

Implications of Justification in the Many Contexts of Today's World

Seventy "younger" Lutheran theologians, most of them from the two-thirds world, travelled at the invitation of the Lutheran World Federation to Wittenberg, Germany, at the end of October this year to talk about the Implications of Justification in the Many Contexts of Today's World. On the last day of their meeting, Reformation Day, the 31st, they presented their theses, 12 of them, to the member churches of the LWF. And where did they post them? Not on the door of the castle church in town, as Luther himself had done with his 95 theses 481 years before, but on the Internet. Talk about new contexts for justification! What Gutenberg's printing press did for the cause of justification by faith alone (JBFA) 500 years ago, the Internet can do for it now, they said. So they put their message where their mouth was. You can see for yourself at www.lutheranworld.org/wittenberg/document/theses.html

Although professed Lutherans presented papers on the justification issue, the LWF brought in "outsiders" to deliberate the issue of cyberspace as a medium for JBFA. One of those from outside the club was Ignacio Ramonet, a leading French journalist. He warned that cyber-tech wineskins come already partially filled with their own wine. The brute fact of inequality between the "info-rich" and the "info-poor" marginalizes millions of people, he said. Information technology is not immune to original sin. The "brave new world" of "a perfect market of information and communication, completely integrated . . . without borders and functioning permanently in real time" is just that, a utopia more akin to Dante's inferno

than anything else.

But another speaker—maybe not really an outsider since, like Luther once, he's a Roman Catholic monk—sounded a more cheering note. This came from a very different context, namely, a monastery in the middle of the New Mexico desert. The monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert (Albuquerque, NM) have picked up the tools of the Internet to create a global community on the World Wide Web. Their site now averages 20,000 "hits" per day, though they once got a million a day when CNN featured them and the New York Times gave them a front-page story. What they offer is chants, homilies, prayers, information about the monastery, links to other resources and even information about sustainable building and renewable energy.

Two of the monks answer the prayer requests, while another, originally trained to illuminate manuscripts, provides images for the site, drawing on the artistic traditions of New Mexico and other streams of south-west US culture. Only a minority of the Web-visitors are Roman Catholic, and many say they have no religion at all. Their latest project is to set up an on-line prayer calendar. The monks are working with IBM to replace their prayer books with computer panels, so that people around the world can log on and pray with the monks in "real time." Brother Aquinas Woodworth, the architect of all this, relished the irony of explaining the virtues of new communication technology to Lutherans in Wittenberg.

The reports in Lutheran World Information (LWI) and Ecumenical News International (ENI) don't reveal whether last October's "younger" Wittenbergers actually got around to crossing today's internet context with JBFA theology. Can the Reformation Gospel exorcise the demons that Ramonet warned about and run on the internet as it once did on the printing press? And vis-a-vis the New Mexico monks, can JBFA good news go on-line as readily as

their prayer calendar does? Does the Gospel need not only “real time,” but a real face with a real voice in order to interface with people today as well as (it seemed to) in the past? These are the agenda items confronting our own Crossings web-spinners. Ideas and experience from any of you receiving ThTh will be greatly appreciated. We need all the help we can get.

How did JBFA itself fare at the Wittenberg gathering? Some answers can be deciphered from the twelve theses [actually paragraphs] of the “working paper” they posted on the web. Their language bulges with additional terms from today’s contexts: process, complexity, concern, today’s world, interpret anew, meaning, accents, implications.

After an opening preface on justification articulated in classical Reformation terminology—they were after all in “Lutherstadt” Wittenberg and it was October 31—the document then “tries to explicate this code language” for people today. So the 12 theses proceed under the overall caption: “What Justification could imply...” Then come the contexts.

“In the context of global economics” today we’re bombarded with the ideology of justification by production, prosperity and consumption. [I’ve seen that just today in the Christmas wish-lists our grandchildren have presented to us.] Au contraire JBFA with God’s declaration of our identity and value in Christ. “Justification frees one from the tyranny of the market, and impels Christians to care for those who are victims of the market ... and its religion of productivity.”

“In the context of global communication . . . justification implies that we oppose the messianic promises of mass communication systems and that we encourage their practical enhancement of genuine community.”

“In the context of gender consciousness . . . justification

means the equal value of women and men . . .challenging stereotyped or generalized views about gender relationships with a sensitive understanding of the real conditions of both genders” in widely different contexts throughout the world. Both self-righteousness and self-deprecation are manifestations of sin. Justification liberates sinners of both kinds.

“In the context of pluralism...we as justified people can remain open-minded towards understanding other people, religions and beliefs.” Why? Because “our righteousness is not inextricably linked to the code language by which we communicate the faith, but is ensured by the Christ whom we confess.” This suggests, it seems to me, that if Paul could be a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks, then being a Muslim with Muslims and a Buddhist with Buddhists is not beyond the pale for Christians today.

Thesis nine notes that “secularity is part of the world’s pluralistic character.” Though it can strengthen freedom and solidarity, secularity pushes its own justification agenda. “People are forced to justify themselves vis-a-vis others and are therein both accusers and accused.” The modern pressure to justify oneself is itself a global problem. Here JBFA is timely. “In this situation justification in Christ offers God’s freedom from the awful compulsion to demand and to accuse, and to justify and protect ourselves.” Here too the challenge is to “communicate the good news in terms adequate to the context,” which must mean—though the document doesn’t say so—as a secularist to the secularists.

The document is “good Lutheran” in pinpointing the justification agenda that comes in the guise of secularity. Even “better” Lutheran would be to say that this pressure to justify ourselves, though mediated by the contexts we live in, does not come finally from those contexts, but from God’s own self—as Adam found out in the context of the bushes in Genesis 3. And it

is in the face of God's own demand that we justify ourselves that JBFA is the deepest good news of all.

"In the context of the church" the new Wittenbergers say: "The church is a consequence of justification. . . . When the church lives in the certainty of justification, it can risk prophetic witness and need not feel obliged to mimic culture's criteria of success." It need not maintain a chronic defensive attitude. It can acknowledge its failures and guilt. "Finally, the justified church need not justify itself even by reference to its theology of justification, but can and will expend itself for the communication of justification through all the world."

The final thesis is a "Conclusion: Justification as the call to Apostolic Witness."

Curmudgeon that I sometimes am, I was grumpy after my first reading. Maybe because I was too old—and too unknown—to get invited to the party. But I softened up when I went through the text a second time (almost) rejoicing here and there, as you can detect above. However, had some of us "older" folks been there, we might have put in a plug for one significant element in the 16th century context for justification talk missing in this message.

These younger Wittenbergers speak of justification as somewhat "flat." Sinners are OK with God when they trust Christ; nothing more is needed. That's true. But in Luther's day justification by faith was a phrase that jolted. Justification was not merely a courtroom term, but a gallows term. Capital criminals were "justified" (=given their due justice) when they were executed. The big deal about JBFA is that sinners get justified (put to death) in their union with Christ. He dies our death with us and for us. Then just as he was raised at Easter, Christ-connected sinners survive their own executions to walk in newness of life.

That's hardly flat. Yet for sinners it is very flattering.

Linking justification as a new way of dying to today's contexts probably calls for another conference. Maybe it could be done next year in Wittenberg on the occasion of Katie (von Bora) Luther's 500th birthday. She was born on 29 January 1499. Celebrations are in the works at the "Lutherhaus" which she managed during her and Martin's time in Wittenberg. Oftentimes better than Martin himself, he said, she lived in the death-defying freedom of JBFA.

And apropos of dying, while writing this I got a phone call with the news of the death this evening of Carl Volz at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. A Seminex colleague from days gone by and a gutsy JBFA contextual theologian, Carl relished the flattery of having already died with Christ. He signalled the new life in Christ already operational in the vitality with which he carried out his callings. He'd patently gotten his second wind, the Holy Gust. Requiescat in pace.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder