

Martin Luther

Dr. Gannon Murphy

Luther on Justification

While the principle of *sola Scriptura* is considered to have been the 'formal principle' of the Reformation, it is Luther's famous doctrine of *justification* that has often been called the 'material principle.' Luther, and the notion of justification, go hand in hand. Luther found the issue to be so central that he stated, 'When it comes to the article of justification we must not yield, if we want to retain the truth of the Gospel.'¹ And, 'When the article of justification is lost, nothing remains except error, hypocrisy, godlessness, and idolatry.'² Even more pointedly, Luther stated that, 'When this article [justification] stands, the church stands, when it falls, the church falls.'³ The matter of justification is central to Luther's theology.

What, then, *is* the article of justification? Simply put, Luther's doctrine seeks to answer the question: *How are sinful human beings to be justified before a Holy God?* Luther answer is that,

...justification is by faith alone. [For] How can the Law effect our justification, when Paul so plainly states that we must be dead to the Law if we want to live unto God? If we are dead to the Law and the Law is dead to us, how can it possibly contribute anything to our justification? There is nothing left for us but to be justified by faith alone. Further, to be justified, is to be righteous before God.⁴

Two key Scriptural passages for Luther both come from Paul's Epistle to the Romans: '...God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.' (5:8-10). And also, 'The just shall live by faith' (1:17). Luther would later write of this passage that,

Night and day I meditated on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: 'The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: The just person lives by faith.' Then I began to understand the justice of God by which the just person lives by a gift of God that is by faith. The meaning of this verse started to open up to

¹ Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1939), 32.

² Ibid, 89.

³ WA, 40 III, 352, 3.

⁴ Ibid, 107.

me: The justice of God is revealed through the gospel but it is a passive justice by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: 'The just person lives by faith.' All at once I had the feeling of being born again and entering into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately the whole of Scripture shone in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms also had analogous meanings: e.g. the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which God makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. – I would exalt this sweetest word of mine 'justice of God' with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. Thus this phrase of Paul was for me the true gate to paradise.⁵

One of the most notable of Luther's works concerning justification is his *Commentary on Galatians*, which we became familiar with in the last unit. Expounding on the Pauline corpus, he writes:

Paul has nothing against those who are justified by faith and therefore are true doers of the Law. He opposes those who think they can fulfil the Law when in reality they can only sin against the Law by trying to obtain righteousness by the Law. The Law demands that we fear, love, and worship God with a true faith. The law-workers fail to do this. Instead, they invent new modes of worship and new kinds of works which God never commanded. They provoke His anger according to the passage: 'But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men' (Matthew 15:9). Hence, the law-righteous workers are downright rebels against God, and idolaters who constantly sin against the first commandment. In short, they are no good at all though outwardly they seem to be extremely solicitous of the honour of God.

We who are justified by faith as the saints of old, may be under the Law, but we are not under the curse of the Law because sin is not imputed to us for Christ's sake. If the Law cannot be fulfilled by the believers, if sin continues to cling to them despite their love for God, what can you expect of people who are not yet justified by faith, who are still enemies of God and His Word, like the unbelieving law-workers? It goes to show how impossible it is for those who have not been justified by faith to fulfil the Law.⁶

Luther's understanding of justification by faith is often summarized as *simul iustus et peccator*, 'at the same time, just and sinner.' This is to say that, though Christian believers are, and remain, sinners, they are no longer under

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, eds. (St. Louis, PA: Concordia, Fortress Press. 1999), 34:336-37.

⁶ Ibid, 62.

the curse of the law (which now serves to convict one's conscience of sin) by virtue of his or her faith in Christ.

This leaves us, in this life, with a certain ongoing tension which continues until the believer's final consummation with Christ in the eschaton. On the one hand, we have the promise of God in the gospel of salvation through faith and the manner in which this changes our disposition toward the things of God. On the other hand, we continually strive against sin which still lives within us, and a world which remains under a curse as it marches toward death. The Christian life is not, therefore, an easy one. Indeed, it is one often marked by pain while the Christian clings to the hope of eternity. Nor, however, is being a 'righteous sinner' a matter of practical stasis in which we abstain from working for the good. Rather, the Christian life is a continually unfolding progress in which the believer becomes more and more conformed to the image of Christ.

An Alien Righteousness

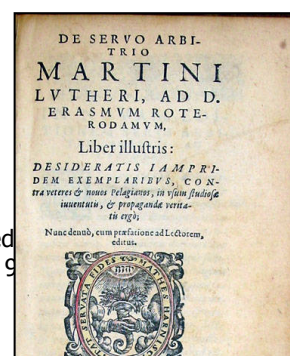
Luther's so-called 'Reformation discovery' of justification by faith alone naturally led him to a theology of 'alien righteousness.' As Markus Wriedt has written, 'The discovery of God's passive justice, that justice with which sinners are clothed and justified, turned for Luther into the opening key to the complete revelation of Holy Scripture. The insight that God acts "for me—for us" (*pro me—pro nobis*), turns Luther's past religious experience and theological thinking upside down, though he would call it being "back on his feet."⁷ As a monk, Luther had strived for perfection, to stand righteous before God in virtue of his own merits. Justification by faith alone, however, makes this out to be a veritable blasphemy, since such purity of action, and of the heart, is manifestly impossible for the sinner. Only Christ lived the perfect life in the believer's stead. To rely on one's own efforts is literally to spurn the love of God for lost humanity by which he freely bestows his grace and favour by giving the gift of faith, while such recipients remain sinners.

Grace and Election

Importantly, faith is seen by Luther not as an intrinsic human power but as a free gift received unilaterally and undeservedly from God. In his dispute with Erasmus in, *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther forcefully contended that human beings are not to be given any credit whatsoever for their own salvation. Faith, as a gift, disclaims all forms of merit. Here again, Luther was profoundly influenced by the words of Paul: 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?' (1 Cor. 4:7).

In this, Luther clearly casts his lot with the storied Augustinian view of grace and election in which

⁷ Markus Wriedt, "Alien Justice—Luther's re-invention of God's promise to red
<http://www.marquette.edu/theology/resources/documents/AlienJustice.pdf>, 9



humanity is understood to be in a condition totally incapable of achieving salvation on its own. For Luther, the denial of this was tantamount to simply denying the gospel of justification which is a function of free grace, and according to the mysterious elective purposes of God. This understanding was, in large part, *pastorally* motivated. If humans were ultimately responsible for inaugurating in their own salvation, then they were equally capable of absconding from it. This, in turn, destroys the comfort of the assurance of salvation and the believer's perseverance in it.

Faith and Works

Luther's understanding of justification through faith alone (*sola fide*) is often misconstrued as merely a polemic against the Christian believer doing any good works at all in the course of his or her Christian life. But this was not Luther's position at all. As he argues in his, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, the place of good works is to be found within the context of faith—lived out in the community of the church—as a sinner now justified in God's eyes. Works *spring forth* from true faith, but they are not the basis of it. In other words, rather than good works meriting salvation, it is one's very salvation itself that prompts he or she to perform good works, that is, Christians are *saved unto good works*.

In this sense, the matter of justification itself is not to be associated with works. Justification *produces* good works, but is not caused by them and any view to the contrary necessarily leads one to a theology of 'works righteousness.' It is this very view which Luther saw in the Roman church of his day and which he strived so indefatigably against. One of his favourite images in this regard was that of the biblical analogy of the good tree which produces good fruit (Mat. 7) which he recounts in *On the Freedom of the Christian*. Faith alone transforms one's affections from that of self-absorption and self-indulgence to one of love toward both God and humanity. The Christian is freed from total bondage to sin and thus enabled to exercise faith, love, and charity.

Based on this brief treatment of Luther's doctrine of justification, it is possible to identify three central concluding theses.

1. Justification is a decisive *event* that ushers the believer unto new life, ever renewed through ongoing sanctification. God the Son comes to redeem the sinner and brings he or she into the eternal family of his kingdom. The promise of redemption is that believer's sins will not be counted against them, but rather that they are 'cloaked' with the alien righteousness of Christ.
2. Justification must be understood on both the principles of God's sovereignty and the Christological ministry. To be justified is to have been called according to elective purpose of God and brought into the church as the community of God's people. This is the ministry of Christ as prophet,

priest, and king—in fulfilment of the Old Testament law which must forever remain as the interpretive backdrop of the New Testament gospel ('good news').

3. For Luther, there are two equal and opposite errors that one can make concerning the gospel. One is *nomianism*, the other *antinomianism*. Nomianism is to set up a system of laws, rules, ceremonies, sacraments or other measures as necessarily machinations for the attainment of salvation. This, of course, is precisely what Luther saw during the indulgence controversy with Rome, along with its developed system of confession, absolution, and penance. Luther's position is that fallen man has no decisive influence in God's free gift of grace and, thus, is not determinative of his or her eternal salvation. This is according to God's free, elective grace alone. Antinomianism, however, makes no place for the law whatsoever. In this sense, justification by faith alone becomes a license for sin. Such an attitude, however, was evidence to Luther of a lack of justifying faith to begin with. True faith produces good works and a life that constantly strives against the impulses of the sinful nature which is not totally expunged until the final consummation.

The Texts: As with his doctrine of Scripture, Luther's writings concerning justification appear in sundry places. Key reading, however, is to be found in his major works, *On the Freedom of the Christian* and, again, his *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. We will read the first in its entirety, and a select passage from the latter.

On the Freedom of the Christian (1520) was the third of Luther's three major reforming treatises including the *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* and *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. The work cuts to the heart of Luther's reforming efforts, arguing that neither the law nor a putative, attained righteousness through works are salvific in nature. Rather, truly repentant believers are the forgiven children of God and, while no longer under the curse of the law, perform good works solely by virtue of regenerated hearts that seek to please God, in union with Christ.

Luther's *Commentary on Galatians* (1535) is considered among the more mature of his works and reflects poignantly his theology of justification while also touching on matters of faith, law, freedom, and Christian praxis.

Further Reading

Althaus, Paul, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), chs. 17-19.

Ebeling, Gerhard, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), chs. 8, 10, 12, & 13.

Forde, Gerhard, *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Approach to the Gospel*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), chs. 4 & 5.

Marius, Richard. *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*. Cambridge: Belknap, 1999, chs. 12 & 15.

McGrath, Alister E. *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Secs. 3.2 – 3.3.

Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 6.

David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), ch. 2, 6, & 10.

Questions for consideration

1. Was Luther correct in understanding justification as a *singular* event?
2. Does Luther's concept of an 'alien righteousness' go beyond a mere legal or imputed declaration of righteousness?
3. For Luther, what benefits does justification have for the life of the believer in the here and now?
3. How do we relate Luther's doctrine of justification to his understanding of Divine election?
4. How would you defend Luther against the charge of *antinomianism*?
5. How would you describe the *type* of faith which Luther claims to be *saving* faith?