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DANIEL PREUS



PART I: MARTIN LUTHER

ONE DOES NOT NEED TO READ FAR IN LUTHER nor to read much of what is written about him to discover that the doctrine of justification was central to his theology and preaching. According to Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther effected a revolution in theology with his “new understanding of justification as the all-inclusive theme of the Christian faith, on the one hand, and a new understanding of the Bible as the comprehensive corroboration of justification, on the other.”¹

Thus Marc Lienhard indicates that Luther’s position on indulgences was taken primarily because they called into question the gospel.² Scott Hendrix declares that Luther’s entire battle against the papacy was the result of Luther’s having been caught in a conflict between the truth of the gospel and the tyranny of Antichrist.³ Lienhard asserts that it was Luther’s understanding of the doctrine of justification that led directly to his opposition to the Roman doctrine on the eucharist.

All of Luther’s battles were fought out of a conviction that justification was indeed the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. Brian Gerrish sums it up well when he states that the article of justification was, according to Luther, master and head, Lord, governor, and judge over all doctrine.⁴ Even Alistair McGrath, who believes that the doctrine of justification was not the leading principle of the Reformation and “that it is no longer possible to assert with any degree of certainty that the Reformation began as a consequence of Luther’s new insights into man’s justification,” nevertheless asserts: “It was Luther above all who saw the *articulus iustificationis* as the word of the gospel, to which all else was subordinate.”⁵

Justification is at the center of all of Luther’s theology, and Christ is at the center of the doctrine of justification and therefore at the center of all theology. “The first and chief article is this,” Luther says in the Smalcald Articles, “that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, ‘was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification’” (SA II, I, 1, Tappert, 292). In his *Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John* (1527), Luther writes, “Through the Gospel, we conclude that Christ alone justifies us” (AE 30: 283). In this same work Luther states, “our hearts should trust in Christ’s righteousness alone and be justified” (AE 30: 285). And again,

I have nothing before God and cannot think of God without knowing that Christ is His Son and the Mediator of the whole world. Thus one must begin with the coming of

Christ, and when stating the causes of salvation one must flee for refuge to Him (AE 30: 287–288).

Christ is our justifier. To speak of justification is to speak of the person and work of Christ, and it is to deny the merit and value of works. In *Against Hanswurst* (1541) Luther insists:

For there are not, and could not be, more than these two ways: the one which relies upon God’s grace, and the other which builds on our own works and merit. The first is the way of the ancient church, of all the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, as Scripture testifies. The other is the way of the pope and his church (AE 41: 213).

Nowhere is Luther’s christocentric principle in the article of justification more evident than in his ongoing conflict with the papacy. The centrality of christology in his eventual battle against the pope was certainly not clear even to Luther himself when he first posted the *Ninety-five Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. A few months later, in a letter to Staupitz, Luther expressed his confidence in Leo X as one through whose verdict Christ himself would speak. “This Christ is the judge whose verdict I am awaiting through the Roman See” (AE 48: 69). As late as January 1519 Luther would write to Leo and confess, “you truly stand in the place of Christ” (AE 48: 100).

As Luther’s struggle for the gospel, his battle for the article of justification, continued, however, and as he confronted the pope at every turn as an obstacle to the proclamation of Christ, his honoring of the papal office rapidly came to an end. Only two months after confessing his confidence in the office of Leo X, Luther would be bold enough to say in a letter to George Spalatin, “I do not know whether the pope is the Antichrist himself or whether he is his apostle, so miserably is Christ (that is, the truth) corrupted and crucified by the pope in the decretals” (AE 48: 114). Already in this confession one can see the christocentric nature of Luther’s concern with the papacy.

Eventually, of course, all doubt was removed from his mind, and by 1521 Luther would write to Staupitz: “I have burned the books of the pope and the bull, at first with trembling and praying; but now I am more pleased with this than with any other action of my life, for [these books] are worse than I had thought” (AE 48: 192). In the same year Luther would speak of the pope as the Roman Antichrist and the papists as bloodthirsty murderers of souls (AE 48: 215, 249). This identification of the pope as Antichrist would never be shaken but would be expressed in ever more definite language over the years.

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Luther's struggle against the papacy cannot be seen simply as a desire to effect reform, as though the office itself were good or at least innocuous, needing only to be purged of its faults. Nor can it be seen as an angry reaction against individual popes. Rather, Luther came to view the office of the papacy as an institution of the devil and the pope as an eschatological figure who, in view of his office, was committed until the last day to do battle against Christ, that is, against the gospel.

Thus the vast majority of Luther's statements condemning the papacy deals not with transgressions against the second table of the law or with scandalous behavior, but with the papacy's attack upon the gospel and therefore upon Christ. Luther's excoriating assault on the papal office does not zero in on greed, the luxury of the papal court, simony or the cost of indulgences, but on the fact that the flock of Christ is deprived of the gospel.

Always at the center of Luther's conflict with the pope was the article on justification, at the center of which always stood the person and work of Jesus Christ.

But the spirit of the pope is the subtlest. He acknowledges the coming of Christ and keeps the apostolic words and sermons; but he has removed the kernel, namely, that Christ came to save sinners. Hence he has filled the world with sects, has left everything for a show, and has really done away with everything. Skill and guile are needed to pollute everything under the best guise, to say that Christ suffered for us and yet to teach at the same time that we render satisfaction. All the rest of the heretics are antichrists in part, but he who is against the whole Christ is the only true Antichrist. Thus one must close one's eyes to all teachings, and the only thought and way of justification to which one must cling is this, that it takes place through Christ (*First John*, AE 30:287).

To fully appreciate Luther's relentless assault on the office of the papacy, attention needs to be given to two features of his understanding of the papal office, particularly as they relate to his remarkably christocentric understanding of the article on justification.

In the first place, Luther viewed the pope as an eschatological figure whom Satan had raised up during the last days to be ordained into an antichristian office as the foremost apostle and bishop of an antichristian church. Luther's typical christocentric emphasis is especially clear in his eschatology. The pope as an inherently eschatological figure can only be understood in opposition to the person of the Son of God. Until the end, Christ will always be opposed by Antichrist, just as the true church will always be opposed by the false church.

The title itself of Luther's treatise *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, written in 1545, indicates his view of the origin of the papacy. Everything that follows in this treatise only supports the title. His frequent references to the pope as "His Satanty," "Most Hellish Father," and "Your Hellishness"⁶ are not meant only as insults, but also to express the source out of which the papal office flows. Even Luther's crude and frequent references to the "ass-fart pope" and various renderings of this same coarse nomenclature (AE 41: 335-337) are not meant simply to be vulgar ridicule designed by a mad and frustrated old man to drive

his enemy to fury. They are, rather, a theological statement about the source of the papal office. One need only read the entire treatise to see that this is so, as Luther again and again points to Satan himself as the founder of the papal office. Thus the pope is called the possession of the devil (AE 41: 286) who founded the papacy (296) and drives the pope (290), as the destroyer of Christendom (278), to attack Christ (339), exterminate the gospel (296),⁷ and ravage Christ's flock (323).

The pope is, by virtue of his office, the enemy of Christ and the gospel.

If Luther's doctrine of justification, indeed all his theology, can be said to be christocentric, then his view of the papacy could perhaps be termed "antichristocentric." The pope is, by virtue of his office, the enemy of Christ and the gospel. In fact, his office has been founded with the very intention that it stand forever in opposition to Christ. Therefore "it is a blasphemous, accursed office, so that even if one should wish to be pious, one would still have to be a blasphemer and enemy of Christ, because of one's office" (AE 41:333).

It would be a mistake, moreover, to conclude that this harsh judgment against the papacy was characteristic only of the late Luther. Already in 1520, in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther was declaring the papacy the Antichrist, Babylon (AE 36: 12, 72, 83), the hunting of Rome (12), thus establishing its intimate connection with the devil (79).

In the second place, the office of Antichrist has been founded not simply to attack Christ, but to attack his true love, the church. Just as the office of the pastor is to stand in the stead of Christ and feed the flock, so the office of the pope is to stand in the stead of Satan and fleece, devour, and destroy the flock. Luther sees any attack upon the article of justification by grace alone, without works, as an attack upon Christ, and any attack upon Christ is an attack upon his flock whose life and hope he alone is. His most frequent criticisms of the pope and the papists, therefore, are that they do not feed the flock.

"Are you a shepherd of souls, O Pope?" Luther was asking in anguish already in 1520 (AE 36: 80), not only betraying his own love for the flock but also bewailing that under the pope's kingdom the sheep were led astray. In the same year, in *On the Papacy in Rome*, he laments the great injury done to "the miserable and poor sheep of Christ" and castigates the popes who "boast of being shepherds and 'tenders,' when in reality they are wolves, thieves, and murderers, as the Lord says in John 10 (AE 39: 100)." In 1521 Luther insisted that the people were still hungry after they had been fed by the pope (*The Misuse of the Mass*, AE 36: 182.) and accused those who should have been shepherds of devouring, destroying, and flaying instead with ungodly doctrine (225). In 1522 he attacks the papal bishops for their "wolfish fury" and cautions the sheep to "beware of the shepherd more than of the wolves" (*Against the Spiritual Estate of the Pope*, AE 39: 271).

Luther's concern for the sheep and his anger that they are being deprived of the gospel and, therefore, of Christ, continue throughout his life and, if anything, become even more intense as the years go by. In a sermon in 1531, he declares: "It is disgusting for me to see the pope . . . chewing up the Gospel" (AE 51: 223). In 1541 he continues to agonize over the loss of souls, describing the pope's church as the mouth of the devil and the jaws of hell swallowing into hell first the pope and then all the world (*Against Hanswurst*, AE 41: 206). Only a year before he died, Luther was still attacking the pope for his refusal to permit Christians to believe that Jesus Christ is the rock upon which the church is built.

No pope can admit or tolerate this meaning, since it does not refer us either to pope, bishops, or to any human being, be he king or emperor, but assembles us all under the only Son of God, the true rock of our Salvation—assembles us so completely upon Christ alone that we have to forsake even ourselves and our good works and be made just and holy solely through faith in him (*Against the Roman Papacy*, AE 41: 328).

Toward the end of his life, Luther's writings became more volatile. Perhaps his acerbic polemic can be attributed partially to frustration or anger. But two far stronger causes can be found in his eschatological battle against Antichrist and his never-ending concern for the sheep of Christ. Luther knew that Antichrist would be destroyed by Christ on the last day, and he was afraid that, should he die before that day came, the battle against the one whose office was founded to destroy the church would lose its force. And if that should happen, what would become of Christ's sheep?

PART II: ROBERT PREUS

Robert Preus was a Lutheran—not just in name, but also in confession, in practice, and in faith. Throughout his entire career, as it was for Luther, the article of justification was central to his theology, and Christ was at the center of this article. Those who sat at his feet as students can testify to his love for the "first and chief article." His insistence upon the teaching of objective justification as necessary to a proper understanding of God's saving work testifies to the christocentric nature of his belief with regard to justification and all of theology.

Like Luther, Robert Preus believed that to speak of justification was to speak of Christ, and to speak of Christ was to speak of justification. In 1992 he described Luther's *solus Christus* principle. "It is obvious that justification before God and the work of Christ as Propitiator and Redeemer belong inextricably together and, so far as Luther is concerned, really constitute the same article."⁸ He could just as well have been describing his own convictions. And when he continued in the same article to speak of Luther's view that all Scripture is christocentric, he echoed again his own belief. How can it be otherwise? Jesus is our Savior; Jesus is our hope. Without him we have nothing.

Like Luther, Robert Preus also had a heightened appreciation for eschatology during the latter years of his life. His christocentric understanding of the article of justification and of Scripture led him to this greater appreciation when he saw in his own life what Luther had seen in his, namely, that the person and work of

Christ will always be the target of all Satan's attacks. If all theology is christocentric, this is how it must be. He saw it as no coincidence that one who so dedicated himself to the study of justification, and whose own faith was so firmly anchored in him who is at the center of all doctrine, should have suffered so much abuse

Robert Preus believed that to speak of justification was to speak of Christ, and to speak of Christ was to speak of justification.

at the hands of members of his own church body. And if his exile did not seem *to others* to be a direct result of his teaching on justification, Satan's purpose was obvious. For if the teacher is discredited, what will be thought of his teaching? And in the end, this was the primary concern for Robert Preus, as it was for Luther. He did not want vindication for his own sake but for the sake of the gospel and therefore for the sake of the church. He was a pastor to congregations for only about ten years, but he was a pastor to the church from the day of his ordination until he died.

Probably nowhere else can his pastoral heart be discerned more clearly than in the instruction he provided to his own children. He was not content to leave this task to others; catechization was a common feature of the daily family devotions he conducted. And in these devotions the article on justification was central, again with particular emphasis on the person of Christ.

This emphasis was probably seen most easily in his hymn selection. Over the years he and my mother taught us hundreds of hymn verses. A quick review of the verses used most often in family devotions reveals a startlingly heavy emphasis on the christological. The so-called "Praise Hymns" were not his favorites. He apparently wanted his children pointed to Jesus, because over and over again he chose hymns and single stanzas of hymns that were strongly christocentric in their proclamation of salvation. One hymn in particular was typical of the focus of the hymnody in our home. The first verse proclaims:

Christ alone is our salvation,
 Christ the Rock on which we stand;
 Other than this sure foundation
 Will be found but sinking sand.
 Christ, His cross and resurrection,
 Is alone the sinner's plea;
 At the throne of God's perfection
 Nothing else can set him free.

The third verse with a stronger eschatological flavor is equally christocentric:

When we perfect joy shall enter,
 'Tis in Him our bliss will rise;
 He's the essence, soul and center

Of the glory in the skies;
 In redemption's wondrous story
 Planned before our parents' fall,
 From the cross unto the glory,
 Jesus Christ is all in all.

Another very popular hymn in our home was the well-known hymn "One thing Needful!" We sang the first verse, skipped the next six, some of which dealt with subjects such as leaving earthly joys behind, the heart of Mary burning with emotion, the faithful following of Jesus, and then sang the eighth verse, which speaks for itself in its christology:

Jesus, in Thy cross are centered
 All the marvels of Thy grace;
 Thou, my Savior, once hast entered
 Through Thy blood the holy place:
 Thy sacrifice holy there wrought my redemption,
 From Satan's dominion I now have exemption;
 The way is now free to the Father's high throne,
 Where I may approach Him in Thy name alone.

Melodies were never a barrier. Good hymns simply had to be learned, and the christological stanzas had to be sung. One hymn with a particularly difficult melody was "In Jesus' Name." We

always sang the first verse of a hymn, but once again we omitted the second verse of this hymn, which deals with our praising of God, and directed our attention to the third verse, which spoke more directly of the work of Christ and his grace. Robert Preus believed that the greatest praise that could be given to God was to speak of the person and work of his Son. Until the day he died, he never tired speaking of Jesus. His love for the gospel and his desire to proclaim it remained undiminished. Thus this third verse of the hymn "In Jesus' Name" was sung in our home not only because it taught us children about Jesus, but also because it so vividly expressed the faith of our mother and father:

In Jesus' name
 We live and we will die;
 If then we live,
 His love we will proclaim;
 If we die, we gain thereby.
 In Jesus' name,
 Who from heaven to us came,
 We shall again arise
 To meet Him in the skies,
 When at last, saved by His grace,
 We shall see Him face to face,
 Live with Him in Paradise. **LOGIA**

NOTES

1. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career: 1521-1530*, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 184.
2. Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ: Stages and Themes of the Reformer's Christology*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 93.
3. Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 97.
4. Brian Albert Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 58.

5. Alistair Mcgrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), 2: 1, 10.
6. See *Against Hanswurst*, AE 41: 263, where Luther in one paragraph alone refers to Pope Paul III as "Your Hellishness" no fewer than five times.
7. "He [the pope] destroys everything that the Son of God our Lord has gained for us with his blood."
8. Robert Preus, "Luther: Word, Doctrine and Confession," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 32 (December 1992): 31.