

The Birth that Gave Rebirth to the Doctrine of Justification

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"Blessed be the day of Martin Luther's birth! It should be a festival second only to that of the nativity of Jesus Christ."

These words by the English poet, Robert Southey, express the profound significance of Martin Luther's birth. Aside from his religious significance, which will be the focus of this essay, historians have used superlatives to describe his influence. Preserved Smith holds that "no man in history has more completely dominated his time." The historian, D'Aubigne, said of him: "Luther proved, through divine grace, the living influence of Christianity, as no preceding Doctor perhaps, had ever felt it before. The Reformation sprang living from his own heart, where God himself had placed it." Speaking of the Lutheran Reformation, the Frenchman Taine said: "There was no province of human intelligence and action which was not refreshed and fertilized by this universal effort." The Catholic historian, Michelet, contends: "It is not incorrect to say that Luther has been the restorer of liberty in modern times." Even the German poet, Goethe, who was not exactly known for his interest in Lutheran theology said: "We do not know for how much, in a general way, we must thank Luther and the Reformation." And Gustav Freytag tells us: "Domestic devotion, marriage, and education of children, municipal life, and school affairs, manners, recreation, all sentiments of the heart, all social pleasures, were consecrated by his teachings and writings. Everywhere he strove to set new goals and to lay deeper foundations. His influence spread far and wide." Such tributes could be multiplied almost indefinitely. It is universally held that Luther's influence created a new order of things; his influence dominated his age and it is still felt in our day. We would have to agree with Frederich von Schlegel, a Catholic critic, that "there are few, even of his own disciples, who appreciate him highly enough."

It has been said that great men are not born great. George Washington, whose birth and lowly childhood did not give any special signs of his future greatness, became the "Father of his country." Who would have dreamed that the infant Abraham Lincoln, born in a rude Kentucky cabin, would one day be hailed as the Great Emancipator! It is God, the Ruler of the destinies of this world, who makes men great. It was God who, near the close of the fifteenth century, caused a child to be born who was to be greater than Washington and Lincoln, greater than any other man in modern times, who was to change the course of history for all time to come. This child was not born in a king's palace, but in a humble home of a miner; not in some great metropolis, but in a small Saxon village. His birth was not heralded by the great and the mighty ones of the world, but it gladdened the hearts of only the parents and immediate relatives and friends. And yet this child—Martin Luther—had been chosen by Divine Providence to be his instrument for the reformation of the church and by that great work to bring untold and immeasurable blessings to the whole world, blessings which we enjoy in rich measure today. It is fair to say that it is because of Luther's birth that our Synod exists and that we at this convention are centering our attention on the doctrine of justification. One shudders to think what our lot would be if God had not raised up Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany, to Hans and Margaret Luther. He was baptized the day after his birth and since that day was St. Martin's Day, his parents named him after that saint. Young Martin attended grade school in Mansfeld and went to high school in Magdeburg and Eisenach. At the age of 17 he entered the University

of Erfurt and graduated with a Master's Degree three years later, in 1509. His father wanted him to study law and entertained dreams of seeing his son become a great jurist. God, however, had different plans for this gifted young man and later he used him as his instrument in restoring the pure Gospel and reforming the church.

As young Luther grew and developed there was a cloud of fear and uneasiness hanging over his heart. He was not at peace with God. He was not sure that God was gracious to him. He was afraid that his weaknesses and shortcomings would condemn him before the judgment-seat of Christ. The thought of death and the judgment-to-come frightened him. Then two things happened which caused that cloud of fear to settle more firmly upon his tender heart. The sudden death of a dear friend came as a severe shock to him and it caused him to ask himself, "What if it had been I? What would become of me if I were thus called away without warning?" Then a short time later he journeyed to visit his parents. On the way back to Erfurt a violent storm overtook him as he was walking through the woods. There was no shelter near. Suddenly a bolt of lightning flashed and crashed to the ground so close that Martin threw himself upon his knees, thinking his turn had come and that death was upon him. Terrors of hell gripped his soul. In his terror he cried out to his favorite saint, "Help, dear St. Anne, and I'll become a monk." He bid farewell to his friends and to the disappointment of his father he entered the monastery, thinking that he would surely find peace for his soul.

His entrance into the monastery really centered around a personal question: "What must I do to be saved?" Luther had been brought up to believe that salvation, in part, was due to man's own works. Consequently the question which haunted him was: "How can I be sure that I have done enough?" He struggled with this question to the point where it almost drove him out of his mind. Later he wrote in one of his hymns:

My good works so imperfect were,
They had no power to aid me;
My will God's judgment could not bear,
Yea, prone to evil made me;
Grief drove me to despair, and I
Had nothing left me but to die;
To hell I fast was sinking.

Lutheran Hymnary 526 v. 3

Then while studying St. Paul's epistle to the Romans in the monastery, the Holy Spirit led him to see that it was not what God demands of us that saves, but rather what he gives us in his Son and which becomes ours by faith. Then it was as though the gates of heaven were opened unto him.

As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, it is indeed fitting that we center our attention on the doctrine of justification. It is certainly true that Luther's birth gave rebirth to this central doctrine of Scripture. Someone has observed that Luther was not an innovator, but a renovator, that is, he did not devise something new, but he simply restored what had always been there. The doctrine of justification by faith had been hidden under the rubbish of man-made doctrines for many years. But Luther, by the grace of God, gave rebirth to this doctrine by restoring it to the church in its pristine purity so that it continues to live in the hearts of all true believers in Christ. Of this doctrine Luther said: "It is this article alone which begets, nourishes, sustains, keeps, and defends the church. And without it the church could not subsist an hour."

In order to understand and better appreciate this we need to know what the church actually taught in Luther's day. In the fifteen centuries that intervened from the time of Christ and the apostles the visible church on earth had become sadly corrupted. This deterioration had been a slow process and it had its beginnings in seemingly small things, as the history of error amply points out. In the course of time, false doctrines slowly crept into the church, which in time undermined the very foundation of the Christian faith. Instead of strictly adhering to the Gospel doctrine of salvation by faith through the grace of God, some in the church began to teach a doctrine of salvation by works. They did not deny Christ's redeeming work altogether, but argued that Christ's sacrifice on the cross had been for the purpose of removing the guilt of original sin and that man himself, by his good works, must atone for his actual sins. Since men could not live lives good enough to remove all their guilt, the doctrine of purgatory was developed. Purgatory was taught to be an intermediate state between heaven and hell, a place of suffering for those who in this life had not made sufficient satisfaction for their sins on earth. There they could make the necessary satisfaction by suffering the pangs of purgatory until they were purged of all guilt; and then they could pass into heaven.

The doctrine concerning the Mass, or Holy Communion, was also perverted. Instead of being regarded as a means of grace, it was changed into a sacrifice; that is, Christ's body was sacrificed by the priest in an unbloody manner for the sins of the living and the dead. The saying of masses for individuals, for which money was paid, was taught to be helpful even if the person did not have saving faith in his heart; and in the case of the departed, masses were supposed to assist their souls, so that they might pass through the fires of purgatory more rapidly.

Instead of preaching the Gospel of free grace for sinners, the priests taught the people to rely on the law, in part, for their salvation. Christ was presented to the people not as a loving Savior, but as a harsh Judge. It was held to be useless to approach him with a request, as he would not listen to it; so the people were told to pray to the Virgin Mary and other saints. When Luther was in school he had the mishap of cutting himself with his sword. He almost bled to death before the doctor arrived, and during the night the wound bled afresh. In his fear he prayed for help to the Virgin Mary. Afterwards he told his friends: "Had I died, then, I should have placed my trust for salvation in Mary."

In answer to the question: "What must I do to be saved?" the church taught that in order to obtain eternal life one must be worthy of it. And how does one become worthy of it? The church recognized that man does not have a good heart by nature, yet he has not completely lost his free will in spiritual matters and therefore he can to some extent choose to cooperate with God. It was held that if man does the best that he can, then God will give him grace. This is known as *meritum congrui*, a reward earned by the free will. Then after God has poured grace in his heart he is capable of doing the works that merit eternal life. This is known as *meritum condigni*, a reward earned by a work prompted by the Holy Spirit.

This might sound like crass work-righteousness—and it is—but Rome also claims to teach "salvation by grace." But by "grace" Catholicism means something completely different from the Biblical meaning of grace. According to Catholic theology "grace" is the God-given ability to keep God's law and earn eternal life. This "grace" is said to be poured into the heart of man by the Holy Ghost. This is known as infused grace. In order to understand this we must realize that to Roman Catholic theology the word justify means to make someone just by giving him a new and holy nature. Thus, when God pours his grace into us, he gives us the kind of heart that can earn heaven. He is justifying us, or making us the kind of people that can be worthy of heaven.

Martin Chemnitz well understood this theology. In his *Examination of the Council of Trent* he says that “the church makes the distinction of a first and second justification. For they call that the first justification when an unregenerate man is first permeated with the inherent righteousness, when the first quality, or infused characteristic, of love has been received. And of this first infusion of love they say that no works merit it as a deserved reward. But they call that the second justification when the infused love exercises its operations, bringing forth good works. And this second justification, they say, can and should be obtained through good works. And these works, they think, merit a greater righteousness than the one which is infused freely, for Christ’s sake, in the first justification. Yes, they add that those works in which their second justification consists finally merit eternal life, which, they say, must be bestowed as a deserved reward upon our works performed in love.” Chemnitz concludes by saying, “Therefore they bring back into the church that scholastic figment that Christ merited only the first grace for us, with the help of which, while our own free will concurs, we can afterwards merit with our own good works that we become more pleasing to God, and are received into life eternal on account of our own good works.” (Ex. Vol. 1, pp. 540, 541).

It all boils down to this, then, that man can earn God’s grace when he does the best that he can and God rewards him for this. However, he is not yet saved. He has only gone half way, but now God will meet him with a gift of grace. But this offer of grace will not benefit unless man makes full use of his natural powers. This, then, is the merit that justifies him before God.

This was the conglomerate in Luther’s day. It was a mixture of works and grace. Consequently the question which Luther struggled with was: “How can I a poor sinner be justified in the sight of a holy, righteous God and be certain of my salvation?” It was in hope of finding an answer to this question that he interrupted his studies at Erfurt and decided to enter the monastery to devote his life to the church, thinking that thereby he would find the peace he was yearning for. But inner peace he did not find. He even inflicted bodily harm upon himself, thinking that that would please God. But then one day while studying St. Paul’s letter to the Romans the Holy Spirit led him to see that it was not the righteousness which God demands of us that saves, but rather the righteousness that he gives us in his Son. He wrote as follows:

I had indeed been captivated with an extra ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then ... a single word in Chapter 1:17, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed,” stood in my way. For I hated that word “righteousness of God,” which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, and most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who

through faith is righteous shall live.' " There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which a merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And I extolled by sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word "righteousness of God." Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. (LW 34, pp. 336, 337)

The Nature of Man and the Nature of God

In order to understand and appreciate the doctrine of justification we must, first of all, know and believe what the Bible says about the nature of man and the nature of God. As a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve all men are born with original sin and are subject to death and eternal damnation. Scripture does not depict sin as merely a weakness or a deficiency as is the prevailing attitude in our day. Prof. Kurt Marquart described the situation well in the Reformation lectures here at Bethany in 1977: "One of the prime deficiencies of our underprivileged age is an almost total absence of the sense of sin. Luther's 'terrors of conscience' and his quest 'for a gracious God' are perceived today, patronizingly, as something comprehensible, something from another, and strangely antiquated world. The 'modern' instinct is to assign the problem to the level of chemo- or psycho-therapy for guilt-feelings."

The Bible, however, teaches that sin is utter corruption, a complete falling away from God, that man is spiritually dead, blind, and an enemy of God. In the Smalcald Articles Luther writes: "this hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand. It must be believed because of the revelation of the Scriptures." Therefore by nature man is totally unable to save himself from his lost condition, and to complicate the situation the Bible describes God as holy and just and therefore must punish sin. Being holy, God cannot have fellowship with unforgiven sin and being just he must condemn the guilty sinner. His holy law demands perfection and will not settle for anything less. Therein lies man's dilemma. However, God is also loving and merciful and in his boundless mercy he has revealed a way whereby his wrath and justice have been satisfied and therefore he can and does forgive sin. The hymn writer Kingo expressed it strikingly in one of his hymns: "His grace and justice found a way, To save us from death's horror; And everlasting judgment stay, And give us joy for sorrow." Hymnary 434 v. 7b. This way, or plan, was conceived in eternity and revealed in time when sin entered into the world. Appearing to our first parents and Satan in the Garden of Eden the Lord God said, "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15) In time someone would be born of a woman who would destroy Satan's power over man. This was fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Luther describes it eloquently in his hymn "Dear Christians, one and all, Rejoice":

Then God beheld my wretched state
 With deep commiseration;
 He thought upon His mercy great,
 And willed my soul's salvation;
 He turned to me a Father's heart;
 Not small the cost! to heal my smart,
 He gave His best and dearest.

He spoke to His beloved Son:
 'Tis time to take compassion:
 Then go, bright Jewel of my crown,
 And bring to man salvation;
 From sin and sorrow set him free,
 Slay bitter death for him, that he
 May live with Thee forever.

Lutheran Hymnary 526 v. 4, 5

Terminology Used in the Doctrine of Justification

The following terminology is helpful in presenting the doctrine of justification properly and also in rejecting false doctrine:

"By Grace, For Christ's Sake, Through Faith"

The Formula of Concord says "the only essential and necessary elements of justification are the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and faith which accepts these in the promise of the Gospel." (Tappert p. 543) The term "by grace" is the favor Dei. that is, the undeserved favor of God. *Grace* denotes God's gracious disposition, which for Christ's sake he cherishes in himself toward sinful mankind and by which he in his heart does not charge men with their sins, but forgives them. Luther describes grace as follows: "Grace in the proper sense of the term, denotes God's favor and good will toward us which he cherishes in himself." (St. L. XIV 98) Grace in this sense has some synonyms in Scripture which also express God's feelings in Christ toward lost mankind, namely, God's love, mercy and kindness. These terms, as Luther says, "lead us into the Father's heart" and "make God sweet to us" and "we ought to go to sleep and arise with these words." Grace was the refrain of Luther's theology. He wrote: "A good song may well be sung often. Grace consists in this that God is merciful to us, shows himself gracious for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, forgives all sins, and will not impute them unto us for eternal death. This is grace: The forgiveness of sins for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, the covering up of all sins." (St. L. 7, 1692)

The term *grace* in Scripture sometimes signifies the gifts which are conferred upon us by benevolence. It designates something in man, namely good qualities and good works, which God works in the believers. For example, the apostle Peter writes: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth." (I Peter 4:10-11) Here the grace of God is the gift received; not the favor Dei forgiving sins, but the ability which God gives, the ability inhering in the Christian to teach what is right and to serve one another. Grace in this sense is a gift of grace, grace residing in the individual, infused grace.

But grace in this sense (infused) is never regarded in Scripture as a cause which moves God to save sinful man. For this, Scripture knows only one cause: *divine grace* and when Scripture speaks of this cause it clearly places the grace of God in opposition to all works of man. The sharp distinction between divine grace (*favor Dei*) and the gifts of grace (infused) is very important in the doctrine of justification. To base justification, in whole or in part, on grace in the sense of infused grace is really basing it on salvation by works and the Christian doctrine of salvation by grace is cast aside, as St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." (Gal. 5:4) Luther repeats it over and over that the Papacy rests on the fundamental error of infused grace.

It is right here where many have departed from Christendom; they substitute divine grace for a good quality in man or combine the two. The church of Rome opposes the doctrine of divine grace so vehemently that it anathematizes all who exclude infused grace as a cause of justification. Philip Melancthon stated the difference between divine grace and gifts of grace very clearly when he wrote: "Here one justly takes issue with the scholastics who so shamefully abuse the most holy term 'gratia' (grace) making it to mean a quality which is said to be in the souls of saints. ... We however, following the usage of Scripture, take this disposition of gratia to mean favor, compassion, unmerited good will of God toward us. The donum (gift) is the Holy Spirit, which he pours out into the hearts of those on whom he has taken pity. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is faith, hope, love, and the rest of the virtues. So much for this term 'grace.' In sum, grace is nothing else than the condonation or remission of sin. The gift is the Holy Spirit, regenerating and sanctifying the heart." (Quoted in Pieper's Dogmatics, Vol. II p. 15)

This saving grace is not an absolute grace, or a fiat of the divine will, but it is a grace in Christ, a grace gained by his vicarious satisfaction. "Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:24) God's gracious disposition springs entirely from the redemption of Christ. Christ's merit and God's grace are indissolubly joined to each other. Outside of Christ, God is a consuming fire. Grace without Christ's satisfaction is a non-ens (no such thing). Luther says that whoever believes in such a grace "is living in an air castle" and is dealing with heathen concepts. A characteristic of heathen religions is that they would believe in God without "the cost," without the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Regarding the cost Luther says: "I have often said before that faith in God alone is not sufficient, but the cost must also be there. The Turks and Jews also believe in God, but without the means and the cost. What, then, is the cost: That the Gospel shows. . . Christ here teaches us that we are not lost, but have eternal life, that is, that God so loved us that he was ready to pay the price of thrusting his only, his dearest Child into our misery, hell, and death, and having him drink that up. In that way we shall be saved." (St. L. XI 1085f)

We cannot, therefore, speak of the grace of God and our salvation apart from the price which our Saviour paid for it. This is the very basis of our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. "Without the shedding of blood is no remission." (Heb. 9:22b) The apostle Peter speaks of the cost in these words: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." (I Peter 1:18-20) It was, no doubt, this passage which Luther had in mind when he wrote the explanation of the Second Article of the Creed: "Not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death." The prophet Isaiah also wrote of the cost. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5) Commenting on this passage Luther writes: "On his shoulders, not on mine, lie all my sins. For

‘the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ and ‘for the transgressions of his people he was stricken.’ Therefore when you say that I am a sinner, you do not frighten me; but you bring me immense consolation.” (LW Vol. 26, p. 37)

In order to accomplish this work of redemption Jesus had to be both God and man in one person, true man in order to fulfill God’s law in man’s stead and to suffer the punishment which we deserved to suffer, and true God in order that his atoning work might be sufficient for all men. We speak of his perfect life in fulfilling the law as his active obedience, and his voluntary suffering and death for the punishment of our sins as his passive obedience. St. Paul sums it up in these words: “When the foulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” (Gal. 4:4-6)

The saving grace concept fails if Christ and his work do not occupy the center of our theology and that is why Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (I Cor. 2:2) To speculate as to whether God could be gracious by virtue of his divine sovereignty is foolish. Here again Luther has good advice: “Will you prescribe to God how he should do things? You should leap for joy that he does it, in whatever manner he will, only that you obtain it.” (St. L. XX 882ff) All who teach a grace of God apart from Christ’s work have renounced the Christian faith. The Christian Church is the communion of all those who believe that they have a gracious God for Christ’s sake “in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” (Eph. 1:7) Article IV of the Augsburg Confession teaches “that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are justified freely for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by his death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight.”

It is on the basis of Christ’s redemptive work that God the Father has declared the world forgiven and this declaration is apart from and prior to faith. Our faith has absolutely nothing to do with this universal declaration. We have been forgiven whether we believe it or not. True, the forgiveness will not benefit us unless we believe it, but the fact remains that we have been declared forgiven. What God told Isaiah to proclaim to the people of his day will be true until the end of time: “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sin.” (Is. 40:1,2) Paul echoes the same truth when he writes: “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” (Rom. 5:20) Refusal to believe that you have been forgiven forfeits making it your personal possession, but it does not change the fact that you have been forgiven. The worst thing you can do to yourself is to reject this precious gift, for in so doing you deprive yourself of that salvation which has been obtained for you. Luther: “A king gives you a castle; if you do not accept it, then it is not the king’s fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it to you.” (LW 40, p. 367) In our ELS Explanation of Luther’s Catechism under the chapter heading *The Forgiveness of Sins* we have this question and answer which sums it up well:

How can God declare sinners righteous?

God can declare sinners righteous because, on the basis of the redemptive work of Christ, he has acquitted all men of the guilt and punishment of their sins, and has imputed to them the righteousness of Christ;

He therefore regards them in Christ as though they had never sinned (general or objective justification). (ELS Catechism p. 154)

“Through faith” designates faith as the empty hand that reaches out and accepts the forgiveness of sins. We do not say that we are saved on account of our faith, for that would make faith a cause of our justification, but we are saved through faith. Faith is the instrument which accepts what God offers and this faith is also a gift of God’s grace, worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. As Lutherans we confess in Article V of the Augsburg Confession: “That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God. in them that hear the Gospel.” This article treats of the means by which God works the justifying faith in our hearts. In his Large Catechism Luther reminds us that “although the work was accomplished and forgiveness of sins was acquired on the cross, yet it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word” that is, the written and spoken Word and also the visible Word in the Sacraments. Luther’s doctrine of the means of grace is eloquently expressed in the Smalcald Articles where he writes: “For God is surpassingly rich in grace: first, through the spoken word, by which forgiveness of sin is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren.” Not only are the blessings of salvation brought to us through these means, but it is also through these means that they are made our own; the Holy Spirit works in our hearts the faith to accept them. The Word, whether spoken, read, or brought to us in the Sacraments bears in itself the gift and heavenly blessing, and thereby works the faith which says, “Be it unto me according to thy word” and which thus appropriates and possesses the gift. All of his rich grace and gifts are in the Word and Sacraments. They are the hands of God by which he brings and offers to us the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Faith is the hand which accepts what the grace of God in Christ has won for us. Again in our Catechism we have this question which follows the one on objective justification:

How do you receive this forgiveness or justification?

I receive this justification when the Holy Ghost through the means of grace leads me, the sinner, to believe that God has forgiven all my sins for Christ’s sake (personal or subjective justification). (ELS Catechism p. 155)

This triad “by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith” affirms that “we must seek our entire righteousness apart from our own and all other human merits, works, virtues, and worthiness and that our righteousness rests solely and alone. on the Lord Christ.” (Tappert p. 549) This truth must be maintained against the Roman Catholic theology which makes “infused grace” together with Christ’s merit the cause of justification and against all enthusiasm and decision theology which bases justification on the “Christ in us” rather than the “Christ outside us,” and against modern theology which would eliminate Christ’s vicarious satisfaction.

Justification is a Judicial, or Forensic Act

Edward Preuss in his monumental treatise on *Justification on the Sinner Before God* observes that the verb justify occurs thirty-eight times in the New Testament and in all these thirty-eight passages it signifies a forensic act. It means to regard as righteous, to declare

righteous, not to infuse righteousness. Justification, therefore, is not a physical or medical act by which the unrighteous man is changed by an inward transformation into a righteous man, but it is a judicial act by which a person who is in himself unrighteous is declared righteous.

While justification is a judicial act it differs from declarations handed down in human courts wherein the judge pronounces the innocent man innocent and the guilty man guilty. If a human judge pronounces the guilty righteous, then he is an abomination in the sight of God. But this very thing which the judge does not do God does when he justifies a man through the Gospel and faith. God pronounces the “ungodly” righteous, as St. Paul says in Romans 4:5. Our Confessions also call attention to the difference between the forensic act in the divine justification and in the civil courts. Commenting on Romans 5:1 the Apology says: “In this passage ‘justify’ is used in a judicial way to mean ‘to absolve a guilty man and pronounce him righteous,’ and to do so on account of someone else’s righteousness, namely Christ’s, which is communicated to us through faith. Since in this passage our righteousness is the imputation of someone else’s righteousness, we must speak of righteousness in a different way here from the philosophical or judicial investigation of a man’s own righteousness.” (Tappert p. 154) Righteousness here is the basic difference between the theology of the Lutheran Confession and Roman Catholic theology. Catholic theology says that God can declare only such people righteous as are righteous in themselves, having kept the Law or at least have done the best they can. According to Scripture God pronounces “the ungodly” righteous “without the law” therefore without making any moral demands whatsoever on men. Roman 4:5 says: “To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness.” This proves conclusively that justification is a forensic, declaratory act.

The reason a holy and just God can do this is because of the redemptive work of his Son. Jesus willingly placed himself under the law, became our substitute, was made the one great Sinner by imputation and therefore as Luther says “he became the greatest of all sinners for he took the place of all sinners and thus became guilty of all sins of the world,” was cursed and condemned in our stead, paid the penalty of the law for us by suffering and dying on the cross, even suffered the torment of hell for us. And when all this was done, when divine justice was satisfied, he was released again. God raised him from the dead thus putting the divine stamp of approval upon his work. And because of this saving work of his Son, God has justified the ungodly; he has pronounced every sinner to be guiltless and holy, or, in other words, he has forgiven all sin.

Note that the justifying does not follow the believing. If it did, it would be a conditional justification, and the meaning would be that if the ungodly believes, then God will justify him. But that is not what the text says. Besides, how can I depend or rely on anything that is not a fact, that has not taken place. No, first God justifies the ungodly, and then the ungodly has something to believe. Without a justification before faith there can be no justification by faith.

The statement “God justifies the ungodly” is not cumbered with any conditions; there are no ifs or provideds, none whatever. God justifies the ungodly regardless of his behavior and therefore the ungodly is justified whether he believes it or not. Justification is an accomplished fact. Therefore Jesus uses the past tense: “For God so *loved* the world” and “The Son of Man *came*.” Likewise, St. Paul: “God *was* in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” (II Cor. 5:9) So when the ungodly believes “his faith is counted to him for righteousness.” He is in possession of the righteousness which God demands, the perfect righteousness that opens the door of heaven. With the apostle Paul he can say that he is in possession of “the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” (Phil. 3:9b NIV)

It is therefore Scriptural to say “God justifies” and “faith justifies.” These two statements denote the same thing, only from different viewpoints. God, on the basis of Christ’s saving work, pronounces and declares the ungodly righteous and faith accepts that declaration. Thus he applies it to himself and now faith has that righteousness for its own. So faith justifies, as Paul says, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” (Rom. 3:28)

An illustration from our national history will help to put this in perspective: On January 1, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which set all the slaves free. This was an objective fact and it took on subjective dimensions as each slave received the benefit of this proclamation. In this announcement we have a telling parallel to what God the Father accomplished by way of his proclamation that all men are righteous on account of the work of Jesus Christ. That decision, validated by the raising of his Son from the dead, is known as objective justification. The fact of universal reconciliation or objective justification is a clear teaching of Scripture. It could not be expressed more clearly than in these words of St. Paul: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.” The benefits of this reconciliation are extended to everyone in the world, and when they are appropriated by faith then the individual is personally justified before God. This is known as subjective justification. (Condensed from an article on justification in the *Luth. Witness*)

It is this central doctrine of Scripture which Rome officially condemned at the Council of Trent, a Council which began in 1545. In the Sixth Session which deals with justification it is stated in canons 11 and 12:

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 11)

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 12)

In Luther’s day there was a man named Osiander who denied justification by faith. He called it a “horrible doctrine” to teach that justify means “to declare righteous.” He held that it means “to make righteous” and in so doing he was teaching Catholic doctrine, even though he called himself a Lutheran. Like Rome, he based the assurance of forgiveness of sin on sanctification and good works. Luther’s doctrine of justification was based on the Christ “outside us” while Osiander based it on the Christ “in us,” the indwelling of Christ’s divine nature. Luther summed it up as follows: “It is certain that Christ, or the righteousness of Christ, since it is outside and foreign to us, cannot be apprehended by our works; but faith, which is poured into us by the Holy Spirit through hearing Christ, this faith apprehends Christ.” (St. L XIX, 1452)

Sola Fide

Scripture emphasizes the truth that the justification of sinners before God is by faith alone, apart from the works of the law. Hence justification is not partly by faith and partly by works, as the Roman Catholic church claims, but by faith alone, as the Lutheran church teaches.

The term “by faith alone” does not exclude God’s grace, Christ’s merit, means of grace, but on the contrary, includes these as prerequisites. But because we are justified by grace, for Christ’s sake, therefore we are justified by faith alone, to the exclusion of works. Faith is always the instrument that receives what God gives. Faith is the poor sinner’s hand which merely grasps and makes one’s own what is already prepared and at hand.

In Luther’s day the Catholics charged him with falsifying Scripture by adding the word “alone” to Romans 3:28. Luther’s translation of this passage is: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified without the deeds of the law, by faith alone.” The Roman theologians stated that Lutherans and Catholics could come to an agreement on justification if only the Lutherans would strike the word sola.

To those who protested against this translation that the word “alone” is not found in the original text, Luther replied: “I am surprised at the opposition in this manifest manner. Do tell me whether the death and resurrection of Christ is our work. It certainly is not our work nor the work of any law. Now, alone the death and resurrection of Christ makes us free from sin, as St. Paul says. Furthermore, tell me, which is the work by which we take hold of the death and resurrection of Christ. It certainly must be no external work, but solely and only faith in the heart. This faith alone, yea, all alone, without all works, apprehends the death and resurrection of Christ where it is preached through the Gospel. ... Now, if this is manifest, why, then, should we not also speak thus.” (St. L. XIX, 980) Article XX of the Augsburg Confession uses the language four times and the Apology advises those who are not pleased with the little word sola to erase in so many places in the epistles of St. Paul these words, “by grace,” “not of works” “gift of God,” “lest any man should boast.” (Tappert p. 117) It must be stressed that no intrinsic value dares be ascribed to justifying faith. This is precisely the meaning of the statement that faith is merely the instrument of receiving the grace of God. That is what Scripture teaches when it says: “By faith, without the deeds of the law.” (Rom. 3:28) The Lutheran Confessions declare repeatedly: “Faith’s sole office and property is to serve as the only and exclusive means and instrument with and through which we receive, grasp, accept, apply to ourselves, and appropriate the grace and the merit of Christ in the promise of the Gospel.” (Tappert p. 546) “Faith does not justify or save because it is a good work in itself, but only because it accepts the promised mercy.” (Tappert p. 114)

This “faith alone” which justifies the sinner in the sight of a holy God is also a gift of God’s grace worked in the heart by the Gospel. The Gospel is a powerful means of grace, for it is not only an invitation, but also a transportation, that is, it actually brings us to faith and in possession of the righteousness of Christ which covers all our sins. This is of great comfort to the individual. If salvation depended in the least upon the works of the law we could never be certain of it. One of the greatest sins of the Catholic Church is that by its doctrine of justification it keeps distressed consciences in perpetual doubt, hindering them from being sure of salvation. In a letter to an Augustinian friar named Spenlein, who was in great agony concerning his state of grace, Luther wrote as follows: “Therefore, my dear friar, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him, and despairing of yourself, say, ‘Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.’ Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see sweet consolation. For why was it necessary for him to die if we can obtain a good conscience by our works and afflictions? Accordingly you will find peace only in him and only when you despair of yourself and your own works. Besides, you will learn from him that just as he has received

you, so he has made your sins his own and has made his righteousness yours." (LW Vol. 48, p.12)

What Luther wrote to his troubled friend is the most beautiful Gospel that can be preached. For it declares that Christ has come in behalf of everybody, that he has borne every man's sins, that he calls everyone to believe on him, to rejoice and rest assured that his sins are forgiven and that in the hour of death he will depart saved.

"Not of Works"

While it is true that good works are always present with faith—for faith without works is dead—yet to say that the presence of good works is necessary to obtain justification is an outright disavowal of the Scriptural doctrine. To say that justification requires the presence of good works transfers justification to the sphere of the law. In his epistle to the Galatians St. Paul is very explicit when he writes: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." (Gal. 2:16) Then referring to Abraham who believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness he says: "So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith." (Gal. 3:9-11)

In this connection some might say that there is a contradiction between Paul and James. James asks: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" (James 2:21) and then concludes: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only." (James 2:24) Really, there is no contradiction. The thrust of James' argument is that a dead faith is no faith and a dead faith never has, nor ever will, save anyone. Our confessions correctly explain when they say that "James calls that faith dead where all kinds of good works and fruits of the Spirit do not follow. James is speaking of the good works of those who are already justified through Christ, who are reconciled with God, and who have obtained forgiveness of sins through Christ." (Tappert p. 547) Good works do not precede justification, rather they follow it, since a person must first be righteous before he can do good works.

Luther explains the distinction between works and faith in his commentary on Galatians:

We certainly grant that we must teach about love and good works too. But it must be done at the time and place where it is necessary, namely, when we deal with good works apart from this matter of justification. At this point the main question with which we have to do is not whether a person should also do good works and love, but how a person may be justified before God and be saved. And then we answer with St. Paul that we are justified alone through faith in Christ, and not through the works of the law or through love—not in such a way as if we thereby utterly rejected works and love (as the adversaries falsely slander and accuse us) but so that we may not be diverted (as Satan would very much like) from the main issue with which we here have to do into another extraneous matter which does not belong in this article at all. Therefore, while and as long as we have to do with this article of justification, we reject and

condemn works, since the very nature of this article cannot admit any treatment or discussion of works. For this reason we summarily cut off every reference to the law and the works of the law in this conjunction. (Tappert p. 544)

Again we let Luther speak: "There is a beautiful agreement between faith and good works; nevertheless, it is faith alone which apprehends the blessing without works. And yet faith is at no time ever alone." And, finally in his preface to the Romans:

Faith is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God, kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, faith is a living busy active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active. Whoever does not perform such good works is a faithless man, blindly tapping around in search of faith and good works without knowing what either faith or good works are, and in the meantime he chatters and jabbars a great deal about faith and good works. Faith is a vital, deliberate trust in God's grace, so certain that it would die a thousand times for it. And such confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes us joyous, mettlesome, and merry toward God and all creatures. This the Holy Spirit works by faith, and therefore without any coercion a man is willing and desirous to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything for the love of God and to his glory, who has been so gracious to him. It is therefore as impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire. (Tappert p. 552, 553)

Ironically, on Judgment Day the Saviour will call attention to the works of believers as evidence that they had true faith, though their works were in no way the cause of their faith and salvation. The hymnist correctly describes the relationship between faith and works in these words:

Faith to the cross of Christ doth cling
 And rests in Him securely;
 And forth from it good works must spring
 As fruits and tokens surely;
 Still faith doth justify alone,
 Works serve thy neighbor and make known
 The faith that lives within thee.
 (Lutheran Hymnary 205, v. 10)

"No Degrees in Justification"

Justification is not a gradual process, as Rome teaches. According to Catholic theology justification is a process extending throughout man's life on earth and beyond that into purgatory. Faith is merely the beginning or root of justification and belongs with numerous other acts merely to the preparation for justification. According to Rome, justification is accomplished as follows: First, the preparation for justification and this is made up of several parts or steps. This preparation is followed by justification which is not remission of sins

merely, but also sanctification. And in all of this man must cooperate and when a man has finally completed justification itself; then he must ever remain in doubt whether he has obtained the grace of God. Not until a person has gone through purgatory will he be fully justified. The Roman doctrine of justification may be summarized as follows: Christ's merit enables man to earn his own salvation, first *de congruo* (a reward earned by free will), later *de condigno* (a reward earned by a work prompted by the Holy Ghost).

Because the Roman Catholics confound justification with sanctification they teach that there are degrees of justification. While there are degrees of sanctification, there are no degrees of justification. God does not forgive partially, but the Bible teaches that when God justifies a man, he justifies him completely. If God forgives only partially, then all the texts which speak of the all-sufficient atonement through the blood of Christ become uncertain. If there is anything taught clearly in God's Word it is God's full and free forgiveness. I John 1:7 says, "The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanseth us from all sin." The blood of Christ is always our garment and it always covers us completely.

Our confessions also teach a complete justification, "Justification is the approval of the entire person." (Tappert p. 137) The Smalcald Articles say: "By faith we get a new and clean heart and that God will and does account us altogether righteous and holy for the sake of Christ, our mediator. Although the sin in our flesh has not been completely removed or eradicated, he will not count or consider it." (Tappert p. 315) Luther: "Now we well know what forgiveness of sins means. If he forgives, he forgives everything altogether and leaves nothing unforgiven. Now, if I am rid of, and free from sin, then I am also rid of death, devil, and hell and am a son of God and a lord of heaven and earth." (St. L. XX 75)

Dr. Edward Preuss in his monograph on JUSTIFICATION has some excellent quotations regarding this matter of full forgiveness. We would like to share some of these with you:

"Forgiveness of sins has no plus and no minus; God freely forgives all, exhibiting to all the same fullness of mercy. Therefore, Scripture testifies that all who are justified, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, those of little faith and those of strong faith, are just as righteous as Abraham, the father of all them that believe." (Henry Hoepfner)

"The forgiveness of sins in this life is perfect, so that no condemnation remains. Consequently also justification is perfect, it being nothing else than the forgiveness of sins." (Scherzen)

"Just as the merit of Christ is conveyed to the believers in its entirety and at the same time, so also all sins are forgiven at the same time." Again: "Now Christ and his righteousness are indivisible. Whoever has him has him wholly. . . . Hence it follows without contradiction that he must be wholly righteous because his Savior brings him his entire righteousness." (Fresenius)

Phillipi: After all, the fact remains that justification, as the imputation of the perfect righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ, is incapable of growth, grades, or degrees, but from beginning to end is perfect in itself. There are indeed degrees of faith, but no degree of justification, because also the infirm faith, if it be but upright, apprehends the righteousness of Christ, which verily needs no perfecting through our faith or our works.

It is indeed comforting that a weak faith justifies as completely as strong faith. Luther: "Therefore we are all equal in Christ through faith. Though St. Peter had a stronger faith than I, still it is the very same faith in Christ. The Father has given the same Christ to all men, asking

them to lay hold of him. Whoever receives him, receives him entirely, no matter whether he receives him with a strong or a weak faith." (St. L. XI 1840)

It is this truth that the Formula of Concord has in mind when it says: "We also believe, teach and confess that, although the genuinely believing and truly regenerated persons retain much weakness and many shortcomings down to their graves, they still have no reason to doubt either the righteousness which is reckoned to them through faith or the salvation of their souls, but they must regard it as certain that for Christ's sake, on the basis of the promises and the Word of the holy Gospel, they have a gracious God." (Tappert p. 474)

Therefore, the Christian; no matter how weak his faith, can joyfully and confidently sing with Paul Gerhard:

He canceled my offenses
 Delivered me from death;
 He is the Lord who cleanses
 My soul from sin through faith
 In Him I can be cheerful,
 Bold, and undaunted aye;
 In Him I am not fearful
 Of God's great Judgment Day

Naught, naught can now condemn me
 Nor set my hope aside
 Now hell no more can claim me
 Its fury I deride.
 No sentence e'er reproves me,
 No ill destroys my peace;
 For Christ, my Savior, loves me
 And shields me with his grace.

Lutheran Hymnal, 528, vs 5, 6

A Prominent Role

A cursory reading of the history of our Synod reveals that the doctrine of Justification has played an important role in the history of our Synod. In the *Foreword of Grace For Grace*, the anniversary book commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Synod and the 25th anniversary of its reorganization, the purpose of the book is stated in these words: "As an *historical* presentation it endeavors to show how 'grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' to our fathers and to us; and as a *confessional* statement it declares unhesitatingly the allegiance of our Synod to the central doctrine of an unconditioned Gospel of grace as this is clearly taught in the Scriptures, in the Lutheran Confessions, and in the official statements of our church since 1853."

In his presidential address to the Synod in 1866 President H. A. Preus draws a parallel between the book of Nehemiah and the situation of Lutheranism in the 1860's. The builders of the wall at Jerusalem were beset by enemies who tried to keep them from building: so they had a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. When he has reminded the convention of the facts of Nehemiah's time, he says:

So far the account in Nehemiah! I sat and thought about our Lutheran Church, how it was in the days now passed, in the golden era of the Reformation

and in the century which followed; I thought of how it is now; then I went back to Nehemiah's description of the situation in Jerusalem, and among its people, and it seemed to me to be a true picture of our Lutheran Zion; but it also contains so many words which were rich in instruction and comfort for me and especially suited to lead and strengthen the despondent heart to faithfulness and dauntlessness in the work of building our beloved Zion. Therefore, brethren I have directed your attention to it.

How beautifully situated, as a city set on a hill, our Lutheran Zion was in the days of the Reformation, resplendent with its excellent confession, with the faith, testimony, struggle and death for the truth, of its citizens. Securely, though always watchful, they dwelt there in the city which the Lord had built, protected by the walls which were as solid as rock—the pure, incomparable, glorious Confessions, grounded solely in the Word of God revealed in the Scriptures. No enemy was able to leap over those walls or tear them down; because the men who stood behind them entertained no doubt of the truth and the firmness of their confession, they looked upon it not as a human creation which they could confess for a while and later give up, no, they confessed because they believed, and in the power of faith, died and triumphed for their confession. And the core of this confession is that Jesus Christ, God and Man, by his suffering and death has atoned for all the world's sin, overcome death, crushed Satan, burst hell asunder, and by his resurrection has become the righteousness of us all in the sight of God. How precious it was for their faith—it was their comfort, their power, their everything. It was the iron gate through which the devil's fiery darts could not pierce, the gates of hell could not break through them.

In that same address President Preus said:

And it is especially important that we urge the chief article of our faith, that God justifies the unrighteous, that God, reconciled to all the world by the blood of Jesus, in the Gospel offers to everyone who hears it, the forgiveness of sins and out of undeserved grace and without setting up the slightest condition which we are supposed to fulfill, so that he who hears need only believe in his heart and be fully assured of it that it is the earnest desire and truth of God which hears, so that he has forgiveness of sins and is saved. It is important to present this costliest pearl among the articles of faith in all its purity: that sinners are justified by the grace of God alone by faith without the deeds of the law. (translated from the Norwegian by Pastor Herbert Larson)

President Preus goes on to show how the Synod had to contend against false brethren. Professors Weenaas and Oftedal, members of the Norwegian–Danish Conference who also served on the faculty of Augsburg Seminary, authored a lengthy article under the title “Wisconsinism” in which they accused the Synod of teaching “Universalism” of abolishing all personal responsibility” “looses justification from its logical and organized connection with faith and therewith from its connection with Christ himself” and that justification thus becomes only “a logical conclusion,” “a mere supposition of the ‘pure doctrine’ ” “something in the blue which cannot be caught,” but “not a personal act of God, who with his real contents brings an actual, new, personal relationship.” Weenaas coined the word “Wisconsinism,” as a term of

derision against the staunch, scriptural, orthodox, Lutheran, confessional, theology taught and confessed and defended by the old Norwegian Synod. Since its president and leading spokesman was President Preus, who lived in Wisconsin, Weenaas apparently felt that "Wisconsinism" was the best word to use. Preus responded with an article entitled "Rejoinder" in which he responds to the charges of Weenaas and Oftedal and ably defends the doctrine of justification.

At the request of the Norwegian Synod the doctrine of justification was made the subject of discussion at the organizational meeting of the Synodical Conference in 1872. At the 50th anniversary of the Synod at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, June 18-24, 1903, one of the papers read and discussed was "The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Concerning the Justification of a Sinner Before God." When the reorganized Synod gathered for the first time in its own spacious and commodious quarters at Bethany Lutheran College, again the doctrine of justification was one of the essays. In the years that have followed we note that the doctrine of justification has been prominent among the topics discussed.

Dr. Koren, one of the leaders of the Synod, delivered an essay in 1890 entitled "WHAT THE NORWEGIAN SYNOD HAS WANTED AND STILL WANTS." In this essay he speaks of the two main pillars of truth upon which the Synod was built, the first one being that Holy Scripture is the only sure and perfect rule of our faith and life, and the second, the great truth that Jesus Christ is the way to salvation for all believing souls, in other words, that a man is justified and saved for Christ's sake by faith alone without the works of the law. Regarding justification Koren says that "one cannot keep this, the most precious treasure and greatest comfort of God's Word, unless he in sincere obedience clings to the chief truths of the Scripture which are inseparably connected with said doctrine."

Thus we see that the doctrine of justification has played an important role in the history of our Synod. It has been taught, confessed, defended, and by the grace of God, preserved. This doctrine, taught so clearly in Scripture and revived through the Lutheran Reformation, has lived throughout our history and has survived the many attacks which have threatened to abort this life-giving doctrine. For this we thank our gracious God and implore his grace to preserve this precious truth in our midst.

As we commemorate the quincentenary of Luther's birth, we should indeed be grateful that this heritage has been handed down to us in its truth and purity. It is due to his unmerited grace that we are in possession of his soul-saving truth, and let us never forget it. The longer we possess it the greater the tendency to take it for granted and permit it to diminish in importance. May God preserve us from growing lukewarm toward this central teaching of God's Word. Instead, as this doctrine lives in our hearts through faith may a spirit of gratitude burn in our hearts to our gracious God for revealing unto us how poor sinners are justified in his sight, namely through faith in the atoning merits of his Son, Jesus Christ. Let us also resolve to grow in our understanding and appreciation of this doctrine. We would do well to heed what our synodical president said in his message to the Synod at our last synodical convention when he spoke of the needs of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod as we go forward in the service of the Lord: "We need, first of all, continued instruction on the central doctrine of the Christian religion, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith in Christ."

Martin Luther would second this for he reminds us that no one has "completely mastered the article of justification and that therefore we need to study and restudy every phase of it." Dr. Koren also gave good advice when he reminded the Synod in his day of the wonderful grace of God that we have and encouraged the pastors and laity to study again and again and be established in this truth. That is good advice to us in our day too. The doctrine of

justification must be central in all of our preaching and teaching, for as our Confessions say: "it is the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine without which no poor conscience can have any abiding comfort or rightly understand the riches of the grace of Christ." In the same vein Luther declared: "Where this single article remains pure, Christendom will remain pure, and without any schisms. But where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to repel any error or heretical spirit." (Tappert p. 540)

As we look around in Lutheranism today, we see a growing indifference, confusion, and outright disregard for this doctrine. Going back to 1963 the Lutheran World Federation, which embraces most Lutherans in the world, could not agree on the doctrine of justification at its Helsinki meeting causing the secular *Time* magazine in its August 23, 1963 issue to say: "The doctrine of justification by faith alone was the keystone of the Reformation... But at Helsinki justification and its meaning for modern man came in for some questioning." Dr. Gerhard Gloege of Bonn University was quoted as saying: "It is an open secret that today neither the church nor the world knows what to do with this doctrine of justification. For the fathers it was the fountain and rule of faith and life. For the church today it is clearly an embarrassment." From the official proceedings of the Assembly we read: "Justification by faith remains a difficult and obscure doctrine. We may be impressed by the fact that the Lutheran Church has confessed it loyally and unswervingly through the centuries since the Reformation. But we still have difficulty in comprehending it, interpreting it, in seeing its relevance for the situation in which we live."

Dr. Warren Quanbeck, a spokesman for the American Lutheran Church, is quoted as saying, "Today biblically informed theologians in both traditions can agree on the teaching of the New Testament concerning justification by grace alone through faith, and can agree on theological formulations of the doctrine without denying or betraying their theological heritage." In other words there is a Roman Catholic/Lutheran convergence today on justification. This is also evidenced by Dr. Hans Kung, a Roman Catholic theologian, who says "that neo-Lutheran doctrine is quite compatible with that expressed by Trent."

Dr. Robert Preus in the July 1981 issue of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* reminds us of the problems which keep cropping up, "problems which have perennially in the church tended to obscure that brilliant light of justification by grace, to mitigate the doctrine, to deny it, to corrupt it, to ignore it, or to relegate it to the vast limbo of meaninglessness." Listed among those problems is the attempt "to define justification as something other than a divine forensic act or acquittal" and "to make faith a condition for justification." We might also add still another danger, namely "neo-universalism" that is the teaching that since God has declared everyone forgiven that therefore in the end all will be saved. This is the universalism which holds to objective justification, but not to subjective justification through which man appropriates this forgiveness and eternal salvation.

Bringing it even closer to home two surveys have been conducted this past decade which reveal that all is not well in the Lutheran Church, including our own ELS, so far as the right understanding of the doctrine of justification is concerned. The first survey, conducted by Dr. Merton Strommen and his associates, shows that "about two out of five Lutherans believe in salvation by works." (*A Study of Generations* p. 289) The other survey, entitled "Profiles of Lutherans" revealed that in response to the statement that the main emphasis of the Gospel is God's rules for right living, "49.9 of the ELS respondents and 62.1 of the laity of all synods accepted the false statement as it was presented or said they were not sure" causing Dr. Tjernagel to remark: "There can be no doubt that all Lutherans need to turn their minds toward

a serious effort toward a full and mature understanding of the doctrine of justification, the key and central doctrine of the Lutheran faith." (Lutheran Sentinel, March, 1982, p. 8)

Coupled with a desire to preserve and defend this doctrine must be a burning zeal to spread it and share it with others. While conservative Lutherans are known to devote much time and energy to the defense of the truth—and that is important—we should be just as concerned about giving equal time and energy to spreading it and sharing it with others. May we truly mean what we love to sing: "To spread its light from age to age Shall be our *chief* endeavor" remembering that the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations is in effect until the end of time and that therefore it is our business to be about this work with all diligence and zeal. We cannot and must not relax our efforts in proclaiming the doctrine of justification to the salvation of blood-bought souls. Ten new missions within the next five years, as suggested by our Mission Board, is certainly within the realm of possibility. We would also do well to heed Dr. Tjernagel's suggestion that "an ultimate aim might be the establishment of an evangelism program in every ELS congregation."

In conclusion, we would remind ourselves once more of the importance of the doctrine of justification. It is by this doctrine that the Church lives. It is this spiritual life-giving air which the Christian breathes. It tells me that my God is gracious to me, a poor sinner, and saves me, not because I have done anything to deserve it, but for the sake of his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, my dear Savior, who came down from heaven and shed his holy, blood on the cross. Because of his redemptive work the holy and righteous God has imputed to me the righteousness of Christ and has acquitted me of the guilt and punishment of sin so that he regards me as holy and righteous and through the power of the Holy Spirit he works in my heart the faith to believe this and thus make his righteousness my personal possession.

Yes, the doctrine of justification is the chief doctrine of the Christian religion. It distinguishes the Christian religion from all other religions, all of which teach salvation by works. This big difference has been strikingly spelled out by Max Mueller, an expert in comparative world religions, in a lecture before the British Bible Society some years ago in which he said:

In the discharge of my duties for forty years as professor of Sanskrit in the University of Oxford, I have devoted as much time as any man living to the study of the Sacred Books of the East, and I have found the one keynote, the diapason so to speak, of all these so-called sacred books, whether it be the Veda of the Brahmans, the Puranas of Siva and Vishnu, the Koran of the Mohammedans, the Zen-Avesta of the Parsees, the Tripitaka of the Buddhists—the one refrain through all—salvation by works. They all say that salvation must be purchased, must be bought with a price, and that the sole price, the sole purchase money, must be our own works and deservings. Our own holy Bible, our sacred Book of the East, is from beginning to end a protest against this doctrine. Good works are indeed enjoined upon us in that sacred Book of the East; but they are only the outcome of a grateful heart—they are only a thankoffering, the fruits of our faith. They are never the ransom money of the true disciples of Christ. Let us not shut our eyes to what is excellent and true and of good report in these sacred books, but let us teach Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, that there is only one sacred Book of the East that can be their mainstay in that awful hour when they pass all alone into the unseen world. It is the sacred Book which contains that faithful saying worthy to be received of all

men, women, and children, and not merely of us Christians – that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” (Pieper, Vol. II p. 4)

As we commemorate this anniversary of Luther’s birth may we thank and praise our gracious God for using this servant to give rebirth to the doctrine of justification. May we say with Luther: “In my heart there reigns, and shall ever reign, this one article, namely, faith in my dear Lord Jesus Christ, which is the sole beginning, middle, and end of all spiritual and godly thoughts which I may have at any time, day or night.” And may this faith give birth to a warm spirit of gratitude to our God for his grace and a fervent desire to preserve, defend, and share this faith, sparing no effort, but willing to make any sacrifice to advance its cause. May our Evangelical Lutheran Synod always be known as a church that teaches justification by grace through faith as its chief tenet, and thus continue to hold high the flag of the blessed Reformation. And now “unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” (Rev. 1:5, 6)

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