

RECENT LUTHERAN THEOLOGIES ON JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: A SAMPLING

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Thesis One

When recent Lutheran theologies have confronted the Reformation claim that justification by faith is the "article by which the church stands or falls," their reactions, though mixed and reflecting a variety of readings of what the Reformers meant, do tend to reaffirm the confessional tradition of justification by faith as the "chief article."

Is the gospel of justification by faith still, if it ever was, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*? Recent Lutheran answers range from no to yes, mostly toward yes, and even the no's are too dialectical to be quoted as flatly as that and without qualification. This predominantly affirmative chorus is all the more remarkable in a time when, at least until recently, the entire conceptuality of justification was deemed to be no longer meaningful for moderns. That sense of anachronism is shared not only by Ernst Troeltsch and Paul Tillich but by some of the same Lutheran theologians who in this present sampling insist that justification by faith is the key to the gospel nevertheless.

At the negative end of the spectrum, one of the most persuasive

Lutheran demoters of justification by faith has been Krister Stendahl. He has argued "that the doctrine of justification is not *the* pervasive, organizing doctrinal principle or insight of Paul, but rather that it has a very specific function in his thought," namely, to deal with the *ad hoc* problem of relating Jews and Gentiles and not with the generic "problem of how *man* is to be saved." Paul is not to be translated "into a biblical proof-text for Reformation doctrines." However, in view of what Stendahl understands by "Reformation doctrine" as "the introspective conscience of the West," in view also of what alternative doctrine he reflects in his own emphasis on salvation history, the question arises whether his own doctrinal center, complete with juridical ("critical") overtones, is all that far from justification by faith.¹

In the writings of Wolfhart Pannenberg, especially those in English, justification by faith has received little mention, except in references to the theological past, and relatively scant affirmation. A monograph by Pannenberg in German and two recent lectures of his in the United States² reflect an understanding of justification by faith (and inevitably therefore a criticism of it) not unlike Stendahl's; though it is Lutheran Pietism that bears the chief blame for the morose Protestant preoccupation with "guilt consciousness," still the historic seeds of that preoccupation inhere in the Reformation's doctrine of justification by faith, given its background in medieval penitentialism and authoritarianism. On the other hand, there are also counterindications in these same writings, that, while Pannenberg does not accord justification by faith priority, he does value at least its "extrinsicism" in the way Luther's concept of faith places us "beyond ourselves in Christ" (*extra nos in Christo*).

Even Paul Tillich, whose identification with Lutheranism was at best ambivalent and who doubted that the Reformation doctrine of

justification by faith could still be made intelligible for this age, labored to “discover anew the reality which was apprehended in that earlier day,” “The thing itself,” “the boundary situation,” “the Protestant principle,” having himself been shaped by that “so-called ‘material’ principle of the Protestant churches.”³

On the other hand, some of the most explicitly Lutheran theologians may seem at first glance to have displaced justification *sola fide* with some new theological center: Anders Nygren, with *agape* or “theocentricity”; Werner Elert, with law and gospel or reconciliation; Regin Prenter and Gustav Wingren, with creation; Gerhard Ebeling, with the happening of the word of God. Yet each of these theologians not only asserts but is at pains to explicate how his apparently different theme really amounts to the same thing as justification by faith and indeed necessitates it.

Not only in his later *Commentary on Romans*, where Nygren left little doubt that justification by faith is quintessential gospel, ⁴ but also in his *Agape and Eros*, a historical-scientific effort at “motif-research,” the theology of Luther culminates the distinctively Christian theocentric tradition of love, and precisely in his gospel of justification *sola fide*.⁵

The fact that Elert’s mature systematics, *The Christian Faith*, is organized around the theme of reconciliation rather than around justification sustains a decision he announced three decades earlier in his little *Outline of Christian Doctrine*. “It is possible, of course, to develop the whole Christian doctrine of salvation out of the conception of justification, but...under the influence of philosophical idealism, justification became a mere change of man’s disposition, and the boundaries between God and man were obliterated.”⁶ But when instead Elert moves the “reconciliation of God and man into the focal position,” he more

than ever has to demonstrate that this is not “arbitrary exoneration” which evades “the Creator’s original demands on his creatures, namely, to justify themselves before him.”⁷

Prenter, a Dane, and his Swedish colleague, Wingren, have labored (also co-labored) to restore primacy to a Christian theology of creation in contrast to a tradition, in part Kierkegaardian, which had set creation and redemption at odds dualistically. But for neither of these theologians does the interest in creation preempt justification *sola fide*. For them the two emphases come to nearly the same thing. Prenter’s systematics, *Creation and Redemption*, cites not only Lutheran but ecumenical reasons for following the general progression of topics in the Augsburg Confession, though he admits that that is not the only or even the best plan. Apart from formal considerations of progression, however, he reaffirms confessionally the Augsburg Confession’s “structural principle,” namely, “a message of salvation at the center of which is justification by faith in Christ alone—the center toward which everything else points.”⁸

In Wingren’s most recent book in English, his semi-autobiographical *Creation and Gospel*, he notes how reviewers have observed that in his writings “the voice of Irenaeus can be heard with increasing clarity whereas the voice of Luther has become weaker and weaker.” To this Wingren adds: “I hope these reviewers are right,” but soon explains why: “People in the twentieth century stand psychologically closer to the heathen of the classical period than to the slave under the law of the sixteenth century, who was burdened with guilt...” Still, if in the sixteenth century “the important contrast was between forgiveness and guilt, not between resurrection and death, as in the second century,” the truth remains, “fundamentally the two are the same,” with perhaps one notable exception. “Unique to Luther, as opposed to Irenaeus, is his intensive concentration

on 'justification by faith alone' and therefore the subsequent sharp contrast of the Law to the Gospel." On that Lutheran issue Wingren, not contra Irenaeus but contra Barth, has been front and center.⁹

Ebeling has stressed the need to balance Reformation studies with "modern thought," and he himself, having begun as a church historian, has moved into systematic theology, especially hermeneutics, with a strong advocacy for "proclamation" to people when and where they live.¹⁰ All of this might lead us to imagine that in his theological writings, surely the more proclamatory ones, such an old chestnut as justification by faith would have dropped from use. But even when, for purposes of proclamation, he translates that phrase into "the reality of faith," he openly admits, "I intend to present simply the so-called doctrine of justification." For "this is the point on which simply everything depends: the reality of faith is the justification of man." Moreover, this is "the so-called doctrine of justification" because "justification by faith alone...is not one doctrine besides many others, but constitutes the whole of Christian faith."¹¹

Theologians like Nygren, Elert, Prenter, Wingren, and Ebeling, who at first appear reluctant in their prioritizing of justification *sola fide* but soon allay that misimpression, may remind us of the second son in our Lord's parable, the one who began by declining to work in the vineyard but then did so after all. There is now a new generation of Lutheran theologians who are less oblique in seizing upon the thematic of justification, also its terminology, as basic to the gospel. Historian Gerhard Müller, while he grants Barth's contention that the centrality of justification does not speak for Protestantism in general, nevertheless reports that at present this doctrine is again receiving more attention than it has previously in this century.¹² The mere fact that Müller can now acknowledge Elert

as one of the three recent agenda-setters (along with Ritschl and Barth) for any new theologizing about justification, after Elert had long received silent treatment, may be one straw in the wind.

Carl Braaten is another member of this new generation. Seldom since the days of Francis Pieper, the former court dogmatician of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, whom Braaten criticizes on other grounds, has an authoritative theologian in American Lutheranism so elaborately endorsed (though with some of Pieper's same reservations) the centrality of justification the way Braaten has. Confident that the vocabulary of "righteousness" at least might be revived (for instance, through the current interest in "rights"), Braaten maintains: "The article of justification which Luther rediscovered...belongs to the foundation of the whole Christian church." Lately he has gone that assertion one better: "it is more than that, for it lies at the gospel's center, it has to do fundamentally with the standing and falling of not only the church but of the whole of humanity."¹³

What looks to be a formative factor for the whole new generation of Lutheran clergy in America is the book by Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism, the Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings*, a manual whose every chapter radiates from the Reformation's distinctive "proposal of dogma," namely, "justification by faith alone, without the works of the law." What "makes that a doctrine by which the church stands or falls," Jenson explains, is its "metalinguistic character," stipulating not this or that telltale vocabulary but a certain "*kind of talking.*" "It does not say: Talk about justification and faith..." Unpacking the words 'justification' and 'faith,' the proposed dogma says:

Make the subject of your discourse those points in your and

your hearers' life where its value is challenged, and interpret the challenge by the story about Christ, remembering that when this is rightly done your words will be an unconditional promise of value.

The Lutheran Reformation, Jenson adds, had its own formula for this kind of "language analysis": "rightly divide law and gospel."¹⁴

With theologians like Braaten and Jenson, does not justification by faith acquire an imperialism, at least an aloofness, which the Lutheran Confessors themselves would not have recognized? To say that is to misrepresent Braaten and Jenson. True, it is not the Confessors' habit to call justification by faith a "dogma," as Jenson proposed, or even a "doctrine," as Braaten sometimes does, a term which the Confessors usually reserve for the "gospel" (*doctrina evangelii*). For them justification by faith is one of several "articles" (*articuli*) articulating the one gospel, as the article on original sin also does, or the article on the church, that is, ever so linguistically, in so many earthly words. But then Jenson should not be misunderstood to be saying that "metalinguistic" means independent of any and all language or even of a quite finite range of language. Justification by faith, in *addition* to being itself one languaging of the gospel, is at the same time a normative language *about* all other gospel languagings—in that sense, *meta*. We might say, after the manner of language philosophers, that justification by faith is L 2 as well as L1.

Müller, similarly, says justification by faith is "not so much 'doctrine' as it is a criterion (*Massstab*) of proclamation."¹⁵ Luther, in the Smalcald Articles, referred to it as one *Artikel*, all right, but as *der Hauptartikel, der erste Artikel*. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession speaks of "our rule"

(*regula*), and the Formula of Concord locates the doctrinal norm not in the Scriptures as such but in that scriptural “shape of doctrine” (*forma doctrinae*) which gives all Scripture its doctrinal identity.¹⁶ Thus, with latter-day Lutheran theologians the confessional tradition of a *Hauptartikel*, and now (meta)-linguistically, continues.

Thesis Two

On the other hand, some Lutheran theologians object that to ascribe primacy to justification is to subvert what alone is absolute, God's grace in Jesus Christ, who after all must be revealed through the whole array of biblical and ecumenical “pictures” and not only in one relative picture like justification, lest that one become absolutized.

One spokesman for this criticism is Horst Georg Pöhlmann, in his book entitled *Rechtfertigung*. Although the book has not been widely read in the United States, it does explicate a point of view which until recently has been held by many Lutherans also in this country. What is Pöhlmann's objection to making justification by faith the “article by which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*)? Is it that that competes Jesus Christ, who alone deserves such priority? That does seem to be Pöhlmann's ultimate objection, and the one on which this review will concentrate.

In, with, and under his Christocentric argument, however, Pöhlmann, without clearly distinguishing, raises another objection, and does so over and over, namely, that exalting the Pauline “picture” of justification by faith suppresses other, equally valid “soteriological pictures” (for example, the Synoptics' “kingdom of God”). The implication seems to be that elevating one soteriological picture (*Heilsbild*) over other

Heilsbilder impoverishes not only biblical and ecumenical diversity but also, and *thereby*, Jesus the Christ. Pöhlmann seems to be saying, though not always outright, that the *Heilsbilder*, on one hand, and God's deed in Christ, on the other, like "pictures" and "pictured" (*Ektyp und Archtyp*), are related as finite to infinite, as part to whole, as relative to absolute, so that the absolute, the person of Christ, though he does need to be pictured or revealed, is sinned against by our "absolutizing" any one of his relative "pictures."¹⁷ If that idealist-revelationist logic does reflect Pöhlmann, it may or may not reflect other Lutherans who nevertheless might still agree with his general antithesis: where justification dominates, its sheer dominance diminishes Christ.

For his Christocentric polemic against a rival centrality of justification, Pöhlmann takes his cue, as other Lutherans have, from Karl Barth's criticism of Luther or, more recently, from Hans Küng's reiterating of Barth's criticism. Pöhlmann's discussion of "the theological ranking of justification" begins with this quote from Küng's book, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*: "The doctrine of justification is not the central dogma of Christendom...*The central dogma of Christendom is the Christ-mystery.*" But Küng was here reaffirming Barth, whom Pöhlmann also quotes: "*The articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is not the doctrine of justification as such but is rather that which grounds and climaxes that doctrine, the confessing of *Jesus Christ*,...the knowledge of his being, his doing for us, to us and with us." Barth added: "It could probably be shown that *that* was also what Luther meant."¹⁸

For his contention that the preeminence of Christ necessitates the subordination of justification, Pöhlmann finds some encouragement in the Helsinki assembly of the Lutheran World Federation though not encouragement enough. In this assembly the

question of the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* was addressed head-on and, as Pöhlmann is glad to report, that pride of place was often conceded to Christ, yet not unambiguously so. For instance, the assembly's final "Document 75," for all its admitted Christ-centeredness, Pöhlmann still finds misleading as it stands. Why, he asks, should "Christ's act itself" still depend in some privileged way on just *this* "image," justification by faith? "Does that not at least arouse the impression that one New Testament half-truth is being overextended into the whole truth...? Is it not rather Christ who is the 'one subject' [*eine Sache*'] of all the New Testament's soteriological concepts, including justification?"¹⁹

It is this Christocentric challenge, effectively mounted by the Barthians (and Pöhlmann is by no means the only Lutheran to have been aroused by it) that has helped to evoke some of the Lutheran counter-assertions which we sampled earlier. Witness, as another sample, Ernst Käsemann's arguing that Christology and justification, far from being separable, are mutually interpretive. Justification, he says, "is and remains applied Christology."²⁰ It is my impression that the Christocentric disjunction which Barth's critique of the Lutheran "chief article" presupposed, namely, that justification cannot be that central without compromising Christ, is no longer as persuasive as it once was, especially among Lutherans, and hence that a position like Pöhlmann's is less and less representative.

Thesis Three

Significant is what the above complaint (Thesis Two) leaves out, namely, that the Lutheran Reformers centered attention not only on the forensic picture of justification by faith but at least as much on justification by faith, and that for them sola fide was the constant amidst diverse soteriological metaphors,

and that precisely because Christ is central (through whatever metaphor) so also must sola fide be.

Although this essay is not directly about the Lutheran Reformation but about Lutheran theologies now, what must be recognized is that these current theologies, especially on the matter of the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, try explicitly to come to terms with the Reformation tradition. And what Peter says about Paul says as much about Peter as it does about Paul, also in what is omitted.

Before we come to the point, however, a preliminary observation is needed. We noticed above in the complaint that justification-centeredness militates against Christ-centeredness, the following corollary argument: the concept of justification is only one among many soteriological metaphors or "pictures" and therefore ought not be absolutized at the others' expense. In a moment we shall suggest that the Reformers likewise used the metaphor of justification almost interchangeably (almost!) with other metaphors. However, we ought to be mindful that, when the Reformers compared the article of justification with other *articles*, they were not just comparing it with other *soteriological metaphors*. No, the articles with which justification by faith was compared and found to be superior for articulating the gospel were such articles as those on original sin or repentance or the ministry, none of which is strictly a picture of *salvation* the way justification is. But that exactly was the Reformers' point. That was one reason, at least, why justification was better for conveying the gospel.

What is more to the point, however, is that the whole antithesis between Christocentric and justification-centric is, from the standpoint of the Reformers, gratuitous and probably wrong. For them, what makes that article of justification preeminent is its

own very different antithesis: not between justification and Christ but between faith in Christ and works of the law. True, that accent upon *sola fide* in opposition to “the works of the law” (*operibus legis*) the Reformers found in other soteriological pictures as well, like redemption or liberation. Hence we have not yet explained what the forensic picture brings to the task which the nonforensic or less forensic ones do not. Our point now is that, with the Reformers, the thing about the article of justification (or any equivalent metaphor) which needs to be kept “first,” “principal,” is the premium it places upon our faith in contrast to our merits. For without that priority Christ himself does not retain priority. The centrality of *faith* (whether “justifying” or “saving” or “victorious” faith) and the centrality of Christ are not mutually exclusive but, on the contrary, mutually implicative.

That confessional point is largely muted, perhaps overlooked, in Lutheran theologies like Pöhlmann’s which reflect the Barth/Küng critique. Pöhlmann does find some comfort in the fact that for the Luther of the Smalcald Articles, at least, the *Hauptartikel* is Christological. So it is. “The first and chief article,” the one which at the upcoming council can never “be given up or compromised” is, as Luther says repeatedly, the article which deals with “the office and work of Jesus Christ, or...our redemption [*Erlösung*].”²¹ But the way Pöhlmann reads the texts, the chief article is “actually Christ and not the *doctrine of justification*.”²² His importing that alien either/or suddenly reverses the intention of Luther, for whom Christ’s redeeming work is indeed first only so long as justification *sola fide* is first. As Luther pointedly explains,

inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from

works of law” (Rom. 3:38), and again, “that he [God] himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).²³

All of this, very definitely including the indispensable *sola fide*, is what Luther intended by the *Hauptartikel* on the “office and work of Jesus Christ, or our redemption.”

As we shall see, the allergy which some Lutheran theologians have had against the Reformation’s *sola fide* has not been unprovoked. But the fact remains that the secret of justification—that it is only by faith—is then lost in the process. With that loss it is no wonder that justification may no longer be seen as “first” without seeming to compete with Christ. For it is precisely justification’s dependence on faith which insures its dependence on Christ.

Thesis Four

*On the other hand, the Reformation accent upon faith has by no means been forgotten, least of all by those theologians in the Bultmann tradition who have been preoccupied with faith as a radically new form of subjectivity. But that preoccupation only heightens their critics’ suspicion, namely, that *sola fide* then threatens to compromise the “object” of faith, *sola gratia propter Christum*.*

A pivotal place in recent Lutheran discussions of faith belongs to Bultmann’s treatment, in his *Theology of the New Testament*, of Paul’s understanding of faith. The more Bultmann labored to show that faith is not faith in faith, or else it is not faith at all, the more preoccupied he needed to be with faith itself. For Bultmann, Paul’s “ ‘faith’ is the condition for the receipt of ‘righteousness,’ taking the place of ‘works,’ which in the

Jewish view constitute that condition.” However, that does not mean that faith, just because it is not an “accomplishment,” is therefore not a “deed.” On the contrary, faith is the deed *par excellence*, through its character as “decision,” “obedience,” “surrender,” and “renunciation” of the self.²⁴

May not this very concentration upon faith overshadow the object to whom faith submits? On the contrary, says Bultmann: “The attention of the believer does not turn reflectively inward upon himself, but is turned toward the object of his faith,” “Jesus Christ,” “God’s prevenient deed of grace which preceded faith.”²⁵ But might this not still suggest that what characterizes God’s “grace” as gracious is simply that it encourages human faith, that that is all that is saying about it, and that it converts unbelievers into believers—and very unfinished believers at that—as if God’s deed in Christ were but a means to altering people’s subjectivity?

Bultmann does at times speak as though “the message which demands acknowledgement of the crucified Jesus as Lord” is valuable for just such instrumental reasons, namely, that it “demands of man the surrender of his previous understanding of himself.” Usually, though, Bultmann’s statements are more two-edged than that. True, he does say that it is not “at all that *God* needed to be reconciled; it is *men* who receive the reconciliation which God has conferred.” On the other hand, God has conferred that reconciliation “not by removing their subjective resentment toward Him but by removing the objective state of enmity which, in consequence of sins, existed between Him and men.”²⁶

A representative Lutheran critic of Bultmann, in some ways resembling Bultmann’s Barthian critics, is Helmut Thielicke, who charged that according to Bultmann the significant change achieved by Christ is “in the human consciousness,” in our new

and true understanding of ourselves.²⁷ Thielicke's position has enjoyed wide reception among Lutherans in America, especially pastors. Similarly, the bishops of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Germany at their 1952 assembly issued a pastoral letter condemning the theology of demythologizing (without mentioning Bultmann by name) as "false doctrine." The bishops drew support from an officially sponsored volume of essays, *Ein Wort Lutherischer Theologie zur Entmythologisierung*, edited by Ernst Kinder.²⁸ Some of these essays reached American readers through the English translation by Carl Braaten and Roy Harrisville, *Kerygma and History*.²⁹ A basic charge which the essays leveled against Bultmann's theology of justification by faith is that it denies the "objective factualness" of redemption history.³⁰

It is one thing to protest that the Bultmannians, by overemphasizing what Jesus does to us (evokes new existential decisions), thereby underemphasize what God does to Jesus (raises him from the dead) or what Jesus does for God (enacts God's being reconciled).

It is not necessarily the same objection when critics like Wingren or Stendahl or Pannenberg protest that whatever God has done in Jesus must at least affect a wider range of beneficiaries than the believers in their subjectivity—for example, the whole history of salvation, universal history, or all creation. The latter criticism, taken by itself, need not be opposed to Bultmann's view of the basic relation between God and Christ.

In fact, Bultmann's alleged fideism or individualism, as well as his neglect of creation, are charges which apparently can be taken seriously and accommodated by a leading disciple of Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann, though admittedly with small thanks from his fellow Bultmannians. On a lecture tour of the U.S., at that time Stendahl's own context, Käsemann granted that

salvation history “forms the historical depth and cosmic breadth of the event of justification.” But “the doctrine of justification” is still “the key to salvation history,” and faith still the key to justification. Moreover, what continues to make faith so valuable, for Käsemann as for Bultmann, is that by God’s word we are being “called out of ourselves.” The need is: “We do not transcend ourselves.” The solution is: “God comes to us in his promise and makes us righteous—righteous in that we, as the receivers, allow him to come to us.” Accordingly, “to talk about the ‘object’ and ‘content’ of faith is completely inadequate and highly confusing...” “[W]hat belongs to the world cannot become the content and foundation of our faith, even in the form of salvation history.”³¹

In retrospect, it seems to be a special burden for current Lutheran theologies of justification to manage two apparently incompatible accents simultaneously. How to do justice to the Reformers’ most embattled *sola* of all, *sola fide*, and at the same time do justice—not only not compromise but maximize—*sola gratia propter Christum*? Indeed, how to accomplish the latter expressly by means of the former? How to emphasize the “wholly by faith” in such a way that God’s gracious deed in Christ is not only not demoted thereby but is, as the Reformers would say, “necessitated” thereby? Probably none of the parties to the present Lutheran theological scene would want to evade this confessional challenge by somehow combining a little *sola fide* with a little *solus Christus*, or even by holding subjectivity and objectivity in “creative tension.” It seems that some such question as this continue to haunt Lutheran theology: What is it about Christ that commends to God those who believe in him? Conversely: What is it about faith in Christ that it alone, of all the things Christians do, should commend them to God?

Francis Pieper flourished before the time of Bultmann, but his influence in some sectors of American Lutheranism has survived

into recent times. Piper, too, as some of Bultmann's critics, found a major threat to the gospel in the current fideism (*Ich-Theologie*) that threatened to debase faith into self-trust. Thus he responded with an elaborate counteremphasis upon the "objectivity" of justification, and he emphasized that faith is "merely" the "hand that receives" grace. His treatment of *sola fide* and the "righteousness of faith" was largely defensive, disclaiming what these confessional themes dare not mean rather than extolling faith as that which God counts positively as righteousness.³²

Not unlike Pieper in this one respect is Braaten in his recent essay on "The Christian Doctrine of Salvation." He too grants, though almost in passing, that "justification by grace alone [is] received through faith alone." But his more urgent concern by far is to reverse the present, post-Enlightenment "soteriological shift," "an earthward shift from superhuman to human power," and to recover "the significance of the atoning death of Jesus and his resurrection." The impression arises that, in order to recover that classical Christian transcendence, there must somehow be a corresponding reticence about faith. Otherwise the human subject might be tempted to take over. Braaten's references to faith tend to be cautionary. "Faith does not produce the meaning of the salvation event; it can only receive it in radical gratitude." Or: "The Protestant type of exclusivism has stated that apart from faith there is no salvation",³³ here again the nervousness about faith is that it might restrict grace. The fideist distortions seems to have traumatized and immobilized Lutheran reactions to the point where the Confessors' once bold *sola fide* has become virtually irretrievable.

Thesis Five

Though it is true that the Reformers' gospel of justification highlighted sola fide, it is also true that they paid special attention to the forensic idiom, that is, to the divine law. There has been a major effort in recent Lutheran theology not only to reappraise the gospel's intrinsic seriousness about the law but also to see in that very criticalness of the law why sinners can be justified "only by faith."

There may be disagreement as to where on the spectrum Dietrich Bonhoeffer belongs in the controversy between the Barthians' "gospel-law" and the Lutherans' "law-gospel." But there is little doubt that he has been enormously influential (also in America) in reviving Lutheran seriousness about the Christian disciple's accountability to the divine law, under whatever terminology. Reviving Luther's notion of "cheap grace" – which has since become a household word (and not only in parsonages), Bonhoeffer made it popularly clear how that Lutheran malady necessitates recovering Luther's original, "costly" understanding of justification and, only because of that, faith.

What Bonhoeffer meant by cheap grace is "the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs." Costly grace, by contrast, "is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner." "In both cases we have the identical formula—'justification by faith alone.' Yet the misuse of the formula leads to the complete destruction of its very essence." But Bonhoeffer asks: "Did not Luther himself come perilously near to this perversion..." with his shocking advice, "Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ more boldly still"? No, unlike "cheap grace" Lutheranism, which has taken Luther's formula as a premise rather than as a

conclusion, Luther saw it only as "his very last refuge." "Take courage and confess your sin, says Luther, do not try to run away from it, but believe more boldly still." The experience which taught Luther that this grace "had cost him his very life, and must continue to cost him the same price day by day," was which experience? "In the depth of his misery, he had grasped by faith the free and unconditional forgiveness of all his sins."³⁴

What Elert identified as "the problem of justification" is posed by "the total testimony of Christ," also in the Synoptics and the Johannine corpus but most explicitly in Paul's "relationship of Gospel and Law." "The Law demands that man justify himself before God. But then the question immediately arises whether the Gospel frees him from this obligation to his Creator." Yet that, says Elert, "is entirely impossible, since it would strip God's Law of all serious intent." The challenge to a theology of justification is to show that the gospel does in truth meet "the basic demand God makes of His creatures."

It is true, says Elert, that God's justifying of sinners includes his declaring them righteous, but saying only that much could easily be misconstrued as an arbitrary, even fictitious exoneration of sinners who in fact are still sinners. Rather, the justified sinner is one who stands before God, bereft of every last excuse and thus reduced to silence, awaiting the verdict which he can only trust will be just and, in that trust, listens. However, "silence and hearing alone are not yet faith," not even when what is heard is "the Word of God." For the law, too, is God's word. "Faith springs solely from the Gospel, and it consists only in the conviction that the Gospel's content, that is, the person and work of Christ, apply to the believer." Only that way can "*Christ* our righteousness" and the "righteousness of faith" be harmonized as one and the same. But then "Christ's righteousness is not, as it were, credited to us externally." On the contrary, " 'we have been united with Him in

a death like His;' and only thereby 'shall we be united with Him in a resurrection like His.'"35

Similarly, Prenter, in his argument for "law and gospel" (as opposed to "gospel and law"), wishes to make room for a universally human "immediate acknowledgement of guilt [as] the sinner's veiled response to the demand of God's law." But then,

when God's answer is heard, the immediate acknowledgement of guilt takes on the character of a Christian acknowledgement of sin. And this is the object of the theological use of the law.

However, Prenter explains, "the theological use of the law is not...a use of the law alone." "The judgment, when it is God's radical judgment, is never without the grace of the promise." "It is the law, not the gospel, which reveals sin...But the law cannot reveal sin if it is divorced from the gospel."36

Applying this concept of law and gospel to his theology of justification, Prenter addresses the question of the righteousness of Christ and of faith. "The righteousness of Christ, his atonement, which is imputed to man through forgiveness is, however, not to be understood as an external, juridical righteousness which in a purely legal manner is transferred from Christ to the sinner...When the sinner receives the promise of forgiveness and in faith relies upon that promise, he is not only in an external sense counted righteous, but he *is* righteous in the full sense of the word. He can never become more righteous and holy than he is in the moment when he believes that his sins are forgiven." Prenter goes on to explain that last sentence. "Progress...does not mean that faith is followed by another and more perfect righteousness (for example, in terms of works or love...). Progress can mean only that everything which is contrary to faith, all forms of self-righteousness, all the aspiration and strivings of the old man

are more and more overcome, so that only faith remains.”³⁷

It is significant that in these last three samples—Bonhoeffer, Elert, Prenter—such an uninhibited use of forensic-legal categories should appear, at all places, in a manual of Christian discipleship (Bonhoeffer), in a chapter on the effect of the Holy Spirit (Elert), and in a discussion of Christian “renewal” (Prenter) and still, in all three cases, as the righteousness which is “only by faith.”

1 Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 26-27, 39-40 (emphasis in text).

2 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Reformation zwischen gestern und morgen* (Gutersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1969), “Protestant Piety and Guilt-Consciousness” and “A Search for the Authentic Self,” unpublished lectures presented in Chicago, Saint Paul, Berkely, and Saint Louis in October and November 1980. Pannenberg also contributed an essay, “The Confession Augustana as a Catholic Confession and a Basis for the Unity of the Church,” which in its English translation appears in *The Role of the Augsburg Confession* (ed. J. A. Burgess; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), but this essay deals with justification by faith in the context of sixteenth-century polemics, then very briefly, and not at all with reference to the question of doctrinal centrality.

3 Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: The University Press, 1957) 196, 201, x.

4 Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949) 65-96.

5 Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 681-91, 739-41.

6 Werner Elert, *Outline of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia:

United Lutheran Publication House, 1927) 14.

7 Werner Elert, *The Christian Faith: An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics* (Columbus, Ohio: Trinity Lutheran Seminary Bookstore, 1974) 298.

8 Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 190.

9 Gustav Wingren, *Creation and Gospel: The New Situation in European Theology* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979) 146, 159, 48, 61, 69.

10 Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 190.

11 Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961) 120, 126-27, 150 (emphasis added).

12 Gerhard Müller, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre: Geschichte und Probleme* (Gutersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1977) 115.

13 Carl Braaten, "The Christian Doctrine of Salvation," *Interpretation* 35 (1981) 129.

14 Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 42-43 (emphasis in text).

15 G. Müller, op. cit., 115.

16 SA2, 1:1-15; BS 415-16; BC 292; Ap 4:185; BS 196-97;

17 Horst Georg Pöhlmann, *Rechtfertigung: Die gegenwertige kontroverstheologigische Problematik der Rechtfertigungslehre zwischen der evangelish-lutherischen und der romisch-katholischen Kirchen* (Gutersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971) 25-39.

18 Ibid., 23, 31 (emphasis in text).

19 Ibid., 31, 33.

20 Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 96.

21 SA 2, 1:1-5; BS 415-16; BC 292.

22 Pöhlmann, *op.cit.*, 29 (emphasis added).

23 SA 2, 1:4; BS 415; BC 292.

24 Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1951, 1955) 1:314-24.

25 Ibid., 319.

26 Ibid., 315, 287 (emphasis in text).

27 Helmut Thielicke, in *Kerygma and Myth* (tr. And ed. R. Fuller; London: S.P.C.K., 1953) 148. See also H. Thielicke, "Reflections on Bultmann's Hermeneutic," *The Expository Times* 67 (1956) 155-57, 175-77.

28 Ernst Kinder, *Ein Wort Lutherischer Theologie zur Entmythologisierung* (Munich: Evangelischer Presseverband für Bayern, 1952).

29 Carl Braaten and Roy Harrisville, *Kerygma and History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

30 See also R. Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study* (New York: Scribner's, 1962) 17; F. Gogarten, *Demythologizing and History* (London: SCM Press, 1955) 49.

31 Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 75, 83-84, 89, 93.

32 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia,

1951) 2:438.

33 Carl Braaten (n. 13 above) 117, 122, 124, 127, 130 (emphasis added).

34 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1963) 47-48, 53, 55-56.

35 W. Elert, *The Christian Faith*, 297-98, 302-305 (emphasis in text).

36 R. Prenter, *op.cit.*, 101-111.

37 *Ibid.*, 444-45 (emphasis in text)

[justification \(PDF\)](#)