

Justification by Faith Alone

Colleagues,

For this week's ThTh some old-fashioned seminary classroom stuff—but newly confected for Singapore Lutherans. Ever since we arrived two months ago I've had a Monday morning seminar with the pastors of the Lutheran Church here on "Lutheran Distinctives." This week the topic was "Justification by Faith Alone in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the AC." In an attempt to "cram it all in" into a mere two hours, I conjured up a "Guide Through the Text of Augsburg and Apology Article Four," handed it out and we walked/talked our way through what otherwise is 60 pp. of text in the Tappert Edition of the Book of Concord.. Here's what they got. Peace & joy!

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"A Guide Through the Text of Article Four of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the AC"

Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession

Note: All three of these key terms are synonyms: "forgiveness of sin... justification... righteousness before God." This "cannot" happen by any human effort, but is "received" "by grace [= "freely" in the Latin text of AC4], for Christ's sake, through faith." The word "faith" [German text] means "believing

that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.” [Latin text: Faith means to “believe that [we] are received into favor and that [our] sins are forgiven on account of Christ who by his death made satisfaction for our sins.”] God says: “Such faith equals righteousness.”

Note: the word “alone”— as in “faith alone”—is not in the text of AC4. Nor is the word “promise.” Both of these words are “big” words when we get to Apology 4. The response from the Roman Confutation [hereafter “RC”] to AC4 pushes Apol 4 to concentrate on these two words. Why? “Forgiveness of sins” [FoS] offered by Christ is a “promise.” A promise that our sins are forgiven now, but also “promised” in the future on the Last Day when God gives us his “final examination.” Since this Gospel-gift is a promise, faith in this promise [trusting it] is the only way it goes into effect. That is true of any promise. If the promise-receiver does not trust it, it doesn’t work. So faith ALONE is what makes promised forgiveness work. And since FoS = justification / righteousness, justification is by faith ALONE. Promise-trusters are 100% OK with God.

The first place that “faith alone” appears in the AC is in AC6 [New Obedience – Good Works]. AC6 says: Such faith does produce good works, as a fruit tree produces fruit. But the fruit doesn’t make the fruit tree. Good works do not make a person righteous. You first become a righteous person and then—like a tree—you produce righteous fruits. The last sentence of AC6 quotes St. Ambrose: “Believers in Christ shall be saved. . . have forgiveness of sins ... not through works, but through faith alone.”

The RC response to AC4 summarized in the Tappert footnotes: “It is entirely contrary to Scripture to deny that our works are meritorious All Catholics agree that of

themselves our works have no merit but that God's grace makes them worthy of eternal life." "...ascription of justification to faith ALONE is diametrically opposed to the truth of the Gospel, by which works are not excluded [The Confessors'] frequent ascription of justification to faith is not admitted since it pertains to grace and love"

Apol 4 response to RC 4.

[The numbers below in brackets are the marginal numbers in the Book of Concord text. I'm using Tappert's edition of the BoC, Most often, but not always, these numbers are the same in the new Kolb-Wengert edition of the BoC.]

[1] At 4 places RC condemns us. Not when we say "grace alone" [they agree on that, but what they mean by grace is not what grace is in the scriptures]. It is "faith alone" they object to.

[2] This is the main doctrine of Christianity. It is the center of the controversy.

[4] Before we start our response we need to check the hermeneutics going on here: see how we read the Bible and how they read the Bible. [5] We use a law/promise hermeneutic. [7] They use a law hermeneutic: that justification comes from doing right [=just] things. That's how they read the Bible: looking for God's word about doing the right things. [9] Philosophers say the same thing: "Do good and you get merit. God grants grace [rewards] to those who do good things."

[12] Many errors are in this point of view. [16] Here's one: If this is true, "there will be no difference between philosophical righteousness [doing good things and getting rewards] and Christian righteousness [Christ's gift to sinners who do NOT do the right things.]"

[17] "In order not to bypass Christ altogether, they do require

some knowledge of his life.” [18] But they do not USE Christ as mediator, the free forgiver of sinners. So they actually “bury Christ,” put him back in his grave.

[19] Since they talk about merit in their system, they need to distinguish different kinds of merit. But the whole notion of merit (=rewards) is wrong for the topic of justification. Remember: Justification is the same as forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is never merited. It is always an un-merited, undeserved “free” gift. Sinners merit / deserve punishment as their “reward.” Instead Christ gives them the opposite—forgiveness—not deserved at all.

[21] The only righteousness they talk about is “law and reason” righteousness. That leads to contempt for Christ’s free gift, and despair for “timid consciences,” who “at last despair utterly.”

[25-28] Four things are false here. 1) Works merit forgiveness. 2) God calls people righteous if they do reason’s kind of right things. 3) That using our reason-strength, sinners can keep the first commandment. [AC2 said the definition of sinner is first-commandment-breaker: no fear of God, no trust in God, life curved into myself.] 4) That people keeping God’s commandments apart from Christ are not sinners.

[Then follows “proof” from the Scriptures and the Church Fathers.]

[34] Our opponents concentrate on the second table of God’s law (commandments 4-10). Yes, sinners can do many of these. Reason can understand. It is civil righteousness—doing right things in human society. But they ignore the first table (our relationship to God). [36] How can anyone “love” God if there is no fear of God, no trust in God present in that person in the first place? It is impossible. [38] Thus this very first

commandment of God's "law always accuses and terrifies consciences."

[The difference between Law and Promise—40 to 47]

[40] Conclusion: the law won't work to justify sinners. But Christ's promise can and does. [41] Law is always conditional ["IF you do this, then you get the reward."]. The promise is un-conditional [no prerequisites]. Therefore it is "freely offered." [In this section "promise" appears at least 10 times. "Free" also appears several times.]

[Here is the link between GOSPEL and PROMISE – 43] "The GOSPEL is, strictly speaking, the PROMISE of forgiveness of sins & justification because of Christ."

[44] The different grammar of law and gospel: "The law **REQUIRES** our own work and our own perfection. . . the promise freely **OFFERS** reconciliation for Christ's sake . . . accepted by faith alone. This **FAITH** brings to God a **TRUST** ...only in the **PROMISE** of **MERCY** in Christ."

[45] "This faith regenerates us and brings us the Holy Spirit, so that we can finally obey God's law, love him, truly fear him, be sure that he hears us, and obey him in all afflictions. ...Faith sets against God's wrath not our merits of love, but Christ the mediator and propitiator. This faith . . . **USES** his blessings, regenerates our hearts, it precedes our keeping of the law."

Final critique of RC: [47] "About this faith there is not a syllable in the teaching of our opponents. Therefore we condemn our opponents for teaching the righteousness of the law instead of the righteousness of the Gospel, which proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ."

Then follows sections on specific elements of justification by faith.

A. What is Justifying Faith? [48 – 60]

B. Faith in Christ Justifies [61 – 74]

C. We Obtain the Forgiveness of Sins only by Faith in Christ [75 – 121]

D. Love and the Keeping of the Law [122 – 182]

E. Reply to the Opponents' Arguments [183 – 400]

In this long section—60% of Apology 4—Melanchthon examines passage-by-passage the Bible texts used by the RC to argue that the Augsburg Confessors are wrong. Here we see the two different hermeneutics (mentioned at the beginning [5 -11]) in operation. Melanchthon uses the “law/promise hermeneutic” on every passage where the RC uses its “law-hermeneutics.” He seeks to show how the RC hermeneutic—with every text— “buries Christ and robs sinners of the Good News God wants them to have.” The Good News is lost—there is no Good News—when the Bible is read with a law-hermeneutic. [Paul: “The law’s veil must be taken away.”]

Some comments:

A. What is Justifying Faith?

Promise, promise, promise & mercy, mercy, mercy are the major building blocks.

[53] Whenever we speak of “justifying faith, we must remember 3 elements that always belong together: the promise itself; that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the price & propitiation of the promise.”

[55f] “At every mention of faith we are also thinking of its

object, the promised mercy. For faith does not justify or save because it is a good work in itself, but only because it accepts the promised mercy.”

[Note the “Lutheran distinctive” theology of “acceptance” here. Not decision for Christ, not giving your life to the Lord, but receiving, trusting, having, Christ’s promised mercy. This is “conversion” Lutheran style. The posture is that of a receiver. Luther’s last recorded words: “We are beggars. That is the truth.”

[49 & 57 & 59 & 60] Lutheran definition of worship is spelled out in this section. Basic statement: “faith is the foremost kind of worship.”

B. Faith in Christ Justifies [61 – 74]

[61] Four things we’ll do here: 1) show how faith happens; 2) show that it justifies and 3) what this means, and then answer our opponents’ objections at each point.

[62] Faith happens when people accused by God’s law, terrified by its accusations, with real and serious fears, hear Christ’s promise of forgiveness. Having heard it, they can trust it [=faith]. “This faith brings peace of mind, consoles us, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies and quickens us...a new and spiritual life.”

[63-68] Then come answers to the opponents on this point—both RC and Anabaptists—who are really the same on this point.

[69-70] “Now we will show that faith justifies.”

To trust Christ —that’s what faith is—is to trust him as mediator. But does God “agree” with Christ as mediator? That is included with “faith in Christ” — it “means to trust in Christ’s merits [AND] that because of him God wants to be reconciled to us.” To be reconciled and to be justified are the same thing.

[71-74] What this means. It is not that “faith” begins the justification process and the works finish the job. That’s what RC claims. Because faith is always “faith in Christ” we are 100% righteous “by faith.” No additions needed to get to the 100%. “To be justified”—according to the way Scripture speaks—is both “to make unrighteous men righteous” [a new creation] AND to be “accounted/pronounced” righteous [as by a judge in a courtroom] . “Scripture speaks both ways.”

[73] Faith ALONE, trusting Christ ALONE, is how all this happens. That’s why we insist on the ALONE word when we speak of faith. Yes, works follow. But the “justification” project is 100% Christ’s work, and we sinners become 100% when we trust Christ’s promise. The “alone” wants to exclude any- and everything from competing with Christ here.

C. We Obtain the Forgiveness of Sins only by Faith in Christ

[75 – 121 This section expands the argument we just followed in section B. Melanchthon argues using a classic syllogism.

[76-78] Major premise: Forgiveness of sins is the same as justification. Minor premise: F.o.S. comes “only by faith in Christ (and not through love, or because of love works—although love does follow faith).” Conclusion: Therefore justification [too] comes “by faith alone (and not”

[80-81] “Proving the minor premise.” In order to be saved, sinners need something to “set against the wrath of God.” Our own works cannot possibly stop the wrath of God.

[82-85] Christ the mediator and propitiator stops the wrath of God against sinners. “This propitiator benefits us when by faith we receive the mercy promised in him and set it against the wrath and judgment of God.”

[83-85] That’s what the Promise is all about. The term is used 6 times here.

[86-101] Scripture testimonies that say the same thing.

[102-106] Church fathers Ambrose and Augustine say the same

thing.

[107-121] Back to our opponents. They claim "faith fashioned by love"

[technical Latin formulation: "Fides charitate formata"]. With that they say "faith AND works of love" together produce a justified sinner. But that claim "abolishes the Gospel." Therefore we keep saying over and over again "faith alone." "Following our opponents and rejecting faith-alone" will "destroy the entire promise of the free forgiveness of sins and of the righteousness of Christ."

D. Love and the Keeping of the Law [122 – 182]

Some points:

- 1. Faith comes first, then keeping the law follows. [141]*
- 2. Faith in Christ already "keeps" the first table of the commandments. [140]*
- 3. "God is pleased with us not because we live up to the law, but because we are in Christ."*
- 4. If you doubt that Christ has forgiven your sins, or if you believe you obtain forgiveness by your works of love, you "insult Christ." [149-150]*
- 5. On the contrary, "believing in Christ's forgiveness . . . is the highest way of worshipping Christ." [154]*
- 6. IMPORTANT. It is not that Christ once was our mediator back in NT times, but "Christ does not stop being the mediator after our renewal...Christ remains mediator. We must always go back to the promise. This must sustain us in our weakness" that Christ continues to be our mediator. [162-165]*
- 7. Especially when "the law accuses us [Christians]" of the sins that still afflict believers. See the list at [167].*
- 8. See the conclusion [177 & 182]*

E. Reply to the Opponents' Arguments [183 – 400]

[183] The conflict is all about hermeneutics. "With the acknowledgement of the fundamentals in this issue (namely, the distinction between the law and the promises or Gospel) it will be easy to refute the opponents' objections. For they quote passages about law and works but omit passages about the promises." Melanchthon then looks at all the RC passages used to make their case.

One major criticism in the RC is that no Christians will do any good works at all if you keep saying "faith alone." To that Melanchthon says: "We must see what the Scriptures ascribe to the law and what they ascribe to the promises. For they PRAISE WORKS IN SUCH A WAY AS NOT TO REMOVE THE PROMISE." That is Melanchthon's agenda throughout this entire section, 60% of the whole text of Apology 4.

Some individual items:

1. [204-205] The three failures of justification by works: Dishonor Christ, give no peace of conscience, separate people from God.
2. [206] "The wicked idea about works (works = righteousness) has always clung to the world."
3. [221] Where a Bible text uses the word "faith," the RC "always adds 'faith formed by love.'"
4. [244-253] The famous passage in James about "justification by works" was used by the RC against the AC. Here Melanchthon demonstrates that when read with a law/promise hermeneutic the results are this: "It is clear that James is not against us" [248]. In fact, James is "more against our opponents than against us." [245]
5. [256-281] "ADDING the Gospel" when there is none present in a Biblical text, especially a "law" text, especially when preaching/teaching an OT text. See the word "add" in 257, 260, 263, 281. This "adding" is commended by Christ. The RC does its own "adding" too, but what they add is a "legalist opinion" to

Biblical law texts and “omit the promises.” [264 & 265]

OBEDIENCE AND WORSHIP using the law/promise hermeneutic:

6. [308-311] *There are two kinds of obediences: “to the law” and “to the Gospel.” Two kinds of worship. “The service and worship of the Gospel is to receive good things from God, while the worship of the law is to offer and present our goods to God.”*

7. [332] *It is easy to wind up “praying like the Pharisee,” who says “I am not like other men.” “Such prayer, which relies on its own righteousness and not on the mercy of God, insults Christ, who intercedes for us as our high priest.”*

8. *Besides faith and love, “hope” is one of Paul’s trio in I Cor. 13. Here is what HOPE is. [332 and 344-347] It is “faith” focused on the future. Like faith, hope is built on God’s promise, and that promise is the same promise faith trusts, namely, God’s mercy in Christ.*

9. [348 – 377] *Eternal life is not a “reward.” It too is grounded in God’s mercy. There is no space in a “mercy-relationship with God” for any notion of reward—or of merit.*

10. [[378-400] *Summary and Conclusion.*

[389] *“Justification by faith alone” is not our invention. Not something we dreamed up on our own. “We know that what we have said agrees with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, with the holy Fathers, Ambrose, Augustine, and many others, and with the whole church of Christ, which certainly confesses that Christ is the propitiator and the justifier.”*

11. [400] *So in this conflict “Where is the church?” Augustine’s answer is our answer: “Wherever the Gospel is, the Gospel of the church’s head, our Lord Jesus Christ, that’s where the church is.” We are not bothered by our critics with their opinions “contrary to the Gospel.”*

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