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Justification and the Office of the Holy Ministry

The first five articles in this issue were originally papers presented at the 35th Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions held in Fort Wayne on January 18–20, 2012 under the theme “Justification in a Contemporary Context.” The final two articles, by Joel Elowsky and Roland Ziegler, were first delivered as the plenary papers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Theology Professors Conference that met at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, on May 29 to June 1, 2012, under the theme “To Obtain Such Faith . . . The Ministry of Teaching the Gospel” (AC V). It has been the practice of the two seminary journals to alternate in publishing plenary papers from this bi-annual conference in order that these studies may be shared with the wider church.

The Editors

Evangelicals and Lutherans on Justification: Similarities and Differences

Scott R. Murray

Speaking about justification in Evangelicalism and Lutheranism is a perilous task. Identifying both Lutherans and Evangelicals is a significant challenge, especially for the Evangelicals. The moniker has been applied to many varied theological varieties since it was taken up by Carl F. H. Henry just after World War II.¹ There are at least three commonly accepted definitions of "Evangelicalism." On the one hand, British historian, David Bebbington, defines Evangelicalism by four broad characteristics.

1. Conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed;
2. Activism, the expression of the gospel in effort;
3. Biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and
4. "Crucicentrism," a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.²

On the other hand, historian George M. Marsden listed five characteristics marking Evangelicalism.

1. The authority of the Bible.
2. The historicity of God's saving work recorded in Scripture.
3. Salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ.
4. Importance of evangelism and mission.
5. The importance of a spiritually transformed life.³

Finally, "Evangelical" can refer to a style as much as a set of beliefs. Therefore, Dutch Reformed Churches, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Catholic charismatics, and Southern Baptists might all consider themselves Evangelicals, or be considered Evangelicals by others. Evangelicalism can refer to the reaction against the anti-intellectual, separatistic nature of the

¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

² David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism : Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, George A. Rawlyk (New York : Oxford University Press, 1994), 180-181.

³ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 4-5.

Scott R. Murray is the Senior Pastor of Memorial Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas. He also serves as the Fifth Vice President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and is a member of the Board of Regents of Concordia Theological Seminary.

fundamentalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Importantly, its core personalities, like Carl F. H. Henry, and institutions like Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, and Fuller Theological Seminary have played a pivotal role in giving the wider movement a sense of unity that extends into the broader culture.⁴

Given any one of these three definitions, it remains quite difficult to define who is an evangelical and who is not. It is like the old arguments about public indecency laws: "I have trouble defining what indecency is, but I know it when I see it." Similarly, I have trouble defining "Evangelicalism," but I know it when I see it. That being said, it remains true that Evangelicals are all over the landscape on justification. The scope of this paper will not permit me to give any detail on the specific positions held by this or that evangelical or evangelical group. While there are many definitions of what it means to be Lutheran, I am settling on a self-consciously confessional Lutheranism, while tied to church, not tied to a denomination.

I am considering the meaning of, and theological fallout from, the New Perspective on Paul debate as a prism through which we might consider the doctrine of justification. Right now many Evangelicals are intensely involved in the ongoing "New Perspectives on Paul" debate, both for and against. I would like to look again at this debate from the perspective of what it means for the article of justification among Lutherans and Evangelicals.⁵

When E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* was published in 1977, the game was on. Sanders did not present a radically different interpretation from those that had been offered by some scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the iconic Albert Schweitzer and William Wrede, both of whom were nominally Lutheran. This is ironic, given that both men proposed an interpretation of Paul that militated against what would become known as the "Lutheran" interpretation of

⁴ Consider, for example, the identification of the "evangelical vote" with the Republican Party. Larry Eskridge, "Defining the Term in Contemporary Times," <http://isae.wheaton.edu/defining-Evangelicalism/defining-the-term-in-contemporary-times/>, 2011 (accessed 9 January 2012).

⁵ For an introduction to this debate, see Charles A. Gieschen, "Paul and the Law: Was Luther Right?" in *The Law in Holy Scripture*, ed. Charles A. Gieschen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 113-147.

Paul. Their views gained only little traction, until E.P. Sanders popularized and refined them.⁶

In 1977, a revisionist view of Paul was an idea whose time had come. Concern about the outcome of Jewish-Christian dialogues drove a desire to rethink Paul's relationship to Palestinian Judaism. N.T. Wright pointed out: "History, theology and exegesis are always done—not only sometimes and not only by preachers—with at least half an eye to the results that may be experienced in the scholar's own world."⁷ Perhaps Wright is more correct than he knows. To what degree do the questions drive the answers, as though the tail is wagging the dog? The Holocaust's near memory and the false guilt connected to it drove theologians to flee at almost any cost the slightest odor of anti-Semitism, whether real or imagined. To this day, everyone in the midst of the New Perspective on Paul debate must establish their support for the Jews by offering obligatory anti-anti-Semitic remarks in the literature.⁸ But perhaps there were older currents rising to the surface in this effort to reread Paul in a way that distanced him from the so-called Lutheran understanding.

James D.G. Dunn labeled the results of E.P. Sanders work "the New Perspective on Paul." However, it may not be so new. First, the New Perspective has clear antecedents in the views of earlier theologians like Schweitzer and Wrede. Second, the view has roots in Arminianism and semi-Pelagianism. Third, the claim being made for the New Perspective is that it is Paul's own perspective based on understanding his rabbinic and

⁶ In 1963, Krister Stendahl's groundbreaking article, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199–215, revived interest in a rereading of Paul. Stendahl argued that Luther's interpretation of Paul in terms of the justification of the person burdened by the law-wounded conscience simply read Luther's own agony of conscience back into Paul. According to Stendahl, such a self-reflective pattern of salvation would not have occurred to Paul, but began in the work of Augustine of Hippo, as evidenced by his painfully self-reflective *Confessions*. Here was the beginning of the introspective conscience of the West. It did not begin with Paul.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 15.

⁸ Theologians are asking publicly, "How can I avoid the charge of anti-Semitism?" For example, when Donald Hagner argued for a supercessionist view of Christianity centered in the superiority of Christ over the old covenant, he felt compelled to offer this disclaimer: "Those who agree with Paul here, I hasten to add, must oppose anti-Semitism with all the strength available to them." And this from one who is no supporter of the New Perspective! See "Paul and Judaism: Testing the New Perspective," chapter 4 of Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 103.

pharisaic context. Ultimately, that makes it a first-century view, not so new at all. One of the leading proponents of the "New Perspective," N.T. Wright does not think that this is *a* perspective at all, but the view of the apostle himself. He titled one of his books *What St. Paul Really Said*.⁹ So this cannot be let pass as though it were a tolerable influence on Christian theology. Nor may it be rejected just because it is new. In fact, it is nothing of the sort. Like all theological disputes, this one may merely be a recycling of old arguments under new wrappings; arguments that have had a long history among confessional groups over the centuries.

The rereading of Paul in light of the understanding that first century Judaism also included a doctrine of grace was called "covenantal nomism" by Sanders. This rereading meant that justification could no longer stand as the center of Paul's theology, to say nothing of the New Testament as a whole. This is certainly in keeping with Schweitzer's view.¹⁰ Justification becomes just one emphasis among many, and perhaps not a very important one. This had already been the presupposed position of many American Evangelicals long before Sanders. One can easily see how this would have been introduced into the thought-pattern of American Evangelicalism. Evangelical theological method is one that attempts to draw upon a number of influences, weighing them, counterbalancing them, and then attempting some kind of *mélange*, often without considering how the various parts fit together into the larger whole. There is something of an inability to consider theology as single body, a doctrinal corpus.

Evangelical theology, unburdened by any written confessional commitments, becomes something like the blind men's elephant; it looks like a tree, a snake, a leaf, and a wall, but there is no sense how the parts interrelate. More anecdotally, I became aware of this in the course of my doctoral studies among Southern Baptists when I realized that they tried to give proper due to Calvinism and Arminianism at the same time. When I said I was having difficulty understanding their larger theological commitments, and asked if Southern Baptists were attempting to mix Calvinism and Arminianism, the wry reply was, "Why, you have understood us exactly."

⁹ N.T. Wright, *What Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

¹⁰ "The doctrine of righteousness by faith is a subsidiary crater, which has formed within the rim of the main crater, the mystical doctrine of redemption through the being-in-Christ." Albert Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1930), 220, cited in Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine*, 29.

Here we cannot recount all the details of the ongoing “new” Paul versus “old” Paul debate; the theologically adept are familiar with it. This study will attempt to consider some of the ways in which the rereading of Paul has made an impact on theology under four headings by asking what happens when justification is no longer the center of Christian theology? Under each of these headings, we will include some remarks about how Lutherans and Evangelicals are similar and different on the doctrine of justification.

It is quite difficult to pin down to a similar universe of theological meaning those who identify themselves as Evangelicals. In fact, we can find those who would identify themselves as Evangelicals on opposite sides of the arguments coalescing around justification. Of course, misunderstanding abounds on all sides. Unfortunately, generalizations must suffice. Perhaps names such as “Evangelical” (and maybe “Lutheran”¹¹) have become meaningless. So it is perhaps better to speak of theological differences on the doctrine of justification. I would like to look at four ways that Evangelicalism and Lutheranism diverge in their views of justification: 1) Faith and *Pure Passive*, 2) The Bound Will and Justification, 3) The Christological Ground of Justification, and 4) The Theological Centrality of Justification.

I. Faith and *Pure Passive*

The doctrine of faith alone is a corollary of justification. Faith is the receiving hand, but faith is never reduced to a human work or a meritorious act of the will. “This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8–9). Once faith has become a work, by being reduced to obedience or commitment, then it becomes a meritorious act on the part of the human actor. Os Guinness states this in the boldest terms possible, saying that faith is “a reasonable decision after rational reflection.”¹² No wonder that Donald Bloesch can say, “An undercurrent of semi-Pelagianism is certainly present in circles of evangelical revivalism where it is assumed that man is free to decide for salvation on his own, though he needs the assistance of grace to

¹¹ The members of my congregation regularly ask me why confessional Lutherans cannot sue the ELCA to get exclusive right to the name Lutheran. They consider its use by liberal churches to be an infringement of trademark and false advertising.

¹² Quoted in Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1:113.

carry through his decision."¹³ Faith, then, becomes a fundamentally human act of the will. So it is for the proponents of the New Perspective on Paul. While the person is brought into the covenant relationship by grace, he remains in it by obedience to the law. Grace gives the kingdom; the law keeps the Israelite in it. At best, this is Semi-Pelagian.

Richard B. Hays has attempted to preserve human autonomy in the act of faith by suggesting a radically different understanding of the Pauline phrase "the faith of Jesus Christ" (ἡ ἐπαγγελία ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοθῆναι τοῖς πιστεύουσιν, Gal 3:22) as an objective genitive. This means then that Paul is attributing the promise of the gospel to the believing of Christ. Hays says, "If this is correct, Galatians 3:22 must not be interpreted to mean that believers receive the promise by the subjective act of placing their faith in Jesus Christ; instead, it must mean that Jesus Christ, by the power of faith, has performed an act which allows believers to receive the promise."¹⁴ At first, such language delights Lutheran ears. The objectivity of the gospel and the work of Christ for the world guarantee the grace of God to a world full of sinners. However, there are a number of problems with this view. Faith, for example, is never attributed to Christ by any other text of the New Testament.¹⁵ While knowing certainly resides together with believing, "Christ's believing" is not the language of the New Testament.¹⁶

Hays has presumed, furthermore, that Bultmann was correct, that subjective faith is a human act of the will. There are problems with this presumption as well. The New Perspective battles Bultmann, but Bultmann hardly represents the confessional Lutheran position on faith as a receiving instrument and as a gift of God.

The New Testament does not portray subjective faith as a self-generated act but rather as a gift of God (Eph 2:9). It is truly a mystery that our faith can be a gift. Perhaps it could be conceived this way: the gifts I

¹³ Bloesch, *Evangelical Theology*, 1:113.

¹⁴ Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed., Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 115–116.

¹⁵ If we accept the communication of attributes in the personal union, what would the faith of the eternal Son of the Father look like? How would attributing faith to Christ square with the perfect fellowship of the Son with the Father and the Spirit and his claim to know all things (John 16:30) and therefore that he will be able to disclose the fullness of the Father's will to us (John 1:18; 14:9)? This is dogmatically tenuous.

¹⁶ For a helpful summary of the uses of faith in Paul, see Roy A. Harrisville III, "PISTIS CRISTOU and the New Perspective on Paul," *Logia* (Eastertide 2010), 23–28.

received from gracious givers at Christmas are always described as “mine,” and this in no way implies that they are any less completely free gifts of grace. So it is for faith being mine subjectively; it still remains a gift. So the Formula of Concord says, “Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father, and are saved forever” (SD III, 11).¹⁷ And Luther: “This is why we continually teach that the knowledge of Christ and of faith is not a human work but utterly a divine gift; as God creates faith, so He preserves us in it.”¹⁸

Subjective faith is a receiving hand that is no way meritorious. For example, if a starving man comes to your door seeking food and you set before him a table full of food and rescue him from imminent death, would the starving man pride himself on the ability to bring the food to his mouth and then boast of saving himself from starvation? If asked what saved him from death, would he contend that it is by his eating, rather than by the food that was freely given by you? Scripture attributes subjective faith or believing to the work of the Holy Spirit. Luther said: Faith is “nothing but the work exclusively peculiar to the Divine Majesty; for it is not the work of man or of angel first to promise this and then to create faith in the human heart. St. Paul declares (Eph. 2:8) that such faith ‘is the gift of God,’ effected and bestowed by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹

Roy A. Harrisville III points out that there would be no desire to argue for an objective genitive in Gal 3:22, if faith were not conceived of as a work of the believer. “That were it not for an emphasis on faith as a human work, the new rendering of πιστις Χριστου would lose much of its allure. There would be little or no theological impetus to stress any supposed faith of Christ if faith in Christ were understood as a gift in the first place.”²⁰

In the New Perspective, faith is an act of the human will. In the covenantal nomism of Sanders, the Jewish believer is part of the people of God through the election of Israel into the covenant. Obedience to the law

¹⁷ Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 541. All quotations hereafter from the Tappert edition.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 26:64.

¹⁹ AE 15:277.

²⁰ Harrisville, “PISTIS CRISTOU,” 22.

is the way in which those who are the people of God stay in the covenant. However, the data are not as unified as the New Perspective people would have us think.

The material collected by Paul Billerbeck and Hermann Strack in their *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Midrash*, offers a strong defense of the legalism of first-century Judaism. These data cannot be ignored. The Qumran literature, for example, provides counter examples from a minority Jewish community. It is unsurprising that Jewish theology was not unified. Already the New Testament alerts us to various theological strains among the Jews: Pharisees, Sadducees, the people as distinguished from the leaders (John), and perhaps the Zealots and the Herodians (who were political groups that undoubtedly had theological commitments). The rabbis were able to speak of God's grace, because the Old Testament certainly did. But they were often unable to speak of God's grace to Israel without reemphasizing human works, especially in the face of the final judgment. As Peter Stuhlmacher pointed out: "There are also serious comments about the endtime [*sic*] significance of (a treasure of) good works, which the faithful should store during their lives."²¹ Such language smacks of the very thing about which Luther was critical in the medieval church: the "treasury of human merits." Perhaps the first century was not so far from the 16th century after all.

The judgment of Jesus against his contemporaries must not be ignored, nor the Christologically-centered statements made by Jesus over against the Old Testament tradition, including his supersession of Abraham, David, and Moses. Jesus hardly seems to accept the Pharisees as sharing his emphasis on grace, rather he excoriated them in the most uncomplimentary terms on many occasions. His judgment of first-century Pharisaism should have priority in the consideration of the Christian who is trying to understand first-century rabbinic tradition.

At least we are required to see that the rabbis had an understanding of grace that admitted the necessity of works for the ultimate judgment in the presence of God. References to the covenant of grace do not stand alone without legalistic elements in rabbinic literature and the literature of Qumran. Therefore, we cannot call the religion of the rabbis a religion of grace.

Nor can the definition of a gracious religion be reduced to one in which grace is one element or an occasional resource. Everything the

²¹ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine*, 41.

church teaches about Christ, justification, our standing *coram Deo*, the sacraments, the bound will, and law and gospel must be seen within the context of grace. Mere use of the word “grace” does not guarantee that the truth about grace will be the operative theological principal. Grace cannot be a power of occasional use to the believer or merely the source of good works. Nor is it a mere vocable as it is used in Lutheran theology. When the Lutheran Confessions and Lutheran theologians use the term, they are thinking of a broad semantic domain that encompasses mercy, loving-kindness, favor, and divine benevolence. Robert Preus said: “Contextualizing the concept within the framework of the work of Christ and soteriology (justification), Luther and the reformers present the grace of God as God’s favor—His benevolent and good disposition and intention toward fallen mankind.”²²

Unfortunately, the view of Sanders that grace was a resource to keep the Jew in the covenantal relationship is exactly the sort of Arminian redefinition of grace, which if true, proves not that first-century Judaism was a religion of grace, but the exact opposite. Sanders has redefined grace in a non-biblical way to make the claim that Judaism was a religion of grace.²³ This contradicts the *sola gratia*. We are placed in a gracious relationship with God and stay in that fellowship by grace. The exclusivity of grace lives in the universe of all the solas. The solas are required by justification and also serve to clarify its theological function.

And this is St. Paul’s intention when in this article he so earnestly and diligently stresses such exclusive terms (that is, terms that exclude works from the article of justification by faith) as ‘without works,’ ‘without the law,’ ‘freely,’ ‘not of works,’ all of which exclusive terms may be summarized in the assertion that we are justified before God and saved ‘through faith alone’ (SD III, 36).

For Lutherans, justification is always justification *coram Deo*. Justification is that verdict that will stand in the presence of the holy God when we appear before his judgment throne on the last day. Lutheranism sees that divine judgment impending over the world at all times, certainly with temporal outcroppings of divine wrath pointing to the final consummation, but also with the proclaimed law still and always bringing us before the divine judge. The law’s little judgments come every day as

²² Robert Preus, *Justification and Rome* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 1997), 48.

²³ Given his roots in Methodism, it is hardly surprising to see him using an Arminian viewpoint.

we face the word of God that brings the wrath of God upon us (Rom 11:19). The eschatological threat shadows the church until that threat is expended fully at last. The classic expression of this eschatological wrath against unbelief is in Romans 1:18. Paul expresses the life of the believer established in the divine verdict of justification and yet follows with a clear reference to the divine wrath against all ungodliness (Rom 1:17–18). We need the perpetual justification of Christ so that we are able to live under (not in) this wrath and divine judgment through the law.

Justification cannot be an occasional resource. It must be intensively complete. Justification is complete in that it is a full remission of sins and a conferral of all the divine promises upon poor sinners. There are no partial measures with God. This verdict will stand up in the face of every divine judgment, because it is God's own work applied to us by faith.

Justification must also be extensively complete. Justification is a divine verdict that has no "best before date" like a jug of milk. In other words, it does not begin a process of salvation, but is a full and complete salvation upon which the believer is able to stand today, tomorrow, and at the final consummation. John's Gospel hints at this: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18).

Dunn and Sanders simply avoid the question of final judgment. Given that the first section of Romans is entirely committed to placing all people under the divine judgment, whether Jew or Gentile, this is a fairly large oversight. Justification places the person in the presence of the holy God to stand upon a righteousness that is not his own. That righteousness obtains as much under the judgment of the preaching of the law as it does under the ultimate judgment before Christ in the final consummation. The apostolic preaching is always set in the context of the final judgment and imminent return of Christ to judge the living and the dead.²⁴ If we accept the goal of covenantal nomism to be primarily about the cultic inclusion of Israel as the people of God, it easily ignores the threat of final judgment. Peter Stuhlmacher, in an understatement, says, "The Pauline doctrine of justification is distorted to the extent that this end-time perspective is faded out."²⁵

²⁴ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine*, 48.

²⁵ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine*, 42. I don't want to read too much into this, but I wonder if temporal and institutional church goals, such as membership numbers and other church growth targets don't arise out of an emphasis that fails to present the wrath of God and his judgment against sin to people. If the New Perspective

Classic Evangelical theology sees justification as one theological emphasis among many. It cannot be the doctrine of the standing and falling of the church or the chief article, as in the Smalcald Articles. For example, Dale Moody's *The Word of Truth* speaks of justification only as a corollary of regeneration. Of course, for many Evangelicals the ruling salvation theme is "regeneration," or what some scholars call "conversionism." In any case, the emphasis is on the getting in rather than on the staying in. It is also activist in that salvation depends on human action or the human will. Unfortunately, faith also becomes redefined as obedience or a way of life. So Moody described the faith of Rom 1:6, "The right relation to God is one of obedience to the covenant from the beginning to end."²⁶ This sounds a great deal like the covenantal nomism espoused by Sanders, although Moody certainly comes to this description of faith completely without being influenced by Sanders.²⁷ However, they come from the same general American evangelical stream, even though Moody was a Southern Baptist and Sanders had roots in Methodism.²⁸ Moody puts an exclamation mark on his readjustment of the meaning of faith when he says, "The biblical theology of the 20th century finally discarded the bondage of legalism for the dynamic view of righteousness as the obedience of faith."²⁹ In a theme often repeated by so-called Lutherans,³⁰ the forensic doctrine of justification by faith is described as

on Paul emphasizes the ways in which the believer is in the cultic community at the expense of the reality of the divine judgment, then this-worldly emphases will easily overwhelm law and gospel preaching. Community harmony becomes paramount, replacing the proclamation of the divine truth in the community. Unnumbered examples of evangelical practice, even among those who think of themselves as Lutheran, come readily to mind. The status within the community of those brought into it must not keep us from preaching God's wrath against sinners and the divine verdict of not guilty to those same sinners.

²⁶ Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 327.

²⁷ "The right relation to God is faithfulness, obedience to the covenant relation," Moody, *Word of Truth*, 327.

²⁸ Sanders graduated from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, Dallas (1959–1962).

²⁹ Moody, *Word of Truth*, 328.

³⁰ See my *Law, Life, and the Living God* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 46–52. The complaint against the Lutheran Orthodox position on the law was that the Orthodox defined the gospel by using law terms, making the church's teaching susceptible to legalism. The problem which justification resolves is identified by the law. The divine judgment against must be resolved by an equally legal divine commutation of the sentence that stands against us.

“the bondage of legalism.” That which frees from legalism is now called that which causes bondage to it. For Evangelicalism, justification is merely the entrance to the kingdom and this given by a faith that is a subjective effort or offering of obedience.

II. The Bound Will and Justification

No matter what one thinks of Luther’s classic reply to Erasmus in *De Servo Arbitrio*, Luther’s judgment that free will was the central issue in the theological debate between them was absolutely correct. Erasmus, by hitting upon it, had Luther by the throat (*cardinem rerum vidisti et ipsum jugulum petisti*). There can be no Lutheran doctrine of justification without a bound will, and vice versa. Where there is any hint of human accomplishment toward salvation, the will cannot be described as bound.

Erasmian indeterminacy will always handicap the uniqueness and urgency of the work of God and re-enthroned the human will as the source (whether partial or entire) of salvation. If we unbind the will, we will bind justification. You cannot have it both ways in matters spiritual. Ultimately, this approaches the first commandment, for if the person is freeing himself, then he has become his own God. Luther says,

If the natural powers are unimpaired, what need is there of Christ? If by nature man has good will; if he has true understanding to which, as they say, the will can naturally conform itself; what is it, then, that was lost in Paradise through sin and that had to be restored through the Son of God alone? Yet in our day, men who seem to be masters of theology defend the statement that the natural powers are unimpaired, that is, that the will is good. Even though through malice it occasionally wills and thinks something besides what is right and good, they attribute this to the malice of men, not to the will as it is in itself. The mind must be fortified against these dangerous opinions, lest the knowledge of grace be obscured; this cannot remain sound and right if we believe this way about the nature of man. Nor can this scholastic teaching be tolerated in the church: that man can keep the Law according to the substance of the act.³¹

Though he despised the medieval scholastics, Erasmus followed in their train, even if he did not employ their method.

The degree to which theologians reject the bound human will in our status *coram Deo* is the degree to which they are bound to reject the biblical doctrine of justification. Of course, the free-will-ism of many American

³¹ AE 12:308.

Evangelicalism is well known. Evangelicals will easily confuse freedom in external things (AC 18) with freedom in spiritual matters.³² In Lutheranism, justification frees us to attempt the proximate goods of life and face our failures with equanimity and our successes without pride. We will become entirely focused on the neighbor's need. In that way, Lutheranism is truly humanistic, in that good works are done, not for God, but for the neighbor. Evangelicalism is too busy working unto the glory of God to be truly humanistic in its worldly labor. As Werner Elert says, "For all Lutheranism it is of constitutive significance that in Calvin's 'everything to the glory of God' it did not yet find anything specifically Christian or even specifically evangelical, since this glory is not given to the God revealed in Christ."³³ But all this begins with a truncated view of justification.

Even the Jewish scholar, Israel Abrahams, recognizes the convergence between first-century Judaism and the doctrine of Erasmus. He refers to the Jewish doctrine as "something like the *synergism* of Erasmus, which, as his opponents saw, was radically opposed to the Pauline theory of grace."³⁴ Where grace is only partial and the will is only partially bound, Erasmus is correct, and the article of justification must recede into the background.

III. The Christological Ground of Justification

The lack of Christological grounding is pronounced in the proponents of covenantal nomism. If justification was only the polemical tool of Paul to distinguish the Gentile and the Jew, then the watershed of the incarnation and death of God's Son is being overlooked. Peter Stuhlmacher has identified the importance of the Christology of Isaiah's suffering servant song as the basis for Paul's basic confession in 1 Cor 15:3-5 and the resource it offers to make the forensic statements of Paul's doctrinal corpus:

³² For example, when seeking work, Evangelicals will say, "The Lord found me my new job." When they speak of their becoming Christians they will say, "I have found the Lord." If the implications of this difference hold, they are bound in external things and free in spiritual things. And all this despite the free-willism espoused by such self-help gurus like Joel Osteen in Houston.

³³ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 103.

³⁴ Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, 1st series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917; reprint, New York: KTAV, 1967), 146.

In this easily learned four-line formula, the death of Jesus is understood from the perspective of Isa 53:10–12 as death “for our sins.” It was probably Jesus himself who provided the impetus for this interpretation of his death on the cross (cf. Mark 10:45 and 14:24). This is especially important for the theology of justification because Isa 53:11 says that God’s servant will justify many through his sufferings. Christology and justification are connected for the apostles, including Paul, especially on the basis of Isa 53:10–12. One can read the same thing in Rom 4:25, where Paul quotes another Christological formula: Jesus our Lord “was handed over to death (by God) for our trespasses and was raised (by God) for our justification.” *Christological statements about justification were thus already given to Paul in the apostolic faith tradition, which he inherited.*³⁵

This is why Stuhlmacher will conclude that the “Pauline doctrine of justification has ecumenical roots.”³⁶ Its Christological basis does not begin with Paul but is fully accepted by him. There can be no separating Christ and what he does. We must always acknowledge the artificiality of the dogmatic distinction between the person and work of Christ, for each constantly feeds into the other. His work remains to justify the sinner.

Christology and justification are centered in each other. The New Perspective tends to separate them or fade out their relationship. Stuhlmacher argued:

The New Perspective fails to allow for any clear relationship between Christology and justification. It only reaffirms the erroneous distinction of justification and Christ mysticism and does not see that this distinction is due to a deficient understanding of the atonement. The shortcomings of this new style of interpretation can therefore no longer be overlooked. It wants to present an alternative to “Lutheran” interpretation, and it has helped us consider more carefully the problem of (hidden) anti-Judaism in Pauline exegesis. Yet it has also truncated Paul’s statements on justification at every step and turn. Things cannot stay that way.³⁷

The view of Schweitzer and Wrede that distinguished the juridical doctrine of justification from what they thought of as the larger stream of the mystical union with Christ must be rejected as a faulty distinction. This is a kind of Gnostic separation of the person of Christ from the work of Christ. Paul cannot speak of justification without speaking christologically.

³⁵ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine*, 21–22 (emphasis in original).

³⁶ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine*, 23.

³⁷ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine*, 44 (emphasis in original).

Communion with Christ is not something different from being justified by Him. Baptism immerses into Christ and also conveys forgiveness of sins and makes the holy bride of Christ without stain or wrinkle.

The New Perspective fails to see that the incarnation is a cosmic watershed—an inflection point that makes the transition to an entirely new life for the church—a life and hope promised by the Old Testament, but adumbrated there. It can only come to its fruition by the advent of the Messiah and the establishment of his kingdom of the church as the new Zion. The Old Testament is full of this promise of newness (e.g. Psalm 98). The God of the Old Testament is the God of hope, that is, he will only in the future bring to full fruition his promises in the messianic age. This implies a significant break with the past that is only shadowed to the patriarchs and prophets, but in these last days made complete in the Son. “Future expectation for Paul the Jew meant the expectation of the kingdom of God and of his anointed in Zion. After his call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul learned to see the hope of the Zion-βασιλεια in a new way in the light of his personal encounter with the living Christ Jesus.”³⁸

Paul’s justification statements all come out of a mature Christological structure, some statements of which already predate Paul’s expression of them. For example, Christ is for Paul the mercy seat of promise foreshadowed on every Day of Atonement for more than a millennium. Paul calls him the ἱλαστήριον to be received by faith (Rom 3:25). He fills the Old Testament shadows with reality. He does not merely accept what is or what was. Justification is at the heart of Christology. It is not a mere corollary or mere external attachment (even if it would be necessarily attached). Justification is “a living focal point, which turns the confession of Christ into something that vitally concerns my own existence.”³⁹ Justification tells us what all of the Christian theology means to humans. Justification is not an ethereal doctrine, high and floating, but ties all the assertions about God down to earth. Christological statements are statements about my status in the presence of God. So Luther, describing the union of the Christ, the bridegroom with His bride, the church, said, “She has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, ‘If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I

³⁸ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine*, 46.

³⁹ Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 15.

believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his."⁴⁰ The blessed exchange of Luther has specific Christological content.

Christ's justifying work rescues the sinner from the final judgment. There is a heavenly and ultimate goal in the activity of Christ. For Paul "the issue in justification is none other than the kingdom of God that Jesus preached. . . . God's Basileia is the content of the Pauline doctrine of justification."⁴¹ There can be no appropriation of Christ's kingdom, including its cosmic and end times emphases, without taking seriously the justification of the sinner. The goal of the kingdom is only reached in Christ.

IV. The Theological Centrality of Justification

The theological centrality of justification and its hermeneutical function is closely tied to its Christological content. For Lutherans, the centrality of justification means that whole corpus of doctrine flows into and out from justification in Christ.

Karl Barth's objection to the centrality of justification must be criticized in the light of the deep connectedness of justification to Christology especially, but also to the rest of the corpus of doctrine. Barth argued that the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* would not be everywhere and always the doctrine of justification, but rather the confession of Jesus Christ. While Barth cannot be denominated an Evangelical as the term is presently used, still his arguments are more sophisticated antecedents to the position taken by Evangelicals. For Barth, justification is only a presupposition or consequence of Christology, rather than its functional center. Eberhard Jüngel asked if this is the way justification functions in the Smalcald Articles. The question provides its own answer. Without justification at the center, the salvific quality of Christology (or any other article of the faith) would be called into question. "It is appropriate to emphasize that this is precisely the function of the doctrine of justification: to convey the being and work of Jesus Christ for us, to us, and with us. It is only when explained by means of that doctrine that Christology becomes appropriate Christology at all."⁴² Justification always tilts Christology toward the *pro nobis*. Justification does the work of Christology, carrying its water, so to speak.

⁴⁰ AE 31:352.

⁴¹ Ernst Käsemann, *Paulinische Perspektiven*, p. 133; quoted in Stuhlmacher, 52.

⁴² Jüngel, *Justification*, 28–29.

Here is why the means of grace must figure so prominently in Lutheran practice. The means of grace are intimately tied to the article of justification as among the ways the Lord has tied his person and work to our need. For Evangelicalism, the means of grace are a "preoccupation."⁴³ Donald Bloesch tries to have it both ways when he says, "As catholic Evangelicals we wish to retain the sacraments but avoid sacramentalism."⁴⁴ This is something like saying you are for breathing, but you are trying to avoid oxygen. For Evangelicals the sacraments remain signs of something else, empty husks. Justification demands an intense fullness of the sacraments so that the Word is not just "with" us but also "in" us, and for us.

Even the simple Christological statement of Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed is clearly made under the article of justification: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord." He is my Lord in the here and now. The first person singular and the present tense raises Christology to the level of justification. This is not a statement of historical faith, so rightly excoriated by the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, but rather a statement of the present value of the Lordship of Christ for me. Thus justification does not function as a theological Occam's razor to eliminate doctrines thought to be peripheral. There is a long heritage for statements such as "all you have to do is believe that Jesus is Lord." I hear it all the time in pastoral care. The biblical statement that Jesus is Lord does not separate the lordship of Christ (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3) from the rest of the corpus of doctrine, but draws the corpus into it. The direction is centripetal, not centrifugal. The article of justification leads not to a reduction of so-called fundamental articles, but to an enrichment of the theological substance delivered by the church's proclamation. There is not less, but more, much more, if justification is the indispensable criterion for theological meaning.⁴⁵ Justification's exclusivity is enriching, not im-

⁴³ Bloesch, *Evangelical Theology*, 1:9.

⁴⁴ Bloesch, *Evangelical Theology*, 211.

⁴⁵ James Nestingen stated that Erasmus was the reductionist, who, doubtful of the gospel, was doubtful of everything except himself, the authoritative subject. "Erasmus assumes sufficient detachment from Scripture and the authoritative traditions of the church to choose skepticism as an available alternative. He is the agent, surveying the range of claims before him, discerning their relative value. Having taken such a position for granted, Erasmus' goal is to preserve his options. Just as he picks and chooses among truths presented to him, in his own mind he will preserve his alternatives before

poverishing. Only when there is no boasting in men is it true that “all are things yours” (1 Cor 3:21). When your boast is in Christ alone, then all things come into your possession. Theologically, it reminds of C.S. Lewis’s phrase hinting at eschatological abundance, “further up and further in,” from *The Last Battle*.⁴⁶ There is an eschatological fullness in the article of justification: the deeper we go the more connected we become with the whole doctrinal corpus.

Just as *perichoresis* (or interpenetration) hints at inter-Trinitarian fullness, so justification points to a theological inter-penetration of the articles of the faith. The narrowing exclusivity to justification is an expansion of the faith. Jüngel can say that justification “is theological knowledge as a category of reality in one.”⁴⁷ Perhaps this could be likened to a black hole in reverse. The more narrowly we strain theology through the article of justification, the more completely it expands, creating a universe full of theological meaning.

Justification implies that legal arguments are being made in the disputation that goes on between God and man. The argument aims at a verdict of peace after the arguments are all made.⁴⁸ Justification gives a verdict for the truth of the divine righteousness apart from human striving. But it also speaks a verdict of condemnation against all falsehood. The verdict is divine wrath against all ungodliness, the worst of which is the theological error that leads to self-righteousness. Here the boundary is between the gospel and not-the-gospel, not a boundary to divide doctrine from the gospel. Because justification is always inclined to the need of the sinner, it commands and controls the proclamation. It may not be a sterile set of theological propositions, but a real proclamation, a way of opening heaven to the sinner. So Luther here shows how justification functions without ever using the term:

It is clear enough that among the papists the knowledge of Christ, faith, and the gospel are altogether unknown, and at present even damned. When faith is lacking and Christ is ignored, it is impossible to see what is and is not sin before God. For the blindness of unbelief forces them to call evil good and good evil, and to lose their way altogether. If we do not know the difference between sin and good works we cannot loose or bind. So if we want to speak and feel as

God.” In this Erasmus is anticipating Cartesian rationalism. “Biblical Clarity and Ambiguity in *The Bondage of the Will*,” *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier Books, 1978), 175.

⁴⁷ Jüngel, *Justification*, 48.

⁴⁸ Jüngel, *Justification*, 50.

followers of Christ, we must hold that the papists and the shorn sacrificers, as long as they persist in their contention, cannot possess the function of binding and loosing or even be priests, much less be the only ones who have this office or who confer it on anyone by their ordinations. What will you bind when you do not know what should be bound? So their blindness leads them on in their fury. They close heaven and open hell to themselves and theirs. By their binding they despise the gospel and by their loosing they exalt their own traditions. They have lost both the authority and the use of the keys by their perverse and impious abuse.⁴⁹

Such a use of justification clarifies the meaning of office, good and evil, and the delivery of holy absolution to sinners. Here judgment is right at hand; heaven is closed and hell opened to a feast. Justification shows papal practice to be false. There can be no temporizing where justification is at stake. Papal practice must be labeled for what it is.⁵⁰

The person and work of Christ, the bound will, and justification must all hang together or they will hang separately. The Holy Spirit is no skeptic. Justification is that binding. Dogmatic *perichoresis* (interpenetration) stands out as an absolute methodological requirement at the meeting point of Christology and the righteousness of God. Nor is this a methodological add-on, as though this were a Lutheran theological quirk. It is demanded by the theological relationships within the *corpus doctrinae*. It is impossible to dispense with one article of the faith without damaging all of them, because such a dispensation will separate it from justification.⁵¹

⁴⁹ AE 40:28.

⁵⁰ What we now call "mission" must be shaped by justification. Proclamation is inseparable from justification. It demands to be proclaimed to those who are living in darkness and the shadow of death, so that their bonds would be smashed (Ps 107:10–14). There can be no mission apart from this proclamation. No technique can ever replace it, but mere technique must be criticized as not-the-gospel. There can be no reduction of the proclamation to "Jesus is Lord," as though such reduction would not kill the church's proclamation of the whole gospel. Alan Hirsch suggests that with the simple confession "Jesus is Lord!" various mission movements changed the world. Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Waco: Brazos Press, 2009), 24.

⁵¹ From my "Depravity, Christology, Revelation, and Justification All Hang Together," which will appear in an upcoming issue of LOGIA.

V. Conclusion

While many evangelicals can confess quite narrowly the article of justification by faith without works of the law, such as Donald Hagner of Fuller Theological Seminary, many of them still struggle to be clear about the teaching that faith is purely passive and is truly a gift of grace. While they may even be able to express the concept of gracious giftedness and in that way are similar to Lutheranism, many are unable to confess the bound will as a corollary of justification, which is a wide divergence from a Lutheran perspective. The New Perspective, insofar as it affects Evangelical theology, is working with a legalistic redefinition of grace—namely, grace as help toward the good works necessary to remain within the covenant. For Lutherans, this definition of grace is unacceptable.

Evangelical theology will often disconnect Christology from justification, making it truly a legalistic enterprise because it is ripped from its Christological swaddling clothes. Evangelical theology is not organized by justification, which does not play a pivotal role in their dogmatic method. While we can identify these weaknesses in much of Evangelicalism, it must still be said that insofar as Lutherans are influenced by the pervasive evangelical culture, there is much to repent of among us. For to lose justification is to lose everything.