (Rom 5:19). This "establishing the many as righteous" is to be understood as effective: Christ's obedience makes us new creatures. It is for this reason that Paul summarizes his argument here by affirming that grace abounded in the face of our transgressions, so that it might reign *through righteousness*, to eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord (Rom 5:21). Righteousness appears here, not as the result of God's grace, but as the vehicle by which grace (now personified) exercises its rule. It is the reality of the resurrection as it has entered the world in Christ.
- 21 The same passivity of the human being is apparent in Paul's description of God's work in Christ in Rom 7:4-6: we have been put to death with respect to the Law and have been joined to the risen One, so that we might "bear fruit" for God. The agricultural image is significant: the Christian—who by all means remains active, as Rom 6 makes clear—remains a passive vehicle of the Creator's works.
- 22 Paul concludes in Rom 8 by presenting the Christian life in twofold form, now in relation to the Spirit, who is present—once again the locality is significant—in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). On the one hand, believers are active, battling against themselves, "by the Spirit, putting to death the deeds of the body" (Rom 8:13). On the other hand, it is those who are led by the Spirit that are the sons of God (Rom 8:14). Most significantly of all, Paul concludes his description of Christian living, by returning to the topic of Christian suffering with which he began in Rom 5:1-11. He presents the passivity of Christian living emphatically by pointing to the reality of the sufferings that necessarily come to those who belong to Christ: those who are to share in his glory, share here and now in his sufferings (Rom 8:17). Yet even in these sufferings Christians remain active. In contrast to the boasting in afflictions of which Paul speaks in Rom 5:3, he now speaks of the groaning of Christians—the lament that awaits the "redemption of the body" asking "How long, O Lord?" (Rom 8:23) Even this groaning is not merely our own. We groan because we have the Spirit—the first fruit of the eschaton—who intercedes for us with inutterable groans (Rom 8:26-27). The boasting in afflictions that Paul ascribes to Christians in Rom 5:3 is not entirely absent here either. It is found in the confession of the apostle, to which he invites his readers, that "we are more than conquerors through the One who has given us his love" (Rom 8:37) and that "no created thing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).
- 23 Luther, WA 1, 219, 30-36 (*Ein Sermon von Ablass und Gnade* [March 1518]).
- 24 Luther comments in the same way in his Preface to Romans: "Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit." LW 35,370 = WA DB 7,10.6-9.

Justification in the Early Church

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Can the Lutheran understanding of justification be found in the early church, or did Luther invent a novel interpretation of St. Paul? This question is the reason that I went into the study of the early church. The Augsburg Confession maintains that the Lutheran teaching is nothing new. It claims to teach nothing

“contrary to the universal Christian church—or even the Roman church—so far as can be observed in the writings of the Fathers.”¹ Nevertheless, I have heard plenty of Reformation sermons, which portray the church languishing in darkness until Luther came along and discovered the gospel.

This may seem to honor Luther by making him a hero. But the dark side of this triumphalistic description of the Reformation concedes the point that even though the church had been reading Romans and Galatians for 1,500 years, no one had ever interpreted them the way Luther did. Do we really want to concede this point?

So I would like to thank the symposium organizers for allowing me to present my findings on the issue that led me into the study of patristics in the first place. So here it is. Can a Lutheran understanding of justification be found in the early church? No. Did Luther invent a novel interpretation of St. Paul? No.

Thank you for your attention. Are there any questions?

Editor's note

This essay was first presented at the 2017 Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

Perhaps I should ask some better questions myself. The question of whether we can find a Lutheran understanding of justification in the early church demands a yes or no answer. But the fact is, there are both continuities and discontinuities between Luther's understanding of justification and that of the early church. So I propose to offer three different ways of thinking about the continuities that exist so that we can place the Lutheran view in relation to the larger Christian tradition.

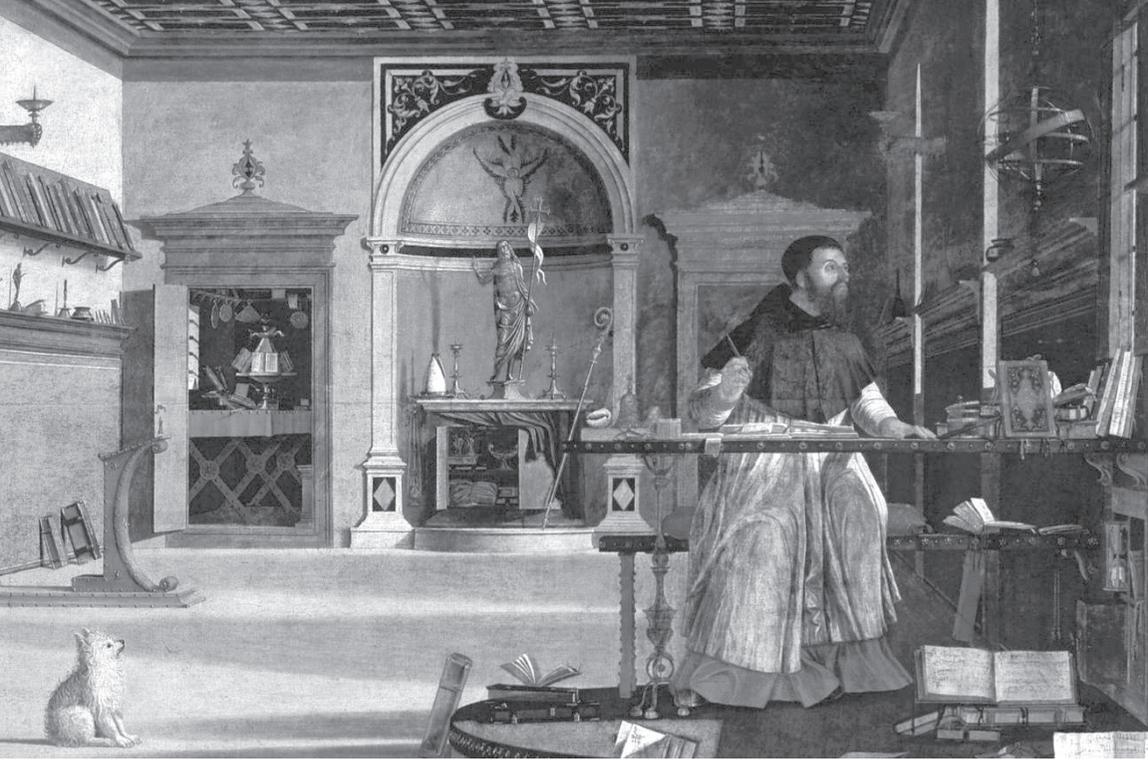
The first continuity is that Lutherans fit within a broad patristic consensus that holds that there is no human autonomy over against God. This is actually somewhat broader than the doctrine of justification, but it will serve as a starting point. The second continuity has to do with the specific vocabulary of justification. Here I employ the image of building blocks to describe the different features of the doctrine. I will argue that the building blocks of the Lutheran account do have precedents in the early church, but Luther arranges the blocks differently than early fathers do. The third continuity, I will argue, is that the *sola fide* may be understood as a corollary of the *homoousios*. In other words, justification by faith alone is an implication of the deity of Christ, given Luther's way of conceiving of theology.

The First Continuity: Consensus on Autonomy

The first continuity is that there is a patristic consensus that there is no human autonomy over against God. A consensus, but not absolute uniformity. It is certainly possible to find patristic authors who do not see it this way, and it even happens that the view shows up in one aspect of a given church father's theology but not in another aspect. Nevertheless, the fathers stress this significant feature in many and various ways.

Perhaps the most obvious example is Augustine's mature soteriology. Augustine asserted divine monergism, which is the view that God alone acts for human salvation. Any human cooperation with God's work must itself be seen as a gift from God. In this, Augustine was an implacable foe of the Pelagians, who thought that natural human powers were sufficient to choose to obey God's law and be saved. This aspect of Augustine's theology leads the Lutheran Confessions to cite him more than any other church father.

However, the second most often cited church father in the Lutheran Confessions is relevant here as well. That is Cyril of Alexandria. Cyril's denial of human autonomy occurs not so much in his soteriology, but in his Christology. Cyril's main christological opponent, Nestorius, held that Christ's human nature was an independently acting subject alongside the word. Thus, when Nestorius read the Gospels, he constantly had to decide which subject was doing the actions. Was it the man or the word? For Nestorius, the man did the suffering, and the word did the miracles. For Cyril, on the other hand, the human nature of Christ did not function independently from the word. The word is the only acting subject in Christ, though the word did become a human being. Thus, Cyril affirmed that the word, not just the human nature, was born and died on the cross. Nestorius, then, asserted a sphere of



Vittore Carpaccio's classic depiction of Saint Augustine in his study (1502).

human autonomy within the person of Christ, while Cyril denied this autonomy.

A number of fifth- and sixth-century authors asserted the kind of connection between Christology and soteriology that I have outlined here, a connection in which human autonomy finds no place in either doctrine. They made this connection in order to oppose the view that the man Christ was promoted to divine status on the basis of his good works and that Christ's reward for good works is the paradigm by which Christians are saved as well. This erroneous view was often ascribed to Nestorius, though that ascription is not historically accurate. Nevertheless this "promotion Christology" was floating around in the early church.²

Augustine opposed such a view by citing Christ himself as the premier example of predestination. Augustine observed that Christ had no human nature before the incarnation, so it is impossible that the man Christ did anything to deserve being united to the word. In the same way, we are predestined to be united to God without any preceding merit on our part.³

Augustine's follower Prosper of Aquitaine develops this connection even further in a poem called the "Epitaph on the Nestorian and Pelagian Heresies." In this poem, written in dactylic hexameter, Prosper asserts a genetic relation between the Nestorian and Pelagian heresies. Conceptually, he sees Nestorianism as the mother and Pelagianism as the daughter, even though Pelagianism chronologically occurred first. Both want to establish a fortress for proud merits, he maintains. Nestorianism does it with Christ

the head when it maintains that Christ was God “by the reward of his good works,”⁴ and Pelagianism extends the same error to Christ’s body the church.⁵ As I mentioned, this is not an accurate portrayal of Nestorius, but our concern here is that Prosper himself perceives a relation between Christology and soteriology that excludes human autonomy from both.

Finally, in the sixth century a group of Germanic monks from Scythia find themselves embroiled in controversy in Constantinople fighting Nestorians and Pelagians simultaneously. In their writings, they draw on both Augustine and Cyril, and they presented Christology and soteriology as two sides of the same coin. They did not hesitate to oppose both the emperor and the pope in their implacable opposition to the concept of merit intruding into Christology or soteriology. They bear a striking resemblance to Luther not only theologically, but temperamentally and ethnically as well. But that is not all. They drew on the writings of Augustine and Cyril simultaneously to defend their theological position, combining Augustine’s soteriology with Cyril’s Christology. This represents a combination of East and West, which is rather rare in the history of the church. The combination does recur, however, in the thirteenth century through Thomas Aquinas and again in the sixteenth century through the Lutheran Reformers. As I mentioned earlier, Augustine and Cyril are the two most often-cited patristic sources in the Book of Concord, if you include the Catalog of Testimonies. Now the Scythian monks arrived in Constantinople in the year 518 so I am confident that the theme of our 2018 symposium will be “Scythian Monks 1500.”

The first continuity, then, is that Lutherans fit within the contours of the patristic consensus I have outlined here. In the relation between God and his creatures, God’s actions have priority, and the creatures have no independent sphere of operation in either soteriology or Christology. That is not to say the Lutherans agree with every detail of the theologians I have mentioned, but we do share their concerns broadly speaking. As we proceed to the second continuity, we will increase the magnification on the microscope, as it were, and move from broad themes to the specific elements of the doctrine of justification.

The Second Continuity: The Building Blocks of Justification

To capture both the continuity and discontinuity between Luther’s doctrine of justification and those found in the early church, I will use the image of building blocks. Various elements go into Luther’s doctrine of justification, such as what he thinks justification means, how faith functions, whether we have free will, and so on. If we imagine that each of the elements is a block, then we might say that Luther is playing with many of the same blocks as patristic authors, but he is arranging them in a different configuration.

Augustine

On the question of divine versus human action in justification, Augustine provides a precedent for Luther. As I mentioned earlier, Augustine holds that natural human power is not sufficient for someone to come to faith. Salvation is given only by God's action, and any human activity that occurs (like good works) arises from God's prior action. The dogmatic term for this is divine monergism. In Lutheran theology it is represented by the slogan "by grace alone." On this topic, we can recognize a clear continuity between Augustine and Luther.

However, Augustine is operating with a different definition of justification than Luther. If monergism is a building block that they share, the definition of justification is one that they do not. Augustine offers his definition of justification in response to Pelagius's interpretation of Romans 2:13, which states that the "doers of the law will be justified." Pelagius had argued that this means justification is a reward for obeying the law. If you do the law, you will be justified.

Augustine, on the other hand, believed that we cannot keep God's law by our natural powers. Grace, understood as the gift of the Holy Spirit, is required. Augustine responds to Pelagius's argument by offering the following definition of *justify*: "What else does the phrase 'being justified' signify than 'being made righteous,'—by Him, of course, who justifies the ungodly man, that he may become a godly one instead?"⁶ The only reason people could be doers of the law in the first place is that God had justified them. You do not keep the law in order to be justified; you are justified in order to keep the law. Justification, then, refers to the inner transformation of the sinner into a righteous person that happens when God pours his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). It is not a forensic declaration of innocence by the judge as it is in Lutheran theology; rather, it is a process of healing. The dogmatic term that describes this is *sanative justification* or justification by healing.

That does not mean that forensic justification was something Augustine never thought of. In the same place where he defines justification as a sanative process, he also mentions a second possible definition. "They shall be justified" could also mean, "They shall be deemed, or reckoned as just."⁷ Justification, in this sense, refers to God considering us to be righteous, which is the way Luther understands the term. Now Augustine never develops this idea or does much of anything with it, but he does recognize the possibility.

Cyril of Alexandria

So far, I have identified two building blocks: monergism and sanative justification. Luther shares the monergism with Augustine, but not the sanative justification. To obtain more building blocks, we turn to Cyril of Alexandria. Cyril was a contemporary of Augustine. Both were Africans, but Cyril is a representative of the Eastern church and wrote in Greek, while Augustine is a representative of the Western

church and wrote in Latin. The first point I need to make about Cyril is that he actually had a doctrine of justification. Now you may be forgiven if you have never heard of it because there is a very powerful stereotype today that says that the Eastern church fathers were not interested in justification. They were only interested in theosis, or divinization, the idea that salvation entails becoming gods, in some sense.

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, for example, declares, “In the history of Orthodox theology, there is almost a total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith.”⁸ Yet Cyril of Alexandria explicitly raises the issue of justification in his *Commentary on John* in his remarks on chapters 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 19.⁹ In fact, I identified more references to justification in his *Commentary on John* than to theosis. The fact that these references to justification are scattered throughout Cyril’s commentary suggests that justification is a significant category that shapes Cyril’s thought. He not only raises the issue when he happens to be commenting on a Scripture text that refers to justification, but he also imports the concept into his discussions of texts that make no mention of it. The above examples are from John, not Paul, after all. Furthermore, a perusal of the list of references above shows that Cyril returns to the issue of justification throughout the entirety of the commentary, not just in isolated sections. Again, this suggests that justification is an important category that Cyril regularly brings to bear on the exegetical task.

That is because Cyril sees justification as an important part of the larger biblical narrative. Adam’s sin subjected humanity to the curse of death in Genesis, where God says, “Dust you are, and to dust you will return” (Gn 3:19) (or as Cyril knows it from the Septuagint, “Earth you are, and to earth you will return.”) The human race is completely helpless in the face of this curse. No one can get out from under it. The only solution is for God himself to cancel the curse, which is exactly what Cyril understands justification to be.

To get Cyril’s definition of justification, we turn to his *Commentary on Romans*, which is extant in fragmentary form. This definition has not been widely accessible before now because Cyril’s *Commentary on Romans* has never been translated into English before. One of the fragments we possess contains Cyril’s comments on Romans 4:2 in which Paul says, “If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” Cyril offers the following paraphrase of this passage:

Since Abraham honored the promiser by ascribing to him the power to accomplish all things, thus bearing witness to God, Abraham was justified (δεδικαίωται) before God and received a reward commensurate with an attitude of such devotion to God (τῆς ... οὕτω θεοφιλοῦς ... γνώμης): amnesty (ἀμνηστίαν) for the ancient charges.¹⁰

Let me draw your attention to a number of features of this quotation. First, unlike Augustine, Cyril does not see justification as a transformation that takes place

in the heart of the believer. Rather, he sees justification as an attitude of forgiveness in the mind of God. This language evokes a court of law setting. The issue at stake is what God is going to do about the charges that stand against humanity. This is a forensic understanding of justification.

Cyril does hold that a transformation takes place, but that is not what the word *δικαιώω* refers to. That belongs to the category of theosis, which I will discuss in a moment. However, if a forensic understanding of justification is one of the building blocks of the Lutheran position, then I think it is fair to say that Luther stands in continuity with Cyril on this point.

Now we might ask why Cyril would take justification forensically when Augustine, at about the same time, takes it sanatively. Alister McGrath suggests that there is a key difference between the Greek word *δικαιώω* and its Latin translation *justificare*. *Justificare*, he maintains, introduces a concept of “making righteous” that is not there in the original Greek word *δικαιώω*.¹¹ If this lexical analysis is correct, then Cyril may intuitively take *δικαιώω* forensically simply because he is a native speaker of the language.

However, I think Cyril’s view of the place of justification within the larger biblical narrative also lends itself to a forensic interpretation. Cyril’s comment on Romans 4:2 states that justification entails the dismissal of the “ancient charges” (*ἀρχαίων αἰτιμάτων*). What charges are those? After considering Cyril’s use of similar phrases in other parts of his *Commentary on Romans*,¹² I am convinced that the phrase “ancient charges” refers to God’s curse after the sin of Adam: “Earth you are and to earth you will return.” Justification, then, would refer to the reversal of that curse. Since a curse is a verbal, juridical act, it makes sense that Cyril would construe justification as verbal and juridical as well.

Excursus on Theosis

When we understand justification as the reversal of the curse of Genesis 3:19, the relation of justification to theosis comes into sharper focus. Theosis is the teaching, more prominent in eastern fathers than western ones, that salvation entails “divinization” of the Christian in some sense. Cyril, for example says that “the Lord raises the saints to a glory that is beyond their nature.”¹³ In Lutheran circles, one often hears the criticism that those church fathers who teach theosis are trying to escape human creatureliness. Athanasius’s famous dictum that God became man that man might become God¹⁴ is rejected in favor of a more creature-affirming slogan such as God became man that man might become fully human.¹⁵

I think this criticism misconstrues what Athanasius and Cyril mean by theosis. Both Athanasius and Cyril were strong opponents of the Arians. Since the Arians put the Son in a middle position between God and creation, one of the ways Athanasius insisted on the full divinity of the Son was to emphasize a sharp distinction between creator and creatures. Athanasius states that the Son is either God or a creature

because there is nothing in between.¹⁶ Cyril repeats this statement in his *Commentary on John*, and indeed much of the weight of his comments on the first chapter of John is devoted to stressing the sharp distinction between creator and creature. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Athanasius and Cyril are going to turn around and blur that distinction by claiming that we literally transcend our creatureliness. Indeed, Cyril explicitly excludes such an interpretation of theosis. When he explains one of the main theosis Scripture passages, Psalm 82:6, “I said, ‘You are gods,’” Cyril says “Shall we then leave what we are by nature and climb up to the divine and ineffable substance? Shall we expel the Word of God from his true sonship and take our seat in his place next to the Father? Shall we turn the grace of the one who honors us into a pretext for impiety? May it never be!”¹⁷ So the accusation that the early eastern fathers like Cyril and Athanasius are proposing a soteriology that finds fault with our creatureliness and infringes on the creator/creature distinction is simply unfair, and we need to stop saying that.

But if that is not theosis, what is it? What does Cyril mean when he says that the Lord “raises the saints to a glory that is beyond their nature?” Cyril would say that we are “gods” by grace, not by nature. That means that we receive once again the life that Adam was given at his creation. When God breathes the breath of life into Adam in Genesis 2:7, Cyril describes that too as elevating Adam beyond his nature.¹⁸ But why should a return to our original condition be called divinization? Wouldn’t that just be a return to our full creatureliness? Being alive, after all, does not make you divine. Life is something that creatures possess.

Here I think Cyril would disagree. He places life on the creator’s side of the creator/creature distinction. It is a divine attribute. There is no such thing as natural creaturely life that operates independently from God. Creatures only have life derivatively by participation.¹⁹ Thus, when God breathes the breath of life into Adam’s face, he is granting Adam participation in the divine life and raising him to a dignity above his nature.²⁰

I spoke earlier of the patristic conviction that there is no human autonomy over against God. I traced briefly how this conviction manifested itself in Augustinian soteriology and Cyrillian Christology. Here we see it in Cyril’s doctrine of creation as well. If life itself is a divine attribute, then there is no possibility of a creaturely realm of existence that can run on its own without God.

If we understand theosis this way, then its relation to justification becomes clear. Adam was formed from the earth in Genesis 2, but that is reversed in Genesis 3 when he hears the curse, “Earth you are and to earth you will return.” This sentence presents the human race with a two-fold problem. First, we are under a curse, which is a verbal, juridical act. Second, the result of that curse is that we are stripped of the divine attribute of life that we were originally given at creation. God’s answer to this problem is correspondingly two-fold. First, he justifies, which is a verbal, juridical act. This results in divinization because it restores us to the original condition of Adam. So

it would probably be accurate to describe divinization as the ontological ramification of justification.²¹

Faith

So far we have seen that Cyril understands justification to be a forensic act by which God cancels the curse of Genesis 3:19. We now turn to the question, “What is justifying faith?” We saw above in Cyril’s comments on Romans 4 that he defines faith as an “attitude of devotion to God” (θεοφιλήs γνώνμη). This could also be translated as an “attitude that is dear to God.” Either way faith receives justification as a *reward* (γέρας). I will now fill out this description of faith by drawing on other discussions of faith that we find elsewhere in Cyril’s biblical commentaries.

Cyril, like other church fathers of his era, works with a distinction between two kinds of faith: dogmatic faith and energetic faith. Dogmatic faith assents to truths, while energetic faith performs miracles like moving mountains.²² Justifying faith is dogmatic faith, not the miracle-working variety.²³ Thus, faith justifies because it assents to truth about God. Abraham’s faith, for example, ascribed power to God. More often in the *Commentary on John*, the truth that faith confesses is that the Son is of the same substance with the Father.

But why would assent to dogmatic truth justify? After all, James says that even the demons believe that God is one. How is justifying faith different from that? Cyril has two approaches to this problem. One is to insist that justifying faith is “pregnant with the full power of the mystery.”²⁴ It brings with it participation in the “Mystical Blessing,” which is his term for the Lord’s Supper, and also brings the Holy Spirit and eternal life.²⁵ In this strategy, he concedes that intellectual knowledge alone saves no one, so he packs into the term *faith* all the blessings that come with salvation.

His other strategy, which I want to focus on here, is to say that faith justifies because it honors God. In his comments on Romans 4:2, Cyril states that Abraham was justified because he “honored the promiser.” Elsewhere he states that those who honor the Son as God are justified because “they honored him as God with a pure faith.”²⁶ Conversely, Cyril constantly charges the Arians with being impious and blasphemous because they refuse to confess that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father. For him, this is not just a dogmatic error, but it is an insult to Christ resulting in condemnation—the very opposite of justification by faith.

The connection between honor and justification is perhaps not immediately apparent to us. However, it helps to consider the ancient definition of righteousness. This view is classically expressed by Cicero in the statement, “Righteousness renders to each his due” (*Iustitia . . . suum cuique tribuit*),²⁷ though it has biblical resonances as well.²⁸ When faith confesses the Son to be *homoousios* with the Father, it is rendering to God his due. In response, or as Cyril says, as a reward, God then justifies the believer by canceling the curse of Genesis 3:19.

The obvious point of discontinuity between Cyril’s account of why faith

justifies and that of the Lutheran Confessions is that for Cyril, faith is not passive and receptive. It is something that elicits a reward. However, there is also a point of continuity. Luther can also say that faith justifies because it honors God. However, for Luther, honoring God means trusting his promises. The move from confessing Christ's divinity to trusting his promises is a significant one that I will discuss further when we come to the third continuity: *sola fide* as a corollary of *homoousios*.

Free Will

If forensic justification is a building block that Cyril and Luther share and faith is one that they at most partly share, the building block of free will is one that they definitely do not share at all. Cyril is both adamant and consistent in his insistence on free will. Cyril maintains that free will is necessary in order for God's rewards and punishments to be fair.²⁹

This concern surfaces prominently whenever Cyril grapples with the doctrine of election. When God chooses people, Cyril maintains, he must be responding to something worthy that he sees in them. In his comment on Jesus's statement that "No one can come to me unless it is granted to them by my Father" (Jn 6:65), Cyril insists that God does not give faith to the impure, since that would be like pouring costly perfume on mud.³⁰ In response to the question of why Jesus chose Philip, Cyril explains that "he would not have chosen him if he were not altogether worthy."³¹ But perhaps the most striking instance of Cyril's struggle with the doctrine of election is how he handles God's choice of Jacob over Esau in Romans 9. Cyril maintains that God foresaw Jacob's worthiness and Esau's unworthiness and made his choice on that basis. And when Paul states in Romans 9:16, "So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy," Cyril asserts that Paul is not here presenting his own view, but the ignorant view of his opponents!³² This is perhaps not Cyril's most convincing exegetical move, but it does illustrate the importance he places on free will and God acting in a fitting manner.

Arrangement of the Building Blocks

If we take stock of the discussion so far, we see that there are some building blocks that Luther shares with patristic authors and some he does not. With Augustine, he shares monergism but not forensic justification. With Cyril, he shares forensic justification, but not free will. However, identifying the blocks themselves is not sufficient to capture the continuities and discontinuities because each theologian arranges the blocks in a different way. This means that the blocks function differently within each author's theological system.

Let us take the example of free will in Cyril. Why would he place such emphasis on this? Cyril's cultural context provides part of the answer. He is very concerned to distance Christianity from the classical Greco-Roman view of fate. This surfaces a number of times in Cyril's *Commentary on John*, most prominently when John says

that Jesus's "hour has not yet come." Cyril wants to make sure his readers realize that John is *not* saying that Jesus's fate is governed by hours and seasons and times "as the Greeks ignorantly suppose."³³

This question would probably not arise for a modern reader of John because fatalism is not as serious a worldview contender in our day as it was in Cyril's. It was even less of a contender in Luther's day. In Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, he actually cites pagan authors and their view of fate in support of his own view of election!³⁴ He never would have done this if he felt any serious pressure from fatalism as a competing worldview. As far as I know, Lutheran theology has never had to defend itself against that front. A gesture in that direction is made by the Formula of Concord when it says that God does coerce people into faith,³⁵ but that comment remains undeveloped.

Cultural context, however, does not tell the whole story. Cyril is also operating within a different theological framework than Lutherans. Lutherans tend to view everything through the lens of the distinction between grace and works. To assert free will, then, detracts from the glory of Christ. Christ alone is the savior, so any credit that goes to our works detracts from Christ's role as savior. Thus, from a Lutheran perspective, Cyril's emphasis on free will is not only wrong, but it constitutes an insult to Christ and an idolatrous glorification of creatures. Only God has free will, creatures do not.

Cyril does not frame the issue in terms of grace versus works, however. For him, the operative distinction is grace versus nature. We have already seen this distinction in play in Cyril's understanding of theosis. That doctrine requires Cyril to distinguish the sense in which Christ is God from the sense in which Christians are "gods." His answer is that Christ is God by nature, while Christians are "gods" by grace. He can also say we are "gods" by participation, by relation, or by our will. All of these things are the opposite of nature.

This means that for Cyril, free will is not a glorious quality, but an inferior one. If our attachment to God is by our will, then that attachment is inherently unstable. Our will can always change. We can attain a kind of immutability by watchfulness and attention, but we can never achieve a permanent participation in God on our own. This is why Christ has no free will, according to Cyril. Cyril explicitly denies that Christ has "volitional virtue." His virtue is a permanent attribute. He has it by nature, not by an act of his will. Only creatures have free will.

So while it is true that Luther and Cyril disagree about free will, that bare fact does not tell the whole story. Cyril is operating in a theological framework in which there is no sharp distinction between grace and free will, since both are the opposite of nature. When Cyril insists upon free will, he is not trying to parcel out divine and human action in salvation. Instead, he is trying to defend human responsibility over against a pagan view of fate, and he is trying to maintain that Christians share in God's life in a creaturely way (by grace or by will) rather than in a divine way (by nature).

When Luther denies free will, he is not trying to address the issue of fate. Instead, he is insisting that we relate to God as creatures (with bound wills) not as gods (with free wills). So Luther and Cyril are both trying to maintain our human status as creatures, but they disagree on whether free will is a divine or creaturely attribute.

This complexity shows the limitations of the “building blocks” approach. It is helpful to see that the different elements of Luther’s doctrine have precedents in the early church. Cyril, for example, shows that Luther did not make up a forensic understanding of justification. But a comparison of Luther and Cyril also shows that they operate within different theological frameworks. How can we account for that discontinuity?

Sola Fide as the Existential Corollary of Homoousios

This question leads us to the third kind of continuity. We can view Luther’s *sola fide* as a corollary of the *homoousios*. Otto Pesch describes Luther as an existential theologian in contrast to Thomas Aquinas, whom Pesch identifies as a sapiential theologian.³⁶ This means that while Thomas seeks wisdom for its own sake, Luther always wants to draw the implication of a given doctrine for our faith. He does not just want to know God; he wants to know God *for us*. Theology for Luther, then, is not primarily a cognitive exercise, but a practical one: a form of confession or prayer.

Pesch illustrates this by observing that one of the ways Luther analyzes theology is by turning it into prayer.³⁷ For example, Luther argues against Erasmus that holy men such as Augustine and Bernard are on his side because when they pray, they despair of free will and rely only on grace.³⁸ Pesch also observes that Luther can turn his opponents’ theological positions into prayer in order to demonstrate the absurdity of their claims. This is how Luther opposes Latomus’s claim that Christians can perform works that are entirely without sin. He imagines the kind of prayer that would be prayed by such a successful Christian:

Lord God, behold this good work which I have done through the help of Thy grace. There is in it neither fault nor any sin, nor does it need Thy forgiving mercy. I do not ask for this, as I want Thee to judge it with Thy strictest and truest judgments. In it [my work] I can glory before Thee, because Thou canst not condemn it, for Thou art just and true. Indeed, I am certain that Thou canst not condemn it without denying Thyself. The need of mercy which, as Thy petition [in the Lord’s Prayer] teaches, forgives the trespass in this deed is canceled, for there is here only the justice which crowns it.³⁹

This is an absurd prayer, which illustrates that Latomus’s views are themselves absurd. Theology is not simply a list of true statements about God. Its most important use is to direct our trust to Christ.

This practical orientation continues in Lutheran orthodoxy, despite the fact

Theology for Luther is not primarily a cognitive exercise, but a practical one: a form of confession or prayer.

that the Lutheran orthodox fathers make much more extensive use of philosophy (especially Aristotle) than Luther did. Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard, for example, regularly include a discussion of the *use* of a given doctrine. In their presentations of doctrine, these authors can be quite sapiential to use Pesch's term. These

can be highly technical scholastic discussions. However, Chemnitz and Gerhard both take the time to spell out the implications for faith of these discussions of doctrine. For example, after Martin Chemnitz engages in a detailed discussion of the union of the two natures in the person of Christ, he then provides a chapter on the *use* of this doctrine, where he spells out various ways that it is comforting that the Savior is both God and man.⁴⁰

Along these lines, I propose that we think of Luther's understanding of justification by faith alone to be an implication of the divinity of Christ. Even though it is not an implication that was explicitly drawn by the early church, it is nevertheless grounded in the most foundational and widely accepted confession that the early church produced: the Nicene Creed. The creed declares that the Son is *homoousios* (of the same substance) with the Father, and this is foundational for the doctrine of the Trinity.

This confession has come to be seen as the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian church bodies. We can see this most concretely in our baptismal practice. If someone comes to our church who has been baptized in a Trinitarian church body like the Roman Catholics or the Baptists, we acknowledge their baptism and do not re-baptize them. But if they come from a non-Trinitarian body like the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses, we do baptize them. So if there is anything in the early church that we want to maintain continuity with, it would be the confession that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father.

Cyril, as we have seen, asserts that faith justifies because it renders due honor to God precisely by confessing the Son to be *homoousios* with the Father. This faith is primarily, though not exclusively, intellectual assent. That makes sense because the Nicene statement that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father is an ontological claim that calls for intellectual assent.

The Lutheran questions would be, "What are the implications of that ontological claim for our faith? If we assent intellectually to the proposition that Christ is God, how does that shape our trust?" In his discussion of the first commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther defines a "god" as whatever you trust in.⁴¹ If you trust in money, then money is your god. If you trust in your good works, then your good works are your god. But the Christian trusts in Christ and looks to him alone for all good things. That is what it means to have Christ as your God. Or to put it in Nicene

language, to believe that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father means that you trust in him. In that sense, we may view *sola fide* as a corollary of the *homoousios*.

Luther connects the *homoousios* and the *sola fide* even more explicitly in his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*. There he accuses the Roman Catholic scholastic theologians of being Arians. Now in one sense, this charge is absurd. These theologians confessed the Nicene Creed, so how could they be Arians? Well, according to Luther if they really believed in the divinity of Christ, they would trust in him rather than in their own

In his discussion of the first commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther defines a “god” as whatever you trust in.

works for salvation.⁴² Luther states, “To attribute glory to God is to believe in him,” which means, “to acknowledge Him as the Author and Donor of every good.”⁴³ This faith justifies, says Luther, “because it renders to God what is due Him.”⁴⁴ If you trust in anything else, such as your own good works, then you are effectively robbing Christ of his divinity and failing to render him

his due. In the same vein, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* defines faith as “that worship which receives the benefits that God offers God wants to be honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers.”⁴⁵

So Cyril and Luther both apply Cicero’s definition of righteousness to the doctrine of justification. For Cicero, righteousness “renders to each one his due.” The difference is that Cyril deploys that definition in a sapiential way, while Luther deploys it in an existential way, to use Pesch’s terminology. For Cyril, God’s “due” is that we honor him by assenting to the objective truth of the *homoousios*. For Luther, God’s “due” is that we honor him by looking only to him for all good things. That shift in meaning is not due to dogmatic difference on a discrete theological topic. It is due to the fact that Luther transposes all of theology into an existential key. The divinity of Christ is an ontological fact for Cyril, and Luther draws out the implications of that fact for our faith. To confess the divinity of Christ means to trust him alone for salvation.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have examined various kinds of continuity and discontinuity between Luther and the early church. We saw that there is continuity when it comes to their view of the priority of God over the creature, which excludes any human autonomy over against God. We saw that there are both continuities and discontinuities between the various building blocks of justification. We can find divine monergism in Augustine and forensic justification in Cyril, but Luther, Augustine, and Cyril all arrange those blocks differently. In the end, however, the most important question regarding continuity is whether it is a legitimate move to

transpose theology into an existential key. If so, then the Lutheran slogan *sola fide* is a corollary of the Nicene *homoousios*. A full treatment of that question would require another article.

However, let me gesture at an answer by following up on Luther's comment in the *Bondage of the Will* that Augustine is really on his side because of how Augustine prays. If you look only at the doctrine of justification, it is clear that Augustine is not completely on Luther's side. Though Augustine believes that salvation is completely the work of God, he understands justification to be a sanative process by which God's grace transforms us and gives us the ability to keep the law. So how would you expect Augustine to pray in light of this, especially as he envisions himself standing before the judgment seat of Christ?

You might expect Augustine to do what Thomas Aquinas did. My colleague Bob Kolb reports that when Aquinas reached the pearly gates and St. Peter asked him why he should let him into heaven, he presented St. Peter with a large sack and said, "Here are my works, which I performed only by God's grace." I have no idea how Bob knows this, but I will take his word for it. In any case, this scene expresses Aquinas's Augustinian understanding of grace. We are saved because we fulfill the law, but we can claim no credit for ourselves because our works are themselves gifts from God worked by grace. So if you transpose that theology into an existential key, you would expect its adherents to trust in their graced works for salvation.

Is that what Augustine does? We actually do know the answer to this. Augustine's biographer Possidius reports that as Augustine lay dying, he had his friends post the penitential psalms on the wall so he could pray them.⁴⁶ That means that in the end, Augustine did not place his trust in the merit that God worked in him by the Holy Spirit. He placed his trust in the forgiveness of sins. In that moment, Augustine too became an existential theologian. Luther is not alone.

Endnotes

- 1 Augsburg Confession, Conclusion of Part One, para. 1 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 58. Hereafter Kolb/Wengert.
- 2 For example, a monk named Leporius held such a position, but Augustine helped him see the error of his ways. See David Maxwell, "Christology and Grace in the Sixth-Century Latin West: The Theopaschite Controversy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2003), 36–37.
- 3 Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 15.30.
- 4 Prosper, *Epitaphium* (Migne, Patrologia Latina 51, 154A).
- 5 Prosper, *Epitaphium* (PL 51, 153A).
- 6 Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter* 26.45 (NPNF, 1st series, vol. 5, 102).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 6.
- 9 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John: Volume 1*, trans. David R. Maxwell, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 69, 102, 139, 155, 248, 354; *Commentary on John: Volume 2*, trans. David R. Maxwell, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 61, 108, 113, 132, 149, 219, 233, 253, 345, 352.

- 10 *Commentary on Romans* 4:2 (Pusey 5:181.1–5). All translations of Cyril are my own. Citations of the Greek text are from P. E. Pusey, ed., *Sancti Patris Nostri Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini*, vols. 3–5 (Bruxelles: Impression Anastaltique Culture et Civilisation, 1965).
- 11 Alistaire McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20. See also James Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*, 3rd rev. ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 195. Voelz defines διακίω as “I justify, make righteous legally.”
- 12 See, for example, *Commentary on Romans* 5:11 (Pusey 5:182.1–10), *Commentary on John* 19:18 (Pusey 5:84.23–85.13), where Cyril makes an explicit connection between justification and the curse of Gn 3:19.
- 13 *Commentary on John* 15:14–15 (Maxwell 2:232).
- 14 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.
- 15 Cf. Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 53.
- 16 Athanasius, *On the Council of Nicaea (De decretis)* 13.
- 17 *Commentary on John* 1:9 (Maxwell 1:49).
- 18 *Commentary on John* 14:20 (Maxwell 2:186).
- 19 Cyril makes this point strikingly in his comments on Jn 1:4. See *Commentary on John* 1:4 (Maxwell 1:32–33).
- 20 See in *Commentary on John*. 1:12 (Maxwell 1:60).
- 21 I should also add that sometimes Cyril describes divinization in terms of dignity or status rather than ontology, but that is beyond the scope of this discussion.
- 22 *Commentary on John* 11:40 (Maxwell 2:92).
- 23 *Commentary on John* 17:3.
- 24 *Commentary on John* 17:3 (Maxwell 2:274).
- 25 *Commentary on John* 17:3.
- 26 *Commentary on John* 16:8–11 (Maxwell 2:253).
- 27 Cicero, *De natura Deorum* 3.38.
- 28 Cf. Mt 16:27, Rom 2:5–6, Rom 13:7, Rv 22:12.
- 29 *Commentary on John* 6:45 (Pusey 3:507.20—508.4, Maxwell 1:226).
- 30 *Commentary on John* 6:64–65 (Maxwell 1:248).
- 31 *Commentary on John* 1:43 (Maxwell 1:88).
- 32 *Commentary on Romans* 9:14–24 (Pusey 5:228).
- 33 *Commentary on John* 7:30 (Maxwell 1: 295).
- 34 *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. Philip S. Watson, The Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 121.
- 35 FC SD 2.60 (Kolb-Wengert, 555).
- 36 Otto Hermann Pesch, *Die Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1967), 941.
- 37 Pesch, 939, n.9.
- 38 Luther, *Bondage of the Will* (WA 18, 644.5; Rupp & Watson, 149). Cited in Pesch, 939, n.9.
- 39 Luther, *Against Latomus* (WA 8, 79.21, ff.; LW 32, 190).
- 40 Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 147–155.
- 41 Large Catechism, 1st Commandment 2–3 (Kolb-Wengert, 386).
- 42 Cf. LW 26:127.
- 43 LW 26:227.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Apol 4.49 (Kolb-Wengert, 128).
- 46 Possidius, *The Life of Saint Augustine* 31.2, trans. Cardinal Michele Pellegrino, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1988), 129.

The Creedal Logic of Justification in Martin Luther

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Luther's doctrine of justification is arguably his most important contribution to Christian theology. His relationship to this teaching is usually described as a discovery, a breakthrough, a sudden experience when in a flash the gospel

became clear and the Scriptures opened up to him. The most famous account comes at the end of his life in 1545, in his preface to his collected Latin works in which he recounts the early years of the Reformation. This is the important section:

Meanwhile, I had already during that year [1519] returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skillful, 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 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, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," (*iustitia dei*) which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding

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the formal or active righteousness, as they call 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 Scripture 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 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 (Augustine passage included below). 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.¹

This account gives us a lot of information: a possible date for his discovery (1519), the nature of his theological insight, the biblical text in question (Rom 1:17), and Luther's relation to the patristic and scholastic traditions before him. Nevertheless, both the meaning of justification for Luther and the nature of this discovery have been hotly debated since his death. Why is this? For one, as helpful and clear as this account is, it does not adequately capture the breadth of Luther's writings about justification. Key words and phrases like *passive righteousness*, and *imputation* are enormously important for Luther's understanding, but they do not exhaust the various forms and explanations of justification that Luther used throughout his life. For example, one of Luther's favored and more frequent descriptions of justification is the *fröhliche Wechsel*—the happy exchange—in which Christ, joined to the soul, takes our sin and imparts his righteousness, like a kind of divine diffusion. It is thus hardly surprising that one of Luther's colleagues, Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), would later focus on this union of Christ and the soul as the central feature of justification and regard it as faithful to Luther. Though Osiander's colleagues were arguably right to reject his formulation, one can certainly imagine how such a debate over the meaning of Luther's language might occur.²

In modern times, the question of Luther's doctrine focused not only on his language but also his life. Even before scholars would debate the biographical date of Luther's breakthrough, Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) oriented the doctrine of justification to Luther's own biographical *Heilsfrage*—the central question of how one overcomes the feeling of man's alienation from God, what Karl Holl would call Luther's quest for *Heilsgewissheit*, the "certainty of salvation."³ For Ritschl, Luther's question arose from an experience post-conversion, that is, *as a Christian*. Thus, Luther's doctrine of justification was not a description of how one *became* a Christian, but rather was the gift (*Gabe*) of assurance that one was indeed right with God, in other words, faith or trust (*fiducia*). Such assurance produced both an individual ethical response (*Aufgabe*)—which for Ritschl looked a lot like Kant's categorical imperative to do one's duty—and the corporate reconciliation within the Christian community, a community which, for Ritschl, looked remarkably like the utopia of the aristocracy and upper middle class of the Bismarckian Reich.⁴

Ritschl's interpretation of justification was too arbitrary and anachronistic to be accepted or sustained by the new studies on Luther in the early-twentieth century (the so-called Luther Renaissance); nevertheless, the meaning of justification and its relation to the biographical question of Luther's discovery of the gospel remained a constant focus. This led to numerous studies over a fifty-year period that had Luther's breakthrough occurring as early as the early 1510s, as late as 1520, and everything in between.⁵ Likewise, the understanding of justification shifted with each new date, a protean concept that often reflected more of the values and concerns of the historian than of Luther himself.⁶ Because of these difficulties, many have since abandoned the effort altogether.

Perhaps part of the problem with this approach was the idea that a doctrine like justification could ever be encapsulated into a single moment of insight. In spite of the way Luther sometimes spoke of his own theological development, Luther's doctrine of justification did not depend on a single word or the interpretation of a single passage. Rather it consists of an amalgamation of various insights, distinctions, and themes. And rather than see his theological development in a linear or dialectical fashion where each stage builds upon another, Luther's writings seem to indicate various moments of deep clarity which highlight perhaps only one facet of the doctrine, replaced in a subsequent moment by another insight into another facet. Consider this brief list of related concepts with the likely dates by which Luther came to first clarify them:

- the distinction of law and gospel, 1515/1516
- the meaning of *poenitentia*, 1516/1517
- the theology of the cross, 1518
- the word as *promissio* and thus a means of grace, 1520

Whether or not Luther's insight into the meaning of the Pauline phrase the "righteousness of God" happened in 1513, 1515, or 1519, it would be wrong to isolate this from these other concepts that remain essential to how Luther understood justification as the meaning of the gospel.

So what new thing can we say about Luther and his teaching on justification? I do not think entering into the weeds of all of the literature and past debates would be helpful now. Instead, I would like to take a step back and take in the various features and emphases of Luther's doctrine, organizing them not chronologically but thematically and theologically. I have chosen to use the logic of the Creed as the organizing principle, in part because I have found this to be a successful way to think of other theological doctrines,⁷ but also because Luther's doctrine of justification is deeply Trinitarian, a fact that may be formally acknowledged but not often described or fully explicated.

Why a Creedal Framework

The three articles of the Creed touch the deep foundations of the Christian faith. Their presence and their interrelations are indispensable to Christianity as a whole and the logic of every church doctrine. They are fundamentally Trinitarian, rooted in God and his work. And yet each of the three articles do have their own logic and contribution to the overarching Christian narrative. They cannot be summarily blended into a single exposition, nor would that be a desirable goal. The church's doctrine is informed and shaped differently by each. For example, within the logic of the first article the doctrine of marriage is shaped by the ordinance of the family and procreation, companionship in the task of dominion (i.e., care of the creation) and

reflecting God's image. But the logic of the second article might focus on the analogy of self-sacrificial love and devotion that exists between God and his redeemed people (Song of Songs), between Christ and the church (Eph 5). And then, consequently, according to the logic of the third article, marriage as an image of Christ and his church is a sign of the future life, when such divine consummation is complete and "we will be like the angels, neither marrying nor giving into marriage" (Mk 12:25).

I think justification is another doctrine that would benefit from such a creedal analysis, and in particular would give some clarity to the thoughts of one of the great doctors of justification, Martin Luther.

First Article

When we ask how the first article of the Creed informs Luther's doctrine of justification we immediately find that he can understand justification as a continuation of God's work as creator, namely as one who creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing (cf. Rom 4:16f.). Just as in the beginning when God spoke into the void and brought forth all that there is, so also in justification he continues to create life from where there is no life, declaring us righteous through the gospel even though we are sinners. Indeed through the law, he exposes that we have nothing, that we are nothing, that we are dead in our trespasses, yet all in order that he might breathe new life into us through the gospel.⁸

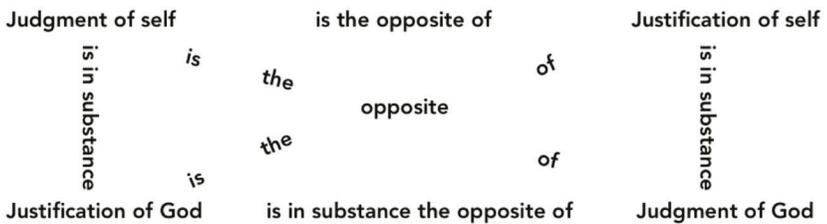
Further, this first article emphasis in justification comes to expression in that notion that God does all of this through his *word*. His word that promises the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and life actually brings into being that which it says. As it was in the beginning, reality comes into existence through God's speaking, "let there be." Such a speaking cannot be reduced to the polarity of forensic versus effective speech because the doctrine of creation acknowledges that God's speaking is an effective word. Luther calls this a "tettel-wort"—a *deed word*, a word that does what it says.⁹ Thus, to declare us righteous is not some legal fiction where God deceives himself into thinking that we are just when we are not. No, God's declaration establishes reality. Indeed, what he says is more "real" than what we see or experience. Thus, when God says you are mine, you are holy, and so on, we can be certain it is true, no matter how the experience of sin, death, and the devil seem to contradict it.

Another feature of the first article logic in Luther's doctrine of justification has to do with the nature of faith and the righteousness of faith. Throughout his writings, but especially in his catechetical works, Luther will bind the confession of the first article of the Creed to the first commandment by means of faith.¹⁰ Well known to be sure, Luther notes in the catechism that the first commandment calls upon us to have no other gods but the true God—the Maker of heaven and earth. But what does it mean to "have" a god? Luther's answer is *faith*—a god is "that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need . . . to trust and believe in that

one with your whole heart . . . it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and idol.” Likewise, in his second Galatians commentary, “*Fides est creatrix divinitatis*”—“Faith is the creator of divinity . . . not in [God’s] person, but in us.”¹¹

Thus, for Luther, faith is not incidental to our relationship to God, *it constitutes it*. Faith is the only fitting correlative to the fact that God is my creator—everything I have and am depends on him. Faith is the true worship of God. Justification is by faith alone, because faith alone is the only fitting relationship to God. Faith is not an emergency measure, given to repair a relationship that is otherwise established by works, or obedience, or some other category. Faith is righteousness. Sin *is* unbelief.¹²

One sees this vividly in Luther’s first lectures (Psalms and Romans, 1513–1516) when he defines faith as the alignment of one’s will with God’s will, including God’s judgment of us. Taking his cue from Psalm 51:3–4, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment,” Luther notes that faith, which takes God at his word, “justifies” God (i.e., it confirms and agrees with what God has said). And what has God said? God has declared that we are sinners. Thus to “justify” God is to agree with his assessment and judgment against us and confess our sins. Such faith is a kind of resignation to our own condemnation, yet—in a double irony—it is precisely in such resignation to God’s judgment that God then justifies us: “Through the fact that ‘God is justified’ we are justified. . . . For he regards that faith which justifies his words as righteousness, as it says . . . ‘The just shall live by faith’” (Rom 1:17).¹³ Such a faith is not our work but a gift as he says, “For the fact that we declare his words righteous is his gift, and because of the same gift he himself regards us as righteous, that is, he justifies us.”¹⁴ Unbelief, however, is our attempt to justify ourselves. To do so is thus to reject God’s judgment over us, which is to judge and condemn God, to call him a liar! For this reason, self-justification can only lead to God’s judgment against us.¹⁵



A word-diagram from Luther’s lectures on Genesis (see endnote 15)

Luther would move away from speaking this way about judgment and justification—in part because it is just plain confusing—but also because the role of Christ is not clear. In fact, it is important to remember that these thoughts from Romans were not ever delivered in his lectures in the classroom. They only represent

his preparations, his own thinking through the material. Nevertheless, the principle of faith that is represented here, namely faith, as the absolute and humble honoring of God's word, remained an important aspect of the doctrine of justification by faith throughout his life.

Faith is not incidental to our relationship to God, it constitutes it.

More clear is the fact that as fallen creatures, faith in God our creator is now impossible. Curved in on ourselves, we incessantly ascribe divinity to the creature rather than give thanks to the Creator (Rom 1), using the best things in the worst ways.¹⁶ Thus we can only receive God through Jesus, who as God's Son has revealed him to us as our creator and our loving heavenly Father. So we observe that Luther's description of Christ's work in the catechism is one of redemption and the transfer of lordships—bringing us out of the dominion of sin, death, and the devil to his own dominion so that he may return us again to the Father: “he has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor and grace.”¹⁷ This leads us to the next article, justification within the logic of Christ's person and work.

Second Article

Isn't justification always about the person and work of Christ? Indeed. But again, the approach I am using is a making a more specific point—that Luther can talk about being justified in Christ according to the logic of what it means that God is our creator, but also what it means that his Son is “born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate” and so on, or what it means in the context of “the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

One would think that the logic of the second article deals with atonement. It is certainly true that Luther could speak about Christ's suffering and death as *Genugtunng* (satisfaction), or *Erlösung* (redemption), or *Erwerb* (purchase or payment), but Luther does not work out a single or consistent “theory” of atonement.¹⁸ Some of his richest and most elaborate descriptions of Christ's saving work are cast in pugilistic themes—a great and mighty battle or duel between Christ and the devil, or Christ and the personification of death, or sin, or even the law.¹⁹ This *duellum mirabile motif*, Gustaf Aulen famously dubbed “Christus Victor” and while it is not Luther's only way of speaking about Christ's work it does appear to be one of his favorite ways.²⁰

In any event, when it comes to the doctrine of justification, the nature of the atonement isn't really the controverted issue. That Christ died for sins and the fruits of his cross are *for us* is largely common opinion throughout medieval theology. The question of justification has to do with the precise manner and scope in which Christ's person and work affects our final salvation. It is in this context that Luther

stresses the *vita passive*, the passive life, and centers on the meaning of passive righteousness.

Scholarly consensus has long recognized that a central feature of Luther's theology is his distinction between two kinds of righteousness.²¹ One righteousness is *active*, either in God or man, by which we act and judge in accordance with a standard of justice. But that is not the righteousness by which we are justified. The righteousness of God that comes to us through faith is not active but instead renders us passive, that is to say, we *suffer* (*passio*) the death of our old self and all of its idols, so that God might be our God and redeemer in Jesus Christ, and give life to our new self in him. The righteousness is passive because it is not we who act, but God who acts upon us. It is passive because we are joined to the path of the suffering, crucified Christ and risen Christ. Through faith, which clings to the promise of the gospel, we undergo a holy passion—not ours but Christ's:

He who presumes that he is righteous in any other way than by believing in Christ rejects Christ and considers Christ's passion and resurrection useless. However, the person who believes in Christ, who died, dies to sin himself at the same time together with Christ, and whoever believes in the resurrected and living Christ also rises and lives in Christ by the same faith, and Christ lives in him. Therefore, the resurrection of Christ is our righteousness and our life, not only by way of example but also by virtue of its power.²²

Christ's passion and resurrection is thus the ground and exemplar for our dying and rising in faith. We do not merely imitate him, Christ's death and resurrection is the very image for how God deals with us and not separately or apart from Christ, but in and with Christ.

Another aspect of Luther's second-article logic in justification is expressed in the traditional language of bridal-mysticism, which echoes Bernard of Clairvaux, and Johannes von Staupitz, along with what Luther would call the *der fröhliche Wechsel*, the happy exchange.²³ Here faith receives Christ who joins himself to the believing soul as a bridegroom to a bride. Like a wedded couple, they now share all things:

Faith . . . unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom . . . Christ and the soul become one flesh . . . it follows then that they come to hold all things, good and bad, in common. Accordingly, the faithful soul can both assume as its own whatever Christ has and glory in it, and whatever is the soul's Christ claims for himself as his own. . . . Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation; the soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith intervene [the wedding ring!] and it will turn out that sins, death and hell are Christ's, but grace, life, and salvation are the soul's. . . .

In Christ, her bridegroom, she has her righteousness, which she can enjoy as her very own property. (*Freedom of the Christian*, 1520)²⁴

There is also another way that has been proposed by some Luther scholars, especially the Finnish, namely that Luther's doctrine of justification, described as such a union with Christ ought to be regarded as a form of *theosis* or deification and thus compatible with the Eastern Orthodoxy.²⁵ The argument is that, for Luther, justification is not purely a forensic declaration of God's favor (*favor dei*) but that the gift (*donum*) of Christ's presence in faith is also a crucial aspect of what it means to be righteous. While they seem to be correct in recognizing that the presence of Christ in faith is essential to Luther's doctrine of justification, it is the opinion of many that to interpret this along the lines of *theosis* (that justification divinizes us) is to grossly overplay one's hand.²⁶ Still, it is worth noting that for Luther the second-article logic of justification is more than what some have caricatured as a mere legal fiction, a distant, detached imputation that happens only in the mind of God, but it also includes Christ's presence to the believer in faith.

A helpful example of this can be found in a letter that Philip Melanchthon wrote to Johannes Brenz in 1531. Evidently, Brenz was trying to grasp the evangelical teaching on justification but was focused on the inner renewal similar to Augustine's way of thinking. So Melanchthon wrote to help him out:

Regarding faith, I have figured out what your problem is. You still hold on to that notion of Augustine's, who though he rightly gets to the point of denying that the righteousness of reason is reckoned for righteousness before God, he next imagines that we are counted righteous on account of that fulfillment of the law which the Holy Spirit works in us. So you imagine that people are justified by faith, because we receive the Holy Spirit by faith, so that afterwards we can be righteous by the fulfillment of the law which the Holy Spirit works in us.

This notion places righteousness in our fulfillment, in our cleanness or perfection, even though this renewal must follow faith. But you should turn your eyes completely away from this renewal and from the law, and toward the promise and Christ, and you should think that we are righteous, that is, accepted before God, and find peace of conscience, on account of Christ, and not on account of that renewal. . . . We are righteous, not on account of love, not on account of the fulfillment of the law, not on account of our new life, even though these things are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but on account of Christ; and we lay hold of this only through faith.²⁷

Melanchthon's theology is refreshingly clear here: he sees that Brenz is confusing justification and sanctification, focusing on the inward renewal. And so Melanchthon distinguishes sharply from what happens on the inside and directs Brenz *outside* of himself to the promise of Christ and the acceptance of God on account of Christ.

But then Luther himself writes a postscript to the letter and says this:

And I, dear Brenz, in order to get a better grip on this issue frequently imagine it this way: as if in my heart there is no quality that is called faith or charity, but instead of them I put in Christ himself and say: this is my righteousness . . . I want *Him* to be my gift and teaching in Himself, so that I may have all things in Him. So he says: "I am the way, the truth and the life." He does not say: I *give you* the way, the truth and the life, as if He worked in me while being placed outside of me. He must be such things in me, remain in me, live in me, speak not through me but into me, 2 Cor. 5; so that we may be righteousness in Him, not in love or in gifts that follow.

So there it is; Melanchthon says, "Look to Christ *outside* of me" and Luther says, "Look to Christ *in* me." And it would seem that Luther finds both ways of talking compatible, both imputation and union with Christ. In fact, I would argue that this union of Christ and the believer, this presence of Christ in which we are joined to his suffering and resurrection, exchange his righteousness for our sins—this is, in part, what Luther understands by imputation. However, I would also argue that the language of imputation is actually best understood according to the logic of the third article and it is to that we now turn.

Third Article

Luther has a distinct and powerful way of talking about justification that runs within the logic of the third article; however, this aspect has received less attention. This fact is striking, especially since it seems to be precisely within the logic of the third article that the late-medieval debate on justification is expressed, whether that be the nature of forgiveness, the Spirit's gift of grace, the consequence of post-baptismal sin, and so on. In this regard, Albrecht Ritschl was correct: Luther's crisis over justification was a crisis about the assurance of salvation *after* one is already in a converted state rather than a question about conversion. To put it another way, Luther's question about justification is one that arises while he is already within the communion of the "one holy catholic and apostolic church," as one who has already received the "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." Perhaps the best way to express this is that Luther's doctrine of justification has a strong sense of eschatological urgency. It is shaped by anxiety over God's final judgment—at one's personal eschatology in death, and at the end of all things on the last day.

Luther was terrified of the image of Christ as judge. He lived in fear of the day



Christ du Jugement Dernier (*Christ of the Judgment Day*) as sculpted into the central portal of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Amiens, France (Photo credit: Guillaume Piolle / CC BY 3.0)

that he would have to render account for his deeds. The presence of Christ in the mass was particularly terrifying so that even the corpus Christi procession and sight of the host in the monstrance filled him with dread. After his evangelical insight into justification, one of Luther's frequent handles for teaching the gospel was to encourage his readers and hearers to avoid thinking of Jesus as judge, but rather to think of him as our savior and brother.

Luther's eschatology is often depicted as comparatively weak and underdeveloped. Yet this can only be the case if eschatology is conceived separately from justification. Luther does not. Again, this should not be interpreted as a weakness in Luther's eschatology; rather it should be recognized as an eschatological dimension to his doctrine of justification.

To illustrate this I want to focus on two areas. The first goes back to the problem of his breakthrough and Luther's struggle to understand "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17. The second will take its cue from Romans 4:25, "Jesus who was delivered up for our transgressions, and *raised for our justification.*"

You will remember the problem of his 1545 reflections on his breakthrough.

Luther clearly considered his first lectures on the Psalms (1513–1515) as inferior, in part because he did not yet understand the meaning of *iustitia Dei*, “the righteousness of God” as he found it in Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Once he came to understand that this righteousness was not the measure by which God was to judge him but was rather his gift to us, Luther said the whole of Scripture was opened to him. Racing through the Scriptures, he found other genitives that could be taken in the same way: the wisdom of God, the strength of God, and so on. The problem is, when one examines those first “inferior” lectures on the Psalms, this insight seems to be already present:

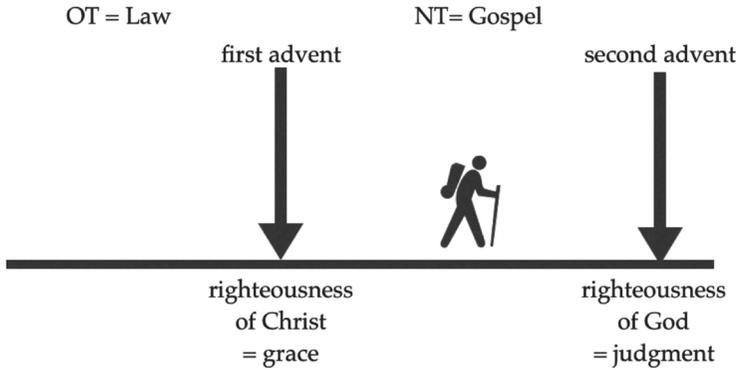
“Judgment [of God]” expresses the true nature of humility, which is the disparagement, contempt, and the complete damnation of oneself. This is especially the case where the word is coupled with “righteousness” . . . This is called the “judgment of God” in the same way as *righteousness*, *strength*, or *wisdom of God*, i.e. that by which we are wise, strong, righteous, and humble—or by which we are judged.²⁸

So what gives? Is Luther just mistaken? More importantly, if this is not his evangelical breakthrough then what is it? If we look more closely at Luther’s first Psalms commentary, I think that we can see at least part of the answer. This will feel a bit like foreign territory to most of us. Luther has very different assumptions about biblical exegesis than we do, especially in this time where he continues to be steeped in allegory and the fourfold sense of the Scriptures. I will keep it as clear and simple as I can, but the reader will need to walk with me “into the weeds” a bit.

In Luther’s very first Psalms lectures, he understands them to be prophetic texts that either speak in the person of Christ or refer to the time of Christ. Furthermore, the dominant way in which Luther understands the gospel, at this time, is within the overall structure of salvation history. The Old Testament is the time of the law of Moses, but the New Testament is the time of the law of Christ (or the gospel); the Old Testament was a time of veiled mysteries and prophecies about Christ, and the New Testament was the time in which those mysteries were revealed and those prophecies were fulfilled. Within that structure, God’s people traversed. The faithful people of the Old Testament strained ahead, awaiting the coming of the Christ. Their entire piety, sacrificial system, and obedience to the law was a preparation for this promised future, this advent of the Messiah. Likewise, after Christ’s coming the faithful in the church were also urged forward toward the second advent of Christ. And in a similar way everything the Christian did was a preparation for the second, final coming of Christ.

While there were a variety of approaches to the doctrine of justification in the Middle Ages, all of them worked within this basic framework. The Christian was a *viator*—a pilgrim—traveling between the two advents of Christ. The first advent

provided him everything he needed for the journey. The fruits of Christ’s death and resurrection took away the guilt of original sin in baptism. Grace was repeatedly given in the sacraments so that the nature weakened by sin might gradually be healed. The church, also established by Christ, provided additional opportunities to cultivate Christian virtue through various works and acts of charity, assisted by grace all along the way. All of this, so that when the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, we might be ready—we might be righteous.



(Credit: Erik Herrmann)

And so we see this structure here in Luther’s Psalm lectures, at the very same place where he seems to have already discovered the evangelical meaning of the righteousness of God—that by which he makes us righteous, the wisdom of God that makes wise, and so on.

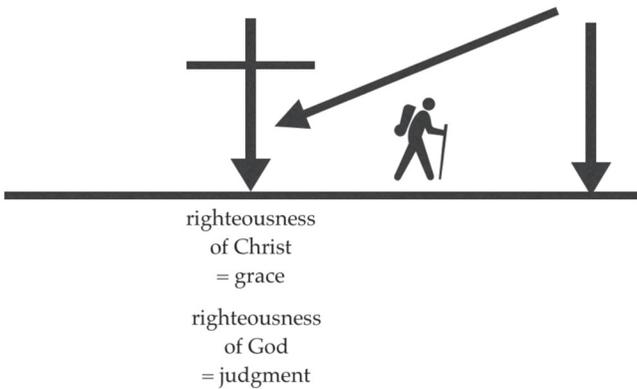
In Psalm 72, which begins with “Give the king your judgment (*iudicium*), O God, and your righteousness (*iustitiam*) to the son of the king, may he judge (*iudicare*) your people with righteousness (*iustitia*),” Luther reflects on the meaning of judgment and righteousness. He says:

In the scriptures of the Old Testament, “judgment” and “righteousness” rarely refer to the future [i.e. the Last Day] . . . for this is because the Old Testament prophesied only about the *first advent of Christ*. In this advent Christ rules with kind and salutary judgment. For this first advent is one of grace and kindness. . . . But the New Testament prophesies only about the future judgment and righteousness [of the Last Day], since the New Testament prophesies about the *second advent of Christ* which will be severe judgment and eternal punishment.²⁹

So what is Luther’s problem with “righteousness”? It’s not that he can’t conceive of it as a gift from God. In fact, that is what the whole Old Testament is pointing to when it anticipates the first coming of Christ. Here Christ graciously bestows his righteousness to his church with the gift of grace. Rather, the problem is what “righteousness” means in the *New Testament*. What does righteousness mean *in Paul*? For when the New Testament talks about righteousness, Luther believed that it is primarily talking about the righteousness of God that serves as a standard for his judgment of us. So when Paul says the gospel has revealed the righteousness of God, Luther sees nothing but the overwhelming obligation to use the grace of Christ well, to invest the talent so that when the master returns he has something to show for it.

So how then does one describe Luther’s insight, his evangelical breakthrough? It is this: that the righteousness of God by which we are judged on the last day *is the righteousness that has already been given to us in the cross of Christ*.³⁰ The Christ who was born of the blessed Virgin, who suffered and died and rose again, who is present to the believer in faith, he is the coming of the last day ahead of time, he bears the judgment of the *dies irae* by becoming, in Luther’s words, “the only and greatest sinner.”³¹ The gift of righteousness in Christ is the *imputation* of God’s judgment, it is his final verdict, it is the in-breaking of the eschaton.

The exchange that Luther talks about is the “happy exchange” in which Christ takes on my sins and I take on his righteousness. But this exchange is only meaningful when it is seen in its entirety against the background of God’s judgment—when it concerns God’s judgment and his verdict. What happens in this event, in the death and intervention of Jesus for our sins, is not something that occurs contemporaneously, but it is an end-time event. The righteousness that Christ brings is dedicated to us finally and conclusively at the time of the last judgment. Therefore, when faith



(Credit: Erik Herrmann)

grasps this righteousness it makes the person eternally righteous; he lives entirely from what God has promised him and grasps his future-self as his only true being. God does not lie; the promise that he has made to us he will most certainly keep.³²

This is why Luther tends not to talk about our righteousness as Christ's earthly fulfillment of the law on our behalf, as latter Lutheranism and Reformed theology will do when talking about Christ's "active obedience."³³ Instead, Luther identifies our righteousness with the presence of Christ himself or with his resurrection. Thus we see how close Luther's doctrine of justification can be to Paul's when Paul writes in Romans chapter four, "It will be reckoned to us [as righteousness] who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and *raised for our justification*." This resurrection is no mere past event; Jesus has ushered in the last days with his resurrection and has given us a glimpse, promise, and foretaste of our future when we will rise and experience God's gift of righteousness fully. Here are just a few examples of Luther linking justification to the resurrection and righteousness to the Creed's third article:

- "The death of Christ is the death of sin, and his resurrection is the life of righteousness, for through his death he made satisfaction for sin and through his resurrection he delivers righteousness to us. Thus, his death does not merely signify but also accomplishes the remission of sins as an all-sufficient satisfaction. His resurrection is not only the sacrament of our justification, but it effects this righteousness in us, if we believe in it. The resurrection is its cause."³⁴
- "In his suffering Christ makes our sin known and thus destroys it, but through his resurrection he justifies us and delivers us from all sin, if we believe this."³⁵
- "Wherever there is faith, eternal life has already begun"³⁶
- "The article of the resurrection is the highest and foremost article of the Christian faith"³⁷
- "Not only are all our sins eliminated and destroyed through Christ's death, but also that through his resurrection we are to become righteous, as Paul says in Rom. 4, 'Christ was handed over for our sins and he was raised again for our righteousness.'"³⁸

Conclusion

Luther's doctrine of justification is not a single concept, to be distilled by a single phrase. It is a complex and vibrant doctrine shaped and informed uniquely by each article of the creed even as it runs like a thread through all three. Attending to Luther teaching on justification in this way also, hopefully, opens up for us the rich and diverse ways that this chief article of Christendom continues to bear witness to our God and the great love with which he loves us in his Son.

Endnotes

- 1 LW 34:336–337.
- 2 See the *Formula of Concord*, article 3.
- 3 For more on Albrecht Ritschl's interpretation of Luther see, David Lotz, *Ritschl and Luther. A Fresh Perspective in Albrecht Ritschl's Theology in the Light of His Luther Study* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974).
- 4 James M. Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 5.
- 5 For a very helpful survey of the debate with excerpts from the various secondary literature see Bernard Lohse, ed. *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968); idem, *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther: neuere Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart : F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1988).
- 6 Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 4: "There can be no doubt that every description of Luther's theology is at least linked to a given author's often very personal attempt to make a statement, so that some descriptions are plainly the author's personal confession. . . . As a result, for many of them, the distinction between their own point of view and the picture of Luther's theology can be drawn only with difficulty."
- 7 See my article "Rhetorical Frameworks for Justice: Creedal Perspectives on Christian Compassion in the World," in *Concordia Journal* 39 (Summer 2013): 217–226.
- 8 E.g. Heidelberg Disputation, 1518, explanation to thesis 16: "The law humbles, grace exalts. The law effects fear and wrath, grace effects hope and mercy. Through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20), through knowledge of sin, however, comes humility, and through humility grace is acquired. Thus an action which is alien to God's nature (*opus alienum dei*) results in a deed belonging to his very nature (*opus proprium*): he makes a person a sinner so that he may make him righteous." Explanation to thesis 24: "He, however, who has emptied himself through suffering no longer does works but knows that God works and does all things in him. . . . He knows that it is sufficient if he suffers and is brought low by the cross in order to be annihilated all the more. It is this that Christ says in John 3:7, 'You must be born anew.' To be born anew, one must consequently first die and then be raised up with the Son of Man. To die, I say, means to feel death at hand."
- 9 See David C. Steinmetz, "Luther, the Reformers, and Bible," in *Living Traditions of the Bible: Scripture in Jewish, Christian & Muslim Practice*, ed. James Bowley (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 1999), 167f.
- 10 Cf. Albrecht Beutel, "Luthers Auegung des ersten Gebotes" in *Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott' – Das erste Gebot in säkularisierter Zeit*. Veröffentlichungen der Luther-Akademie e.V. Ratzeburg, Band 24, hg.v. Joachim Heubach, 1995. Pp. 65–108; Charles Arand, "Luther on the God Behind the First Commandment," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (Winter, 1994): 397–423.
- 11 LW 26:227.
- 12 See, for example, Luther's *Treatise on Good Works*, 1520, LW 44:15–114.
- 13 WA 56, 226, 23–26; LW 25:211.
- 14 WA 56, 227, 19–228, 2; LW 25:212.
- 15 See the diagram and his comments on Psalm 51 in the Dictata, WA 55 II, 271, 77–272, 115; LW 10:237–239. See also in his Romans lectures, WA 56, 218; LW 25:204: "Therefore we conclude that God in his words cannot be—wise, righteous, truthful, strong, good—unless we believe him and submit to him by confessing that we are—foolish, unrighteous, liars, weak, evil."
- 16 Cf. Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 24: "Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner." See also Heather Choate Davis, *Man Turned In On Himself: Understanding Sin in 21st-Century America* (Icktank Press: 2014).
- 17 LC, Creed, 30.
- 18 See Robert Kolb, "'Not without the Satisfaction of God's Righteousness.' The Atonement and the Generation Gap between Luther and His Students" *Archive für Reformationgeschichte: Sonderband: Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa, Interpretation und Debatten*, ed. Hans R. Guggisberg und Gottfried G. Krodel. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1993), 136–156.

- 19 See Uwe Rieske-Braun, *Duellum mirabile: Studien zum Kampfmotiv in Martin Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).
- 20 Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (SPCK: 1931).
- 21 Distinguishing the righteousness of faith and the righteousness of the law as two fundamentally different kinds, that is, two different sources, spheres, and ends, is prominent throughout Luther's writings (e.g. Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness [1519]; Galatians commentary [1519], ch. 2:16f.; Galatians commentary [1535], preface). For the role that two kinds of righteousness play in Lutheran theology more broadly, see Charles Arand, "Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospel in the Apology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 417–39; Charles Arand and Robert Kolb, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).
- 22 WA 2; 455, 1 6–23; LW 27; 1 68.
- 23 See Friedrich Ruhland, *Luther und die Brautmystik nach Luthers Schrifttum bis 1521 (Giessen: 1938); Theobald Beer, Divus Bernhardus: Bernhard von Clairvaux in Martin Luthers Schriften*, (Mainz: 1993); Jack Kilcrease, "The Bridal-Mystical Motif in Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther," in *Journal for Ecclesiastical History* 65 (April 2014), 263-79; David Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980); Idem, "Religious ecstasy in Staupitz and the young Luther," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 (1980), 23-37. See also Ulrich Asendorf, 'Die Grundzüge der Theologie Luthers im lichte seines Ansatzes vom 'admirabile commercium'', in Peter Manns (ed.), *Martin Luther 'Reformator und Vater im glauben'* (Stuttgart: 1985), 262-79; Theobald Beer, *Der fröhliche Wechsel und Streit: Grundzüge der theologie Martin Luthers*, (Einsiedeln: 1980); F.W. Kantzenbach, 'Luthers Gedanke vom fröhlichen Weschsel', *Lutherjahrbuch* 35 (1964): 34-45; and Raymund Schwager, 'Der fröhliche Wechsel und Streit: zur Erlösungs- und Rechtfertigunglehre Martin Luthers', *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 106 (1984): 27–66.
- 24 LW 31:352.
- 25 See Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress: 2005); Carl Braaten and Robert Jensen, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1998).
- 26 See, for example, William Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are?: Anthropology and the Theology of Theosis in the Finnish School of Tuomo Mannermaa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).
- 27 MBW 1151, Texte 5, 104–113: Mel. To J. Brenz in 1531.
- 28 LW 10:406.
- 29 LW 10:407.
- 30 Heiko Oberman, "Iustitia Christi and Iustitia Dei: Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification," *Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 59, No. 1 (January, 1966): 1–26.
- 31 LW 58:45.
- 32 Hans J. Iwand, *The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 77–78.
- 33 Cf. Erik Herrmann, "Conflicts on Righteousness and Imputation in Early Lutheranism: The Case of Georg Karg, (1512–1576)," in *From Wittenberg to the World: Essays on the Reformation and Its Legacy in Honor of Robert Kolb*, eds. Charles P. Arand, Erik H. Herrmann, and Daniel L. Mattson. (Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 2018), 93–108.
- 34 WA 56; 296,17–23; LW 25:284.
- 35 WA 2; 140,22–26; LW 42:12f.
- 36 WA 31/I, 156; LW 14:88.
- 37 WA 28, 429, 14–24.
- 38 WA 52; 246, 36–247,22.

Luther on Justification Relevant or Irrelevant?

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Gerhard Forde noted, “Arguing for the relevance of justification by faith is perhaps like making an apology for marriage in a brothel. Those who have some inkling of what is involved will not need to be convinced, and those who do not will hardly be convinced by such an exercise.”¹ To make things

clear from the start: those committed to justifying themselves whether to their Maker, others, or even themselves will not find Luther’s view of justification relevant. But those burned out on religion or the attempt to prove their worth, whether before God, others, or themselves, will find it delightful news indeed. Justification should not be reduced to a doctrinal disagreement with the Roman Catholic Church or other Christian groups. Such a disagreement exists, but the doctrine of justification is far more than a polemical teaching. Instead, more than anything, it clarifies the nature of the gospel and allows us to preach the gospel in its purity, unalloyed with the works of the law. It gives us insight into the nature of all sinners: they are inherently and incessantly self-justifying.

Editor's note

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Not Merely an Ecumenical Matter

Those who see Luther's doctrine of justification as contributing to an ecumenical breach to be bridged see the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) as the answer. At one level, we can be grateful for the work showcased in this proposal. After all, member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, along with the Roman Catholic Church (and now the World Methodist Council²) confess: "In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ."³ The *JDDJ* does a remarkable job voicing the nuances of where Lutherans and Catholics have tension points over the doctrine of justification and the Christian life, but for all that, we must admit that it does not settle the major disagreements between Lutheran theology and Roman Catholic theology.

For Lutherans, justification is essentially a declaration of "not guilty" and "righteous" pronounced by God for the sake of Christ, as opposed to the Roman Catholic conviction that justification is primarily an internal process in which believers are transformed and "made" increasingly righteous.⁴ The question of whether or not the weight in the doctrine of justification should be placed finally on an external word that changes sinners' reality or instead on an internal, healing, or sanative movement within believers distinguishes Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Undoubtedly, Roman Catholics are anxious that the Lutheran view leads to negligence in a Christian's growth in holiness. Such growth is believed to be essential for a Christian's ultimate beatitude. But even St. Augustine was off key in his claim that when God crowns our merits he is crowning nothing other than his own gifts.⁵ As a neo-Platonic thinker, Augustine was unable to get the direction of justification right.⁶ This is because Christology and justification are two sides of one doctrine: what God accomplishes in Christ (atonement) he applies to believers (justification).⁷ Hence, the Lutheran tradition urges us not to "bury Christ"⁸ but instead to "use Christ."⁹ We also must realize that God's word imputing forgiveness to sinners for Jesus's sake also transforms our lives, gives us life and salvation, new hearts.

Most importantly, the *JDDJ* did not override the canons of the Council of Trent, which remain authoritative, binding dogma. Canons IX, XII, and XIV rule out any perspective on justification, which requires nothing other than faith or that trusts in nothing other than mercy.¹⁰ Surely, Lutherans can be grateful for a warmer rapport with Roman Catholics than they had even six decades ago. But even with the *JDDJ*, ecumenicity between Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Church does not promise any quick healing of the sixteenth-century breach. Opposing grammar still exists behind the language that the *JDDJ* agrees on.

Dismissal of the Vertical Dimension

If ecumenism is in part motivated by the rise of a post-Christendom West, then we need to explore how Luther's doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone fares in a secular world. Luther developed his doctrine of justification in the context of Christendom, that is, an environment that axiomatically took for granted the truth of the Christian faith. This does not mean that everyone in Europe was a practicing Christian, let alone a believer. While most pockets of paganism had long been conquered, not every European was looking for a gracious God. After all, many were confident of their ability to earn salvation. Others were spiritually indifferent, and a minority were even skeptical of orthodox Christianity, the *Epicureans* as Luther and Melancthon called them. But even those Renaissance skeptics did not deny the existence of God or the role of a vertical dimension in life—that we are held accountable to God and find our ultimate good in God alone—in addition to a horizontal dimension—that our lives are intertwined with all other creatures.

In the Middle Ages, it was common to see life as an itinerary on a ladder pointed toward heaven in which grace helps pilgrims grow closer and closer to God. Those in purgatory, for instance, eventually would be purified of their sin and be able to enter paradise. In no way did Luther undermine the distinction between the vertical, humans' relation with God, and the horizontal, humans' relation with each other and the earth. If anything, Luther intensified this distinction since he believed that the human is rendered wholly passive before God, a thought foreign to the majority of his peers of whatever theological school, other than mystical thinkers such as Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361) or the anonymous author of the *German Theology* or his mentor Johann von Staupitz (c. 1460–1524).¹¹ The affirmation of both horizontal and vertical dimensions was both axiomatic and non-negotiable for Luther as it would be for the vast majority of late medieval and early modern thinkers. But within the five centuries between us and Luther this distinction has radically changed. In a word, the publics of the academy and society (including education, the media, and much of the political realm) have sought to erase the vertical realm.

This is a significant cultural shift and bears upon the credibility of the doctrine of justification. Luther, along with the majority of medieval and early modern thinkers, believed more than anything that we are ultimately accountable to God. But many modern educators, therapists, business people, politicians, and others believe that you are first of all accountable to yourself. If there is a God, God is of value only to the degree that God helps you feel good about yourself. For the most part, God does not and should not interfere with your life and decisions. This stance, popular especially among younger Americans, has been termed “therapeutic moral deism.”¹² Many of the people to whom you will minister are “therapeutic moral deists.” Naturally, they are bound to give you a mixed reception when you engage them. While many Americans cling to some kind of spirituality in their private lives, whether it be an “inner voice,” a “higher power,” Yoga, New Age, enneagrams, or social media quizzes,

the tendency is to interpret public life either pantheistically, that is, that everything in the world (apart from any vertical dimension) is sacred, or atheistically, the view that there is no God, that the horizontal dimension alone is real.

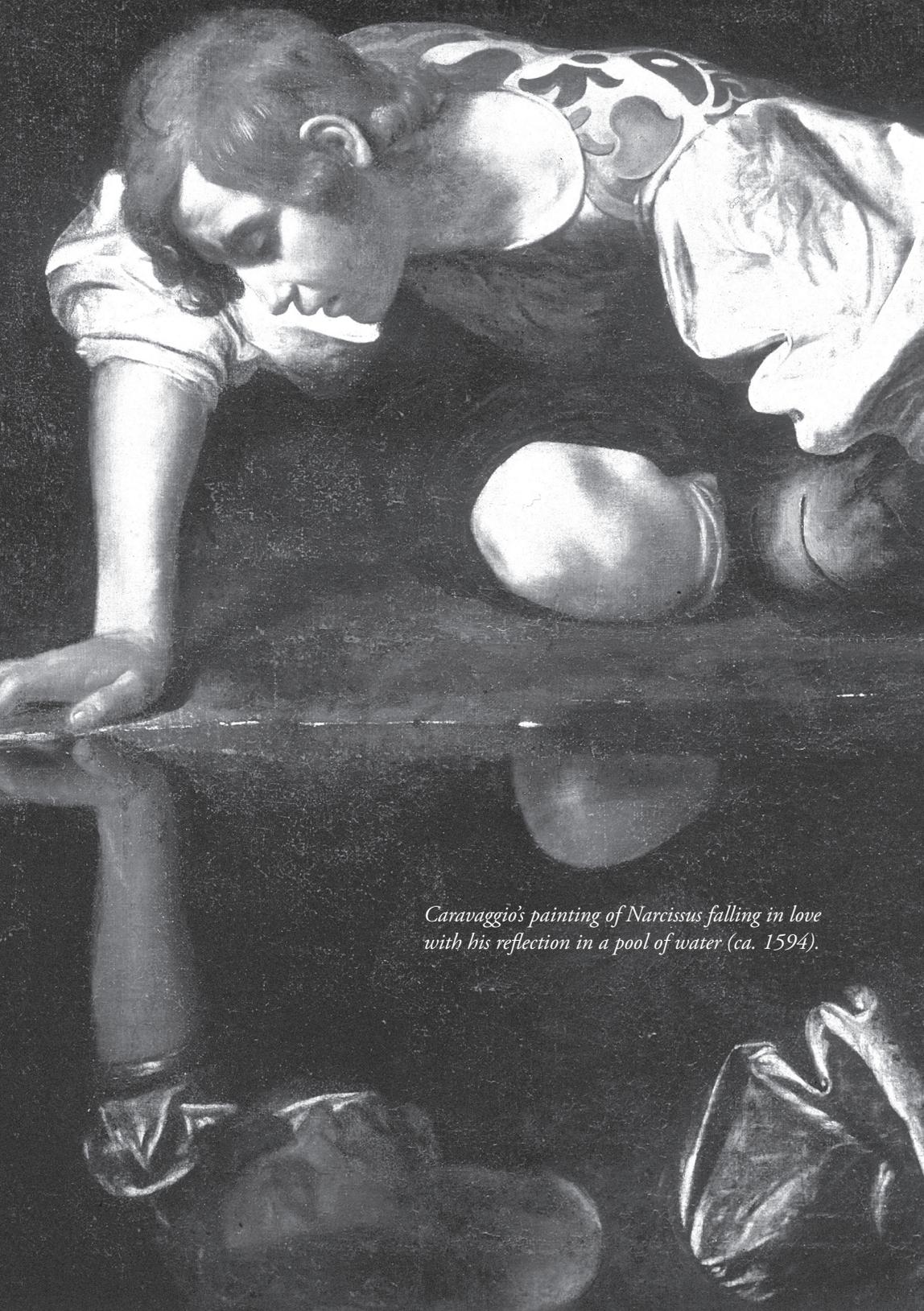
Contemporary Epicureanism and Gnosticism

G. K. Chesterton once noted, “When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.” Many modern people are far more religious, even superstitious, than they realize. The more secular we become, excluding the biblical God from the public square, the more that spiritual void is filled by retrieving the ancient perspectives of either Epicureanism or Gnosticism. For contemporary Epicureans, nothing is more sacred than individual liberty, provided one does no harm to others. For contemporary Gnostics, nothing is more sacred than the self. Neither position can be proven true beyond any doubt. They are faith stances. But they are the faith stances to which many in education, therapy, business, the media, or government default. Seldom do such leaders ever reflect on the reality or unreality of these stances.

It would help to make our secular friends and co-workers aware that their stance is no indisputable, privileged truth vested by science, but instead merely one other ideology to purchase in the agora of ideas. That is, what is non-negotiable—even untouchable—among the privileged in the educational, therapeutic, social, economic, and political establishments is actually open to challenge from the perspective of Christian faith. That is where an appreciation of apologetics is vital for contemporary gospel preachers.¹³ The practice of both Epicureanism and Gnosticism comes at a price: the anomie experienced by so many today is a result of a dissociation from traditional faith with its ability to anchor hearts in God’s love. To my way of thinking, this is nothing other than an outworking of God’s wrath, even though it is not named as such. Ironically, God having turned his face on their ideologies, these peers are chained to the “unencumbered self”¹⁴ which values maximal liberties from external and internal constraints that would check its drive to explore and affirm itself. It is no wonder that many Americans feel a lack of purpose (since they have no sense of vocation) and loneliness (since they are untethered from vital faith communities that

The anomie experienced by so many today is a result of a dissociation from traditional faith with its ability to anchor hearts in God’s love.

can support them through thick and thin). Modern men and women are like Narcissus, gazing ever at their own perceived uniqueness, goodness, and beauty, not realizing just how ugly this makes them, since nothing is quite as ugly as self-centeredness. Nor do they realize how it leads them, as it did for the original Narcissus, to death, closing off any real communication, in spite of



Caravaggio's painting of Narcissus falling in love with his reflection in a pool of water (ca. 1594).

Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Social media are at the forefront of undermining communication; they devalue the give and take that happens in communication and substitute a tribalism encoded by memes and internet links of concern only to similarly high-minded thinkers as themselves.

Secularism's Impact on Justification

Given the pervasiveness of this secularization, it is little wonder that by the early 1960s many Lutherans questioned the relevance of Luther's doctrine of justification. This uncertainty was summarized well by Horst Symanowski (1911–2009) when he noted that Luther's question "How can I find a gracious God?" . . . unleashed crusades and started wars. It drove man and would not let him sleep. But how many people today are awakened to rise and seek an answer to that question? . . . another question does drive us . . . unsettles us, agitates whole people, and forces us into anxiety and despair: How can I find a gracious neighbor?"¹⁵ To which Gerhard Forde rightly responded: "good luck!" Forde noted that the modern world no longer makes a distinction between human judgment and God's judgement. Modern people tend to make God a "patsy" since their goal is not to live a godly life but to have their chosen lifestyles affirmed.¹⁶ Forde's insight in contrast is that people are apt to be gracious to others if they themselves have received grace. But counter to Forde, modern people bypass grace for acceptance and justification for tolerance. They are disinclined to confess their sins. Instead, they crave acceptance but seldom get it. Thereby, they often see themselves not as sinners but instead as victims.

Similar to Symanowski's reframing of Luther's quest for a gracious God was the 1963 Lutheran World Federation (Helsinki) evaluation of justification:

The Reformation witness to justification by faith alone was the answer to the existential question: "how do I find a gracious God?" Almost no one asks this question in the world in which we live today. But the question persists: "How do I find meaning for my life?" When man seeks for meaning in his life he is impelled to justify his existence in his own eyes and before his fellow men. He then proceeds to judge his fellow men by these same standards. This is why men are confident of their own accomplishments and avid for recognition and fame. It also explains why there is so much mutual accusation and condemnation. Do men not all compulsively pursue dreams of the future which they expect will give validity to their lives?

As much as I find this assessment a sellout of the vertical dimension, so crucial to Luther, it has a hidden promise that helps us move forward. In public life, there has been clearly a change of context for the doctrine of justification from Luther's time to our time. Our time has undermined the vertical dimension altogether. All

*The doctrine of
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that remains is the horizontal, a flat-line approach to culture, nature, and history, which construes the world as lacking purpose, let alone depth. Its modus operandi is cartography, mapping we see in the periodic table of elements, the human genome, the biochemistry of the brain, or the attempt to manage social inequities, through housing projects and the like. To be sure, much good has come from this.

Humans have learned much about nature at both the microscopic and macroscopic, the individual and the social, levels. But lacking a sense of purpose, people are left in a lugubrious anomie.

However, quite helpfully, this LWF document clarifies the unvarying feature between Luther's century and our own: because of our original sin, humans are self-justifying, and self-justifying to the core. In the sixteenth century, like for some today, that meant to justify oneself before God (*coram Deo*). Contemporary people not seeking to justify themselves *coram Deo* still are driven to justify themselves before their fellow humans (*coram hominibus*) or to themselves. The Lutheran insight into fallen human nature is that all, at their core, are insecure, and, for this reason, all will seek to justify themselves through their deeds or through the ideologies to which they are aligned.

Unlike their sixteenth-century forebears, such self-justifiers today eschew any talk of God as judge. No doubt, that is a good defensive tactic, since the biblical God knows all hearts, and holds all accountable. So, it is not surprising that people in twelve-step programs, for all the good that these movements do, look not to the God who forgives but instead to a god, a higher power, of one's "own understanding" who accepts them, rather than forgives them. This is a shame, since many in recovery could experience release from their guilt through the word of absolution and thereby be empowered for newness of life.

A Neo-Freudian Defense of the Vertical Dimension

For all the attempts to erase the vertical dimension or police its presence in public life, it is not clear that it is erasable. At least this is what is indicated by the research of the late Ernest Becker, whom Gerhard Forde appropriated to translate Luther's doctrine of justification into a stance viable for modern Americans. It is worth our time to understand Becker's perspective on human nature and why a good case can be made that the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone can speak to broken-hearted people today.

Counter to Freud's contention that, more than anything, humans repress their sexuality, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Becker contends

that instead they repress their awareness of their mortality, that is, that death ever hovers on the horizon. For Becker, human nature is inherently insecure and unstable. Humans live in a paradox because on the one hand they are mortal, marked by death, and on the other they are imaginative beings hungry for their existence to be validated. In scriptural terms, we are born Pharisees or, in light of the parable of the Prodigal Son, “elder brothers.” In Becker’s words:

Man is not just a blind glob of idling protoplasm, but a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter. His sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea composed of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper. And this means that man’s natural yearning for organismic activity, the pleasures of incorporation and expansion, can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into immortality.¹⁷

So, in order to live, we do not need just food, water, and oxygen. We need a sense of meaning or purpose, visibly expressed through symbols, that validates our lives and affirms before an everlasting tribunal that our lives are worth living. Given that humans are tribal, we are bound to give allegiance to conflicting systems of validation. We are set up to behave as jealously as Cain who resentfully took Abel’s life. (But, note that when God marks Cain in order to protect him from any potential vengeance, God is justifying a sinner.¹⁸) To be sure, we must acknowledge that Becker is not describing human nature as it has come directly from God’s hand. Instead, like any social scientist, he is actually describing *sinful* human nature, even if he is unaware of the concept of sin.

For Becker, humans as both finite and free, or mortal and symbolic, seek to be “heroic.”

An animal who gets his feeling of worth symbolically has to minutely compare himself to those around him, to make sure he doesn’t come off second-best. Sibling rivalry is a critical problem that reflects the basic human condition: it is not that children are vicious, selfish, or domineering. It is that they so openly express man’s tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he counts more than anything or anyone else.¹⁹

The upshot is that Becker’s way of thinking undermines the plausibility of a default secular stance that erases the vertical dimension to human existence. Now,

Becker's stance is unabashedly secular. It is not based on revelation nor is it an apologetic for Christian faith. But it undermines the notions that the human is somehow at its core non-religious or areligious and that religion is some kind of maladaptive epiphenomenon, a cul-de-sac in humanity's evolutionary history. Instead, religion is at the core of any given individual and at the core of any given society, whether individuals practice a particular faith tradition or not:

The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. When Norman O. Brown said that Western society since Newton, no matter how scientific or secular it claims to be, is still as "religious" as any other, this is what he meant: "civilized" society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money and goods *make man count* for more than any other animal. In this sense everything that man does is religious and heroic, and yet in danger of being fictitious and fallible.²⁰

Because the stench of death lingers over us, undermining the merit by which we wish to justify ourselves, we must embrace the heroic, however that may be symbolically expressed, and so establish our own lasting worth. Whether that value is established through buildings such as a Babylonian ziggurat, a Mayan temple, a Manhattan skyscraper, or symbols such as the peace sign, a Phi Beta Kappa handshake, or whatever, heroism is something to be established, worked at, and demonstrated. The human "has to earn his value as a person from his work, which means that his work has to carry the burden of justifying him. What does *justifying* mean for man? It means transcending death by qualifying for immortality."²¹ Indeed, the human "is the only organism in nature fated to puzzle out what it actually means to feel 'right.'"²² Following Søren Kierkegaard, Becker notes that when heroism is too demanding we "tranquelize ourselves with the trivial."²³ And we, thus, find ourselves here in the digital age of instant information, on-demand movies, and an endless stream of self-satisfied Facebook posts. Ennui, indeed.

The Social Nature of Anfechtung

On the basis of Becker's research, it is clear that the vertical dimension of human nature, so important to Luther's view of justification before God, is not so erasable as secular people would like to maintain. The vertical dimension is hardwired into human nature, whether it is expressed as in St. Augustine's view that the human heart is restless until it rests in God or through its literally hell-bent attempt to prove its ultimate and lasting worth. Luther's description of *Anfechtung* then should not be overly psychologized, that is, that Luther was looking for a gracious God to help him psychologically cope with his scrupulosity.²⁴ Instead, *Anfechtung* is more than an accidental psychological state but is

instead definitive of the core of any sinner's experience, because whatever symbol system to which sinners flee, whatever serves as their "higher power" apart from the scriptural God who in Jesus Christ promises mercy, contributes to the human plight. That is because all such systems seek to assist sinners in avoiding the unavoidable, death. Death cannot be managed, it can only be suffered.

In contrast to any attempt to manage death, the cross of Jesus Christ leads people smack dab into the valley of the shadow of death, from which there is no escape. Luther understood this as God's alien work, God's judgment upon sinners, precisely so that they would appropriate Jesus Christ as their only rescue from the cul-de-sac of heroism and the egoism that it feeds. Few have seen this truth about *Anfechtung* as clearly as Episcopal priest John Koch:

This concept, for Luther, represents what he considers to be a universal battle for meaning and reality in a world that is often devoid of self-evident answers. In essence, this is the word that describes a life lived in a world devoid of answers to the simple question, "why?" This is why he can consider both the Christian and the non-Christian to be "theologians," i.e., people who contemplate the existence or non-existence of god in light of lived human reality. In the Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus argues that this question begged by life, this "why?" is the one that arises after the "stage-set" of life collapses and is the point at which "everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement." Oswald Bayer argues that the question "why?" is synonymous to the question of "who are you?" and thereby "considers every human being to be a theologian, and every believing person to be a Christian theologian."²⁵

So let's be honest. For those committed to the program of heroism, as every sinner is, the doctrine of justification is neither plausible nor relevant. If God justifies the godless, it can only be as St. Paul understood it, a scandal (1 Cor 1:18–21). This is because in the language of the parable of the Prodigal Son the "elder brother" has a point when he complains to his father, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends" (Lk 15:29), and for that matter so do the self-righteous men planning to stone the adulteress (Jn 8), or the Galatian Judaizers hell-bent on circumcision with whom Paul had to contend. The only thing that can silence the law as expressed in the elder brother, the stone-throwers, or the Judaizers is that God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy.

Relevant for Whom?

So, is Luther's view of justification as relevant today as it was five hundred years

ago? The answer depends on who is being addressed. If you can continue to exist and establish your worth by exercising your own power, then the gospel is irrelevant. But if you are the one despairing of yourself, as described in thesis 18 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* (“It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ,”²⁶)

you will be beside yourself with joy when you receive the absolving word that forgives or the bread of life that delivers Christ’s last will and testament. As Luther makes clear, only those broken by the law (even in the quest for heroism) will receive the message of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ as relevant. The broken-hearted have come to recognize that all the works of the law, all heroism, all accrual of merit, cannot avail them. So, justification by faith is most relevant for any sinner who needs mercy, though the others will never be convinced until the law breaks them down. As thesis 26 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* makes clear, “the law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done.”²⁷ Faith unites you to the one who has done it all for you and so releases you not only from the burden of your sin but also the hounding of social or personal expectations of perfection and the symbolic world’s incessant demands of one-upmanship. You are “perfect” just as a child of God. Nothing more than faith can be added to make life meaningful, valuable, or beautiful.

Since grace and not law is the center of life, Luther’s view of justification continues to be a radical word.

A God Mercifully Wrestling for You

Since grace and not law is the center of life, Luther’s view of justification continues to be a radical word. It has refreshed those “burnt out on religion,” as Gerhard Forde put it. It should be better known among other Christians as well as secular people. The gospel is all so relevant for those hungry for mercy. After all, for Lutherans, grace is not merely the favor of God’s condescension to deal with mortals. It is surely that, but it is best seen more specifically as mercy. For Lutherans, sinners are saved not only from sin, death, and the devil, but also from the law, indeed, God’s very own law. This is because the law always accuses. Such a view is not *imposed upon* scripture but *grows out* of scripture. We can see this strife within God’s own life in Jesus’s rescue of the adulteress (Jn 8). God’s law is clear: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Lv 20:10). Leviticus offers no loopholes or provisions in the fine print: adulterers are to be executed. In this circumstance, if mercy should apply, it would be “Aim for the head!” Put the sinners out of their misery as quickly as possible! But when Jesus was put to the test with this specific situation by his opponents, those obsessed with religious, and social purity, Jesus hurled the charge back at them: “Let the one who is

without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8:7). Jesus preached the accusing law to the woman’s accusers. Thereby, he thoroughly disarmed them, taking away not just the stones, but also the law written in stone. They wanted to use the law to feed their self-righteousness, and to entrap Jesus as an “antinomian” in the process. But their machinations only fueled Jesus’s case against them: before God we have no righteousness of our own to bring. *Coram Deo*, our sin, but also our heroism, righteousness, or goodness is problematic. Thus for Luther, theology’s first move is to destroy our sense of the good.

To be clear: Jesus was not just opposing his enemies, the Scribes and Pharisees. He was opposing God’s own law in the Torah. How could Jesus do this? Isn’t he God in the flesh? As the Savior, shouldn’t he be righteous and uphold the law? No doubt, he himself “fulfilled” the commandment not to commit adultery. But with this sinful woman he failed to uphold the law because he refused to allow anyone to strike her dead. One can picture the foreshadowing of his willingness to take the death penalty for her if the stones were to fly. The doctrine of justification is quite relevant to those who need an advocate to defend them from the accusations of God’s law whether in the Torah or society, or any accusation that the old adversary may hurl against God’s people.

Of course, the story of the woman caught in adultery is primarily one of foiled entrapment, specifically of Jesus. When it came down to it, Jesus’s opponents were less interested in upholding the law than they were in accusing Jesus. But given Jesus’s opposition to effecting the consequences of the law, the Scribes and Pharisees have a legitimate, that is, biblical and legal, complaint against Jesus. Not only is the law vulnerable to being used violently in the hands of evil people but it also fails to deliver the core of God’s economy with sinners: mercy to the repentant.

In Jesus’s defense of this sinful woman, we meet God *contra* God (*Gott gegen Gott*). God as mercy extended in Jesus’s intervention for a sinner in opposition to God who expresses himself in communal order and ritual purity. In receiving such mercy in Jesus, the New Testament embodied, the woman must flee from the God who wants her dead to the God who insists on doing nothing other than claim her as his own—for Jesus’s sake.

This incident is no mere outlier. Nor is it to be psychologized. The woman’s experience was social, not psychological. The inner experience of *Anfechtungen* exists only because of insecurities in the wider social world, and its history, outside or beyond the individual. After all, the experience of this woman is the experience of Israel itself. Israel’s story is that of exile and return, death and resurrection, since the nation was chronically unfaithful to its Lord and so suffered God’s judgment. God’s people were ever humbled by the surrounding powers and empires, through whom God chastened the people. The Scribes and Pharisees play out the script of pride and rebellion just as well as their predecessors did. By seeking to uphold the letter of the law, the Scribes and Pharisees fall short of Israel’s calling to protect the powerless, such as the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the foreigner, “to do justice, and

to love kindness, and to walk humbly with . . . God” (Mi 6:8), caring for the least, and seeking out “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15:24). The inner logic of such merciful behavior is grounded in the primary narrative of Israel, the Exodus. God’s people had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt. Knowing the plight of slaves, redeemed hearts should be open and generous to those entrapped, even if it is due to their own sin. God’s command to Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer illustrates God’s own covenant love to his own wayward people (Hos 3:1).

Sin is not merely about moral culpability. It is also about victimization. Earlier I mentioned our tendency to disown our responsibility for our lives by perceiving ourselves as victims. But we do in fact become victims of our own attempts at self-justification. We are victims of our own attempt to be heroes. Sinners fool themselves into thinking that they are free, that they can walk out of or away from their sin. They have no more power to do this than addicts have the ability to walk out of addictions solely by power of their will. Sin, like addiction, has captured the sinner. The law can show people the right way but is impotent to rescue them from bondage and situate them on a life-giving and wholesome path. The adulterer certainly does not deny her culpability. She was caught in the act. But her sin is not the only fact of her life. She too is a daughter of Abraham. Her only hope for rescue is Jesus. Jesus Christ is her defense. He stands against her adversaries. Even more importantly, he stands against God’s own Torah. He brings this defense home to the adulterer in the words of absolution, words that reconcile her to God in the present: “Neither do I condemn you” (Jn 8:11).

That word of absolution, given from the one who himself “knew no sin” but was made sin for us (2 Cor 5:21), is liberating. The woman is liberated from her accusers, but even scandalously, from God’s own accusation, God’s own law. Her defender is none other than Jesus before whom the law is silenced. Her life is now defined through Jesus, by his affirmation of her, by his validation of her, not as a sinner, but as a daughter of Israel. She must have been astonished! In such a redefinition of her life, the directive “go and sin no more” is plausible. Defined now by God’s love, rescued from death, hers is a natural, spontaneous heart of gratitude. A new way is opened for her because her identity is no longer that of *sinner* but instead that of *redeemed*. Captivated by God’s mercy, she herself can be merciful. Having appropriate boundaries established by Jesus in his discernment of righteousness for one oppressed by the law, she can maintain the appropriateness of sexual boundaries channeled in the marriage union.

The view of God inferred from this story testifies to neither a Marcionite nor a schizophrenic God. Instead, this God insists on mercy and will have our relationship to him be based on nothing other than mercy; God is in fact most glorified when we live from his mercy alone. God’s alien work of accusation exists solely for the proper work of mercy. The rupture between law and gospel (“Let him who is without sin among you”) is established for the sake of the gospel (“Neither do I condemn you;

God's alien work of accusation exists solely for the proper work of mercy.

go, and from now on sin no more.”) It can only happen because Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God-with-us, is the fulfillment of the law.

No wonder there are a percentage of Evangelicals who have adopted Lutheran views of justification in spite of their spiritual heritage of demanding our devotion to God. They daily experience the shallowness of the revivalist ploy that if we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior all will be fine. But that is not God's way with those whom he remakes to be people of faith. Wade Johnston notes:

The Spirit is not in this for a quick buck. He does not come in and flip a house. No, He renews it and makes it His own temple, His own eternal dwelling place. This is not a matter of some paint and new floors. The Holy Spirit kills and makes alive, drowns and raises. Transformation, as we understand it, is often measured in law. Baptism is measured in crosses, Christ's cross traced upon our head and our heart as the crosses we bear for Him”²⁸

The abundant life Jesus promises and the life-transforming changes it brings are to be had only when we grieve the illusion that we could ever serve as our own Atlas, holding up the entire world on our own shoulders. Daniel Deutschlander nails this truth: “Most human unhappiness is the result of self-service and the result of the very flawed assumption that other people exist primarily for the service of oneself.”²⁹ Freed from the pretense of being Atlas, we can be quite happy. We can, as Paul puts it, “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). But the flipside of the theology of the cross is that of resurrection. Luther noted, “God is repelled by sorrow of spirit; He hates sorrowful teaching and sorrowful thoughts and words, and He takes pleasure in happiness. For He came to refresh us, not to sadden us.”³⁰ Indeed, Luther acknowledged that “a renewal of the mind by the Holy Spirit” would result in “an outward change in the flesh, in the parts of the body, and in the senses. For when the heart acquires new light, a new judgment, and new motivation through the Gospel, this also brings about a renewal of the senses . . . these changes are, so to speak, not verbal; they are real. They produce a new mind, a new will, new senses, and even new actions by the flesh, so that the eyes, the ears, the lips, and the tongue not only see, hear, and speak otherwise than they used to, but the mind itself evaluates things and acts upon them differently from the way it did before.”³¹

The Social Outworking of Justification

Does the fact that the gospel grants not only forgiveness but also life and salvation whereby believers are empowered to do good works bear upon public life? Yes, insofar as you the believer do good in the world not for God's sake (God does not need your

good works, thank you very much!) but for your neighbor's sake. But counter to so many different views of the Christian life, the law does not exist for the purpose of personal growth in holiness. That way of thinking would return us to the fleshpots of Egypt and Rome. Indeed, there is no metric by which to monitor let alone measure holiness with respect to the reality of God. That God is ever greater than our abilities to fathom undermines our ability to measure any progress made in our Christian walk. Since we have died to our egoism in Christ, such self-monitoring is no longer our concern. Our concern is to glorify God and to serve our neighbors.³² As Luther notes, we will be perfected in the life to come.³³ But that is God's work and not our business.

That said, we Lutherans have a different witness than that of so many Christians who wish to christianize all of society and culture. That view grows out of the Reformed tradition, not the Lutheran. The Reformed have a somewhat different vision of the meaning of Reformation than that of Luther, one that wants a guarantee that not only the church will be reformed but also society will be morally transformed, that Christians should work for the christianization of society.³⁴ But while an outright secular, God-denying society is hardly a good thing, neither would a society be that seeks to weave all its laws, institutions, and schooling through the fabric of Christ, as if God is not already at work in non-Christians. In a sense, social institutions are already holy since they provide sufficient order for families to flourish, children to be nurtured, and elderly and the infirmed to be taken care of. Naturally, there is always room for improvement in these areas, but the attempt to christianize them threatens to de-humanize them. From the perspective of the gospel, not only is sin challenged, but even purity is suspect. The drive for purity haunts the elder brother and motivates the stone-throwers. While contemporary Lutherans should challenge outright secularism, a problem that Luther did not have to face, we should be wary of the Reformed tendency.

It is not that faith does not bear on public life or that one concedes to the regnant secularistic worldview. Lutherans seek neither exile from public life (like Mennonites) nor conquest of public life (like the Reformed). Instead, "The Lutheran stress on active righteousness widens our vision regarding the left-hand realm and seeks to identify the common ground for moral reflection between Christians and non-Christians"³⁵ insofar as such common ground can be established. Lutherans are apt to be whistle-blowers but never utopians. The gospel restores us to creation, not social engineering of either the right or left. Lutherans advocating traditional stances on abortion and marriage in the public realm do so because these stances accord with natural law, not the quest for an America as a "city shining on a hill." In a sense, if we use Charles Taylor's criteria of reform, Lutheranism fails as a "reform movement" — and confessional Lutherans are good with that.

What then is truly pleasing to God? What glorifies God? That is, after all, the core of what justification by grace alone through faith alone is all about. Lutherans are bold to confess that faith alone not only saves, but also is sufficient to express

For Lutherans, faith is at the heart or core of all people whether they acknowledge God's divinity or not. Human behavior, like human feeling, is an outgrowth of faith.

God's glory in human life.³⁶ Indeed, before God, it is faith alone that only ever could accord with God. Given that God always transcends any descriptors applied to him, at least for the Lutheran perspective, there is no comparative relation (*proportio*) by which to measure the proximity of human behavior in relation to the divine. The difference between God and humanity can be bridged only through Jesus Christ and the gospel.³⁷

For Lutherans, faith is at the heart or core of all people whether they acknowledge God's divinity or not. Human behavior, like human feeling, is an outgrowth of faith.

Conclusion

So, is justification by faith relevant or not? It depends who you ask. Those convinced that they can fit the bill of heroism will not be interested. Those who are crushed or despairing, who find no hope in themselves, are fit candidates for the good news. But to those broken by the law's accusations or adrift in life wondering if God is fair or if life at all makes sense, and so experience God as a hidden God, send a preacher.³⁸ Those with ready ears hear a gospel which establishes them as the objects rather than the subjects of a story where they are no longer the heroes, a story centered in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been baptized, one which begins "in the beginning" and which will end with a new heavens and new earth. They find justification by grace alone through faith alone most relevant indeed.

Endnotes

- 1 "The Christian Life" in *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2:462.
- 2 The World Methodist Council signed on to the *JDDJ* on July 23, 2006. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/meth-council-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20060723_text-association_en.html, accessed February 21, 2017.
- 3 The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), par. 15, 15.
- 4 The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (St. Louis: The Lutheran church—Missouri Synod, 1999), par. 4, 8.

5 Homilies on the Gospel of John, Tractate 3, 10; The Enchiridion, 106, 107; Grace and Free Will, 7, 16.

6 Steven Paulson, “The Augustinian Imperfection” in Wayne C. Stumme, ed., *The Gospel of Justification in Christ: Where Does the Church Stand Today?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 121.

7 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective*, 24.

8 “Disputation Concerning the Passage: “The Word Was Made Flesh”” in LW 38:240. See also Apology of the Augsburg Confession in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 133:81.

9 AC 131:69.

10 The Council of Trent (<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent.html>), accessed February 20, 2017.

11 Franz Posset, *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Works of Johann von Staupitz* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

12 Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

13 See Mark Mattes, “A Lutheran Case for Apologetics” in Logia XXIV:3 (Holy Trinity, 2015).

14 I am indebted to the late Ronald Thiemann for this phrase.

15 Gabriel Fackre, “Affirmations and Admonitions: Lutheran and Reformed” in Wayne C. Stumme, editor, *The Gospel of Justification in Christ: Where Does the Church Stand Today?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1.

16 “The Irrelevance of the Modern World for Luther” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark Mattes and Steve Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 76–77.

17 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 3.

18 See Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 8–11.

19 *The Denial of Death*, 4.

20 *The Denial of Death*, 5.

21 *The Denial of Death*, 109.

22 *The Denial of Death*, 151.

23 *The Denial of Death*, 177–178.

24 Against Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Consciousness of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56:3 (July 1963): 199–215.

25 *The Distinction between Law and Gospel as the Basis and Boundary of Theological Reflection* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 7.

26 LW 31:40.

27 LW 31:41.

28 Wade Johnston, *An Uncompromising Gospel: Lutheranism’s First Identity Crisis and Lessons for Today* (Irvine, CA: NRP, 2016), 83.

29 Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2009), 106.

30 Lectures on Galatians (1535), LW 27:93.

31 Lectures on Galatians (1535), LW 27:140.

32 Sasse summarizes well the differences between Lutherans and the Reformed on law and gospel: “Both communions wish to distinguish the Gospel from the Law and yet indicate the relation which subsists between them. Both acknowledge that the chief article of the Christian faith is the forgiveness of sins: the Lutherans consider it the *whole* content of the Gospel, while the Reformed consider it the *principal* content of the Gospel. Both know that Christ preached the Law as well as the Gospel, even as the Old Testament contains the Gospel as well as the Law. Both know that the church must proclaim the whole Word of God, both the Law and the Gospel. The difference lies in the fact that the Reformed believe that both Law and Gospel are parts of Christ’s real work, and consequently are essential functions of the church; the Lutheran Church, on the other hand, teaches that the preaching of the Law is the “strange”; and the preaching of the

Gospel is the “real,” work of Christ, and that accordingly, although the church must also preach the Law—how else could it proclaim the Gospel?—the only thing which is essential to its nature as the church of Christ is that it is the place, the only place in all the world, in which the blessed tidings of the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake are heard.” See *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), 129.

33 “The Freedom of a Christian,” LW 31:358.

34 In *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007) Charles Taylor notes of the Reformed: “here is where it becomes significant that Protestantism is in the line of continuity with mediaeval reform, attempting to raise general standards, not satisfied with a world in which only a few integrally fulfill the gospel, but trying to make certain pious practices absolutely general” (82). More specifically, “Calvin held that we have to control the vices of the whole society, lest the vicious infect the others. We are all responsible for each other, and for society as a whole” (82).

35 Charles P. Arand and Joel Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?” *Concordia Journal* (April 2007): 131. See for example the case of resistance with the Magdeburg Confession of 1550: David Mark Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001).

36 Reformed theologian Brian Gerrish notes that of Luther “the believer does not earn this divine imputation with his faith, neither is there any legal fiction: God counts the confidence of the heart as ‘right’ because that is what it is. Its rightness lives in the fact that faith, for its part, does not make God an idol but takes him for exactly what he is: the author and giver of every good, the precise counterpart of the believer’s confidence. In a sense faith, by believing, is the “creator of divinity” in us: it lets God be God.” See “By Faith Alone” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 86.

37 See Knut Alfsvåg, *What No Mind has Conceived: On the Significance of Christological Apophaticism* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 176–259.

38 For how the distinction between God as accusing and God as hidden effects preaching, see Mark Mattes, “Properly Distinguishing Law and Gospel as the Pastor’s Calling” in *Logia* 24/1 (Epiphany 2015).

Homiletical Helps

Here We Stand

A Reformation Sermon on Romans 5:1-2

David Peter

“**H**ere I stand!” This is probably the most famous quote from the life of Martin Luther. It is claimed that he spoke these words at the Diet of Worms in April of 1521.

The iconic version of this event depicts Luther standing boldly before the powers of the day—the emperor, princes, bishops, and prelates of the Holy Roman Empire. He enters the assembly in a strong stride, with his chin up and his chest out, and declares, “I will not recant! Here I stand!” Then he throws his fist into the air, storms out of the castle, mounts his horse and gallops off to fight the Reformation.

But it didn’t necessarily happen that way.

Luther’s words, which everyone agrees were spoken, are these: “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”

Some versions add to this the pronouncement: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.” The official record of the event does not include it, and many historians now doubt that Luther spoke those words: “Here I stand.”

Whether he used the words or not, he was taking a stand. Martin Luther took a stand against the false teaching of his day. He took a stand for the word of God, the message of grace, and the finished work of Jesus Christ. He took a stand for the truth of the gospel.

Why did he take this stand? Because he realized that how one stands before God is much more important than how one stands before kings, princes, and popes.

Editor's note

This sermon was originally preached on October 29, 2017, at St. John Lutheran Church in St. James, Missouri.

Luther recognized that there is only one way in which *he* could stand before a holy God. This is the only way in which *we* can stand before a holy God, too.

How can we stand before God and be accepted and not rejected? It comes down to two options. We either stand before God based on our own work, or on the work of another. Let's consider these two platforms on which to stand.

Platform One: Standing on Our Own Works

Most religions of the world claim this option. In fact most people in the world assume that this is the basis on which one stands before God—his or her own attitudes and actions. This platform posits that God gives approval to our good deeds and welcomes us into his presence based on them.

What are those deeds? Well, different religions have different lists. Judaism has its 613 *mandamientos* or commandments. Buddhism has its eight-fold path. Islam has its five pillars. In each of these, there is a list of actions to take or rituals to enact in order to be right with God. The idea is that if you keep these rules or participate in these practices you will find approval from the deity.

Even among those who claim to be Christian a large number believe that they stand before God based on their performance. A majority of Americans believe that good works result in going to heaven. Recently the Barna Research Group reported: "Among the American population, most (55%) agree that if a person is generally good, or does good enough things for others in their life, they will earn a place in heaven."¹

Earlier in his life Martin Luther tried this option, the platform of earning God's favor with his own efforts. He became a monk, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. It was believed that doing this granted one the best chance of becoming right with God. He attended chapel several times a day, fasted, and prayed. He scourged his own back with a whip in order to show God how sorry he was for his sins. He spent hours each day making a recitation of his sins in the confessional. Later he reflected on this experience: "If ever a monk would get to heaven by his monkery, it was I."

This is what you can call the *doing* option. It grounds your salvation in what you *do*. And the operative word with a *doing* religion is the word *try*. In other words, you *try* your best to *do* what is required to be right with God. You struggle, sweat, and slave to *do* enough to please God and to gain his favor. You *try* your hardest.

The problem is, how do you know if you *do* enough? How do you know if you have *tried* hard enough?

In the monastery, Luther discovered that all of his actions on the outside didn't change who he was on the inside. Inwardly he was still greedy, lustful, and selfish. Inwardly he was still sinful. So he had no peace, no assurance of salvation, no confidence that what he did was good enough for God.

This is the problem with standing on your own works to be right with God. How

do you know if your works are good enough? In fact, the Bible declares unequivocally that your efforts are *not* good enough. Listen to these words from Romans 3:20: “For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his [God’s] sight.” You see, God’s standard for our performance is holiness. It is perfection. God doesn’t grade on a curve. You are either holy, and you make it. Or you are not, and you don’t.

This is why we cannot stand upon our own meritorious works before the holy God. For no matter how good your works are, they aren’t good enough. They aren’t holy. They aren’t perfect! It is because of this that the platform of doing and trying for God’s acceptance is nothing more than sinking sand. That is no way to stand before God!

But there is another option. It is an option that is radically different from the doing and trying platform.

Platform Two: Standing on Christ and His Works

As sinful humans, we are helpless to achieve God’s approval. By ourselves, it is a hopeless cause. That is precisely why God intervened to do what we could not. God has done what is necessary to justify us because we cannot. God has done something to rescue us! He has done it all in Jesus Christ.

God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, entered into human time and space. He entered humanity itself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As a true human being, Jesus identified with humans and could substitute for them. He lived a righteous and holy life, completely without sin. God his Father was well pleased with him. Yet he died, experiencing the penalty of sin, which is death. This was not for his own sin, for he committed no sin. He took upon himself the sins of others, indeed the sins of all humanity. Yet after two nights in the grave, his lifeless body was revived. Christ’s resurrection demonstrates God’s approval of his sacrifice and his victory not only over death but also over the cause of death, sin.

This was all done for us and, as the creed states, “for our salvation.” But notice that I say it was *done* for us. Salvation is *done*! In his dying breath Jesus himself declared, “It is finished!” It was done!

This is why Christianity is not a *doing* religion. It is a *done* reality. Humanity’s redemption is done, completed, *finito*! Jesus Christ has done all that is necessary for our salvation. The Epistle to the Hebrews declares that Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). Once for all! Finished! Done!

I said earlier that in a *doing* religion the operative word is *try*. We *try* to do enough to gain God’s approval and acceptance. In the *done* redemption of Christianity, there is nothing to try to do. Christ has done it all for us. So in this *done* relationship, the operative word is *trust*. We *trust* that Jesus has done what is necessary for our salvation. We *trust* that the penalty for sin has been paid and that we are reconciled to the Father. We *trust* that atonement has been made for sin. We *trust* that our restoration with God is completed. We *trust* that what Jesus declared from the cross is

true: “It is finished!” It is *done*, and we *trust* that.

The appropriate response to the *done* reality of Christ’s mission is to trust him and what he has done. This is faith. This is belief. This is why Christ’s finished work of salvation is received by us through faith.

Our text from Romans chapter five affirms this by asserting twice in two verses that salvation is “by faith.” Listen to these verses and how the Apostle Paul interweaves what God has accomplished in Christ (the *done* reality) with our reception of this salvation by faith (the *trust* dynamic).

First, look at verse one of our text [Romans 5:1]: “Therefore, since we *have been justified* . . .” Notice the past tense here. Justification—being made right with God—is *done!* “. . . since we have been justified *by faith* . . .” That is, by *trusting* what has been done for us “. . . we have peace with God . . .” We *have* it; reconciliation with God is already ours! “. . . we have peace with God *through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” It is through Christ, his work and not ours, that we are right with God.

Now continue with verse two of our text: “Through him . . .” Once again, it is only because of what Jesus has done that we have these benefits. “. . . We have also obtained access . . .” Notice the past tense. It is done. We have *obtained* access . . . to what? “. . . into this grace in which we stand.” We have received this grace (done!) and it is in that grace we now stand (present tense, continuing benefit). But here the apostle reminds us for a second time that all of this is received by faith, by trust: “Through him [Christ] we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.”

“Been justified”—done! “By faith”—trust! “Obtained access into grace”—done! “By faith”—trust! This biblical text affirms several times over this dynamic of the completion of our salvation and its reception by faith. It is *done*, so we *trust*.

This is called the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And this was Martin Luther’s discovery that caused him to take his stand against the religion of *doing* and its call to *try*. Instead, he rejoiced that it is, as our text states, “into this grace in which we stand.”

It is because of Luther’s trust in what God had done in Jesus Christ that he could take his stand upon the gospel at the Diet of Worms and thereafter. In fact, Luther claimed that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ is the article upon which the entire Christian church stands. He said it is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*—that is, “the article on which the Church stands or falls.”

More than that, it is the article upon which we are able to stand before a holy and righteous God. We stand in God’s grace. We stand upon Christ’s finished work of salvation. We stand in faith in what God has done to reconcile us to himself. Here we stand!

During the 1800s on the Great Plains of America, the early settlers occasionally encountered a prairie fire. On the horizon they would see a wall of smoke approaching, at the base of which appeared the yellow and orange flashes of flame.

These homesteaders recognized that they could not outrun the oncoming flames.

So they took action to protect themselves. They kindled another fire of their own and around their home and possessions. This fire would burn a wide swath around them and leave nothing but charred stubble and grass for several hundred feet in each direction. Then these people took their stand in the burned-out area, trusting that they were safe from the oncoming wall of fire. When the conflagration arrived, it passed around the settlers because it had no fuel in the area that had already burned. As a result, the pioneers were saved. They were safe. It was all because they stood within the perimeter of grassland that already was burned.

The Bible says that on the final day God's judgment will come upon this earth like a raging fire. Our only hope on that day is to take our stand in the place where the fire of God's wrath has already burned. That place is at the cross, where thousands of years ago God's judgment fell upon Jesus Christ in full fury. But because the judgment has already come there, we who are united with Christ by faith are safe from the future wrath of God on the day of judgment. We stand upon the finished work of Jesus Christ, the *done* reality, and we believe in his promise of deliverance, the *trust* response.

As our text puts it: "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand." Or as a familiar hymn renders this truth:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
No merit of my own I claim,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand. (LSB 575)

Martin Luther may not have uttered those words: "Here I stand." However, he did take a stand against emperor, kings, bishops, and princes. He did take a stand for the gospel. For he knew that the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is not only the article on which the church stands or falls, but it is also the article on which he—Martin Luther—would stand or fall.

Indeed, it is the article upon which *you and I* will stand or fall when facing the holy God. And so, here we stand!

1 <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>.

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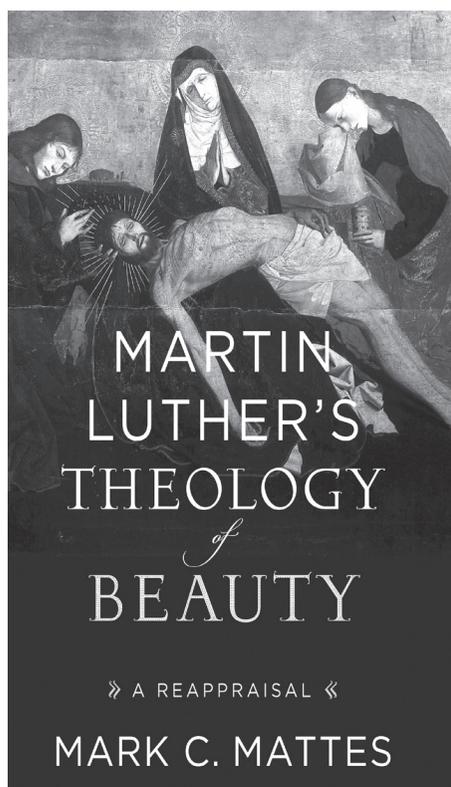
MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY: A Reappraisal. By Mark C. Mattes. Baker Academic, 2017. Hardcover. 240 pages. \$35.00.

Oswald Bayer's emphasis on *promissio* as the embodied word (*das leibliche Wort*) has had a profound impact on Luther research. The implications for gleaning a theology of beauty from Luther are palpable. In arguing against the anachronistic narrative that Luther was an existentialist, Mark Mattes has rendered the academy—and more importantly, the church—a magnificent service in bringing out an oft neglected, but important, aspect of

the reformer's theology (2). This well-written book leads the reader through Luther's theological understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty followed by important implications for the musical and visual arts and contemporary engagement with the concept of beauty.

Following the introductory chapter 1, chapters 2 and 3 prime the discussion of beauty by properly situating Luther's foundation for truth and goodness as predicated on the word: the grammar of Scripture which testifies to Christ (37) and "God's *favor*" granted in Christ (44). Human philosophy and observation of the world, while useful for understanding the things of the creation and even clarifying theology as a science, offer no certainty to who God is or how he looks upon his creatures, let alone what beauty is. "Ultimately, to understand beauty we cannot base its truth on analogies of beauty in the world. Instead, it must be defined by and filtered through Christ and his cross" (42).

Chapters 4 and 5 serve as the heart of Mattes's investigation into the role of beauty found most prominently in Luther's commentary on Scripture (11). Luther's theology of the cross plays a prominent role in these chapters as it removes any human attempts at seizing beauty for themselves; rather, "sinners put their trust in God's goodness—and *beauty*—granted in Jesus Christ. But such beauty is hidden" (86). Christ's beauty is his compassionate love (97). "It is through Christ that we experience God as truthful, beautiful, and good" (100). Mattes notes a progression in the reformer's mature years with greater



emphasis on the fact that creation is given back to the redeemed for enjoyment as a gift; yet, pivotal here is the distinction between creation beauty and gospel beauty (111). Rather provocatively, Mattes writes, “In a word, beauty is not an insignificant concept in Luther’s thinking—unless one regards the doctrine of justification as insignificant” (110).

Chapter 6 is Mattes’s look into how Luther’s theology of beauty played into his conception of music. Luther’s encomiums of music are well known. For Luther, “music’s beauty is yoked to the gospel” (113). It is not merely the intellectual qualities of music, but also the affective ones, because they can help to form the heart (122–126). “In a sense, the effect of music, like the gospel, is to remake sinners curved in on themselves into liberated children of God who live outside themselves in Christ and in the neighbor” (130).

Chapter 7 rightly places Luther’s view of the visual arts in the “wider category of imaging”; thus, important here is seeing the human imagination as a gift into which God projects his word (133–134, 147–151). That is, Luther did not see a “strict dichotomy” between word and image like the Reformed, but rather a “continuum” (148). Mattes then turns back to creation as the “covered” address of God, that, while “enchanted” is “not always gracious” and therefore no “stairway” to communion with God (151–153). While very well done, I found myself wanting to see a little more discussion of how Luther interacted with medieval ways of seeing and perhaps

examples of his personal interaction with medieval images mentioned throughout his preaching and writing. Luther did not simply seek removal of images that could be misunderstood but, in certain instances, allowed images to remain so long there was room to reframe them by the Scriptures—for instance, an image of Mary with child, attested to have been in Luther’s room, served as a teaching opportunity for the incarnation (WA Tr 5:623 no. 6365). This is not so much a criticism of Mattes’s work as a recognition that his overall argument with regard to Luther’s reform of medieval philosophy and theology finds a parallel in his reform of the medieval ways of seeing.

The final two chapters demonstrate that this is not merely a historical record of Luther’s theology of beauty, but also a viable way to interact with the contemporary conversation of *nouvelle théologie* advocates who argue for a retrieval of Christian Neoplatonism. Mattes helpfully finds that Luther’s theology of beauty does not negate analogies and participation but grounds them in Christ, through whom all of creation is opened (161). “Luther has no disenchanting worldview. But his enchanted world is free of the attempt to self-justify through merit by climbing the itinerary of the spiritual ladder” (175). And again, “Through beauty—given most clearly in Jesus’s death and resurrection, which confirms encounters with beauty in creation and human creativity—God assures his creatures that they are at home in this world. All things mask God, but not all things are

beautiful” (182). Stressed throughout the work is that, for Luther, gospel beauty is firmly tied to Christ’s work of redemption and so opens all that it is to be a creature in creation: “The article of justification by grace alone through faith alone is not something other than or different from beauty, but instead articulates the form of what beauty most truly is, and even more importantly frees and so beautifies sinners and reveals this good earth as beautiful” (204).

This book is much needed. This work does not simply defend the Reformer against misconceptions, but charts a path forward into engagement with what his theology has to offer to the church today. When it comes to theology, true beauty is not the final step of taste left for book covers and marketing strategies. In other words, gospel beauty is not something to be tacked on to theology. It stems from the very heart of theology. Mattes makes it quite clear that its shape is the cruciform love of our beautiful Savior.

*Matthew Rosebrock
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**AUTISM AND SPIRITUALITY:
Psyche, Self and Spirit in People
on the Autism Spectrum.** *By Olga
Bogdashina. Jessica Kingsley Publishers,
2013. Paper. 272 pages. \$32.95.*

An ongoing project: read books that come at life experiences from a perspective quite different from my own. It was in that spirit that a review of *Becoming Friends with Time* by John

Swinton appeared in the Winter 2018 *Concordia Journal* and it is in that spirit that Bogdashina’s book was read.

Beginning with the two forewords the reader gets a quick sense of what is coming. “In this book the possibility is raised that there might be things for the rest of us to learn from the autistic experience” (9, Christine Trevett). “You must let your patients, and those you encounter who suffer, from time to time be your teachers” (11, Larry Culliford). This theme is repeated by Bogdashina in her introduction as she quotes from Jim Sinclair’s discussion of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*: “The tragedy is not that we’re here, but that your world has no place for us” (16). She sees this experience as paralleled by the autistic experience. If, therefore, a reader wants “to understand how some autistic individuals experience their inner worlds and how these worlds shape the spiritual dimension of their lives” (22), then this book is for her or him.

Key to a fuller experience of *Autism and Spirituality* is a deep reading of chapter 5, “Different Realities.” Most of us have built-in limitations on the amount of sensory stimulation that we can take in and to which we can respond. We have functioning and helpful filters. Without those filters we can become overwhelmed with too much stimulation. The good news of this is that we adapt and function; the bad news is that there is a lot of stimulation that we miss. This good news/bad news is critically important to understanding her book. Bogdashina posits a considerable influence of stimulation that is not consciously realized by most people. In

short, we are limited in our awareness of what actually is influencing us. This book helps us appreciate those limitations. But it also helps when others are able to go beyond our limitations, (i.e., some folks can sense things I cannot). It is this additional sensing that persons on the autistic spectrum can provide in a number of arenas, including the arena of spirituality. Again, this is key to Bogdashina's invitation. We who are not on the autistic spectrum can learn from those on it. At the same time, those on the autistic spectrum likely struggle with more stimulation than they can handle. They are flooded. This book helps to begin to understand the complexity and over-stimulation of the internal world of those who have autism.

Through chapter 7, even the confessional Lutheran, with some work, can stay on board. Her book is a rich landscape of theory and shared experiences—her own (she has an autistic son) and others. In some ways, the book itself is a bit of a communication about the rich internal world of a person on the autistic spectrum or one who has experienced it deeply through others. Its richness is flooding in and of itself. It was only when I recognized my experience as parallel, in very mild ways with some much-varied information coming at me, to the autistic experience, that I could settle down some and enjoy the richness of the book.

But those of us who operate from a confessional base will run into difficulty with Bogdashina when she turns to the nature of spirituality. Operating with an understanding of generic spirituality that

tilts toward the experiential and mystical with more comfort in Buddhism and Zen than in doctrinal statements and mainline religious institutional expression, the heightened awareness of persons on the autistic spectrum is seen by Bogdashina as a helpful path toward a greater and fuller connection with that which is beyond human. Confessional folk will need to balance this approach with the richness of thoughtful theological discernment and with the understanding that that which is beyond human is, in fact, God who has revealed himself in Jesus the Christ.

Yet, Bogdashina's final "Endword (and Beyond)" encourages us to listen and understand before pontificating. "The widely held assumption that everyone is supposed to see the same reality results in dogmatic rules to treat those who experience everything differently as 'abnormal' and in need of psychiatric help" (242). "One of the difficulties is that many people are afraid to talk about their inner worlds. It is important to open this subject for discussion and to recognize (and not discredit) the very different ways some people with autism feel and think—a different worldview, because it is valid for them even if it does not make sense to those around them" (242). This book is a call to listen, learn, and understand before anything else. In that way, among others, it is a great read.

Bruce M. Hartung

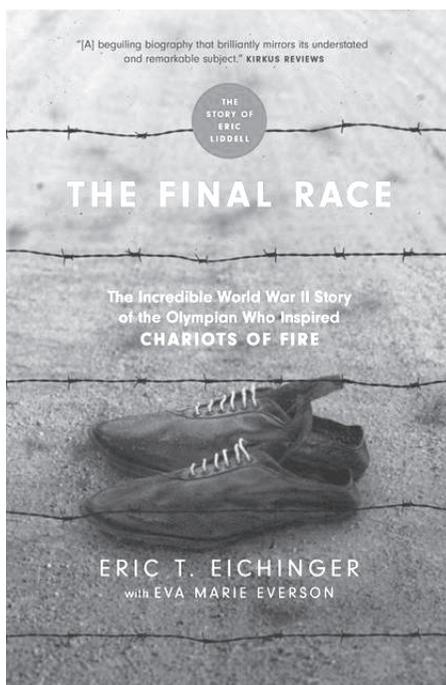
THE FINAL RACE: The Incredible World War II Story of the Olympian Who Inspired Chariots of Fire. By Eric T. Eichinger with Eva Marie Everson. Tyndale House Publishers, 2018. 277 pages. Paper. \$22.99.

The analogy of a race in the book's title is doubly appropriate because it refers not only to Eric Liddell's running accomplishments in the Olympics but also to his remarkable Christian pilgrimage, sometimes described in the Bible with the metaphor of a race. (See 1 Cor 9:24–27 and Phil 3:13–14.)

This analogy even informs the book's structure: Part One, The First 100 (detailing Eric Liddell's Olympian victories); Part Two, The Second 100 (depicting Eric's missionary work in China); Part Three, The Third 100 (describing his imprisonment and premature death from a brain tumor in a Japanese World War II internment camp).

Readers of the *Concordia Journal* will be pleased to note that the author, Eric T. Eichinger, is a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod pastor serving in Clearwater, Florida. Assisting him in the writing project is Eva Marie Everson, a prolific novelist. Together they have authored a fitting tribute to a world-renowned athlete and a dedicated Christian missionary.

I first became aware of Eric Liddell's athletic prowess and sterling Christian character decades ago when watching the award-winning Hollywood film *Chariots of Fire*. Although its haunting musical score still plays in my mind, I



had forgotten many other features of the film and of Mr. Liddell's career and was only faintly aware of his missionary work. So reading this book was personally rewarding.

Biographies (in my experience) can too easily become cluttered with irrelevant and insignificant detail, carrying the additional risk of confusing and boring the reader. Pastor Eichinger and novelist Everson combat this with two unique features in their approach. The first is beginning each chapter with a highlighted (in italics) incident or conversation in Eric's life written in a dramatic novelistic style. The second feature is ending most of the chapters with a (usually) short, pithy, dramatic statement, faintly elusive, hinting at a solution or answer to be found in the subsequent chapter.

The book pays tribute not only to Eric Liddell's athletic prowess but even more so to his outstanding character, particularly emphasizing his integrity, his discipline, and his humility. His was, in the authors' words, a "God-controlled life." Perhaps an unorthodox feature of Liddell's running style in his most intense moments (face lifted up and head reared back) can be viewed as a symbol of his look up to God as the source of all his strength and accomplishments.

"Inspiring" is too conventional and tame a word to describe the impact of this book on the reader. "Transformative" might be an improvement. As Ms. Everson puts it, "This manuscript has changed my life. It has changed my walk with God."

Francis C. Rossow

**PAUL'S NEW PERSPECTIVE:
Charting a Soteriological Journey.**
*By Garwood P. Anderson. IVP Academic,
2016. Hardcover. 439 pages. \$45.00.*

Anderson seeks to transcend the divisions between the amalgam commonly called the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and the opposing amalgam he calls the Traditional Perspective (TPP). As he shows, Paul's corpus frustrates both paradigms, so that each seems right about different passages or about different issues in the same passage. Forty years after E. P. Sander's seminal work, attempting a *via media* is of course nothing new. Anderson's main contribution comes from two methodological pillars. First,

a developmental approach to Paul. Anderson (quite rightly) assumes that, while Paul did not necessarily change his mind on an overall issue, his articulation or expression of a theological concept grew and flowered over time, and with an identifiable trajectory (esp. 153–163). Second, and quite important when combined with the first, Anderson accepts the Pauline character and authorship of all thirteen letters that bear his name. With these, he aims to show "a traceable development of Pauline soteriology from its earliest ad hoc, exigent expression to its later principled articulation" (227). This approach is a breath of fresh air.

Anderson asks after soteriological matters generally at issue in the NPP/TPP opposition: justification, works of the law, grace. Seeing Galatians as Paul's earliest letter, followed by Thessalonians and Corinthians, then Romans, then the Captivity Letters (Phil, Col, Eph, Phlm), then the Pastorals, he charts Paul's soteriological journey. A brief summary of the main results follows. Regarding *works of law*, in Galatians Paul is "swinging from his heels" (334) in responding to the Judaizing crisis, primarily concerned with the Jewish boundaries that are now threatening the fellowship of Abraham's family in Christ (so NPP). But over time what began as more situational flowers beyond the matter of such boundary markers to human striving in general, as seen in the more sweeping divine monergism seen in Romans and, toward the end of Paul's career, Philippians 3, Ephesians 2, and Titus 3 (so TPP). Again, this is not

that Paul has changed his mind, but that what in Galatians is more of response to a crisis unfolds to be the backbone of his gospel even when Jew/Gentile issues are not at the fore. A similar story is told regarding *grace*: tracing the words *charis* and *charisma* he shows a development toward a thematization of the word as Paul worked out his theology. Regarding *justification* (as opposed to other soteriological terms), Anderson agrees with TPP adherents that it is principally forgiveness of sin and one's being counted righteous in Christ, not limited to Jew/Gentile conflicts in the church. Nevertheless, if we make this our watchword for all of Paul's soteriology (as often in traditional readings, for various reasons), we make it bear "a soteriological burden it was never meant to bear" (11, cf. 384). Paul leaves the specific courtroom metaphor out of several letters, and, Anderson argues, moves over time toward the more "nonspecific and holistic" (307) language of salvation (*sôteria*, etc.) as in Ephesians or Colossians. Anderson also rightly highlights *reconciliation* with God, entering the fray in 2 Corinthians and then thematized in Romans (as a goal of justification), Ephesians, and Colossians.

Anderson's book is, again, a breath of fresh air, and it is a pleasure to think through Paul reading it. Naturally any Paulinist will have quibbles here or there. A couple of broader concerns surface, however. First, any conclusions about development in Paul are predicated upon one's relative chronology. If one puts Philippians earlier and Galatians later than Anderson (as I do), his resultant

trajectory becomes unconvincing at some (certainly not all) points. Second, while it is right to assume development in Paul's expression and thought, it must be remembered that plotting them based on what he *happens to say* in one letter or other is insufficient, because Paul did not say everything in every letter. For instance, tracing a development in Paul's expression of grace in Romans 5:12–21 as super-abounding where sin abounded, Anderson then argues that this is new because nothing in Paul's earlier letters about grace could have reasonably invited the diatribe about whether we should continue in sin in 6:1 (277). But Romans 3:8 indicates that many people, who presumably did not get their information only from our Pauline corpus, thought this about his gospel before Romans was written. The Pauline corpus allows us to track development of expression along a trajectory, surely, but we must not only have the right chronology but must also keep in mind that Paul's thought (and thus his soteriology), while expressed in the letters, remains in a certain respect sub- or simply extra-textual. Finally, because his treatment is poised between NPP and TPP (with some interaction with the apocalyptic school), his treatment of Paul's soteriology is largely restricted to those issues. Anderson's treatment befits the aims of his book, surely, so this is perhaps not a criticism so much as a notification that a full treatment of Pauline soteriology is neither the aim nor the content of this book. His book shows that a developmental reading of Paul is not only appropriate but also accounts

for the apparent accuracies of both NPP and TPP paradigms. A full treatment of Pauline soteriology would be another book; but Anderson's book should influence the approach and content of that bigger book. I encourage anyone to read it and think through Paul with Garwood Anderson.

*James Prothro
Farmington, Missouri*

MARTIN LUTHER ON READING THE BIBLE AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE: The Messiah in Luther's Biblical Hermeneutic and Theology.

By William M. Marsh. Pickwick Publications, 2017. 208 pages. \$27.00.

There has been a long debate concerning Luther's christological interpretation of Scripture, namely, whether his insistence on a "Christ-centered" understanding of the Bible is based upon a set of "dogmatic" assumptions or the view that Christ is the *sensus literalis* of Scripture. Put another way, does Luther christianize Scripture in general—and the Old Testament in particular—at the expense of the grammatical-historical significance of the texts?

Marsh argues effectively that Luther's placement of Christ as the center of Scripture is not due to Luther's dogmatic presuppositions. Rather, Luther found that the writers of both Testaments placed Christ in the center of their writings. The author asserts that "Luther's scriptural exegesis of the Bible's 'letter' is responsible for his designation of Christ as its literal sense" (xi). In brief,

Christ is the *sensus literalis* of Scripture. To establish his argument, the author first introduces modern scholarship on Luther's biblical hermeneutic and examines several assessments of Luther's christocentric understanding of Scripture. Noteworthy, the author chooses the "later" Luther, from 1521 through 1546, as his interest of study because it is a relatively untouched research area. After reviewing various assessments of Luther's christological interpretation of Scripture, which more or less regarded Luther's Christ-centered hermeneutic as a dogmatic conclusion, Marsh leaves a thoughtful question at the end of chapter 1. "How is one left to interpret the OT at any Christianly level without the charge of 'Christianization' if assigning a christological sense to the OT's grammatical-historical meaning is off limits?" (26). What Marsh implies in this question is that a coherent understanding of Luther's christological interpretation of Scripture must entail the recognition of Christ as the *sensus literalis* of Scripture. Otherwise, no one who indicates the christological significance of the OT could be exempted from the charge of christianizing the OT text.

Moreover, how does the author substantiate the claim that, for Luther, Christ as the *sensus literalis* of Scripture is an exegetical conclusion derived from the historical-grammatical approach to the OT in light of its fulfillment in the NT? Marsh's answer is to examine Luther's Prefaces to the Bible. Chapter 2 sets forth the significance of the "preface-genre" in the history of biblical interpretation as

well as in the understanding of Luther's hermeneutical principle. In the late medieval period, the prologues of the Bible were intentionally fashioned by commentators "to introduce the reader to the textually discerned literal sense of the biblical author, which could be accepted as the divine author's inspired meaning" (31). The same is true for Luther. Marsh contends, "The prefaces as a composite whole can provide a holistic account of the essence of Luther's approach to Scripture" (33). Thus, the remaining section of the chapter, which constitutes almost a third of the monograph, is the inductive demonstration that shows how Luther's prefaces to the Bible, supporting the conclusion that Christ as the *sensus literalis* of Scripture, is due to its messianic unifying thread. The author traces Luther's prefaces chronologically, from 1520 until 1546. Three related arguments stand out as pillars of Luther's christological interpretation of Scripture. First, warranted by Romans 1:1–3, Luther is convinced that God has promised the gospel in many ways through the prophets of the Old Testament. Thus, in his *Preface to the New Testament*, Luther endeavors to trace the key texts of messianic prediction, Genesis 3:15, Genesis 22:18, and 2 Samuel 7:12–14. In brief, for Luther, "The promise of the Messiah in the OT is the promise of the gospel of the person and work of Jesus Christ to which the NT bears witness and heralds" (40). Second, in his *Preface to the Old Testament*, Luther mentions two views concerning the significance of the OT for the Christian church. The

first view diminishes the value of the OT as being merely for the Jews. The second view teaches that the only way to make the OT accessible to Christians is through spiritualization. Luther rejects both views. He urges his readers to learn from John 5:39, where Jesus claims that the Scriptures bear witness to him. Furthermore, Luther employs the analogy of the OT as the "swaddling cloth" of Christ to reinforce the idea that the OT is the bearer of Christ and thus is still relevant for Christians (54–55). Third, also in the *Preface to the Old Testament*, Luther argues that it is Moses's original and true intention to teach in the Pentateuch that the only hope for human beings to overcome sin and death is not by laws and merits, but by the woman's seed, Jesus Christ, promised to Adam and Abraham. Put another way, for Luther, the intention of Moses or the laws in the Pentateuch is twofold: to uncover our sins and thus to drive us to the promised Messiah. With this establishment, Luther extends the "plain sense" of the Pentateuch to the prophets, the whole OT writings, and the apostolic witness in the NT (56–57).

In chapter 3, Marsh finds three hermeneutical implication from Luther's prefaces with respect to Christ as the *sensus literalis* of Scripture. First, Luther's main rationale for Christ as the *sensus literalis* of Scripture is the "Scriptures' textual witness to the messianic portrait of Jesus" (102). To speak of Christ as the literal sense of the OT means that the primary concern of the OT as Christian Scripture is what the Messiah is doing (*was Messias treibet*) (122). Second,

Luther's textual warrant for Christ as the *sensus literalis* of Scripture is its authorial intention. For Luther, to apprehend the Holy Spirit's intended sense in Scripture is to discern the human authors' intention that was conversed through the literary forms and historical settings of the texts. For the authorial intention of both the divine and human authors of Scripture to ultimately bear witness to Christ, the literal sense of Scripture must be Christ because the authorial intention of Scripture is only conveyed through the *sensus literalis* (125, 140). Third, Luther's view of Scripture as a two-testament Bible provides the hermeneutical significance of Christ as the *sensus literalis* of Scripture. For Luther, the Old and New Testaments relate to each other in two ways: the first is soteriological and the second is hermeneutical. The soteriological form is the distinction between law and gospel. The OT is mainly a book of laws and commands while the NT is mainly a book of gospel and promise, though there are places in which law and gospel transcend into the other Testament. Luther connects each Testament to its corresponding historical period in relation to the advent of Christ. Thus, the relation between the two Testaments through the law and gospel distinction becomes a soteriological relation (142). In brief, the OT as a book of law serves a messianic purpose to reveal sin and direct us to the advent of Christ; the NT as a book of gospel corresponds to the messianic anticipation of the OT and proclaims the forgiveness of sin fulfilled in Christ (145). The two Testaments also

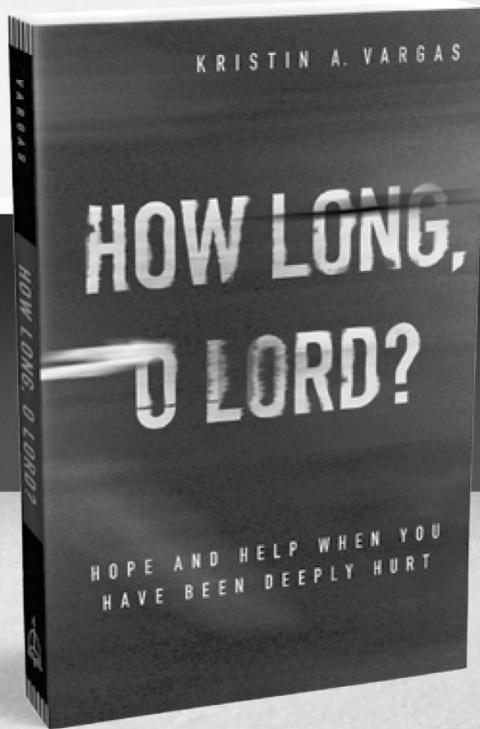
relate in a hermeneutical way. Luther characterizes the OT as "Scripture" and the NT as "proclamation." For Luther, the OT is always to be inscripturated while the NT is primarily a "spoken word" and secondarily becomes a "written" form. The implication here is that Luther believes what Jesus himself and the apostles proclaimed about the fulfillment of the messianic promise is nothing other than what the OT as the written form of Scripture has already revealed. As Marsh comments, "The identities of OT as 'Scripture' and the NT as 'proclamation' are complementary, inseparable, and hinge upon a messianic focal point" (150). In sum, as Marsh insightfully concludes, "The hermeneutical relationship between the Testaments in Luther's thought is a dialectical one, where the OT proves the NT and the NT illumines the OT" (160). That Christ is the *sensus literalis* of Scripture is the best way to capture Luther's understanding of this dialectical relationship in which Christ is the focal point of both Testaments.

Overall, this monograph is richly helpful to three groups of readers: those who seek to understand afresh the main impetus of Luther's christological interpretation of Scripture; those who are interested in the hermeneutical development of the "later" Luther; and those who want a deeper understanding of Luther's "preface-genre," a literary form that has attracted relatively little attention in Luther's scholarship.

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