



Why Does Faith Justify?

*Reconsidering the
Basis for Justification
in the Thought of Martin Luther*

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Of all the teachings of Martin Luther, none is generally considered to be more central to his thought than the doctrine of justification by faith. There can be little doubt that, for Luther, that doctrine constitutes the very essence of the biblical gospel.

Yet while the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith in Luther's thought may be beyond debate, the manner in which he understood that doctrine continues to raise many questions. What exactly did he mean when he spoke of justification? How did he understand and define justifying faith? And why is it that faith in Christ justifies?

Since the sixteenth century, Luther has been interpreted as having answered questions such as these in essentially the same way as the other Protestant Reformers of his day did. A careful analysis of Luther's writings, however, reveals that in some ways his understanding of justification by faith and the gospel was fundamentally different from that of the other theologians of the Reformation period. In particular, Luther's conception of justification as a healing process can be seen as providing the basis for an alternative paradigm for the doctrine of justification by faith that resolves many of the problems associated with the traditional Protestant formulations of that doctrine and also recaptures the logic and power of the New Testament gospel.

**The Development of the Protestant Understanding of
Justification and the Work of Christ**

While prior to Luther's time the Roman Catholic Church had never adopted officially any clearly-defined understanding of the doctrine of justification and the role of Christ and his death in the justification of believers, certain aspects of the thought of Anselm of

Canterbury (1033–1109) had become central to Roman Catholic teaching. In particular, in his work *Cur Deus homo*, Anselm had argued that, because of God's justice, God could not freely forgive sinful human beings their sins and disobedience to his will but required that either satisfaction be made for those sins or else that they receive the punishment due to them. On this basis, Anselm argued that Christ had made satisfaction to God's justice by restoring to God the honor and obedience due to him in his sufferings and death, thus paying on behalf of human beings the debt that they owed to God and were unable to pay themselves. In this way, human beings were delivered from the punishment to which they were subject on account of their sins.

In *Cur Deus homo*, however, Anselm affirmed that Christ had made satisfaction *only for past sins* and spoke of the need for those who continued to sin to make satisfaction for their present sins themselves, while nevertheless adding that whatever imperfect satisfaction they made would be accepted by God by virtue of the satisfaction made by Christ on their behalf.¹ Although when Anselm spoke of "past sins" he did not specify to which sins he was referring, among Roman Catholic theologians it came to be taught that Christ had made satisfaction to God for the sins that were "past" in relation to the baptism of believers, that is, the original sin and guilt they inherited from Adam and any actual sins they may

¹ Anselm's clearest statement of this idea is found in *Cur Deus homo* 2.16 in a parable he tells about a king, an innocent servant, and a people who have offended the king. Clearly associating the king with God and the servant with Christ, Anselm affirms that once the servant has rendered satisfaction to the king, the king "grants absolution from *all past guilt* to all those who either before or after that day acknowledge their desire both to obtain pardon on the basis of the work done on that day and to assent to the agreement then contracted. And [the king grants that] *if they sin again after this pardon*, they will be pardoned anew through the efficacy of this agreement, *provided they are willing to make an acceptable satisfaction and thereafter to mend their ways*" (Quotation taken from *Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson; Toronto/New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1976).

have committed prior to being baptized.² Therefore, in order for believers to continue to be justified or declared righteous by God, it remained necessary for them to make satisfaction for the sins they continued to commit through various means, such as penance, masses, indulgences, the adoption of the monastic life, the veneration of relics, and other similar works or deeds.

Following Luther, the Reformers regarded this understanding of justification as highly oppressive in that it served as the basis upon which the Church exploited the faithful by constantly demanding that they make satisfaction for their sins through means such as those just mentioned. Most of the Reformers therefore altered Anselm's understanding of Christ's work by claiming that Christ had made satisfaction for *all* human sins, including especially not only the past sins of believers but also the sins they continued to commit. For that reason, believers did not need to make satisfaction for sins themselves. In order to be justified and saved, they merely needed to accept and receive through faith the satisfaction and forgiveness that Christ had made on their behalf.³

The Reformers also departed from Anselm's understanding of Christ's work by maintaining that what had satisfied God's justice was not the honor and obedience that Christ had rendered to God in his passion and death but the fact that he had endured in the place of human beings the penalty or punishment to which they were subject on account of their sins. Whereas in Anselm's thought the satisfaction rendered by Christ had made it possible for God to leave human sins *unpunished*, according to the Reformers, in Christ's

² Luther himself refers to his idea in his *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*: "The pope and the cardinals write that Christ rendered satisfaction only for original sin and that we ourselves must atone for the actual and daily sins" (American edition of *Luther's Works* [hereafter *LW*], ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress/St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986, 22:333).

³ On these ideas and those that follow in this section, see my work *Redeeming the Gospel: The Christian Faith Reconsidered*, *Studies in Lutheran History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 62-75.

passion and death the punishment due to those sins had been inflicted in its entirety on Christ in their stead. By adopting the idea of penal substitution to understand Christ's death, the Reformers *equated* satisfaction with the suffering of punishment rather than seeing the two as alternatives in the way that Anselm had. While in this regard the Reformers' understanding of Christ's work represented a departure from Anselm's thought, they retained fully the idea that constituted the basis for Anselm's argument, namely, that God's justice and perfection would not allow God simply to forgive sins freely without receiving satisfaction for those sins.

Their alteration of Anselm's understanding of the manner in which Christ made satisfaction for human sins made it necessary for many of the Reformers also to establish a distinction between Christ's *active* and *passive* righteousness in order to avoid affirming that *both* the honor and obedience Christ had rendered to God *and* the full punishment for human sins that he had endured in his death had satisfied God's justice. In that case, God's justice would have demanded *both* that the honor and obedience that sinful human beings owed him be restored to him by Christ *and* that the penalty for their sins be inflicted on Christ as their substitute. In order to avoid this difficulty, many of the Reformers claimed that the honor and obedience to God that Christ manifested in his life, passion, and death had not satisfied God's justice in themselves but rather had qualified Christ to die in the place of sinful human beings as their innocent substitute. In this way, what actually constituted the basis for the justification of believers was Christ's *passive* obedience or righteousness, that is, the fact that in his passion and death he had endured the penalty that their sins deserved, rather than Christ's *active* obedience or righteousness, that is, his perfect fulfillment of God's law in his life, passion, and death.

Among the Reformers, it also became common to speak of Christ's righteousness being reckoned to believers on account of their faith. According to this idea, because those who come to faith in Christ become clothed or covered with his righteousness, when God looks at them he no longer sees their sins but only Christ's righteousness. On that basis, God declares them righteous in a

forensic sense, since the righteousness that enables them to be justified in God's sight is not their own but that of Christ, which is imputed to them. In this regard, the Reformers went beyond what the New Testament affirms explicitly, since even though Paul speaks of the faith of believers being reckoned to them as righteousness, he never affirms that Christ's own righteousness is reckoned to them. Many of the Reformers often implied as well that what is imputed to believers is Christ's *active* righteousness, that is, his perfect sinlessness and fulfillment of God's law, rather than his *passive* righteousness, thus overlooking or disregarding the problems raised by claiming that both Christ's active righteousness and his passive righteousness constitute the basis upon which believers are justified.

The Reformers' understanding of justification and Christ's work raises other problems as well. If Christ made satisfaction for the sins of all human beings in their entirety, it is not clear why it is necessary for human beings to come to faith in Christ in order to be spared from the punishment and condemnation to which they are subject on account of their sins. If those who do *not* come to faith in Christ remain subject to punishment and condemnation for their sins, in effect the penalty for their sins is being exacted twice by being inflicted first on Christ and subsequently on them as well. It also seems to be a misnomer to speak of the *forgiveness* of sins, since strictly speaking God's justice did not *allow* for forgiveness but instead demanded that each and every sin committed receive its due punishment by having that punishment inflicted either on Christ or on human beings themselves. Furthermore, even though faith in Christ is said to be merely the *means* by which believers receive justification and the forgiveness of their sins, in essence such faith also becomes a *condition* or *basis* for their justification and forgiveness, since God has decreed that no one can be justified or declared righteous without that faith. There seems to be no necessary or intrinsic reason why God has determined to demand that people come to faith in Christ in order to spare them from the punishment which their sins deserved and which Christ has already endured in their stead.

Such an understanding of justification also raises the problem of why it is necessary for believers to put aside their sin and live a life of righteousness. Supposedly, their justification and salvation does not depend on these things. While it is claimed that their faith in Christ *should* or *will* lead them to seek to avoid sin and practice righteousness, there seems to be no basis for *demanding* these things from them, since to claim that they cannot be saved without them or will forfeit their justification and salvation if they do not seek to live righteously and instead willfully persist in sin would be to make their justification and salvation depend on their own deeds and way of life rather than on Christ alone and faith alone. Of course, such an understanding of justification also equates it with the forgiveness of sins and leads to a view of salvation in which it is virtually reduced to being spared from the punishment due to one's sins in the afterlife.

Luther's Understanding of Justification and the Work of Christ

It is often recognized that Luther was not a systematic theologian. This is evident from the fact that throughout his writings Luther repeatedly affirms the ideas associated with Anselm's understanding of Christ's work and the penal substitution idea found in the writings of other Reformers without acknowledging the problems, redundancies, and even contradictions involved in doing so. Thus he speaks of Christ meriting God's favor and making satisfaction to God and God's justice for sinful human beings through his obedience to God and fulfillment of the law in the way that Anselm did, while at the same time affirming that Christ satisfied God's justice and wrath at the sins of believers by enduring the penalty or punishment that their sins deserved in their place. At the same time, Luther regards Christ's active obedience to the law as something that is reckoned to believers and constitutes the basis

upon which they are accepted by God as righteous.⁴ In fact, Luther also adopted certain of the patristic interpretations of Christ's work that Anselm had explicitly rejected in formulating his own interpretation, such as the idea that Christ had overcome the devil by concealing his divinity under his humanity so that when the devil swallowed up Christ in his death he was unable to keep Christ under his power.⁵

Perhaps the best example of the needless redundancies or even mutually exclusive ideas repeated by Luther in his explanations of justification and the work of Christ is his teaching regarding the *fröhliche Wechsel* or "joyous exchange" between Christ and believers.⁶ According to this teaching, what enables believers to be justified is that their sins have been transferred to Christ, who endured on their behalf the punishment due to those sins, while at the same time the perfect righteousness of Christ is reckoned or given to them by God. If righteousness is understood in terms of being free of sin and guilt, however, these two ideas must be considered at the very least redundant and probably even mutually exclusive as well. If the sins of believers are not taken into account by God because they are covered by Christ's righteousness, which is reckoned or given to believers, then they are already righteous and there is no need for their sins or their punishment to be transferred to Christ. Conversely, if their sins and the punishment due to those sins have been transferred to Christ or assumed by him, then they are already righteous in the sense of being entirely free of sins and there is no need for Christ's righteousness to be reckoned or given to them as well in order for them to be justified.

Alongside all of these ideas in Luther's writings, however, we also encounter an understanding of justification, faith, and the work

⁴ For examples of these ideas in Luther's writings, see *LW* 13:347; 22:147, 392-93; 25:31-33, 284; 26:32-33, 132, 277-78, 325; 31:282; 34:119; 52:252-53, 280.

⁵ See, for example, *LW* 22:24; 26:267.

⁶ See *LW* 26:167-68, 278, 284; 31:298, 351-52; 51:316.

of Christ that is unlike anything found in Roman Catholic teaching prior to Luther's day or in the writings of the other sixteenth-century Reformers. According to this understanding, the basis upon which God pronounces believers righteous in the present is not merely the righteousness of Christ but also *their own future righteousness*. In other words, when God looks at them, he pronounces them righteous not simply because they are covered by Christ's righteousness but also because God sees in them the righteous persons that they are in the process of becoming through their faith in Christ, a process that will reach its culmination when they are transformed and made perfect through their death and resurrection, together with creation as a whole. The German theologian Karl Holl compared Luther's thought in this regard to that of a sculptor who looks at a block of marble before beginning to sculpt it and already sees in it the finished sculpture that he intends to chisel out of it.⁷

Luther generally combines the idea that God regards believers as righteous by virtue of the fact that through their faith in Christ they are being *made* righteous and will one day become so fully with the idea that God regards believers as righteous by virtue of the righteousness of Christ that is reckoned or given to them. In these cases, however, the righteousness of Christ reckoned or given to them is in essence a temporary or stopgap measure that they require only in the present or interim until they are actually made fully righteous. In these passages, Luther uses words and phrases such as "until," "meanwhile," and "in the meantime" to express this idea. One of the clearest affirmations of these ideas is found in a passage from his 1521 work *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther which Were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull*:

For this is the abundant grace of the New Testament and the surpassing mercy of the Heavenly Father that, through baptism and repentance, we begin to become godly and pure. God does not

⁷ See Karl 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), 1:117-25.

hold against us whatever sin is still to be driven out, *because of the beginning that we have made in godliness and because of our steady battle against sin which we continue to expel*. He chooses not to charge this sin against us, though, *until we become perfectly pure*, he might justly do so. For this reason, he has given us a bishop, namely Christ, who is without sin and who is to be our representative *until we too become entirely pure like him* [Heb. 7:26; Rom. 8:34]. *Meanwhile, the righteousness of Christ must be our cover. His perfect godliness must be our shield and defense. For his sake, the sin that remains in those who believe in him may not be charged against them, as St. Paul so masterfully describes it in Rom. 3[:24–26] (LW 32:28).*

Here Luther clearly states that the reason why God does not hold the sins of believers against them is that they have begun to become godly and pure and battle against their sinfulness. He also affirms, however, that some day believers will become “perfectly pure” so that they will no longer have any sin that God might hold against them and that *in the meantime, until that day comes, the righteousness of Christ must be their cover and defense against God’s wrath. As he writes elsewhere with regard to Christ, “For he alone is our righteousness until we are made to conform with his image” (LW 31:64).*

Throughout his writings, Luther repeatedly uses the language of *healing* to describe the manner in which believers are freed from the power of sin that resides in them so as to be able to live in justice, love, and righteousness. According to this imagery, sin is comparable to an illness that does them harm and will eventually kill them. It should be stressed that this involves defining the problem faced by believers in terms of a sinful *power* or *tendency* that is stronger than them and needs to be overcome in them rather than in terms of their guilt before God and their liability to punishment on account of that guilt. Luther often uses the terms “concupiscence” and “tinder” to refer to this sinful power or tendency, which he also equates with original sin. This understanding of sin is in essence that which Paul presents in Roman 7:14–23, where he speaks of not being able to do the good he desires or to observe God’s commandments in the way he would like due to the sin that dwells in his flesh. In a

number of passages from his writings, Luther affirms that the reason that God does not take into account the sin of believers is that, as a result of their faith in Christ, they are in the process of being healed from that sin and that, as long as they continue in that faith, God can be certain that one day that healing will be complete so that they will no longer have any sin in them.

Everyone who believes in Christ is righteous, not yet fully in point of fact, but in hope. For he has begun to be justified and healed, like the man who was half-dead (Luke 10:30). *Meanwhile*, however, while he is being justified and healed, the sin that is left in his flesh is not imputed to him. This is because Christ, who is entirely without sin, has now become one with his Christian and intercedes for him with the Father. Thus after Paul has said that through the law of his members he was made captive to sin (Rom. 7:23), he declares: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh" (Rom. 8:1, 4). He does not say "no sin." On the contrary, much sin still remains; but it is not imputed for condemnation. It was with reference to this mystery, it seems, that Christ said: "It is finished" before he died on the cross (John 19:30). Therefore all such statements praising the righteous are to be understood in the same way, namely, that the righteous are not wholly perfect in themselves, but God accounts them righteous and forgives them because of their faith in his Son Jesus Christ, who is our Propitiation (LW 27:227-28).

But this concupiscence is always in us, and therefore the love of God is never in us, unless it is begun by grace, and until the concupiscence which still remains and which keeps us from "loving God with all our heart" (Luke 10:27) is healed and by mercy not imputed to us as sin, and *until it is completely removed and the perfect love for God is given to the believers and those who persistently agitate for it to the end* (LW 25:262).

From this it is clear how faith justifies without works and how the imputation of righteousness is necessary nevertheless. Sins remain in us, and God hates them very much. Because of them it is necessary for us to have the imputation of righteousness, which comes to us on account of Christ, who is given to us and grasped

by our faith. *Meanwhile*, 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*. Then there will be new heavens and a new earth (Rev. 21:1), in which righteousness will dwell (LW 26:235).

After baptism original sin is like a wound which has begun to heal. It is really a wound, yet it is becoming better and is constantly in the process of healing, although it is still festering, is painful, etc. So original sin remains in the baptized until their death, although it is in the process of being rooted out. *It is rendered harmless, and so it cannot accuse or damn us (LW 54:20)*.

For God has not yet justified us, that is, he has not made us perfectly righteous or declared our righteousness perfect, but he has made a beginning in order that he might make us perfect. Hence we read in James 1:18: "That we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." This is pointed out in the story of the man half dead who was brought to the inn. After his wounds had been bandaged he was not yet cured, but he was on the way to being made whole (LW 25:245).

Several points from these quotes are particularly worthy of note. Luther here speaks of justification not as a divine declaration regarding a forensic status of righteousness but as a *healing process* which has begun and is not yet complete. In the first of these passages, in fact, he even equates *being justified* with *being healed*. The basis upon which believers are forgiven and accepted as righteous is that, through their faith in Christ, by which they grasp and cling to him, they are in the process of being healed from their sinfulness.

While Christ propitiates or assuages God's wrath against them through his intercession, the basis upon which he does so is that he is in the process of healing them from their sinfulness. On that same basis, God accepts them in the present, even though they continue to sin because they have not yet been fully healed. This healing process, which involves not only being delivered from their sinfulness but also being brought to live in love, is not something that believers bring about in themselves but rather something that God brings about in them through Christ and their faith in him. That

same faith leads them to “agitate” for healing in the sense that they ardently long for that healing and implore God to bring it about. At the same time, due to God’s promises regarding the resurrection of the body and the new world of righteousness that he intends to bring about, believers can be assured that one day the healing process will be complete. On that same basis, they can have full certainty that God accepts them just as they are even now, despite their ongoing sinfulness, which they despise and repudiate just as much as God does due to the manner in which it does them harm and prevents them from being the persons that God wishes them to be for their own good out of love for them. Of course, out of love for themselves they too wish to become those persons, since only in that way can they be happy and whole.

In a couple of the passages just cited, Luther compares Christ to the good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37 who poured oil and wine into the wounds of the man beaten by thieves and bandaged those wounds up before taking him to an inn where he might continue to recover until he became healed completely. Luther refers repeatedly to this image throughout his writings and also draws on the comparison Jesus makes between himself and a physician in the Gospels to speak of the manner in which he heals believers from their sinfulness:

After baptism there still remains much of the old Adam. For, as we have often said, it is true that sin is forgiven in baptism, but *we are not yet altogether clean*, as is shown in the parable of the Samaritan, who carried the man wounded by robbers to an inn [Luke 10:30-37]. He did not take care of him in such a way that he healed him at once, but rather bound up his wounds and poured on oil. The man who fell among robbers suffered two injuries. First, everything that he had was taken from him, he was robbed; and second, he was wounded, so that he was half-dead and would have died, if the Samaritan had not come to him. Adam fell among the robbers and implanted sin in us all. If Christ, the Samaritan, had not come, we should all have had to die. He it is who binds our wounds, carries us into the church and is now healing us. So we are now under the Physician’s care. The sin, it is true, is wholly forgiven, but *it has not*

yet been wholly purged. If the Holy Spirit is not ruling men, they become corrupt again; but the Holy Spirit must cleanse the wounds daily. Therefore this life is a hospital; the sin has really been forgiven, but *it has not yet been healed* (LW 51:373).

At this point, the parables of the gospel shed light on the problem. First, the one about the Samaritan [Luke 10:29–37] who placed the half-dead man on his beast, poured wine and oil into his wounds, and asked the groom to take care of him. He did not straightway cure him altogether. Similarly, we too are not entirely cured by baptism or repentance, but *a beginning is made in us and the bandage of the first grace binds our wounds so that our healing may proceed from day to day until we are cured.* For this reason, St. James says in James 1[:18], “God has given us birth through his word, out of his sheer gracious will, without our merit, that we should be a first fruit of his work or creatures.” This is as if to say, “So long as we live here on earth, believing in his word, *we are a work that God has begun, but not yet completed; but after death we shall be perfect, a divine work without sin or fault*” (LW 32:24).

Thus original sin is restless even in us, but since we are under the doctor, under Christ, and live mindful of our illness, we shall be blessed. For that poison decreases more and more from day to day and we always wipe out, wash, and cleanse the poison, with the poison becoming less *until it is totally extinguished by fire in the judgment.* In the meantime we endure the cure of a living physician, that is, of Christ. We hear the Word, pray, read. As much as we can, we recover through the Word (LW 34:182–83).

Here it is worth noting that the manner in which Christ is said to heal believers as their physician is not through some type of mystical union or the infusion of some mysterious power such as grace or righteousness (*gratia infusa* or *iustitia infusa*), but through his Word and the response of believers to that Word.

To be sure, elsewhere Luther does speak of righteousness as something that is infused or instilled in believers, but this need not be understood in terms of some type of mysterious substance or power. In his 1519 sermon on the *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, for example, he speaks of Christ himself acting in believers to free them

from their “old Adam” and instill in them a righteousness that is not their own but *his*. Once again, Luther sees this as a process that begins in the present life but does not reach perfection until believers die and are raised to new life:

Therefore this alien righteousness (*iustitia aliena*), 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* (LW 31:299).

In this passage, it is clear that the “alien righteousness” of which Luther speaks is not merely a forensic status or standing before God but a righteous way of living and behaving.

For Luther, the role of God’s law is not simply to bring people to the awareness that they are guilty of sin and are subject to God’s wrath but also to enable them to realize that they are sick and desperately in need of help. Once they come to this realization, through faith they seek from Christ not only forgiveness but also the help and healing they need and cry out to God with sighs and tears asking him to deliver them from the sin and illness that hold them in bondage.

Now once a man has thus been humbled by the Law and brought to the knowledge of himself, then he becomes truly repentant; for true repentance begins with fear and with the judgment of God. He sees that he is such a great sinner that he cannot find any means to be delivered from his sin by his own strength, effort, or works. Then he understands correctly what Paul means when he says that man is the slave and captive of sin, that God has consigned all men to sin, and that the whole world is guilty in the sight of God. . . .

Now he begins to sigh: “Then who can come to my aid?” Terrified by the Law, he despairs of his own strength; he looks about and sighs for the help of the Mediator and Savior. Then there comes, at the appropriate time, the saving Word of the Gospel, which says: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven (Matt. 9:2).

Believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for your sins. If you feel your sins, do not consider them in yourself but remember that they have been transferred to Christ, 'with whose stripes you are healed' (Is. 53:3)."

This is the beginning of salvation. By this means we are delivered from sin and justified, and eternal life is granted to us, not for our own merits and works but for our faith, by which we take hold of Christ. . . . Here it is to be noted that these three things are joined together: faith, Christ, and acceptance or imputation. Faith takes hold of Christ and has him present, enclosing him as the ring encloses the gem. And whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteous. This is the means and the merit by which we obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness. "Because you believe in me," God says, "and your faith takes hold of Christ, whom I have freely given to you as your Justifier and Savior, therefore be righteous." Thus God accepts you or accounts you righteous only on account of Christ, in whom you believe (*LW* 26:131-32).

In passages such as this one, Luther undoubtedly speaks not only of the need for believers to be healed from their sinfulness but also of their need to be saved from God's wrath and the judgment and condemnation to which they are subject on account of their sins. Luther also attributes this salvation to Christ's death on behalf of believers. The cause of God's anger, however, is not merely the *guilt* of believers but the power of sin that resides in them and holds them in bondage as its slaves. It is this bondage or slavery from which they must be delivered and not merely God's wrath. For that reason, God's wrath against the sin that remains in their flesh is not *contrary* to God's love for human beings but is an *expression* of that love, since what God desires is to *see them freed* from their bondage and slavery to sin. Furthermore, what provokes God to anger is not merely the sin that holds human beings captive but their refusal to accept the help that he offers them through Christ. God cannot heal sinners from their sickness if they do not acknowledge that sickness but instead insist that they are not in need of healing:

Now, when sins are unrecognized, there is no room for a remedy and no hope of a cure, because men will not submit to the touch of a healer when they imagine themselves well and in no need of a physician. Therefore, the law is necessary to make sin known so that when its gravity and magnitude are recognized, man in his pride who imagines himself well may be humbled and may sigh and gasp for the grace that is offered in Christ (*LW* 33:262).

This is like the case of the doctor (as Persius tells us) who wishes to heal his patient, but finds that he is a man who denies that he is sick, calling the doctor a fool and an even sicker person than himself for presuming to cure a healthy man. And because of the man's resistance the doctor cannot get around to recommending his skill and his medicine. For he could do so only if the sick man would admit his illness and permit him to cure him by saying, "I certainly am sick in order that you may be praised, that is, be a man of health and be spoken of as such, that is, when you have healed me" (*LW* 25:202-3).

Although Luther speaks frequently of God's wrath at sin and sinners, in a number of passages from his writings he seems to suggest that those who perceive God as wrathful do so mistakenly. Rather than seeing these passages as a denial of the idea that God is truly wrathful, however, it is probably best to understand them in the sense that what provokes God to wrath is God's love, since what he seeks is to rid human beings of the sin and sickness that destroy their lives through Christ so that they may be healed from those things:

Then how can these two contradictory things both be true at the same time, that I am a sinner and deserve divine wrath and hate, and that the Father loves me? Here nothing can intervene except Christ the Mediator. "The Father," he says, "loves you, not because you are deserving of love, but because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father" (John 16:27).

Thus a Christian remains in pure humility. He really and truly feels that there is sin in him and that on this account he is worthy of wrath, the judgment of God, and eternal death. Thus he is humbled in this life. Yet at the same time he remains in a pure and holy

pride, by which he turns to Christ. Through him he strengthens himself against this feeling of divine wrath and judgment; and he believes that he is loved by the Father, not for his own sake but for the sake of Christ, the Beloved (*LW* 26:235).

But this is what it is: if you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then you see immediately that you have a gracious God. For faith leads you up and opens up the heart and will of God for you. There you see sheer, superabundant grace and love. That is exactly what it means “to see God,” not with physical eyes, with which no one can see him in this life, but with faith, which sees his fatherly, friendly heart, where there is no anger or displeasure. Anyone who regards him as angry is not seeing him correctly, but has pulled down a curtain and cover, more, a dark cloud over his face. But in Scriptural language “to see his face” means to recognize him correctly as a gracious and faithful Father, on whom you can depend for every good thing. This happens only through faith in Christ (*LW* 21:37).

When, amid these terrors, the mind has thus been crushed by the hammer of the Law and the judgment of God, this is really the place, time, and occasion to grasp this divine wisdom. Then the heart consoles itself and is sure that when God is wrathful against sinners, he is wrathful only against those who are hard and callous. About those who feel the burden of their sins, it is said (Ps. 147:11): “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him” (*LW* 12:316).

The thought of God’s wrath is false even of itself, because God promises mercy; yet this false thought becomes true because you believe it to be true. However, the other thought, that God is gracious to sinners who feel their sins, is simply true and remains so. You should not suppose that it will be this way because you believe this way. Rather be assured that a thing which is sure and true of itself becomes more sure and true when you believe it. On the other hand, if you believe that God is wrathful, you will certainly have him wrathful and hostile to you. But this will be a demonic, idolatrous, and perverse thought, because God is served if you fear him and grasp Christ as the object of mercy.

This is true theology about the true God and the true worship of God. It is false theology that God is wrathful to those who acknowledge their sins. Such a God is not in heaven or anywhere else, but is the idol of a perverse heart. The true God says (Ezek. 33:11): "I do not want the death of the sinner, but that he might turn from his way and live" (LW 12:322).

In Luther's thought, therefore, what God ultimately seeks is not merely to *forgive* believers their sins but to *heal* and *free* them of their sinful and destructive way of life through Christ and their faith in him. As soon as they accept this healing by looking to Christ in faith for it, God puts away his wrath at their sins since he knows that their faith will allow such healing to take place. For Luther, therefore, the basis upon which God forgives believers their sins and does not impute those sins to them is not merely Christ's death on their behalf but the fact that *through faith in Christ they are in the process of being healed and will ultimately be healed entirely*. For that reason, even though at present they remain sinners, believers are already regarded as righteous by God:

Thus in ourselves we are sinners, and yet through faith we are righteous by God's imputation. For we believe him who promises to free us, and in the meantime we strive that sin may not rule over us but that we may withstand it until he takes it from us.

It is similar to the case of a sick man who believes the doctor who promises him a sure recovery and *in the meantime* obeys the doctor's order in the hope of the promised recovery and abstains from those things which have been forbidden him, so that he may in no way hinder the promised return to health or increase his sickness until the doctor can fulfill his promise to him. Now is this sick man well? The fact is that he is both sick and well at the same time. He is sick in fact, but he is well because of the sure promise of the doctor, whom he trusts and who has reckoned him as already cured, because he is sure that he will cure him; for *he has already begun to cure him and no longer reckons to him a sickness unto death*. In the same way Christ, our Samaritan, has brought his half-dead man into the inn to be cared for, and he has begun to heal him, having promised him the most complete cure unto eternal life, and he does

not impute his sins, that is, his wicked desires, unto death, but *in the meantime* in the hope of the promised recovery he prohibits him from doing or omitting things by which his cure might be impeded and his sin, that is, his concupiscence, might be increased. Now, is he perfectly righteous? No, for he is at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man; a sinner in fact, but *a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that he will continue to deliver him from sin until he has completely cured him*. And thus he is entirely healthy in hope, but in fact he is still a sinner; but he has the beginning of righteousness, so that he continues more and more always to seek it, yet he realizes that he is always unrighteous (LW 25:260).

Now notice what I said above, that the saints at the same time as they are righteous are also sinners; righteous because they believe in Christ, whose righteousness covers them and is imputed to them, but sinners because they do not fulfill the Law, are not without concupiscence, and are like sick men under the care of a physician; *they are sick in fact but healthy in hope and in the fact that they are beginning to be healthy*, that is, they are “being healed” (LW 25:336).

We, on the other hand, teach and comfort an afflicted sinner this way: “Brother, it is impossible for you to become so righteous in this life that your body is as clear and spotless as the sun. You still have spots and wrinkles (Eph. 5:27), and yet you are holy.” But you say: “How can I be holy when I have sin and am aware of it?” “That you feel and acknowledge sin – this is good. Thank God, and do not despair. It is one step toward health when a sick man admits and confesses his disease.” “But how will I be liberated from sin?” “Run to Christ, the Physician, who heals the contrite of heart and saves sinners. Believe in him. If you believe, you are righteous, because you attribute to God the glory of being almighty, merciful, truthful, etc. You justify and praise God. In short, you attribute divinity and everything to him. And the sin that still remains in you is not imputed but is forgiven for the sake of Christ, in whom you believe and who is perfectly righteous in a formal sense. His righteousness is yours; your sin is his” (LW 26:233).

But because we have only the first fruits of the Spirit and do not yet have the tithes, and because remnants of sin remain in us, we do not keep the Law perfectly. But this is not imputed to us who believe in Christ—in Christ, who was promised to Abraham and has blessed us. For *meanwhile* we are cherished and fed, for the sake of Christ, in the lap of the forbearance of God. We are that wounded man who fell among robbers; whose wounds the Samaritan bound up, pouring on oil and wine; whom he set on his own beast and brought to an inn and took care of; and whom he entrusted to the innkeeper upon departing, with the words: “Take care of him” (Luke 10:30–35). Thus we are cherished *meanwhile* as in an inn, *until the Lord reaches out his hand a second time, as Isaiah says, to deliver us* (Is. 10:10–11) (LW 26:260).

But life, which should daily direct, purify, and sanctify itself according to doctrine, is not yet entirely pure or holy, so long as this maggoty body of flesh and blood is alive. But *as long as it is in the process of purification and sanctification, being continually healed by the Samaritan and no longer decaying in its own impurity, it is graciously excused, pardoned, and forgiven for the sake of the Word, through which it is healed and purified; thus it must be called pure* (LW 41:218).

Once again, this last passage cited makes it clear that for Luther the basis upon which believers are “graciously excused, pardoned, and forgiven” is not merely the death of Christ on their behalf but the process of healing and purification that takes place in them. Furthermore, Luther attributes this healing and purification not only to Christ’s presence in believers but also to the Word that is announced to them.

In a number of these passages, Luther also speaks of the church as the place or instrument through which believers are healed. The church is thus comparable to a hospital or the inn to which the Samaritan takes the man who had been beaten and robbed so that the process of healing may be continued and completed:

If Christ, the Samaritan, had not come, we should all have had to die. He it is who binds our wounds, carries us into the church and is now healing us (LW 51:373).

This life, then, is a life of being healed from sin, it is not a life of sinlessness, with the cure completed and perfect health attained. The church is the inn and the infirmary for those who are sick and in need of being made well. But heaven is the palace of the healthy and the righteous. As blessed Peter says in his Second Epistle [3:13] that the Lord will build “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” Righteousness does not yet dwell here, but it is preparing a dwelling place for itself here in the meantime by healing sin (*LW* 25:262-63).

Of course, for Luther the sacraments are also means by which God begins and continues the process of healing and purifying believers from their sin. Even though they remain wounded and impure, through Word and sacrament they anticipate their full liberation and cleansing from sin and for that reason can be considered healed and pure even now:

According to one, all your works are polluted and unclean on account of that part of you which is God’s adversary; according to the other, you are genuinely pure and righteous. As testimony that you are thus purified, you have the symbol of baptism, through which all sins are most truly forgiven you – entirely forgiven, I say, but not wholly abolished. We believe that the remission of all sins has been without doubt accomplished, but we daily act in the expectation of the total removal and annihilation of all sin (*LW* 32:213).

Christ binds up the hurt and heals the wounds of his people twice: once through the forgiveness of sins which he gained by his death and blood and which he brings to us through his Gospel, holy Sacraments, faith, and Spirit; and again through the resurrection of the dead, when he shall raise us from the dead, completely pure of all sin. Then the hurt will be bound up completely and the wounds healed altogether, and we shall be healthy, sound, and pure in body and soul. Then there will also be a new heaven and earth, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, that is, immeasurably brighter than now (*LW* 12:119).

As many of the passages cited make clear, although Luther often attributes the justification of believers to Christ's work on their behalf *in the past*, he also stresses the work that the risen and exalted Christ carries out in believers *in the present* as the means by which they are justified and healed. He clearly seems to have Christ in his exalted condition in mind when he speaks of him acting as a physician and as the good Samaritan to whom believers are to cling. In this case, the basis for the justification of believers is not merely Christ's work *pro nobis* but also his activity *in nobis*. As their mediator and "bishop," Christ intercedes to God on behalf of believers, yet the basis for this intercession is the fact that he is in the process of healing them of their sin. This idea appears in a passage already cited above as well as several others from Luther's writings:

God does not hold against us whatever sin is still to be driven out, because of the beginning that we have made in godliness and because of our steady battle against sin which we continue to expel. He chooses not to charge this sin against us, though, until we become perfectly pure, he might justly do so. For this reason, he has given us a bishop, namely Christ, who is without sin and who is to be our representative until we too become entirely pure like him [Heb. 7:26; Rom. 8:34]. Meanwhile, the righteousness of Christ must be our cover. His perfect godliness must be our shield and defense. For his sake, the sin that remains in those who believe in him may not be charged against them, as St. Paul so masterfully describes it in Rom. 3[:24–26] (*LW* 32:28).

Now acceptance or imputation is extremely necessary, first, because we are not yet purely righteous, but sin is still clinging to our flesh during this life. God cleanses this remnant of sin in our flesh. In addition, we are sometimes forsaken by the Holy Spirit, and we fall into sins, as did Peter, David, and other saints. Nevertheless, we always have recourse to this doctrine, that our sins are covered and that God does not want to hold us accountable for them (Rom. 4). This does not mean that there is no sin in us, as the sophists have taught when they said that we must go on doing good until we are no longer conscious of any sin; but sin is always present, and the godly feel it. But it is ignored and hidden in the

sight of God, because Christ the Mediator stands between; because we take hold of him by faith, all our sins are sins no longer (*LW* 26:132-33).

23. For we perceive that a man who is justified is not yet a righteous man, but is in the very movement or journey toward righteousness.

24. Therefore, whoever is justified is still a sinner; and yet he is considered fully and perfectly righteous by God who pardons and is merciful.

25. Moreover, God forgives and is merciful to us because Christ, our advocate and priest, intercedes and sanctifies our beginning in righteousness.

26. His righteousness, since it is without defect and serves us like an umbrella against the heat of God's wrath, does not allow our beginning righteousness to be condemned.

27. Now it is certain that Christ or the righteousness of Christ, since it is outside of us and foreign to us, cannot be laid hold of by our works;

28. But faith itself, which is poured into us from hearing about Christ by the Holy Spirit, comprehends Christ.

29. Therefore, faith alone justifies without our works, for I cannot say, "I produce Christ or the righteousness of Christ."

30. Just as I can say, for all that, "I do works either of heavenly righteousness through the Spirit or earthly righteousness by nature."

31. But I must speak thus, "I believe in Christ and afterward I do truly good works in Christ."

32. Therefore, one speaks correctly thus, "We are justified by faith without the works of the law."

33. To be justified includes that idea, namely that we are considered righteous on account of Christ.

34. Nor is any sin, either past or a remainder that is left in the flesh, imputed to us, but as if it were nothing, removed in the meantime by remission.

35. The start of a new creature accompanies this faith and the battle against the sin of the flesh, which this same faith in Christ both pardons and conquers (*LW* 34:152-53).

In these passages and others, for Luther it is as if Christ stood before God pleading with God to forgive believers their sins precisely because he is in the process of healing and cleansing them from those sins. In essence, Christ implores God to *tolerate patiently* the sinfulness of believers in the meantime because at present *he has not yet finished his work of healing, purifying, and transforming them into the new persons that they will become through their faith in him*. The reason that God responds favorably to such a petition is that he can be sure that, as long as believers continue to cling to Christ in faith, that healing and purifying process will continue and some day reach its completion, which is what both God and believers themselves desire.

Why Faith Justifies in the Thought of Luther

Why, then, does faith justify? For Luther, faith in Christ is not a condition that for some unknown or arbitrary reason God has established in order to justify and save human beings. Rather, faith in Christ justifies because it is the means by which believers are healed and liberated from the sinful and destructive behaviors that do them and others harm so that they may live in accordance with God's loving will for their own good. Luther repeatedly stresses that true faith inevitably takes the form of yearning to be freed from one's sinful behavior so as to be able to live in justice, righteousness, and love, as well as fervently imploring God to bring about such a transformation. If those who are truly believers *do not want to sin*, it is not merely because they are afraid of arousing God's anger but because they know that their sin does them harm and destroys their happiness and well-being. For that reason, they *hate* their sin in the same way that God does and desire to be delivered from it. Like St. Paul in Rom 7:14-23, they long to do good rather than evil and become upset and frustrated when the sin that resides in their flesh will not allow it. They therefore cry out to God as Paul does at the end of that passage in order to be delivered from that sin.

At the same time, the reason that believers seek to live in justice, righteousness, and love is not simply to obtain God's favor and approval but because through faith they are brought to see that only

such a way of life can give them peace, happiness, and well-being. Like Paul, they long to obey God and do all that God commands because they are convinced that God seeks nothing but what is good for them and that to live in accordance with God's will brings life and well-being *in and of itself*.

In other words, for Luther faith justifies *because of that to which it leads in the lives and hearts of believers*. It leads them to see that they are sick and diseased on account of their sinfulness and in desperate need of help. At the same time, it leads them to cry out to God for that help and to accept through faith the help and healing that he offers them in Christ. Yet precisely because that healing involves being enabled to put away their sin and live in righteousness for their own good, it is not merely faith in Christ in itself but rather *the transformed life of believers and the practice of righteousness that result from that faith that appease God's wrath at their sins and lead God to accept them as righteous*. The reason that faith justifies, therefore, is that *it is the means by which believers are brought by God and Christ to live in accordance with God's loving will. Faith in Christ saves because it enables believers to be healed and made whole by living and behaving in ways that make healing and wholeness possible. It is this that God ultimately seeks: not merely to forgive believers or declare them righteous but to transform them into righteous people for their own good out of love for them*.

Because for Luther true faith is inseparable from the life of love and righteousness that constitutes the form which that faith inevitably takes, at times Luther can equate faith with righteousness, as if they were the same thing. Luther's idea in this regard is not merely that righteousness *follows* from faith but that in a sense faith itself *is* righteousness:

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has

already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works. . . .

Righteousness, then, is such a faith. It is called “the righteousness of God” because God gives it, and counts it as righteousness for the sake of Christ our Mediator, and makes a man to fulfil his obligation to everybody. For through faith a man becomes free from sin and comes to take pleasure in God’s commandments; thereby he gives God the honor due him, and pays him what he owes him. Likewise he serves his fellow-men willingly, by whatever means he can, and thus pays his debt to everyone. Nature, free will, and our own powers cannot bring this righteousness into being. For as no one can give himself faith, neither can he take away his own unbelief (*LW* 35:370-71).

To say that righteousness is faith and faith is righteousness, however, is not merely to affirm that faith *leads* to a life of righteousness or that God *accounts* faith as righteousness. Because for Luther faith involves trusting in God not only for *forgiveness* but for the *new life of righteousness that God brings about in believers by pure grace*, any who do not strive to live in righteousness cannot be considered to have true faith because they are not truly trusting in God. Those who trust fully in another person will do gladly and willingly whatever that person asks or commands, precisely because they are confident that that person desires only what is good for them. Similarly, those who truly trust in God’s love and sovereignty will be convinced that by definition whatever God commands of them must be for their own good and will therefore strive to do it. If they do not, they cannot truly be said to have faith. In the words of Luther just quoted, “Whoever does not do such works. . . is an unbeliever.” For that reason, *the life of righteousness that is inseparable from faith can also be considered the basis upon which believers are justified*, since in essence *the two are one and the same thing*.

As already noted briefly above, precisely because true faith involves trusting fully in God’s love and goodness, it also leads

believers to *hate their sin* and to hate their old selves, which are subject to the power of sin. If God loves them and wants only what is good for them, then anything that God prohibits must by definition be *bad* and *harmful* for them. They thus seek to do what God commands and to avoid sin not merely because they *ought* to do so or act out of gratitude to God but because they are convinced that to do so is in their best interest due to the intrinsic consequences of behavior that is in conformity with God's will. On that basis, Luther can even posit as a basis for the justification of believers their hatred of sin and their struggle against it, as well as their clamoring to God for the power and ability to overcome it:

I would not believe St. Augustine if St. Paul did not support him when he says in Rom. 8[:1], "Those who believe in Christ have nothing damnable in them, because they do not obey the flesh." He does not say, "They have nothing sinful in them," but, "nothing damnable," for he has said previously that there is sin in the members and the flesh which is at war with the spirit. But since the spirit fights against this sin and does not obey it, it does no harm, and *God judges a man not according to the sin which assails him in the flesh, but according to the spirit which is at war against sin, and is thereby like the will of God, which hates and fights against sin.* It is one thing, then, to say that sins are forgiven and another to say that there is no sin present. After baptism and repentance, all sins are forgiven, but sin remains present until death. But because of God's forgiveness, *this sin does not impair our salvation, provided we fight against it and do not surrender. . . . (LW 32:27-28).*

Just as the patient who is too anxious to recover can surely have a serious relapse, we must also be healed gradually and for a while put up with certain weaknesses. For *it is sufficient that our sin displeases us, even though we do not get entirely rid of it.* For Christ carries all sins, *if only they are displeasing to us,* and thus they are no longer ours but his, and his righteousness in turn is ours (LW 25:254).

And the mistake lies in thinking that this evil can be cured through works, since experience bears witness that in whatever good work we perform, this concupiscence toward evil remains, and no one is

ever cleansed of it, not even the one-day-old infant. But the mercy of God is that this does remain and yet *is not imputed as sin to those who call upon him and cry out for his deliverance*. For such people easily avoid also the error of works, because they so zealously seek to be justified. Thus in ourselves we are sinners, and yet through faith we are righteous by God's imputation. For we believe him who promises to free us, and in the meantime we strive that sin may not rule over us but that we may withstand it until he takes it from us (LW 25:259-60).

For those saints to whom these works were reckoned for righteousness and commended as an example surely did not do them in order that they might be so reckoned; indeed, they were entirely ignorant that they were reckoned righteous by God, but did what they could in their humble faith, always praying that their works might be pleasing to God according to his mercy. Thus after they had first been *reckoned as righteous because of the humble prayer of faith*, then *also their works were so reckoned and approved*. But you stupid perverter, you first begin with the works which have been reckoned, ignoring *the inner groaning by which you were already reckoned as righteous*, just as these saints were (LW 25:264).

For he does not have righteousness who only has a quality, indeed, he is altogether a sinner and an unrighteous man; but *he alone has righteousness whom God mercifully regards as righteous because of his confession of his own unrighteousness and because of his prayer for the righteousness of God* and whom God wills to be considered righteous before him (LW 25:274).

For we must act toward ourselves in the same way that a man does who hates another man. For he does not hate him in imagination, but he sincerely desires to destroy and kill and damn the person whom he hates. Therefore *if we so sincerely want to destroy ourselves that we offer ourselves to hell for the sake of God and his righteousness, we have already made true satisfaction to his righteousness*, and he will be merciful and free us (LW 25:384).

In this last passage, it should not be overlooked that Luther speaks of *believers themselves* making satisfaction to God's justice or righteousness rather than Christ doing so in their stead. Yet the way

that they make satisfaction for their sins is by hating their sin and ardently seeking God's help and healing, precisely because this enables God to transform them into new creatures in the way that God desires and that they themselves desire as well. For this reason, their confession of their own unrighteousness and their prayer for God's righteousness also constitute the basis upon which God accepts them as righteous.

Luther can also affirm that believers are justified and forgiven on the basis of the imperfect righteousness that they attain in the present. God accepts this imperfect righteousness precisely because it anticipates the perfect righteousness that will some day be theirs *as long as they continue to cling to Christ in faith*.

And "in your comeliness and your beauty set out, etc." (Ps. 45:8), that is, the evil work is put away and the residue of sin, that is, the tinder, is *not imputed until it is healed*. Then in the third place it follows that already an ungodly man is justified; for although he is a sinner, he is not ungodly. For that man is called ungodly who is not a worshiper of God but turns away from him and is without fear or reverence for God. But a person who is justified and whose "sins are covered" is already turned toward God and is a godly man; for he worships God and seeks him in hope and fear. And *for this reason* God regards him as a godly and righteous man (LW 25:265).

What then, are we sinners? No, rather we are justified, but by grace. Righteousness is not situated in those qualitative forms, but in the mercy of God. In fact, if you remove mercy from the godly, they are sinners and really have sin, but *it is not imputed to them* because they believe and live under the reign of mercy, *and because sin is condemned and continually put to death in them*. This is a most glorious pardon which comes through baptism. Surely, if you look at it carefully, it is almost greater to accept as righteous him who is still infected by sin than him who is entirely pure. [However], it must not therefore be said that baptism does not remove all sins; it indeed removes all, but not their substance. The power of all, and much of the substance, are taken away. Day by day the substance is removed so that it may be utterly destroyed. I am neither the first

nor the only man to say this since the [days of the] Apostle. Augustine's words are these: "All sin is forgiven in baptism, not so that it no longer exists, but so that it is no longer imputed." Do you hear? Even after forgiveness there is still sin, but it is not imputed. Are you so little satisfied with this ineffable mercy of God which justifies you from all sin, accepting you as if you were without sin, that you push on further to put to death what he has himself already condemned and brought close to extinction? (LW 32:208-9).

I therefore say that every good deed is both accepted and not unaccepted, and, on the other hand, that it is not accepted but unaccepted. It is accepted through pardon, and thus not rejected, for he forgives through mercy that which is less worthy of being accepted. This, however, is unaccepted, that is, sin, insofar as it is an action of the malice of the flesh.

God nevertheless pardons sin in his time and demands a good deed now as well as in the future. For there is no action which God accepts without reserve (such expressions are fictions of the human heart), but he pardons and deals sparingly with all our actions. Those opponents of ours, however, imagine that there might be someone whom he would accept without pardon, which is false. When therefore he pardons, he neither accepts nor does not accept, but he pardons. And thus he accepts his own mercy in our works, that is, the countenance of Job, namely the righteousness of Christ for us [Job 42:8]. For this is the mercy seat of God who forgives and makes pardonable our actions so that we substitute his fulness for that which is deficient in us. For *he alone is our righteousness until we are made to conform with his image* (LW 31:64).

A righteous and faithful man doubtless has both grace and the gift. Grace makes him wholly pleasing so that his person is wholly accepted, and there is no place for wrath in him any more, but the gift heals from sin and from all his corruption of body and soul. It is therefore most godless to say that one who is baptized is still in sin, or that all his sins are not fully forgiven. For what sin is there where God is favorable and wills not to know any sin, and where he wholly accepts and sanctifies the whole man? However, as you see, this must not be attributed to our purity, but solely to the grace of a favorable God. Everything is forgiven through grace, but as yet

not everything is healed through the gift. The gift has been infused, the leaven has been added to the mixture. It works so as to purge away the sin for which a person has already been forgiven, and to drive out the evil guest for whose expulsion permission has been given. In the meantime, while this is happening, it is called sin, and is truly such in its nature; but *now it is sin without wrath, without the law, dead sin, harmless sin, as long as one perseveres in grace and his gift.* As far as its nature is concerned, sin in no way differs from itself before grace and after grace; but it is indeed different in the way it is treated. It is now dealt with otherwise than before. How was it treated previously? In such a way that it was existent, known, and overwhelmed us; but now it is treated as non-existent and as expelled. Despite this, it is truly and by nature sin. Indeed, it is ingratitude and injury to the grace and gift of God to deny that it truly is sin. To be sure, for grace there is no sin, because the whole person pleases; yet for the gift there is sin which it purges away and overcomes. *A person neither pleases, nor has grace, except on account of the gift which labors in this way to cleanse from sin.* God saves real, not imaginary, sinners, and he teaches us to mortify real rather than imaginary sin (LW 32:229).

Thus I was at war with myself, not knowing that it was a true forgiveness indeed, but that this is nevertheless not a taking away of sin except in hope, that is, that the taking away is to be done, and that *by the gift of grace, which begins to take sin away, so that it is not imputed as sin* (LW 25:261).

So far as the words are concerned, this fact is easy, namely, that righteousness is not in us in a formal sense, as Aristotle maintains, but is outside us, solely in the grace of God and in his imputation. In us there is nothing of the form or of the righteousness except that weak faith or the first fruits of faith by which we have begun to take hold of Christ. Meanwhile sin truly remains within us. . . . It is not an idle speculation that Christ was given for my sins and was made accursed for me in order that I might be rescued from eternal death. *To take hold of the Son and to believe in him with the heart as the gift of God causes God to reckon that faith, however imperfect it may be, as perfect righteousness* (LW 26:234).

Faith alone obtains the blessedness of all good things. We have good works and life eternal in this life through faith. Therefore, as Egranus once absurdly inferred from this, should Christ not be the Savior? I reply that faith in Christ, which is not of ourselves, obtains these benefits. Moreover, we have an initial, yet not a perfect, righteousness. For the forgiveness of sins is a continuing divine work, until we die. . . . But that radical sin does not cease, nor will it ever be destroyed, except through the fire of the conflagration. *Meanwhile* in this wicked life, God deals with us in such a way that he does not impute our sins to us (LW 34:190).

In these passages and others, Luther in effect regards the “beginning in righteous” that is taking place in believers through their faith in Christ as the basis for their forgiveness and acceptance by God. *It is because they are being healed and have attained a partial righteousness that will one day be perfected that God regards them as righteous and forgives them their sins rather than imputing those sins to them.*

Rearticulating the Doctrine of Justification by Faith for Today

According to many traditional interpretations of Luther’s teaching on justification, faith is *merely an end in itself* in that it is a condition that God has established for forgiving people their sins and declaring them righteous. In that case, the life of love and righteousness that is to follow from such faith is *not* a basis for the justification of believers and therefore is not a necessary condition for their justification and salvation. What concerns God is simply that people believe that Jesus died to atone for their sins. As long as they fulfill this condition, God declares them righteous, independently of the manner in which they live. God’s objective is merely to be able to reckon them righteous with a forensic righteousness without compromising his own perfect righteousness. And the reason for which God sent his Son into the world was so that he might die to satisfy God’s justice or righteousness and thereby make it possible for him to forgive sinners and accept them as righteous. In many cases, faith becomes the one “work” God

requires of people in order to save them, and justification by faith becomes justification by the *orthodoxy* of one's faith.

On the basis of the passages from Luther's works considered here, however, his understanding of the reason why faith justifies must be regarded as distinct. Faith justifies *because of that to which it leads*, that is, the new life of love and righteousness which actually constitutes the objective of both God and Christ. The reason God declares believers righteous is that through their faith in Christ *they are actually becoming righteous and will become so perfectly as long as they continue to cling to Christ in faith*. What God seeks is not simply to *forgive* but to *heal and transform*. The only thing that can truly please and satisfy God and attain his approval is *the transformation of believers into people who actually live in love and righteousness*.

According to this understanding of the gospel, it is not merely a declaration of forgiveness. Forgiveness itself is not the objective of God or Christ. The objective is the healing and transformation of human beings and the world as a whole. In other words, the gospel *is primarily about healing and only secondarily about forgiveness*. The forgiveness of sins and the declaration of a forensic righteousness are *not in themselves an end but only a means to the real objective of God*. What the gospel proclaims is primarily *that Christ heals*, and that on that basis *God accepts believers as they are now*, confident that as long as they continue to cling to Christ in faith they will be healed fully. God is *not content with merely forgiving believers*. God is only content *in seeing them healed and transformed into new people*. And this is the purpose for which God sent Christ into the world: not so that Christ might obtain his forgiveness but so that he might bring healing for all.

To explain this understanding of justification by faith, I like to use the example of a man addicted to alcohol. The problem of such a man is not primarily that he needs to be *forgiven* for his alcoholism and the destructive behavior that follows upon it but that he needs to be *healed* from his addiction. Simply to tell such a man, "Don't worry about your addiction to alcoholism because God forgives you for it" does not help him and may even encourage him to continue in his alcoholism without struggling against it. What he needs to be

told is that there is a solution for his addition to alcohol, which is what he is told at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or AA.

During the twentieth century, the treatment of alcoholism was radically transformed when it began to be viewed primarily in terms of an *illness, sickness, or addiction* that requires *help and healing* rather than in terms of a *vice* that was simply to be *censured and condemned*. This has been the primary focus of AA. Those who attend an AA meeting can be confident that, rather than being viewed with disapproval or censured as “bad persons,” they will be received with kindness, understanding, and open arms by people who like them have acknowledged that they suffer from the sickness of alcoholism and are in need of the same help as everyone else in the room. If they have not yet fully acknowledged their illness and addiction, they are encouraged to do so in a way that does not vilify or condemn them but rather encourages them to accept the gracious solidarity of their fellow alcoholics. Once they have admitted their need for help, they are given the support, knowledge, and tools they need to begin to recover from their alcoholism. At the same time, they are taught that even if they are able to stop consuming alcohol, in a sense they will remain alcoholics for the rest of their lives and will always continue to require the help and support of others to avoid falling back into their alcoholic behavior. Even if they do have a relapse, however, they know that they will always be received back warmly and enthusiastically by their fellow recovering alcoholics without censure or reproach, no matter how often that may happen.

Because their alcoholism inevitably has led them to engage in behavior that is destructive and harmful both to themselves and others, those who begin the process of recovery are in need of forgiveness on the part of those whom they have hurt. If those who have been harmed by the behavior of a man who is addicted to alcohol choose to forgive him in a sincere and honest manner, the basis upon which they will generally do so is that he has recognized his alcoholism and is seeking and obtaining the help he needs to combat and control it. Receiving that forgiveness may also help him in his recovery process by enabling him to see that by ceasing to

consume alcohol he will be able to restore and rebuild relationships that have been damaged and broken as a result of the behavior that resulted from his addiction. It is also vital that the alcoholic be able to forgive *himself* for many of the destructive things that his alcoholism has led him to do in the past. Forgiveness is therefore a vital and important part of his process of healing and recovery. In itself, however, it is not sufficient to enable him to bring his addiction to alcohol under control.

If instead the alcoholic refuses to acknowledge his addiction or sickness and willfully persists in his alcoholism, he cannot begin to heal or recover. While there is a sense in which others may forgive him by not holding his ongoing destructive behavior against him, that forgiveness may actually do more harm than good since it will involve overlooking the problem of his addiction rather than confronting it and seeking to address it. For that reason, the alcoholic's loved ones may need to *refuse* to forgive the alcoholic in the sense of insisting that he be made to face and acknowledge the harmful consequences of his alcoholism rather than being allowed simply to downplay or ignore those consequences. It is often said that before the alcoholic can begin to heal and recover, he must first "touch bottom" in the sense of realizing that his condition is one that he cannot resolve or change on his own and that he therefore desperately needs not only to acknowledge his need for help and healing but also to seek out those who are able to give him the help and support he requires to overcome his addiction, although strictly speaking he will never actually *overcome* it but at best will only be able to control and manage it until the day he dies. If his loved ones treat him in ways that lead him to touch bottom, therefore, they are doing him good rather than harm.

These same ideas are extremely helpful for understanding Luther's thought regarding justification and the gospel. Like the alcoholic, the problem that sinful human beings face and need to see resolved is primarily that of their destructive behavior and its consequences for themselves and others. That behavior is essentially an illness from which they need to be healed or an addiction from which they need to recover, even though in the present life that

healing and recovery will at best always be partial and incomplete and must therefore consist of an ongoing process involving a daily struggle against their sinfulness. This is analogous to the process and struggle that recovering alcoholics face until the day they die.

Like alcoholics, in order to heal and recover, believers are in need of a community that provides them with help and support. Such is Luther's understanding of the church or community of believers, which is like the inn to which the Samaritan takes the man who had been beaten and robbed. The community of faith is essentially a hospital or infirmary where all together look to Christ their physician and to one another to find the healing and support they need. This is similar to what takes place at meetings of AA, where all receive one another with compassion and understanding and actively reach out to one another, not to condemn or censure but to welcome, encourage, and build up.

According to this analogy, the role of God's law (according to its second use in Lutheran thought) is to make evident to people their illness and their need for help and healing by showing them what their behavior and way of life ideally should be in order for them to enjoy the happiness and well-being God desires for all. At the same time, the law points out to them how far they are from living and behaving in that way. It also enables them to realize that it is impossible for them to bring about such a way of life on their own through their own power or ability and that therefore they must look to Christ and the community of faith he has established in order to find what they need in order to begin the process of recovery and healing. Rather than simply accusing and condemning them or indicating to them that they are under God's wrath, the law in essence acts like a physician who shows a patient who is seriously ill the results of her laboratory tests, which makes it clear to the patient that she is in fact ill and urgently in need of medical treatment. At the same time, the law points those who see and acknowledge their illness to Christ the physician and encourages them to cling to him in faith in order that he may begin the process of restoring them to health. The law is therefore not *contrary* to grace but is an *expression* of grace in that it plays a vital role in leading

people to acknowledge their sin and to look to Christ and his community for the help they need.

Undoubtedly, at times the law must accuse and condemn people and indicate to them that they are under God's wrath, yet as Luther maintains, this occurs when people refuse to acknowledge that they are seriously ill and desperately in need of help. Just as the family members of an alcoholic who refuse to overlook, ignore, or passively tolerate the destructive behavior associated with his alcoholism are acting out of love and concern for the alcoholic rather than seeking to do him harm, so also God, by means of the law and the community of believers, is acting out of love when he refuses to tolerate the destructive behavior of sinful human beings and instead demands that they acknowledge their desperate need of help and look to Christ in faith to receive through him the help he graciously offers to all. In this sense, the law serves the purpose of bringing people to "touch bottom" so that they have no choice but to acknowledge the desperate condition in which they find themselves because of their sinful behavior and its consequences in their life and to seek the help they need, since they are unable to cure themselves of their condition on their own, no matter how hard they try.

While those who cling to Christ in faith are undoubtedly in need of forgiveness both for the sinful behavior into which they have fallen in the past as well as the sinful behavior into which they continue to fall in their everyday life, what they need in order to enjoy wholeness and well-being is not merely forgiveness but the healing that God offers them through Christ their physician and their sisters and brothers in the "infirmary" or community of faith of which they form part. The *basis* for this forgiveness, however, is precisely the fact that through faith they are receiving the help and healing they need to *overcome* their sinful and destructive behavior, even though in this life they will never overcome that behavior fully but only partially. The reason that God tolerates and forgives their ongoing sinfulness is that, by means of their faith, they are in the process of being healed and restored to a way of life that enables them to enjoy the well-being God desires for all. Due to their fallen condition, God cannot ask or expect of them anything more than

this, that they receive and accept the help he graciously offers them in Christ.

It can also be said, as Luther does, that the basis upon which God forgives and accepts them as righteous is that they daily struggle against their sinfulness. They do so, however, because their faith leads them to realize that their sinful behavior destroys their happiness and well-being and that it is therefore extremely harmful for them rather than something that is in some sense good or attractive. For that reason, the sin of believers can be said to arouse *their own* wrath just as much as it arouses God's wrath, since they hate their sinful behavior in the same way God does due to the manner in which it destroys their lives and their well-being. It is not simply threats of punishment or fear of God's wrath that lead them to put away their sin, therefore, but their desire to be healed of their sinful and destructive behavior, a desire which is manifested in the kind of ongoing struggle Luther describes, which is analogous to that of the recovering alcoholic. Of course, it is not only the struggle itself that leads God to forgive and accept them as righteous but the fact that by means of their faith in Christ they are receiving the help and healing they need in order to be transformed into people who will be able to live in ways that promote their wholeness and well-being in the way that both they and God desire.

Should believers cease to look to Christ in faith in order to receive the help they need, however, God's love would lead him to deny them forgiveness in the sense of overlooking and ignoring their sin, since such forgiveness would do them harm rather than good. In his love for them, God would instead demand that they acknowledge their illness or sinfulness and receive the help he graciously offers them so that they may be restored to health and wholeness. As long as they refuse to fulfill that demand, God's love and grace will take the form of *not* accepting them in their present condition but insisting that they allow him to be at work in them to change them. If they respond positively to that demand, however, God will accept them just as they are in spite of their sin because he can be confident that they will undergo the process of becoming the new persons he wants them to be for their own good. In a similar

manner, there is a sense in which believers accept themselves just as they are, despite their ongoing sinfulness, and another sense in which they do *not* accept themselves as they are since they hate their present condition and long to be healed and transformed into new persons. Because God loves them unconditionally, they love themselves unconditionally as well, yet while that love takes the form of accepting and forgiving themselves in the way that God accepts and forgives them, at the same time it also takes the form of waging a constant battle against the sin that continues to be present in their flesh, which they abhor and repudiate just as much as God does.

While God's forgiveness plays an important and vital role in their healing, therefore, in itself it is not sufficient for that healing to take place. Nor can their healing or salvation simply be equated with forgiveness. What they need is not merely to be *forgiven* but to be *restored to wholeness* by being brought to live and behave in ways that are conducive to that wholeness. Nevertheless, because this is something that they cannot do by or for themselves, their only hope is to look to Christ in faith and live as part of the community that God has established through him in order to receive there the power, knowledge, and strength they need in order to be transformed and healed.

It is also important to stress that, according to this understanding of justification and the gospel, everything that God does from beginning to end is an expression of his unconditional love for human beings. It is his love and grace that lead him to give the law so that human beings may become aware of their desperate condition and their need for help. That same love and grace also lead God not only to offer them through Christ the help they need but also to insist and demand that they accept that help for their own good. If they persistently reject that help and refuse to acknowledge their need for it, they provoke God to anger, yet this anger is an expression of God's love and concern for them, since what God demands is precisely that they acknowledge their need for help and receive the help that he graciously offers them for their own good. From beginning to end, therefore, God's love, God's

justice, and God's wrath seek the same thing, namely, that all recognize their need to be restored to health and allow him to bring about that healing by clinging to Christ in faith. Rather than being *contrary* to God's love, therefore, God's justice and wrath are *expressions* of that love, which is always free, unconditional, and unbounded.

When God's love takes the form of denying his forgiveness to those who refuse to recognize their sinfulness and need for help until they come to do so, his objective is not to *punish* them but to bring them to accept and receive that help. *It is this and this alone that can satisfy God and God's justice*, since that justice seeks nothing but the well-being of all. In this regard, it must be stressed that *punishment alone can never satisfy God or God's justice*. God's justice does not seek to *punish* but to *heal and restore*. If any type of punishment is thought to be involved, it must be seen as having the objective of bringing believers to despair of their own strength and power and instead cling more tightly to Christ as well as preventing and deterring among them and others behavior that is harmful and destructive.

According to this understanding of the gospel, therefore, *it cannot be reduced to the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins in Christ*. While the forgiveness of sins is a vital and important component of the gospel, the "good news" is first and foremost that *in Christ God graciously offers healing and wholeness to human beings, all of whom are desperately in need of that healing and wholeness due to the destructive behavior that holds them in bondage and the brokenness that results from that behavior*. What God seeks is not merely to *forgive* sinful human beings but to transform them into people who are able to live in ways that allow them to enjoy the well-being and wholeness that he desires for all and that they also desire for themselves. The means by which God does this is *faith in Christ*. That faith *justifies and saves* because it *heals, restores, and transforms* as it directs believers to look solely to Christ for all that they need.

This understanding of salvation as healing is reflected in the words frequently attributed to Christ in the Gospels after he had healed those who were suffering from various types of ailment or

infirmity: “Your faith has saved you” (*hē pistis sou sesōken se*), which can also be translated “your faith has healed you” or “made you whole.”⁸ It should also be remembered that the Latin term from which the English word “salvation” is derived is *salus*, which literally means “health.” Thus, in Latin as well, *to save* is *to heal*.

Toward a New Paradigm in Consonance with New Testament Thought

This understanding of the doctrine of justification and the gospel represents a significant paradigm change from traditional Lutheran and Protestant teaching on the subject, which generally reduces justification to the forgiveness of sins and equates salvation with such forgiveness. This tendency is evident, for example, throughout most of the Lutheran Confessions and especially in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, written by Philip Melanchthon. There allusions to the gospel generally mention only the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers without including as an essential component of the gospel the process of healing, restoration, and transformation that takes place in believers through their faith in Christ.⁹

In this regard, it is interesting to contrast Melanchthon’s *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* with Luther’s *Smalcald Articles* (SA), where he offers a summary of his understanding of the gospel and justification in his own words. While in his article “Concerning the Gospel” Luther mentions only the forgiveness of sins without alluding to the idea that believers are healed and delivered from their subjection to the power of sin through their faith in Christ (SA IV, 3), in his article on “How a Person Is Justified and Concerning Good Works,” he writes: “I cannot change at all what I have consistently taught about this until now, namely, that ‘through faith’ (as St. Peter says) we receive a different, new, clean heart and that,

⁸ See Matt 9:22; Mark 10:52; Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42.

⁹ See, for example, *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, Article IV, 43-45, 62, 75-80, 110.

for the sake of Christ our mediator, God will and does regard us as completely righteous and holy. Although sin in the flesh is still not completely gone or dead, God will nevertheless not count it or consider it. Good works follow such faith, renewal, and forgiveness of sin, and whatever in these works is still sinful or imperfect should not even be counted as sin or imperfection, precisely for the sake of this same Christ. . . ." (SA IV, 13).

Here we see several of the emphases examined above with regard to Luther's thought. Through faith believers receive not only forgiveness but *a new heart* that enables them to begin to live differently, in conformity with God's will. While God regards believers as righteous on account of Christ, this is because he serves as their mediator, in effect interceding to God to accept them in spite of their sinfulness. Luther's words also imply, however, that God accepts and justifies believers at present in part on account of *their own* righteousness, which remains imperfect in this life, precisely because the sin in their flesh has begun to be removed, even though this process is not yet completed. If it were not the case that this initial righteousness contributes in some way to the justification of believers, there would be no point in Luther mentioning it. To say that God does not take into account the sin in the flesh of believers that has not yet been completely removed or eradicated and that he does not reckon as sin or imperfection whatever is still sinful or imperfect in their works clearly conveys the idea that the reason that God does not do these things is that the sin in their flesh is in the process of being removed and eradicated and that what is *no longer* sinful and imperfect in their works *is* reckoned to them for righteousness. Luther's idea therefore seems to be that God accepts believers as righteous and forgives them their sin because of the healing and transformation that are taking place in them, yet because that healing and transformation are not yet complete, God overlooks their sin on account of Christ's intercession on their behalf as well as the work that Christ is active to carry out *in* them.

Of course, throughout the Lutheran Confessions and other writings of the Reformers, it is recognized that regeneration and a life of righteousness follow upon the forgiveness of sins that

believers receive through faith in Christ and the satisfaction he made to God's justice in his death. It must be stressed, however, that this idea is distinct from the idea that the regeneration and life of righteousness that Christ brings about in believers through faith constitute the *basis* upon which they are forgiven and justified. It is one thing to affirm that *faith in Christ* leads to a new life of righteousness and another to affirm that it is the *forgiveness of sins* that leads to such a life. According to the latter idea, God forgives believers and declares them righteous *merely because they believe in Christ*, as if this were all that concerned God, and the life of righteousness that follows upon that forgiveness plays no role in their justification. According to the former of these two affirmations, however, God forgives believers and declares them righteous because he knows that their faith in Christ will lead to a new life of righteousness, and it is this that truly concerns and interests him.

In other words, the new life of righteousness is not merely the *result* of the forgiveness of sins but its *basis*. The reason that God forgives believers and declares them righteous is not simply that they believe in Christ but that their faith in Christ leads to the new life of righteousness that God desires to see in all for their own good. And the reason that believers live a new life of righteousness is not merely that they have been forgiven but that Christ is active to bring about such a life in them as they cling to him in faith. While *temporally* the new life is brought about *following* the forgiveness that they receive through faith, *logically* the *basis* for that forgiveness is not faith in and of itself but the new life to which that faith will inevitably lead—a life which believers do not bring about in themselves but which is instead brought about in them *by Christ alone through faith alone and by grace alone*.

The basis upon which believers are forgiven and justified, therefore, *cannot be both the righteousness of Christ and their own life of righteousness* but must be one or the other, unless the two are equated with one another. If believers are forgiven and justified because God accepts the righteousness of Christ in lieu of their own, then their own life of righteousness is not only unnecessary but also irrelevant for their forgiveness and justification. Conversely, if

believers are forgiven and justified on account of their own life of righteousness, which is brought about in them by Christ alone through faith alone and by grace alone, then they have no need for the righteousness of Christ to be imputed to them in order to be forgiven and justified. The righteousness of Christ can be said to constitute the basis for their justification only in the sense that the righteous way of living that exists in them is brought about by Christ's activity in their lives and is therefore not truly *their own* righteousness but *his* – thus an *alien* righteousness – and in the sense that God declares them righteous at present despite their imperfect righteousness because he knows that, as long as they continue to cling to Christ in faith, the perfect righteousness that is manifested in Christ will one day be fully theirs as well. Even in this case, however, it is *their own righteousness that they will possess fully and perfectly in the future* that constitutes the basis for their forgiveness and justification rather than the righteousness of Christ per se.

For the same reasons, what must be said to satisfy God's justice is not the active or passive obedience and righteousness of Christ or his sufferings and death on behalf of believers, but the new life of righteousness that he brings about in believers. If what God and God's law and justice demand of human beings is the practice of righteousness, then nothing but their own practice of righteousness can satisfy God, God's law, and God's justice. Furthermore, if God demands that human beings live a life of righteousness not *for his own sake* but *for theirs*, then he has no interest in simply *reckoning* or *accounting* them as righteous on the basis of the righteousness of someone else, namely, Christ. What leads God to demand that all practice justice and righteousness is his love for human beings, that is, his desire that they live in ways that allow them to be healthy and whole. That same love would like to see them be perfect in their righteousness, not for his sake or for the sake of his nature but for *their* sake. In fact, believers themselves would like to be perfect in their righteousness, not simply to please God or gain his approval but because if they could attain such perfection they would no longer act in ways that do harm to themselves and others. Nevertheless, because such perfection is not possible for human

beings in this life, both God and believers themselves have no choice but to continue to tolerate their sin in the present until the day comes when they will be able to leave that sin behind completely.

It is important to stress as well that the thought of Luther and the other Reformers on the subject of justification and the work of Christ is based on several presuppositions that can no longer be regarded as reflecting faithfully biblical thought. Among these presuppositions is the idea that God demands perfection of human beings in order to accept them as righteous. Throughout the biblical texts, many people are spoken of as righteous and even blameless in spite of the fact that they are not entirely without sin.¹⁰ In biblical thought, even the righteous committed sin. What distinguished them from those regarded as sinners was not that they were perfect but that they were committed to living in accordance with God's will. In contrast to the sinners, who preferred to live in sin and did not wish to practice righteousness, the righteous wished to live in justice and righteousness and to avoid sin due to their repudiation of it. At the same time, of course, they looked to God for the power and ability to live righteously and leave their sin behind, depending solely on him rather than on their own strength and resources. Luther rightly stresses these ideas throughout his writings, yet at the same time he goes beyond what the biblical texts affirm by maintaining that God's demand for perfection makes it necessary for believers to rely on the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to them in order to be justified. In biblical thought, it is sufficient for believers to be committed to living righteously and to look to God for everything they need to live in such a manner in order to be justified, precisely because God knows that perfection is impossible for fallen human beings.

For the same reasons, the idea that Christ had to suffer and die in order to satisfy God's justice must be considered entirely foreign to biblical thought. What God's justice demanded in order to forgive and justify human beings was not the suffering, death, or blood of a

¹⁰ See, for example, Gen 6:9; Exod 23:7; Deut 19:10; 1 Sam 19:5; 2 Sam 22:21-25; Job 1:1; 2:3; Ps 19:13; 94:21; 119:1; Luke 1:6; Phil 3:6; Titus 1:6-7.

righteous and innocent substitute but the practice of justice, righteousness, and love among them. It is this that he sought to bring about through Christ. The purpose for which he sent his Son was not that he die but that he serve as the means by which God might bring into existence a community in which human beings everywhere could come to find healing, new life, and forgiveness by living under Christ as their Lord. As I have argued extensively elsewhere, the reason that Christ died was not that God orchestrated or planned his death to accomplish some saving purpose or objective but that his faithfulness to the task of establishing a community of followers fully committed to living in his same love led him to stand firm and not back down when his work on behalf of that community led to conflict and the threat of a violent death. In biblical thought, therefore, it is by means of his death that Christ has made the justification, redemption, forgiveness, and salvation of believers possible, not because his death in itself effected these things, but because by means of his faithfulness unto death to his God-given task of establishing a community in which all might find these things they have become a reality for all those who come to form part of that community. In other words, Christ died “for us” and “for our sins” in the sense that he gave up his life to bring into existence a community of people who would be saved and healed from their sinful and destructive behavior and on that basis be justified, sanctified, redeemed, and forgiven by God as they lived in faith under Christ as their Lord.

The idea that Christ merited, acquired, or obtained God’s grace for believers must also be rejected as contrary to Scripture. Like the other Reformers, Luther speaks repeatedly in these terms in his writings.¹¹ In biblical thought, grace is a free gift and for that reason, by definition, it cannot be purchased or merited by anyone, including Christ himself. As we have already seen above, in biblical thought God is *always* gracious in that he loves all people unconditionally and does everything in his power to save them from

¹¹ See, for example, *LW* 22:147-48; 30:29; 32:228; 33:150; 52:241, 252-53; 53:82.

their sinful and destructive behavior and lead them to live in ways that will allow them to enjoy the well-being, wholeness, and happiness that he desires for all human beings everywhere. The reason that no one can earn, deserve, or acquire God's grace, love, and mercy is that these things are *already theirs* and will always *remain theirs*, no matter what they do or fail to do. While they may follow a path that leads to their destruction rather than the path that leads to life that God has graciously laid out for all, this is not because God has ceased to love them and to seek their well-being but because they have failed to respond to that love in the way God desires.

Although there is a sense in which God can be said to reckon the righteousness of Christ to believers, as already noted above, the New Testament never speaks in such terms. St. Paul follows the Old Testament in affirming that God reckons faith as righteousness and also speaks of believers being clothed in Christ,¹² yet nowhere does he ever write or imply that the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to believers. Nevertheless, this idea is not necessarily contrary to the thought of the New Testament, as long as the righteousness of Christ is equated with the future and perfect righteousness that believers will one day attain at the resurrection. Like the sculptor who sees ahead of time in a block of marble the sculpture she intends to chisel out of it, when God looks at believers, he sees them not as they are at present but as they will be once Christ has finished his healing and transforming work in them. On that basis, God accepts them as they are and forgives them their sins.

Without a doubt, the most problematic aspect of the understanding of justification, the gospel, and the work of Christ found in the thought of most of the Reformers and often in the writings of Luther as well is the manner in which it pits God's justice against God's love, as if the two were in conflict with one another. In biblical thought, God's justice is an expression of his love, since in his justice God seeks to do away with the sinful, unjust, and oppressive behavior that destroys the life of human beings and to

¹² See Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3-6, 9-11, 22-24; 13:14; Gal 3:6, 27.

bring them to live in ways that allow them to attain the well-being he desires for all. For that reason, from the perspective of believers, God's justice and righteousness as well as his wrath are not *against* human beings but *on their side*, since what God seeks is not to *condemn* but to *save*. What they must be saved from, however, is not God's condemnation per se but the sinful, oppressive, and destructive behavior that *leads* to that condemnation. To understand the gospel in the sense that through faith they can be saved from God's wrath and condemnation without first being delivered from the destructive behavior that leads to that wrath and condemnation is to deny the clear teaching of Scripture. For that reason, the New Testament gospel must be understood as proclaiming primarily not the forgiveness of sins but rather the healing and transformation of believers from the sinful way of life that undermines and destroys human well-being. Undoubtedly, human beings must be saved from God's wrath and condemnation, yet what brings about that salvation is neither their faith itself nor the death of Christ but the transformed life that Christ brings about in them by pure grace as they cling to him in faith.

While Luther and the other Reformers follow the New Testament in referring to Christ as mediator between God and believers, Luther appears to be unique in speaking of Christ's work *in* believers (*in nobis*) as the basis for his activity on their behalf in relation to God (*pro nobis*). According to this idea, Christ intercedes to God asking God to forgive and accept them in spite of their past and present sin, yet the basis upon which he makes such a petition and obtains from God a favorable response to it is the healing and transforming activity he is carrying out in them as they live as members of the community that calls him Lord. The other Reformers generally overlook or deny this understanding of Christ's mediation, as does Luther on occasion. Instead, they present Christ imploring God to forgive and accept believers on account of *his own perfect righteousness* by reckoning that righteousness to believers in lieu of their own righteousness. Because in biblical thought what God desires and demands out of love for human beings is that they practice justice and righteousness for their own sake, the basis for

Christ's intercession on behalf of believers cannot be his own righteousness but must be a righteousness of believers themselves, namely, that which he brings about in them by pure grace through their faith alone. Only this can put away God's wrath at their sin, precisely because that wrath is the expression of a love that demands that they be brought to live righteously for their own good.

One of the objections that inevitably arises when it is claimed that in biblical thought the righteous way of life that is brought about in believers through their faith in Christ constitutes the basis for their justification is that, at first glance, it seems to deprive believers of full assurance regarding their ultimate salvation by making that salvation depend on their own transformation. In reality, however, such is not the case. The reason for this is that the transformation on the basis of which God declares them righteous is not *their own* work but that of Christ *in them* as they look to him in faith. What gives believers assurance of their justification and salvation is not anything that *they* do but that which *Christ does in them* by pure grace. Because believers depend not on themselves or their own efforts or strength but on Christ alone, they can be certain that the process of healing and transformation that has begun in them will reach its completion, as long as they cling to Christ in faith. In essence, this is what Paul tells the believers in Philippi in Phil 1:6: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

While Luther's thought regarding justification by faith and the work of Christ opens up the way for a radical paradigm shift in relation to the paradigm found in the writings of the other Reformers, therefore, at the same time it must be purged of ideas that run contrary to New Testament teaching. Precisely why Luther did not recognize that those ideas were in conflict with the alternative understanding of justification and the gospel that appears throughout his writings is not clear. There can be little doubt, however, that he inherited those ideas and the presuppositions underlying them from others and incorporated them into his own thought somewhat uncritically, letting them stand

alongside his own ideas on the subject of justification, many of which were distinct from those of his fellow Reformers. To a large extent, this was probably because he found those ideas helpful in refuting the Roman Catholic teaching that he found so problematic, yet by adopting much of the same terminology and many of the same categories and presuppositions as those whom he sought to refute, he unwittingly retained many of the elements that had made that teaching problematic in the first place. These include especially the ideas that God demands of human beings a righteousness that is perfect, that God's justice cannot leave sins unpunished but requires that satisfaction be made, that God's grace must be merited or purchased, and that Christ's righteousness must be imputed to believers in order for God to justify them. Precisely why the other Reformers failed to capture the distinct understanding of justification found in Luther's writings is also a question for which answers are not readily apparent, yet to some extent this must be attributed to their continued adherence to the same problematic terminology, categories, and presuppositions just mentioned.

What is clear, however, is that the alternative understanding of justification and the gospel found in Luther's writings possesses a power, splendor, and appeal that is sorely lacking in the formulations of the doctrine of justification that have long since become traditional in Protestant thought. Because that alternative understanding is also much more in accordance with New Testament teaching on the subject, its adoption today should be seen as an urgent priority for Christians struggling to articulate the gospel in ways that are faithful to the biblical texts and are capable of impacting and transforming the world in accordance with their understanding of God's loving will for all people everywhere.

In order to explain more precisely the alternative paradigm being proposed here and highlight the differences it presents with respect to the traditional paradigm associated with most Protestant thought, I have set the two paradigms alongside one another in the chart that appears below. By concluding the present article in this manner, I hope to make it clear that the ideas inherent to each of the two paradigms are incompatible with one another and therefore

cannot be reconciled or combined with one another in a single paradigm. Instead, the adoption of one of these paradigms must involve the rejection of the other. It should also be noted that this chart incorporates ideas found in other writings of mine and not only those considered above.

* * *

<p>JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: TRADITIONAL PARADIGM CENTERED ON <i>FORGIVENESS</i></p>	<p>JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM CENTERED ON <i>HEALING</i></p>
<p><u>God's justice/righteousness:</u> God is perfectly righteous and holy by nature and therefore for the sake of his nature must demand the same perfect righteousness and holiness of human beings in order to accept them.</p>	<p><u>God's justice/righteousness:</u> What God seeks in his justice/righteousness is the well-being and wholeness of human beings. For that reason, for <i>their</i> sake rather than his own, out of love he demands that they live in ways that make that well-being and wholeness possible.</p>
<p>God's justice/righteousness is <i>opposed</i> to his love and mercy, as is his wrath, which is an expression of his perfect justice/righteousness and not of his love for human beings.</p>	<p>God's justice/righteousness is an <i>expression</i> of his love and mercy, as is his wrath, which seeks to put an end to behavior that does human beings harm and destroys their lives.</p>
<p>God prohibits sin <i>for his own sake</i>, because his justice/righteousness will not let him tolerate human sin due to the effect that it has <i>on him</i> rather than the effect that it has <i>on human beings themselves</i>. In other words, sin angers, upsets, offends, and repulses God, and for that</p>	<p>God prohibits sin <i>for the sake of human beings</i>, because of the harmful and destructive effect that sinful behavior has <i>on them</i>. God's love for human beings and his concern for their well-being lead him to demand that they avoid actions and behaviors that do them</p>

<p>reason he prohibits it, not out of a concern for human well-being but rather out of a concern for himself and his own peace and tranquility. To be righteous is to refrain from doing what bothers and irritates God on account of his holiness and righteousness.</p>	<p>harm and instead do what promotes their well-being. Justice/righteousness are therefore defined in terms of what human beings <i>do</i> and not merely what they do <i>not</i> do. To be just or righteous is not simply to be acquitted or free of guilt but to live in the way that God commands for the good of all.</p>
<p>The reason that God does not accept sinful human beings freely and forgive them their sins without exacting punishment for those sins is that his strict justice will not allow it.</p>	<p>The reason that God does not accept sinful human beings freely and simply forgive and overlook their sins without seeking to correct them is that to do so would involve leaving them to continue unabated in their destructive behavior, thus abandoning them to the harmful and ruinous consequences that result from that behavior rather than doing them good.</p>
<p>God's love and "grace" are not a free gift but must be earned by Christ in his death (although to speak of grace as something earned is actually an oxymoron, since by definition anything that must be earned is not a free gift).</p>	<p>God's love and grace are unconditional and by definition <i>cannot</i> be earned or merited, precisely because a free gift cannot be earned or merited.</p>
<p>God's law: God gives the law <i>for his own sake</i>, to safeguard his justice/righteousness. The law is an expression of his <i>justice/righteousness</i> but <i>not</i> an expression of his <i>love and grace</i>.</p>	<p>God's law: God gives the law <i>for the sake of human beings</i>, to promote ways of living that benefit them and prohibit behaviors that do them harm. The law <i>is</i> an expression of God's love and grace. It <i>guides</i> and <i>instructs</i> human beings (<i>Torah</i>).</p>

<p>By demonstrating to human beings their sin, the law stands <i>against</i> them, accusing and condemning them and placing them under God's wrath. It acts as a tyrant.</p>	<p>By demonstrating to human beings their sin, the law shows them that they are living in ways that do them harm and are in need of help so that they may be brought to live in ways that instead do them good. God's law may <i>seem</i> to be against them, but it is not.</p>
<p>God demands perfect obedience to the law <i>for his own sake</i>, because the perfection that is his by nature can tolerate nothing less.</p>	<p>God desires perfect obedience to the law <i>for the sake of human beings</i>, since only by living in ways that promote well-being can human beings attain that well-being. Nevertheless, God does not realistically expect perfect obedience. Because they love themselves in the same way that God loves them, the desire of believers to be perfect in their obedience is just as strong as God's desire that they be perfect, since that obedience promotes their well-being for intrinsic reasons. For their own sake, therefore, at the same time that they accept themselves as they are, they also strive for perfection, even though they are aware that in this life they will never attain it. Both in their own eyes and in those of God, sinful and destructive behavior is <i>never</i> to be regarded as acceptable due to the tremendous harm that it does.</p>

<p>Human beings, including believers, would generally prefer <i>not</i> to observe God's law, but they are obliged to do so if they wish to avoid God's punishment and condemnation. They tend to love their sin and hate the law, which prevents them from being free to live as they wish and imposes on them a way of life that for the most part they find tedious, unpleasant, and burdensome.</p>	<p>Because God's law promotes their well-being, believers desire to live in accordance with that law just as badly as God wants them to do so. They hate their sin as much as God does and wish to be saved from it. Their sin arouses <i>their own wrath and displeasure</i> just as much as it arouses God's. If they do not love the law and hate their sin, it can only be because they have not grasped God's love for them and his loving purpose in giving them the law and demanding that they obey it for their own sake.</p>
<p>The law drives human beings to despair and to seek deliverance from God's wrath and condemnation on account of their <i>guilt</i>. They seek to be saved from God's <i>punishment</i> for their sin.</p>	<p>The law drives human beings to despair of attempts to heal themselves and to seek the help of God as a physician who out of love and grace wants nothing more than to heal them from their destructive behavior. They wish to be delivered from that destructive behavior itself, though of course as this happens they will also be delivered from God's loving wrath at their sin and his condemnation of that sin. By making known to them their sin and their need for help through the law, God is showing them grace and kindness, especially because through Christ he also offers them the help they need.</p>

<p><u>The problem of sin:</u></p> <p>Due to God's perfect justice and righteousness, sin arouses God's wrath and results in divine punishment. The obstacle to salvation is human <i>guilt</i> before God.</p>	<p><u>The problem of sin:</u></p> <p>Sin prevents human beings from enjoying the well-being that God desires for them and that they desire for themselves. The obstacle to salvation is not <i>guilt</i> but the <i>power</i> of sin that holds human beings in bondage and will not allow them to live in ways that promote their well-being.</p>
<p>Because God's strict justice will not allow him to forgive human sin but requires that it be punished, God <i>never truly forgives sin</i>. Strictly speaking, therefore, to speak of God's forgiveness is a misnomer.</p>	<p>God can freely forgive and overlook sin whenever and wherever he wishes, yet in itself this would not solve the problem of sin, namely, its destructive power over the lives of sinful human beings. Forgiveness at times may contribute to healing, but at other times it may also harm people by leading them to overlook and ignore behavior that needs to be corrected and changed. God therefore always forgives sin when to do so promotes human wholeness and well-being, yet in his love God will withhold forgiveness when it undermines that wholeness and well-being.</p>
<p>The call to repent is a threat of punishment for any who refuse to change their ways. For that reason, it is <i>not</i> an expression of love but of God's righteous wrath at sin.</p>	<p>The call to repent is a gracious and loving exhortation aimed at bringing human beings to abandon the destructive behavior that does them harm and instead behave in ways that promote their well-being.</p>

<p>The call to repent is not a call to change one's ways, since even if one changes one's behavior, one remains guilty of past sins and can never attain the life of perfect righteousness necessary to obtain God's forgiveness. Thus repentance merely involves acknowledging that one is guilty and deserving of punishment so that one may obtain forgiveness.</p>	<p>The call to repent is a call not simply to acknowledge guilt, but to stop living in ways that do harm and destroy true life and instead live in ways that promote well-being. Those who repent acknowledge the harm they do to themselves and others through their destructive behavior and on that basis seek not only forgiveness but especially help and deliverance from that behavior.</p>
<p>God demands such repentance <i>for his own sake</i> and for the sake of his justice.</p>	<p>God demands such repentance <i>for the sake of human beings</i>, due to his loving desire and insistence that they live in ways that promote their own well-being and that of others.</p>
<p><u>The understanding of salvation:</u> Salvation is defined almost exclusively in terms of being delivered from God's wrath and condemnation. For that reason, in principle sinful human beings can be saved without being changed or changing their behavior.</p>	<p><u>The understanding of salvation:</u> Salvation involves being delivered from destructive behavior that does harm to oneself and others. For that reason, sinful human beings <i>cannot</i> be saved without being changed or changing their behavior, since their well-being is not possible without such a change.</p>

<p>To be saved is equivalent to being <i>forgiven</i> for one's sins, since the only obstacle to the salvation of sinners is their guilt. Forgiveness and salvation are understood in terms of being <i>spared from punishment</i>.</p>	<p>Because the obstacle to salvation is the power of sin that holds human beings captive, to be saved involves primarily being delivered from this power, though this deliverance always remains partial in this life. Those who are in the process of being delivered from their sinful behavior are forgiven on that basis in the sense that they are fully received and embraced by God, Christ, and the other members of the community of believers.</p>
<p>In order for human beings to be saved, God's love must deliver them from God's wrath. In effect, they must be saved <i>from God</i>.</p>	<p>In order for human beings to be saved, God's love must deliver them from their sinful and destructive behavior. They must be saved <i>not from God but from themselves</i>. As that happens, however, they are also delivered from God's wrath, which in love seeks only to do away with sin and bring about their well-being and transformation.</p>
<p>In order to save human beings, God must demand that they make atonement for their sins in order to satisfy the demands of his justice, that is, the demand that sin receive the punishment due to it. What satisfies God's justice is <i>the punishment of sin</i>.</p>	<p>In order to save human beings, in his love and justice God demands that they put away their destructive behavior and live in ways that promote their well-being. At the same time, in his grace and love God is committed to enabling and empowering them to do these things. In and of itself, the punishment of sin does not satisfy God's justice. Only the practice of love and justice among human beings can satisfy God's justice.</p>

<p><u>The work of Christ:</u></p> <p>Christ was sent by God to save human beings by dying to make atonement for their sins and thereby to satisfy the demands of God's justice. According to a penal substitution view, Christ satisfies the demands of God's justice by enduring in the place of human beings the punishment that God's justice demands on account of their sin and guilt.</p>	<p><u>The work of Christ:</u></p> <p>Christ was sent by God as a "physician" to heal human beings from their sinful and destructive behavior. He does this by establishing a community – the <i>ekklesia</i> – in which he remains active among believers through the proclamation of God's Word, the Holy Spirit, and the love, grace, acceptance, and forgiveness that he shares with them there both directly and indirectly through one another. It is these things that bring about in them the healing and transformation they need and the ability to live in ways that promote their well-being, and <i>not</i> the infusion of some mysterious power or substance into them, such as grace or justice (<i>gratia infusa/iustitia infusa</i>).</p>
<p>The basis upon which God accepts and "forgives" believers in Christ and declares them righteous is that in his sufferings and death Christ endured the punishment that they deserved and thereby satisfied God's justice and appeased his wrath. Nevertheless, human beings are not <i>actually</i> "forgiven" and declared righteous by God unless they <i>believe</i> that Christ accomplished these things on their behalf. Ultimately, those who do <i>not</i> believe that Christ accomplished these things on their behalf are <i>not</i> forgiven or declared righteous by</p>	<p>The basis upon which God accepts and forgives believers in Christ and declares them righteous is that, as they cling to Christ by faith and live as part of the <i>ekklesia</i>, they are in the process of being healed from their sin and brought to live in ways that promote their well-being. <i>Because of God's love for them, it is this healing and transformation that constitute his ultimate objective for them and not their forgiveness per se as an end in itself.</i> However, God's forgiveness and acceptance are vital for their healing and transformation since they enable believers to forgive and</p>

<p>virtue of Christ's death on their behalf, even though in his death Christ supposedly obtained these things for them as well.</p>	<p>accept themselves as well and continue in their healing and transformation.</p>
<p>God declares believers righteous because Christ's righteousness is imputed to them forensically, even though they are not <i>actually</i> righteous in their behavior and way of being. By virtue of their faith, God accepts Christ's righteousness in lieu of their own, so that it is no longer necessary for them to live righteously in order to be declared righteous by God.</p>	<p>God declares believers righteous forensically because they are actually <i>becoming</i> righteous in their conduct and <i>will one day be made fully righteous</i> as long as they continue to cling to Christ in faith. It is <i>their own</i> righteousness, therefore, that constitutes the basis upon which they are declared righteous. However, it can also be said that Christ's righteousness is reckoned to them in the present because Christ is active to bring about his same righteousness in them and will ultimately complete that transformation in them. Thus, when God looks upon them, he sees both their own present and future righteousness as well as the righteousness of Christ that is in the process of becoming theirs, and on that basis declares them righteous even now.</p>
<p>The perfect righteousness that God's justice demands of believers is given to them through Christ by means of imputation. This righteousness is of a <i>forensic</i> nature.</p>	<p>While God wants believers to be perfectly righteous in their behavior for their own sake (as do believers themselves), God does not demand perfect righteousness on the part of believers. Nevertheless, God can be confident that believers will one day become perfectly righteous as long as they cling to Christ in faith.</p>

<p>Because God's grace is equated with his "forgiveness" and God's justice prevents him from forgiving sinful believers, it was necessary for Christ to merit or earn God's grace and forgiveness by his sufferings and death. Christ thus can be said to have obtained or acquired God's grace on behalf of believers.</p>	<p>God's grace is not only his forgiveness but also his activity in bringing about in believers through Christ a new way of life that enables them to enjoy the well-being that he desires for them and that they desire for themselves. Because that grace is by definition a free gift, it cannot be said to be earned, merited, or acquired either by believers or by Christ.</p>
<p>Thanks to Christ's death, which merited and obtained God's grace for them, believers now have a gracious God. Therefore, had Christ not satisfied God's justice and appeased God's wrath by his death, human beings would <i>not</i> have a gracious God.</p>	<p>God is <i>always</i> gracious to <i>all</i> people in that he is and always has been fully committed to seeking their well-being no matter what they do or fail to do. What human behavior merits is not God's grace but a certain <i>form</i> which that grace takes in response to that behavior, which may be either acceptance or a loving but persistent demand that people put away their sin for their own good by means of the correction, guidance, and power that God graciously provides for all who believe.</p>
<p>What gives believers full certainty and assurance of their forgiveness, justification, and salvation is their faith in the completed work of Christ on their behalf.</p>	<p>What gives believers full certainty and assurance of their forgiveness, justification, and salvation is their faith that, in spite of their sin, God accepts them by virtue of the healing and transformation that he is accomplishing in them through Christ and will some day accomplish fully. The basis for their assurance is thus not anything that they do themselves but their confidence that the one who began</p>

	a good work in them “will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).
The reason that believers need Christ is that, due to God’s strict justice, they cannot be delivered from the punishment their sins deserve of their own accord by making the satisfaction that God’s justice requires.	The reason that believers need Christ is that they cannot heal themselves from their sinful and destructive way of life, nor can they obtain the forgiveness that follows from that healing and is based on it.
Even though Christ already obtained God’s forgiveness on behalf of believers, he intercedes on their behalf as their mediator on the basis of his completed work, in effect reminding God of the satisfaction he rendered to God’s justice in his sufferings and death on their behalf. Since God has already accepted Christ’s completed work once and for all and put away his wrath at the sins of believers definitively, however, it is not clear why Christ should have to intercede on their behalf, unless what Christ seeks for them through his intercession is something other than the grace and forgiveness he has already obtained for them.	Christ intercedes on behalf of believers asking God to continue to forgive and accept them in spite of their past and present sin by virtue of the healing and transformation that he is bringing about in them. Confident that believers are being brought to live in the way necessary for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for all, God responds favorably to Christ’s intercession on their behalf, in effect tolerating and overlooking their sin because he knows that through their faith in Christ they are in the process of being delivered from their sinful behavior for their own good. In effect, Christ can be regarded as asking God to overlook the sins of believers until he is finished healing them fully from their sinfulness. This will take place at the end of the present age, when believers will be raised from the dead.

<p>The reason Christ died on the cross was that his death was necessary in order to satisfy God's justice and placate his wrath on our behalf.</p>	<p>The reason that Christ died on the cross was that his efforts to form a community in which all might find healing, new life, and salvation generated opposition and conflict in a sinful world that rejects God. Those who saw that community as a threat to their interests sought to silence Christ and put an end to those efforts. In the face of that opposition and conflict, however, Christ remained faithful to the task given him of doing what was necessary to establish such a community and refused to back down or desist from his efforts to accomplish that task. Had he put an end to those efforts out of fear of a violent death, that community would never have become a reality through him.</p>
<p>"Christ died for us" means that he died to satisfy God's justice and placate God's wrath at sin.</p>	<p>"Christ died for us" means that he gave up his life in order to bring into existence a community in which all might be delivered from their sinful ways of living and thereby find forgiveness, healing, new life, and salvation through faith in him as they live as part of that community.</p>
<p>In itself, Christ's death or blood saves believers by satisfying the demands of God's justice on their behalf. Such was the purpose for which Christ died and for which God sent him to die.</p>	<p>Christ's death or blood saves no one. God did not send his Son into the world for the purpose of dying, nor was it Christ's objective to die. The objective of God and Christ was to establish a community in which all might find healing, wholeness, new life, and salvation.</p>

	<p>Yet because of the opposition that Christ's efforts to establish that community generated, it was necessary for Christ to be willing to give up his life if that community was to be brought into existence and if it was to have as its primary characteristic the same type of loving commitment of all to giving of themselves fully to others. Had Christ refused to give up his life in the face of the threat of the cross, such a community would not have become a reality through him. Believers are therefore said to be saved <i>through</i> or <i>by means of</i> Christ's death or blood, since his death or blood – that is, his willingness to give up his life rather than seeking to save it – was the means by which the community in which all can now find forgiveness, healing, new life, and salvation was able to come into existence and be established.</p>
<p>"We have been justified, redeemed, purchased, and saved by Christ's death or blood" means that his death or blood in itself accomplished these things on our behalf by satisfying God's justice and appeasing his wrath.</p>	<p>To say that "we have been justified, redeemed, purchased, and saved by Christ's death or blood" is not to say that Christ's death or blood in itself accomplished the justification, redemption, acquisition, and salvation of anyone, but rather that these things have now become a reality for believers <i>by means of</i> Christ's death or blood, as the New Testament affirms. In other words, by means of Christ's faithfulness to death in seeking the creation of a community in which all might find</p>

	<p>justification, deliverance from their sinful and destructive way of life (redemption), as well as healing or salvation, such a community has now come to exist. Because those who form part of the community that has been brought into existence thanks to Christ's faithfulness to death in seeking to establish it now belong to God as his own, it can be said that Christ acquired them or made them God's own through his death or blood, and also that God purchased them for himself by means of his Son's death or blood. The price that both God and Christ had to pay in order to make it possible for such a community to exist was the death or blood of Christ, since only by remaining faithful to death in his efforts to establish that community was it possible for it to become a reality. It therefore cost Christ his life and cost God the life of his Son to bring into existence this new community in which all may now find healing and deliverance in Christ as they live as God's own.</p>
<p>"Christ died for our sins" means that Christ died so that God might be able to do something that he would not have been able to do without Christ's death, namely, "forgive" the sins of believers in the sense of not punishing them for those sins (even though God did not actually <i>forgive</i> them their sins</p>	<p>"Christ died for our sins" means that Christ willingly gave up his life in order that his efforts to create a community in which all might be delivered from the sinful behaviors that destroy human well-being might accomplish that objective, and so that on that basis those who would belong to that community</p>

<p>but instead ensured that those sins received their <i>due punishment</i> by sending Christ to endure that punishment in their stead).</p>	<p>might also attain God's forgiveness for their sins. In other words, when Christ's efforts to bring into existence a community in which all might be saved from their sins (i.e., from their sinful conduct and its destructive consequences) led to conflict and the threat of the cross, Christ chose to give up his life so that such a community might become a reality through him. Had he instead sought to save himself from such a death by desisting from his efforts to create such a community, it would not now exist, and therefore no one would be able to find there deliverance from their sinful way of life and from the destructive consequences of that way of life; nor would they be able to find there the forgiveness that God grants to those who are being delivered from that way of life through his Son.</p>
<p>"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28) means: "This is my blood, which I will allow to be shed in my death so that God's justice may thereby be satisfied and those who trust in the efficacy of my death for their salvation may be delivered from the condemnation that their sins deserve."</p>	<p>"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" means: "Rather than backing down from my commitment and efforts to form a community in which all may find forgiveness and salvation by living under a (new) covenant that God has intended to establish through me, I am choosing to give up my life, since only in that way will that community and that covenant ever become a reality." To live in that covenant involves relating to God</p>

	<p>and others through Christ, living in the same love seen in him in his life and death, and receiving forgiveness on the basis of the transformation and healing that result from one's relationship with him.</p>
<p>"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13) means: Christ endured in the place of sinful human beings the punishment or curse that the law pronounced on them due to their sin so that they might no longer be subject to that punishment or curse.</p>	<p>"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" means: Christ's willingness to submit to a type of death upon which the law pronounced a curse has redeemed us from the curse that the law pronounces on those who do not obey it, because that willingness has led to the existence of a new community in which all are accepted by God and no longer subject to the law's curse by virtue of the healing and transformation that God is effecting in them through Christ.</p>
<p>The reason that faith in Christ alone saves is that God has determined to make such faith the condition for justification and salvation. Precisely <i>why</i> God should require such faith in order to justify and save people is not clear, however, since in principle he might justify and save anyone he desires, given that Christ endured the punishment necessary not only for the sins of believers but for those of the whole world as well.</p>	<p>The reason that faith in Christ alone saves is that, when believers cling to Christ in faith, he is able to bring about their healing and transformation and on that basis obtain for them God's forgiveness and acceptance as well.</p>

<p><u>Faith, new life, and salvation:</u></p> <p>While the salvation of believers does not depend on their leaving behind their sin and living in righteousness and sanctification, they either <i>should</i> do these things out of gratitude toward God or <i>will</i> do them as a result of the forgiveness they have received.</p>	<p><u>Faith, new life, and salvation:</u></p> <p>Because salvation involves being healed from sinful and destructive behavior and being brought to live in ways that promote well-being, a change in one's way of life is by definition necessary in order to experience that salvation. Nevertheless, this change is not something that believers bring about in themselves but is brought about solely by God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit by pure grace as believers look and cling to Christ in faith.</p>
<p>God's "free gift" to believers is forgiveness.</p>	<p>God's "free gift" to believers is the new life and new heart that enable them to be delivered from their destructive behavior and live in ways that allow them to enjoy well-being, as well as the forgiveness and acceptance by God that accompany that new life and new heart.</p>
<p>Although believers do not cooperate in their justification, they do cooperate with the Holy Spirit in their new life or sanctification.</p>	<p>Believers receive both the new life of righteousness and the forgiveness that accompanies it as they look and cling to Christ in faith. Because they receive both of these things as a free gift through their faith and neither is the fruit of their own efforts, the language of cooperation is not appropriate when speaking of their justification or sanctification. They are not called to "do" anything except to continue to look and cling to Christ in faith,</p>

	<p>trusting solely in him for all they need and not in their own strength or abilities. As they do so, they are both justified and sanctified.</p>
<p>In principle, those justified through faith may not begin to live a sanctified life, though they <i>ought</i> to do so.</p>	<p>Because faith involves trusting in Christ and clinging to him, such faith will inevitably lead to a life of love and righteousness, since one cannot cling to Christ without being led by him to do his will. Therefore, any who do not obey him cannot truly be said to be trusting him or clinging to him in faith. If one truly trusts another person, one will do gladly and willingly whatever that person asks or commands.</p>
<p>While in principle those justified should want to obey God and avoid sinning, they may also see God's commandments as onerous and burdensome.</p>	<p>Because those who truly know and trust God believe that everything God asks and demands of them is rooted in a loving concern for their well-being and that the commandments he has given exist for <i>their</i> sake and not for his own, they <i>want</i> to do his will and avoid disobeying him. For the same reason, because they know that sinful behavior does them harm, with God's help they seek to avoid sinning, not primarily because they are fearful of God's punishments (servile obedience), but because they do not wish to do harm to themselves or others.</p>

<p>What should motivate believers to serve their neighbor is primarily their desire to please God and manifest their gratitude to him for his forgiveness.</p>	<p>What motivates believers to serve their neighbor is not simply a desire to please God but the genuine love for their neighbor that results from their faith in Christ.</p>
<p>The salvation brought about by God through Christ involves allowing people to enter into eternal life rather than excluding them from it.</p>	<p>The salvation brought about by God through Christ involves enabling human beings to attain well-being and wholeness (<i>salus</i>) in part in this life and to see that well-being and wholeness perfected and completed in the next life.</p>
<p>The reason that some people are not saved is that they refuse or fail to believe that Christ died in order to obtain from God their forgiveness and salvation. On that basis, God condemns them eternally.</p>	<p>The reason that some people are not saved is that their refusal to accept the help and healing that God graciously offers them makes it impossible for them to be healed from their destructive ways.</p>
<p>Saving faith involves trusting in the efficacy of Christ's death for one's forgiveness and justification, since this is the condition that God has laid down to forgive and justify people.</p>	<p>Saving faith involves trusting in God and Christ for healing and wholeness, for the ability to live in ways that promote healing and wholeness, and for the forgiveness that God grants to those who are being healed and made whole as they cling to his Son in faith.</p>
<p>Because salvation is nothing but the forgiveness of sins and this forgiveness is not based on the new life of righteousness or sanctification of believers, ultimately it does not matter whether they begin to live righteously or grow in sanctification, since these things do not affect their salvation.</p>	<p>Because salvation involves being healed and made well and whole, it is inseparable from a way of life that promotes healing, well-being, and wholeness. Such a way of life is therefore indispensable for salvation. However, it is a free and gracious gift of God brought about in believers as they cling to Christ in faith and look to him alone.</p>

<p>The sacraments are means by which God assures believers of his promise and pledge to forgive them their sins so that they may attain eternal life in heaven.</p>	<p>The sacraments are means by which God assures believers of his promise and pledge not only to forgive them their sins but to be present in their lives through Christ and the Spirit to heal and transform them so that they may enjoy the well-being he desires for all both in this world and the world to come.</p>
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Cover image: Marble relief, St. Charles Borromeo Church, Antwerp, Belgium