

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND THOUGHT

Since we are Justified by Faith

Justification in the Theologies of the Protestant Reformations

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CHAPTER 2

Martin Luther preaches salvation to his friends: justification by faith in the mature reformer

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In any volume devoted to justification in the Reformation, some treatment of Martin Luther is almost inevitable. One might even say *necessary*. After all, Luther was the first of the sixteenth century Protestant reformers, and he identified justification as the cornerstone of his theology. Although historians still quibble about when precisely Luther came to his new evangelical understanding of the faith, already in 1518 at the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther was saying things like, 'He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ,' a sentiment on which he elaborated with these words, 'The righteousness of God is not acquired by means of acts frequently repeated . . . but it is imparted by faith. . . . works contribute nothing to justification. . . . His justification by faith in Christ is sufficient to him. Christ is his wisdom, righteousness, etc.'¹

Justification by faith was a conviction, once acquired, that Luther never yielded. The 'mature' churchman as well as the 'young' reformer maintained this doctrine. In 1537, in the Schmalkald Articles, aptly described as 'Luther's Theological Testament,'² he identified justification by faith as 'the first and chief article' of the Christian religion and insisted that 'nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed'. In Luther's characteristic fashion, he went on to write, 'On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.'³ Luther's commitment to justification by faith was absolute.⁴

¹ LW 31.55-56 (WA 1.364.1-5, 11, 14-15).

² Luther composed them for a possible church council at a time when he was seriously ill. See William R. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

³ Schmalkald Articles 2.1.1-5. These articles are a part of the Lutheran Confessions, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburgerischen Konfession 1930*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck

However, it is one thing to say that something is important in a document intended for a church council and quite another actually to preach it. Doctrinal statements and homilies are very different things, and preachers routinely make choices about what they are going to include in their sermons. So it is useful to examine the sermons of Martin Luther in order to test the importance of justification by faith in his practical ministry. How and to what extent did the Reformer make use of this doctrine when he preached?⁵

For Martin Luther was a preacher. According to one estimate, Luther preached about 4,000 times during his career, and of his sermons, around 2,300 have survived in one form or another.⁶ The Reformation did not initiate a homiletical revival in the church;⁷ but the reformers, beginning with Luther, embraced preaching as necessary for true Christian worship and viewed it as essential to authentic Christian ministry.⁸ In one of his earliest efforts to reform worship, Luther had this to say about preaching:

& Ruprecht, 1959). The English translation is from Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

- ⁴ The literature on Luther and justification is voluminous; but for a good, clear exposition, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 258-66.
- ⁵ Of course, this question has been treated before. See Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 16-25; Detlef Lehmann, 'Luther als Prediger', in *Oberurseler Hefte*, Heft 17 (Oberursel: Fakultät der Luth. Theol. Hochschule Oberursel, 1983), 13-15; Gerhard Heintze, *Luthers Predigt von Gesetz und Evangelium* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958); Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 65-66, 116-32, 139-44, 373-76. In this essay, we are looking very narrowly at the question of justification in the house postils.
- ⁶ Fred W. Meuser, 'Luther as Preacher of the Word of God', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136. See, also, John W. Doberstein, 'Introduction' to *Sermons I*, *LW* 51.xi-xiii; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1.150-55.
- ⁷ Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10-17; John M. Frymire, *The Primacy of the Postils: Catholics, Protestants, and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 10-25. Frymire argues convincingly that late medieval preaching was much more extensive—beyond the cities and towns—than many scholars have previously thought.
- ⁸ Pettegree, *Reformation*, 10-11. See, also, Larissa Taylor (ed.), *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period* (Boston: Brill, 2003), especially the articles by Beth Kreitzer ('The Lutheran Sermon', 35-63) and James Thomas Ford ('Preaching in the Reformed Tradition', 65-88). For the evangelical character of early Reformation preaching in Germany, see Bernd Moeller, 'What Was Preached in German Towns in the Early Reformation?' in C. Scott Dixon (ed.), *The German Reformation: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 36-55.

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Know first of all that a Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word and prayer, no matter how briefly as Psalm 102 says, 'When the kings and the people assemble to serve the Lord, they shall declare the name and the praise of God.' And Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 says that when they come together, there should be prophesying, teaching, and admonition. Therefore, when God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together.⁹

'When God's Word is not preached, one might as well not even come together for worship.' That's how important preaching was for Martin Luther.¹⁰

In part, Luther's commitment to preaching resulted from his convictions regarding the *oral* character of the Gospel. In his preface to the New Testament, first published in 1522 but regularly reprinted thereafter, Luther defined the word 'gospel' as 'a good message, good tidings, good news, a good report, which one sings and tells with gladness'¹¹ and then described the Christian Gospel as 'a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them'.¹² This message, Luther insisted, 'Christ...commanded and ordained . . . be *preached* [*aus zuruffen*] after his death in all the world. . . . A poor man, dead in sin and consigned to hell, can *hear* [*horen*] nothing more comforting than this precious and tender message about Christ.'¹³

A few paragraphs later, Luther again summarized the Gospel as 'the preaching about Christ', i.e., the 'Son of God and of David, true God and man, who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us the sin, death, and hell of all men who believe in him'.¹⁴ This alone is the message that deserves the title 'Gospel'. It is not enough, Luther insisted, just to be familiar with what Christ did or what was done to him. Such information becomes Gospel only 'when the voice [*die stymme*] comes that says, "Christ is your own, with his life, teaching, works, death, resurrection, and all that he is, has, does, and can do."' That's what true preaching is: 'The voice . . . that says, "Christ is your own."' ¹⁵

For Luther, Christ, Gospel, and preaching all go together. So the challenge of treating justification in Luther's preaching turns out to be an embarrassment of riches rather than a lack of evidence.

⁹ 'Concerning the Order of Public Worship' (1523), *LW* 53.11 (*WA* 12.35.19-25).

¹⁰ See, also, Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 11-34.

¹¹ *LW* 35.358 (*WA DB* 6.2.23-25).

¹² *LW* 35.358 (*WA DB* 6.4.4-6).

¹³ *LW* 35.359 (*WA DB* 6.4.15-22), emphasis added. For the oral character of the Gospel in Luther, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 63-70.

¹⁴ *LW* 35.360 (*WA DB* 6.6.22-26).

¹⁵ *LW* 35.360-61 (*WA DB* 6.8.17-19). For Luther, Christian preaching was the same as God speaking. See Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 11-16.

One way, however, to narrow the focus constructively is to examine a subset of Luther's sermons, defined perhaps by theme, text, or context. Among other possibilities, Luther's house postils stand out especially on account of their provenance. In the early 1530s, Luther, in poor health and extremely overworked, for the most part quit preaching in Wittenberg's parish church; but he did not quit preaching. Instead, he preached at home to his family and friends—often quite a group on account of relatives, friends, and boarders who stayed at Luther's home in addition to his own wife and children.¹⁶

These sermons, transcribed at the time by some of those present, were later published in a couple of different versions. The only one that appeared during Luther's lifetime was that of Veit Dietrich in 1544. Modern editors recognize that Dietrich often combined two or three of Luther's sermons into one and occasionally used materials that Luther had preached 'publicly' and not at home. Sometimes Dietrich even included a sermon by someone other than Luther! Nonetheless, Dietrich based the *Hauspostille* on Luther's private preaching and Luther acknowledged as much in an introduction he wrote for his friend's work.¹⁷ Thus, the Luther presented here is not simply Luther preaching to his friends but Luther as mediated by a friend for public consumption. Obviously not a perfect source, Dietrich's house postils still provide insight into what the mature Luther thought people needed to hear from the Word of God. Not surprisingly, justification is a major theme.¹⁸

As biblical texts for his house postils, Luther used the traditional Gospel lessons of the medieval church year. He often preached on these texts since the Wittenberg church continued to use them in its services. One obvious advantage from our perspective is that this facilitates comparison over long periods of time of Luther's various treatments of particular Bible passages.¹⁹

In addition to the house postils, we also have the church postils from much earlier in Luther's career. These are quite different from the house postils in terms of their origins, because Luther initially intended them as homiletical helps for preachers rather than as sermons themselves. When Luther was 'hid-

¹⁶ Brecht, *Luther*, 2.204.

¹⁷ *WA* 52.1.3-8.

¹⁸ Andreas Poach produced a second version of the house postils in 1559, more than a decade after Luther's death. For background to both versions, see the introduction by Georg Buchwald in *WA* 52.vii-xii. The Weimar edition also provides data on the relationship between Dietrich's edition and the manuscript notes of one of the copyists, Georg Rörer. See, also, Emanuel Hirsch's introductory comments to each version in *Luthers Werke in Auswahl: Predigten*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1962), 7.69, 84.

¹⁹ Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), 21-25, explains how it is that Luther retained the pericopal system and indicates that Luther came to appreciate the advantages of yearly repetition of certain scriptural texts for the young and the simple.

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ing' at the Wartburg (1521-1522), he prepared postils or commentaries on the traditional Scripture lessons for the church year from Advent through Epiphany.²⁰ Thus, some of Luther's earliest homiletical materials, prepared specifically for evangelical preaching, concern the same biblical texts as the house postils that Luther preached years later. Therefore, the church postils provide a base line from which we can measure continuity or change in Luther's treatment of justification in sermons delivered a decade later (and published a decade after that).

Another good reason for examining the earlier set of postils is the fact that Luther prepared an introduction for them, entitled, 'A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels'; and in this work, he set some priorities for evangelical preaching. For example, regarding the definition of Gospel, Luther was concerned that preachers not limit themselves to the first four books of the New Testament. Instead, he insisted that there was really 'only one Gospel, but that it is described by many apostles'. Whether presented in long or short form, it had the same essential content, 'Gospel is and should be nothing else than a discourse or story about Christ,' and in its most basic form it consisted of these points, 'that he is the Son of God and became man for us, that he died and was raised, that he has been established as a Lord over all things'.²¹

Significantly, Luther's description included two little words that made the Gospel more than simply a recitation of facts, viz., 'for us'. 'He is the Son of God and became man *for us* [*für uns*]' (emphasis added). Whether the Gospel is actually good news or not depends on why God became man, suffered and died, and how he exercises his Lordship. Therefore, Luther's next main point was to emphasize and explicate the 'for us' character of the Gospel by insisting that preachers present Christ as a 'gift' before they describe him as an 'example'.²²

Both treatments were legitimate, but Luther warned against so emphasizing the exemplary character of Christ as to turn him into another Moses or lawgiver, 'as if Christ did nothing more than teach and provide examples as the other saints do, as if the Gospel were simply a textbook of teachings or laws'. For Luther, such preaching hardly deserved to be called the Gospel because it did not help the hearer with their sins. 'On this level,' Luther explained, 'Christ is no more help to you than some other saint. His life remains his own and does not as yet contribute anything to you. In short this mode [of preaching] . . . does

²⁰ The church postils have a long and complicated history that was still ongoing in 1544, the year that saw the first publication of the house postils. See Doberstein, 'Introduction', xiv-xv; Ebeling, *Evangelienauslegung*, 30-37; and Frymire, *Primacy*, 31-37.

²¹ LW 35.117-18 (WA 10¹.9.6-7, 11-12, 19-20).

²² LW 35.119 (WA 10¹.11.12-14).

not make Christians but only hypocrites.' Sinners need a Savior not just an example.²³

So Luther went on to insist that 'the chief article and foundation of the Gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift'. By employing this formulation, Luther emphasized the vicarious nature of the work of Christ, 'This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you. On this you may depend as surely as if you had done it yourself; indeed as if you were Christ himself.' And therefore, by depending on Christ, one obtains what Christ has obtained by his saving work, 'When you lay hold of Christ as a gift which is given you for your very own and have no doubt about it, you are a Christian. Faith redeems you from sin, death, and hell and enables you to overcome all things.'²⁴

In short, the Gospel is the story of Christ, God made man, who rescued sinners from death and hell by taking their place. This God grants to those who trust in him. We call this justification by faith, and Luther said that it must be preached.

But Luther also acknowledged that 'when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example'. This then introduces the topic of good works, 'giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you'.²⁵ With respect to such works, Luther insisted on two things—first of all, that they were not a part of saving faith, 'As widely as a gift differs from an example, so widely does faith differ from works, for faith possesses nothing of its own, only the deeds and life of Christ.' Christ alone is the Savior and our works add nothing to him. However, Luther's other point about good works was that they necessarily followed faith, 'These [works] do not make you a Christian. Actually, they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian.'²⁶

Clearly, Luther's 'Brief Instruction' offers criteria for evaluating his treatment of justification in his sermons. So let's consider his presentation of the Gospel in the house postils as compared with the first of the church postils—the Christmas postils of 1522.²⁷ Taking our cue from the 'Brief Instruction,' we need first of all to examine how Luther presented Jesus Christ in each set of homiletical materials. Is Christ the center of the Gospel and is he the same

²³ LW 35.119 (WA 10^{1.1}.10.20-11.1, 11.8-10).

²⁴ LW 35.119, 120 (WA 10^{1.1}.11.12-18, 12.7-10).

²⁵ LW 35.120 (WA 10^{1.1}.12.12-15).

²⁶ LW 35.120 (WA 10^{1.1}.12.19-13.1).

²⁷ Luther's first publication of postils included homiletical helps for Epistle lessons as well as Gospels, and lessons for New Years and Epiphany as well as the Christmas season. See Doberstein, 'Introduction', xiv-xv. For details, see W. Köhler, 'Einleitung zur Wartburgpostille', WA 10^{1.2}.xli-lxxix. In the interest of space, we are restricting our comparison in this essay to the postils on the Gospels for Christmas.

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Christ in the later sermons as well as the earlier ones? The answer to both questions is, Yes.

As one might expect, Luther dealt at length with the person of Christ in his sermons on Christmas. The subject is especially hard to avoid when your text is John 1.1-14, 'The Gospel for the Main Christmas Service,' and Luther addressed it at length in his church postil on this text. So, for example, Luther summarized the evangelist's intentions this way, 'He wanted to indicate what was to be written about Christ in the whole Gospel, namely that he is true God and man, who has created all things, and that he was given to men to be life and light.'²⁸ Luther also maintained the integrity of each nature as well as the unity of the person of Christ²⁹ and insisted on distinguishing the person of the Son from that of the Father.³⁰ In other words, he was operating within the parameters of Chalcedonian Christology.³¹

He continued to do so in the house postils. Unfortunately, this set of sermons does not include an exposition of John 1. But it does include four sermons, based on Luke 2, for Christmas day; and in the first two of these, Luther preached directly and extensively on the incarnation. Luther spoke as clearly here as he did in the earlier set of homiletical helps, 'God himself becomes true man, with the result that out of God and human nature there comes to be a single person. . . . Now God has become man and still remains God.'³²

One noteworthy element in Luther's treatment of the person of Christ in these postils is that he found edifying material for believers in the simple fact of incarnation without considering the work of redemption. Apart from the 'use and benefit' of the incarnation, Luther contended that it was an 'honor' [*die Ehre*] for humanity that God became a man. He did not do it for the angels, and the devil cannot do it. But God can and has.

We should learn well, first of all, the honor we have received in that Christ has become man. This is such an honor that if someone were an angel, he would wish to become man just so that he could boast, 'My flesh and my blood sit above the angels.' Therefore, the creature who is called human is indeed a blessed creature.³³

²⁸ LW 52.65 (*WA* 10¹¹.213.20-24).

²⁹ LW 52.54 (*WA* 10¹¹.198.22-24, 199.6-8)

³⁰ LW 52.43-44 (*WA* 10¹¹.183.25-28, 184.13-18).

³¹ See Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 207-21, for Luther's traditional Trinitarian and Christological doctrines in view of his own Reformation emphases.

³² *WA* 52.43.1-6. See, also, *WA* 52.47.38-39. The house postils were not translated for *Luther's Works*. There is a 19th century translation (Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospels* [2 vols; Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1871]) that is of some help, but the translation in the text is my own.

³³ *WA* 52.43.35-36, 40.31-35. In another place (*WA* 52.48.2-8) Luther comments on how men and angels share the same Lord and, therefore, are neighbors and members of the same civil society.

Obviously, the incarnation should cause people to rejoice. Luther exclaimed over 'unhappy people' who knew nothing about the 'honor' of the incarnation and even more so over those who had heard about it and yet had no joy in it. 'So how can it be,' he asked, 'that we too do not rejoice in this, that we do not want to take it to heart, nor do we thank and praise God that my God has become my flesh and blood and now sits above on the right hand of God, a Lord above all creatures?'³⁴

Luther returned to this theme of honor several times in these sermons and developed it in two additional ways. One of them was connected to justification in that the incarnation brings comfort to poor sinners.

Therefore, he who has in his heart this idea—that God's Son has become man—can expect nothing bad from the Lord Christ but instead everything good. . . . Such an idea—if it were truly in our hearts—would melt in an instant all horrible examples of God's wrath like the Flood and the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Everything like this must disappear in a single moment when I think about the only man who is God and has so honored poor human nature that he has become a man.³⁵

As we shall see, this is hardly the entirety of Luther's teaching about the comfort of the Gospel, but nonetheless it is significant that Luther asserted it on the basis of the person of Christ and not his work, since usually it is the work of Christ to which Luther points as the heart of the Gospel.³⁶

A second application of the incarnation is the encouragement it provides for showing love toward others. After all, Luther argued, if God has so honored humanity as to become human, how can we who *are* human do anything less than follow his example and love others?

If we truly took this to heart, then we could never be hostile to any of our fellowmen. For who would want to be hostile or to do something bad to the form [*dem bilde*] that has flesh and blood like my God and yours. Should we not therefore for the sake of the honor that God has shown us also love all men and do everything good to them?³⁷

The 'honor' of the incarnation is a major motif in the first two house postils for Christmas; but it is not the only theme or really the main theme in Luther's treatment as a whole. For Luther, the person of Christ is always a precondition for his work. The ultimate purpose of God's *becoming* a man is God's *redeeming* humanity.³⁸ This is evident already in the church postils from 1522. They include separate treatments for Luke 2.1-14 (the birth and its announcement by

³⁴ WA 52.44.19, 27-29. See, also, WA 52.45.12-16.

³⁵ WA 52.44.37-39, 45.3-7.

³⁶ See, for example, the Schmalkald Articles, 2.1-3.

³⁷ WA 52.43.36-40.

³⁸ Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 223-25.

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the angels) and 2.15-20 (the response of the shepherds). In these postils, Luther affirmed the incarnation, but he also emphasized the 'for you' character of the Gospel. He found it especially in the announcement of the angel which he identified with the Gospel itself:

The angel demonstrates the Gospel most clearly with his words. . . . He does not say, 'I preach to you,' but 'I am speaking a Gospel to you.' . . . And whereof does the Gospel speak? . . . 'For you is born a Savior, Christ the Lord.' . . . See there what the Gospel is: a joyous sermon concerning Christ, our Savior. . . . Thus, the Gospel does not merely teach the story and accounts of Christ, but personalizes them and gives them to all who believe.³⁹

But what did it mean to believe that Christ was 'our Savior'? Not just that he was God and man, but that what he did as God and man, he did for us: 'The Gospel teaches that Christ was born for our sake and that he did everything and suffered all things for our sake.'⁴⁰

Besides the passive quality of faith that receives what Christ is and has done for sinners, Luther also described the transformative character of faith. On the one hand, he separated works from justification:

That man (if he has faith) may boast of such treasure as that Mary is his real mother, Christ his brother, and God his father. For these things are, all of them, true and they come to pass, provided we believe them; this is the chief part and chief good in all the Gospels, before one derives from them teaching concerning good works. Christ . . . must become ours and we his before we undertake good works. That happens in no other way than through such faith.⁴¹

But on the other hand, Luther insisted that works flow from this saving faith:

That [faith] makes for a right knowledge of Christ; from it the conscience becomes happy, free, and contented; from it grow love and praise of God. . . . Then there follows a mind right willing to do, to refrain from doing, and to suffer everything that is pleasing to God.⁴²

Such faith does *not* require special 'religious' works like fasting or wearing unusual clothing. Instead, the true Christian continues as always but with a new attitude, 'For a Christian knows that it all depends upon faith; for this reason he walks, stands, eats, drinks, dresses, works, and lives as any ordinary person in his calling.'⁴³ Works that are good in God's sight come from a believing heart and are directed to others. In fact, now—but only now—a believer should look

³⁹ LW 52.20 (WA 10^{1.1}.78.20-79.13).

⁴⁰ LW 52.14 (WA 10^{1.1}.71.9-10).

⁴¹ LW 52.15-16 (WA 10^{1.1}.72.20-73.6).

⁴² LW 52.16 (WA 10^{1.1}.73.7-11).

⁴³ LW 52.38 (WA 10^{1.1}.137.22-138.2). For Luther's doctrine of vocation, see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 36-42.

upon Christ as his example, 'Now there follows the example of good works, that you also do to your neighbor as you see that Christ has done for you.'⁴⁴

From person and work of Christ to faith and the fruits of faith in the Christian, Luther layed out the plan of salvation in the Christmas postils of 1522. Many years later in the house postils, he was still doing the same thing. As in the earlier work, Luther identified the news that Christ was the Savior as the most important part of the angel's message to the shepherds, 'But beyond this natural honor and joy [in the incarnation] is still this—that he, the man Jesus, is also a savior. This is first and foremost the chief part [*allererst das rechte stück*] and the greatest reason why a person should be happy.'⁴⁵ And again, 'That which was spoken of before, viz., that God has become man, is itself a glorious, great matter. But it is a far greater thing [*weyt drüber*] that he shall be our spiritual and eternal Savior.'⁴⁶

But what did Christ do in order to save humanity? For one thing, he humbled himself. In his recounting of the Christmas narrative, Luther emphasized humility in the circumstances of Jesus' birth—'the birth so poor and miserable'.⁴⁷ In this way, Jesus joined himself to the humanity he came to save. '[Aside from sin] everything was natural with him as with other men. He ate, drank, became hungry, became thirsty, suffered from cold—just like other men. These and similar natural weaknesses he possessed just as we do.' Luther contrasted this past humiliation with our Lord's present state of exaltation, 'He could easily have made it happen that he would become a human being *as he is right now in heaven*. He has flesh and blood as we do, but does not do what we do.'⁴⁸

Like the incarnation, Luther understood the humiliation as a presupposition for redemption,

The Christmas story is preached every year for this reason: that every young person should keep it in his heart and be thankful to God and say, 'I have no want or need, because I have a brother who has become just like me. . . . For this has happened in order that he might deliver me from sin and eternal death.'⁴⁹

Significantly, the 'me' in this statement is universal. Christ has redeemed not just 'every young person' but every person—all:

The little phrase, 'for you' [in the words of the angel to the shepherds] should indeed make us happy. For with whom is he speaking? With wood? Or with stones?

⁴⁴ LW 52.16 (WA 10¹.74.2-4). More than Christ, Luther uses the example of the shepherds to discuss the *response* of faith in works and attitudes like humility, love of neighbors, joy in sharing the Gospel, action, confession, vocation, and praising God (LW 52.33-38).

⁴⁵ WA 52.45.23-25.

⁴⁶ WA 52.46.28-30.

⁴⁷ WA 52.38.5.

⁴⁸ WA 52.39.28-31, 34-36, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ WA 52.40.3-7.

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No, but with men, not with one or two only but with all people [*mit allem volck*]. . . Is it not a great thing that an angel from heaven brings such news to people? And therefore so many thousands of angels are so happy, wish for and preach that we human beings [*wir menschen*] should also be happy and accept such grace with thanks.⁵⁰

But, now, how did the Son of God, humbled as well as incarnate, actually redeem all people? Theologians have answered this question in a variety of ways, and Luther himself offered more than one explanation.⁵¹ In the house postils for Christmas, the Reformer explained the work of Christ principally but not exclusively as defeating the devil: the devil is our enemy and Christ has rescued humanity from him. In a couple of places, Luther indicated that the work of Christ also reconciled God with humanity, 'He [the Christ child] shall be our help and comfort so that henceforth all wrath between God and us is taken away while pure love and friendship remain.'⁵² But that's about it. Luther did not describe redemption as assuaging the wrath of God against sin or as paying the penalty for sin as our substitute.

True enough, our problem is sin,⁵³ but the Reformer treated sin along with death as the devil's mechanism for enslaving humanity. He said:

Through sin and death the devil has cast us down and placed us into a state of extraordinary misery. Not only are we stuck fast in original sin and liable to eternal death, but also must expect daily all sorts of misfortune in the world from him. Therefore virtually no one is secure for a single moment in either his body or property.⁵⁴

Elsewhere Luther called the world 'a horrible hell' and explained that in it is nothing except

lies, deceit, greed, gluttony, drunkenness, prostitution, violence, and murder, i.e., the abominable devil himself. . . . There is neither love nor faithfulness. No one is sure of anyone else. One must stay on guard against friends as much as against enemies, and sometimes even more. This is the kingdom of this world that the devil runs and rules.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *WA* 52.46.4-6, 19-22.

⁵¹ Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 223-28. The classic treatment of this question in Luther and others is Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), but see, also, Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 218-23, who called Aulén's treatment 'a significant misinterpretation of Luther'.

⁵² *WA* 52.48.36-37. See, also, *WA* 52.50.22-29.

⁵³ 'This birth belongs to you who are poor, depraved, and lost human beings,' *WA* 52.46.25-26.

⁵⁴ *WA* 52.42.10-14.

⁵⁵ *WA* 52.55.35-37, 56.1-4.

But Christ has come precisely to rescue humanity from Satan. Commenting on the angel's phrase, 'Christ the Lord,' Luther explained:

From the fact that Christ is called 'a Lord,' we must understand . . . that he will claim you and me as his own and that he will demand his own from the devil and will tell him: 'Give me this person whom you are holding captive. He is not yours but mine—indeed, my creation which I did not only create but also have purchased with my body. Therefore, let him go and return him to me, for he belongs to me.'⁵⁶

Aside from Christ's facing down the devil in this way, Luther did not otherwise describe how he defeated the devil⁵⁷ anymore than he explained how Christ removed God's wrath from sinners. Instead, Luther was content simply to affirm that Jesus was the only Savior of humanity: 'This child alone is our Savior, in whom alone we shall have all consolation and joy as in the greatest treasure.'⁵⁸ And this Savior 'shall accomplish everything that concerns [our] salvation'.⁵⁹

The message of Christ's redemptive work was the only Gospel and God offered it in his word, especially by *preaching*. As we saw above, the young Reformer was insistent that the word be preached. This was still true in the house posts. Commenting on the situation of the papal church that retained baptism, the text of the Gospel, the Lord's Prayer, and the like, Luther lamented that the people did not know what they were singing or talking about. 'The problem,' he said, 'is with the preachers who are supposed to open up the ears of the people and to stir up the word so that they understand what they hear, read, or sing.' Instead, the preachers themselves were asleep, 'and a sleepy preacher can put to sleep even an eager hearer'.⁶⁰

Presumably, evangelical preachers like Luther himself were presenting the word faithfully and effectively. But how should his hearers respond? In faith, of course. Luther indicated that appropriating the work of Christ was a matter of trusting the message rather than earning God's favor. Regarding the angel's announcement that 'to you is born a Savior,' Luther called it an 'excellent, dear word,' aimed at men and women to show them their Savior from sin and death. 'Whoever really perceived and believed that,' Luther said, 'would know what real joy was.'⁶¹

Luther recalled the tyranny of pre-reformation religion, 'when poor consciences were oppressed on every side and no one could find any real com-

⁵⁶ *WA* 52.47.24-25, 27-32. See, also, *WA* 52.48.4-6, 49.7-10, 55.8-9.

⁵⁷ He did connect it to the Incarnation, however, when he further imagined Christ saying to Satan, 'I am the Lord. It belongs to me *by nature* [*von natur*] and not to you that I should rule over men,' *WA* 52.47.35-36, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ *WA* 52.48.41-49.2. See, also, *WA* 52.52.23-30.

⁵⁹ *WA* 52.53.2. See, also, *WA* 52.48.35-37.

⁶⁰ *WA* 52.51.23-25, 27-28.

⁶¹ *WA* 52.46.23, 30-31. See, also, *WA* 52.47.3-5.

SINCE WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

fort'.⁶² Too many, he complained, have forgotten those bad old days; and so, he summoned his hearers to follow Mary as 'an example of someone who rightly hears God's word'⁶³—the word of the Gospel—'that her son was indeed the Son of God and the Savior of the whole world'.⁶⁴

Luther did not always use the word 'faith' [*der Glaube*] but he did urge exclusive reliance upon Christ the Savior. 'The Law,' he maintained, 'could not help against sin and death; one's own works and piety also could not help. . . . The angels preach that Christ is the one who will do it and in him everyone will find everything that belongs to the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.' But if Christ was the exclusive Savior, then one must reject every alternative—'every kind of doctrine and religion, through which people want to direct humanity to eternal life apart from Christ'.⁶⁵ In that same passage, Luther rejected the cult of the saints and monasticism as false Christs.⁶⁶ In another place, he called the mass and the pomp surrounding it a form of idolatry because people depended on such works for salvation.⁶⁷ From Luther's perspective, therefore, to be a Christian meant to rely on Christ as Savior and on nothing and no one else.

¶ However, just as in the 1522 treatment, Luther insisted that such faith would transform one's life. It began in the heart, since faith was not simply an intellectual assent to the truth of the Gospel but also involved a change of attitude toward God. Luther said, 'This is the real change for which Christ has come, viz., that a man becomes completely different within in his heart . . . so that it can say: "I know that God accepts me and truly loves me [*mich mit trewen meindt*], for he has sent his Son."⁶⁸ But this was only the beginning, for faith also transformed one's attitude toward life. Luther continued, 'Our dear Lord Christ has worked it out so that the heart and the soul should have a completely new and different understanding, will, pleasure, and love.'⁶⁹

As in 1522, however, the new attitude did not lead away from worldly responsibilities and into monasticism but instead to a new motivation for carrying out one's ordinary duties: 'The heart has a new desire and will, but a person remains in his calling and outer circumstances just as before.'⁷⁰

Man should maintain all estates . . . for they do not hinder the Christian faith and Christ does not ask what your external situation is—whether you are man or woman, emperor or stableboy, mayor or constable. He lets all such things remain

⁶² WA 52.58.35-36.

⁶³ WA 52.59.18-19.

⁶⁴ WA 52.59.31-33.

⁶⁵ WA 52.50.33-39.

⁶⁶ WA 52.50.39-51.12.

⁶⁷ WA 52.52.23-28.

⁶⁸ WA 52.61.25-26, 35-37.

⁶⁹ WA 52.62.3-4.

⁷⁰ WA 52.62.15-17.

as they are and says: 'People should be obedient to God in every estate and way of life and should not refrain from it.'⁷¹

Serving God by carrying out your vocation; trusting in God's word that promises you forgiveness and eternal life for the sake of Christ; and recognizing that Christ, God and man, has rescued humanity from sin, death, and hell—the power of the devil—these principles were the essence of Luther's teaching regarding justification in 1522 and they remained the same more than a decade later, at least according to the evidence of the Christmas postils (both sets). ✓

So what should we make of this? Just this, the first of the Protestant reformers not only articulated justification by faith in treatises and commentaries and not only recommended that others employ it in their sermons, he also preached it himself loud and clear. God had become a man in the person of Jesus Christ in order to save sinners. People needed to hear it, so Luther told them precisely that.

⁷¹ WA 52.62.31-36.