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Justification in the Theology of Walther

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“A PERSON who wishes to describe Walther as a theologian must above all explain his position on the doctrine of justification.”¹ This view of Pieper is in harmony with Walther’s own evaluation of theology. On the first page of *Der Lutheraner* Walther quotes Luther as follows:

This one article reigns and should only reign in my heart, namely, faith in my dear Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only beginning, middle, and end of all the spiritual and divine thoughts which I may ever have by day and by night. . . . This article is the one firm rock and the eternal, firm basis of all our salvation and blessedness; namely, that we, not through ourselves, much less through our own works and accomplishments (which certainly are much smaller and less than we ourselves), but that we through foreign help, namely, through the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ, are redeemed from sin, death, and the devil and brought again to eternal life.²

This quotation from Luther was more than a passing reference. The doctrine of justification was to be the source and center of Walther’s activity in America as he stated fifteen years later:

When *Der Lutheraner* 15 years ago first began publicly to serve the church, the first stone which it contributed toward the re-erection of the fallen walls of Jerusalem

was the publication of several magnificent testimonies of Luther regarding the chief article of Christian doctrine, namely, the justification of a poor sinner before God through faith in Jesus Christ. *Der Lutheraner* thereby intended to remind itself and its readers immediately at its first public appearance, that the erection of the Lutheran Zion, and the defense of its fortification, depended primarily on the preservation in its purity of this article, which Luther called the article whereby the church stands and falls. . . .³

This doctrine in the thought of Walther was the very center of the teaching of the church:

The person who correctly understands the doctrine of the Lutheran Church on justification cannot teach differently on any of the other doctrines mentioned, since these are intimately connected with the pure doctrine of justification as it is taught in the Lutheran Church.⁴

This position remained unchanged during Walther’s entire life. In 1877 he wrote:

The doctrine of justification, namely, that man becomes righteous and blessed before God by grace alone, for Christ’s sake alone, and through faith alone, without any merit or worthiness, is the chief doctrine of all Christendom. Yes, it is the real kernel of the whole Christian religion whereby it is differentiated from each and every other religion in the world. This

¹ Franz Pieper, “Dr. C. F. W. Walther als Theologe,” *Lehre und Webre*, XXXVI (1890), 10.

² “Zeugnisse Luthers: Welches der Hauptartikel der christlichen Lehre sei,” *Der Lutheraner* (hereafter abbreviated *Luth.*), I (1844), 1.

³ *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 1.

⁴ *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 2. Justification is not simply to remain theological propositions but is to penetrate deeply into “the entire thought, will, and life of Christians” (*Luth.*, XIII [1856], 57).

teaching, therefore, is also the greatest treasure. Covered up under the debris of papal, human doctrine, this was again restored to Christendom and placed in the light by the Reformation. Therefore Satan is not more hostile to any doctrine than he is to this one. It is also inseparably connected with all other articles of the Christian faith, so that, where it is pure, all other articles of faith are certainly also present in their purity; and where a person deviates in other articles, also this doctrine no longer is or remains pure.⁵

These and many other statements by Walther indicate that he placed the doctrine of justification in the center of all Christian doctrine. All other teachings serve this doctrine as presuppositions or flow as conclusions from it. Because Walther saw it attacked whenever false doctrine was present, he fought without compromise against various errors.⁶

It is possible to trace the steps whereby Walther reached the conviction that the doctrine of justification is the center of all theology and thus to delineate his theological development, or *Werdegang*. The *Turmerlebnis* (tower experience) of Walther can be found neither in a realization, during his struggle with rationalism, that

⁵ C. F. W. Walther, *Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern* (St. Louis: Barthel, 1877), p. 35.

⁶ Walther held that people err in the doctrine of the ministry, church, sacraments, person of Christ, millennialism, and other areas if they do not properly understand this doctrine: ". . . Most of those who now are regarded as the best and most zealous among the so-called believing pastors are nothing else than sour law preachers . . ." (*Luth.*, XVI [1859], 1). "In the center of all Christian doctrine Walther placed the doctrine of justification, namely, the doctrine that a person is righteous before God and saved by grace through faith in Christ" (Pieper, p. 10).

the Scriptures are true nor in the realization, in his pietistic period, that man cannot save himself through spiritual exercises.⁷ The space which the doctrine of the church occupies in his writings may indicate the severity of the crisis which occurred when his confidence in Stephan was destroyed and before he presented the Altenburg Theses.⁸ If, however, we are to point to a significant event in the life of Walther which had permanent effect on his theological development, then we must refer to the time before the Saxon immigration, when he received the letter of absolution from Stephan. Although Walther later rejected his mentor, he nevertheless carried this experience into his theology throughout his life. He himself described it as follows:

When the writer finally received the answer [from Stephan] he did not open the letter before he had fervently asked God to preserve him against accepting false comfort, if the answer which he had received contained such. But after he had read it, it seemed as though he had suddenly been translated from hell to heaven.

⁷ This does not imply that these were not a part of Walther's experiences. He was an opponent of 18th-century rationalism throughout his life. He did, however, not move into a dead theology in his reaction to pietism. Arndt's *Wabres Christentum* remained a precious book to him (*Luth.*, I [1844], 1). His lectures to students and popular writings display a fervent spirit.

⁸ Martin Günther, *Dr. C. F. W. Walther* (CPH, 1890), pp. 41—47; J. F. Köstering, *Auswanderung der sächsischen Lutheraner im Jahre 1838, ihre Niederlassung in Perry-Co., Mo., und damit zusammenhängende interessante Nachrichten, nebst einem wahrheitsgetreuen Bericht von dem in den Gemeinden zu Altenburg und Frohna vorgefallenen sog. Chiltastenstreit in den Jahren 1856 und 1857*, 2d ed. (St. Louis: A. Wiebusch u. Sohn, 1867), pp. 51, 52.

The tears of anguish and distress, which had so long been shed, changed to tears of genuine heavenly joy. He could not resist; he had to go to Jesus. Stephan showed him that he had long ago experienced the penance of the Law which he was seeking; that he now lacked nothing but faith, nothing, except that he, like the man fallen among thieves, now yield himself to the heavenly, merciful Samaritan. So the peace of God came to dwell with him. Then he had a real experience of the meaning of private absolution for the deeply terrified sinner.⁹

This event undoubtedly contributed to the fact that Walther upheld private absolution at a time when it tended to disappear in America.¹⁰ Absolution and justification at times become almost synonyms for him. Thus he can say, "Christ's glorious resurrection from the dead is the actual absolution of the whole world of sinners."¹¹ And again, "The resurrection of Christ is the completely valid justification of all men."¹²

⁹ C. F. W. Walther, *Kurzer Lebenslauf des weiland ehrwürdigen Pastor Joh. Friedr. Büniger* . . . (St. Louis: F. Dette, 1882), p. 29, fn.

¹⁰ Through words of Luther he urges strongly the retention of private absolution (*Luth.*, XVI [1859], 35). Walther emphasized that the words of absolution announce an accomplished fact and that validity does not depend on the administrant or the faith of the recipient. See *Proceedings of General Convention of Missouri Synod*, 1860, pp. 38, 39; C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: CPH, 1929), pp. 167—178. S. S. Schmucker's *Definite Platform* rejected private absolution (*CTM*, XV [1944], 531).

¹¹ C. F. W. Walther, *Lutherische Brosamen* (St. Louis: Barthel, 1876), p. 140.

¹² C. F. W. Walther, *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Epistel Postille*, 2d ed., (St. Louis: CPH, n. d.), p. 211. See also *Luth.*, XXVI (1880), pp. 120—122.

Luther, in the thought of Walther, became the Reformer of the church through a similar experience of forgiveness. "The fact that Luther by the grace of God came to a pure and clear knowledge of the article of justification made him a reformer born, anointed, and equipped from above."¹³ The most important factor in Walther's theological development was undoubtedly his study of Luther's works. He had done much of this already before he came to America, but he continued to be a student of Luther throughout his life. In a Western District essay, May 5, 1859, he quotes extensively from Luther. The following quotations made a deep impression on him and occur again and again in his writings:

If this article of our soul's salvation is grasped and held with firm and sure faith, then other doctrines like that of the Trinity gradually follow.¹⁴

If the article which teaches how a person becomes sinless and righteous before God is lost then the whole Christian doctrine disappears with it.¹⁵

In it all other doctrines of our Christian faith are contained; if it is pure and upright, then all the others are in proper shape.¹⁶

Therefore everything concerns this article of Christ and depends on it; the person who has it has everything. . . . For everything depends and is founded on it, and it draws all the others along with itself. . . . If someone errs in another [doctrine], he certainly does not under-

¹³ *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 17.

¹⁴ "Referat . . ." *Western District Proceedings*, 1859, p. 13. Quoted from Luther (Walch ed.), XXII, 751, 752.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, quoted from Luther, VIII, 1552, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14. Quoted from Luther, VIII, 2180.

stand this one correctly; and even if he holds all the others but does not have this one correct, then all is still in vain.¹⁷

The conception of pure doctrine as relationship caused Walther to emphasize that the proper understanding of doctrine was not easily attained.¹⁸ He had little patience with people who felt that they had mastered this doctrine or no longer needed to study it.¹⁹ In this connection he pointed out that many Protestants held to the doctrine of justification verbally, but failed to carry it out in their teaching and in their practice.²⁰

As will be indicated later, the other doctrines were closely associated with this one, in fact, were contained in it. Walther is again following in the footsteps of Luther when he shows little patience with those theologians who deal with doctrines in isolation or with purely theological questions.²¹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16. Quoted from Luther VIII, 502—506. Also see *Luth.*, XIII (1856), 58.

¹⁸ *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 9.

¹⁹ *Luth.*, XIII (1856), 58.

²⁰ *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 33.

²¹ *Luth.*, XIII (1856), 57, 58. Note the statement: "People thought that after withdrawing from the left there was no possibility of erring in the other direction. Thus it has come to pass that no one has departed farther from true Lutheranism than those who want to be the strictest Lutherans. They did not consider that also the way of truly pure doctrine is everywhere a narrow way, on which only he remains who with holy earnestness is intent on turning neither to the right nor to the left. It was assumed that the praise of being strictly orthodox was easy to obtain; that it required no earnest study, searching deliberation, prayer, struggle, and the conquering of many temptations. Every unconverted man had only to attack every apparent heretic and everything which had the appearance of being ecclesiastical laxity with utmost ferocity and to press and urge everything which had the

He says:

Luther gives excellent advice how a person can easily determine whether a doctrine is true or false. A person must first of all determine whether the doctrine is in harmony with the article of justification before God alone through faith in Christ by grace or not.²²

Another factor in Walther's theological development is his study of the Lutheran Symbols. Here again it is his deep conviction regarding justification as learned from Luther which leads him to accept the Lutheran Confessions. His becoming a champion of confessionalism in America²³ was not primarily due to his desire to be loyal to the principles of conservatism or traditionalism. That his primary concern was the doctrine of justification is shown by quotations like the following:

We are not fighting for a particular constituted division which calls itself Lutheran. It is not our goal to bring matters to such a pass that all Christians accept a so-called Lutheran Church polity and Lutheran ceremonies, join a Lutheran Synod, or bind themselves by Lutheran symbols. . . . The object of our struggle is nothing else than the true faith, the pure truth, the unfalsified Gospel, the pure foundation of the apostles and prophets.²⁴

His bridge to the confessions was probably the Smalcald Articles of Luther. Es-

appearance of being churchly; then the deed was accomplished, the prize of orthodoxy won, the Great Inquisitor had established himself, and all now had to fear his citation to judgment. Thus it has come to the stage that no teacher stands more in the way of the so-called 'strict churchly Lutherans' than — Luther."

²² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²³ See Erwin L. Lueker, "Walther and the Free Lutheran Conferences," *CTM*, XV (1944), pp. 529—563.

²⁴ *Luth.*, I [1844], 100.

pecially precious to him was the following quotation:

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). "And with His stripes we are healed" (Is. 53:5). On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.²⁵

By careful study of the Lutheran Confessions, Walther became convinced that all the articles centered in justification.²⁶ As a result it was impossible to reject these articles and not endanger the Christian faith. The *Definite Platform* opened his eyes to the fact that the rejection of some of the articles in the Augsburg Confession would destroy the very center of that confession.²⁷ Hence he insisted upon an unqualified subscription to the Confessions.²⁸

²⁵ "Referat . . ." Western District *Proceedings*, 1859, pp. 11, 12. The translation here given is from Tappert, Pelikan, Fischer, Piepkorn, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), SA II I 5. Probably more important for Walther was Ap IV 2—4 (German).

²⁶ *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 2; C. F. W. Walther, *Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern*, p. 32.

²⁷ *CTM*, XV, 529—563.

²⁸ C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," trans. A. W. C. Guebert, *CTM*, XVIII (1947), pp. 241—253. While the confessions were a formative norm and criterion of Lutheranism in Walther's thought, the doctrine of justification remained a critical norm to which

In addition to Luther and the confessions, Walther also studied the classic Lutheran dogmaticians for a deeper insight into the significance of justification. Chemnitz was undoubtedly his favorite and then Gerhard and Miesner.²⁹ His debt to the dogmaticians may be gathered from a list of axioms which he published.³⁰ When he refers to the dogmaticians, Walther indicated that they did not present justification as forcefully as Luther did, although they have it in the same sense.³¹ The writings of the dogmaticians entered into his professional discussions and to an extent shaped his logical conceptions of the doctrine of justification, but it is primarily Luther who speaks to his heart and whose voice is heard in his popular writings.

Walther was concerned not only with writings from the past but also with contemporary articles. His evaluation of the Euen Theses³² reveals a penetrating insight into the doctrine of justification. The same is true when he points out that Hengstenberg had followed a very dangerous, Romanizing course in his presentation of

he looked amid growing opposition "as a bright torch in whose light he always hoped to find the right path through the labyrinth of these last times" (*Luth.*, XVI [1859], 2).

²⁹ *Luth.*, I (1844), 1; VII (1851), 172, 177, 201.

³⁰ The emphases stressed by Walther are given in this list. Gerhard is the most frequently quoted. Quotations from Luther are the longest. Other quotations are from Kromayer, Scherzer, Dannhauer, Quenstedt, Brenz, Huelsemann, Dietrich, Michael Neander, V. Loescher, Chemnitz, Augustine, Book of Concord. "Theologische Axiome," *Lehre und Wehre*, VII (1861), 225 to 228; 257—264.

³¹ Western District *Proceedings*, 1859, p. 17.

³² These theses had been discussed at Nau-gard, Germany, May 13, 1857 (*Lehre und Wehre*, IV [1858], 10).

justification.³³ On the other hand, his acceptance and endorsement of an article in Guericke's *Zeitschrift* show that he was not simply defending the old against the new, but that he could understand new terminology and evaluate it very carefully.³⁴

Walther's first convention paper on justification had the following outline:

I. The Evangelical Lutheran Church alone has the pure doctrine of justification.

A. That the doctrine of justification is the most important doctrine of the whole divine revelation is the general confession of our church in its symbols as well as in the private writings of its pure, faithful teachers.

B. Those people erred greatly who imagined that it is an easy matter properly to grasp the doctrine of justification and present it, or who believed that this doctrine has long ago been completely mastered.

C. Because Luther by God's grace attained the pure and clear knowledge of the article of justification, he was born, anointed, and equipped a reformer from above.

D. Luther complained that already in his time only a few thoroughly understood the pure doctrine of justification and presented it; that many had become weary of it and hence this doctrine would again be obscured and lost after his death.

E. The papal church does not only falsify the article of justification, it also condemns and curses it.

F. Most of the so-called Protestant churches outside the Evangelical Lutheran Church indeed confess: Man becomes righteous before God by grace through faith for Christ's sake and not through the works of the Law. But by their doctrine of the means through which a man becomes righteous before God they again overthrow this doctrine. They teach falsely: first, regarding the means of grace or the conveying means (*Gebemittel*) of God, namely, Word and the Holy Sacrament; secondly, about the instrumental (*werkzeugliche*) means or regarding the receptive means (*Nehmemittel*) on the part of man, namely, faith. These errors again are basic to false doctrines concerning Christ's person and work of redemption as of God's gracious will and gracious call.

II. Whence is it that the consciousness that the Evangelical Lutheran Church alone has the pure doctrine of justification has often disappeared within this our church? [This question is answered with five points: (1) Rationalism and supernaturalism; (2) Principles of the new philosophy; (3) Unionism, which minimizes purity of doctrine; (4) Experience theology; (5) Emphasis on external churchism.]

III. What rules are to be adopted in order again to awaken this banished consciousness? [This question is answered with two points: (1) Diligent study, in addition to the Word of God, of the precious confessions of our church by the ministers of the church. Then by study especially of Luther for a knowledge of the proper preaching of the righteousness which avails before God and that which is very closely related to this, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. After this has been done, pastors are to incor-

³³ "Professor Hengstenbergs Lehre von der Rechtfertigung," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (1867), 234-243.

³⁴ "Die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (1867), 76-86.

porate this basic teaching in their preaching, catechetical activity, and all contacts with their parishioners. (2) Hearers are to become interested in studying this doctrine in Luther and are to be careful to note the difference and the importance of this doctrine in comparison with all other human books on edification.]³⁵

Toward the end of his life Walther prepared the following eight theses:

Thesis I: The doctrine of justification is that doctrine with which the church stands and falls.

Thesis II: The word "justify" in the Holy Scriptures, when it is applied to the justification of the sinner before God, signifies the forensic act of God by means of which the sinner is regarded and declared righteous by God.

Thesis III: The causes which move God to regard and declare sinners righteous are (1) His universal grace, and (2) the righteousness of Christ won for all men.

Thesis IV: The means through which God offers, appropriates, and seals the righteousness of Christ to the sinners are only (1) God's Word and (2) the Holy Sacraments.

Thesis V: The means through which man appropriates and attains the righteousness of Christ is faith alone, which the Holy Spirit works in him through the Word of the Gospel.

Thesis VI: The effects of justification are (1) the peace of God, (2) Christian freedom, (3) sanctification, and (4) the hope of eternal life.

Thesis VII: The properties of justifica-

tion are (1) that it does not happen gradually but in a moment; (2) that it is complete; (3) that it is equal in the case of all who are justified; (4) that it is lasting; (5) that it can be lost again; and (6) that it can also again be attained.

Thesis VIII: The final purpose of justification is (1) the salvation of man, (2) God's honor.³⁶

Walther felt that it was especially important to emphasize three points in the preservation of the true doctrine of justification:

1. That complete reconciliation has been accomplished by Christ.

2. That this justification is given in the means of grace. "In this connection Walther continually emphasizes that a person dare not make the essence of the Gospel dependent on faith. But that it must be regarded as an offering of grace by God which possesses validity within itself. 'The magnificent gifts of Christ have already been given to us; that must be well noted! They have already been given to us and are always there for us even when we do not believe.'"

³⁶ "Thesen über die Rechtfertigung des sündigen Menschen vor Gott nach dem Evangelium," Nebraska District *Proceedings*, 1883, pp. 10, 11. F. Pieper, *Lehre und Wehre*, XXXVI (1890), bases his discussion of Walther's doctrine of justification to a large extent upon theses delivered at the first convention of the Synodical Conference. The essay appeared anonymously in the *Proceedings*, 1872, pp. 20 to 68. According to a report on the convention, they were prepared by F. A. Schmidt (*Luth.*, XXVIII [1872], 162). Walther highly praised them (*Luth.*, XXVIII [1872], 184). At the time of the convention, Schmidt was a member of the Norwegian Synod (*Proceedings*, 1872, p. 12). He was Walther's student, then colleague, and finally opponent in the Predestination Controversy.

³⁵ "Referat. . . ." Western District *Proceedings*, 1859, pp. 11—52.

3. That faith receives the promise of grace in Word and Sacrament.³⁷

In the presentation of other doctrines Walther was concerned not only that they should be in harmony with this central doctrine but also that this doctrine should actually appear in the structure of all teaching and doctrine. Thus he speaks of the teaching of Law and Gospel:

This mode of preaching is characteristic of the Lutheran Church. It preaches the Law to the godless in such a way as if there were no Gospel at all; and the Gospel to penitent sinners in such a way as if there had never been a Law. It allows the Law and its preaching to precede not in such a manner that a person, say a year later, in a new congregation should hear only Law to make people pliable, but in such a way that in every sermon sin is everywhere made thoroughly sinful, but that, at the same time, immediately that is heard which makes the sinner blessed, namely, the doctrine of justification.³⁸

The doctrine of Scripture likewise must center in and preach justification through a proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Therefore it is not sufficient for Walther merely to present "all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture," but

³⁷ Pieper, *loc. cit.* Also see Western District *Proceedings*, 1874, p. 47; *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 9.

³⁸ "Verhandlungen über die 17. Thesis des Referats, 'dasz die ev. luth. Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden sei,'" Western District *Proceedings*, 1868, p. 33. The doctrine of justification is basic to Walther's *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. See note 10 above.

Law and Gospel must be rightly distinguished.³⁹

Walther is especially remembered for his doctrine of the church. It has often been held that his structure of the church was made to conform to democratic American principles. This, however, is not the case. The basic factors in his conception of the church were formulated before he had had time to become well acquainted with the American structure of society. It was, according to his own assertion, the article on justification which guided him in the formulation of the teaching on the church. His primary concern was to make sure that a visible organization of the church would not become an intermediate savior (*Nebenheiland*).⁴⁰ "'Outside the invisible church there is no salvation' means nothing else than 'outside Christendom, in which alone Christ is, there is no salvation.'" ⁴¹ For the same reason he opposed the proposition that "the visible truly believing Evangelical Lutheran Church is the one holy Christian Catholic Church outside which there is no salvation."⁴²

These examples show that Walther regarded justification not merely as a *locus* among *loci* but as the doctrine which is to be presented in all phases of theology.

St. Louis, Mo.

³⁹ *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, pp. 1—4; Western District *Proceedings*, 1868, pp. 32—34; *Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern*, 35; *Luth.*, XVI (1859), 1.

⁴⁰ *Luth.*, XIII (1856), 58.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴² *Ibid.*