

JUSTIFICATION AND FAITH IN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY*

JARED WICKS, S.J.

Gregorian University, Rome

IN THIS year filled with commemorations of the life Martin Luther began a half millennium ago, a straightforward exposition of the heart of his theology can be of interest and even of use. Also, the American Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue is currently treating justification, and consequently we can look forward to receiving a major clarification of the doctrinal issues, in terms of common convictions, divergent confessional emphases, and an exchange of probing questions on sin, faith, grace, and the new life and activity given his members by Christ the Redeemer.

In his day Luther stood at the center of acrimonious controversy on numerous aspects of the doctrine of justification, but in this essay the emphasis will fall on historical retrieval and on what we hope will be a coherent exposition of Luther's central themes. The approach will be in part genetic and in part systematic. I distinguish Luther's early thought (1513–17), the transition year 1518, and his mature teaching in 1519 and after. Certain consistent lines of thought do, of course, appear all through Luther's productive years, but there are other elements of considerable importance that predominate only in certain periods or that have an ascertainable time of emergence in Luther's theology. I hope to convey something of the movement of his development, by noting some of Luther's early insights into St. Paul and then sketching the developed formulation he offered to the Church of his day.

The themes of a theology of justification include humankind's fall and the legacy of sin, God's merciful approach to sinners, the commitment of faith, reconciliation with God, and a graced life of righteousness. Luther at times showed impressive synthetic powers in drawing up comprehensive statements on these matters. One thinks of the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), the *Antilatomo* (1522), Luther's biblical prefaces (1522 and later), sections of *De servo arbitrio* (1525), and the exposition of the *Miserere* (1532). With Luther, a passage on justification often included important material on the

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doctrine of revelation, on God's rule of creation, and on the redemptive work of Christ. Justification frequently was the place where much of Luther's thought fused into cohesive unity.

Luther presents special problems for the historical theologian, both because of the abundance of his utterances and because of the profound influence of situations on his teaching. The give-and-take of disputation and controversy frequently set the scene for Luther's accounts of God's grace and of believing existence. Still, the work itself of articulating his perception of Christian conversion was for Luther a labor of searching the Scriptures and amassing texts and references. The Vulgate Bible must come first among the situations affecting Luther's teaching. Consequently what he said is a classic part of the Christian heritage, and one approaching Luther today can reasonably expect to learn from him about conversion and the new life opened up in the sphere of Christ's redemptive influence.

LUTHER'S EARLY THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION (1513-17)

Research on Luther in our own century has turned attentively to his early lectures and disputations, a considerable part of which were not published in the sixteenth century. In these works of the young professor of Scripture we find the elements of a coherent doctrine of conversion to Christ and of God's justifying action in the human heart.¹ Extensive passages from this early phase contain positive, biblically based instruction on the way God and human creatures interact in the drama of personal salvation. Other illuminating texts show us Luther beginning his polemic against theses of the scholastic theology then holding sway in university theology. Further passages manifest special theological convictions and characteristic formal and rhetorical patterns that will constantly recur in Luther's long theological career.

Justification in the Form of confessio peccati

St. Paul's citation of Ps 51:4 ("That thou may be justified in thy words . . .") in Rom 3:4 occasioned a lengthy reflection by Luther on faith and justification.² Faith is the act of "justifying God in His words," that

¹ The author set forth this teaching of the young Luther in *Man Yearning for Grace* (Washington, D.C., 1968 and Wiesbaden, 1969) under the rubric of the "spirituality" inculcated in Luther's works down to the end of 1517.

² *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883 ff.) [hereafter *WA*] 56, 214-34; in English in *Luther's Works, The American Edition* (St. Louis and Philadelphia, 1955 ff.) [hereafter *LW*] 25, 199-218. This section of the Lectures on Romans (1515-1516) has been treated well by M. Kroeger in *Rechtfertigung und Gesetz* (Göttingen, 1968) 41-72, highlighting the paradoxical identity of God's grace and judgment and the consequence that for Luther at this time *fides* was identical with *humilitas* and he was never certain of being in grace. Similarly, O. Bayer, *Promissio* (Göttingen, 1971) 45-57, 118-23.

is, appropriating God's words and affirming that He speaks the truth. The special insistence here, though, is that the words to be assimilated contain the revelation of human sinfulness. As he exegeted Rom 3:4, Luther knew he was dealing with the Pauline manifesto on God's charge against the humanity standing before Himself as guilty and liable to condemnation. Therefore a fundamental aspect of conversion is submission to this precise revealed truth, which is to become a truth about oneself. The submission of faith comes to expression in humble self-accusation, "Tibi peccavi."³

Paradoxically, this confession of sin is a form of justification itself, and not simply a disposing precondition. Personal appropriation of God's verdict on human sinfulness transforms the self-understanding and self-assessment of the believer from the falsehood of secure self-approbation to the truth and righteousness of self-accusation. By so "justifying God in His words" the person is justified, that is, made just and truthful, in conformity with God's just and truthful words about the given human condition.⁴

In Luther's early thought a crucial foundation stone is laid for his lifelong teaching, especially this starting point that is the dissipation of a sense of personal power and achievement through submission to God's word of judgment. Conversion occurs in one's self-understanding, where the word makes one "become a sinner," by a radical *metanoia* of self-assessment, in the midst of which God is making one righteous through a hidden but transformative action.⁵

Radical Sinfulness and Its Healing

A decisive event in Western ecclesiastical history was Luther's protest in October 1517 over the way papal indulgences were being offered in Germany and being avidly received by the people. In this intervention, however, Luther was only drawing a practical consequence from another central aspect of his early theology of sin, grace, and justification.

Luther had dwelt at some length on the words denoting "sins" in Rom 4:7, where St. Paul cited Ps 32:1 f.⁶ By glancing ahead to Rom 7, especially

³ WA 56, 229, 28–33. Similarly at 218, 7–13, leading to the conclusion "Ergo humilitate et fide opus est." Also 221, 24–34; 226, 14–21; and 231, 6–13.

⁴ WA 56, 226, 23–227, 6. The confession is, of course, made in virtue of God's gift: "Quia quod nos eius sermones iustificamus, donum ipsius est [WA: eius], ac propter idem donum ipse nos iustos habet, i.e., iustificat" (227, 19 f., corrected according to the reading of E. Vogelsang in *Luthers Werke in Auswahl* 5 [Berlin, 1963] 235).

⁵ WA 56, 233, 5–9. But by such an operation of God the humble are justified, by both infused grace and imputation, when they come to "justify God," that is, "quando [Deus] impios iustificat et gratiam infundit sive quando iustus esse in suis verbis creditur. Per tale enim credi iustificat, i.e. iustos reputat. Unde haec dicitur iustitia fidei et Dei" (220, 9–11).

⁶ WA 56, 268–91 (*LW* 25, 257–78). I treated this section in *Man Yearning for Grace* 99–101, 111–14.

verses 5, 7, and 12, Luther realized that for St. Paul sin was not properly the discrete thoughts, words, and deeds a person might mention in the self-accusation of confession, but instead the pervasive desires and orientations from which sinful human actions arise. Acts are the fruits or consequences of sin, while sin itself consists in the concupiscent inclination toward evil making one reluctant toward the good recognized as one's duty.⁷

Consequently sin is a pervasive infection of the heart with which even the righteous person must contend and struggle. God's forgiveness is nonetheless quite real, for in the case of those who confess their sin He does not impute this evil infection unto damnation. For the believer, however, having a disoriented and reluctant heart is a grave concern, and authentic faith includes the desire for its purification. So the righteous yearn and long for God's healing grace. Unfortunately, contemporary theology in Luther's day had lost sight of these truths and, according to Luther's barbed charge, was actually undermining the Christian struggle for personal liberation and integration.⁸ In Luther's famous phrase the believer is *simul peccator et iustus*,⁹ sinful because of the deep infection preventing one from delighting in God's law, but righteous because of God's mercy and the self-accusation affirming a true estimate of one's standing before God.¹⁰ A related factor in present righteousness at this time is the trust that God will in time complete the cure He has begun.¹¹ But more emphasis falls on delighting in God's law than on trust in promises. Grace, for the early Luther, is *caritas* gradually instilling willingness, that is, *hilaritas* and *voluntas liberrima*.¹² Because such

⁷ Luther uses these phrases in describing the nature of sin: "desideria, affectiones et inclinationes ad peccata" (WA 56, 271, 3); "passio, fomes et concupiscentia sive pronitas ad malum et difficultas ad bonum" (271, 7 f.); "voluntas, si liceret, nunquam faceret quae lex precipit. Invita enim est ad bonum, prona ad malum" (279, 17 f.). Luther concluded that to reduce sin simply to the absence of righteousness is to undermine the *conatum poenitentiae* and open the way to complacency (313, 18–22). Still, in believers this many-sided evil is subject to the Spirit, who is preparing its destruction (314, 5 f.).

⁸ "Et error est, quod hoc malum possit per opera sanari. . . Sed misericordia Dei est, quod hoc manet et non pro peccato reputatur iis, qui invocant eum et gemunt pro liberatione sua" (WA 56, 271, 24–28). Over against contemporary scholasticism Luther maintained: "Ista vita est vita curationis a peccato, non autem sine peccato finita curatione et adepta sanitate" (275, 25 f.). But because people are not taught to yearn for healing grace, they become proud of a righteousness they think is perfect: "nihil solliciti sunt et concupiscentiis bellum indicere per iuge suspirium ad Dominum. Unde et tanta nunc in Ecclesia est recidivatio post confessiones" (276, 8–12).

⁹ WA 56, 272, 17.

¹⁰ WA 56, 271, 20–22.

¹¹ WA 56, 272, 17–22; 274, 2–11.

¹² E.g., WA 56, 257, 18–29 and 358, 1–8. Consequently caution is in order regarding a doctrine of justification by faith in Luther's early work. Where a recent author, treating the Romans lectures, says, "Spirit is the whole person in its openness to God and in its

delight is always partial and flawed, the *simul* remains ever central to believing self-understanding.

In 1517 Luther grew seriously concerned over the way preachers were extolling the great “graces” of the papal indulgence offered to those who would contribute to the fund for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica.¹³ Sound instruction, he contended, would remind people of the pervasive infection of sin in their hearts and so would inculcate lifelong, penitential self-denial and especially the earnest petition for God’s healing grace.

We must be quite earnest in preventing indulgences . . . from becoming a cause of security, laziness, and neglect of internal grace. Instead, we must be diligent to fully cure the infection of our nature and thirst to come to God out of love for Him, hatred of this life, and disgust with ourselves. That is, we must incessantly seek God’s healing grace.¹⁴

Sad to say, Luther’s plea for reform of indulgence preaching and for popular instruction on lifelong penance went unheard in 1517. Instead, he was cited to Rome for threatening the income needed by the Archbishop of Mainz and for derogating from papal authority.

Luther’s Early Debate with Scholastic Theology

As Luther lectured on Romans in 1515–16, he articulated a series of judgments on elements of decadence present in society, the Church, and religious life in his day.¹⁵ In theology certain errors verging on heresy

trust in God’s promises,” the texts cited make no mention of trust or promises (D. C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz* [Durham, N.C., 1980] 117). Instead, Luther characterized “spirit” by a love for the law of God instilled by healing grace. The remedy for *caro* and its egotism is a gift of *caritas* (WA 56, 350, 27; 352, 6; 356, 7). Luther can describe the gospel as setting forth and offering *caritas et Ihesum Christum* (338, 13–20).

¹³ I offered an exposition of Luther’s 1517 critique of indulgence preaching in *Man Yearning for Grace* 216–64, with special attention to the otherwise neglected *Tractatus de indulgentiis* (1517), in which Luther formulated a constructive doctrine of penance and indulgences. Also treated in *TS* 28 (1967) 481–518. An example of neglect of the constructive *Tractatus* is S. Hendrix’ account of Luther’s 1517 intervention in *Luther and the Papacy* (Philadelphia, 1981) 23–32. The engaging, theologically profound account of lifelong penance in this document was all the more reason why the papacy should have attended to Luther’s intervention.

¹⁴ *Tractatus de indulgentiis*, WA *Briefwechsel* 12, 9, 152–56. Similar statements of this attitude normative in Luther’s critique of indulgences had come in the *Lectures on Romans*, e.g., WA 56, 235, 25–38 and 264, 16–21. As Luther said, “Populus itaque fidei totam vitam suam agit in quaerendo iustificationem” (264, 35).

¹⁵ Luther’s scholia on Rom 2:1–3 castigated the cruelty and avarice infecting government and the higher clergy (WA 56, 189 f.), which he interpreted as God’s punishment meant to make people aware of the ruin that has come upon His holy Church (190, 27–30). Numerous abuses in society and the Church were listed and lamented in Luther’s comments on Rom 12–14. This material was studied by Gerhard Müller, “Ekklesiologie und Kirchenkritik beim jungen Luther,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 7 (1965) 100–128.

were fostering attitudes of pride and were undermining morality.¹⁶ Luther felt he was at the root of the abuses and laxity when, commenting on Rom 14:1, he began unmasking Pelagianizing attitudes and positions. Some forget that interior devotion must be the ground of actions pleasing to God. Others feel that repentance is a matter of a relatively easy free decision. This superficial religiosity rests on a Pelagian belief about the power of the will to form a good intention which will work on God to certainly obtain His grace.¹⁷ No one, of course, explicitly professes Pelagianism, but many in fact live according to its maxims, especially those who are sure that they have on their own, independently of grace, the freedom and ability to act in a manner to which God is sure to respond by granting His saving grace. The whole Church, Luther maintained, is undermined by the false security instilled by this error.¹⁸

We cannot develop here the late-scholastic theological doctrines of the residual freedom of choice found in fallen humanity, of the responsible preparation or disposition required before the gift of grace, of merit for human actions, and of the final grace of God's acceptance of those whom He saves.¹⁹ But it is essential to see Luther's early thought on justification in the context of his critical and increasingly polemic reaction to this current of thought, which he saw reviving the ethical optimism and salvation-by-achievement contested a millennium before by St. Augustine.

According to Luther, a human being does not have a natural endowment for forming a good intention at will, as "the Scotists" teach. Instead of trying to arouse such an intention interiorly, one should fall prostrate before God and utter in prayer one's total dependence on God's gift of inward, transforming grace.²⁰ These scholastics in effect inculcate a sense of independence and autonomy, contrary to the New Testament's "fear

¹⁶ WA 56, 273, 3-274, 18; 276, 6-12; 394, 28-395, 2.

¹⁷ WA 56, 501, 3-503, 12 (LW 25, 494-97).

¹⁸ WA 56, 503, 1-6.

¹⁹ Luther frequently recited the *monstra* taught in scholasticism: WA 2, 402, 20-31; 8, 467, 1-35; 40I, 291, 15-294, 22; 39I, 419, 19-420, 3; 50, 222 ff. H. A. Oberman set forth how Gabriel Biel, professor at Tübingen from 1484 to ca. 1490, treated these matters, in *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963) 120-88. We note that for Biel the human effort of "doing what lies in one" (*faciens quod in se est*) can be a purely natural actuation of the will (Oberman 138), which is then the necessary disposition for the infusion of justifying grace (152). H. McSorley answered a qualified but definite "yes" to the question highlighted in his article, "Was Gabriel Biel a Semipelagian?" in *Wahrheit und Verkündigung* (Festschrift M. Schmaus), ed. L. Scheffczyk *et al.* (Munich, 1967) 2, 1109-20. W. Ernst stressed Biel's seriousness about the effects of original sin, so that it would be nearly impossible for the fallen will to do good works without grace. Still, Ernst ends by admitting that Biel's view of merit and freedom is doubtlessly close to Pelagianism (*Gott und Mensch am Vorabend der Reformation* [Leipzig, 1972] 310-20, 332 f.).

²⁰ WA 56, 501, 3-18.

and trembling” before God. The saints were constantly begging for God’s grace, ever fearful of doing evil on their own. Their way to God’s favor was, therefore, their humble yearning for grace.²¹

Convictions and Thought Patterns

So far we have seen a selection of themes forming Luther’s early account of conversion and justification. I turn now to mention briefly some more pervasive convictions which gave rise to characteristic patterns of thought and language as Luther spoke of God and believers in interaction.²²

1) Luther opened his exposition of Romans in 1515 by stating what he took to be the substance of Paul’s message in the letter as a whole, namely, to pull down, to pluck out, and to destroy all human wisdom and carnal righteousness, so as to implant the reality of sin. Paul holds that our own achievements are not worth anything at all, since it is by God’s gift from beyond ourselves and our achievements that we are saved.²³ This is a good instance of Luther’s penchant for thought and expression in terms of opposed totalities. Luther communicated the biblical call for conversion through rhetorical schemes of dialectical opposition, in which contents stand in sharp discontinuity with each other. Consequently the Reformation was being shaped by a trait of Luther’s thought when it came to summarize its principles in the exclusives of *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*. Schooled as he was in Paul, especially in Gal 1–2 and 1 Cor 1, Luther found it second nature to highlight exclusive alternatives, oppositions brooking no compromise, and totalities set in discontinuity.

2) While lecturing on the Psalter in 1513–15, Luther came to characterize God’s redemptive work as a hidden work, an *opus sub contrario absconditum*. The glory of the Church, accordingly, lies concealed beneath folly and weakness.²⁴ God regularly carries out His designs in a manner

²¹ WA 56, 503, 18–22. In the Heidelberg Disputation of April 26, 1518, Luther concluded his exposition of human sinfulness with this instruction: “His auditis, procide, et ora gratiam, spemque tuam in Christum transfer, in quo est salus, vita et resurrectio nostra. Quia ideo haec docemur, ideo Lex notum facit peccatum, ut cognito peccato, gratia queratur et impetretur” (WA 1, 360, 35–38).

²² My presentation in this section has close affinities with three studies of Luther’s thinking: Joseph Lortz’s essay “Martin Luther, Grundzüge seiner geistigen Struktur,” *Reformata Reformanda* (Festschrift H. Jedin), ed. E. Iserloh et al. (Münster, 1965) 1, 214–46 (English translation in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. J. Wicks [Chicago, 1970] 3–33); Gerhard Ebeling’s book *Luther: Einführung in sein Denken* (Tübingen, 1964) (English translation, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* [London and Philadelphia, 1970]); and John O’Malley’s article “Erasmus and Luther: Continuity and Discontinuity as Key to Their Conflict,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 5 (1974) 47–65.

²³ WA 56, 157, 2–6; 158, 10–14. Later in the lectures this theme returned at 207, 7–11, and implicitly at 305, 22–306, 1.

²⁴ WA 4, 77, 35–78, 9 (LW 11, 226–28).

contrasting sharply with outward appearances. The sign does not represent the reality by analogous and homogeneous expression, but instead stands in contrasting discrepancy with the reality. God is working out our renewal interiorly, but empirically one perceives weakness and diminishment—as occurred in the folly of the cross (1 Cor 1:21).²⁵ Consequently humility is required and a hesitant suspicion about what one senses and perceives outwardly, lest God's truth slip by unnoticed beneath its alien outward form. God's own proper work lies beneath an alien work.²⁶ In 1518, in the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther characterized God's humbling revelation of sin as the alien work beneath which He is doing His proper work of justification.²⁷

3) The personal crisis initiated when God addresses His word to the person standing in complacent self-approval concerns a set of forensic relationships. The gospel calls in question the values that rate highly before men and before our own eyes (*in conspectu hominum . . . coram nobis*), to prepare us for God's own gift of righteousness and wisdom.²⁸ At issue is the adoption of the right perspective for judgment and assessment. What is valid *coram hominibus* must cede to what is valid *coram Deo*, that is, in the forum of God's judgment. Faith, consequently, represents a shift toward accepting and professing what one is *coram Deo*, or in God's estimate.²⁹ The worldly perspective is illusory and deceptive because of its false values. But faith initiates the person into God's perspective and assimilates one to evaluations valid *coram Deo*.

4) Thus the stage on which the drama of justification unfolds is the conscience. Luther had an overriding concern with a person's self-estimate in relation to God's word. This judgment of conscience is not a matter of assessing particular acts in the light of the known norms of conduct, but a matter of the self in its global, yet simple, relation to God.³⁰ Conscience is at times troubled and distressed, fleeing from God's word of judgment on human self-seeking. But when the gospel announces

²⁵ WA 4, 81, 25–32; 82, 17–27.

²⁶ WA 4, 83, 3–7, and 87, 22–25 (citing the Vulgate of Isa 28:21, “Opus eius alienum est ab eo, ut faciat opus suum”). The presence of the Spirit is concealed, as beneath many vexations (WA 56, 246, 12–20) or in words and teachings we might easily resist (256, 10–23).

²⁷ WA 1, 360, 37–361, 5.

²⁸ WA 56, 157, 2–6; 158, 3–5, 10–14.

²⁹ This is true, above all, in accepting God's judgment, that is, “quando nos credimus esse peccatores, mendaces, etc., et nostram virtutem atque iustitiam coram Deo penitus nihil esse. Ac sic tales efficitur in nobis intra nos, quales sumus extra nos (i.e., coram Deo)” (WA 56, 229, 11–14).

³⁰ This has been acutely set forth by M. G. Baylor in *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden, 1977) chap. 6, “Luther's New Object of Conscience” 209–72.

Christ the Savior, the conscience is pacified and calmed by the gift of a reconciler and the promise of personal healing and renewal.³¹ The gospel dissipates the reproaches and accusations that often torment the conscience and so the gospel leads to *fides Christi*, in which the converted and transformed conscience finds itself sharing in the redemptive victory of God's own Son.

CHRIST AND FAITH IN THE TRANSITIONAL YEAR 1518

In late 1517 Luther had invited his theological colleagues to join him in a disputation on the efficacy of papal indulgences. The disputation did not take place, but nonetheless Luther went on to think out his position on indulgences and a series of related topics. This occasioned theological reflection on the sacraments and especially on priestly absolution in the event of justification. Whereas his earliest thought had treated God's word primarily as a judgment to be appropriated in self-accusation, now Luther came to stress much more the effective address of grace to be appropriated in joyous certainty of forgiveness. A maxim Luther cited frequently in 1518 points to the new accentuation in his notion of justifying faith: "Non sacramentum sed fides sacramenti justificat." However, this shift of accent should not obscure the broader framework of Luther's conviction about the effective presence of Christ in the believer.

Fides sacramenti

A good example of the transitional phase in Luther's theology of justification is the set of disputation theses he composed in 1518 as "an inquiry into the truth and for the consoling of fearful consciences."³² Luther distinguished between the remission of ecclesiastical penalties (by indulgences) and the more excellent remission of guilt before God (by sacramental absolution). The former reconciles with the Church, while the latter brings peace of conscience by reconciling the penitent

³¹ WA 56, 204, 8–29 (LW 25, 188 f.). Also 411, 4–21; 424, 5–17; and 426, 5–9. On the promise of healing, 272, 3–21.

³² WA 1, 630–33. O. Bayer gave special attention to these theses, expounding them as the first consistent presentation of Luther's new Reformation theology of the word as gracious and forgiving promise (absolution) and of faith as certainty of forgiveness (*Promissio* 166, 182–202). W. Schwab has set forth perceptively the context of Luther's transition in 1518 in *Entwicklung und Gestalt der Sakramententheologie bei Martin Luther* (Frankfurt–Bern, 1977) chap. 2, "Die Entdeckung des Buss sakramentes" 77–144, in which the theses "Pro veritate" are studied on 98–105. Martin Brecht's new biography of Luther down to 1521 presents the theses as a milestone in Luther's intense reflection in 1518 on the word and justification. Luther's Reformation insight has now become the heart of a new doctrine of ecclesial mediation, penance, faith, and certitude of God's grace (*Martin Luther: Sein Weg zur Reformation* [Stuttgart, 1981] 228–30).

with God. But how is consoling remission of guilt attained? What is its basis? Luther's theses deny that the basis lies in the acts and attitude by which the penitent disposes himself in contrition. Also, Luther does not attribute fundamental importance here to the office and power of the priest. Instead, the basis of forgiveness is faith, by which one casts oneself upon the words of Christ to Peter: "Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).³³ Christ desires that our salvation rest on his creative word of power that cleanses hearts (Heb 1:3 and Acts 15:9). Consequently one being absolved must not doubt the effectiveness of the word of forgiveness spoken over him in virtue of the utterly certain promise of Christ the Savior.³⁴ The characteristic element in Christian sacraments is the word of Christ the promiser.³⁵ The disputation theses end with a concluding flourish from Paul: the righteous person does not live by works or the law, "sed ex fide vivit" (Rom 1:17).³⁶

In the exegetical lectures on Hebrews in early 1518, Luther spoke in warm, positive tones about this faith in the word spoken in the Church, specifically in the proclamation of the Eucharist that Christ's blood is shed for the remission of sins. Faith in such a message is identical with a cleansed and quieted conscience filled with delight before God.³⁷ In another work of 1518 Luther called for a shift in Christian instruction on the sacrament of penance from emphasis on contrition and works of satisfaction, which produces the bad conscience of the self-reliant person, to emphasis on faith in Christ who grants forgiveness mercifully and gratuitously. Luther was convinced that such teaching on faith would result in a new wave of Christian confidence and in strengthening for living the penitential life.³⁸

Thus faith in Christ's promise is the essential pivot of Christian experience, by which one swings away from reliance on one's own religious achievement and begins building a new existence in trust, peace, joy, and certainty, out of which arise spontaneously the contrition and penance which another theology would make the precondition of justification. Whereas Luther had stressed a self-accusing faith in 1513-16, by

³³ WA 1, 630, 5-631, 6. There follows the dictum "Non sacramentum fidei, sed fides sacramenti . . . iustificat" (631, 7-9). Luther had frequent recourse to this probative sentence in the years 1518-20: WA 57III, 170, 1; WA 1, 544, 39; 595, 33; 286, 16; 324, 15; WA 2, 15, 32; 715, 34; WA 6, 471, 15; 532, 29; WA 11, 301, 16.

³⁴ WA 1, 631, 9-22.

³⁵ WA 1, 632, 38 f. M. Kroeger brought out the great importance of Mt 16:19 in Luther's transition to his mature doctrine of justification, speaking of the discovery of this text as the hinge on which Luther swung toward his new integration of faith, the word, and the sacraments (*Rechtfertigung und Gesetz* 173).

³⁶ WA 1, 633, 12.

³⁷ WA 57III, 208, 22-209, 3 (*LW* 29, 210). Also 269, 10-271, 7 (*LW* 29, 171-73).

³⁸ WA 1, 542, 29-543, 2 (*LW* 31, 103).

1518 a fiducial faith was coming to the fore, and conversion was now focusing on the appropriation of Christ's promise applied in the sacrament as valid *pro me*.³⁹

Christus actuosissimus

Luther gave a concise account of conversion and justification in the Heidelberg Disputation (April 26, 1518). We cited this work above with reference to the hidden work of God. Other portions of the text show us essential Christological themes shaping Luther's view of justification.⁴⁰

The initial movement of Luther's argument at Heidelberg concluded in theses 16–18, where the outcome of the insistent assertion of human sinfulness is the profound realization of the need of the grace of Christ, in whom alone is found salvation, life, and resurrection.⁴¹ Then, after a section on Christ's self-emptying and crucifixion as the unique way to know God (theses 19–24), Luther sketched some dimensions of the new life of the righteous. Contrasting with an Aristotelian righteousness resulting from repeated righteous actions, revelation asserts that righteousness is infused into the hearts of those who believe in Christ. Righteous actions then result from the power of Christ, who makes the believer his operative instrument for doing good. Christ becomes present in transforming virtuality.⁴² At its deepest level justification is union with the Christ, who begins conforming the believer to his own action and behavior.⁴³

Faith thus brings one into union with the Savior, who is active, not static or dormant. In a sermon in February 1517 Luther had anticipated this assertion of Christ's influence with a description of Christ's life in his members as one of superlative activity (“... actuosissimus est, et... cum omni suavitate et facilitate”).⁴⁴ Justification, consequently, has an assimilative and conformative effect in one who submits to God's

³⁹ Personal assurance was stressed in the 1518 scholion on Heb 9:24 (WA 57III, 215, 16–20).

⁴⁰ Luther spoke pointedly of Christ as *sacramentum*, effective sign, of righteousness, as in the scheme *sacramentum/exemplum*, which he saw as positing the priority of grace over morality. See E. Iserloh, “Sacramentum et exemplum: Ein augustinisches Thema lutherischer Theologie,” *Reformata Reformanda* 1, 247–64. M. Lienhard focused on Luther's 1517–18 use of this formula in *Luther: Témoin de Jésus-Christ* (Paris, 1973) 84–87. Most impressively, W. Joest brought out Christ's actuality for and in the new life of the believer: *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen, 1967) 365–91.

⁴¹ WA 1, 360, 34–361, 30 (LW 31, 50–52).

⁴² WA 1, 364, 4–16 (LW 31, 55 f.).

⁴³ WA 1, 364, 23–28 (LW 31, 56 f.). In another 1518 text, the explanation of the 37th thesis on indulgences, Luther spoke with great conviction of the union of Christ and the believer, leading to the courage-filled delight of a conscience freed from the weight of sin and now sharing Christ's own righteousness (WA 1, 593, 12–28 [LW 31, 190]).

⁴⁴ WA 1, 140, 20–23.

word and work. Through Christ, become the inner principle of the righteous life, God is creating in the believer a new behavior conformed to the conduct of His own Son, in whom He was well pleased.

PROVISIONAL SUMMARY ON *FIDES CHRISTI*

The key elements, therefore, in Luther's early portrayal of justifying faith in Christ are the following. These motifs were sounded early and remain lasting elements of Luther's theological work and legacy.

1) Justifying faith can only occur in one who readily accepts God's judgment against human sin. Faith must sense how forlorn and frustrating is the way of action and achievement for the fallen and diseased descendants of Adam. Faith appropriates God's judgment upon sin. God's primary instrument for impressing this sense of sin is His law.⁴⁵

2) God's reconciling work entered the world in Jesus Christ and climaxed in his redemptive death. His cross is paradigmatic for conversion, but actual communication of righteousness stems from his historical promises, especially of the loosing of consciences by the word. Absolution and the other sacraments are essential, so that in the life of the Church justifying faith has the form of *fides sacramenti*. Thereby one accepts forgiveness and the conscience is renewed in joy before God.

3) More profound than the interaction of word and faith, however, is union with Christ through faith. Believing in Christ is to put Christ on and to have life in union with him who has been made our wisdom and righteousness. *Fides Christi* is thus transformative because of the action of Christ in the believer.

4) Most characteristic of the experience of faith is the dramatic monologue of conscience under God's approach and address, as found in Luther's comment on Rom 2:15. The conscience, finding itself assailed by accusations of guilt, turns to Christ the redeemer. Here then is a refuge! He took on sin, and he alone has the righteousness needed! "And if he made his righteousness mine, then I am righteous in the same righteousness as he. But my sin cannot swallow him up, but is swallowed up in the infinite abyss of his righteousness, for he is God Himself, to whom be praise forever."⁴⁶

JUSTIFICATION IN LUTHER'S MATURE TEACHING

This final major section will offer a systematic account of the themes which coalesce in Luther's mature teaching on faith and justification. Some of these themes are specific to Luther and represent historic contributions to forming the central Protestant tradition, such as the

⁴⁵ An early, concise formulation of the function of the law came in Luther's first lectures on Galatians (1516, extant in student notes): WA 57II, 59, 18-60, 13.

⁴⁶ WA 56, 204, 8-29, citing lines 19-23.

role of experience, the bondage of the will, and imputation. Some of these themes stirred controversy and even occasioned anathemas against Luther. Here I leave controversy aside, in order to concentrate on the contexts in which Luther developed his major themes and on the theological motivations that become evident when one follows out the arguments with which Luther supported the themes and assertions of his mature doctrine.

Characteristics of Luther's Teaching on Justification

At times Luther attributed extraordinary importance to the correct doctrine of justification. Toward the end of his introduction to the *Lectures on Galatians* of 1531 (printed 1535) he states that one who loses the truth of this doctrine has thereby lost the whole of Christian doctrine. By this doctrine the Church comes to be and perdures.⁴⁷ Justification was for Luther the real heart of his controversy with Rome: "Once this has been established, namely that God alone justifies us solely by His grace through Christ, then we will not only bear the pope aloft on our hands but also kiss his feet."⁴⁸ The work of the authentic theologian is, therefore, concentrated on the cluster of themes that make up the doctrine of justification: "The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned (*homo . . . reus ac perditus*) and God the justifier and savior of man the sinner (*Deus iustificans ac salvator hominis peccatoris*). Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject is error and poison."⁴⁹ Luther was convinced that all of Scripture sought to show God's merciful work of restoring to righteousness and life the humanity that had fallen into sin and condemnation. One who takes justification as the *scopus* (target, goal) of his reading of Scripture will be nourished by the sacred text, because his quest is thereby conformed to the biblical message itself.⁵⁰

But the way to an adequate theology of justification was not simply the accurate reading of the text. One must have *experience* of sin and grace, and of life and death, to become a theologian worthy of the name.⁵¹ Luther claimed that it was precisely his own experience of God and of

⁴⁷ WA 40I, 48, 28 f.; 49, 26 f. (*LW* 26, 9 f.). Also 441, 29–31, on the doctrine of justification embracing all the other articles of faith. On justification as the *caput et summa* of Christian doctrine, WA 39I, 489, 6. Further, WA 40III, 335, 5–8, on justification as the one doctrine that preserves the Church of Christ; for "hoc amisso amittitur Christus."

⁴⁸ WA 40I, 181, 11–13 (*LW* 26, 99).

⁴⁹ WA 40II, 328, 17–20 (*LW* 12, 311).

⁵⁰ WA 40II, 328, 20–29.

⁵¹ "Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando" (WA 5, 163, 29 f.). In a 1531 table remark Luther went so far as to say "Sola experientia facit theologum" (WA *Tischreden* 1, 16, 13).

sin that set him apart in the theological world, that is, from Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, and the Antinomians.⁵² Consequently Luther's teaching on justification bears the marks of profound, often anguished, moments of personal involvement with deep feeling. Sin and guilt are terrifying in this world of thought, grace and forgiveness liberating and full of delight. Theological discourse on justification is at times only the explanatory and protective superstructure built over the religious core and substructure of experience.

Arising from experience, the theology of justification then serves further experience. The beginning concerns sin, which must not remain simply a concept in a thesis being asserted, but is to become a condition sensed with personal awareness of distance from God and of His fated condemnation. We know God's law well enough but we do not keep it. Realization of this occurs amid interior combat and struggle (*vera experientia et gravissimum certamen cordis*), and so one comes to confess oneself a sinner.⁵³ Then the person is ready to hear and appropriate another message, that of God's gracious design to raise the fallen in Christ. This dissipates all fears and lifts the spirit. Christ came for sinners. God is merciful precisely to the sinners who fear Him. Knowing self as sinful, one can move on to genuine theological knowledge of God, the God of the poor and afflicted upon whom He shows His mercy.⁵⁴ Then occurs the experience of faith, about which Luther's booklet *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520) has instructed so many readers. It is an experience of strength and courage now imperturbable, of trust and joy deep in the heart, and of a life transformed in Christ the Savior.⁵⁵

Luther's orientation to personal experience had a number of consequences beyond the mark left on his works by tones of struggle, involvement, and deep feeling. He repeatedly tested doctrines and arguments with a view to their actual influence on one's lived relation to God. Luther, for instance, would not mitigate his insistence that "sin" remains after baptism, both because St. Paul said this in Rom 7 and because a change in terminology would likely make people cold and lethargic in praising God's mercy to people who are really sinners. They might glory in their incipient perfection and cease praying for forgiveness. They could come to rely on the purity and renewal given them, and not rely totally on Christ.⁵⁶

⁵² WA 8, 127, 24-26 (Aquinas); WA *Tischreden* 1, 146, 6-14 (Erasmus); WA 39I, 490, 16 f. (Antinomians). Neither the "Rottengeister" nor the papists have experience of what they assert (WA 36, 505, 1-506, 2).

⁵³ WA 40II, 326, 34-37; 327, 21-26 (LW 12, 310 f.). On the distress of those truly struck by the demands of the law of God: WA 39I, 455, 16-456, 8.

⁵⁴ WA 40II, 327, 26-35; 334, 35-335, 18; 361, 15-18 (LW 12, 311, 316, 334).

⁵⁵ WA 7, 49, 7-14; 59, 1-20 (LW 31, 343, 357 f.).

⁵⁶ WA 8, 103, 17-26; 108, 2-9; 111, 16 f., 27-36 (LW 32, 223, 230, 235).

The doctrine that salvation lies wholly outside the scope of our willing and striving is essential to the depth of humility God wants.⁵⁷ In fending off arguments from St. Augustine and St. Bernard for free choice having a role in justification, Luther contended that one should not attend to their subtle disputations about the will and grace but instead to their personal prayers to God. As they addressed God from the heart, they despaired of themselves and implored grace, only grace, without recourse to any power of choice.⁵⁸ An argument over the experiential outcome was one of Luther's last points in his refutation of Erasmus' case for free choice. Luther confessed that he had no desire to be free regarding his salvation. With freedom, how would he ever withstand the assaults of the enemy? How would he ever be certain of satisfying God's good pleasure by his free choices? But because there is no free choice regarding salvation, the way opens to a special range of experience:

Now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into His, making it depend on His choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by His grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that He is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversities to be able to break Him or to snatch me from Him. . . . Moreover, we are also certain and sure that we please God, not by the merit of our own working, but by the favor of His mercy promised to us.⁵⁹

The Human Condition of Bondage

Any interpretation of Luther's thought must take serious account of his massive broadside of 1525, *De servo arbitrio*, written as a rebuttal of Erasmus' *De libero arbitrio* (1524).⁶⁰ Justification is the central topic here, but this leads Luther to offer his readers treatises on biblical and doctrinal hermeneutics and ecclesiology, as well as numerous passages that amount to a tract on God's sovereign rule of His creation. *De servo arbitrio* was a significant contribution to the process of clarification and demarcation by which Luther in 1525 defined with all desirable clarity the precise character of the Reformation he had initiated. Early that year Luther completed *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, in which he attacked the spiritualistic Christianity found in the pamphlets of his former colleague Andreas Carlstadt. Luther responded to the peasant uprisings of

⁵⁷ WA 18, 632, 30–633, 3 (LW 33, 62).

⁵⁸ WA 18, 644, 5–16 (LW 33, 76 f.). This passage is used to good effect by Otto H. Pesch in his seminal essay "Existential and Sapiential Theology: The Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther* 61–81.

⁵⁹ WA 18, 783, 17–39, citing lines 28–39 (LW 33, 289).

⁶⁰ G. Chantraine has recently offered a most useful historical account of the controversy between Luther and Erasmus, with special attention to their divergent theological approaches to Scripture: *Erasmus et Luther: Libre et serf arbitre* (Paris–Namur, 1981), "Partie historique" 3–263.

spring 1525 with a pamphlet calling upon the princes to suppress those rebelling against the established order. In autumn 1525 Luther turned to Erasmus' book on freedom, which was a subtle yet optimistic defense of human dignity, of the ethic of reward and punishment, and of the justice of God in His condemning or rewarding our responsible decisions and actions. Luther, in 1525, was making clear for all the differences between his reform and the reforms of revolutionary spiritualists and of the optimists among the humanist theologians.

De servo arbitrio represents a highpoint of dogmatic assertiveness in Luther's theology, as he ruthlessly condemned point by point Erasmus' gentle optimism about the human condition. God is to remain sovereign, Luther maintained, and not to be miniaturized in order to fit the contours of a sweetly reasonable religious-ethical piety. A topic of such importance as human freedom must be treated clearly and forcefully. One who is ignorant or unclear here will not know how to relate to God and what to expect from God's working. This is to undercut the worship and praise of God. "It therefore behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God's power and our own, God's work and our own, if we want to live a godly life."⁶¹ What one must know is that God's power in fact does everything in our salvation, while our will does nothing. Before justification, there is no human activity in preparation for grace and renewal; once God has recreated the will, it does nothing toward preserving what has been given, "but the Spirit alone does both of these things in us, re-creating us without ourselves and preserving us without our help in our re-created state."⁶²

Luther's doctrine of human bondage, upon closer inspection, proves to be woven of three theological strands. Three distinct clusters of doctrinal convictions about the human condition fused in *De servo arbitrio*.

1) Whereas Erasmus saw the will prior to justification as neutral and standing poised between God and Satan, poised, that is, between alternatives of choice, Luther asserted that the fallen will is captive to evil and actually doing evil of its own accord and gladly (*sponste et libenti voluntate*).⁶³ The Creator supports the will's perverse actuation ontologically, but God does this in conformity with the given condition of the will, which is one of aversion to God and His law. The first type of bondage is thus the impossibility of altering this aversion: "It thus comes about that man perpetually and necessarily sins and errs until he is put right by the Spirit of God."⁶⁴ Human bondage is first a captivity under

⁶¹ WA 18, 614, 1-18, citing lines 15 f. (LW 33, 35).

⁶² WA 18, 754, 7-12, citing lines 11 f. (LW 33, 243).

⁶³ WA 18, 634, 25. Also 670, 7 f., on the will being determined by either God or Satan: "Si Deus abest, Satan adest, nec nisi velle malum in nobis est."

⁶⁴ WA 18, 709, 21-710, 10, citing 710, 7 f. (LW 33, 176 f.). Further 685, 10-17; 768, 17-26; 774, 19-775, 18; 786, 7-14.

the irresistible rule of evil in the fallen will, which is ever prompt and ready in its quest.

2) A further strand in Luther's account of human bondage is his resolute exclusion of a free consent to grace which in a given case could be dissent and refusal. The fallen will has no residual capacity out of which to freely comply in its justification. Furthermore, when God turns the will to Himself, this is no weak and hesitant influence that awaits our ratification. "God's 'turning' . . . is that most active working of God which a man cannot avoid or alter, but under which he necessarily has the sort of will that God has given him, and that God carries along, by His own momentum (*rapt suo motu*)."⁶⁵ God's gift is so dynamic and influential as to leave no place for a division of labor between the human will and the Spirit of God. Synergism is ruled out both by the ineptitude of the fallen will and by the efficacy, quite irresistible, of the Spirit.

The result, however, is not violent compulsion, for the will is swept along in a spontaneous movement of seeking the good.

If God works in us, the will is changed, and being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord, not from compulsion, so that it cannot be turned another way by any opposition . . . but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good. . . . So not even here is there any free choice, or freedom to turn oneself in another direction or to will something different, so long as the Spirit and grace of God remain in a man.⁶⁶

Therefore there is a bondage of subjection to God that consists in the passivity of the will under the active, enrapturing influence of God. Such is the way God works in His elect.

3) Finally, there is the total subjection of all creatures to the divine governance of the universe. God foreknows all things and He carries out His design in complete accord with His eternal, unchangeable, and infallible will. There is thus a cosmic subjection to God's rule that also shatters the pretensions of free choice.

Everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God. For the will of God is effectual and

⁶⁵ WA 18, 747, 24–27 (LW 33, 233). Other references to God's work as *raptus*: 636, 17; 699, 13; 753, 29–35; 782, 10, 33.

⁶⁶ WA 18, 634, 37–635, 7 (LW 33, 65). Luther had in his *Operationes in psalmos* (1519–21) spoken of the way the will is passive in faith, hope, and love, because in them "non est nisi passio, raptus, motus, quo movetur, formatur, purgatur, impregnatur anima verbo Dei" (WA 5, 176, 12–14). Also 177, 11–14. Similarly, in the 1519 *Resolutiones* of the Leipzig Disputation: WA 2, 421, 7–15.

cannot be hindered, since it is the power of the divine nature itself; moreover it is wise, so that it cannot be deceived.⁶⁷

Christian faith in divine providence means for Luther that God remains in such wise sovereign that creatures have no share in determining the governance of the world. Consequently one can believe with total assurance the word of God, because He carries out effectively all that He promises.⁶⁸

An ultimate reason for the bondage of the will, in Luther's argument, is the subjection of all things to God's hidden preordination, according to which He carries out all He has determined. Why the design is such as it is and not different—that is God's own secret, far beyond the proper scope of our inquiry. Especially we are not to investigate why God gives His transforming grace to some and not to others. We have no right to ask about God's own counsels; instead, we are to attend to God as revealed and preached, that is, as merciful to all.⁶⁹ It may seem quite unjust for God to leave sinners in their rebellion and then to condemn them to hell for being children of wrath, but faith must bear with this for the present, until in the light of glory God is revealed as supremely just.⁷⁰

Thus Luther has a variety of arguments against any human autonomy before God. The ethical way of salvation by meritorious free choice is walled off by three bulwarks that safeguard God's initiative and sovereign effectiveness in human salvation.

Structures of Justification Itself

The unique object of justifying faith is Christ and his redemptive work. This is the one way to encounter God and survive. As Luther laid down in the First Antinomian Disputation (1537), approaching "the naked God" in His majesty is perilous in the extreme. Instead, one must turn

⁶⁷ WA 18, 615, 25–616, 12, citing 615, 31–35 (*LW* 33, 37 f.). Also 714, 38–722, 29, where Luther argues at length from Rom 9:15–18 that what God foreknows then takes place of necessity. In addition 752, 12–15; 753, 28–33.

⁶⁸ WA 18, 618, 19–619, 21. Also 714, 18 f.

⁶⁹ WA 18, 684, 32–686, 13; 712, 19–38. B. Gerrish brought out the distinctive character of Luther's position on the inscrutability of God in *De servo arbitrio*, noting the threat Luther thereby posed to his central message by allowing such a forbidding presence to lurk at the edge of faith ("To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *Journal of Religion* 53 [1973] 263–92).

⁷⁰ WA 18, 785, 35–39. On Luther's own anguished struggle amid resentment over the mystery of predestination: 719, 9 f. Also *WA Tischreden* 4, 641, 14–642, 2, where Luther observed that we have enough to do learning about God's revealed will, in the humanity of Christ, without probing mysteries meant to be hidden.

to the God who is given for us as Savior, the Word Incarnate whom the believer finds in the manger and hanging on the cross.⁷¹ Specifically, justifying faith lays hold of the redemptive work of Christ—his delivery for sins, the shedding of his blood, his death, and his triumphant resurrection—all done out of merciful love for sinners. Luther would characteristically posit in one and the same article of faith both Christ's redemptive work and justification by faith alone. That Christ is Savior means that no works, merit, or performance according to precept can have a role beside him on whom faith focuses.⁷² Faith, thus, is wholly soteriological in orientation and content, and it becomes authentic when it dawns on a person that the Redeemer did all this *for me*.

True faith says, "I certainly believe that the Son of God suffered and rose, but that he did all this for me, for my sins, of that I am certain." . . . Accordingly, that "for me" or "for us," if it is believed, creates that true faith and distinguishes it from all other faith, which merely hears the things done.⁷³

By such faith Christ becomes active in one's existence against the malevolent forces of sin, guilt, and despair.

1) *The Savior's victory*. The fullest statement by Luther on redemption itself as an event came in his exposition of Gal 3:13 ("Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, becoming accursed for us . . .").⁷⁴ Here Luther developed the conception of Christ taking upon himself all the sins of the human race, becoming thereby the willing *socius peccatorum*.⁷⁵ A theology that would segregate Christ from sin, say, to make him the supreme example of virtue, renders the Lord useless for sinners in need of deliverance.⁷⁶ Our consolation rests upon his being wrapped about by all the sins of the world. The event of redemption then transpired with the attack of sin, death, and the curse upon Christ laden with our sins. But in the drama of the Passion the malevolent forces did not see what was hidden in the person of Christ, namely, supreme and invincible righteousness.⁷⁷ Encountering divine power, the hostile forces were exhausted and suffered total defeat.⁷⁸ As the Easter Sequence celebrates, "Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando/Dux vitae mortuus regnat vi-

⁷¹ WA 39I, 370, 13–17; 389, 10–15. Also WA *Briefwechsel* 1, 328, 45–329, 60 (a letter of Feb. 12, 1519). As well WA 40II, 329, 19–35.

⁷² *Smalcald Articles* (1537), Part 2, Article 1 (WA 50, 198, 23–199, 21).

⁷³ WA 39I, 45, 21–46, 10, citing 45, 33 f. and 46, 7 f. Some other representative passages on the *pro me* in genuine faith: WA 2, 458, 22 ff.; 490, 35 ff.; WA 40I, 297, 15–33.

⁷⁴ WA 40I, 432–48 (LW 26, 276–88).

⁷⁵ WA 40I, 434, 17.

⁷⁶ WA 40I, 434, 22 f.

⁷⁷ WA 40I, 439, 13–24.

⁷⁸ WA 40I, 441, 14–28.

vus.”⁷⁹ Justifying faith, thus, embraces Christ triumphant over sin, death, and the curse of condemnation.

2) *Communication by word and sacrament.* The means linking Christ’s redemptive work with the believer is the proclamation of the gospel, that message of Christ’s saving victory and legacy to humankind.⁸⁰ A narrative about Christ becomes “gospel” when you sense that Christ is offering himself to be your very own, so that all he has done becomes all yours (*totum tuum*).⁸¹ The privileged events of redemption-being-proclaimed are the sacraments, where words are spoken that make the individual utterly certain of God’s grace in Christ.⁸² Justification can occur in one’s response to the baptismal formula, to the words of Eucharistic institution, or to absolution, by hearing in delight (*auditus gaudii*). Works count for nothing here, where hearing interacts with the *vox Dei*.⁸³ Luther can address Christ and say: “All our certitude rests upon your word, which reveals that the sins of the whole world have been expiated and destroyed by your sacrifice, death, and resurrection.”⁸⁴

3) *Grace frees from guilt; the gift purifies.* Luther elaborated a detailed account of what is conferred in justification by making use of the distinction in Rom 5:15 between *gratia* and *donum*.⁸⁵ This scheme served well in Luther’s effort to articulate, on the one hand, the simple personal relationship between the merciful God and the believing person come to righteousness and, on the other hand, the complex historical process of lifelong struggle against sin in the power of God’s Spirit shed abroad in the hearts of believers. “Grace” defines the relationship, the “gift” the process of the new life.

“Grace” is God’s mercy, benevolence, and favor, a reality ever outside a person but announced and come near in the gospel. God’s grace stands opposed to His wrath, and each of them encounters the person in

⁷⁹ WA 40I, 439, 32 f. Perceptive on Luther’s soteriology is Y. Congar, “Regards et réflexions sur la christologie de Luther,” *Chrétiens en dialogue* (Paris, 1964) 453–89 (English translation in *Dialogue between Christians* [Westminster, Md., 1966] 372–406), where the point is made that Luther leaves the human subjectivity of the God-man entirely passive in the divine work of redemption. Luther is, in tendency, Alexandrine, not Antiochene, in his soteriology.

⁸⁰ WA *Deutsche Bibel* 5, 476, 5–24 and 477, 16–38 (LW 35, 358, 360). D. Olivier chose Luther’s short instruction of 1522 on finding “the gospel in the Gospels” as an illuminating first example of Luther’s discourse on faith (*La foi de Luther* [Paris, 1978] 61–69, with comment on 69–72).

⁸¹ WA *Deutsche Bibel* 5, 478, 1–5.

⁸² WA 40I, 591, 16–30 (LW 26, 388 f.).

⁸³ WA 40II, 409, 20–411, 34 (LW 12, 368–70).

⁸⁴ WA 40II, 413, 24–26.

⁸⁵ See E. Iserloh’s study “*Gratia und Donum: Rechtfertigung und Heiligung nach Luthers ‘Wider den Löwener Theologen Latomus,’*” in *Luther und die Reformation* (Aschaffenburg, 1974).

undivided totality, wrath upon the sinner and grace upon the righteous. God takes the person who confesses his sin and believes the gospel promise wholly into the embrace of His mercy. Grace is consequently not a quality in the human heart but divine forgiveness of sin because of Christ. The believer's relation to grace proceeds from the conscience, where the power of sin to condemn has been broken. Before justification by God's grace, sin dominated (as *peccatum regnans*) and overwhelmed the conscience, but now it is dominated (as *peccatum regnatum*) and is no longer imputed, since guilt has been wiped away by God's merciful grace. This relationship brings peace of heart, joy, assurance, and courage—a totally new self-understanding before God. By grace the believer is wholly righteous because of Christ the Savior laid hold of in faith.⁸⁶

The "gift" is directly opposed to our sinful and corrupt self-seeking. It is the Holy Spirit infused into the heart, where there unfolds the gradual process of eradicating and expelling the baneful complex of sinful drives and tendencies. One does not have the gift fully in this life, but there can be a gradual increment until complete purification is attained in death. The gift initiates a struggle of penitential transformation amid prayer for the healing of both soul and body, a struggle for which vitality and direction are supplied by the Holy Spirit (*ubi vita et gubernatio cordis sit Spiritus Sanctus*). The struggle, in Luther's later accounts, is both against egotistical flaws in one's love of God and against perverse notions of God suggested by the flesh, which is ever ready to doubt God's favor by making it conditioned on our works. The Holy Spirit comes as the effective opponent of this pseudo wisdom and as the animator of a holy life of unselfish service of others and growing dedication to God.⁸⁷

4) *Imputation and union with Christ*. In the strictest sense the cause of justification is solely the meritorious work of Christ, the victor over sin, in whom the believing heart lays hold of mercy.⁸⁸ The righteous are

⁸⁶ In the *Antilatomo* (1522), *WA* 8, 88, 25–29 (*LW* 32, 202); 94, 8 f.; 106, 10–15; 106, 37–107, 4; 107, 13–23, 32–36. In the prefaces to Romans (1522, 1529), *WA Deutsche Bibel* 7, 8, 10–22; 5, 622, 17–41; 623, 26–32 (*LW* 35, 369 f.). In the exposition of Ps 51 (1532, printed 1538), *WA* 40II, 350, 33–37 (*LW* 12, 327); 351, 23–25; 352, 21–23; 352, 36–353, 21; 353, 36–354, 20; 357, 35–358, 19. In a disputation on justification (1536), *WA* 39I, 99, 18–27 (*LW* 34, 168 f.).

⁸⁷ *WA* 8, 107, 13–23, 32–36; *WA Deutsche Bibel* 5, 622, 18–24, 34–37; 623, 17 (cited); *WA* 40II, 351, 26–352, 17; 352, 33–36; 354, 21–32; 355, 16–24; 356, 19–23; 357, 20–31; 358, 19–26. First Antinomian Disputation (1537), *WA* 39I, 383, 3–12. Third Antinomian Disputation (1538), *WA* 39I, 495, 11–26.

⁸⁸ *WA* 40II, 358, 35–37 (*LW* 12, 332). In this context Luther would allow one to speak of the confession of one's sin as a *causa secunda* or *causa sine qua non*, which however has no independent causal influence: "quia sic est causa, ut tamen tota res pendeat ex misericordia Dei seu ex promissione." There is no ground at all here for merit, since even one's confession is effected by God's promise (358, 37–359, 17 and 359, 23–25).

forgiven and acquitted before God, but not because of the beginning in them of purity and good deeds. At the stage of justification itself, righteousness is by *imputation* because of, and with regard to, Christ.⁸⁹ However, faith is a real relation to Christ, and his righteousness does become one's real possession by the promise of faith, although it is ever alien and external because we do not merit it.⁹⁰ The forgiveness, totally present by grace and imputation, begins at once to be cleansing and effective transformation by the gift.⁹¹

Luther's technical accounts of the diverse elements in justification should not obscure the more obvious character of the faith in Christ by which one is justified. By faith one clings to Christ and becomes one with him, sharing in all the righteousness and life that are his own.⁹² Luther's stress on the unmerited *extra nos* of righteousness and its imputation in no way prevented him from appropriating Gal 2:20 ("I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me") as a testimony to Christ abiding "properly and inherently," conferring his life, grace, and salvation "by cementing and inhesion in faith," and becoming in a way one person with the believer.⁹³ It is not too much to say that justification entails a mystical union with Christ the Savior in the depths of the believing person.

Penance and Good Works in the New Life of Righteousness

The person once guilty but now saved by grace has been set right in relation to God, but God's design encompasses much more in his regard. Luther can compare one living this life to the heavens and earth in the beginning, since both are "matter," even "pure matter," for the future form of perfection God plans to bring forth, a form which in our case is in God's own image.⁹⁴

The lifelong task remaining after justification is the purgation of the complex of sinful tendencies that remain. This is the daily cleansing, the

⁸⁹ WA 39I, 83, 18-27; 97, 16-22; 492, 2-23; 514, 13-20.

⁹⁰ "Extra nos esse est ex nostris viribus non esse. Est quidem iustitia possessio nostra, quia nobis donata est ex misericordia, tamen aliena a nobis, quia non meruimus eam" (WA 39I, 109, 1-3 [LW 34, 178]).

⁹¹ WA 39I, 98, 5-11 (LW 34, 167). In the second Antinomian Disputation (1538) Luther repeatedly linked two modes of deliverance from sin: imputative and expurgative (WA 39I, 431, 16-432, 11; 434, 3-12; 444, 4-6).

⁹² WA 2, 491, 12-18; 504, 6-8 (LW 27, 222, 241); WA 7, 54, 31-55, 35 (LW 31, 351 f.); WA 8, 599, 2-7 (LW 44, 286).

⁹³ WA 40I, 283, 8 f.; 284, 6 f.; 285, 5—all cited from the lecture script, not from the text polished up by Luther's assistants for printing.

⁹⁴ WA 39I, 177, 3-12 (LW 34, 139 f.). This text from Luther's Disputation on Man (1536) was used to good effect by K.-H. zur Mühlen to show the abyss separating Luther's biblical-eschatological view of the human situation from Aristotle's ontological-rational perspective (*Reformatörise Vernunftkritik und neuzeitliches Denken* [Tübingen, 1980] 132 ff.).

renewal from day to day in groaning and struggle.⁹⁵ Sin's power in the conscience, where it once tyrannized and implanted guilt, has been broken, but the residue of sin is still present, as evidenced by reluctance in doing good and by recurrent temptations to satisfy God by achievements. But the state and condition of this sin is, after justification, changed decisively, for it is now subject, condemned, and bound over for eventual complete destruction.⁹⁶ The believer, therefore, does penance all his life, but with confidence as he confronts his lust, anger, and pride. The internal *donum* of the Spirit and the external word work to bring the whole person to health and well-being by expelling the poisoned complex of sinfulness.⁹⁷

In the context of this lifelong penance, Luther comes to ascribe a role to good works. They clearly are not justifying and so one puts no stock in them as meritorious. The Spirit instils instead an uncalculating, free, and spontaneous desire of pleasing God and promoting His glory. No claim is made by one doing good only as God's instrument.⁹⁸ Works are not the cause of righteousness but its fruit.⁹⁹ The believer's delight in Christ frees him from the burden of meritorious achievement of status. Gratitude gives rise to joyful service in love unconstrained.¹⁰⁰ As Christ worked and suffered for us *gratis*, so those who believe in him, in whom he is now working, seek to benefit others without concern for gain.¹⁰¹ Applying Phil 2:5–11, Luther presents Christ as the model who, being in the form of God and possessing all perfections, emptied himself in labors for others; just so, the righteous person, possessing righteousness in Christ and made free, is now to empty himself in service for the neighbor, dealing with others just as God dealt with him.¹⁰² Thus faith and works are not to be separated. The distinction between them is radical, as between God and man in Christ or the soul and body in a human being, but they are connected. Luther can speak of faith "growing fat" by works, as it makes its presence felt.¹⁰³

⁹⁵ WA 2, 414, 14–19; 536, 3 ff.; 570, 16 ff.; WA 5, 299, 30–34.

⁹⁶ WA 8, 88, 25–29 (LW 32, 202); 91, 15–25, 35–40 (LW 32, 206 f.); 94, 8 f.

⁹⁷ WA 39I, 113, 20–114, 4 (LW 34, 182 f.); 394, 13–19; 395, 22–396, 1; 398, 11–20.

⁹⁸ WA 5, 169, 1–9; WA 6, 207, 26–30 (LW 44, 27).

⁹⁹ WA 6, 94, 39 f.

¹⁰⁰ WA 7, 60, 6–9, 27–29 (LW 31, 359 f.). Also WA 6, 207, 15–30 (LW 44, 27).

¹⁰¹ WA 8, 608, 24–32 (LW 44, 301 f.).

¹⁰² WA 7, 65, 32–66, 10 (LW 31, 366).

¹⁰³ *Rhapsodia de loco justificationis* (1530), WA 30II, 659, 13–21. In a more technical mode, Luther could contrast *fides abstracta vel absoluta* (outside of good works) with *fides concreta, composita seu incarnata* (active in good works) and thereby he came to attribute qualified but definite significance to good works done in faith (WA 40I, 414, 24–416, 27 [LW 26, 264–266]). On Luther's correlation of faith/works with Christ's divinity/humanity, and on the problems Luther's polemic brings in its train, see P. Manns, "Absolute and Incarnate Faith: Luther on Justification in the Galatians' Commentary of 1531–1535," *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther* 121–56.

Strange as it may seem, Luther's reform came to take pride in its instruction on good works;¹⁰⁴ for the experience of conversion to Christ's salvation does lead, according to Luther, to a movement of descent into the world and society to meet human needs. "When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises."¹⁰⁵ The relation to God given by reconciling grace leads the believer to gladly take up a vocation in which God has stipulated needed tasks in the basic sectors of worldly life. These are the spheres of service in which to work for others in obedience to God's calling.

The "estates" wherein one works for others as an instrument of the Creator's bounty are generically the Church, the family, the economy, and civil government.¹⁰⁶ This, then, is the context of Luther's stress on the dignity of the most ordinary occupations instituted by God the Creator—and the context of his attacks on doctrines of higher states in monastic and religious life. Marriage, government, and the ministry are God's own "orders," in which true good works can be done in abundance. But systematically these spheres of service belong to the first article of the Creed, on creation, and not to the second article, on redemption and its appropriation.

Still, the believer is freed by faith in Christ to attend to the needs of others. Service of the neighbor is clearly a consequence of, not a means to, the saving encounter with God's loving-kindness in Christ. The person returns again and again to be confirmed in God's freely given grace and forgiveness, by hearing the preached word and receiving the assuring sacraments in faith. Then the movement outward into service can commence again: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, forgiving enemies, praying for all living on earth, and suffering trials and pain.

¹⁰⁴ Article 20 of the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530 points to instructions on the Ten Commandments in its refutation of charges that the Lutherans undermine good works. Lutheran teaching "is rather to be praised for teaching that good works are to be done and for offering help as to how they may be done" (text from *The Book of Concord*, ed. T. G. Tappert [Philadelphia, 1959] 46). Similarly, Luther said in his apologetic *Admonition to All the Clergy Assembled at Augsburg* (also 1530) that now even young children in Reformed lands are learning about the Ten Commandments in catechism (WA 30II, 301, 5–16 [LW 34, 28]). Luther had explained the Decalogue in his *Treatise on Good Works* of spring 1520 (WA 6, 202–76 [LW 44, 21–114]). His catechisms of 1529 begin with instructions on the Ten Commandments before taking up the Lord's Prayer and the sacraments. The *Small Catechism* finishes with a concise table of the duties incumbent on members of the various estates.

¹⁰⁵ WA 40I, 51, 21–23 (LW 26, 11).

¹⁰⁶ WA 26, 504, 30–505, 10 (LW 37, 364 f.). See P. Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1972) 36–42.

But none of these good actions serve in gaining salvation, since that is found uniquely in clinging to Christ the Redeemer in faith.¹⁰⁷

CONCLUDING HISTORICAL EVALUATION

Some generalizing reflections can serve to highlight points of special significance in Luther's account of justification. I would indicate five contexts in which his work is of fundamental significance.

First, numerous points of Luther's theology occasioned sharp reactions on the part of Catholic controversialist theologians and the bishops gathered at the Council of Trent. Two of Luther's teachings presented in this essay caused a perceptible contrary movement in the formulation of doctrine basic to modern Catholicism. Trent, and the theology shaped by the Council, asserts pointedly the role played by human freedom in the assent or dissent by which movements initiated by grace are appropriated or resisted. Catholic theology, faced with the excesses of *De servo arbitrio*, is to this day unabashedly synergistic in its account of faith and justification, and so this theology can speak clearly about human guilt for noncompliance with God's saving action. Also early modern Catholicism, reacting to Luther's "first-article" theology of good works, asserted that the righteous act under the influence of Christ and his Spirit poured out into believing hearts. In this "third-article" view of works, believers are members moved by the head or branches become fruitful because of Christ the living vine. This stress produced a characteristic spirit in the men and women of modern Catholicism, an activist spirit of constant struggle, zeal for missions, and discipline and self-sacrifice in everyday life. The best representatives of this Counter Reformation spirituality were convinced of the supernatural and salvific value of their activity in a manner closed to Christians instructed by Luther. On these two points at least, Luther's doctrine of justification was of historic significance because of the contrary reactions that shaped an era in Catholicism. The contemporary dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in America is struggling hard to overcome the impasse represented by these two oppositions.

Second, looking to the positive side of Luther's message, one must single out an element of perennial Christian value. Luther confronts our secure, complacent, and proud humanity with a powerful evangelical witness to the primacy, yes even the sovereignty, of God's agency in what is most intimately human, namely, personal development. Luther demonstrated, on his Pauline basis, the inadequacy of ethical striving toward the goals of humane living. Against various mentalities stressing achievement—whether in theology, popular piety, or humanistic "philosophies

¹⁰⁷ WA 26, 505, 11-20.

of life"—Luther sets forth the cross as the paradox-filled paradigm for life. One finds life by losing it, that is, by delivering it over to God's own redemptive project. Then a new life can begin, but even this is predominantly a penitential existence, ever in needy dependence, ever on the way, ever being purified. Luther's theology of justification has a fundamental religious significance.

Third, Luther posited soteriology in the center of theological work. His thought was dominated by the effort to bind faith and theology in single-minded attentiveness to Christ as Savior. Turning from personal dispositions, intentions, and achievements as values in view of salvation, faith focuses exclusively on Christ's redemptive mystery. Theology then strives to serve this orientation by constantly reaffirming redemption and continually connecting all other topics to the central event, Jesus Christ crucified for sin and risen. In this, Luther was offering a significant alternative to the schools or *viae* of late-medieval university theology, with their broad systematic attention to the levels of creation and all the stages and instruments of the human return to God. Thomists stressed the harmonious interrelation of all elements under divine wisdom, while Scotists and Ockhamists accented the freedom of God's unbounded will over against the contingent universe. But Luther posited a new foundation by expounding theology tightly unified about soteriology.

Fourth, there is Luther's drive to relate theological discourse to lived religious existence (experience). Here his importance is monumental, especially when seen in the perspective of the fateful divorce in the West of academic from monastic theology and spirituality beginning in the twelfth century, as with Abelard and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In Luther's doctrine of justification the systematic and experiential concerns came together again in creative renewal. Luther did argue from the texts to conclusions; he defended theses and gave elaborate, often ingenious, explanatory accounts. Thus he stood in dialogue, to say nothing of stormy polemic, with the academic tradition of disciplined, grounded discourse. But all Luther's explanations serve religious living of a particular style. His theses relate directly to humility *coram Deo*, to laying hold of redemption in audacious confidence, and to living then in penitential purification. Theology, rediscovering a center in the Pauline writings, is in Luther's work vitally connected with lived religion.

Fifth, Luther's theology of justification was a major achievement of Western thought at the beginning of the modern age. A crisis of basic institutions had afflicted Europe in the fourteenth century, but this gave way to a many-sided recovery in which the economy, governments, and schools began in the fifteenth century to provide both a context of order and more adequate nurture for humane living. The Church, it is clear,

lagged behind in this broad growth of competency. The Renaissance papacy (1450–1521) was victorious over conciliarism, but it did not effectively supervise the pastoral work of Europe's bishops. The German episcopate was thoroughly politicized, being a domain of aristocratic pursuit of power. Homiletics, with rare exceptions, remained beholden to old schemes of moralizing and to the support of devotional religion. Popular piety, in lush growth around 1500, was not checked and controlled by doctrine. But the sixteenth century saw the formulation of new ways of faith, preaching, and worship that have proven viable over the long haul of subsequent centuries. Among these new ways, Luther's striking account of *homo reus ac perditus* and *Deus iustificans ac salvator* played a truly historic role.