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## The Doctrine of Justification in the Lutheran Confessions

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### I

IN the 1538 edition of his commentary on Galatians, Luther speaks of "this one and firm rock, which we call the doctrine of justification, that is, that we are delivered from sin, death, and devil, not through ourselves (nor certainly through our works which are of lesser value than we ourselves), but through outside help, through the Only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> "If the article concerning justification falls, everything falls."<sup>2</sup> "This is the chief article of the whole Christian doctrine, which comprehends the understanding of all godliness. It is, therefore, of prime importance that it be well understood and constantly emphasized."<sup>3</sup> "As I often emphasize, the doctrine of justification must be diligently observed. In it are involved all other articles of our faith, and so long as justification is properly taught, it will be well with all other doctrines also."<sup>4</sup>

The church that gratefully bears Luther's name did not follow Luther's personal opinions and emphases in all things; the church is more than one man. There is no doubt, however, that she wholeheartedly incorporated her blessed teacher's views on justification in her official doctrinal position as enunciated in her Symbols, both as to content and importance.<sup>5</sup> In his book *The Religious Bodies of America* the sainted Dr. F. E. Mayer discusses the unique place of the Lutheran Church among other bodies under the heading: "The Soteriological Approach to Christian Doctrine."<sup>6</sup> He asserts that justification is the *material principle* of Lutheran theology. That is to say "that all theological thinking must begin at this article, center in it, and culminate in it. As the various facets of the dia-

mond catch, refract, reflect the light, so the phrase 'justification by faith alone' gives brilliance to every phase of Christian revelation, and in turn each facet of Christian truth sheds new brilliance on this so-called central doctrine, whether it is viewed as justification by faith, or as the work of Christ, or as the distinction between Law and Gospel, or as faith in Christ, or as the doctrine of the 'righteousness before God.'"<sup>7</sup>

The Lutheran Confessions strongly support this estimate. The "doctrine of grace and of the righteousness of faith . . . is the chief part of the Gospel," "praecipua pars evangelii" (AC XXVI 4).<sup>8</sup> "The Gospel compels us to insist in the churches upon the doctrine of grace and of the righteousness of faith" (ibid., 20). "It is necessary that the chief article of the Gospel be preserved, to wit, that we obtain grace freely by faith in Christ" (AC XXVIII 52). It is the "chief topic of Christian doctrine," "praecipuus locus doctrinae christianae" (Ap IV 2). "This is the very voice peculiar to the Gospel, namely, that for Christ's sake, and not for the sake of our works, we obtain by faith remission of sins," "haec est ipsa vox evangelii propria" (Ap IV 274). This is not a Lutheran idiosyncrasy, but "tota ecclesia confitetur," "the entire church confesses" (Ap IV 322, 389). "Who, however, does not see that this article, that by faith we obtain the remission of sins, is most true, most certain, and especially necessary to all Christians?" (Ap IV 398.) Justification is the "primus et principalis articulus." "Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin" (SA-II, I 5). The second generation of Lutherans had the same conviction: "This article concerning justification by faith is the chief article in the entire Christian doctrine, without which no poor conscience can have any firm consolation or can truly know the richness of the grace of Christ" (FC SD III 6).

## II

That this emphasis is no mere lip service on the part of the Lutherans is clear from the manner in which other doctrines are treated in relation to justification. Our Confessions are markedly uninterested in viewing doctrine in the abstract, academically, philosophically, theoretically. The Triune God is brought near to us

because of His attribute of "immensa bonitas," of "infinite goodness" (AC I 2). Man is seen in his desperate need of God's justifying act, because in his natural condition he is "without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence," and those who ascribe inherent powers to man are condemned because they "obscure the glory of Christ's merit and benefits" and "argue that man can be justified before God by his own strength and reason" (AC II). The specific concern of the Lutherans in this matter is that "it will not be possible to recognize the benefits of Christ unless we understand our evils" (Ap II 50). The tremendous mysteries of Christology are not there to furnish material for theological debate, but "that He might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men" (AC III). The office of the ministry has no reason for independent existence as a rank, order, or office, but has meaning only in its function of administering Gospel and Sacraments, through which the Holy Spirit creates justifying faith. Faith, moreover, is seen from the point of view of its content, or object, "quod Deus . . . propter Christum iustificet," "that God . . . for Christ's sake justifies" (AC V). In stressing the necessity of good works the Lutherans hasten to append the caution that we must not "rely on these works to merit justification before God." (AC VI 1. See also XX 9.) Good works are the inevitable consequence of justifying faith (Ap IV 114: "although love necessarily follows," "necessario sequitur dilectio"). In the definition of the church the emphasis rests on the true believers gathered around the Gospel and Sacraments rightly taught and administered (AC VII, VIII). All Lutheran Sacramentology is soteriological. "Through Baptism is offered the grace of God" (AC IX 2). "It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this." The "chief thing" in the Sacrament of the Altar lies in the "words here written: Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." The real value of confession lies in the absolution (AC XI), which asks us to "regard it as certain that the remission of sins is freely granted us for Christ's sake" (Ap XI 2). The heart of repentance is not to be found in an external penance, but in "faith, which is born of the Gospel, or

of absolution, and believes that for Christ's sake sins are forgiven" (AC XII, cf. Ap XII 2, 30, 35, 36, 53, 76, 84, 95). The right use of the Sacraments calls for faith in the promises of the Gospel (AC XIII 2). Not only in their thetical statements do the Lutheran Confessions link the several doctrines with justification, but also the antitheses are formulated from this vantage point.

The adoration of the saints is repudiated because Scripture "sets before us the one Christ as the Mediator, Propitiation, High Priest, and Intercessor" (AC XXI 2). Abuses connected with the Mass must be abolished because "they depart from the Holy Scriptures and diminish the glory of the Passion of Christ" (AC XXIV 24). Over against the mechanical and externalized enumeration of sins in confession the Lutherans urge the precious comfort of absolution and the importance of "faith to believe such absolution as a voice sounding from heaven, and that such faith in Christ truly obtains and receives the forgiveness of sins" (AC XXV 4). The idea that the traditions of men are profitable to merit grace is repudiated, because, "first, the doctrine of grace and of the righteousness of faith has been obscured by it, which is the chief part of the Gospel" (AC XXVI 4). The evils of the monastic system consist in this, that its devotees "taught that by this kind of life they merited forgiveness of sins and justification before God" (AC XXVII 11), and the question is asked, "What else is this than to detract from the glory of Christ and to obscure and deny the righteousness of faith?" (Ibid., 38.) Of the errors and abuses associated with episcopal powers it is said that "these errors crept into the church when the righteousness of faith was not taught clearly enough" (AC XXVIII 62). Whether bishops, in addition to their proper function of exercising the Office of the Keys, also have certain powers delegated *iure humano* does not cause the Lutherans much concern so long as the doctrine of justification suffers no infringement.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that the specific *locus* "De iustificatione," considered by itself, is all that the Lutherans consider indispensable. Rather, they regard the entire *corpus doctrinae* as bound up inextricably with justification. All doctrines have their place in this doctrine. All doctrines stand or fall with the doctrine of justification.<sup>10</sup>

## III

Looking at the doctrine itself, we find it precisely stated in Article IV of the Augustana: "Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4."

This brief definition is maintained essentially throughout the Lutheran Symbols. It is, however, amplified and expounded as regards its implications, especially in Melancthon's exhaustive treatise in Article IV of the Apology. The significance of this assertion will become apparent in a later chapter of our discussion. Some of the material is foreshadowed by reference to the German text of AC IV, fully equivalent in authority with the Latin. The German form lays stress at the outset on "Vergebung der Sünde und Gerechtigkeit vor Gott." Corresponding to the Latin: "Gratis iustificentur propter Christum per fidem," is the German phrase: "Vor Gott gerecht *werden* umb Christus willen durch den Glauben." The "hanc fidem imputat Deus pro iustitia coram ipso" of the Latin is meant to reproduce the German: "Dann diesen Glauben will Gott für Gerechtigkeit vor ihm halten und zurechnen." Following the somewhat more precise outline of the Latin text, we proceed to examine the component factors of this most vital doctrine.

A. *Negative*

"Quod homines non possint iustificari coram Deo propriis viribus, meritis, aut operibus," "that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works." This flat negation of any human contribution to the sinner's justification is the corollary of "propter Christum per (solam) fidem," "for Christ's sake through faith (alone)." A Scripturally realistic anthropology and soteriology go hand in hand. The doxology of divine monergism is in direct proportion to a clean-cut repudiation of any kind or degree of synergism and a clear-eyed evaluation of human limitations.

St. Paul's and Luther's exuberant glorification of the grace of God in Christ springs from the background of an overwhelming awareness of sin.

The Lutheran Confessions mirror this truth throughout. Take a quick glance at the Augsburg Confession, and note the multiplication of expressions like these: ". . . not for the sake of our own merits," "non propter nostra merita" (AC V); ". . . we should not rely on those works to merit justification before God," "per ea opera iustificationem coram Deo mereri" (AC VI); ". . . saved without works," "salvus sit sine opere" (AC VI). "They also are rejected who command us to merit grace through satisfactions of our own" (AC XII 10). Man's will "has no power . . . to work the righteousness of God" (AC XVIII 2). "Our works cannot reconcile God or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification" (AC XX 9). Against the extravagant claims made for the meritorious virtue of the monastic life, it is clearly stated that "righteousness is not to be sought from our observances and acts of worship" (AC XXVIII 37). The attachment of any justifying merit to any activity of man is wrong. "It is against Scripture to establish or require the observance of any traditions, to the end that by such observance we may make satisfaction for sin, or merit grace and righteousness. For the glory of Christ's merit suffers injury when, by such observances, we undertake to merit justification" (AC XXVIII 35, 36). Particularly in the Apology Melancthon demolishes every optimistic view concerning man's capabilities. The Scholastic, synergistic phrase that natural man can and should do what is in him, *facere* "quod est in se," is rejected (Ap IV 9). No matter what names may be given to man's alleged contributions, whether "habitus" or "meritum congrui," or "ratio," or "dilectio," all are man's own powers and works (*proprii vires, propria opera*), and, as such, all are ruled out. In a series of statements Melancthon rejects as false the propositions:

1. "That we merit the remission of sins by our works."
2. "That men are accounted righteous before God because of the righteousness of reason."<sup>11</sup>
3. "That reason, by its own strength, is able to love God above all things, and to fulfill God's Law."

4. "That men do not sin who, without grace, do the commandments of God" [äusserlich] (Ap IV 25—28).

In short, "it is impossible to love God unless the remission of sins be apprehended first by faith" (Ap IV 36). All these sentiments are succinctly comprehended in the familiar Catechism phrases that I am "a lost and condemned creature" and that therefore "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him." Hence all the manifold blessings of God come to me "without any merit or worthiness in me." We must confess that "we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them. . . . For we daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment."

### B. *Positive*

1. "Gratis iustificentur," freely, "aus Gnaden." By denying to natural man any spiritual powers, any capabilities whatsoever toward his justification, we are driven inexorably to the conclusion expressed in Scripture that our justification is the work exclusively of grace. This doctrine of *sola gratia* finds constant and unequivocal expression in the Confessions. Lest the Lutheran emphasis on the necessity of good works be understood to imply any ascription of merit to these works, Ambrose (Ambrosiaster) is quoted in support of the thesis that we receive the remission of sins "gratis," "ohne Verdienst" (AC VI). "Through Baptism is offered the grace of God" (AC IX). "The Gospel compels us to insist in the churches upon the doctrine of grace" (AC XXVI 20).<sup>12</sup> Melancthon in Ap IV enters in great detail into this facet of the doctrine. Those who deny that men receive remission of sins "gratis" are guilty of burying Christ (Ap IV 18). The Gospel is "the Gospel concerning the gratuitous remission of sins and the righteousness of faith" (Ap IV 20). This promise does not depend on our merits, but "freely offers the remission of sins and justification" (Ap IV 41).<sup>13</sup> References could easily be multiplied in which the terms "gratis," or "gratuita," or "ex mera gratia," "by pure grace," are used, or in which "not by works" is juxtaposed with "but by grace."

*Sola gratia* emphasizes the Scriptural truth that the initiative always rests with God, that nothing in man has any claim on God's goodness or can contribute anything of merit to God's act. *Sola*

*gratia* lets God be God, glorifies the majesty of His wisdom, power, and love, and magnifies the honor of Christ. *Sola gratia* drives the pardoned child of God to his knees in endless and amazed adoration: "All this purely out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy!" It fills him with the confidence to pray that God would grant all requests "by grace" and reminds him to receive the divine blessings "with thanksgiving."

2. "Propter Christum," "for Christ's sake." This is the concrete expression of *sola gratia*. Apart from Christ there is no grace; there is only wrath and judgment. The Lutheran definition of grace as "favor Dei propter Christum" points up this inseparable connection. The whole Christology is here involved. The church has always shown tremendous concern for the doctrine of Christ, His person, His natures, His states, His office and work. The church has warred fiercely against any and every vitiation of this doctrine, and to safeguard it, the church has spared no efforts at precise and unequivocal creedal formulations. These formulations, being human, have not always done full justice to the concrete reality, encumbered, as they often were, by abstract philosophical terminology, but the motivation is unmistakable. The true church knows what is at stake. Eternal salvation is bound up with the preservation of the truth concerning Christ. Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Augsburg—all these are solemn reminders of the fact that the doctrine of Christ has a direct, "existential," eschatological bearing on every man's situation. There can be no such thing as an academic, impersonal, theoretical interest in Christology. In the Athanasian Creed the somewhat ponderous affirmations concerning Christ are set in this frame: At the beginning, "it is necessary to everlasting salvation," and at the end, "for our salvation," "pro nostra salute." The Nicene Creed states that Christ, of whom it avers the *homoousios* in the most sonorous tones, came down from heaven "for us men and for our salvation," and was crucified "for us," "pro nobis." Even the Apostles' Creed, simpler and perhaps less directly conditioned by heresy, can express faith in the forgiveness of sins only because it has first rehearsed the history of "Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord."

The Lutherans declared themselves to be in direct succession of the church's Christology and likewise placed it into the service

of soteriology. Not only do they incorporate the ancient Symbols in the *Book of Concord*, but in their particular Confessions they link their theology (doctrine of God) to the "decretum Nicaenae synodi" (AC I) and their Christology to the *Symbolum Apostolorum* (AC III). The facts concerning the Son of God have the purpose of teaching us that He came to "reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men" (ibid.). The definition of justification elucidates the *propter Christum* with "by His death has made satisfaction for our sins." *Propter Christum* therefore means infinitely more than the example of His life, or the time-tested truth of His teaching, or the impact of His "martyrdom," or the deathlessness of His influence on His followers. *Propter Christum* admits of no fragmentation or compartmentalization. It involves the whole Christ, "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary"; the Christ who is my Lord, who, "by His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death has redeemed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil." *Propter Christum* embraces, above all, the vicarious nature of His holy Passion. It is *Christus pro nobis*: "by His death has made satisfaction for our sins" (AC IV).<sup>14</sup> The suffering of Christ was "an oblation and satisfaction" (AC XXIV 25). The death of Christ is "a satisfaction not only for guilt, but also for eternal death" (Ap XII 140; *Triglot*, p. 295). Christ is "Mediator" (AC XXI), "propitiation" (Ap IV 46, 179).

For us, then, to believe in Christ, to relate the *propter Christum* to ourselves personally, means that *propter Christum* our sins are forgiven; it means the recognition and appropriation of the *merita Christi*, the *beneficia Christi*.

The richness of the content in the phrase *propter Christum* is simply beyond comprehension. It expresses the fact that God "*sich ganz und gar ausgeschüttet hat und nichts behalten, das er uns nicht gegeben habe*" ("completely poured forth Himself and withheld nothing from us that He has not given us," LC II 26).<sup>15</sup>

3. Per fidem, "durch den Glauben," "through faith." Justification is exclusively God's act. He planned it, motivated by His unmerited grace, and He executed His plan through His Son Jesus Christ. Man's merits and works are altogether excluded as a con-

tributory factor. The glory belongs wholly to God. This does not mean, however, that man's role is that of bystander or more or less unconcerned spectator. Man is involved personally and to the uttermost. It is for man, for me, that God pitied and planned, for me that God sent His Son, for me that Jesus Christ suffered and died and rose again, for me that God had His Spirit-filled Gospel preached. No presentation of justification that omits my vital involvement, response, and appropriation is complete or Scriptural. For this truth the Confessions make provision by a singularly massive emphasis on faith. No single word is featured so prominently as *fides*, *fides* qualified by *sola*, *fides* placed in opposition to works. "Qui credit in Christum, salvus sit, sine opere, sola fide" (AC VI). "Hanc tantum fide consequimur," "This we obtain only by faith" (AC XX 9).

Faith is the "opus Spiritus Sancti" (AC V; Ap IV 64). Faith is described as not signifying "merely the knowledge of the history," but "a faith which believes also the effect of the history — namely, this article: the forgiveness of sins, to wit, that we have grace, righteousness, and forgiveness of sins through Christ" (AC XX 23). According to its various aspects, faith is pictured as *fiducia* (AC XX 26), *confidere* (AC XXVII 49), *vera cognitio Christi* ("true knowledge of Christ," Ap IV 46), *haec beneficia nosse*, "to know these benefits" (Ap IV 101); "thus to think of Christ [to seek from Him the remission of sins], thus to worship Him, thus to embrace Him, is truly to believe" (Ap IV 154); *obedientia erga Evangelium* (Ap IV 308); *assentiri promissioni Dei* (Ap IV 48); *velle et accipere* (*ibid.*). Viewed psychologically, then, from within the believer himself, faith is seen to involve the whole man. Faith is an activity of the intellect, the will, and the emotions. Faith may even be called a "virtus" (Ap IV 227), a good quality in man.

However — and this our Confessions are at pains to make abundantly clear — faith justifies not because of any intrinsic value or goodness, not because it has any meritorious or supplementary function with respect to the justifying act of God. Faith justifies because of its object. Faith justifies "not because it is a work that is in itself worthy, but because it receives the promise" (Ap IV 86).<sup>16</sup>

The objects of justifying faith are variously stated as Christ, the merits of Christ, the mercy of God, the Gospel, the promise of God, the promise of the remission of sins and justification, the promise of Christ. All of these, of course, amount to the same thing. Faith in Christ, if it be genuine, necessarily includes confidence in God's entire *ordo salutis*, in His mercy, His Word, His power, His faithfulness, as well as unreserved acceptance of the full implications of the *propter Christum* as detailed above.<sup>17</sup> For this reason AC IV can say that it is faith itself which God imputes for righteousness ("Dann diesen Glauben will Gott für Gerechtigkeit vor ihm halten und zurechnen"). Thus we may speak not only of a "per fidem," but also of a "propter fidem" (Ap IV 177). This substitution is possible because "fides sit ipsa iustitia" (Ap IV 86). How this is to be understood is made clear in these words: "But faith, properly so called, is that which assents to the promise.<sup>18</sup> Of this faith Scripture speaks" (Ap IV 113). "But because the righteousness of Christ is given us by faith, faith is for this reason righteousness in us imputatively, that is, it is that by which we are made acceptable to God on account of the imputation and ordinance of God. . . . Faith is truly righteousness because it is obedience to the Gospel" (Ap IV 307 f.). Manifestly, faith is given no synergistic role. At the same time the intimate, inseparable connection between God's gift and man's appropriation is emphasized.

4. Iustificentur, are justified. (More fully in the German text: "dass wir Vergebung der Sünde bekommen und vor Gott gerecht werden"). We have thus far in the doctrine of justification traveled a glorious road. Reproducing the heart of Scripture, the Confessions sing a hymn in praise of the ineffably marvelous mercy of God, who condescended to our totally sinful, lost, and helpless situation and reconciled us all to Himself in Christ. The finished redemption wrought by our Lord constitutes the heart of the Gospel, which by the Holy Spirit creates in man the saving acceptance of faith. This, our Symbols aver, is the doctrine of justification. To the elaboration and defense of these truths Melancthon devotes the greatest amount of space in the Apology, Article IV. Because of the breadth and comprehensiveness of the discussion, a large number of terms are used by Melancthon in his attempt to unfold the doctrine in all its aspects. Much of the discussion, and perhaps also

much of the terminology, may have been determined by the formulations of Roman theologians and the framers of the Confutation. All of this has prompted many learned theologians through the years to submit Article IV of the Apology to searching scrutiny and exhaustive analysis as to the scope of Melanchthon's *Rechtfertigungslehre*.<sup>19</sup> In view of the controversies surrounding the "later" Melanchthon the prospect of finding at least the germs of "Melanchthonianism" in the Apology has proved to be tempting indeed. It will therefore be constructive to review some of the terminology employed in connection with justification.

#### IV

Already in the Augsburg Confession several formulations appear, partly anticipating the variety in the Apology. It is interesting to compare both the German and the Latin wordings in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession. German: "Dass wir Vergebung der Sunde bekommen und vor Gott gerecht *werden* . . . so wir glauben, dass Christus fuer uns gelitten habe und dass uns umb seinen willen die Sunde vergeben, Gerechtigkeit und ewiges Leben geschenkt wird." Latin: ". . . iustificentur . . . cum credunt se in gratiam recipi et peccata remitti." Article V. German: "Dass wir durch Christus Verdienst . . . ein gnädigen Gott haben." Latin: ". . . quod Deus . . . iustificet hos, qui credunt se propter Christum in gratiam recipi."

Article VI. German: "Vergebung der Suende und Gerechtigkeit." Latin: "Remissio peccatorum et iustificatio." Article XXIV: "Dass wir fur Gott Gnade erlangen." Latin: "Nos coram Deo iustificari." It seems that the brief, simple formulations of the Augsburg Confession present no particular problem. The irenic interest of the Augsburg Confession dictated a somewhat more general terminology, without, of course, sacrificing the truth.

In the Apology, however, Melanchthon was compelled to take issue with Roman assertions and attacks on the Lutheran position. It was natural that there should be a multiplication of terms. By far the most common equation is: *iustificatio* is the same as "consequi remissionem peccatorum" (Ap IV 1, *passim*). This is done in conscious reference to the church's affirmation in the Apostles' Creed.<sup>20</sup> The basic concept: justification is equal to forgiveness of sins, is amplified by the addition of "reconciliation" (Ap IV 18).

The terms are interchangeable: "reconciliatio seu iustificatio" (Ap IV 182). "Fide iustificemur coram Deo, reconciliamur Deo" (Ap IV 386). To this is added a third term: "et regeneremur" (ibid.). This, in turn, is amplified by the statement: "Iustificare significat ex iniustis iustos effici seu regenerari," "out of unjust men just men are made, or reborn" (Ap IV 72). And yet still more: "significat et iustos pronuntiarum seu reputari," "pronounced or accounted just" (ibid.).<sup>21</sup> The idea of imputation occurs repeatedly: "accounted righteous before God," "reputantur iusti" (Ap IV 48); "for His sake we are accounted righteous," "iusti reputemur" (Ap IV 69); "imputed freely," "gratis imputari" (Ap IV 89); "pronounced righteous in a forensic sense," "usu forensi iustum pronuntiarum" (Ap IV 251); "acquit a guilty one and declare him righteous, but on account of the righteousness of another," "aliena iustitia" (Ap IV 305); "righteousness imputatively" (Ap IV 307). Another term introduced into the discussion is "vivificatio," "quickening" (Ap IV 366). The list of formulations has not been exhausted. Enough have been mentioned to show the variety and complexity of treatment as well as the problems that may arise.

A number of questions suggest themselves. Is it Melancthon's purpose to give a precise, carefully systematized presentation of the doctrine of justification? Does he use the various terms always in the same sense? Does he, for example, think of justification in a strict, limited sense, including only the objective, one-time declaration of God on the basis of Christ's redemptive work, or in a wider, more general sense, extending also to conversion and the new life? Is there perhaps a combination, or even a mingling, of both concepts? Does "faith" always mean only the passive, receptive appropriation on the part of man of God's completed act, or is the term broadened to embrace also the fruits of faith? Yes, as some have alleged, may we perhaps find even the seed of synergism in his presentation? Does justification imply only the imputation of a foreign righteousness to a sinful being, a *iustum pronuntiarum*, or does it involve a total transformation, a *iustum effici*? Are there progressive stages of justification? These problems have, as a matter of fact, evoked a goodly volume of literature.<sup>22</sup>

What shall we say? Was Melancthon's work hasty and slipshod? Was his own thinking confused and perhaps even contra-

dictory? Does he manifest synergistic leanings? In short, what precisely, was Melanchthon trying to prove?

After subjecting the Apology to repeated scrutiny, it was this writer's dominant impression that Melanchthon tried within the limitations of human language to present the grand doctrine of justification in all its fullness, to pull all the stops, as it were, in developing all the variations upon the central theme: justification is wholly the act of divine grace *propter Christum*, received by faith. At the very beginning of the discussion (Apology IV) the theme is stated: "that men obtain remission of sins, not because of their own merits, but freely for Christ's sake through faith in Christ." Faith is in constant reiteration presented as the divinely wrought means of appropriation, in constant antithesis to anything that smacks of being an *opus* or *meritum* of man. At times Melanchthon thinks of justification in terms of its objective aspects, then as seen subjectively from man's point of view, then again in both directions. Now Melanchthon presents justification as a momentary act, now with the inclusion of its blessed results. If we may speak of one outstanding emphasis in Apology IV, it would seem to be *sola fides*. What systematization there is appears thus to be conditioned by the implied and expressed works-righteousness of Roman theology. This is also the conclusion of Engelland<sup>23</sup> and Schlink.<sup>24</sup>

That Melanchthon's sometimes indiscriminate formulations could be ambiguous and furnish the occasion for misunderstanding became evident in the generation of intra-Lutheran controversies, mainly after Luther's death, which were definitively resolved in the Formula of Concord. The names of Osiander, Stancarus, Flacius, and others bring to mind many of the battles that raged around justification within the Lutheran camp especially when the vacillations and ambiguities of the aging Melanchthon, who wanted nothing so much as surcease from theological strife, were read back into the Apology and thus provided a constant supply of ammunition.

The decisive character of the role of the Formula of Concord dare not be underestimated. Nor may the later symbol be played off against the earlier ones. According to its own claim the Formula of Concord is the "*gründliche, lautere, richtige und endliche Wiederholung und Erklärung etlicher Artikel Augsburger Confession*"

(Title). The Formula of Concord is "*für den rechten, christlichen Verstand der Augsburgerischen Confession*" (Preface). Specifically, the framers of the Formula want to "abide firmly and constantly in the doctrine of the righteousness of faith before God (*de iustificatione fidei coram Deo*), as it is embodied, expounded, and proved from God's word in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology issued after it" (FC SD III 66).

This claim of the Formula of Concord should be taken seriously. Because the formulations of the Augustana and the Apology had been subjected to the most critical review by friend and foe for upwards of 40 years, and because they had been shown to be open to varying, if not contradictory, interpretations, and therefore had proved in a sense inadequate, the Formula of Concord endeavored to safeguard the correct understanding by more precise terminology, even to the extent of supplying a corrective, not so much to the language of the former confessions as to a false interpretation of it. The history of the church reveals other instances of this procedure. When subsequent developments and controversies have shown existing creeds to be no longer adequate for the new situation, the church has risen to meet the need, not by repudiating her former confessions but by clarifying and strengthening them with new formulations.

This principle is clearly applied by the Formula of Concord to the doctrine of justification as presented in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. If we ask: What is involved in the *propter Christum?* the Formula answers: It is "the entire Christ, according to both natures, in His obedience alone, which as God and man He rendered to the Father even unto death, and thereby merited for us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life" (FC Ep III 3); "the righteousness of the obedience, suffering, and death of Christ, which is imputed to faith" (FC SD III 32); "the entire person of Christ, who as God and man is our Righteousness in His only, entire, and complete obedience" (SD III 55. See also SD III 56—58). If the question has to do with the nature of justifying faith, or the total exclusion from justification of all kinds of works, before, in, or after justification, the Formula offers unequivocal definitions (cf. Ep III 4, 5, 6, 10; Ep IV 7; SD III 31, 37, 38). How shall we understand the Apology when it uses terms like "regeneratio" and

"vivificatio" in connection with justification? Hear the Formula of Concord: "When, in place of this [*vocabulum iustificationis*], the words *regeneratio* and *vivificatio* . . . are employed, as in the Apology, this is done in the same sense" (Ep III 8). Rejected is the teaching that renewal and works belong to our righteousness before God (Ep III 20, 21). "Since the word *regeneratio* is sometimes employed for the word *iustificatio* . . . it is necessary that this word be properly explained, in order that the renewal which follows justification may not be confounded with the justification of faith, but that they may be properly distinguished from one another" (SD III 18. See especially the immediately following paragraphs). Finally, the word "justification" is most carefully defined. To "justify" means "to declare free from sins," "*absolvere a peccatis*" (Ep III 7). "Accordingly, the word *justify* here means to declare righteous and free from sins, and to absolve one from eternal punishment for the sake of Christ's righteousness, which is imputed by God to faith" (SD III 17. Note the comprehensive definition in SD III 9 ff.).

It may be that the Formula of Concord itself does not cover completely every facet of the wonderful truth of justification. We have heard Melancthon say (Ap IV 72) that "justify" signifies both "*ex iniustis iustos effici*" and "*iustos pronuntiar*." We also remember that the German speaks of "*gerecht machen, fromm werden*." May these expressions not emphasize the truth that he whom God *declares* righteous is, in fact, *made* righteous, totally righteous (cf. Ap IV 222), "pure and fresh and sinless" in God's holy eyes? Not in a synergistic, *gratia infusa* sense, of course. We *are* righteous, the holy people of God, the *communio sanctorum*, by virtue of a *iustitia aliena*, the radiant perfection of Christ, appropriated by our hearts' trust in God's promise. We *are* righteous because of the *remissio peccatorum*. "In order, therefore, that troubled hearts may have a firm, sure consolation, also, that due honor be given to the merit of Christ and the grace of God, the Scriptures teach that the righteousness of faith before God consists alone in the gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins" (SD III 30).

One further accent of the Confessions with regard to the doctrine of justification must be pointed out, because it is especially com-

forting to the Christian in his daily concern with his sin. Justification, in its full declaratory sense, is a daily, ongoing process. “. . . it is evident that justification signifies not [only, *non solum*] the beginning of the renewal, but the reconciliation by which also we afterwards are accepted” (Ap IV 161). “. . . Christ does not cease to be Mediator after we have been renewed. They err who imagine that He has merited only a first grace [*tantum primam gratiam*]. . . . Christ remains Mediator, and we ought always to be confident that for His sake we have a reconciled God, even although we are unworthy” (Ap IV 162, 163). Beautifully Luther: “. . . although the grace of God is secured [*erworben*] through Christ, and sanctification [*Heiligkeit*] is wrought by the Holy Ghost through the Word of God in the unity [*Vereinigung*] of the Christian Church, yet on account of our flesh which we bear about with us [*noch am Hals tragen*] we are never without sin. Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here” (LC II, 54, 55). Thus, with ever-greater appreciation of the grace of God, we state it most simply, yet adequately, as we do in the Small Catechism: “. . . in welcher Christenheit er mir und allen Gläubigen täglich alle Sünden reichlich vergibt”; “in which Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers.”

For all that, neither Luther nor Melancthon nor Chemnitz nor Walther nor Pieper can ever do full justice to this high and holy, yet inexpressibly tender and comforting truth. I can't even begin. But my concern must be to attempt to give the proper emphasis to each aspect of justification, God's eternal grace in Christ, my personal response created by the Holy Spirit, the transforming power in my life, and, as the sum of all, my endless and holy hallelujahs before the throne of the Lamb that was slain for me and has reconciled me to God by His blood and restored me to full fellowship with God. In this way I shall, by the grace of God, be preserved both from a mechanical view of justification and from synergistic perversions. Both abridge the *soli Deo gloria*.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis ed., IX, 9, my translation. WA XL-1, 33.
2. *Ibid.*, St. L., IX, 44; WA XL-1, 72.
3. St. L., IX, 129; WA XL-1, 168.
4. St. L., IX, 376; WA XL-1, 441.
5. Cf. FC SD III 67.
6. *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1954) pp. 143 ff.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
8. The references to the Confessions are cited according to the paragraphing as found in the Latin text of *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Ev.-Lutherischen Kirche*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1952). These paragraph references coincide with those in the Latin text of *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), with one exception. Art. IV of the Apology, "De iustificatione," in the *Bekenntnisschriften* is a unit comprising 400 paragraphs, while in the *Triglot* Art. IV (II) runs to par. 121. Here a new Art. (III) begins. Hence any reference to Ap. IV from 1 to 121 will be the same in both editions. Any reference to paragraphs beyond 121 may readily be found in the *Triglot*, under Art. III, by subtracting 121 from the paragraph numbered. E. g.: Ap IV 200 in the *Bekenntnisschriften* corresponds to Art. III 79 in the *Triglot*.
9. Cf. Luther: "Hoc impetrato, scilicet quod solus Deus iustificet, non solum volumus Papam in manibus portare, imo etiam ei osculari pedes." *Com. ad Gal.* WA XL-1, 181.
10. Luther, *ibid.*, p. 168: "Is principalis est doctrinae Christianae articulus in quo cognitio totius pietatis sita est. Ideo maxime refert, eum bene scire et perpetuo inculcare." Page 441: "In eo enim comprehenduntur omnes alii fidei nostrae articuli, eoque salvo salvi sunt et reliqui."
11. German: "Auch ist's Lüge und nicht wahr, dass ein Mensch vor Gott könne gerecht und fromm werden durch seine Werke und äusserlich Frömmigkeit."
12. Cf. AC XXVIII 52: "Denn es muss je der furnehme Artikel des Evangelii erhalten werden, dass wir die Gnad Gottes durch den Glauben an Christum ohn unser Verdienst erlangen."
13. "Lauter aus Gnade bietet er an Vergebung der Sünden." Cf. 43: "So wir aber vor Gott fromm und gerecht werden allein aus lauter Gnade und Barmherzigkeit, die in Christo verheissen ist, erfolgt, dass wir durch unsere Werke nicht fromm werden."
14. "das uns umb seinen willen die Sunde vergeben, Gerechtigkeit und ewiges Leben geschenkt wird."
15. See this entire section for a superb summation, which Luther concludes with the words: "Aye, the entire Gospel which we preach is based on this, that we properly understand this article as that upon which our salvation and all our happiness rest, and which is so rich and comprehensive [*so reich und weit*] that we never can learn it fully."
16. ". . . nicht derhalben, dass unser Gläuben ein solch köstlich rein Werk sei, sondern allein derhalben, dass wir durch Glauben, und sonst mit keinem Ding, die angebotene Barmherzigkeit empfaßen."
17. Cf. Ap IV, 53: ". . . haec tria obiecta: promissionem, et quidem gratuitam, et merita Christi tamquam pretium et propitiationem."
18. ". . . wenn mir mein Herz und der heilige Geist im Herzen sagt, die Verheissung Gottes ist wahr und ja."

19. For a representative listing of theologians and a concise summary of their investigations on this subject the reader is directed to: Hans Engelland, *Melanchthon, Glauben und Handeln* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1931), pp. 541 ff. See also Edmund Schlink, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, 3. Auflage (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1948), pp. 134 ff., fn. 15, 16.
20. Cf. Ap IV 51: “. . . ubi certe ponitur hic articulus: remissionem peccatorum.”
21. “. . . das Wort *iustificari* auf zweierlei Weise gebraucht wird, nämlich für bekehrt werden oder neu geboren, item für gerecht geschätzt werden.” Cf. 76—78.
22. Engelland (n. 19, above), p. 559, mentions Loofs, G. N. Bonwetsch, E. F. Fischer, v. Frank, P. Gennrich, R. Seeberg, C. Stange, as including the new spiritual life in justification, and Eichhorn, Koestlin, Kunze, Lipsius, Nitzsch, Oehler, O. Ritschl, Thieme, Warko, Zitzlaff, as restricting justification to “ein neues religiöses Verhältnis zu Gott.”
23. Engelland, p. 559: “. . . das sola fide . . . das Thema der ganzen Rechtfertigungslehre in der Apologie. . . .”
24. Schlink (n. 19, above), pp. 136 f., fn. 16: “Überschüttet vom Reichtum der Gnadengaben, die durch das Wort der Vergebung zuteil werden, bekennt in Ap IV die Kirche diesen Reichtum in der Unbefangenheit und Überschwänglichkeit beschenkter kindlicher Freude, ohne die Gabe im einzelnen klar zu unterscheiden oder gar in ihren Aussagen über sie eine bestimmte Reihenfolge einzuhalten. Entscheidend bleibt, dass sie alle *Gnadengaben* sind und alle allein um Christi willen durch den Glauben empfangen werden” (emphasis original). See also pp. 141 ff.