

# Present Truth

A magazine dedicated  
to the restoration  
of New Testament Christianity  
in this generation

*Sola Gratia*

Solely by Grace

*Solo Christo*

Solely by Christ

*Sola Fide*

Solely by Faith

Vol 6 #4

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# Present Truth

**Present Truth** is a magazine dedicated to the restoration of New Testament Christianity and committed to upholding the great Reformation principle of justification by faith.

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**Publishers:** A group of Christian scholars and businessmen without denominational sponsorship who have united to uphold the objective gospel amid the present deluge of religious subjectivism. Multitudes are being caught up in the popular and frantic effort to find satisfaction in some sort of religious experience. *Present Truth* is a voice in this barren wilderness of groveling internalism, a voice which boldly proclaims those great principles upon which the Reformation was founded—namely:

1. *Sola gratia.* God's saving activity outside of us in the person of Jesus Christ is the sole *ground* of our salvation.
2. *Solo Christo.* Christ's doing and dying on our behalf is the sole *basis* of our acceptance and continued fellowship with God.
3. *Sola fide.* The Holy Spirit's gift of faith through the hearing of this objective, historical gospel is the sole *means* whereby Christ's substitutionary life and death are imputed to us for justification unto life eternal. He who is thus justified by faith and filled with God's Spirit will glory only in Christ's cross and make God's saving work in Christ the central affirmation of his Christian witness. Though he will be careful to obey God and please Him in all things, he will continue to repent rather than glory in the feeble attainments of his own Spirit-filled life.
4. *Sola Scriptura.* The Bible and the Bible only is the Christian's objective and infallible rule of faith and practice, alone sufficient that he may "be established in the present truth" (2 Peter 1:12). It is the God-ordained account of and witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

*Present Truth* is not only committed to the task of upholding these founding principles of the Reformation, but it believes that we today must allow these principles to call all that we do and all that we teach into question. These principles call all traditions into question and all statements about the truth into question—even the ones set forth in this magazine. Our vision is a new Reformation that will recover what the Reformers bequeathed us and complete the restoration they so nobly began.

*Present Truth* is committed to the time-honored verities of the Christian faith—such as the Trinity, deity of Christ, virgin birth, blood atonement, bodily resurrection and ascension, second coming, final judgment, justification by faith alone, sanctification through the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, and glorification at Christ's soon return.

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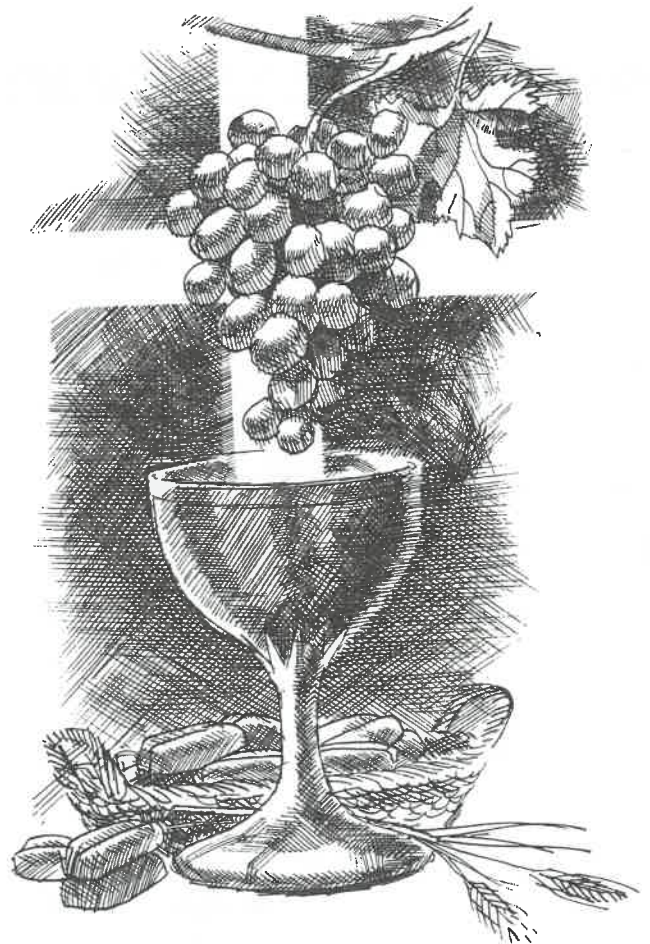
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The idea that believers are always acceptable to God solely through an imputed righteousness (i.e., "extrinsic justification") was the indispensable lifeblood of Luther's faith.



# Letters

Address Letters to Present Truth,  
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## “The Man of Romans 7:14-25”

Sir / I enjoyed immensely your June issue devoted to the man of Romans 7:14-25, particularly your own putting of this passage into perspective. You show a Spirit-given insight when you remark on the bearing this portion of Scripture has on the doctrine of “the third use of the law” for Christians. Failing to see this connection lies behind many ancient and modern heresies.

When, within our own confessional fellowship, we were reasoning together over the so-called third use of the law, I was assigned a study paper on Romans 7:22. It became more and more clear that the assigned verse could not be properly understood unless it was taken in the full context of chapter 7, specifically with regard to the third use of the law. Paul delighted in the law according to the inner man, but his flesh continually stonewalled his ability to perform that which his renewed heart, mind and will earnestly desired.

Sixteenth-century Reformation theology staunchly maintained the reality of the ongoing tension within the spirit/flesh, inner-man/outer-man nature of the regenerate. The Lutheran Confessions, and particularly the sixth article of the Formula of Concord, which treats the third-use-of-the-law doctrine, clearly maintain, with Paul, that the regenerate is a divided man, continually at war with himself. On the one hand, Article VI was written over against the antinomian heresy, which maintained that once one is regenerate, he is altogether free from the law, for he is led by the Spirit in his new life of obedience. In a sense, the article admits, this can be said; though it hastens to qualify the words in line with Pauline theology:

“But when man is born anew by the Spirit of God, and liberated from the Law, that is, freed from this driver, and is led by the Spirit of Christ, he lives according to the immutable will of God comprised in the Law, and so far as he is born anew, does everything from a free, cheerful spirit; and these are called not properly works of the Law, but works and fruits of the Spirit, or as St. Paul names it, *the law of the mind and the Law of Christ*. For such men are no more under the Law, but under grace, as St. Paul says, Rom. 8:2, 7:23, 1 Cor. 9:21, *but* [my emphasis] since believers are not completely renewed in this world, but the Old Adam clings to them even to the grave, there also remains in them the struggle be-

tween the spirit and the flesh. Therefore they delight indeed in God's Law according to the inner man, but the law in their members struggles against the law in their mind; hence they are never without the Law, and nevertheless are not under, but in the Law, and live and walk in the Law of the Lord, and yet do nothing from constraint of the Law.”

Later on, it is put this way:

“Because so far as they have been born anew according to the inner man, they do what is pleasing to God, not by coercion of the Law, but by the renewing of the Holy Ghost, voluntarily and spontaneously from their hearts; however, they maintain nevertheless a constant struggle against the Old Adam. *For the Old Adam as an intractable, refractory ass, is still part of them* [my emphasis], which must be coerced to the obedience of Christ, not only by the teaching, admonishing force, and threatening of the Law, but also oftentimes by the club of punishments and troubles, until the body of sin is entirely put off, and man is perfectly renewed in the resurrection, when he will need neither the preaching of the Law nor its threatenings and punishments, as also the Gospel any longer.

... The authors of the article are purposefully redundant as they heap up the phrases: “nevertheless, the old Adam clings to them”; “because of these lusts of the flesh”; “because of the flesh”; “but as far as the old Adam is concerned.” If Paul, in Romans 7:14-25, is not speaking of the believer *after* conversion, there is little ground to stand on over against antinomianism and/or perfectionism of the former and latter days.

Whereas antinomians fail to understand the Christian in Romans 7:14-25, so also do those who follow Calvin in his view of “the third use of the law.” In Book 2, chapter 7, of his *Institutes*, Calvin ascribes the following function to the law (and he begins by making clear that this has to do with “believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns”):

“By frequently meditating upon it [the law], he [the regenerate] will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin. . . .”

“ . . . the Law is a constant stimulus, pricking him forward when he would indulge in sloth. . . .”

“Moses has admirably shown that the Law, which can produce nothing but death

in sinners, ought to have a better and more excellent effect upon the righteous. . . .”

“Therefore, the doctrine of the Law has not been infringed by Christ, but remains, that, by teaching, admonishing, rebuking, and correcting, it may fit and prepare us for every good work.”

This view of the doctrine of “the third use of the law” plays into the hands of the infused grace of Roman Catholic teaching, bringing the law of God down to a standard the regenerate is capable of fulfilling. If it doesn't say so in so many words, yet it implies that the point can be attained where Paul's anguished cry, “O wretched man that I am!” no longer applies to the regenerate.

As you state, “There is no time or point in this life where we can do without this disciplinary function of the law.” The third use of the law, even as the first and second uses, performs a necessary function in its contribution to the Christian life after conversion. Its function is disciplinary and negative. It doesn't reform the flesh but arouses it to sin and exposes it as contributing “no good thing” toward the new life of obedience. That new life is the sphere of the Holy Spirit, who works through the gospel. Yes, the Christian needs the law as a rule of life *because of the flesh*. Taking that law in its radical seriousness sends the regenerate fleeing again and again to the “alien righteousness” of his God-Man Saviour, Jesus Christ, which alone fulfills and satisfies the law.

Understanding the man in Romans 7:14-25 helps us to keep our balance, turning neither to the right hand nor the left in this doctrine of “the third use of the law.” For while we must all stand in Paul's shoes as wretched men, we can simultaneously bask in his victory cry, “Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul G. Fleischer  
Lutheran Pastor  
North Dakota

*We should be careful that “the third use of the law” (as a rule of life for believers) does not slip away into second use only. In this slipping away we are left only with a negative view of the law. Psalm 119 reflects the positive view, which should also be shared by all believers. We see Luther and Calvin's positions as complementary and not antagonistic.*  
-Ed.

Sir / Regarding Arthur W. Pink's article, "The Christian in Romans 7," reprinted in your June issue: On page 30 he cites David Brainerd as "the first missionary to the Indians." Incidentally, his name is correctly spelled "Brainerd," not "Brainard." And he was *not* the first missionary to the Indians. That distinction belongs to John Eliot (1604-1690), who translated the whole Bible into the Algonquin dialect of the Massachusetts Indians and was used of God in the conversion of many hundreds of Indians.

David Brainerd lived 1718-1747, dying at the young age of less than 30 years. While evangelizing the Indians, he was dying of consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis). That seldom-mentioned fact undoubtedly accounts for some of the gloomy and discouraged feelings manifested in his well-known *Diary*. I know. I have had the disease myself, and that is how it makes a person feel. By the mercy of God through modern medical science I have been completely cured; Brainerd died of it.

Brainerd should certainly be remembered and honored for what he did by the blessing of God. However, the Moravians, just a brief generation later, far exceeded Brainerd in the success of their work among the Indians (Heckewelder, David Zeisberger, who labored 63 years among the Indians, John Ettwein, Spangenberg and others). Some of their life-dates partly overlap Brainerd's.

May I add that I earnestly deplore your approving citation of Karl Barth—the father of neo-orthodoxy and a destroyer of the biblical Reformed faith (page 41).

References for Brainerd and the Moravians and Eliot: *Encyclopedia Britannica*; Moyer, *Who Was Who in Church History*. Johannes G. Vos  
Theology Professor  
Pennsylvania

*We deplore Romanism too, but would happily quote the Pope if what he said were worthy of attention.—Ed.*

Sir / After reading the June issue, "The Man of Romans 7:14-25," I cannot help but write and thank you for it. You have so clearly and completely revealed this forgotten truth from the Scriptures. Oh, how many souls have lost out with God because they were never taught to correctly understand this spiritual struggle! Where there is life there is always struggle. May God bless this issue to those many discouraged and confused souls who, like me, experience daily what Paul wrote about.

Dale R. Hanson  
Lutheran Pastor  
Minnesota

### "The Righteousness of Christ"

Sir / I am a member of a conservative Protestant denomination and have been receiving *Present Truth* for several years.

I am quite impressed, both with its content and its design. Your art director does a fine job of choosing inspiring and fitting illustrations for the articles that you publish.

I appreciate greatly your emphasis upon the substitutionary work of our Lord. Only as we seek to understand His life and death will our lives become meaningful. When I am tempted to despair because of my daily failure to meet His standards of righteousness, I remember that God accepts me because His Son has not only met the requirements but has gone beyond them.

Mr. Brinsmead's article in the April, 1977, issue, "The Righteousness of Christ," was especially good. Praise the Lord for the statement on page 22 in the first paragraph under the heading, "The Benefits of Christ's Righteousness":

"God's justification of the believer includes more than pardon for past offenses. While the blood of Christ washes away the stain of all guilt, the righteousness of Christ clothes the believer with the righteousness that the law demands. Justification is not clearing away the past so that the believer can go on and provide his own life for acceptance with God. The holy life of the believer never becomes the central preoccupation where Christ's righteousness is given its proper place."

Keep printing your magazine. I too am looking for a "new reformation" in this generation.

Robert D. Allen  
College Student  
California

### Both Particular and Universal

Sir / The opening verses of John 3 set forth the particularism of God's saving activity in rebirth by the Holy Spirit and faith in the Son of God, which each of us needs. Then in John 3:16-17 there is the revelation that God so loved the world as to give His Son, that the world through Him might be saved. Those who reject the light of Christ are lost (vss. 19-20, 36).

Again in 1 John 2:1-2 we meet the particularism of God's dealing with the sinner through the gracious intercession of Christ his Advocate. Then in the next line there is the fact that Christ made propitiation for the sins of the whole world. No wonder that, in commenting on this passage, John Calvin quotes the scholastic idiom that the atonement of Christ is sufficient for all and efficient for the elect. He thus taught both the universal and the particular.

Likewise, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, in the chapter on redemption, teach that the work of Christ is sufficient for all, fully adapted for all and to be offered to all. And, of course, that Synod teaches the particularism of God's saving activities. But when the message of Dort is condensed into an abbreviation of "The Five Points of Calvinism" and one of these is "limited atonement" or "efficacious redemption," the universal element in Dort and in Calvin has fallen out.

Luther's emphasis was no doubt on the universal element. But as I remember his *The Bondage of the Will*, he there teaches how Christ intercedes and secures the gift of the Spirit to work faith in the man whose will is otherwise enslaved by sin; and as Luther teaches the children the meaning of the third article of the Creed, it seems to me that he has not forgotten the element of particularism in the gospel.

Most of all, Paul strove more than anyone else to carry Christ from one end to the other of the known world. His missionary work was universalistic. Yet he saw God's plan for himself reaching from before he left his mother's womb, through the confrontation on the road to Damascus when he alone of the company understood the words addressed by the Lord Jesus in the Hebrew tongue, and until he confessed, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." So that he is also a great example of the particularism of God's saving activities.

Why may the two not find a place in our thinking and preaching? I have known of those who reasoned from John 17:9 (where Christ said He prayed, not for the world, but for those God had given Him out of the world) thus: Would Christ die for those for whom He did not pray? The rhetorical question implies a negative answer. But is that not setting human reason counter to God's Word that Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, that Christ is the Saviour of the world, that He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world? I doubt whether we are able to dovetail the two thoughts into a thoroughly integrated, logically perfect system. But since both are taught, let us teach both.

In other matters, such as divine sovereignty and human responsibility, admitting that we cannot perfectly show how the two fit together, we have had to use double-line thinking and affirm both. Perhaps we need to admit here also that we cannot perfectly fit together Christ as the propitiation for the sins of the whole world with His praying, not for the world, but for those the Father has given Him. Yet we affirm that the Good Book teaches both.

May these two paradoxical statements be reconciled by noting that the universal relates the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ to turning the wrath of God away from the whole wicked world, while the particular relates the intercession of Christ to those whom the Father has given Him, and in answer to His intercessions, the Holy Spirit, using the Word, turns each in faith to God in Christ, to God our Saviour?

William C. Robinson  
California

*Dr. Robinson is professor emeritus of church history at Columbia Theological Seminary.—Ed.*



## Editorial Introduction

St. Paul's doctrine of righteousness by faith, which was powerfully revived in the Reformation, has suffered serious erosion in the contemporary church. In some places the doctrine of imputed righteousness has been lampooned as a legal fiction, as a pasted-on "as if" righteousness. Scholars have desperately sought ways to express the doctrine of righteousness by faith in a way which is more compatible to our modern religious sensibilities.

In a quite recent and significant monograph entitled *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul*, J. A. Ziesler says, "More commonly today, the language of imputation is avoided, partly because of the difficulties to which it has led . . ."—(Cambridge University Press), p. 8. He goes on to propose a new synthesis between the Catholic and Protestant positions.

In current Luther studies there seems to be more interest in the young Augustinian Luther. This is significant because much of the theology of the young Luther is in harmony with the Augustine/Tridentine<sup>1</sup> view of justification by faith. Some Roman Catholic scholars are making good capital of this—so much so that it is amusing to imagine that it may not be long before the rebel monk is proclaimed a Catholic saint!

The Pauline doctrine of righteousness by faith can only be preserved by eternal vigilance. If the Fathers one generation removed from Paul could show so little understanding of Paul's theology, what might be said of us who are many generations removed from the Reformers? If the powerful and revolutionary truth of righteousness by faith is going to live in the church, it must be rediscovered in every generation. *Present Truth* is dedicated to that objective.

In this issue of *Present Truth* we begin a series of articles on righteousness by faith. We will not only review our Reformation heritage, but we will discuss some of the major modifications and deviations which have been

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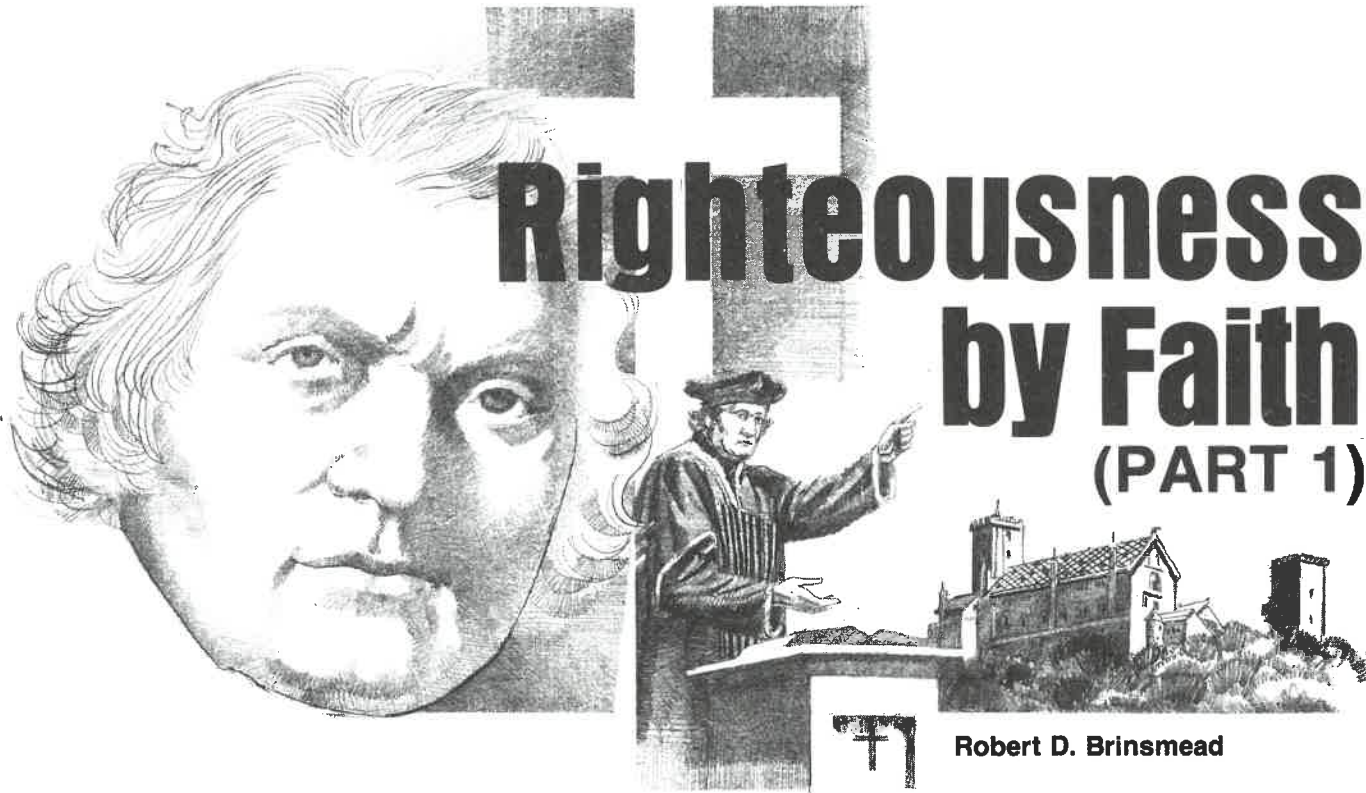
put forward. We will also review the genuine progress which has been made by Christian scholarship.

The Reformation doctrine of righteousness by faith is being revived in all sorts of surprising places, and we must add that it is meeting some stiff twentieth-century opposition. We hope to report on this soon and would like to receive reports from our readers on how the gospel emphasis is faring in their churches. According to our policy of willingness to judge material on its merits, we are including in this issue an essay entitled *Is Luther's Doctrine of Justification Compatible with Orthodox Catholic Theology?* It is written by a theology student who wishes to remain anonymous. We regret that a situation exists where a church claiming to be foremost in the Protestant heritage has a climate where a man cannot identify himself without being in jeopardy. But it is a sorry fact that we have come to the place where the gospel cannot be presented in certain "Protestant" circles without offense. We think that the author of the essay has handled his subject with surprising skill. We might criticize the article on a couple of points—but these are not fundamental to his thesis. Certainly most of our readers will give the young scholar three cheers for his incisive paper.

Come, let us reason together.

R.D.B.

<sup>1</sup>The theology of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent.



Robert D. Brinsmead

## Chapter 1

### The Doctrine of Righteousness by Faith in the Reformation

Luther has been described as “the first great, clear preacher of the righteousness of faith sent to the Christian church since the days of the apostle Paul.”—Julius Koslin, *The Theology of Luther*, pp. 77-78. Prior to Luther there were many great teachers in the church who advocated that the only way man could attain to righteousness was by the grace of God and through faith in Christ. But the best of them, even Augustine himself, had confounded the article of righteousness by faith with the renewal and life of new obedience which the Holy Spirit accomplishes in the life of the believer. There was no clear distinction between the righteousness which the believer has by faith and his own holiness of life. Justification and sanctification were confounded. Or to put this another way, gospel and law were not clearly distinguished.

True, the better teachers of the church did not slip into the terrible, overt kind of legalism which characterized most of “grass-roots” Catholicism. They even repudiated the more refined kind of legalism known as

**As Luther so often warned, unless we diligently preserve the purity of the article of righteousness by faith, the darkness of the errors of the past will overtake us.**

semi-Pelagianism. But it was their confusing righteousness by faith with the believer’s holiness of life which inevitably corrupted the gospel and bore the bitter harvest of darkness, error, superstition and the other evils of the medieval religious system.

We do not say these things for the sake of a mere academic, historical interest. If we fail to learn from the mistakes of the past, we are condemned to repeat them. As Luther so often warned, unless we diligently preserve the purity of the article of righteousness by

## Luther had a very critical opinion of his earlier works and doctrinal formulations. He wished them burned rather than published.

faith, the darkness of the errors of the past will overtake us.

Foremost among those who would lead us back to the darkness and bondage of pre-Reformation theology are some of the Luther scholars of this century. They tell us that Luther taught that *justification* means to *make (personally) righteous* and that *justification* is identified with the renewal which the Holy Spirit works in believers. Some tell us that it was Melancthon and Protestant scholasticism, not Luther, which developed the concept of forensic justification.

Much of the debate hangs on the actual date of Luther's so-called "tower experience"—the time when he was given clear insight into the meaning of "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17). Luther himself describes the enlightenment that came to him in the heated tower as he was pondering over the meaning of Romans 1:17. Before this, Luther was not the mature Protestant Reformer but the young evangelical Catholic.

In the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his works, written in 1545, Luther relates the "tower experience" and places it sometime near the end of 1518. That is quite late—a year after he had nailed The Ninety-Five Theses on the church door and only a little more than a year before he went to the Diet of Worms. We should also remember something else: Luther had a very critical opinion of his earlier works and doctrinal formulations. He wished them burned rather than published.

Before this "tower experience" Luther, as we said, was a young Catholic theologian. He had come a long way and had already learned many precious insights into Paul's gospel of Christ's righteousness. He had lashed out against the legalism and semi-Pelagianism

of the schoolmen. He knew that no works can avail for salvation, but only Christ's righteousness which is by grace through faith. At this stage of his development Luther went back to Augustine and followed the great Latin Father. The righteousness of faith was understood as that which Christ works *in us* by His grace, and this was curiously mingled with the concept of imputed righteousness. But Luther's doctrine was sufficiently evangelical to cause him to challenge and stir the great medieval system.

Yet all this—his famous Lectures on Romans as well as The Ninety-Five Theses—was the work of Luther the young Catholic or Luther the Augustinian theologian. It was not yet Luther the Protestant Reformer.

But some of the Luther scholars of this century say that he must have been mistaken in giving such a late date to his "tower experience." They contend that he must have had a lapse of memory or something of that sort. And they insist that the "tower experience" came much earlier, perhaps even as early as 1512 or 1513—at least before he gave those famous lectures on the book of Romans (1515-1516).

What is at stake is this: If the "tower experience" did come earlier, then the real Protestant Luther did indeed teach that *justification* means *being made righteous*, and he did confound the righteousness of faith with the renewal and new obedience which the Holy Spirit works in the life of the believer. In other words, Luther was at heart a true Roman Catholic after all—for that is actually the real doctrine of refined Romanism.

We say "refined Romanism" because a number of Roman Catholics now tell us that the church of the sixteenth century had degenerated into semi-Pelagianism and that Luther was justified in rebelling against this decadent Catholicism. However, in order to meet the challenge of the Reformation, the church repudiated semi-Pelagianism as did Luther. And in the Council of Trent she reaffirmed the Augustinian concept of righteousness by faith.

Luther once said that if the Pope would teach the gospel of justification by faith, he would kiss his feet and carry him in his hands.<sup>1</sup> There are Catholic scholars who are now saying: "If only Luther had lived to see the church repudiate semi-Pelagianism in the Council of Trent and reaffirm justification by God's grace alone! He

<sup>1</sup>See H. J. McSorley, "Luther, Trent, Vatican I & II," *McCormick Quarterly* 21, Nov., 1967, pp. 95-104.

would have kissed the Pope's feet and carried him in his hands."<sup>2</sup> And there are some Lutheran scholars who practically agree with these sentiments.

The startling point is this: The young Luther has been rediscovered, and most of the interest in modern Luther studies centers in the theology of the young Luther—the theology that Luther pleaded to have burned and buried. Why this great interest in the early Luther? Because it is this Luther which forms the bridge that unites Catholics and Protestants. The ghost of this Luther has now become the chief apostle of healing the wound of the sixteenth century. It is indeed astonishing that the Luther who broke through and out of the Roman system should now be enlisted as the main agent to bridge the gulf between Romanism and Protestantism.

How much, then, might be at stake in whether or not we accept Luther's own dating of his "tower experience"!

How did the mature Reformer, the real Protestant Luther, reflect the Augustinian (Catholic) view of justification by faith? Let us permit Luther to speak for himself on this point:

At first I devoured, not merely read, Augustine. But when the door was opened for me in Paul, so that I understood what justification by faith is, it was all over with Augustine.—*Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), Vol. 54, *Table Talk*.

The crucial point is: When was this door into Paul opened to Luther? Certainly not in 1515-1516 when he delivered his Lectures on Romans. In these we find him calling on "blessed Augustine" repeatedly. His final breakthrough had not yet come.

In 1518, probably near the end of the year (about the time when, according to Luther's own dating, he had the "tower experience"), Luther published his "Sermon on Threefold Righteousness." It is here that we find the first truly clear distinction between the righteousness of faith and the righteousness of life which is worked in the believer by the Holy Spirit. As Finnish scholar Saarnivaara says:

The conception of justification which Luther sets forth in this sermon is in perfect harmony with his Reformation doctrine. The basic idea of righteousness before God, as expressed in it, is no longer compatible with the Augustinian view. Luther quite definitely teaches that man is justified through the eternal righteousness of Christ and not through a renewal or becoming righteous through the working of grace. The emphasis is laid on the work of Christ for sinners.—*Luther Discovers the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), pp. 94-95.

Very soon after, Luther published another sermon in which he further revised and sharpened his thinking. This he entitled "Sermon on the Twofold Right-

<sup>2</sup>See *ibid.*



**It is indeed astonishing that the Luther who broke through and out of the Roman system should now be enlisted as the main agent to bridge the gulf between Romanism and Protestantism.**

eousness." It was apparently published early in 1519. It is here where we find that the metamorphosis of the Catholic to the Protestant Luther had finally taken place. Out of the old cocoon of Catholicism emerged Luther the full-fledged Protestant. And with him, in this final breakthrough, Protestantism was born.

Since it is in this "Sermon on the Twofold Righteousness" that we first identify the real Protestant doctrine of righteousness by faith, let us spend a little time noting its central thesis and its main thrust.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>See *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 297-306.





## Number 1: Passive Righteousness<sup>4</sup>

This is the righteousness proclaimed and offered to us in the gospel. Luther says that it is

... the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness ... which God through Christ, without works imputeth unto us ... a mere passive righteousness. ... Therefore it seemeth good unto me to call this righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, the passive righteousness [because it is entirely apart from all human efforts and works].—*Ibid.*, p. 101.

This passive righteousness of faith ... which is the righteousness of grace, mercy and forgiveness of sin. ... —*Ibid.*

... by mere imputation. ... —*Ibid.*

... this righteousness is heavenly and passive: which we have not of ourselves, but receive it from heaven: which we work not, but apprehend it by faith. ... —*Ibid.*, p. 105.

In that righteousness and life [of Christ] I have no sin, no sting of conscience, no care of death. ... I have another righteousness and life above this life, which is Christ the Son of God, Who knoweth no sin nor death, but is righteousness and life eternal.—*Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

Because this righteousness of faith is the righteousness of Christ, Luther in many places declares it to be a whole, eternal and an infinite righteousness which is given to the believer, not piecemeal or gradually, but instantaneously and altogether.

There is one point that needs clarification. At times Luther will talk about this "alien righteousness" being "in us" (*ibid.*, pp. 101, 109). When he says this, he is not stepping back into the Augustinian/Roman Catholic formulation which confounds the work of Christ *for us* with His work *in us*. When Luther says that this alien righteousness is "in us," he does not mean "in us" as a quality (i.e., imparted or infused righteousness, as it has come to be called) but "in us" by faith. That is to say, it is seen and treasured by the heart. In the same fashion, Paul could tell the Philippian believers, "... I have you in my heart ..." (Phil. 1:7). To prove beyond all doubt that this is what Luther means, we cite his clarifying comments on Galatians:

Christian righteousness, therefore, as I have said, is the imputation of God for righteousness or unto righteousness, because of our faith in Christ, or for Christ's sake. When the popish schoolmen hear this strange and wonderful definition, which is unknown to reason, they laugh at it. For they imagine that righteousness is a certain quality poured into the soul, and afterwards spread into all the parts of man. They cannot put away the imaginations of

<sup>4</sup>This term "passive righteousness" must not become confused with what later Protestant scholars came to call "passive obedience" when they referred to the two phases of Christ's work as "passive obedience" (death) and "active obedience" (life).

The first kind of righteousness Luther calls "alien righteousness"—"Christ's living, doing and speaking, his suffering and dying." He calls it an "infinite righteousness," "primary." It is what men receive "in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant" and is given "without our works by grace alone."

The second kind of righteousness is what Luther calls "good works." "... this righteousness consists in love to one's neighbour, ... in meekness and fear toward God. ... this righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence. ... this righteousness follows the example of Christ."

It is especially to be noted that Luther does not belittle the necessity of the second righteousness. In its proper place he highly extols it. But he ascribes salvation wholly to the first righteousness.

These concepts may not seem so startling to us who take for granted a clear distinction between justification and sanctification (or to say this another way, between gospel and law). But the right distinction between gospel and law was regarded by Luther as the foundation of the Reformation. Often warning against thinking that this distinction is easy to maintain, he said that much grace and skill are required to make the distinction in practice.

There are a few points in Luther's "Sermon on the Twofold Righteousness" which are still a little fuzzy, but we must remember that the first Protestant had just hatched and started scratching. However, in the following years we find him polishing this concept of twofold righteousness into a sharp instrument. His Commentary on Galatians, given in 1531, reflects his mature thinking. Dillenberger says, "... he considered the lectures of 1531 ... among the few works of his worth saving."—Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, p. 99.

In his Commentary on Galatians, Luther expands and fills out his concept of twofold righteousness.

reason, which teacheth that a right judgment, and a good will, or a good intent is true righteousness. This unspeakable gift therefore excelleth all reason, that God doth account and acknowledge him for righteous without any works, which embraceth his Son by faith alone, who was sent into the world, was born, suffered, and was crucified &c. for us.

This matter, as touching the words, is easy (to wit, that righteousness is not essentially in us, as the Papists reason out of Aristotle, but without us in the grace of God only and in his imputation . . .).—Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, tr. Philip S. Watson (Cambridge & London: James Clarke, 1953), p. 227.

## Number 2: Active Righteousness

. . . there is another righteousness called the righteousness of the law, or of the Ten Commandments, which Moses teacheth. This do we also teach after the doctrine of faith.—Quoted in Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

Luther says that this righteousness consists in

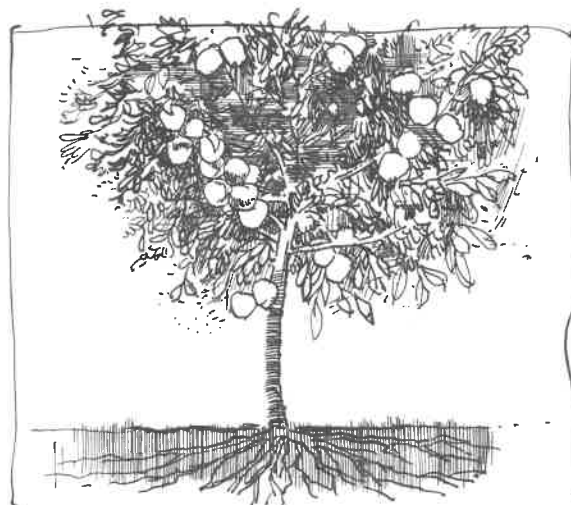
. . . our works, and may be wrought of us either by pure natural strength (as the sophisters term it) or else by the gift of God. For these kinds of righteousness are also the gift of God, like as other good things are which we do enjoy.—*Ibid.*, p. 101.

It should be carefully noted that Luther acknowledges that this active righteousness in the Christian is a gift of God. That is to say, the Holy Spirit is given to the Christian to work it in him. But Luther does not, because of this, call it “the righteousness of faith.” That is absolutely a distinct gift and belongs to Number 1. Only the passive righteousness is called “the righteousness of faith.”

Of this active righteousness Luther says, “I know I ought to have it, and also to fulfill it.” His point is that it cannot atone for sin, satisfy justice or appease his own conscience. In this life it is always incomplete and imperfect because the flesh of man remains an imperfect channel of the Spirit. Therefore Luther says, “I cannot trust unto it, neither dare I set it against the judgment of God.” In the matter of consolation of a troubled conscience which trembles before God’s judgment seat, Luther says that he abandons trust in this active righteousness altogether and rests only in the passive righteousness of mercy, grace, forgiveness of sins and imputation (see *ibid.*, p. 102).

Yet active righteousness is “necessary,” only it must be kept within “its bounds” (*ibid.*, p. 104). As Christians, we must be diligent to do good works, but we must also be diligent not to trust in them. To trust in active righteousness, even though it too is a gift of God (i.e., He gives strength to obey), is to fall from grace (see *ibid.*, p. 106).

Active righteousness is the fruit of passive righteousness (i.e., sanctification is the fruit of righteousness by



faith). Luther describes how imputed righteousness works active righteousness in the believer. Says he:

I do good works, how and whensoever occasion is offered. If I be a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the broken-hearted, I administer the Sacraments. If I be a householder, I govern my house and my family, I bring up my children in the knowledge and fear of God. If I be a magistrate, the charge that is given me from above I diligently execute. If I be a servant, I do my master's business faithfully. To conclude: whosoever he be that is assuredly persuaded that Christ is his righteousness, doth not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation, but also submitteth himself through love to the magistrates and to their laws, yea though they be severe, sharp and cruel, and (if necessity do so require) to all manner of burdens and dangers of this present life, because he knoweth that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleaseth him.

Thus far as concerning the argument of this Epistle, whereof Paul intreateth, taking occasion of false teachers who had darkened this righteousness of faith among the Galatians, against whom he setteth himself in defending and commending his authority and office.—*Ibid.*, p. 109.

When we have thus taught faith in Christ, then do we teach also good works. Because thou hast laid hold of Christ by faith, through Whom thou art made righteous,<sup>5</sup> begin now to work well. Love God and thy neighbour, call upon God, give thanks unto Him, praise Him, confess Him. Do good to thy neighbour and serve him: fulfil thine office. These are good works indeed, which flow out of this faith and this cheerfulness conceived in the heart, for that we have remission of sins freely in Christ . . . When sin is pardoned, and the conscience delivered from the burden and sting of sin, them may the Christian bear all things easily . . .—*Ibid.* pp. 111-112.

<sup>5</sup>In context Luther obviously means being made righteous *imputatively*, not *subjectively* as Rome teaches.

## The distinction between the righteousness of faith (justification) and the righteousness of the law (sanctification) was the foundation of Luther's doctrine.

### The Proper Distinction in the Twofold Righteousness

This distinction between the righteousness of faith (justification) and the righteousness of the law (sanctification) was the foundation of Luther's doctrine. He insisted on maintaining the distinction for two reasons: for the glory of Christ and for the comfort of troubled consciences.

Salvation is based on the righteousness of faith. If we bring sanctification (active righteousness) into this article of righteousness by faith, we darken the glory of Christ because we fail to ascribe salvation to His doing and dying alone. Nothing pacifies God's wrath and saves us except that Christ "loved me, and gave Himself for Me" (Gal. 2:20). Compared with this inestimable price of His eternal and infinite righteousness, the active righteousness of all men, the sufferings of all the martyrs and the obedience of all the holy angels are nothing. Indeed, it would be better to throw all works—even those done by grace—down to hell rather than to put them in the room of this great righteousness of faith.<sup>6</sup>

Then Luther looks at the human side of the coin. The proper distinction between the righteousness of faith and the righteousness of holy living (sanctification) is necessary for the comfort of a troubled conscience. Says Luther:

This is our divinity, whereby we teach how to put a difference between these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive . . . Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their bounds.—Quoted in Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

I am indeed a sinner as touching this present life and the righteousness thereof . . . But I have another righteousness and life above this life, which is Christ the Son of God, Who knoweth no sin, no death, but is righteousness and life eternal.—*Ibid.*, p. 106.

Therefore do we so earnestly set forth and so often repeat this doctrine of faith or Christian righteousness, that by this means it may be kept in continual exercise, and may be plainly discerned from the active righteousness of the law. (For by this only doctrine the Church is built, and in this it consisteth.) Otherwise we shall never be able to hold the

true divinity, but by and by we shall either become canonists, observers of ceremonies, observers of the law, or Papists, and Christ so darkened that none in the Church shall be either rightly taught or comforted. Wherefore, if we will be teachers and leaders of others, it behoveth us to have great care of these matters, and to mark well this distinction between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of Christ. And this distinction is easy to be uttered in words, but in use and experience it is very hard, although it be never so diligently exercised and practised; for in the hour of death, or in other agonies of the conscience, these two sorts of righteousness do encounter more near together than thou wouldest wish or desire.

Wherefore I do admonish you, especially such as shall become instructors and guiders of consciences, and also every one apart, that ye exercise yourselves continually by study, by reading, by meditation of the Word and by prayer, that in the time of temptation ye may be able to instruct and comfort both your own consciences and others, and to bring them from the law to grace, from active and working righteousness to the passive and received righteousness, and, to conclude, from Moses to Christ. For the devil is wont, in affliction and in the conflict of conscience, by the law to make us afraid, and to lay against us the guilt of sin, our wicked life past, the wrath and judgment of God, hell and eternal death, that by this means he may drive us to desperation, make us bond-slaves to himself, and pluck us from Christ. Furthermore, he is wont to set against us those places of the Gospel, wherein Christ himself requireth works of us, and with plain words threateneth damnation to those who do them not. Now, if here we be not able to judge between these two kinds of righteousness, if we take not by faith hold of Christ sitting at the right hand of God, who maketh intercession unto the Father for us wretched sinners [Heb. 7:25], then are we under the law and not under grace, and Christ is no more a saviour, but a law-giver. Then can there remain no more salvation, but a certain desperation and everlasting death must needs follow.—*Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

### The Formula of Concord

A few years after the death of Luther the Formula of Concord (1556) reiterated these basic Luther insights on double righteousness. In the Formula of Concord Luther's doctrine of righteousness by faith suffered no deterioration at the hands of his ardent followers. What

**If we bring sanctification (active righteousness) into the article of righteousness by faith, we darken the glory of Christ because we fail to ascribe salvation to His doing and dying alone.**

<sup>6</sup>See Luther, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-177.

the Formula lacked in the thunder and fire of Luther's language, it gained in a statement of greater precision and refinement. This is no surprise when we consider Luther's temperament as well as the lapse of time in which to sharpen the Protestant arguments. It is ridiculous to suggest, as some have done, that the Formula of Concord departed from Luther in its statement on righteousness by faith. Certainly it departed from the early Augustinian Luther, whom Luther himself repudiated. But if these early Lutherans were to be faulted in drawing up their statement, it would be in slavishly following their hero in almost everything.

The two sections of the Formula of Concord which concern us here are its declarations, "The righteousness of Faith Before God," and, "Of the Law and the Gospel." Here Luther's distinction between the two kinds of righteousness, or his distinction between the law and the gospel, is hailed as the brilliant light of the Reformation.

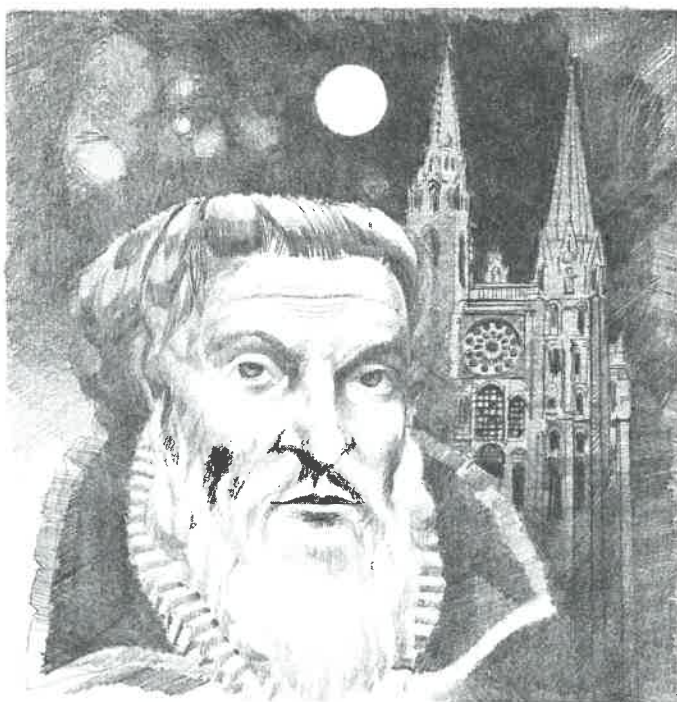
The righteousness of faith is declared to be our only righteousness before God. This righteousness consists in the obedience of the divine-human Christ in both life and death, by which He fulfilled and satisfied the law on behalf of poor, condemned sinners. God imputes this righteousness to all who believe the gospel, and by it they are justified and saved. *Justification* is a declaration or verdict of God that the sinner is acquitted and counted as righteous for the sake of the obedience and death of Jesus Christ.

Renewal, sanctification and the life of new obedience "succeeds the righteousness of faith." This is called "incipient righteousness" because it is never complete in this life due to the corruption of original sin, which inheres in the flesh of all saints. This righteousness consists in a life of active obedience to the law of God, which becomes the rule of life for the justified believer (see "Of the Third Use of the Law," *Book of Concord*, pp. 261-264). No one can "retain" justification if he despises God's law and the necessity of good works. The Holy Ghost indwells believers and enables them to live this life of new obedience. Nevertheless (and here is the vital point):

... this indwelling of God is not the righteousness of faith which St. Paul calls the *iustitiam Dei*, that is, the righteousness of God, for the sake of which we are declared righteous before God; but it follows the preceding righteousness of faith, which is nothing else than the forgiveness of sins and the gracious adoption of the poor sinner, for the sake of Christ's obedience and merit alone.—*Ibid.*, pp. 254-255.

The Formula of Concord declares that the two kinds of righteousness must not be mingled together so that they are both called "the righteousness of faith before God" (*ibid.*, p. 254).

... neither renewal, sanctification, virtues nor good



Martin Chemnitz

**The Formula of Concord declares that the two kinds of righteousness must not be mingled together so that they are both called "the righteousness of faith before God."**

works are . . . our righteousness before God, nor are they to be constituted or set up as a part or cause of our righteousness, or otherwise under any pretext, title, or name whatever in the article of justification as necessary and belonging thereto; but the righteousness of faith consists alone in the forgiveness of sins out of pure grace, for the sake of Christ's merit alone; which blessings are offered us in the promise of the Gospel, and are received, accepted, applied, and appropriated by faith alone.—*Ibid.*, p. 253.

### **Martin Chemnitz Answers the Council of Trent**

Martin Chemnitz (sometimes called the second Martin of the Reformation) was one of the main spirits in drawing up the Formula of Concord. He lacked Luther's volcanic and dynamic power of speech, but he was a careful, precise and thorough scholar. He had sat at the feet of Philipp Melancthon. A few years after the For-

## One of the main arguments between Rome and the Reformers was over the meaning of “the righteousness of faith” in Paul.

mula, he produced his very thorough *Examination of the Council of Trent*.

One of the main arguments between Rome and the Reformers was over the meaning of “the righteousness of faith” in Paul. According to the Papists:

. . . the righteousness of faith is said to consist in this, that it leads the regenerate to obedience and observance of those things which are written in the Law, so that the righteousness of faith is the obedience of the regenerate to the Law, when love, which embraces the whole Law, is infused into believers through the Holy Spirit.—Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (Concordia), p. 528.

In reply to this Papal proposition, Chemnitz agrees “that the Holy Spirit writes the Law into the hearts of the regenerate, so that by faith, through the Holy Spirit, they begin to keep the Law.”—*Ibid.*, p. 529. But following Luther, Chemnitz proves from Paul that this kind of righteousness is properly called “the righteousness of the law” (Rom. 8:4). It must not be confused with what Paul calls “the righteousness of faith.” Says Chemnitz:

For the righteousness of the Law is that a man does the things that are written in the Law; but the righteousness of faith is by believing to appropriate to oneself what Christ has done for us. Therefore the works by which the regenerate do those things which are written in the Law, either before or after their renewal, belong to the righteousness of the Law, though some in one way, others in another.—*Ibid.*, p. 490.

Chemnitz therefore affirms, “The righteousness of the Law [sanctification] and the righteousness of faith are distinguished.”—*Ibid.*

Calvin matches Chemnitz in definitiveness and maintains the same distinction between righteousness by faith and sanctification. As in a sound Christology (union but no fusion in Christ’s two natures), Calvin beautifully argues for union without fusion, distinction without separation in the two kinds of righteousness.<sup>7</sup> In this central issue all branches of the Reformation were thoroughly united. They were implacably opposed to confusing “the righteousness of faith” with sanctification.

<sup>7</sup>See John Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. 3, chap. 11.



Calvin

## All branches of the Reformation were implacably opposed to confusing “the righteousness of faith” with sanctification.

## Chapter 2

# Current Efforts to Include Sanctification in the Article of Righteousness by Faith

The purity of the doctrine of justification by faith can be maintained only by continual battle and eternal vigilance. If it is lost, said Luther over and over, all will be lost, and darkness, error and superstition will again triumph in the church.

Whether *justify* means to *declare righteous* or to *make righteous*, and whether the righteousness of faith includes what the Holy Spirit does in the believer, were issues of fierce debate between the Reformers and Rome.

If Rome's error was the *fusion* of justification and sanctification, Protestantism, in making a distinction, was exposed to the danger of *separating* justification from sanctification. In the 1840's, Anglican churchman John Henry Newman wrestled with the problem. He came up with this solution: *Justify* means to *declare righteous*, said he. On this point Protestants are right. But then he added, What God declares becomes fact. ("Let there be light: and there was light.") God's Word accomplishes what it declares. From this angle the Roman Catholics are right, Newman concluded. This was a synthesis of the Catholic and Protestant positions. The interesting (and vital) point to notice is that Rome can accept the synthesis and still be Rome, but Protestantism cannot accept the synthesis and still be Protestantism. Newman later became Cardinal Newman.

Only a few years ago Hans Kung (sometimes hailed as the new Luther within Catholicism) acknowledged that *justify* means to *declare righteous*. Yet according to Kung, that is not all it means. He has revived Newman's synthesis.<sup>8</sup> In Kung *justification* turns out to be both a *declaring just* and a *making just*.

The Australian Lutheran scholar, H. P. Hamann of Luther Seminary, protests against the current and widespread tendency among leading Protestant scholars of making "sanctification in one way or another, part of justification." He goes on to fault such eminent authors as C. H. Dodd, Vincent Taylor, James Stewart, Karl Holl and a number of German theologians such as E. Schlink, W. Dantine, H. G. Pohlmann and Ernst Kasemann.<sup>9</sup> We could also add many more names.<sup>10</sup>

But for all the dislike that many modern scholars have for the concept of forensic justification, they cannot get away from the forensic, judicial meaning of *justify* in Paul. Even the majority of Roman Catholic



A Twentieth Century Luther?

**The purity of the doctrine of justification by faith can be maintained only by continual battle and eternal vigilance.**

exegetes now admit that it means to *declare righteous*. Hans Kung is very forthright in his admission that on linguistic grounds *justify* must be declaratory.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul*, J. A. Ziesler reviews the history of the debate down to the present and then makes this apt summary:

The debate about whether on a *priori* grounds *dikaioo* [*justify*] can mean "declare righteous" must surely be regarded as closed. Not only is it clear that it does mean this in Biblical Greek, but the parallel with *axioo*, and the fact that in secular Greek there is only one place where it has been discovered to mean "make righteous," show that a declaratory force ought to be given to it unless there are strong reasons to the contrary.—J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul* (Cambridge University Press), p. 48.

<sup>11</sup>See Kung, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup>See Hans Kung, *Justification* (Burns & Oats), pp. 199-211.

<sup>9</sup>See H. P. Hamann, "Sanctification," *Lutheran Theological Journal*, Dec., 1976.

<sup>10</sup>See for example, R. D. Brinsmead, "The Legal and Moral Aspects of Salvation," Part 1, *Present Truth*, July, 1976, pp. 25-26.

Yet Ziesler seems to be troubled by “the main-line Protestant view” because, he says, “there is no road from it to ethics.”—*Ibid.*, p. 5. (That is Rome’s main criticism too.) In his scholarly thesis, Ziesler obviously sets out to make a bridge from the Protestant *declare righteous* to ethics. He comes up with his own theory of a twofold righteousness. But it is not Luther’s original Protestant concept of twofold righteousness which we have already discussed.

In his doctrine of faith Paul uses a verb (*dikaioo—justify*) and a noun (*dikaio-sune—righteousness*). Ziesler points out that Protestants have tended to interpret the noun in the light of the verb (i.e., forensically), while Catholics have tended to interpret the verb in the light of the noun (i.e., ethically). But Ziesler sees a twofold righteousness here:

1. “Justification by faith” means a forensic or declaratory righteousness.

2. “Righteousness by faith” means becoming ethically righteous, “a new kind of man” (*ibid.*, p. 168). While Ziesler does not like the term “imparted righteousness” (*ibid.*, p. 170), he means the same thing (i.e., sanctification).

These two things, forensic and ethical righteousness, are what Ziesler calls “the twin doctrines of justification by faith and righteousness by faith.”—*Ibid.*, p. 171). He suggests that justification by faith (God’s pronouncement) is the root, and righteousness by faith (inward renewal) is the fruit.

Ziesler has set out to make a bridge between justification and ethics, but he has succeeded in making a bridge from Wittenberg to Rome. And that is the main point of his thesis. In his interpretation he says: “. . . we have some sort of reconciliation between Protestant and Catholic traditional exegesis.”—*Ibid.* “We arrive at an exegesis which satisfies the concerns of both traditional Catholicism and traditional Protestantism.”—*Ibid.*, p. 212.<sup>12</sup>

Is there any good reason for seeing a distinction between justification by faith and righteousness by faith in Paul? If so, what is the precise relationship between justification and righteousness by faith?

In our next issue of *Present Truth* we will review the biblical meaning of the word *righteousness* and examine why Paul talks about salvation in terms of righteousness by faith.

(To be continued)



Cardinal Newman

**For all the dislike that many modern scholars have for the concept of forensic justification, they cannot get away from the forensic, judicial meaning of “justify” in Paul.**

<sup>12</sup>Ziesler also says that his formulation is a synthesis of Hebrew and Greek thinking. We are tempted to add that there was a similar synthesis between Hebrew anthropology (resurrection) and Greek anthropology (immortality of the soul) which became the essence of Catholic anthropology from Augustine on.



Luther



Pope Leo X

## Is Luther's Doctrine of Justification Compatible with Orthodox Catholic Theology?

### Introduction

In recent years Roman Catholic authors have been writing about Luther—and his theology—in a way entirely unlike the derogatory polemics which issued from Catholicism for four centuries. No longer is it assumed by Catholic authors that Luther was an agent of the devil, generating wave after wave of fresh heresy. Nowadays Luther is treated with respect, even admiration, and an attempt is being made from the Catholic side to discover those elements in his theology which might be harmonized with traditional Catholicism. Of course, in the zeal to patch up old controversies there is always the dangerous possibility that differences will be harmonized too readily while overlooking (or blindly ignoring) vital issues.

A case in point is Luther's doctrine of justification. A number of Catholic scholars have lately been attempting to call a truce in this area. The message is being broadcast—by more than one pen—that Luther's idea

**No longer is it assumed by Catholic authors that Luther was an agent of the devil, generating wave after wave of fresh heresy.**

of justification by faith is really a very Catholic doctrine. Although it was misunderstood by certain unthinking theologians of Luther's own day, it is actually (we are told) fully compatible with what genuine Catholicism has always taught. Even Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent were saying the same thing as Luther—though perhaps with different vocabulary. So goes the argument.

It is my purpose to make a close examination of this



theory. First, the details of this theory—as set forth by its proponents—will be summarized. The issue is whether Luther was really at variance with orthodox Catholic belief, or whether he was merely protesting a decadent, un-Catholic theology being taught by some theologians of his day.

Second, the arguments used to support this claim will be examined. Luther himself will be invited to speak to the issue, together with orthodox Roman Catholic theologians who have been involved with the doctrine of justification both in Luther's day and ours. Is it possible, after four centuries of painful separation, that we may discover Luther's revolt arose from an unfortunate misunderstanding? This is a serious question which Luther himself must answer. What Luther has to say on this point will probably come as disquieting news for those Catholics who—heady with ecumenism—claim to see no conflict between Luther's doctrine of justification and the traditional theology of their church.

## Chapter 1

### The Viewpoints of Four Catholic Scholars

#### McSorley

In the fall of 1967, Harry J. McSorley wrote two closely related articles regarding Luther's doctrine of justification and the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> To show the centrality which this doctrine played in Luther's battle with the Papacy, McSorley gives the following citation from Luther's 1535 Lectures on Galatians:

If the Pope will grant unto us, that God alone, by his mere grace through Christ, doth justify sinners, we will not only carry him in our hands, but will also kiss his feet.<sup>2</sup>

Then, with great conviction, McSorley states:

The Pope—more precisely, the teaching office of the Catholic Church—*does* teach that the sinner is justified solely by the grace of Christ. "Solely by grace," as it is used here, is opposed to "through the unaided efforts of the unjustified man."<sup>3</sup>

The question that is sure to arise at this point is why Luther found it necessary to revolt in the first place if

<sup>1</sup>"Luther, Trent, Vatican I & II," *McCormick Quarterly* 21 (November 1967): 95-104, and "The Key Issue of the Reformation," *Dialog* 6 (Autumn 1967): 261-264.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in McSorley, "Luther," p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* In the footnote, he adds for the sake of doubters: "Here we are stating the Church's *official teaching.*"

The message is being broadcast — by more than one pen — that Luther's idea of justification by faith is really a very Catholic doctrine.

McSorley assures his readers that orthodox Catholic theology — in actuality — has always believed what Luther rose up to defend!

Rome's "official teaching" is so similar to his own. McSorley anticipates this objection and gives a carefully prepared answer: Luther was reacting against the semi-Pelagianism of Gabriel Biel and William Ockham, whose "via moderna" was an obvious departure from traditional Catholic thought. Luther was right in opposing this decadent scholasticism which taught that when a sinner does what he is capable of doing by his own natural, fallen powers (without the assistance of God's prevenient grace), he is able to "merit the grace of forgiveness of sins." This late medieval scholasticism against which Luther raised his voice taught that "the sinner could take the first step on the road to forgiveness and justification by his own unaided powers."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>"Key Issue," p. 263.



St. Thomas Aquinas

## Van de Pol is sure that there is nothing incompatible between Luther's doctrine of justification and Roman orthodoxy.

Over against this, McSorley feels that Luther's primary spiritual concern was to restore the truth that "man is justified by faith alone—not by merely any human efforts" and that "the sinner is in bondage to his sin, unable to will anything truly good (*coram Deo*) unless he is liberated by the grace of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

Then comes McSorley's bombshell. He assures his readers that orthodox Catholic theology—in actuality—has always believed what Luther rose up to defend! It just so happens that Luther came upon the scene at a time when the "real" Catholic understanding of justification was partially obscured by the careless theological speculations of Ockham and Biel. McSorley cites Augustine, Anselm, Bernard, Gregory of Rimini and the second Council of Orange to prove that the Roman Church has traditionally opposed semi-Pelagianism. He subpoenas Thomas Aquinas to testify concerning the "truth of faith" that the beginning of salvation is always the result of God's work in us, never the result of our own efforts. The Council of Trent takes the stand to declare that the sinner is a captive of Satan and that the Holy Spirit must be present in order for the sinner to take even the first step toward justification. Even Vatican II provides evidence for McSorley's theory:

<sup>5</sup>"Luther," p. 99.

By himself and by his own power, no one is freed from sin. . . . On the contrary, all stand in need of Christ . . .

The followers of Christ are called by God, not according to their accomplishments, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

McSorley asserts that the burden of proof rests on those who claim to see any crucial difference between Luther and Catholic tradition. His conclusion is that "in regard to Luther's central Reformation concern, the doctrine of justification by faith alone . . . there is no essential incompatibility between Trent and the Lutheran Confessions."<sup>7</sup> In a final burst of dogmatic assurance, McSorley assures his readers that if only Luther had lived to see Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II, he would have had to admit that his "central reformation concern" is also a concern of the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup> Presumably, it was an unfortunate misunderstanding which prevented Luther from carrying the Pope in his hands and kissing his feet.

## Van de Pol

In 1952, Catholic theologian W. H. van de Pol issued a book entitled *The Christian Dilemma*<sup>9</sup> in which he made assertions very similar to those now being made by McSorley. Van de Pol's thesis was that the Reformers were battling a semi-Pelagianism which they mistakenly thought was integral to Roman orthodoxy. This, however, was an unfortunate "misunderstanding," because Roman Catholicism has always believed in *sola gratia*.<sup>10</sup> Catholicism affirms that:

The restoration of fallen man is accomplished and merited entirely by Christ . . . Faith, then, is the basis of justification; on no account are we justified through the fulfillment of the Law by our own powers . . . Neither can we accept that justification is brought about partly by the help of God and partly by man's own strength, for this would be to fall back into semi-pelagianism . . . Without grace, without faith, without being in Christ, we are unable to do anything.<sup>11</sup>

Van de Pol is sure that there is nothing incompatible between Luther's doctrine of justification and Roman orthodoxy. He underscores his point by throwing out the following challenge to Luther's spiritual descendants:

It remains now for the Reformation to make clear to the Catholic Church what new discovery Luther made to shed new light on the testimony of the Scriptures, and to attain to a more profound understanding of the Gospel than was possible before his arrival on the scene.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in "Key Issue," pp. 263-264.

<sup>7</sup>"Luther," p. 99.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>9</sup>Trans. G. van Hall (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1952).

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 37-40.

<sup>11</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>12</sup>*ibid.*, p. 97.

According to Bouyer, Luther's view of salvation, in its most basic form, "is in perfect harmony with Catholic tradition, the great conciliar definitions on grace and salvation, and even with thomism."

## Bouyer

Louis Bouyer makes identical claims in his book, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*. According to Bouyer, Luther's view of salvation, in its most basic form, "is in perfect harmony with Catholic tradition, the great conciliar definitions on grace and salvation, and even with thomism."<sup>13</sup> Bouyer pictures the pre-Reformation Luther as a sincere monk who was struggling to gain salvation through his own efforts and finally realized (in despair) that man is totally incapable of "any effective initiative towards salvation." But, of course, the system of semi-Pelagianism under which Luther was struggling had already been condemned by the Catholic faith, both in the Councils and in the theology of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, Bouyer continues, Luther had imbibed some of the "decadent scholasticism" of his age. It is too bad Luther could not have been trained more thoroughly in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, whose sound theology might have delivered him sooner from his agonies.<sup>15</sup> As it turned out, Luther had to discover the hard way that salvation depends, not on man's strength, but upon God's mercy. This was by no means a *new* discovery. Luther had merely returned to the true and ancient teaching of orthodox Catholicism, which also believes in "free salvation" and that "man without grace can do nothing of the slightest value for salvation."<sup>16</sup>

Bouyer admits in passing that Luther's notion of "extrinsic justification" is incompatible with Catholic dogma. Bouyer defines extrinsic justification (correctly) as being something which takes place "exterior to the believer" with the result that the Christian—although just in God's sight—remains a sinner in himself.<sup>17</sup> Bouyer points out that according to this idea, the believer must always feel that his own righteousness is insufficient to please God or insure salvation. His right standing with God is entirely independent of any "interior



St. Augustine

change."<sup>18</sup> Bouyer asserts, however, that this was *not* part of the "main" Protestant position or one of Luther's "basic" propositions.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it was an overreaction on Luther's part as he advanced in his conflict with Rome. Furthermore, says Bouyer, Luther did not even teach the doctrine of extrinsic justification consistently himself but contradicted it on many occasions.<sup>20</sup> Bouyer feels that he has presented

... the clearest evidence, that Luther's basic intuition, ... so far from being hard to reconcile with Catholic tradition, or inconsistent with the teachings of the Apostles, was a return to the clearest elements of their teaching, and is in the most direct line of that tradition.

We need not insist on the importance of this fact . . . If both Protestants and Catholics could be persuaded of it, the object of the basic antagonism of Protestants to the Church would cease to exist. It would be evident that Protestantism, reduced to what Protestants regard as its essence, was under no necessity to embody itself in schism and heresy.<sup>21</sup>

Since Luther's chief concern was to discredit semi-Pelagianism, and since Catholicism also teaches that man cannot even accept the offer of salvation without God's enabling and that faith itself is a gift, are the two really so far apart? Bouyer thinks he can see a striking harmony between the two.

<sup>13</sup>Trans. A. V. Littledale (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1964), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 11-14.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 44-46.

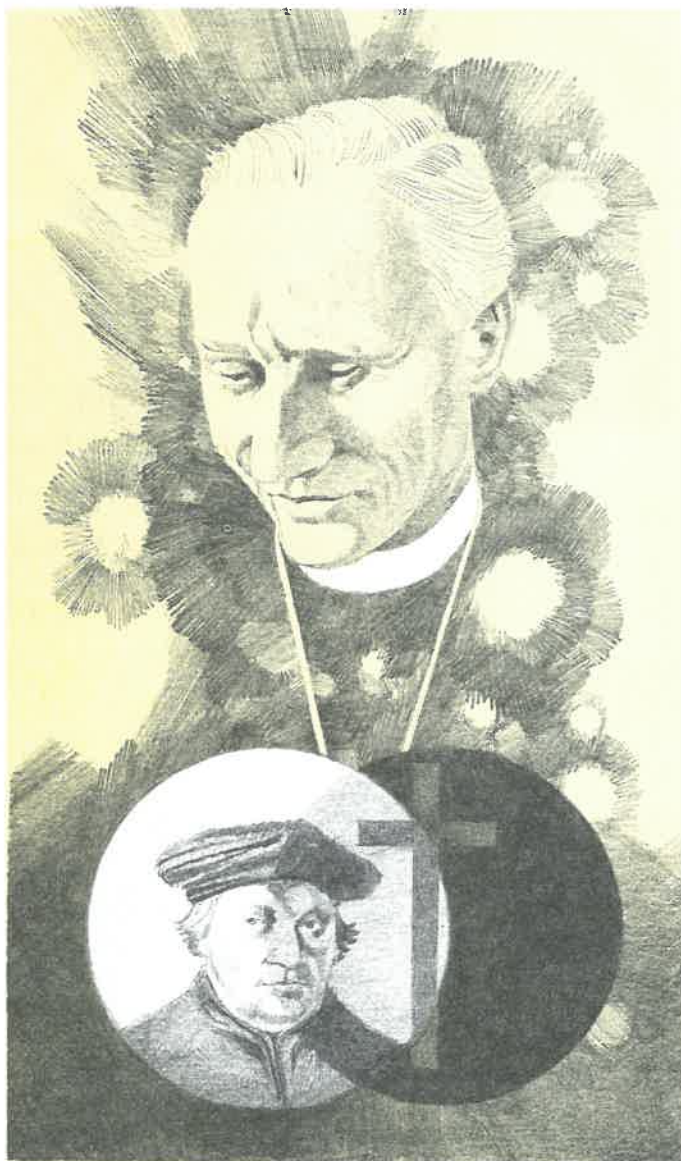
<sup>17</sup>*ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 143, 146.

<sup>19</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.*, p. 139. I will examine these alleged contradictions in the second part of this essay.

<sup>21</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 43-44.



**Catholic scholar Georges Tavard feels that there is no real contradiction between Roman Catholic theology and Luther's gospel.**

## Tavard

Catholic scholar Georges Tavard wrote his book, *Protestantism*, in 1959. He also feels that there is no real contradiction between Roman Catholic theology and Luther's gospel. Tavard explains that when Luther began his work as a Reformer, the gospel was in "partial eclipse." The Council of Trent, however, "reformulated" the gospel afresh and corrected the abuses connected with it.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, in 1546 the divisions in Christendom had already progressed too far. Side issues had come into the controversy, and the Protestants were too embroiled in the fight to admit that Luther's original concern had been endorsed by the Council.

Tavard feels that Luther's chief concern was to hold up the truth that man does not originate anything in his salvation and that everything comes from Christ. Therefore, in view of the Council of Trent, Luther's doctrine of justification is compatible with Catholicism.

## Synthesis

The preceding examples—McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer and Tavard—give some indication of the approach taken by Catholic authors in recent years toward Luther's doctrine of justification. The various aspects of this approach can be synthesized as follows:

1. Luther was right in protesting a decadent scholasticism of his day. This semi-Pelagian scholasticism, however, did not faithfully represent "real" Catholic theology (as Trent subsequently demonstrated).

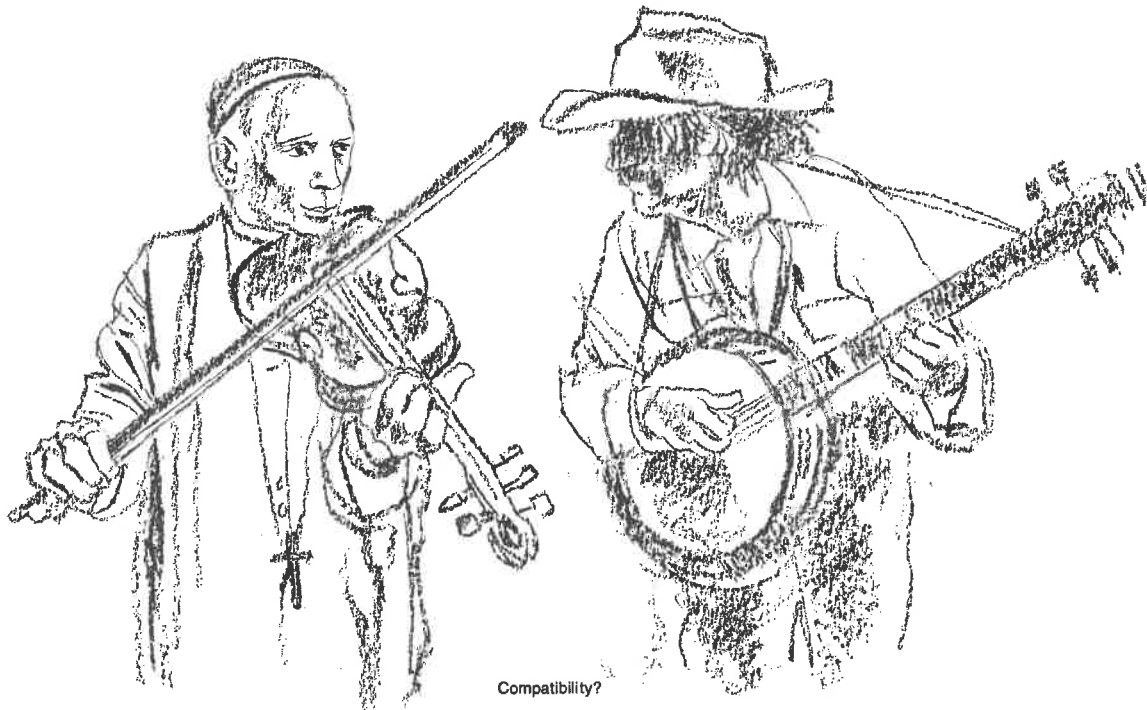
2. Luther's chief and original concern was merely to discredit semi-Pelagianism and to uphold the truth that salvation comes, not through man's strength, but by God's grace.

3. His idea of "extrinsic justification" was brought into the controversy only later and was never really among his "basic" propositions. He himself contradicted this theory.

4. Luther's chief concern, the concern that caused him to separate from Rome, is also the concern of orthodox Catholic theologians, Thomas Aquinas and the Church Councils. If Luther were alive today, he would see that to continue his protest is theologically pointless.

These interesting claims—comprising what might be called the "compatibility theory" between Catholicism and Luther—must be carefully investigated.

<sup>22</sup>Henri Daniel-Rops, gen. ed., *The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 148 vols. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959), Vol. 137: *Protestantism*, trans. Rachel Attwater.



## Chapter 2

### An Examination of the “Compatibility Theory”

#### Is “Orthodox” Catholicism Semi-Pelagian?

Nowadays, no one is questioning the fact that the doctrine of justification was in a sorry state when Luther began his Reformation. Protestants have been saying this for years. Now Catholic scholars are simply admitting what they cannot deny. Hans Kung, an expert in historical theology, confirms that the pre-Reformation church was dominated by “decadent” and “muddle headed late medieval theology.”<sup>23</sup> The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* admits that Martin Luther came upon the scene at a time when the doctrine of justification was “obscured” with ambiguities.<sup>24</sup>

What about the suggestion from the Catholic side that this “muddle headed” theology is not to be taken as representative of genuine and traditional Catholic belief? *This suggestion appears to be very true.* Much evidence indicates that the semi-Pelagianism which Luther opposed was also condemned by the better Catholic theologians and eventually corrected by the Council of Trent.

Hans Kung has amassed a tremendous quantity of material in order to prove that traditional Catholicism (as represented in its great theologians and in the Council of Trent) is to be acquitted of the charge of semi-Pelagianism.<sup>25</sup> His careful research is unassailable and confirms what was suggested by McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer, Tavard and others. Kung points out that the Council of Trent formulated evangelical statements such as these:<sup>26</sup>

We may be said to be justified freely, in the sense that nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification.

If anyone shall say that man can be justified before God by his own works which are done either by his own natural powers, or through the teaching of the Law, and without divine grace through Christ Jesus: let him be anathema.

<sup>23</sup>*Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, with a letter by Karl Barth, trans. Thomas Collins, Edmund E. Tolp & David Granskou (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964), pp. 105-106.

<sup>24</sup>1967 ed., s.v. “Reformation, Protestant,” by W. S. Barron, Jr.

<sup>25</sup>Kung’s book was written in response to Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, in which Barth accuses Catholicism—and Trent in particular—of semi-Pelagianism.

<sup>26</sup>D 801, 811, 813, quoted in *Justification*, pp. 252, 264.

If anyone shall say that without the anticipatory inspiration of the Holy Spirit and without His assistance man can believe, hope, and love or be repentant, as he ought, so that the grace of justification may be conferred upon him: let him be anathema.<sup>27</sup>

Kung has ranged far and wide to produce excerpts from Catholic documents which uphold the primacy of grace in man's justification. After presenting copious evidence, he feels confident to summarize Catholic belief with the following statements:

"Sola fide" makes good sense when it is used to express . . . the total incapacity of man for any kind of self-justification. In justification the sinner can give nothing which he does not receive by God's grace. He stands there with his hands entirely empty.<sup>28</sup>

The sinner himself is incapable of doing anything for his justification . . . Trent's cooperari implies no synergism in which God and man pull on the same rope. It is never as though justification came *partly* from God and *partly* from man . . . The sinner can do nothing without the grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup>

It is very significant that, as late as 1964 (ten years after the initial publication of Kung's book), no Catholic author had yet challenged the correctness of Kung's conclusion.<sup>30</sup> Even more recently, Karl Rahner wrote a review of Kung's book in which he stated that "Kung's presentation is Catholic" and cited twelve other leading Catholic scholars who attest Kung's orthodoxy.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, Protestant scholars have been forced to agree that orthodox Catholic belief—as Kung has documented it—is fully compatible with the Protestant stand against semi-Pelagianism. For example, Karl Barth confesses:

Due to my erroneous (because unhistorical) evaluation of the definitions and declarations collected in Denzinger and the statements of the church's magisterium in general, I have been guilty of a thoroughgoing injustice regarding the teaching of your church, especially that of the Fathers of Trent.<sup>32</sup>

If Kung's conclusions are correct—and I think they are—it means that Barth is not the only Protestant who has judged the Council of Trent too harshly. In the light of Kung's careful documentation, Protestants should

<sup>27</sup>Kung confesses that some of the canons of Trent are worded ambiguously and have been misunderstood by Protestants as implying semi-Pelagianism. He attributes this ambiguity to the "narrowness" of human formulations, "especially polemic ones," and asks Protestants to bear in mind that the canons of Trent are not "frozen formulations" incapable of interpretation or expansion. See *Justification*, pp. 101-106.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>31</sup>*Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4: *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), pp. 190-192.

<sup>32</sup>Letter in Kung, *Justification*, p. xx.



Karl Barth

**Protestants should think twice before accusing Rome's official teaching magisterium of semi-Pelagianism.**

**The semi-Pelagianism which was rampant in Luther's day, which he so tirelessly opposed, is also condemned by the Catholic Church.**

think twice before accusing Rome's official teaching magisterium of semi-Pelagianism. Kung's work demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that the first claim made by McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer and Tavard is basically correct. The semi-Pelagianism which was rampant in Luther's day, which he so tirelessly opposed, is also condemned by the Catholic Church.



Charles V

### Did Luther Oppose “Orthodox Catholicism?”

It has been suggested that Luther’s only *real* concern was to discredit semi-Pelagianism, that—had he lived long enough—he would have found little or nothing in the Tridentine explanation of the gospel with which to find fault. Is it true that Luther would have found himself in harmony with the “genuine” Catholic faith if only he could have known it?

The tragic mistake of those who make this claim is in thinking that Luther did not know the “orthodox” theology of Rome. It is true, of course, that much of Luther’s strength was consumed in beating back the semi-Pelagianism which had been popularized by William Ockham and Gabriel Biel. Luther’s book, *The Bondage of the Will*, was an all-out attack on this plague. This, however, was not Luther’s only concern. It was not even his primary concern. He was protesting more than a maverick theology. Rather, his greatest blows were aimed at Rome’s “orthodox” doctrine of justification, the very doctrine which was re-established at Trent after a partial eclipse and the very doctrine which is now seen in the writings of Kung, McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer

**Luther’s greatest blows were aimed at Rome’s “orthodox” doctrine of justification, the very doctrine which was re-established at Trent after a partial eclipse.**

and Tavard. Luther had full knowledge of this apparently “evangelical” interpretation, and *he rejected it as heresy*.

There is compelling evidence for this in the account of what took place at the Diet of Regensburg in 1541. Charles V was more than anxious to mend the theological rift which had been threatening the unity of his empire for twenty years. In order to heal the wound, he appointed three theologians from each side to sit down together and draft a theological statement which would be acceptable to both Protestants and Catholics. The emperor had high hopes that a reconciliation could be achieved. His hopes sprang from the fact that certain

Roman theologians had begun to say that Luther's doctrine of justification was "a part of that truth which they had always held and taught." The theologians affirmed that there was "no real, or, at least, no radical, difference between the two parties, but only such as might be easily adjusted by mutual explanation and concession."<sup>33</sup>

The foremost advocate of this conciliatory approach was Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, the papal legate in Germany. Contarini had for some time openly expressed his view that "the Lutheran concern for justification by faith was in fact the essence of the Catholic faith also." Protestantism, in other words, was essentially Catholic! He believed that the Protestant schism had been caused "by a misunderstanding of Catholicism."<sup>34</sup> To do away with this understanding, which was preventing the Protestants from appreciating the "real" Catholicism, was his great hope.

At the diet of Regensburg, Contarini worked closely with the three Catholic theologians appointed by Charles in an attempt to draft a statement on justification which would be acceptable to the Protestants. As the discussion proceeded, it became obvious that the Catholics were willing to make "large concessions . . . in favor of the Protestant doctrine."<sup>35</sup> The article finally agreed to by the Catholics is a clear renouncement of semi-Pelagianism. It confesses that man's salvation does not depend on his strength but results solely from God's grace. The two main characteristics of the article are "an insistence on the entirely gratuitous character of our justification" and, secondly, "on the impossibility of driving a wedge between faith and love."<sup>36</sup> It was agreed that sinful humanity can be justified only through an extrinsic, imputed righteousness. Whether this applies to regenerate as well as unregenerate men was left unclear. (The full text of the article appears in an appendix at the end of this essay.)

The article was initially accepted by the three Lutheran representatives. It was generally felt that nothing in the agreed article was incompatible with the Protestant view. When John Calvin heard about the agreement, he wrote to William Farel of his great amazement that the Catholics had conceded so much. He confessed that he could find nothing in the document that was necessarily contrary to Protestant theology although he regretted that the exposition could not have been more explicit.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, it came as a surprise to many when Luther vigorously rejected the Regensburg agreement. Wrote the Reformer:

Popish writers pretend that they have always taught, what we now teach, concerning faith and good works, and that they are unjustly accused of the contrary: thus the wolf puts on the sheep's skin till he gains admission into the fold.<sup>38</sup>

Luther, and the Reformation as a whole, rejected the Regensburg article because it was felt that the wording was dangerously ambiguous.<sup>39</sup> It was felt that the article had failed to explicitly concede "one point" which was crucial to the Protestant cause. A Protestant historian writes:

It has been justly said that, in controversies of faith, the difference between antagonist systems is often reduced to a line as sharp as a razor's edge, yet on one side of that line is God's truth, and on the other a departure from it. At Ratisbon [Regensburg], the difference between the Popish and the Protestant doctrines of Justification seemed to resolve itself into one point.<sup>40</sup>

James Buchanan has pointed out that Luther rejected the Regensburg formula because it failed to state that the *converted Christian* is acceptable to God because of Christ's imputed righteousness alone.<sup>41</sup> The formula made it clear that the *unconverted* man has no merit and can be brought near to God only through the imputed righteousness of a Substitute. But what about the converted man? The ambiguous wording leaves open the possibility that the converted man might eventually be acceptable to God in himself by virtue of an infused or inherent righteousness.

Luther felt that Cardinal Contarini had a dishonest motive for not correcting this ambiguity, and the Reformer's suspicion was probably correct. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* points out that Contarini advocated a theory of "double justification" which—while not denying imputed righteousness—attributes to infused righteousness (or sanctification) a prominent role in insuring the converted man's acceptance with God.<sup>42</sup> Contarini, who was anxious to effect a reconciliation, undoubtedly thought it best to leave this ambiguity undisturbed.<sup>43</sup>

Luther, who was sure he was dealing with a wolf in sheep's clothing, wrote to the Elector of Saxony:

We hold that man is justified by faith without the works of the law; this is our formula, and to this we adhere. It is

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Buchanan, *Justification*, p. 149.

<sup>39</sup>The Protestant representatives at Regensburg had been instructed by Luther not to depart from the wording of the Augsburg Confession—an instruction which they failed to carry out.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>42</sup>1967 ed., s.v. "Contarini, Gasparo," by F. F. Strauss.

<sup>43</sup>There is further evidence that Contarini's lack of precision in defining this aspect of justification was not entirely innocent. When the Regensburg discussions proceeded from justification to the subjects of church authority and the nature of the sacraments, Contarini refused to budge from the traditional Catholic viewpoint. As Peter Matheson has said, this in itself shows that his understanding of justification "must have also been radically different from the Protestant one . . . The acid test of one's appreciation of the doctrine of justification by faith is, after all, one's interpretation of the nature of the church and the sacraments."—Matheson, *Contarini*, p. 179.

<sup>33</sup>James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Swengel, Penna.: Reiner Publications, 1961), p. 144.

<sup>34</sup>Peter Matheson, *Cardinal Contarini at Regensburg* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 49.

<sup>35</sup>Buchanan, *Justification*, p. 145.

<sup>36</sup>Matheson, *Contarini*, p. 108.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 109.



short and clear. Let the devil and Eck, and whoever will, storm against it.<sup>44</sup>

At Regensburg, although the representatives of Rome fully renounced every facet of semi-Pelagianism, an irreconcilable difference remained between them and Luther. In the light of Regensburg, do Catholic writers have any basis for the claim that Luther was ignorant of the "real" Catholicism? The Regensburg article bears a striking resemblance to the doctrine of justification being heralded today by Catholics such as McSorley, Bouyer, van de Pol, Tavard and Kung. The facts of history reveal that Luther did indeed come face to face with the "real" Catholicism and that he rejected it as heresy. He could not accept the Regensburg article on justification, because he felt the Catholic theologians had purposefully failed to concede "one point," an omission which would threaten to undermine the very essence of his theological discovery. For Luther, the idea that believers are always acceptable to God solely through an imputed righteousness (i.e., "extrinsic justification") was the indispensable lifeblood of his faith.

### Luther's Doctrine of Extrinsic Justification

This brings us to the third claim made concerning Luther's theology by recent Catholic writers. It is being stated by some that the idea of extrinsic justification was never really among Luther's "basic propositions." Is this true? Actually, Luther's own writings are sufficient to explode such a careless conclusion. They reveal that the doctrine of extrinsic justification, as expressed in the formula, *simul iustus et peccator*, was Luther's chief spiritual concern. Far from being a side issue, this was the very thing that caused him to reject the teaching authority of Rome. It was the "one point" which led to his rejection of the Regensburg agreement. Further, it was this issue (rather than that of semi-Pelagianism) which Luther had in mind when he promised that:

If the pope will grant unto us, that God alone, by his mere grace through Christ, doth justify sinners, we will not only carry him in our hands, but will also kiss his feet.<sup>45</sup>

Rome cannot conceive a justification in which man remains a sinner. Catholic theology understands justifying righteousness to be something which God graciously pours into man's heart, completely displacing sin and sinfulness in the process.<sup>46</sup> For Rome, either man is just or he is sinful; he cannot be both. It was in open defiance to this doctrine that Luther coined the phrase, *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously righteous and sinful).

<sup>44</sup>Quoted in Vivian H. H. Green, *Luther and the Reformation* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. 183. Johann Eck was one of the three Catholic theologians participating at Regensburg.

<sup>45</sup>Quoted in McSorley, "Luther," p. 100.

<sup>46</sup>*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed., s.v. "Justification," by P. DeLetter.



Cardinal Contarini

For Luther, justifying righteousness is something which always resides in the Person of Christ alone. The imputation of this "alien" righteousness is the only means by which man can be acceptable to God. As long as the Christian lives, he is guilty in himself, but "in Christ" he is righteous and accounted precious.

The statement about kissing the Pope's feet appears in Luther's 1535 lectures on the book of Galatians. McSorley assumes that Luther was talking about the semi-Pelagianism of Gabriel Biel and William Ockham and that Luther would have no doubt kissed the Pope's feet if he had only lived to see the Council of Trent. But McSorley's theory reveals shoddy scholarship. He apparently failed to study the context in which the statement appears.

Extrinsic justification is the oft-repeated theme of Luther's Lectures on Galatians. He again and again repeats his conviction that even the most spiritual man has within him a "remnant of sin." Thus man's only hope is that God is willing to "cover it and to forgive it . . . for the sake of Christ Himself, in whom we believe." The Christian is therefore always "righteous and a sinner at the same time."<sup>47</sup>

Although I am a sinner according to the Law . . . never-

<sup>47</sup>*Luther's Works*, gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan & Helmut Lehmann, Vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians, 1535: chapters 1-4*, ed. & trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, assoc. ed. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 236.

theless I do not despair . . . because Christ lives who is my eternal and heavenly life. In that righteousness and life I have no sin . . . [or] death. I am indeed a sinner according to the present life and its righteousness, as a son of Adam where the Law accuses me, death reigns and devours me. But above this life I have another righteousness, another life, which is Christ, the Son of God, who does not know sin and death but is righteousness and eternal life.<sup>48</sup>

As long as we are alive, we are supported and nourished at the bosom of divine mercy and forbearance, until the body of sin (Rom. 6:6) is abolished and we are raised up as new beings on that Day.<sup>49</sup>

According to Luther's understanding, original sin (i.e., man's sinful nature) will not be eradicated until the second coming of Christ. Meanwhile, however, the guilt of man's inbred corruption is "forgiven" and "not imputed" to all who believe the gospel. This means that even the most sanctified Christian can only tremble and look to God for mercy since he falls infinitely short of God's glory. Christ offers His own holy flesh and spotless obedience to the law in place of man's defilement.

On account of this faith in Christ God does not see the sin that still remains in me. For so long as I go on living in the flesh, there is certainly sin in me. But meanwhile Christ protects me under the shadow of His wings and spreads over me the wide heaven of the forgiveness of sins, under which I live in safety.<sup>50</sup>

Thus the ultimate Christian experience consists in being at the same time a lost sinner and a righteous, beloved son. Luther does not balk at this paradox. Only this twofold statement can really express the relationship between the converted man's state and his standing before God. For Luther, treason is committed against the gospel whenever men try to soften this paradox. If the doctrine of extrinsic justification is lost, "the whole of Christian doctrine is lost."<sup>51</sup>

Further evidence of the centrality accorded this doctrine by Luther is seen in the fact that it found its way into the writings of his fellow Reformers and was given a prominent place in the various "Confessions" of the Protestant churches.<sup>52</sup> Can the claim stand up that Luther's idea of extrinsic justification was a side issue? If it was as unimportant as certain Catholic writers have suggested, why did it appear so prominently in Luther's own writings? And why was it given a privileged position in all the Protestant literature of the age?

Significantly, the idea of extrinsic justification was

one of Luther's first and most important spiritual discoveries. It is simply not true that it became attached to his theology only at a later date as his controversy with Rome deepened. As early as 1515 (two years before the posting of his famed Ninety-Five Theses), Luther recorded his conviction that—according to Scripture—there was no such thing as human sinlessness in this life. He added, "In ourselves we are sinners, and yet through faith we are righteous by God's imputation."<sup>53</sup>

Luther has also been charged with inconsistency. But in 1536, twenty-one years after recording his great discovery, Luther had not budged a single inch from his original conviction. In his *Disputation Concerning Justification* he argued that "a man is truly justified by faith in the sight of God, even if he finds only disgrace . . . in his own self."<sup>54</sup> Luther was obstinate on this point and never surrendered what to him was the very essence of the gospel. He once wrote that, when it came to justification, his forehead was harder than the foreheads of all his enemies.<sup>55</sup>

But still at least one Catholic scholar, Louis Bouyer, persists in charging Luther with inconsistency. He bases his claim on alleged "contradictions" in Luther's writings regarding justification and good works. For example, Bouyer affirms:

The further Luther advanced in his conflict with other theologians . . . the more we see him identifying his affirmation about *sola gratia* with a particular theory, known as extrinsic justification . . .

This is far removed from the other [contradictory] affirmations of Luther, . . . those he returns to whenever he lays stress on his inner experience, . . . or as soon as he speaks as a religious guide or educator, anxious simply to give Christians, learned and unlearned alike, a statement of living Christianity as conceived and realized by himself.<sup>56</sup>

Bouyer does not feel that Luther could be serious about extrinsic justification and at the same time exhort his followers to perform good works and live righteous lives. Is it not inconsistent to say in one place that man is always a sinner in need of an imputed righteousness and to say in another place that God will give His children the power to keep from sinning? Would not the imparted righteousness displace man's sin in such a way as to eliminate the need for imputed righteousness? Is not Luther, after all, capitulating to the Catholic position that the converted man is acceptable to God because of an infused righteousness? Bouyer is sure he sees an inconsistency here, but it is a figment of his imagination. He has simply failed to comprehend Luther's gospel.

<sup>48</sup>LW 26:9.

<sup>49</sup>LW 26:235.

<sup>50</sup>LW 26:231-232.

<sup>51</sup>LW 26:9.

<sup>52</sup>See, for example, John Calvin, *Inst.* III, XI, 23; Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 122; Theodore G. Tappert, ed. & trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 472.

<sup>53</sup>*Luther's Works*, gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan & Helmut Lehmann, Vol. 25: *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, chapters 1-2 trans. Walter G. Tillmans, chapters 3-16 trans. Jacob A. O. Preus (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), pp. 262, 260.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 34: *Career of the Reformer—IV*, ed. & trans. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 151.

<sup>55</sup>LW 26:99.

<sup>56</sup>Bouyer, *Protestantism*, p. 139.

It is very true, as Bouyer has seen, that Luther urged his followers to live lives of holiness in the sight of their fellow men. In fact, he taught that there is no such thing as a Christian who does not have the victory over sin. He writes:

Anyone who yields to his flesh and persists in smugly gratifying its desires should know that he does not belong to Christ; though he may pride himself ever so much on the title 'Christian,' he is merely deceiving himself.<sup>57</sup>

A Christian struggles with sin continually, and yet in his struggle he does not surrender but obtains the victory.<sup>58</sup>

It was Luther's conviction that the doctrines of justification and sanctification must be always held up side by side before the church. They are two sides of the same coin. He saw no contradiction between remaining a sinner in need of Christ's mercy and at the same time living a life of holiness. He made a careful distinction between "having" sin (i.e., a corrupt nature which must always be covered with Christ's merits) and "committing" sin (i.e., obeying the impulses of that corrupt nature.<sup>59</sup> For Luther, sin "remains" in the Christian but does not reign.<sup>60</sup>

The doctrines of justification and sanctification stand side by side in Luther's thought:

It is difficult and dangerous to teach that we are justified by faith without works and yet require works at the same time . . . Both topics, faith and works, must be carefully taught and emphasized, but in such a way that they both remain within their limits. Otherwise, if works alone are taught, as happened under the papacy, faith is lost. If faith alone is taught, unspiritual men will immediately suppose that works are not necessary.<sup>61</sup>

We declare it as a certainty that Christ is our principal, complete, and perfect righteousness . . . In addition, we should take pains to be righteous [in ourselves] . . . , that is, not to yield to our flesh, which is always suggesting something evil, but to resist it through the Spirit.<sup>62</sup>

This does not mean, however, that Luther was giving in to Rome's theology. While it is true that both advocated personal sanctification, there is a crucial difference. Rome teaches men to *trust* in their sanctification as a means of securing God's favor. Luther taught that because we are still in the flesh, "all our righteousness is unclean, and . . . every good work is sin."<sup>63</sup> The Christian must not imagine that his sanctification has any quality

of "merit" before God. Man (in spite of all his sanctification) is still a sinner. Although the Christian receives a new character, "it is not this righteousness that makes us acceptable to God."<sup>64</sup> Even with all our good works, we must run continually to Christ to be justified by His imputed righteousness alone.

So dangerous a plague is it to trust in one's own righteousness and to dream that one is pure. But we are not in a position to trust in our own righteousness, for we are aware of the uncleanness of the flesh. This awareness humbles us, so that we hang our heads and cannot trust in our own good works; and it compels us to run to Christ the Propitiator, who does not have a corrupt or blemished flesh but has an altogether pure and holy flesh, which He gave for the life of the world. In Him we find a righteousness that is complete and perfect.<sup>65</sup>

Lutheran scholar Martin Chemnitz, writing soon after the Council of Trent, summed up the real difference between Catholicism and Luther. His observation reveals that the real question was not whether the *unregenerate* man can come to God in his own strength or with his own merits (the issue of semi-Pelagianism) but whether the *regenerate* man will ever cease to be a sinner in this life. Records Chemnitz:

It is regarding the good works of the regenerate, or the new obedience, that there is now the chief controversy between the papalists and us, namely, whether the regenerate are justified by that newness which the Holy Spirit works in them and by the good works which follow renewal; that is, whether the newness, the virtues, or good works of the regenerate are the things by which they can stand in the judgment of God that they may not be condemned.<sup>66</sup>

The record of Trent itself reveals that Rome considered Luther's *simul iustus et peccator* to be a most serious threat to the traditional teaching of the church. At the Council, the canons on justification were drawn up expressly to counteract a "certain erroneous doctrine concerning justification" which was being disseminated.<sup>67</sup> While it is true that Trent can probably be exonerated from the charge of semi-Pelagianism, even the most sympathetic reading of the canons cannot hide the fact that they are diametrically opposed to the real point of Luther's theology.

Trent was careful to safeguard the Catholic understanding of justification in which the regenerate man ceases to be a sinner. For example, it defines justification as the "renewal of the interior man . . . whereby an unjust man becomes a just man."<sup>68</sup> According to Hans

<sup>57</sup>Luther's Works, gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan & Helmut Lehmann, Vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians, 1535: chapters 5-6; Lectures on Galatians, 1519: chapters 1-6, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, assoc. ed. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964).

<sup>58</sup>LW 27:87.

<sup>59</sup>LW 27:372.

<sup>60</sup>ibid., Vol. 32: Career of the Reformer—II, ed. George W. Forell, trans. George Lindbeck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 179, 210.

<sup>61</sup>LW 27:62-63.

<sup>62</sup>LW 27:71-72.

<sup>63</sup>LW 32:168, cf. pp. 159, 172.

<sup>64</sup>LW 27:72.

<sup>65</sup>LW 27:86.

<sup>66</sup>Examination of the Council of Trent: Part One, trans. Fred Kramer (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 481.

<sup>67</sup>Henry Denzinger, ed., The Sources of Catholic Dogma, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Saint Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), no. 792.

<sup>68</sup>D 813.

Kung, the Fathers of Trent examined Luther's writings carefully.<sup>69</sup> The statements they formulated were obviously intended to discredit the doctrine of extrinsic justification:

If anyone . . . asserts that the whole of that which has the true and proper nature of sin is not taken away, but says that it is only . . . not imputed, let him be anathema. For in those who are born again, God hates nothing, because . . . [they] are made innocent, immaculate, pure, [and] guiltless.<sup>70</sup>

If anyone shall say that the one justified sins, when he performs good works with a view of eternal reward: let him be anathema.<sup>71</sup>

If anyone shall say that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins . . . : let him be anathema.<sup>72</sup>

The issue that really separated Luther from Rome is well illustrated by the case of Bishop Girolamo Seripando. Seripando, who had made a careful study of Luther's writings and had come under their influence to some extent, raised a significant question during the theological deliberations at Trent. He asked whether the justified man really possesses enough inherent righteousness to satisfy divine justice and merit eternal life. Or could it be, asked Seripando, that notwithstanding the infusion of grace (*habitus*), a justified man still needs mercy and the imputation of Christ's merit to make up what is lacking in his own experience? The Reformers recognized that—while not identical—Seripando's view was similar to their own.<sup>73</sup>

Hans Kung frankly admits that the Council could not accept Seripando's idea of "double righteousness," as such, because it resembled Luther's doctrine. "The Council," writes Kung, "wished to exclude any theory which would in any way question the full reality of intrinsic justification."<sup>74</sup> Clearly, Luther differed with Rome over something much greater than mere semi-Pelagianism. Rather, he raised his voice to protest the "real" Catholicism with its emphasis on intrinsic justification. The formula, *simul iustus et peccator*, was his battle cry in the struggle with Rome. Contrary to what McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer and Tavard have said, this was Luther's basic, original and consistent spiritual concern. The proof of its centrality is to be found in his own writings, in the Protestant literature of the age, in the Diet of Regensburg and in the Council of Trent.

<sup>69</sup>Kung, *Justification*, p. 105.

<sup>70</sup>D 792.

<sup>71</sup>D 841.

<sup>72</sup>D 821.

<sup>73</sup>Seripando believed that the Christian is acceptable to God partly because of his own righteousness and partly because of Christ's imputed righteousness. On the other hand, the Reformers would say that a Christian is acceptable to God and sure of eternal life because of Christ's personal merits *alone*, that is, because of a righteousness which is outside the believer altogether.

<sup>74</sup>*Justification*, p. 219.

## Is Luther's Doctrine the Concern of Catholic Theologians Today?

It is claimed that the modern Catholic Church is teaching a doctrine of justification essentially the same as the one Luther labored to defend. Is it true that if Luther were alive today, he would see that to continue his protest is pointless? First, the question must be asked as to whether Rome has corrected the deficiencies which Luther thought he could see in the Regensburg article and which came to the surface again at the Council of Trent. Has Rome revised its definition of justification, a definition which Luther found so offensive? The only way to answer this question is to examine the statements of current Catholic theologians.

Hans Kung is a highly respected Catholic theologian in our generation, and his doctoral dissertation on justification is still regarded as a masterpiece of scholarship by Protestants and Catholics alike. His observations should give a fairly good idea as to how Luther's doctrine of extrinsic justification is faring among Roman Catholics today.

Although Kung adopts Protestant positions on many points, he admits that he cannot accept Luther's *simul iustus et peccator* unless it is interpreted in a decidedly "Catholic" sense.<sup>75</sup> He writes:

It is to be presupposed that the justified man is *truly* just—inwardly in his heart . . . Justification is not merely an externally pasted-on "as if." Man is not only *called* just but he *is* just . . . [and] not just partly but *totally* . . .<sup>76</sup>

Kung realizes that in taking this position, he is siding "against the Reformation."<sup>77</sup> He cautions his readers that however Catholics want to understand the formula, *simul iustus et peccator*, it must not be allowed to challenge the "authenticity" of divine justification. Writes Kung:

God pronounces the verdict, "You are just." And the sinner *is* just, really and truly, outwardly and inwardly, wholly and completely.<sup>78</sup>

Kung quotes Thomas Aquinas as being representative of his own thinking and of the Catholic position in general.

Moreover, when a man is said to be in another's graces, it is understood that there is something in him pleasing to the other; even as when someone is said to have God's grace.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>76</sup>*ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>77</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>78</sup>*ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>79</sup>*ibid.*

**Catholic theology has preserved the connotations which Luther branded as a betrayal of the gospel.**

**In reality, Luther's doctrine of extrinsic justification is still being trampled underfoot by the Church of Rome.**

It is fashionable in Catholic circles today to give lip service to the extrinsic aspect of justification. However, it is obvious that Catholic theology has preserved the connotations which Luther branded as a betrayal of the gospel. The same subtle opposition to Luther's theology which surfaced at the Diet of Regensburg can be seen in the work of modern-day Catholic theologians. Another example is Karl Rahner, who is one of the most popular theologians in the Catholic Church today. Like the theologians at Regensburg, he disarms and surprises many Protestants by agreeing that the idea of extrinsic justification is very biblical. He heartily takes the position that the only hope for unregenerate man is to despair of his own works and accept the free, imputed merits of Christ. But as soon as he turns his attention to the converted man, he deliberately aligns himself against the Reformation. He writes:

[Justification] is not merely an "as if," . . . [he is speaking now about the regenerate man]. Justification, understood as God's deed, transforms man down to the deepest roots of his being; it transfigures and divinises him. For this very reason the justified man is not "at the same time justified and a sinner." He is not simply, in a merely paradoxical and dialectical suspense, sinner and justified at the same time. By justification, *from being* the sinner he was, he becomes in truth a justified man which he was not before. He ceases to be a sinner.<sup>80</sup>

Is it true that if Luther were alive today, he would see that his main Reformation concern is also the concern of the Catholic Church? Would he kiss the pope's feet? Unfortunately, this is a careless speculation, one that ignores the evidence. In reality, Luther's doctrine of extrinsic justification is still being trampled underfoot by the Church of Rome.

<sup>80</sup>*Theological Investigations*, Vol 6: *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. & Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), pp. 222-223.

## Conclusion

McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer and Tavard have reached mistaken conclusions. They have been zealous to prove that Luther's doctrine of justification was really a very "Catholic" truth, but the weight of evidence stands squarely against them. One wonders how carefully they read Luther's own writings. How is it that so much historical evidence escaped their notice? The "compatibility theory" is to be rejected.

The presupposition on which their whole theory rests is that Luther intended to take issue only with a heterodox segment of Catholicism. It is further supposed that his great contribution was a polemic against semi-Pelagianism. My research, however, indicates that the "one point" which really separated Luther from Rome was his doctrine of extrinsic justification (rather than his stand against semi-Pelagianism). In this, he struck at the very heart of Catholic orthodoxy. The Diet of Regensburg, the Council of Trent and the writings of today's most progressive Catholic theologians all point to the fact that neither past nor present Catholicism has been able to appreciate Luther's primary concern.

It is unfortunate that so many Catholic writers have overlooked (or ignored?) the real issue. But as it turns out, there is nothing new under the sun. One is reminded of the observation made by James Buchanan more than a century ago:

Many attempts have been made to show that the difference between the Romish and the Reformed Churches, on the subject of Justification, is not vital or fundamental; and that it is of so little importance as to present no insuperable obstacle to their reunion . . .<sup>81</sup>

[Meanwhile] . . . the radical error, which lies at the foundation of the whole Popish doctrine, . . . is carefully covered up and kept out of view.<sup>82</sup>

**The "one point" which really separated Luther from Rome was his doctrine of extrinsic justification. In this, he struck at the very heart of Catholic orthodoxy.**

<sup>81</sup>*Justification*, p. 162.

<sup>82</sup>*ibid.*, p. 156.

## Appendix

The first article about justification, establishes these three points beforehand:—1. That it is certain that, since the fall of Adam, all men are born enemies of God, and children of wrath by sin. 2. That they cannot be reconciled to God, nor redeemed from the bondage of sin, but by Jesus Christ, our only Mediator. 3. That persons of riper years cannot obtain these graces unless they be prevented (first visited) by the motions of the Holy Spirit, which inclines their mind and will to detest sin; that, after this first motion, their mind is raised up to God, by faith in the promises made to them that their sins are freely forgiven them, and that God will adopt those for His children who believe in Jesus Christ. From these principles it follows, that sinners are justified by a living and effectual faith, which is a motion of the Holy Spirit, whereby, repenting of their lives past, they are raised to God, and made real partakers of the mercy which Jesus Christ hath promised, being satisfied that their sins are forgiven, and that they are reconciled by the merits of Jesus Christ; which no man attains, but at the same time love is shed abroad in his heart, and he begins to fulfil the law. So that justifying faith “worketh by love,”—though it justifies not but as it leads us to mercy and righteousness—which (righteousness) is *imputed* to us through Jesus Christ and His merits, and not by any perfection of righteousness which is *inherent* in us, as communicated to us by Jesus Christ. So that we are not just, or accepted by God, on account of our own works or righteousness, but we are *reputed* just on account of the merits of Jesus Christ only. Yet this is not to hinder us from exhorting the people to increase this faith, and this charity, by outward and inward works; so that, though the people be taught that *faith alone justifieth*, yet repentance, the fear of God and of His judgments, the practice of good works, etc., ought to be preached to them.—The Regensburg Article Concerning Justification by Faith (cited in Buchanan, *Justification*, p. 450).

**While it is true that Trent can probably be exonerated from the charge of semi-Pelagianism, even the most sympathetic reading of the canons cannot hide the fact that they are diametrically opposed to the real point of Luther's theology.**

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