

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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“Here I stand.  
I can do no other.”

**Martin Luther, 1521**

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**Luther Traveling Exhibit at CTS - March 7-28, 2004**

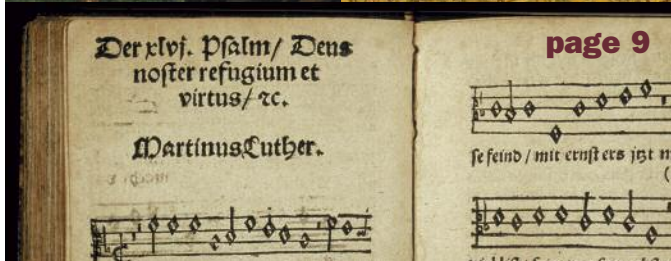
  
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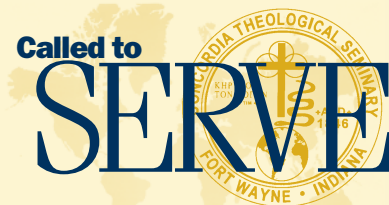
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# Luther and Justification

By the Rev. Roland F. Ziegler

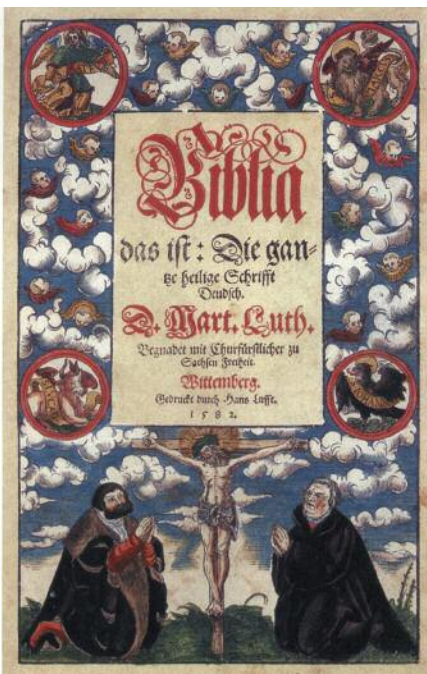
The new movie on Luther had scenes some critics did not appreciate. Was not the young Luther depicted in his cell muttering and speaking to himself more like a madman, an example of an abnormal personality, than the heroic reformer who changed the course of history? Maybe these scenes were not the best way to depict what tormented Luther. But at least it was an effort to show a central point of Luther's life and thought: how can man stand before God and not perish? This was the question that drove Luther almost to despair as a monk. He used the age-old remedies that monastic discipline and the Roman Catholic theology prescribed, but they failed. He never doubted that there was a God and that this God was righteous. But he experienced himself unable to fulfill the will of God, and so God took on the shape of terrible tyrant, demanding what no man could do, and nevertheless condemning man because of his inability to conform to His will. Only when he found the true understanding of the words "the just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:16), did he find peace and freedom.

Such a biographical approach to our topic does not mean that Luther's understanding of justification is an expression of a very important but nevertheless private experience. After all, the turning point for him was a discovery in Holy Scripture, not a private revelation. But a look at the way Luther came to rediscover this great scriptural doctrine sets the tone that any discussion about justification is not an abstract truth, but it describes who God is and who man is. Talking about justification means talking about life, peace, and freedom.

In 1531 Luther lectured for the second time on the Epistle to the Galatians, the great polemical writing of St. Paul in which he attacks an understanding of Christianity as a religion of what man does. Four years later the notes students took were published as a commentary. Luther wrote a preface acknowledging that the content of this commentary were his thoughts and said, "For in my heart there rules this one doctrine, namely, faith in Christ. From it, through it, and to it all my theological thought flows and returns, day and night" (AE 27, 145). He defines justification thus: "that we are redeemed from sin, death,

even less than we are ourselves, but through the help of Another, the only Son of God, Jesus Christ" (ibid.). Justification is a matter of life and death. Negatively it means to be freed from sin, death, and the devil—free from the bondage of evil, free from the consequences of evil, death, and eternal damnation, and positively that we receive eternal life. In another passage in this commentary, Luther defines justification in a way that brings out some other nuances: "But the doctrine of justification is this, that we are pronounced righteous and are saved solely by faith in Christ, and without works" (AE 26, 223). Justification is that we are *pronounced righteous* or acquitted. Here Luther follows St. Paul in the way he uses legal language to describe how man is saved. God pronounces man righteous, as a judge gives the verdict. The difference is that an earthly judge has to acquit the innocent and to condemn the guilty. He has to judge according to the defendant's actions, what he has done. God does it differently. He does not judge us according to our deeds, but He pronounces us innocent, even though we are according to our actions guilty. A human judge searches for innocence in the accused. God finds only guilt but imputes to man Christ's righteousness. This legal language safeguards that the reason for our justification is not something we have done, do, or will do, but solely what Christ has accomplished on the cross. It teaches us to look outside of us for salvation and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and His righteousness during our life and never ever trust that we are pleasing to God because of what we do, but rather to realize that we are pleasing to God because of Christ.

Such an understanding of justification presupposes a certain view of God and His relationship to man. God is



**Luther's understanding of justification is essentially nothing but applied Christology. It is an exposition of "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (2 Cor. 5:19).**

and the devil and endowed with eternal life, not through ourselves and certainly not through our works, which are



holy and He is good. Nothing that is unholy and not in harmony with His will can live in His presence. Man as God's creature is subject to God's will and is accountable to Him for what he does. God is therefore man's judge, and everybody must appear before Him and receive His sentence. Christianity therefore teaches man to live in the horizon of final judgment and see it as the question of his life: "Everything we teach, order, institute is aimed at the goal that the pious expect the arrival of their Savior at the final day" (WA 25, 88, 19). Contrary to much of Christianity today, Luther did not think that God is nice and would never condemn anybody. Rather, he took the passages in Scripture concerning a twofold outcome of the final judgment very seriously. That drove him to despair, as he expressed it in the third stanza of his hymn "Dear Christians, One and All" (LW #353). And here his view of God and much of modernity differ the most and make an understanding of the doctrine of justification difficult for many. That God can be against me is a statement few would seriously consider. The beginning of this shift towards a view of God as a mild and essentially harmless being who cannot inflict anything we fear on us was visible in Luther's time: "For this reason I have undertaken to give you this exhortation, on the chance that there may be some who still have at least a modicum of belief that there is a God in heaven and a hell prepared for unbelievers, and that by this exhortation they might be led to change their minds. [Actually, almost everybody is acting as if there were neither a God in heaven nor a devil in hell.]" (AE 46, 219).

Luther's understanding of justification is essentially nothing but applied Christology. It is an exposition of "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (2 Cor. 5:19). No wonder that in the aforementioned hymn he gives a summary of the history of Christ. In justification the statement "Christ for you" is unfolded: Only the God-man could stand in our stead, bearing our sin and punishment ... and because only He could do it, man cannot do anything. Justification by grace alone through faith alone is the consistent application to man of the atonement whose fruits come to us through the Gospel. To be a Christian is nothing but trust in this message: Christ did everything for you. This Gospel comes to us externally through the word of the apostles and prophets, the preached word, the Sacraments. The fruit of the atonement, reconciliation, is mediated to us through the ministry of reconciliation: "Therefore, that the nations are blessed means that righteousness is granted to them, that they are reckoned as righteous, which does not happen except through the Gospel ... the church ... distributes this blessing by preaching, by administering the Sacraments, by granting absolution, by giving comfort, and by using the Word of grace ..." (AE 26, 245).

Because justification summarizes God's salvific dealing with the world, it is the true subject of theology: "The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject is error and poison. All Scripture points to this, that God commends His kindness to us and in His Son restores to righteousness and life the nature that has fallen into sin

and condemnation" (AE 12, 311). It is the center and the most important article of faith. "The article of justification is the master and prince, the lord and ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness. No error is so mean, so clumsy, and so outworn as not to be supremely pleasing to human reason and to seduce us if we are without the knowledge and the contemplation of this article." (Plass, *What Luther Says*, #2192) That does not mean that the church could forget the doctrine of God, or the Sacraments, or the ministry. It is the hub that is connected to all these doctrines and orders everything, but without these other doctrines, e.g., without the doctrine of the deity of Christ, there is no doctrine of justification: "As I often warn, therefore, the doctrine of justification must be learned diligently. For in it are included all the other doctrines of our faith; and if it is sound, all the others are sound as well. Therefore, when we teach that men are justified through Christ and that Christ is the Victor over sin, death, and the eternal curse, we are testifying at the same time that He is God by nature" (AE 26, 283).

The doctrine of justification defines who God is: He is the one who was in Christ reconciling the world; He is the one who justifies through faith in Christ (Rom. 3:26). Therefore any concept of God that denies this and believes in a god who has to be reconciled by what man does is idolatrous, even if it manages to include Christ in its scheme: "Whoever falls from the doctrine of justification is ignorant of God and is an idolater. Therefore it is all the same whether he then returns to the Law or to

the worship of idols; it is all the same whether he is called a monk or a Turk or a Jew or an Anabaptist. For once this doctrine is undermined, nothing more remains but sheer error, hypocrisy, wickedness, and idolatry, regardless of how great the sanctity that appears on the outside." Therefore the doctrine of justification is rightfully called the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article with which the church stands or falls. This formulation is not Luther's, but he certainly has the content. "When this article stands, the church stands, when it falls, the church falls." (WA 40 III, 352, 3)

The doctrine of justification tells us who God is: our Judge, who bore our punishment. It tells us who we are: guilty, but innocent in Christ. It shows us a foundation to stand on: Christ's righteousness, ours in faith. It extols the God who without our doing makes us alive through the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. It is therefore the true praise of God: It confesses what He has done and is doing to us.

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