

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION (I)

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Entering Paradise: The Origin of Luther's Doctrine

It is impossible to talk about Luther's doctrine of justification without also talking about Luther's experience of justification. Doctrine and the experience and enjoyment of the blessings of God always go together. This was especially and remarkably true in the case of Luther. His doctrine of justification was the fruit of his coming by grace and by faith to know his own justification before God.

He tells the story of his own spiritual pilgrimage:

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 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 its gates.¹

This means, too, that the Reformation did not really begin with the posting of his 95 Theses, but with the reformation of Luther's own life; with a great and gracious work of God in Luther's own soul. It did not begin with a protest against abuses in the church, but with a God-given and biblical answer to Luther's own desperate question, "What must I do to be saved?" So it is always.

No Fishing in Front of the Net: The Crucial Importance of Luther's Doctrine.

As a result of his own experience Luther believed that the doctrine of justification was fundamental. It was for him “the sum of all Christian doctrine,” the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. He considered the teaching of this doctrine of far greater importance than reform of practice and ritual in the church, and insisted that the reform in other areas would follow if the doctrine were brought home to the hearts of God’s people:

We ... beg and exhort you most earnestly not to deal first with changes in ritual, which are dangerous, but to deal with them later. You should deal first with the center of our teaching and fix in the people’s minds what they must know about our justification; that it is an extrinsic (external) righteousness - indeed it is Christ’s - given to us through faith which comes by grace to those who are first terrified by the law and who, struck by the consciousness of their sins, ardently seek for redemption... Adequate reform of ungodly rites will come of itself, however, as soon as the fundamentals of our teaching, having been successfully communicated, have taken root in devout hearts. These devout people will at once recognize what a great abomination and blasphemy that papistic idol is, namely, the mass and other abuses of the sacrament, so that it will not be necessary to fish in front of the net, that is, first to tear down the ritual before the righteousness of faith is understood.²

Reformation often fails because those who seek it do not remember that reformation of doctrine is first and fundamental, especially of such doctrines as these. They cry against abuses but show little or no interest in the doctrines of the church, and are even willing to see those doctrines compromised and cast aside, as the doctrine of justification has been by many evangelicals.³ Luther was right. Reformation of doctrine will bring reformation of life, but attacking various abuses will not bring reformation at all, but will be as vain as the kind of fishing Luther describes.

The Sweet Exchange: Luther’s Understanding of Justification

At the heart of Luther’s understanding of justification lies the “sweet exchange.” He explains it thus:

Therefore ... learn Christ and Him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not, and have given to me what I was

not.”⁴

That exchange of our sins for Christ’s righteousness, Luther understood to be by imputation. Our sins are *charged* to Christ and His righteousness *charged* to our account. Thus He was made *sin* for us and we were made righteousness in Him (I Cor. 5:21), the blessed result being that Christ is treated as Sinner in our place, and we treated as Righteous for His sake. Luther rejected the Romish teaching that righteousness is infused or planted in us and that *on account of the resultant change of life* we are justified. That, of course, is just another kind of work righteousness.

According to Luther, righteousness is given as gift, then to those who are in fact still sinners, and the one who receives that gift of righteousness is not yet cured of his sin. He is, when justified, at the same time both sinner and righteous (*simul iustus et peccator*):

We are in truth and totally sinners, with regard to ourselves and our first birth. Contrariwise, in so far as Christ has been given for us, we are holy and just totally. Hence from different aspects we are said to be just and sinners at one and the same time.⁵

Luther, therefore, often referred to this righteousness by which we are justified as an “alien” righteousness, a righteousness which comes from beyond this world, and which is unattainable by any human effort or merit. It is not only the righteousness of Christ, but of *God* in Christ. God gives us His own righteousness and Christ is the bringer of it, exchanging it for our sins, a sweet exchange indeed.

The Wedding Ring of Faith: Passive Justification

The exchange of our sins for Christ’s perfect righteousness, according to Luther takes place through faith:

By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride’s. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this,

and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than the sins of all men, his life stronger than the death, his salvation more invincible than hell. Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom. So he takes to himself a glorious bride, “without spot or wrinkle, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word” (cf. Eph. 5:26-27) of life, that is by faith in the Word of life, righteousness, and salvation. In this way he marries her in faith, steadfast love, and in mercies, righteousness, and justice, as Hos. 2:19-20 says.⁶

According to Luther that faith by which we are justified is entirely a work of God, and in no sense a work of man. By way of emphasizing this he often described justifying faith as *passive*:

For between these two kinds of righteousness, the active righteousness of the law and the passive righteousness of Christ, there is no middle ground. Therefore he who has strayed away from this Christian righteousness will necessarily relapse into the active righteousness, that is, when he has lost Christ, he must fall into a trust in his own works.⁷

By the use of the word “passive,” however, Luther did not mean that justifying faith is without any activity at all. He did not deny that faith is believing and trusting, resting and relying upon Christ. Nevertheless, he believed that faith was first and foremost union with Christ, the marriage of Christ and the believer by which they become one flesh, the union through which the sins of the believer are actually transferred to Christ and the righteousness of Christ given to the believer.⁸

His emphasis continues to serve as a necessary antidote to the current teaching that makes faith another work. He was much nearer the truth than those who deny gracious justification by speaking of faith as a decision of man’s own will or by suggesting that faith is man’s response to a well-meant “offer,” of salvation in the gospel. Of this Luther would have nothing:

For faith is a divine work which God demands of us; but at the same time He Himself must implant it in us, for we cannot believe by ourselves.⁹

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Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith.... This

is due to the fact that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart which says, "I believe"; they take this then to be a true faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either, and no improvement follows.¹⁰

Faith is grace, a gift of God, not man's work. What a lost truth today!

All the Rungs of the Ladder: Justification by Faith Alone

By way of defending gracious justification, Luther spoke of justification by faith alone. That one word "alone" ("*sola*" in Latin), was at the heart of his theology. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Reformation was a battle over that one word. It was that word especially that distinguished the Reformation doctrine of justification from that of Rome. It is the loss of that one word that marks the decline of the Reformation these days.

His emphasis on the word "alone" is seen in Luther's (German) translation of the New Testament. As a result of his own struggles to come to an understanding of Romans 3:28, Luther, in his translation of the book of Romans added the word "alone" to the passage. In answer to the many criticisms he endured for this translation, he insisted that though the word was not found in the Greek or Latin it nevertheless expressed the meaning of the verse. He says:

Here in Romans 3:28, I knew very well that the word *solum* is not in the Greek or Latin text; the papists did not have to teach me that. It is a fact that these four letters *s o l a* are not there. And these blockheads stare at them like cows at a new gate. At the same time they do not see that it conveys the sense of the text; it belongs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous.¹¹

Though the word was indeed the gate "into paradise" for Luther, he insisted that it was really not a "new gate" but a very old one - the gate pointed out by the best of the Fathers and by Paul. He was right. The opposition between grace and works is the opposition between faith and works (Rom. 11:6 and Rom. 4:16).

By this word "alone," however, Luther not only meant to exclude all works from the

justification of the sinner, but meant to emphasize that salvation, of which justification was the heart, was by *grace alone*, and therefore also through *Christ alone*:

[Christ] must be all - the beginning, the middle, and the end of our salvation. He must be the first stone, the stone on which other stones are placed and on which the entire vault or roof is constructed. He is the first, the middle, and the last rung of the ladder to heaven (Gen. 28:12). For through Him we must make the beginning, continue and conclude our journey into yonder life.¹²

His doctrine of justification, therefore, was not just born out of his own experience of that free and gracious gift of God's righteousness, but out of His love for Christ, the only Savior.

Notes

1. Helmut Lehmann, ed., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 1959-1967), vol. 34, pp. 336, 337, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings." Many of the quotations from Luther's works were gleaned from Robin A. Leaver, *Luther on Justification* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 1975).

2. *Luther's Works*, vol. 49, pp. 262, 263, "To Some Pastors of the City of Lubeck, Wittenberg, January 12, 1530."

3. Witness the publication, signing and defense in 1994 of the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," by a number of leading "evangelicals," which document finds no essential difference between the Romish and Protestant doctrines of justification.

4. *Luther's Works*, vol. 48, p. 12, "Letter to George Spenlein, April 8, 1516."

5. Quoted from: Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press: 1988), p. 71.

6. *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, pp. 351, 352, "The Freedom of a Christian."

7. *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 9, "The Argument of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians."

8. By the use of the word "passive" Luther also meant that the faith which unites us to Christ unites us to his suffering (the words "passive" and "passion" are related). Thus, too, justifying faith is far from inactive in that it shares, through union with Christ, in Christ's suffering. That suffering, according to Luther included not only sharing in Christ's reproach and persecution, but in the agony of dying to sin and being killed by the law.

9. *Luther's Works*, vol. 23, p. 23, "Sermon on the John 6:28, 29."

10. *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, p. 370, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans."

11. *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, p. 188, "On Translating: An Open Letter."

12. *Luther's Works*, vol. 24, p. 48, "Sermon on John 14:6."