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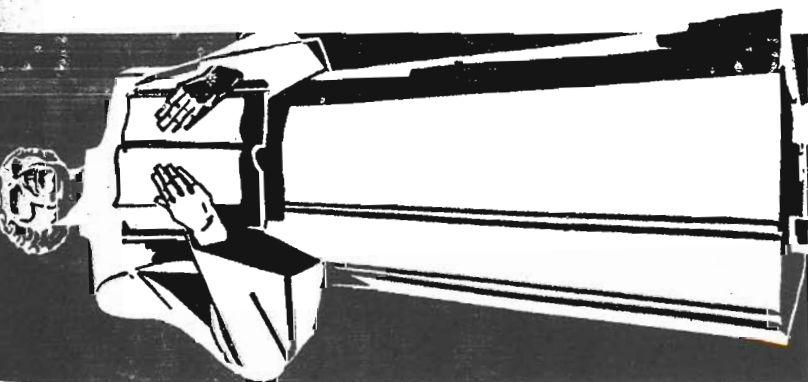
Paul's Concept of Justification, and
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On Believing, Teaching, and Confessing: A Fresh Look at the Confessions

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WHEN IT COMES TO BELIEVING, teaching, and confessing, Lutherans have demonstrated a good deal of expertise. In the comprehensive summary of the Formula of Concord Lutherans were quite explicit in insisting that as the ancient church had its fixed and certain symbols, so they had pledged themselves to one doctrine and certain public writings which had been held and used in all the churches of the Augsburg Confession.¹

Unfortunately, evangelical Christians after 1530 discovered that just as in former times great controversies had arisen in the church, so they had become involved in grievous and injurious dissensions and controversies which, though some regarded as mere misunderstandings or disputes concerning words, were of such a nature that "the opinion of the party in error cannot be tolerated in the Church of God, much less excused or defended."² Necessity required them to explain and discuss controverted articles and on the basis of the Word of God state simply and clearly what they were believing, teaching, and confessing.

In their *Declaratio* Lutherans pledged themselves from their inmost hearts to abide by the "simple, clear, and unadulterated meaning" of the Augsburg Confession which was thoroughly grounded in God's Word and which they received "next to the matchless authority of God's Word" itself.³ From this base, and for permanent unity in the Church, they produced their comprehensive summary in which they brought together from the Word of God the common doctrine which the Churches "that are of the true Christian religion" confess. Incidentally, they also declared "to one another with heart and mouth that we will not make or receive a separate or new confession of our faith, but confess the public common writings which always and everywhere were held and used as such symbols or common confession in all the churches of the Augsburg Confession before the dissensions arose,"⁴ a position to which Lutheranism has (in theory, at least) tenaciously clung even through periods of great theological and ecclesiastical turmoil.

In their not altogether placid history, Lutherans have often wrestled with the persistent and ofttime thorny question of confessional subscription. As the early church agonized over the *homoousios* and the *homoiousios*; as the later church agonized over the *filioque*; as Chalcedon argued about the relevance of *theotokos* (and four adverbs); so Lutherans came in their own peculiar fullness of time to dispute concerning *quia* and *quatenus*. Today, Lutherans face a possibly greater issue, one which centers in the relationship between believing, teaching, and confessing, and the justification of the sinner before God. Do the Confessions (based as they are on Sacred Scrip-

ture) suggest that one is justified *coram Deo* on the basis of what he believes, teaches, and confesses? Is it possible to separate believing from teaching or believing from confessing? Just what do we believe, teach and confess? The faith? If so, what faith? Believing means to have faith; to have faith means to be justified; is believing used in *this* particular sense in our triad: "believing, teaching, and confessing?" One might at this point interpose the Scriptural truth that there is no justification apart from Christ; the *Praefatio* of the Augustana states that "we ought to confess the one Christ"; does the "confessing" of our triad spell our justification before God?

A considerable amount of confusion on this vital issue seems to have gained currency in our day. We might settle the dust and bring some clarity to the fore simply by referring to the quite respectable and historically grounded theological distinction between *fides in genere* and *fides qua iustificat*.⁵ We recall that Luther carefully distinguished between "general" faith and "specific" justifying faith in his discussion with Agricola and Melancthon at Torgau. Luther was even willing to contend that the very term, "faith," should be applied *only* to justifying faith, i.e., to that faith which consoles us because it clings to Jesus Christ and the promise of the Gospel. The Apology also speaks of "special" faith (*fides specialis*), "not only which in general believes that God exists, but which believes that the remission of sins is offered."⁶

Dogmatically, faith (*pistis*) is held to denote the faithfulness of God as well as the faithfulness of man. It also bespeaks trust in God's temporal blessings. In the latter two instances, faith does not only *not* mean *fides iustificans*; it is actually a good work which, as both Scripture and our Confessions forcefully testify, is totally excluded from our justification *coram Deo*.⁹ Lutherans have properly distinguished between faith in the subjective sense (*fides qua creditur*), which is trust in the gracious promises of the Gospel of Christ, and faith in the objective sense (*fides quae creditur*), faith in the sense of the entire Christian doctrine, or the doctrine itself that men are justified by faith in Christ or the Gospel. In his *De iustificatione* Chemnitz declares that there is a difference between that faith which apprehends Christ, and the exercises of faith, even though the exercises of faith presuppose as their foundation the fact that God has been reconciled by faith; thus faith may be certain of the promises of God in other matters. In his *Examen* Hollaz captures the genuine Lutheran and Biblical understanding of faith when he defines *fides specialis* as the special application to the individual of the general promise of the grace of God in Christ. In the words of Luther, true faith embraces Jesus Christ as the one who was delivered up for sins. This is that faith alone which, without works, justifies us through the mercy of God extended to us in Christ.

A fresh look at our Confessions will, I believe, enable us to assert two essential theses: (I.) Lutherans believe, teach, and confess that the faith they hold, drawn from and witnessed to by the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the true Christian doctrine in a pure and sound sense.⁷ (II.) Lutherans believe, teach and confess that they are *not* justified before

God on the basis of the true Christian doctrine they confess, but solely by that faith which clings to, relies on, and apprehends the grace of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I.

Lutherans embodied their faith in Confessions because they were confident that they confess "the doctrine which Christians everywhere will finally admit as true and divine, indeed, which they all in their hearts believe even now, if not explicitly and consciously, at least implicitly and in principle."⁸ Lutherans are, moreover, convinced that the doctrines set forth in their Confessions represent the ecumenical truths of Christendom, since true Lutheranism is nothing but consistent Christianity. The Formula can never be refuted "for its doctrinal contents are unadulterated truths of the infallible Word of God."⁹ The churches of the Reformation held that the sum of their doctrine varied neither from the Scriptures nor from the church Catholic; they dissent in no article of the faith from the church Catholic.¹⁰ In the conclusion of the Augsburg Confession, the Reformers reiterated their conviction that in doctrine they had received nothing against Scripture or the church Catholic.¹¹ Indeed, the Formula concludes with the reminder that in the sight of God and all Christendom Lutherans "wish to testify that their declaration was their faith, doctrine, and confession in which they were willing by the grace of God to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of it."¹² They could manifest such certainty because they received and embraced with whole hearts the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, the only true standard by which all doctrines should be judged.¹³

"Ecclesiae magno consensu apud nos docent . . . It is taught among us . . . It is taught on our part . . . We declare that we believe and teach . . . It is unanimously confessed in our churches in accordance with God's word . . . We must declare what we believe . . . We confess that . . . We unanimously believe, teach, and confess . . . We receive and embrace . . ." The Confessions are replete with such assertions. In a brief, succinct, and clear manner, they declare what Lutherans teach with regard to God, sin, Christ, justification, the ministry, good works, the Church, sacraments, free will, civil government, ecclesiastical power, etc. They affirm what Lutherans believe, teach and confess regarding Jesus Christ as our righteousness, namely, that our righteousness before God consists in God's forgiving our sins out of pure grace without any works, merit, or worthiness on our part; that faith alone is the means and instrument whereby we lay hold of Christ; that faith is not a bare knowledge of the history of Christ, but trust that for the sake of the obedience of Christ we are righteous before God and eternally saved; that the word, "justify," means to absolve, that is, to declare free from sins; that weaknesses cling to true believers even to the grave but do not remove the believers' certainty that they have a gracious God; that for the preservation of the pure doctrine concerning the righteousness of faith, the merit of Christ must be entirely separated from our works; that after

a man has been justified by faith, good works always follows; that the entire obedience of the entire person of Christ is imputed to us for righteousness; that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence as an especially brilliant light by which the Word of God is rightly divided; that the Law is a divine doctrine which reproves everything that is sin and contrary to God's will; that the Gospel is a doctrine which teaches that Christ has obtained and acquired for us, without any merit on our part, forgiveness of sins and righteousness which avails before God and eternal life;¹⁴ that believers have been redeemed by the Son of God that they should exercise themselves in the Law of God and meditate on God's Law day and night; that in the Holy Supper the body and the blood of Christ is truly present and distributed and received with the bread and wine;¹⁵ that it is erroneous to teach that "the promise of grace is appropriated to us by faith in the heart, and confession which is made with the mouth, and by other virtues;"¹⁶ that we receive and embrace with our whole heart the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures; that the true Christian doctrine is collected from God's Word into brief articles of faith.¹⁷

Similar testimonies reinforce the thesis that the faith which Lutherans believe, teach, and confess is the true Christian doctrine in a pure and sound sense; it is in agreement with the *sincera verbi Dei doctrina*, the pure, clear fountain of Israel.¹⁸

II.

Lutherans also believe, teach, and confess that they are not justified before God on the basis of the true Christian doctrine they confess; they are justified solely by that faith which clings to, relies on, and apprehends the grace of God in Christ. "They teach that men are freely justified for Christ's sake, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake."¹⁹ To obtain this faith, the ministry of Word (Gospel) and Sacraments was instituted through which "the Holy Ghost is given who works faith in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake."²⁰ Faith, which is born of the Gospel, "believes that for Christ's sake sins are forgiven."²¹ When the Sacraments are used according to the intention of our Lord, faith must be added "to believe the promises which are offered and set forth through the Sacraments."²²

The Apology insists that all Scripture must be distributed into two principle topics, the Law and the Promises (Gospel). Justification is obtained through the free promise; "since the promise cannot be received except by faith, the Gospel proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ."²³

The Gospel freely offers for the sake of Christ reconciliation, which is received by faith alone. "This faith brings to God, not confidence in one's own merits, but only confidence in the promise, or the mercy promised in Christ. This *special* faith, therefore, by which an individual believes that for the sake of Christ his sins are forgiven him, and that God is reconciled, obtains remission of sins and justifies

us."²⁴ In its discussion of the righteousness of faith, the Formula quotes Luther's exposition of Galatians: "Here the chief matter dealt with is the question, not whether we should also do good works and exercise love, but by what means we can be justified by God and saved. And here we answer with St. Paul: We are justified by faith in Christ alone."²⁵ Faith alone is the sole means and instrument by which we can receive and accept the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins offered us in the promise of the Gospel. In order that troubled hearts may find sure consolation, "the Scriptures teach that the righteousness of faith before God consists alone in the gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins received through faith alone in the promise of the Gospel."²⁶ Again, faith lays hold of (*apprehendit*) and accepts the grace of God and the merit of Christ in the promise of the Gospel.²⁷

In answer to the crucial question, What is justifying faith?, the Apology defines that faith which justifies as assent to the promises of God. This assent is trust of the heart.²⁸ Therefore it is not enough to believe that Christ was born, suffered, and was raised again, unless we add also this article, which is the purpose of the history: the forgiveness of sin.²⁹

That faith in Christ justifies resounds throughout the Confessions. Justification occurs through the Word, as Paul says, Romans 1,16; the Gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes. Justification occurs *only* through the Word; the Word is apprehended *only* by faith, it thus follows that faith justifies.³⁰

The Apology stresses the necessity of insisting upon this article for two important reasons: (1) Christ is Mediator; how will Christ be Mediator if in justification we do not use him as Mediator, if we do not hold that for his sake we are accounted righteous? (2) Those who deny that faith justifies, teach nothing but the Law, both Christ and the Gospel being set aside.³¹ The Confessions then argue with careful cogency that remission of sins belongs to justification and that faith alone receives remission of sins. The argument reads: (1) Remission of sins and justification are identical; (2) faith alone receives remission of sins; (3) ergo, faith alone justifies. In support of (2), a four-fold testimony is adduced. a) In the remission of sins, the terror of sin must be overcome; we gain this victory through Christ, by faith. b) Sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ; he benefits us when by faith we apprehend the mercy promised in him and set it against the judgment of God. c) Acts 10:43 states that "through his name whosoever believes on him shall receive remission of sins." How could this be said more clearly? Besides, he cites the agreement of all the prophets, which is to cite the authority of the church. d) Remission of sins is promised for the sake of Christ; therefore it cannot be received except by faith alone.³² And in typical Lutheran fashion, the entire argument is accompanied by appropriate testimonies from Scripture supporting the thesis that "we receive remission of sins by faith alone; faith alone justifies." These *testimonia* are then followed by additional testimonies from the Fathers.

In summary, *fides qua iustificat* has as its object *not* the entire Word of God (or the faith: *fides quae creditur*; the true Christian

doctrine), but the Gospel. *Fides iustificans* is essentially trust in God's promise of forgiveness. In the words of Quenstedt, faith is confidence of the will, *apprehensio voluntatis*, nothing else than trust which denotes the longing for, and laying hold on, Christ. (*Systema* II, 1348). Faith justifies in the category of relation, i.e., it justifies because of the object (Christ) which it grasps. As our theologians have expressed it, faith justifies *nicht als Werk sondern als Werkzeug!* Faith and the promises are correlative; *diximus fidem et promissionem correlativa*.³³ Q.e.d.! Lutherans believe, teach, and confess, that they are *not* justified before God on the basis of the doctrine they confess, but solely by that faith which clings to, relies on, and apprehends the grace of God in Christ.

III.

This clearly enunciated position of the Lutheran Confessions has been reflected in Lutheran systematic theology. In his preliminary survey of soteriology, Franz Pieper writes: "As soon as a person believes in the remission of his sins, he comes by means of this faith into personal possession of the remission of sins; in other words, he is justified before God."³⁴ Justification *sola fide* is the central doctrine of Christianity. All other doctrines are either antecedent or consequent to this doctrine.³⁵ Pieper permits no doubt as to his position (or that of genuine Lutheran orthodoxy) when he writes: "Some hold that faith, as far as it saves, has as its object the entire Word of God, including the Law; while others teach, *with Scripture*, that the sole object of faith, as far as it justifies, is the Gospel." He declares with the same resoluteness: "Faith, as far as it justifies, concerns itself only with the Gospel, not with the Law or the entire Scripture."³⁶

This brief look at our Confessions demonstrates that both of our theses stand. Not one article of the faith which we believe, teach, and confess is to be surrendered, considered unimportant, or treated with indifference if, as our Confessions insist, it is drawn from the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. On the other hand, this is not our justification before God. It is found completely and only in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Pieper, it seems to me, states it adequately:

"Let it be noted that if the object of justifying faith is the entire Scriptures, there can be no assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Again and again doubt will rise in one's mind, and indeed in the mind of the most learned theologian, as to whether his understanding of all Scriptures, including the historical portions of it, is the correct one. A person may have the *fides iustificans* and *salvans* though he is ignorant of certain parts of Scripture and even in weakness errs in certain doctrines of Scripture. The Bible teaches this explicitly (Romans 14:1ff). Orthodoxy and true faith are not identical. Genuine orthodoxy is in every case the result of saving faith, but there are cases where saving faith has not yet produced the acceptance of all doctrines of Scripture. This truth has been unhesitatingly professed by Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and the Lutheran dogmaticians, though, at the same time, they unhesitatingly have refused to concede

to any man the right to surrender any portion of the Christian doctrine."³⁷

Philosophers ought to speak freely on difficult points; we must speak according to certain rules. St. Augustine.

The Scriptures simply confess . . . There is nothing here of obscurity or ambiguity. Luther (*Bondage of the Will*).

No one wanted to bell the cat. Luther (*Wider Hanswurst*).

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

All Confessional references are to the *Concordia Triglotta* (C.P.H., 1921).

1. Formula, 851, 1-2
2. *Ibid.*, 849, 9
3. *Ibid.*, 847, 4-5
4. *Ibid.*, 851, 2
5. Apology, 267, 60
6. *Ibid.*, 313, 21
7. Formula, 777, 1; 851, 1-2
8. Historical Introduction, 256
9. *Ibid.*
10. Augustana, 59, 1
11. *Ibid.*, 95, 5
12. Formula, 1103, 40
13. *Ibid.*, 851, 1
14. *Ibid.*, 801, 1-8
15. *Ibid.*, 809, 6
16. *Ibid.*, 933, 53
17. *Ibid.*, 851, 4
18. *Ibid.*, 851, 2
19. Augustana, IV, 45
20. *Ibid.*, V.
21. *Ibid.*, XII, 49
22. *Ibid.*, XIII
23. Apology, 133, 43
24. *Ibid.*, 45
25. Formula, 925, 29
26. *Ibid.*, 30
27. *Ibid.*, 44
28. Apology, 135, 48
29. *Ibid.*, 51
30. *Ibid.*, 139, 67
31. *Ibid.*, 141, 69-70
32. *Ibid.*, 143, 79-84
33. *Ibid.*, 208, 203
34. *Christian Dogmatics*, II, 403
35. *Ibid.*, 404
36. *Ibid.*, 422f
37. *Ibid.*, 424f