



***SOLA FIDE AND
LUTHER'S "ANALYTIC"
UNDERSTANDING OF
JUSTIFICATION***

***A Fresh Look at
Some Old Questions***

SOLA FIDE AND LUTHER'S "ANALYTIC" UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION: A FRESH LOOK AT SOME OLD QUESTIONS

United version of article published in Pro Ecclesia 13, 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 39-57

If asked to identify the one figure and one teaching most responsible for the current fragmented state of Western Christendom, most Church historians would point back to Martin Luther and his affirmation of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. While undoubtedly the reasons for the breakup of the Western Church are extremely complex, there can be no doubt that Luther's ideas played a key role, igniting a debate over soteriological questions that continues to divide Christians, in spite of the progress made in recent years through ecumenical dialogue, as reflected in documents such as the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

In light of this, it might seem rather strange to claim that Luther's teaching on justification may hold the key to resolving some of the most important differences and disagreements regarding that doctrine that originally arose in large part as a result of his writings. Yet a number of studies have shown that Luther's thought on the subject was in many ways distinct, not only from the Roman Catholicism of his day, but from the Protestant Orthodoxy that arose after him.¹ Because of this, a

reconsideration of certain aspects of Luther's teaching on justification may offer a fresh perspective from which to address some of the theological problems and difficulties that have continued to divide Christians of different confessional traditions as they seek to articulate a common understanding of the manner in which human beings are saved through Jesus Christ.

TRADITIONAL DIFFICULTIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

According to both Roman Catholic and Protestant teaching, because all people are born sinners in need of salvation, some type of change must take place in their situation in order for them to be justified or accepted by God as righteous. Every doctrine of justification regards this change as having its origin in some type of gracious divine activity taking place *independently* of human beings and prior to any change on their part; generally, this divine activity is seen as revolving around Christ's incarnation, life, death and resurrection.

¹See especially Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986),

Vol. 2, pp. 1-32, as well as several of the essays in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Although all agree that God's work in Christ makes justification possible, that work has been defined differently depending on the manner in which justification is understood.

Basically, doctrines of justification can be divided into two groups: those that see some change produced by God through Christ *in nobis* as the basis upon which believers are justified, and those that base forgiveness and justification on God's work in Christ *pro nobis* and *extra nos*. According to the first of these views, justification is the result of a change which takes place *in sinners themselves* by virtue of Christ's work, which may be defined in terms of having delivered humanity or the human nature common to all from the forces of sin and evil which dominate and enslave human beings, having provided human beings with the knowledge or motivation necessary for them to amend their sinful ways, or having made it possible for some transforming power, such as grace or the Holy Spirit, to be communicated to

believers.² This change in them is often spoken of in terms of regeneration. Thanks to the work of Christ they are enabled to *become* righteous, and on that basis are *declared* righteous and forgiven by God in what has commonly been labelled an "analytic" judgment;³ God overlooks their *guilt* by virtue of the new life of righteousness which results from their having been delivered from the *power* of sin. In other words, ultimately they are *forgiven* because they are *changed*.⁴

According to the second view, Christ's work brings about some type of change, not in human beings themselves, but in the way they are regarded by God. By virtue of Christ's life,

²The first two of these understandings of Christ's work are (respectively) the "classic" view found especially in the Church Fathers and outlined by Gustav Aulén in *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: MacMillan, 1969), which speaks of human beings being delivered either from the devil's power over them or from the forces of sin, death and corruption found in their fallen human nature, and the "moral influence" explanation commonly associated with Peter Abailard as well as the liberal Protestant theologians of the 19th century. The third understanding of Christ's work mentioned is found particularly in Roman Catholic theology, and most notably in the Council of Trent, where it is repeatedly said that by the merits of Christ grace and justice are infused into believers, and they receive the Holy Spirit (see Sixth Session, "Decree Concerning Justification," Chaps. 3, 7, 14, 16; Canon 10).

³On the "analytic" and "synthetic" distinction, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 2, p. 2, and Carl Braaten, *Justification: The Article by which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 13-14.

⁴As McGrath observes, this view was unanimously held in the West up to the period of the Protestant Reformation (*Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 1, pp. 40-51, 145).

death and resurrection, it is now possible for God justly to *declare* human beings righteous; this declaration takes place prior to and independently of any actual change in them in which they *become* righteous, although the life of actual righteousness (usually referred to as "sanctification" in Protestant thought) follows upon the declaration of justification as its consequence. In this case, first human beings are delivered from the *guilt* of sin, and this then enables the *power* of sin to be overcome in them; they *change* because they have been *forgiven*. Their justification thus does not depend on their being delivered from sin's power or on the change that takes place in their way of life; it depends exclusively on Christ's death on their behalf (or in their stead). This is said to involve a "synthetic" judgment on God's part.

This second view, of course, has traditionally been associated with Protestant teaching, in which justification has often been understood as a *forensic declaration* based on Christ's work *pro nobis*.⁵ Nevertheless, it should be stressed that many Protestants have actually held to a variation of the first view by affirming that, although Christ obtained an initial forgiveness for human beings, subsequent forgiveness depends on their obedience to God

⁵See for example the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chaps. 11, 13, 14, as well as Article 4 of both the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*. McGrath argues that the three features which characterize Protestant thought regarding justification up to 1730 are the understanding of justification as a forensic declaration of righteousness, the distinction between justification and sanctification (or regeneration), and the idea that the cause of justification is the alien righteousness of Christ imputed to believers (*Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 1, p. 182; cf. Vol. 2, pp. 2-3).

and the change of life taking place in them.⁶ In other words, human beings are *initially* declared righteous or justified by virtue of Christ's vicarious death, and this produces a change in them (a sanctified life); but this change is then made the basis upon which they continue to be forgiven and accepted as righteous by God. In reality, this is to make their forgiveness ultimately depend once more on the actual life of righteousness brought about in them, rather than Christ's work on their behalf; this understanding of justification is thus actually a variation of the first view, in that the initial forgiveness enables the *power* of sin to be overcome in them, and then the final forgiveness is granted on account of the consequent change of life, and not directly on account of Christ's vicarious death. This understanding of justification is common in Roman Catholicism as well, which has traditionally spoken of an initial forgiveness, followed by a life of righteousness which then becomes the basis upon which one is ultimately justified.⁷

⁶See for example the discussion in Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790. An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 202-224, as well as McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 2, pp. 52-53. Such an idea is generally attributed to John Wesley; on Wesley's doctrine of justification, see especially Ted M. Dorman, "Forgiveness of Past Sins: John Wesley on Justification. A Case Study Approach," *Pro Ecclesia* 10, 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 275-294, and George Tavard, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 86-92.

⁷This is the teaching of the Council of Trent; see Sixth Session, "Decree concerning justification," Chaps. 10, 14. Anselm also affirms the same idea in the parable about the king, his servant and his subjects in *Cur Deus homo* 2.16: there the idea is that, although Christ made satisfaction for "*past sins*," when believers "*sin again after this [initial]*

Behind each of these two views are specific concerns.⁸ In the case of the first view, the primary concern is that believers actually live a life of obedience to God's will, and that there be a basis for demanding that the justice and righteousness (*iustitia*) commanded by God be practiced. Proponents of this view have traditionally criticized the second view in that it provides no basis for making such a demand, since it maintains that believers do not have to change in order to be justified; this seems to make that change optional, and thus ultimately irrelevant and unnecessary, since it plays no role whatsoever in justification. Those defending the second view have responded by arguing that those who have been forgiven and justified do in fact change as a result of the grace of God shown to them.⁹ Yet this response has generally been deemed unsatisfactory and inadequate by those who adhere to the first view, partly because such change is often not readily observable in the behavior of many believers, at least to the extent that it should be if it were true that being forgiven *automatically* leads to a sanctified life, and partly because it fails to provide any basis for insisting that one *must* live in accordance with God's will in order to be accepted as righteous and forgiven by God. At most, it can be said that one *ought* to do so, or that one inevitably *will* do so (even though reality often

forgiveness," they will only be forgiven anew "provided they are willing to make an acceptable satisfaction and thereafter to mend their ways."

⁸On the following, see especially "Salvation and the Church: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission" (London: Church House Publishing and Catholic Truth Society, 1987), pp. 11-13, 16-17.

⁹See for example Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), Part 1, pp. 465-473, 492.

proves otherwise), but not that one *must* do so in order to be justified.

The concern of those who maintain that justification is a forensic declaration based exclusively on Christ's work *pro nobis* is that of providing assurance of salvation; when salvation is said to depend on the extent to which one obeys God and does God's will, such certainty is impossible. This concern was behind Luther's personal struggle with the Roman Catholic teaching as he had understood it, since he felt that no matter how hard he tried, he could not live perfectly as God commanded and therefore attain the righteousness necessary for him to be justified or declared righteous by God. In order for certainty regarding justification to exist, it must be based on something entirely *extra nos*, like Christ's death *pro nobis*, or the *alien righteousness* of Christ which is external to us but becomes ours, as Luther taught. Human beings can only be sure of their salvation if it depends entirely on God, and not on their own efforts or response, which are always fragile, vacillating and imperfect.

Actually, however, this understanding of justification still ends up positing some type of change *in* human beings as necessary in order for them ultimately to be justified, namely, the change from unbelief to faith. By definition, faith constitutes a human response, and cannot merely be something *extra nos*; it must be *our faith*, and thus exist *in nobis*. Yet it would appear that to make faith a condition for justification is to make justification dependent once more on what *human beings* do, and thus to undermine any certainty that they might have regarding their salvation: in this case, in order to be sure of their salvation, they would have to look inwards to see if they have faith, and whether that faith is qualitatively and quantitatively sufficient in God's sight in order for God to justify them.

In an attempt to resolve this problem, many of the theologians of the Reformation argued that faith is something produced in human beings by God alone. This is to make their faith, and thus their justification, entirely dependent on a decision on God's part, rather than any decision of their own. This means that, although there is a change *in nobis* (from unbelief to faith), in reality that change is entirely dependent upon a divine decree taking place *extra nos*; as a result of this understanding of justification, the doctrine of eternal election or predestination came to be central in much Reformation theology.¹⁰ It was claimed that, before eternity, God had already determined who would be saved by deciding precisely in whom to create the faith necessary for human beings to be justified, and making this decision independently of any foreknowledge of what human beings would do. While some claimed that God's election had been made on the basis of God's foreknowledge regarding who would respond properly to the Gospel (*ex praevisa fide*), others rightly pointed out that this involved basing justification ultimately once more on a human decision rather than a divine one, so that it no longer depended exclusively on God's grace.

The claim that justification is to be attributed solely to God's grace (*sola gratia*) has been rejected by many proponents of the first type of view on the grounds that it presents a God who appears to be arbitrary and thus unjust, since God decides to save only some and not others, independently of what they do or do not do. One of the objections to such a teaching is that it seems clear that some people live more

in accordance with God's will than others; thus if God's election was made independently of any consideration regarding what human beings would do, God must have chosen some whose life would be less in accordance with God's will over others whose life would be relatively good and righteous in comparison. Many Reformed theologians attempted to resolve this problem by affirming that all human beings are totally depraved and do nothing good or deserving of salvation, as the Synod of Dort maintained; when all are regarded as equally sinful in this way, the elect cannot be said to have been *less* sinful than those not elected (in which case God's election would have been made on the basis of their works, in that God would have chosen those who would be better than others), or to have been *more* sinful than many of those not chosen (which would be unjust on God's part). Of course, the common response of many Reformation theologians to the problem of the apparent injustice of God electing some and not others independently of what they would do has been to claim that there actually is no injustice, since those who are not saved only end up getting what they deserve on account of their sins. The problem with this response, however, is that the injustice does not lie with some sinners receiving what they deserve, but with the unequal and arbitrary treatment given to human beings: if all are equally sinful, God should treat all equally and impartially, rather than showing preference for some over others.

The belief that human beings are justified not only by grace alone, but by faith alone (*sola fide*), has also generally been rejected by most of those adhering to the first view.¹¹ According to Scripture, God commands that all people practice justice, righteousness, love and mercy,

¹⁰See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 2, p. 39; Braaten, *Justification*, pp. 37-40. On the Roman Catholic teaching on these questions prior to the Reformation, see Tavard, *Justification*, pp. 43-48.

¹¹See the Council of Trent, Sixth Session, "Decree concerning justification," Canon 9.

keeping God's commandments. To say that these things are not necessary in order for one to be justified is therefore problematic, particularly given the fact that the New Testament consistently teaches that all people will be judged on the basis of their works: only those who have done good will be saved.¹² Nowhere is it ever said that God will judge people on the basis of their faith. This difficulty is not resolved by claiming that judgment will be by works because good works manifest the presence of true faith, since this then raises the question of how many works are necessary or sufficient to demonstrate that one has faith; this is to make judgment ultimately dependent upon one's works once more.¹³ The idea that faith is the sole condition for justification is also problematic in that it implies that what has always ultimately concerned God is simply that people believe, but not that they keep the commandments God gave. It is as if God gave the commandments, not so that people might obey them (which was impossible given their fallen condition), but so that they might be condemned when they broke them, and so that Christ might keep them in their stead and then die for them in order that they might be forgiven for not keeping them, as long as they have faith; now that this has occurred, God is satisfied. God then sends Christ to effect, not a change in human beings, but a change in God or God's attitude towards human beings, enabling God to tolerate sin and accept sinners, which was previously not possible. In that case, what ultimately concerns and satisfies God is being able to pronounce sinners righteous while remaining just, rather

than actually seeing them come to practice justice and righteousness; while no doubt God expects that they will *become* righteous as a result of being *declared* righteous, whether they actually do so or not is ultimately irrelevant, because in the end it will not be taken into account by God.

LUTHER'S "ANALYTIC" UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

Luther's teaching on justification has traditionally been associated with the second of the two views just outlined: believers are justified by faith alone for Christ's sake. A number of Luther scholars, however, led by Karl Holl, considered the "pioneer of modern Luther studies,"¹⁴ have argued that Luther's thought on the subject is more in line with the first view. Holl claimed that, rather than holding to a *synthetic* understanding of justification in which justification is understood as a forensic declaration made by God on the basis of Christ's death, Luther taught that an *analytic* judgment is involved: believers are declared righteous by God because they actually *become* righteous. Although many Luther scholars have criticized Holl's interpretation of Luther's *Rechtfertigungslehre*,¹⁵ for our purposes here the question of the degree to which Holl faithfully represents the whole of Luther's thought on the subject is unimportant; in fact, most would agree that Luther's teaching on justification is complex and difficult to reduce to any neat system. Instead, what interests us here is the analytic understanding of justification itself as it can be discerned in Luther's writings.

According to Holl, Luther's teaching on justification contains an apparent contradiction,

¹²See Mt. 25:31-46; Jn. 5:29; Rom. 2:6-10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:12-13.

¹³See for example the discussion in Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 178-180.

¹⁴Braaten, *Justification*, p. 13.

¹⁵See Braaten, *Justification*, pp. 14, 69-70.

in that on the one hand Luther claims that God justifies those who fulfill the law and thus are actually righteous, yet on the other maintains that God graciously justifies sinners who are not actually righteous.¹⁶ For Holl, the solution to this difficulty lies in the recognition that, for Luther, although the new life of righteousness is necessary for justification, this new life is from beginning to end a work of God alone. God graciously gives sinful human beings the gift of faith and transforms their will as Christ dwells in them; through grace they are drawn to God, who changes their hearts and converts them so that they come to love God instead of themselves. The fact that this new creation is a work of God alone guarantees that the restoration of the believer will reach its ultimate goal, since God has the power to finish what God begins. Of course, this goal of perfection is not fully reached in this lifetime. In the present, however, God tolerates the sin of believers and declares them righteous because, through the grace shown them and the work of Christ, they are certain to become perfectly righteous some day. Just as a man who is ill can already be said to be healthy if he is under the treatment of a doctor who will heal him, since his future return to health is ensured, so can the sinner who is being transformed by God be declared righteous even now by God. Holl compares the manner in

¹⁶Karl Holl, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frage der Heilsgewißheit," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1932), Vol. 1, pp. 117-118; on the following points, see especially pp. 119-125. In addition to the references to Luther's writings cited by Holl in those pages in support of this interpretation, see also the notes found in Paul Althaus' discussion of these ideas in *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 234-242.

which God declares believers righteous to the way an artist already sees in the block of marble the finished statue which he will sculpt out of that block, even before he has begun: in the same way, God sees in the sinner the righteous person that God will ultimately fashion out of him or her. This means that the basis upon which people are justified or forgiven is the new life which God brings about in them through Christ.

The strength of such an understanding of justification is that it addresses both the concern regarding assurance of salvation and the concern regarding the necessity of a new life of righteousness for justification on the part of believers. The certainty of salvation is based on the affirmation that *it is God alone who brings about in believers the new life necessary for them to be declared righteous*. This occurs through faith, which is also a free gift of God; in fact, it can rightly be said that believers are justified *sola fide*, through faith *alone*. Yet it is important to remember that the Latin phrase *sola fide* is in the ablative case, and thus refers to the *means* by which one is justified, *not to the basis upon which one is justified*.¹⁷ The *basis* upon which one is justified is the new life of righteousness and obedience to God's law brought about by God through Christ; this is what God requires and demands in order to justify human beings. The Roman Catholic rejection of the notion of "faith alone" seems to stem from the confusion between faith alone as a *means* for justification and faith alone as the *basis* for justification; Roman Catholic theologians have been correct in rejecting the latter idea. Strictly speaking, God

¹⁷McGrath rightly notes: "Luther avoids any suggestion that man is justified *on account of* his faith: justification is *propter Christum*, and not *propter fidem*" (*Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 2, p. 14; cf. pp. 24-25).

does not declare human beings righteous on account of their faith, but on account of the sanctification, righteousness and obedience God brings about in them; yet God brings about this sanctification, righteousness and obedience in them *sola fide*, through faith alone.

Here it is important to stress the manner in which justifying faith should be understood. Often faith has been treated primarily as an intellectual assent to some truth or doctrine. In much Protestant thought, in order to be justified, what must be believed is that Christ's death was sufficient to save us, or that God forgives us for Christ's sake, or even that justification is by faith alone. In Roman Catholic teaching, faith is often spoken of primarily in terms of accepting various other dogmas and doctrines. Faith, however, should instead be understood primarily in terms of *depending entirely on God for salvation and trusting in God alone to do all that is necessary for one's justification through Christ and the Holy Spirit*, as Luther taught. In other words, faith involves trusting solely in God, *not only for forgiveness, but for the new life of sanctification, righteousness and obedience on the basis of which God justifies people*. The object of faith is thus primarily *not a doctrine*, but a *person*, or more precisely, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In effect, as Luther so often stresses, faith involves *clinging to Christ (fides apprehensiva)* so as to depend exclusively on him to obtain forgiveness from God as well as to bring about through his Holy Spirit the change of life God demands. What is involved is merely putting oneself and one's life entirely in God's hands, trusting fully that God will graciously forgive one's sins as well as grant one the life of righteousness and sanctification necessary for justification. Faith alone thus leads to justification, *not because faith fulfills a condition for salvation which God has established or constitutes the basis for justification, but because it is the means by which one receives what God gives through*

Christ, including both the remission of sins and the life of obedience to God's commandments.

It is important to stress, however, that the relationship between faith and the new life of righteousness, or "good works," should not be seen as an immediate one; that is, faith does not *in and of itself* produce a change of life or the works God commands. Rather, it is through faith that God comes to be active in the believer through Christ and the Holy Spirit, and thus it is *God* who graciously brings about the life of righteousness necessary for justification, as well as the works that characterize that life and make it manifest. Certainly, there is a sense in which it can be said that obedience is the consequence of faith, since to depend fully on God and place one's life entirely in God's hands involves not only trusting God for forgiveness but doing what God commands. Abraham, for example, could hardly have been said to have trusted fully in God had he not gone where God told him to go and done what God told him to do, so as thereby to inherit the divine promises. In the same way, all that God desires is that through faith people receive, both passively *and* actively, what God offers them in Christ; when they trust fully in God in this way, they come to do the works God desires and commands.

According to this analytic understanding of justification, even after Christ's vicarious death and resurrection, God continues to demand perfect righteousness on the part of believers. This constitutes a fundamental difference over against the synthetic view, where it is maintained that, although initially God demands perfect righteousness on the part of human beings in order to accept them, that demand is no longer in force after Christ's death. In this case, believers are forgiven on account of Christ's death, not on account of any change in them, and thus justified *independently* of a life of righteousness and obedience on their

part. In contrast, the analytic understanding of justification maintains that *they must still become perfectly righteous and free of sin in order to be justified*, while affirming simultaneously that in Christ some day they will attain this perfect righteousness. The basis on which they are judged does not change; it is said, not only that they *should* obey or that they *will* obey as a result of being justified, but that they *must* obey in order for God to declare them righteous. Yet at the same time, they are directed to Christ alone and not to themselves, in order that he may work in them the obedience and righteousness God requires as they rely exclusively upon him through faith.

The life of perfect righteousness also constitutes the *basis* upon which they are forgiven. It should be stressed that in neither a synthetic or analytic understanding of justification is divine forgiveness unconditional. In a synthetic view, there are conditions that are said to be fulfilled *objectively* (such as Christ's vicarious death for all), as well as *subjectively* (in particular, faith in Christ). These conditions *take the place* of the condition for justification which God had originally laid down, namely, that human beings be perfectly righteous and obedient. According to the strictly analytic view, however, the condition remains the same throughout: in order for God ultimately to accept and forgive them, human beings must still become fully righteous and fulfill God's law perfectly. What enables this condition to be fulfilled, however, is what God graciously does and will do in human beings through Christ and the Holy Spirit; through faith they receive what God gives, and thus depend entirely on God rather than on their own efforts. This means that they can have full assurance regarding their salvation, knowing that the work begun in them will be brought to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

In the present, of course, God does not demand perfection; instead, God patiently tolerates and forgives sins, knowing that through Christ some day believers will become perfectly righteous and obedient: in Luther's words, "he alone is our righteousness until we are made to conform with his image."¹⁸ This idea is similar to the teaching found in both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology, according to which God accepts the imperfect obedience of believers on account of Christ, who makes up for what they are lacking.¹⁹ What is different, however, is that this latter view still bases justification partly on Christ's merits or work *pro nobis*, whereas the purely analytic view bases it entirely on the new life of righteousness and obedience brought about by Christ *in nobis*, on the basis of which he intercedes *pro nobis*: the reason God forgives believers their sins and overlooks their imperfect repentance and obedience is not that Christ died for them or earned merits on their behalf, but that some day they will be fully renewed and perfected in righteousness. The strength of this view is that it holds together what we may call the "Godward" and "humanward" aspects of Christ's work, that is, his activity in relation to God as well as his activity in relation to believers. Christ's Godward activity consists primarily of his intercession, his offering himself up to God asking that God accept those sinners living under him and forgive them their sins; it is in this sense that he died for them and for their

¹⁸Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955-1974), Vol. 31, p. 64; cf. *LW* 26, pp. 132-133; *LW* 27, p. 227; *LW* 32, pp. 28, 207-209, 213, 229; *LW* 34, pp. 152-153, 182, 190; *LW* 35, p. 370.

¹⁹On this idea in Protestant thought, see for example Clifford, *Atonement and Justification*, pp. 183-184, 208.

sins. He makes this petition, however, on the basis of the work he carries out *in* believers, in essence asking God to tolerate them until he can finish the work he has begun in them. God responds affirmatively to Christ's petition to forgive their sins, yet does so because of the transformation *in* them being accomplished through Christ, as Luther taught.

In this sense, believers are justified on account of the "alien righteousness" coming from Christ and originating *extra nos*. This alien righteousness, however, should be understood in terms of the new life of righteousness Christ brings about in believers, rather than in a strictly forensic sense as an imputed righteousness. In Luther's words:

Therefore this alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone—while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ—is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.²⁰

According to a strictly analytic view, therefore, believers are covered by Christ's righteousness, not because God accepts Christ's righteousness in place of their own, or because believers participate or share in Christ's own righteousness, but because when God looks at believers,

²⁰Luther, *LW* 31, 299. The Council of Trent comes close to speaking of our righteousness as an "alien righteousness" in the "Decree concerning justification," Chap. 16: "Thus, neither is our own justice established as our own from ourselves. . . for that justice which is called ours, because we are justified by its inherence in us, that same is [the justice] of God, because it is infused into us by God through the merit of Christ."

God sees them not as they are but as they some day will be: perfectly righteous, just like Christ.

LUTHER'S ANALYTIC VIEW AND THE TRADITIONAL PROBLEMS

While Luther's analytic understanding of justification is able to address in satisfactory fashion many of the traditional difficulties and concerns related to this doctrine, by no means does it resolve all of the problems. Among the problems remaining, the most important have to do with the role of human decision and free will in salvation, the way in which Christ's work is to be understood, and the question of how certainty regarding salvation can be offered at the same time that it is maintained that a life of righteousness and obedience to God is necessary in order for one to be justified.

The basic idea behind Luther's analytic understanding of justification is that of Augustine's prayer to God in his *Confessions*: "Give what you command, and command what you will."²¹ God *demand*s total obedience, righteousness and even perfection, but also graciously *gives* all of this to believers in Christ. It must be recognized, however, that this idea is also problematic; Pelagius argued vehemently against it, claiming that it means that if one does not obey or practice God's will, God is to blame, because God did not give the obedience and righteousness God commanded.²² This seems to undermine any basis for demanding that people live in accordance with God's will, and instead to justify their failure to do so.

Behind this difficulty is the question over which not only Augustine and Pelagius argued, but Luther and Erasmus as well: the question of

²¹Augustine, *Confessions* 10.39.40: "da quod iubes et iube quod vis."

²²See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 1, pp. 71-72.

free will. Is salvation solely the result of a decision of God, or does it depend on a human decision as well? The first alternative would seem to offer more certainty, since if everything is up to God, human beings do not need to depend on themselves in any way. In reality, however, any certainty regarding one's salvation depends on one's faith; even if believers are called to look to God for certainty regarding their salvation, rather than looking inwards to see whether they have sufficient faith, that certainty depends on what they believe, and for that reason, in a sense there can actually be no full certainty. Of course, those with a strong faith might claim to be absolutely certain of their salvation; yet such "certainty" can still only be as firm as their faith. One's faith remains the basis for one's certainty, rather than some type of certainty constituting the basis for one's faith. Therefore, to affirm that salvation is in some way dependent on a human decision does not *undermine* certainty, just as to deny free will to human beings with regard to salvation does not *provide* certainty; to the extent that it can exist, certainty regarding salvation is obtained, not by believing some doctrine which claims that salvation is dependent solely on a divine decision, but by trusting in God alone, not only for forgiveness, but for all that one needs to attain salvation and justification.

On the other hand, those who argue that human free will is involved and reject as unfair the notion that God alone determines who will be saved, independently of any human response, generally claim that this provides a basis for upholding God's justice as well as demanding that human beings make a conscious commitment to practicing the righteousness God commands. This was the concern of Pelagius: if people do not respond to God as they ought, and thus are not saved, it is *their* fault, not God's. Yet this view is also

problematic. The problem then becomes, not why God saves some and not others, but why some respond properly and come to faith so as to live a life of obedience, while others do not. This can be ascribed either to nature, in which case only those who have a natural, inborn predisposition to believe in the Gospel end up doing so, or else to nurture and environment, in which case everything depends on how people are raised, the circumstances in which they find themselves, and the experiences they have throughout their life. In either case, however, the question then arises as to why God made everyone different. God still appears to be unjust for having created a world where some but not all would be predisposed by nature to believe, or having placed some but not others in circumstances in which they would come to faith so as to be saved. There also seems to be no firm basis upon which to demand that people repent and believe so as to live in obedience to God's will, since whether they will do so or not depends on forces over which they do not have full control; thus their decision is not entirely up to them. Their will is not really free because their nature or their environment limit it.

Of course, it might be argued that what human beings do or decide is determined neither by God nor by nature or nurture, but by human beings themselves independently of any external or internal forces or influences. Such an idea is problematic, however, not only because it can scarcely be doubted that such forces or influences play a vital role in our decisions, but because it still provides no satisfactory answer as to why some but not others come to faith. Whether the *Cur alii, alii non?* question is posed with reference to divine election or human decision, it is still ultimately unanswerable. Equally unresolvable in any view is the question of how we can speak of a just God if God purposely created a world where some would

ultimately be saved and not others; behind this question is ultimately the problem of evil, which also admits of no entirely satisfactory solution.²³

In the end, it appears we must end up maintaining both the idea that human salvation and justification are entirely due to God's grace, and that a human decision is involved which, though limited in many ways, is still in some sense free. These two ideas appear to be contradictory, yet can be illustrated well by looking at the example of St. Paul. In his case, Paul (or Saul) came to faith only because the risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus;²⁴ had this not occurred, Paul would not have believed in Jesus, but instead would probably have continued to oppose and persecute Jesus' followers. Yet although Christ's appearance to Paul virtually left Paul no choice but to believe, it would be incorrect to say that God *forced* Paul to believe against his will, and that Paul had thus lost his own free will. In the same way, it can be said that God alone creates faith in believers by means of the Gospel proclaimed to them, as well as by acting upon

²³To affirm a doctrine of universal salvation does not resolve these problems, since such a doctrine still cannot answer the question of why there is so much evil and injustice in the world as it presently exists, and also undermines any basis for demanding that people live in accordance with God's will in this life; in that case, what people do here is ultimately irrelevant to their salvation, which is already assured. Of course, to claim that human beings are saved by virtue of the transformation brought about by God in them through Christ and the Holy Spirit does not necessarily rule out the possibility of salvation for those who do not come to faith in Christ in this life, since it might be argued that in the end they too may come to be graciously transformed by God in Christ and thus be saved.

²⁴See Acts 9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:9-18.

their hearts through the Holy Spirit and becoming present in their lives in different ways, while at the same time insisting that God does not instill faith in people by force. In this case, their coming to faith is due entirely to God's grace, and not to anything done or merited by them; yet their faith is still an act of their own volition. Of course, this example still leaves unanswered the question of why God (or Christ) should choose to appear in various ways only to *some* people so as to create faith in them, and not to *all*; yet it does demonstrate that one can ascribe one's salvation entirely to an act of God while still maintaining that humans are to some extent free to believe or not.

The other major problem with Luther's analytic understanding of justification is that the role played by Christ's death *pro nobis* in human salvation becomes unclear. Paul Althaus criticized Karl Holl's interpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification on the grounds that it overlooked the fact that Luther also based justification and forgiveness upon the vicarious satisfaction rendered to God by Christ in his death.²⁵ The same difficulty arises for the Finnish Lutheran theologians who have recently claimed that for Luther justification depends on the indwelling of Christ in the believer, yet must reconcile this idea with his teaching regarding the saving significance of the cross. They attempt to do so by turning to Luther's idea of the "happy exchange" (*commercium admirabile* or *fröhliche Wechsel*) in which Christ transmits his righteousness to believers, while assuming and "absorbing" into himself their sins (and perhaps their punishment as well).²⁶

²⁵Althaus, *Theology*, pp. 241-242.

²⁶See Tuomo Mannermaa, "Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," in Jenson and Braaten, eds., *Union with Christ*, pp. 29-32.

Yet this idea is problematic on several accounts. First, it makes the process mechanical or even magical, as if both sin and righteousness were some type of substances or entities capable of being transmitted in some mysterious way from believers to Christ and vice-versa when faith is present; Christ's life or righteousness is said to transform believers like leaven permeates bread,²⁷ and human sin is regarded as something that can be taken away by being "absorbed," as if some natural, physical or chemical process were involved. Second, this "happy exchange" does not seem to have taken place on the cross, but either at the incarnation, when Christ assumed into himself the sin(s) of our fallen human nature while joining it to the sinless and righteous divine nature, or in the present, when the exalted Christ comes to dwell in the believer so as to communicate his righteousness and absorb the believer's sin. Third, and most importantly, such an understanding of justification makes the basis for forgiveness, not the fact that ultimately through Christ believers will become perfectly righteous, but the "happy exchange" taking place between Christ and believers. In other words, the question is whether believers are ultimately forgiven by God because in and through Christ they will become the righteous and obedient people God wants them to be, or because their sin or sins have been absorbed by Christ, who has also communicated his righteousness to them. An attempt might be made to combine these two ideas by claiming that God accepts believers and forgives their sins because the indwelling Christ begins to absorb their sin and give them his righteousness, and intercedes to God on their behalf until this process is complete. Yet once again the role played by the cross is not clear; it

²⁷See Mannermaa, "Justification," p. 26.

would appear that the purpose for which Jesus lived and died was only to attain his present exalted condition so that he might now communicate his righteousness to others and absorb their sin by dwelling in them. When Christ's death is also understood in terms of a vicarious satisfaction, then the difficulties are amplified, since in that case it is not clear whether believers are ultimately justified and forgiven by God because one day they will become fully righteous, because of a "happy exchange," or because Christ made satisfaction to God or the law on their behalf.

In order to sustain a strictly analytic understanding of justification as presented above, it appears that the only option is to depart from Luther's understanding of the cross as some type of exchange (which, of course, by no means involves rejecting Luther's *theologia crucis* in general, or the idea that God's Son took on our sinful condition so as to make us righteous like himself), and to understand differently the idea of Christ's death making satisfaction. As I have argued elsewhere, the traditional understandings of the cross that attempt to base justification and salvation directly on Christ's death are problematic and are based on a misinterpretation of the New Testament teaching.²⁸ Rather than looking outside of the concrete history of Jesus of Nazareth to some type of theological explanation in order to understand the cross, Jesus' death should be seen in the context of the story we find in the Gospels: after dedicating his

²⁸See my articles "The Cross and the Curse: Galatians 3.13 and Paul's Doctrine of Redemption," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 81 (2001), pp. 3-32, and "Why was Jesus Crucified? Theology, History and the Story of Redemption," in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54,4 (2001), pp. 484-503.

life to his God-given mission of bringing about a new covenant people who would practice God's righteousness and thus be acceptable to God, Jesus was threatened with the cross; and due to his total commitment to that mission, he did not shrink from the cross, but was faithful to the end, and went to his death offering his life up to God, placing his work, his community of followers and himself in God's hands, trusting in God that what he had constantly sought for others (namely, both their justification and sanctification, and hence their salvation) might still come to pass through him. God responded by granting Jesus what he sought, raising him from the dead and exalting him to heaven so that he might finish what he had begun during his ministry; therefore, nothing can now prevent him from bringing about the salvation that believers anxiously await. Jesus' resurrection can thus be understood as an affirmative response on God's part to the implicit petition Jesus made on behalf of others in death, in which he implored God to forgive and accept the members of his community in whom he had sought to bring about a new life of righteousness; by raising Jesus so that he might return to save all who come to form part of that community, God has already in effect granted them forgiveness and acceptance. This acceptance is based on the fact that, because Christ has been exalted to power and they live under him, they will some day be perfected as God wants; in the meantime, as Luther says, God accepts or "tolerates" them even in the present by virtue of Christ's intercession on their behalf. It is as if Christ were before God (both as he went to his death and now as risen and exalted) asking God to be patient with those whom he was and is actively working to transform, and to overlook their sins until he completes his work in them.

Thus Christ can be said to have "satisfied" God's justice or "made satisfaction" for our sins in that, through his faithfulness unto death to the task given him by God, he has ensured that God will some day have the perfectly obedient and righteous people God always desired, because now that he has been raised to power as a result of that faithfulness, nothing can stop him from completing that task. It must always be remembered that the only thing that could ever "satisfy" God was not the death of Christ *per se*, or having the penalty or consequences of human sin be endured by Christ as humanity's substitute, but *seeing human beings themselves come to practice the justice and righteousness he demands*. Similarly, it can properly be said that Christ has made atonement and brought about reconciliation with God through his death, even though it must be stressed that *it is not Christ's death that effects atonement or reconciliation*; the basis for both atonement and reconciliation with God is the change occurring *in nobis* through God's past, present and future activity through Christ and the Spirit. Christ's faithfulness unto death is atoning in that, because it led to his being raised by God, it ensures that he will complete the work of transforming human hearts and lives for which he lived and died; ultimately, this transformation of human beings, obtained by Christ through his death, is the only thing that could ever make up for human sin in God's eyes and bring about their reconciliation to God. Christ's total dedication to the task given him by God to the very end can also be said to have "merited" our salvation, as long as it is remembered that he died as a result of his efforts to bring about in others a new life of obedience to God's will. Strictly speaking, therefore, what merits our salvation is the past, present and future activity of Christ aimed at bringing about *in nobis* the God-pleasing life of righteousness, since that activity ensures that

this righteousness will some day become a full reality in us.

Therefore, the basis upon which Christ intercedes to God *pro nobis* is his work *in nobis* through which he accomplishes our transformation. In that case, while justification and forgiveness are still based on the new life of righteousness brought about by Christ, as both the analytic understanding of justification and the Finnish interpretation of Luther maintain, this new life of righteousness is not to be attributed to some type of mysterious "effect" produced upon believers by Christ dwelling in them, or to a "happy exchange" of some kind of substance or status. The *power* of sin in believers is taken away, not because it is transferred to Christ in some way, but because believers are filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered by God's Word and the Sacraments in the context of the community of God's people to follow Christ as their Lord, heeding his word and example so as to fulfill God's law (albeit imperfectly) in the way he taught. And ultimately, sin's power will be overcome fully in believers when Christ comes to "change our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21). Similarly, the *guilt* or *penalty* of sin is taken away, not because it is assumed by Christ, but merely because God graciously forgives the sins of believers and remits their penalty, "not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19), in view of the new people they are becoming in Christ. God actually *forgives sins freely* rather than demanding satisfaction or punishment for sins. Thus, there is no reason or need to posit any type of exchange, transfer or substitution.

Of course, to maintain that God overlooks our sins and imperfections on account of Christ's intercession *pro nobis* is problematic in that it seems to undermine once more any basis for demanding that believers practice the

obedience and righteousness God commands. If believers can always depend on Christ to "make up" for whatever they are lacking in faith, righteousness or repentance, in theory they can practice sin and injustice freely and simply trust in God to forgive them for Christ's sake. This is a problem common to virtually all Christian theologies. The Roman Catholic tradition attempts to avoid the problem somewhat by requiring believers to make some type of satisfaction or reparation for their sins, so that there is some cost involved for them if they choose to disobey; yet still they are given the assurance that through the merits of Christ their penitence is acceptable to God.²⁹ Thus it can be argued that even here there is an "easy way out" for those who willingly refuse to obey God's commandments. This means that, just as there is no absolute basis for confidence of salvation other than faith, there is also no absolute basis for demanding that believers *must* practice righteousness and obedience to be saved, as long as the possibility of forgiveness through Christ is offered; and if this possibility is denied, then there is no longer any Gospel, and believers are left to despair in their own efforts and earn their own salvation. Such an idea is rightly rejected by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike.

Perhaps the best response to this difficulty is once again to posit an understanding of faith as placing one's life entirely in God's hands. In this case, the "must" needs to be complemented both by a "should," in that believers are to be exhorted to cling to Christ and live under him, and by a "will," in that a life lived in faith in

²⁹Council of Trent, Sixth Session, "Decree concerning justification," Ch. 14; see also Fourteenth Session, "Decree concerning the Most Holy Sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction," Chaps. 1, 8, 9.

Christ will produce good works, as a good tree produces good fruits. One way or another, what is involved is calling on believers to trust fully in God, looking not to themselves, but to God alone both for forgiveness and for the righteousness and obedience God demands and at the same time graciously gives in Christ.

CONCLUSION

In light of what we have seen here, the adoption of a strictly analytic understanding of justification similar to that identified by Karl Holl in Luther's thought, together with a proper interpretation of *sola fide* and a revised understanding of the role played by Christ's death in human salvation, may contribute to resolving a number of the difficulties traditionally associated with the doctrines of justification found in the different Christian traditions, while at the same time addressing the

main concerns behind those doctrines. Of course, to adopt such views would involve a departure from much of what has traditionally been taught regarding justification in both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, given the fact that both Luther's analytic doctrine of justification and the understanding of the cross outlined above are in many ways different from what is found in these traditions. Yet it is precisely these differences that may provide a fresh perspective from which to work towards building an even greater consensus among Christians regarding the doctrine of justification, as well as for addressing further the many theological and soteriological questions that continue to divide them.

David A. Brondos

Image: Eugene Siberdt, Martin Luther Translating the Bible, 1898 ([Wikipedia Commons](#))