

[Disclaimer]: This is a retyped copy of chapter 11 of Robert Bertram's dissertation entitled "The Human Subject as the Object of Theology: Luther by Way of Barth." His "short" title is "How Luther's Theology is About Man." The dissertation is in our Crossings' library, but when it was transferred into Word Press, the formatting was severely distorted. I have tried to make this chapter readable by taking out the footnotes and re-typing much of it. Nevertheless, mistakes were likely made, as even the original pdf copy I was working from contains errors. I did the best I could, but this is not to be used for official purposes. If you would like to read the pdf version of the entire dissertation, esp. if you want to see the footnoting, you can find it here: [https://crossings.org/wp-content/uploads/1964/05/BertramDissertation\\_text.pdf](https://crossings.org/wp-content/uploads/1964/05/BertramDissertation_text.pdf). Chapter 11 begins on page 247. Cathy Lessmann]

## CHAPTER XI

### MAN THE BELIEVER (CONTINUED)

#### Fides Imputatur Ad Iustitiam

Fideism, by measuring the believer's righteousness in proportion to his faith, interprets Luther one-sidedly. But so does that opposite interpretation which, perhaps in reaction to the fideistic distortion, fixes so exclusively upon the "objective," trans-subjective accents in Luther that it fails to account for the importance of faith, which Luther everywhere extols. But here again, just as with Luther's apparent fideism, the interpretation in question is an attractive one because it seems at first to be well attested by Luther's own statements, particularly by what he says on the matter of divine imputation. Accordingly, his doctrine of imputation can hardly be ignored. The weakness of a one-sided imputationist view of Luther, however, is that it interposes a false separation between the righteousness which God imputes and the righteousness of the believing heart. But neither do we solve our problem, namely the problem of how faith is righteous, by judicious compromise, by steering a middle course between the two extremes of fideism and, shall we say, imputationism. Luther's own procedure, characteristically, is more dialectical than that, and puts the doctrine of imputation to fullest use. But by just that dialectic he accounts for and safeguards--and, more than that, finds cause for joy in--the *iustitia fidei*.

A good place to look for a sample is Luther's lectures on the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth of August, 1531. He is taking his students—"students of the sacred scriptures," as he calls them -- through an exegesis of Galatians 3:6, "Thus Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." In the course of the two lectures on this verse Luther uses "reckon" (*reputare*) interchangeably with "impute" (*imputare*). Our question is this: is a man justified so exclusively by that righteousness which God imputes to him that he is not justified at all by his righteous faith? It is possible, at least in one instance in these lectures, to find an isolated statement which seems to make for an exclusive imputationism. "Righteousness is not in us in a formal sense, as Aristotle maintains, but is outside us, solely in the grace of God and in his imputation." So exclusively does this statement seem to locate righteousness "outside us," solely in the divine imputation, that it makes faith almost superfluous. At the very least, it makes the "righteousness of faith" completely unintelligible. Of course we could still argue that faith is indeed righteous but that its only righteousness is that which God imputes to it. Still, is that the only kind of righteousness Luther means faith to have?

Emphatically not. Earlier in these two lectures we find Luther at the very opposite extreme, playing the rhetorician--the *Rhetor*, as he says--in praise of faith and apotheosizing it in terms which are usually reserved only for deity.

Paul makes faith in God the supreme worship, the supreme allegiance, the supreme obedience, and the supreme sacrifice ... Faith is something omnipotent ... its power is inestimable and infinite; for it attributes glory to God, which is the highest thing that can be attributed to him. To attribute glory to God is..., in short, to acknowledge him as the author and donor of every good. Reason does not do this, but faith does. It consummates the deity; and, if I may put it this way, it is the creator of the deity, not in the substance of God but in us. For without faith God loses his glory in us... Nor does God require anything greater of man than... that he regard him, not as an idol but as God, who has regard for him, listens to him, shows mercy to him, helps him, etc.

"To be able to attribute such glory to God," Luther concludes, "is wisdom beyond wisdom, righteousness beyond righteousness, religion beyond religion, and sacrifice beyond sacrifice."

This "*sacrificium sacrificiorum*," which is faith, gives glory to God not only by believing him, but, in that very act, by slaying that beast which disbelieves him, the beast *Ratio*. "For what is more ridiculous... than when God says to Abraham that he is to get a son from the body of Sarah, which is barren and already dead?"

It does indeed seem ridiculous and absurd to reason that in the Lord's Supper the body and the blood of Christ are present, that Baptism is "the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit," that Christ the Son of God was conceived and carried in the womb of the Virgin, that he was born, that he suffered the most ignominious of deaths on the cross, that he was raised again, that he is now sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that he now has authority in heaven and on earth."

But perhaps the beastliest thing about *Ratio* is its assumption that good work and personal devotion and self-sacrifice, especially if these are distinguished by originality and sincerity, are what justify a man's existence. On this assumption, of course, it is altogether reasonable to construe "the word of the cross" as absurd, "as heresy and as the word of the devil." On this assumption it is only reasonable to be offended and say: "Then are good works nothing? Have I toiled and borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat for nothing?" No wonder, then, since "the whole world and all the creatures cannot kill" this beast, but only faith can, by sacrificing it to the gracious word of God in Christ—no wonder that this priestly action of faith constitutes "any Christian...a supreme pontiff."

It should be clear from all this that Luther does understand faith to be righteous, not just because God reckons it so, but because of what faith does. It slays the enemy of God in us and gives all glory to him by trusting his grace. Yet this still leaves another possible objection to be reckoned with. That is, it might be argued that, even though Luther does grant that faith is righteous because of what faith does, it need not follow from this that that is the righteousness which justifies. Let us see. We have heard Luther say of faith that it is "righteousness beyond righteousness." And it was his express purpose at this point in the lecture to show "what great

righteousness faith is.” He even invokes the Aristotelian term *iustitia formalis*—which in a previous quotation he seemed to locate “outside us, solely in the grace of God and in his imputation “---and now refers that term to faith. “Faith is indeed a formal righteousness” In other words, faith is righteous in actual reality and not just by imputation, and it identifies its owner, the believer, as himself righteous. That righteousness is “in us” in the same way that faith is in us. *Fides in corde* is *iustitia cordis*. But the question still stands: Is that the same righteousness which is designated in the term *iustitia fidei*? Is this, in other words, the faith which justifies? Luther says in so many words, both in Rohrer’s class-notes and in the published edition: “Therefore faith justifies because it renders to God what is due him; whoever does this is righteous.”

But, alas, this seems to separate the righteousness of believing from the righteousness of imputation altogether, even more drastically than an imputationist theory might separate them. Indeed, rather than a mere separation, this seems to present an outright opposition. It might have been better, after all, to skirt this opposition (assuming that is what it is) by minimizing the righteousness which God imputes. But it is too late for that. There is no pretending, for example, that Luther means the one righteousness to be somehow less real, or less actual historically, than the other righteousness. For both of them Luther uses the strongest language he can borrow from the metaphysicians, *formalis*, and, if that is too weak, the language of the rhetoricians. Most of all, though, it is the language of theology which he employs when he says, again of both kinds of righteousness, that they “justify.” Nor, at least as far as I read the texts at hand, does Luther employ the later Protestant distinction between justification and sanctification, as though it were only the imputed righteousness which justifies and the righteousness of the believing heart which only sanctifies. “Therefore faith justifies because it renders to God what is due him.” Both kinds of righteousness are for Luther essential ingredients of what he calls *iustitia Christiana*. And he is content to include them side by side: “For Christian righteousness consists in two things, namely, faith in the heart and the imputation of God.” The separation which we feared from an exclusive imputationism seems now to have worsened into an unresolvable tension.

### *Quis Conciliat illa Summe Pugnancia?*

The truth is, we have been misled by our question. We have created an opposition where Luther intended no opposition at all, only because we began by looking for statements of his which might counter his apparent imputationism. And of course, by assuming an opposition from the outset, we found him providing plenty of ammunition for both sides of the conflict. But not only does Luther not see the two kinds of righteousness, the righteousness of the believing heart and the righteousness which God graciously imputes, as opposed. He sees them rather as complementing each other. The righteousness of the Christian’s believing, since in this life it is only beginning, is in the meantime completed—or, as Luther says, is “perfected”—by the righteousness which God graciously imputes. It is not that faith is not righteous, or that God must reckon faith to be righteous when in fact it is not. “Faith is indeed a formal righteousness; but this does not suffice, for after faith there still remain remnants of sin in the flesh. The sacrifice of faith began in Abraham, but it was finally consummated only in death.” “Faith does not give enough to God formally....; it is barely a little spark of faith....Lust, wrath, impatience, and other fruits of the flesh and of unbelief still remain in us, ...even [in] the more perfect saints.” “Hence

faith begins righteousness, but imputation perfects it until the day of Christ.” “Otherwise no one could be saved.”

It is true, Luther did say, “Righteousness is not in us in a formal sense, as Aristotle maintains, but is outside us, solely in the grace of God and in his imputation.” However, as the context of this sentence reveals, the word “solely” is not meant to exclude faith (which is indeed a formal righteousness”) but is meant to exclude the scholastics, who insist grandly on a righteousness of the whole soul and who “laugh” at Luther’s *imputatio* as an easy way out, as “trivial” and “meager.” Moreover, we have not yet quoted the entire sentence. The rest of it reads, “In us there is nothing of the form or of the righteousness except that weak faith or the first fruits of faith by which we have begun to take hold of Christ.” Finally, when Luther says that God “reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness,” he does not mean that this faith, because it is “imperfect,” is for that reason not righteous. For in the next breath he can speak of it not as “imperfect faith” but as “imperfect righteousness.” So the two kinds of righteousness are far from opposed. Rather the one, being so tiny and beleaguered and vulnerable, is graciously “perfected” by the other, as though the first were whole and entire.

But that does bring us to a genuine opposition—to a “paradox,” (*contraria*) as Luther calls it. God reckons “sin as not sin, even though it really is sin.” Notice, once more, what the opposition is not. It is not faith which is covered by God’s imputation. But sin is. Faith is not sin. But sin “really is sin.” There is the real paradox “God overlooks all sins and wants them to be covered as though they were not sins.” Faith is not the sin which is covered, yet faith does not live in a vacuum, amidst a merely neutral absence of faith. It is surrounded and riddled by its opposite. “My flesh distrusts God, is angry with him, does not rejoice in him, etc. But God overlooks these sins, and in his sight they are as though they were not sins.” It was not to Abraham’s faith that God reckoned righteousness, but to Abraham: The faith with which “Abraham believed God...was reckoned to him as righteousness.” And “him” encompasses the Abraham who “before God...has sin and wrath.”

That this is a real and not a trumped-up paradox, Luther will not let his students forget.

These two things are diametrically opposed That a Christian is righteous and beloved by God, and yet that he is a sinner at the same time. For God cannot deny his own nature.

That is, he cannot avoid hating sin and sinners; and he does so by necessity, for otherwise he would be unjust and would love sin. Then how can two contradictory things both be true at the same time, that I am a sinner and deserve divine wrath and hate, and that the Father loves me?

“Who will reconcile those utterly conflicting statements?”

Who will? Surely not the believer, by somehow joining them in the pathos of his own subjectivity. Yet it is the righteous mark of his faith that he knows who does reconcile them: “Only the Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ.” To this quotation (I Timothy 2:5) Luther immediately adds another (Rom. 8:1): “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” With that Luther brings his lecture on Galatians 3:6 to a climax and a close. Only at the last moment has he disclosed where the real conflict emerges when God reckons the righteousness of faith as the righteousness of sinners. It is not a conflict between the righteousness of their faith and their righteousness which God graciously imputes (for these are

inseparable), but a conflict rather between their righteousness (whether of the heart or imputed), on the one hand, and their sin, on the other hand. And only at the very end does Luther identify the one in whom alone, and in fact, their conflict was fought out and reconciled: “*unicus Mediator Dei et hominum Iesus Christus.*”

### *Iustitia Christi Est Tua*

Now that we have seen all the way to the end we are in a fair way to begin again at the beginning and to retrace the steps of Luther’s lecture, only this time in full knowledge of his solution namely, the mediatorial achievement of Christ, which is his righteousness for sinners—the righteousness, let us say it now, of their faith. So we ask our original question, What is it about faith that is righteous, righteous enough to justify the one who has it? The answer, as we have now discovered at the end of Luther’s argument, is simply Jesus Christ, “the only Mediator between God and man” “Christ, in whom you believe,...is perfectly righteous in a formal sense. His righteousness is yours.”

Still, remarkable as this answer is, it hardly seems to answer our question. The question is, What is it about faith that is righteous? How is it that a man is justified by faith? If it is Christ who is our righteousness, then isn’t it superfluous for Luther to speak of the righteousness of faith and to say that faith justifies? Yet Luther does say just that. Indeed, he makes all too plain that a man is not justified, does not enjoy the righteousness of Christ, unless he believes. So we ask again What is it then that justifies a man, the righteousness of his faith or the righteousness of Christ/ But here, as before, the fallacy lies in the way we ask the question. Before we assumed a disjunction where Luther does not, between the righteousness of the believing heart and the righteousness which God imputes. Now we subtly equate that imputed righteousness with the righteousness of Christ and assume, all over again, that it must be disjoined from the righteousness of faith. Luther, however, does nothing of the kind. For him, on the contrary, these two righteousnesses seem to be one and the same. Accordingly, if we ask, What is it about faith that is justifyingly righteous, Luther’s answer seems clear: It is exactly the righteousness of Christ which is justifyingly righteous about faith.

To say that, however, postpones the difficulty only momentarily. For the obvious question immediately arises, How can the righteousness of Christ be the righteousness of faith? But here, before we proceed any farther, we must be clear about what the difficulty really is, at least as the difficulty is seen by Luther. Unless we are careful, we might, as we did before, create a problem prematurely. We might, for example, locate Luther’s problem (as he does not) in an opposition between subject and object: as though Christ is prevented from being the righteousness of faith by the fact that he is object and faith is subject; as though he could not be the righteousness of faith by being its object but only by being somehow its subject; as though our believing the object is never the same as realizing that object as our own; as though our believing, subjectively, that Christ is our righteousness, objectively, could not be the very way in which we are righteous; as though merely trusting his benefits could not itself be the way to have his benefits; as though that problem, the opposition between subject and object, were the problem which engages Luther. But it is not.

However, this disclaimer is not easy to prove. For, even for Luther, faith does involve a juxtaposition of subject to object. Christ's giving himself to us and for us is not identical with our believing he does. Our faith as such is not our righteousness, but Christ is. And Christ is not our faith. True, our faith is righteous because Christ is the righteousness of that faith. But he is that precisely by being faith's object, not by somehow becoming its subject—not, for example, by being the enabling subject behind our believing, nor by his believing through our believing, nor by his believing for us as we, analogously or imitatively, ought to believe. This is the soft of fideism, as we saw, for which Luther leaves little room. Christ, as Luther explicitly says, is *obiectum fidei*, and the terms Luther uses to describe how we believing subjects relate to that object are terms which are common to the subject-object relation, the relation of knower to known: "comprehend," "apprehend," "grasp," "seize."

Still, what is noteworthy here is that Luther brings to these terms a force and a realism which is altogether uncommon in ordinary epistemological usage. We might say, for instance, "Do you grasp what all they have done for you?" But we hardly mean that "what all they have done for you," now that you "grasp" it, thereby becomes in effect your own doing. Rather, as we are wont to use the terms, presupposing an antithesis between subject and object, the subject's "grasp" of the object hardly resolves the disparity between them except in a noetic way. This may explain why it is tempting to construe Luther's doctrine of justification exclusively in terms of imputation—though I suspect it is prompted even more by a fear of fideism, whose basic subject-object antithesis the imputationist seems to share—as though we can "grasp" Christ's righteousness merely in a noetic way but can really "have" it as our own only by imputation.

### Veritas Cordis

What seems to be called for at this point, therefore, is a brief excursion into Luther's view of faith as "truth," according to which "the truth about God" becomes, in faith, "the truth of the heart." Thus the object, without ceasing to be that, determinatively characterizes and belongs to the subject. In the second class-period of that same two-session lecture which we have been analyzing, namely on August twenty-ninth, Luther takes pains to prove that "truth is faith itself." Some of Luther's critics (possibly Johannes Cochleaus) had argued "that the Hebrew term means "truth," not "faith," "that the vocable 'faith' means 'truth' in Hebrew, and that therefore it is being misapplied" when Luther translates it as "faith." Luther denies that the two terms pose any real difference. On the contrary, "*Veritas est ipsa fides.*" "Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart."

Of course, this statement could just tempt us to reintroduce a subtler version of the subject-object antithesis, to suppose that by "the truth of the heart" Luther intends some brand of "truth as subjectivity," in the superficial sense that faith is true when it is subjectively heartfelt. But that, as the context quickly proves, is not Luther's meaning. That "faith is....the truth of the heart" he immediately explains: "that is, the right knowledge of the heart about God." Faith is right, or true, only when it is right about its object. Similarly, when Luther speaks, as he did the week before, of faith as "obeying the truth," he does not mean that faith is true when it conforms psychologically or ethically to some norm for obedient behavior. No, men "disobey" the truth when they falsify the object ("Christ Jesus...portrayed before their eyes"), when they are "bewitched, deceived,...by erroneous opinions," when they are "concerned how to resist the

truth and how to evade the arguments and passages of Scripture.” For a man to have faith is to “think correctly about God,...[to] have the truth about God,...to think or judge correctly about him, ...[to] have a true idea about God.” Notice, in the following quotation, the determinative force of the object.

Thus truth is faith itself, which judges correctly about God, namely, that God does not look at our works and our righteousness, since we are unclean, but that he wants to be merciful to us, to look at us, to accept us, to justify us, and to save us if we believe in His Son, whom he has sent to be the expiation for the sins of the whole world. This is the true idea about God, and it is really nothing other than faith itself.

A month before, Luther had been making much the same point with a paraphrase of John 16:27. Christ says to the disciples about himself—about “this object, this ‘I’ sent from the Father into the world”: “Because you have taken hold of this object, the Father loves you, and you please him.

Faith is right when it is right about its object. What is right about faith is not that it is from the heart. That much can be said of unbelief, “the inner disease of the heart, such as unbelief, doubt, contempt and hate for God.” The “heart” can just as easily be the throne of the best *ratio*. Faith is in the heart, of course; it is *fides in corde*. Where else could it displace the hostile *ratio*? But the way faith does that, the way it performs its righteous sacrifices, is by believing what and whom it does, “the gospel of Christ the crucified.” The opposition here between faith and reason is not that the one is from the heart and the other is from the head. No, what is wrong about *ratio* is that it is wrong its object, God. It “cannot think or judge correctly about him. Thus when a monk supposes that [his works]...make him acceptable,...he does not have a true idea about God; he has an idea that is wicked and a lie.” Therefore, if faith is only as right as its object, namely the God whom it believes, then the righteousness of faith hinges altogether on whether that God, so believed, is righteous indeed.

However, the very purpose which prompted our excursion into Luther’s equation of faith with “truth” was to avoid that opposite danger, the sort of preoccupation with the object, the truth-about, which neglects the subject, the truth-in. Much as Luther’s faith depends for its truth on the object it believes, nevertheless the “truth” in this case—that is, the Hebrew “truth” which Luther equates with faith—characterizes not only the object but the subject as well. Truth in this sense is not outside of or separate from the believer. “Truth,” as Luther says, “is faith itself.” So here again we may not superimpose upon Luther an alien subject-object antithesis, not even at the expense of the subject. “Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart.” Truth in this context is not just about an objective, separate reality. Truth is that reality believed—believed and realized. Truth is the real situation in the form of its being believed. Granted, as we did, Luther speaks also of “truth” in a more objective sense—“the truth about God,” *veritas de deo*—but he does so with reference to the unbeliever, who “does not have the truth about God.” Faith, on the other hand, is not only truth-about. But simultaneously, exactly because it is the believer’s “true idea about God,” (*vera cogitatio*) his “right knowledge of the heart about God,” therefore faith is also a truth-in or a truth-of: “truth of the heart.” “Having” the truth is itself truth.

Elsewhere Luther even intimates that there is a difference between “having the gospel” and “having the truth of the gospel.” Unfortunately, “many have the gospel but not the truth of the gospel.” For example, the inconstant Peter before the Judaizers at Antioch, though he certainly had the gospel and had been preaching it and “knew the doctrine of justification better than we do,” nevertheless had “to be accused by Pau of failing and of swerving from the truth of the gospel.” To have the truth of the gospel is, not only to have its words, but so clearly to have it in head and heart that it can be distinguished from the law in face of even the direst personal temptations to the contrary. “Truth is faith itself,” the truth about the object as well as the truth of the believing subject.

### Forma Christi, Iustitia Fidei

Accordingly, just as faith is itself characterized as “truth” by the truth which it believes, so it is likewise characterized (or “formed” as righteous by that righteousness which it believes. Faith is righteous not by means of an external, over-arching imputation, but by means of a subject-to-object “grasping” of the graciously offered Christ—offered, of course, always and only through the Word. It is by that grasping of Christ in the Word that the righteousness of Christ is the “righteousness of the heart.”

Therefore we, too, acknowledge a quality and a formal righteousness in the heart; but we do not mean love, as the sophists do, but faith, because the heart must behold and grasp nothing but Christ the Savior.

“Those who believe this are like God,” not in this instance because God transcendentally “reckons” them so, but rather because they actually “think of God altogether as he feels in his heart, and they have the same form in their [*eandem formam in animo*] that God or Christ has.”

True, they have that same for *in animo*—that is, not as doers who are re-formed by enacting the form in their behavior, but as believing subjects who apprehend the form as object—“being renewed in knowledge after the image of their creator” (Col 3:10). Yet it is they themselves who are characterized by what they believe and think. “They feel, think, and want exactly what God does.” And what is that? “That we obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ, His Son,....” “This form of Christ” (so that in everything you feel as Christ himself feels”) is the putting on of the new nature (Eph. 4:24). It is not a putting on by imitation of Christ’s “virtues” (his “patience, gentleness, and love...”). Better than that, it is the putting on of “a new creation”: “an inestimable gift, namely, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, peace, comfort, joy in the Holy Spirit, salvation, life, and Christ himself.” So “the form of the Christian mind is faith, the trust of the heart, which takes hold of Christ....A heart which is equipped with such confidence has the true form of Christ.” Again, this form takes shape, not according to the law, not as right actions rectify their agent, but according to the gospel, “through the ministry of the word,” as the hearkening subject rightly trusts the proclaimed object. “For the word proceeds from the mouth of the apostle and reaches the heart of the hearer, there the Holy Spirit... impresses that word on the heart, so that it is heard” –literally, “so that it sounds” (*ut sonat*).

And as it is the word that does the sounding, so it happens that “our knowing is more passive than active,...more a matter of being known than of knowing.” Yet it is this very “faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift and which formally believes in Christ,” of which Luther could say, in his elaborate encomium on faith, that it “justifies because it renders to God what is



due him,” it is “righteousness beyond righteousness.” Moreover, “it consummates the deity; and, if I may put it this way, it is the creator of the Deity, not in the substance of God but in us.” For, “in us,” to accept the gift of God’s Son by faith is the only appropriate mode of having his righteousness and the only appropriate mode, in us, of giving God glory. In that way alone, but in that way, God “has whatever a believing heart is able to attribute to him.”

*Alioqui Deus Iniustus Esset*

Therefore, as our digression into faith as “truth” to have illustrated, Luther is not prevented from equating the righteousness of the heart and the righteousness of Christ by a premature antithesis between subject and object. For him that is not where the conflict emerges. But a conflict there is, and right within faith’s object, in the very thing which faith believes—which to believe would be altogether unrighteous, unless the opposition can be resolved. The really drastic opposition for Luther is between “those utterly conflicting statements, that the sin in us is not sin, that he who is damnable will not be damned,” that “a Christian man is righteous and a sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God.”

This opposition is posed precisely by the fact of God’s gracious imputation, that “God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin, even though it really is sin.” For the hard fact is that, however righteous faith may be, however justifying it may be, there is far too little of that faith and it is all but swamped in us by its opposite, an unbelief which is more than sufficient to damn us. Still, “God overlooks these sins, and in his sight they are as though they were no sins. This is accomplished by imputation on account of...faith.” That, however, does not solve the problem. Quite the reverse, that is the problem.

For God cannot deny his own nature. That is, he cannot avoid hating sin and sinners; and he does so by necessity for otherwise he would be unjust and would love sin. Then how can these two contradictory things both be true at the same time, that I am a sinner and deserve divine wrath and hate, and that the Father loves me?

But this the very “paradox,” the scandalous *contraria*, which faith believes. Because it does, and exactly because its own righteousness depends entirely on whether that which it believes is itself righteous, there is simply no talking about a “righteousness of faith” unless this paradox can be reconciled—for otherwise the God whom faith believes “would be unjust and would love sin.”

In order for faith to be righteous, then, the paradox of the “unjust” God must be reconciled in faith’s object, by a God who is himself righteous. The paradox is not reconciled by faith, however flattering to the believer such an alternative may be. For example, it might seem at first that Luther locates the righteousness of faith in the very fact that faith is capable of believing the impossible: “things that are impossible, untrue, foolish, weak, absurd, abominable, heretical, and diabolical.” But what faith believes is as “absurd” as all this, Luther immediately adds, only “if you consult reason.” What faith believes is of course “‘the word of the cross’ and ‘the folly of preaching.’” And it is right for faith to slay *ratio* by means of this “folly,” but not because it really is folly; it is that only to “foolish reason.” That other “paradox,” however, which confronts not only reason but faith, involves a tension within God himself: “God cannot deny his own nature.” Thus, it is not for faith but for God to reconcile this paradox, else faith would be as unrighteous as that “unjust” God would be in whom it believes.

Or, again, the righteousness of faith may seem to be this, that faith believes what God says, whatever he says. Of course, faith does say, “I believe thee, God, when thou dost speak.” But does Luther mean by this that whenever a man believes God, no matter what God says, the man is righteous for believing that? How about the man who believes God’s condemnation of him as a sinner? True, Luther can say of such a man, who “confesses...he deserves death and eternal damnation,” that “he justifies God in his word.” And true, this is the same bold expression with which Luther consoles the sinner who runs “to Christ, the physician”: “You justify and praise God.” Neither is the action of the first man to be minimized, for “it is one step toward health when a sick man admits and confesses his disease. But it is only a step toward health. As that man is still left asking, “How will I be liberated from sin?” If believing God in the one case, while it may justify God, does not yet justify the sinner but leaves him in his sin, why should believing God in the other case be different? The difference is that, in the second case, what God says to the sinner is different: “You are righteous.” But that only re-introduces the problem, not only for faith but apparently also for the God whom faith believes: “Who will reconcile those utterly conflicting statements?”

### *Propter Christum*

Here, as Luther finally explains, “nothing can intervene except Christ the Mediator. It is in him alone that God reconciles the paradox righteously. But that is also the one thing that is righteous about faith: Not that it believes God loves sinners and regards them as righteous—believing that, by itself, would be unrighteous and a denial of God’s nature—but that it believes God loves sinners *propter Christum*. The Christian knows “that there is sin in him and that on this account he is worthy of wrath.” Still, “he believes that he is loved by the Father.” But that is precisely the rub, if we are going to represent Luther, where the righteousness of faith comes into question. How can it be righteous for a man to believe that? Only because “he believes he is loved by the Father, not for his own sake but for the sake of Christ, the Beloved.” The scandalous thing about the righteousness of a Christian’s faith is not just that he manages so little of it but rather that, despite its littleness, it is said to count for him before God as righteousness perfect and complete. But believing that, surely, must be not righteous but unrighteous, were it not that the one from whom faith takes its righteousness is Jesus Christ. Believing what he does for the reason he does, *propter Christum*, explains why the Christian’s faith is righteous. The Christian believes vastly more righteousness than he presents when he believes that God reckons him, sins and all, as righteous. This would indeed be, as the sophists complain, laughable mere “playing,” to put it mildly. But what is “not easy trivial” is that “Christ who is given to us and whom we apprehend by faith has not done something meager for us and has not been playing....He ‘loved us and gave himself for us’; and ‘he became a curse for us.’” After all, then, God does not “deny his own nature,” he does not “avoid hating sin and sinners,” “he does so by necessity.” But in pity he bears that hatred himself, in his Son, “in his own body on the tree.”

So if Luther acknowledges a difficulty in speaking of faith as righteous, the difficulty is not that the righteousness of faith competes with the righteousness which is imputed but, on the contrary, that faith believes exactly in the paradox of imputation, as apparently “unjust,” and yet qualifies as righteous faith in the process—which difficulty is reconciled only by the mediation of Christ, on whose account alone it is righteous to trust what faith does. “If you feel your sins, do not consider them.” That much advice, by itself, would be monstrous. But, as it is, “do not consider

them in yourself but remember that they have been transferred to Christ, ‘with whose stripes you are healed.’” “Therefore we, too, acknowledge a quality and formal righteousness in the heart... [namely] faith, because the heart must behold and grasp nothing but Christ the Savior.” “Therefore it is something great to take hold, by faith, of Christ, who bears the sins of the world.”

### *Propter Christum vel propter fidem*

“And this faith alone,” as Luther continues, “is counted for righteousness”—for the righteousness, that is, of the whole man, the whole sinner. So not only is his faith itself righteous, *formaliter*, who accepts the *iustitia reputata*. But, conversely, he himself, as sinner, is reckoned as righteous because of the righteousness of his faith. “On account of this faith in Christ God does not see the sin that still remains in me.” “Because we take hold of him by faith, all our sins are sins no longer.” “Whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteous.

However, what is it about that faith in the heart which, otherwise so weak and imperfect, prompts God to count it as the perfect righteousness of the whole sinner? It is the same feature which shaped that faith, however imperfect it may be, as righteous in the first place, *formaliter*, namely, Jesus Christ.

Here it is to be noted that these three things are joined together: faith, Christ, and... imputation. Faith takes hold of Christ and has him present, enclosing him as the ring encloses the gem... Thus God accepts you or accounts you righteous only on account of Christ, in whom you believe.

Actually, Luther can use “for the sake of Christ” or “for the sake of our faith in Christ” interchangeably, not as alternatives, of course, but in apposition. “Christian righteousness... is a divine imputation... *propter fidem in Christum vel propter Christum*.” “To take hold of the Son and to believe in him with the heart as the gift of God causes God to reckon that faith, however imperfect it may be, as perfect righteousness.”

### *Non Moralis aut Theologica sed Coelestis*

This is the recurrent answer which Luther would give to the problem with which we began, the problem of his theological predication: Why is it that faith, the faith of a sinner, can be called that sinner’s righteousness? By reason of what, according to Luther, do such lofty predicates as “justify,” “makes men sons and heirs of God,” “makes a man God,” apply to such a lowly subject as faith—to the faith, that is, of men who otherwise are nothing of the kind? Luther’s predication, also in this case, follows “not the moral but the theological grammar.”

Here we are in an altogether different world—a world that is outside reason. Here the issue is not what we ought to do.... No, here we are in a divine theology, where we hear the gospel that Christ died for us and that when we believe this we are reckoned as righteous, even though sins, and great ones at that, still remain in us.

Sins still remain in us, that is, until—“until you are completely absolved from them death,” “until the day of Christ,” “until the body of sin is abolished and we are raised up as new beings on that day.” In the meantime faith and imputation continue, though only as merciful makeshifts, as interim arrangements.

In the life to come believing will cease...It will be replaced by glory, by means of which we shall see God as he is. There will be a true and perfect knowledge of God,...neither moral nor theological but heavenly, divine, and eternal. Meanwhile we must persevere here in faith that has the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness through Christ.

“For our blessing has not yet been revealed. But meanwhile we await it in patience and yet already possess it certainly through faith.”

Robert W Bertram